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Wilhelm Meister's Observations About Hamlet

U. Henry Gerlach

Since its publication in 1796 Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* has given rise to diverging opinions as to whether its lengthy passages on *Hamlet* and especially the detailed analysis of the figure of the Prince should be understood as literary criticism or merely as means toward fuller development of the novel's characters. August W. Schlegel exclaimed, "Doch nichts weiter über Hamlets Charakter, nach dem was Wilhelm Meister gesagt: keine Ilias nach dem Homer!"¹ while his brother, Friedrich Schlegel, held that the novel's interpretation of *Hamlet* is not so much criticism as lofty poetry ("hohe Poesie").² Those who regarded Wilhelm Meister's observations about *Hamlet* as literary criticism took the next logical step and identified them with Goethe's personal opinion. This was done most recently in Williamson's anthology *Readings on the Character of Hamlet 1661-1947*, where excerpts from the *Lehrjahre* appear as Goethe's contribution to the critical literature about Shakespeare's play.³ Wilhelm Meister and Goethe were also equated by Conklin's *A History of Hamlet Criticism* which asserts that, "Justly or unjustly, and in spite of the remonstrances of certain modern scholars, this criticism has generally passed for the author's own estimate."⁴ Of these modern scholars Conklin identifies only Diamond and Gundolf. Since then Blackall has added his dissenting opinion. In speaking of the discussion concerning *Hamlet*'s personality and another about the distinctive features of novel and drama, he states, "Neither of these passages represents Goethe's views. Each belongs to Wilhelm Meister and is the product of his situation."⁵ To determine which of these conflicting claims is most reasonable, it is essential to recall briefly the main tenets of the novel's *Hamlet* analysis and to proceed from there to an examination of Goethe's non-fictional pronouncements on issues raised through the mouth of Wilhelm Meister.

Wilhelm's interpretation of the *Hamlet* figure is presented in three separate statements, the first of which occurs in the third and the other two in the thirteenth chapter of Book Four of the *Lehrjahre*. The fifteenth chapter of the same book then adds the famous comment about fate as the unifying element of the play. While partial quoting fails to convey the force and beauty of these passages, brevity requires it. With reference to *Hamlet*'s lament that the time is out of joint and his outcry, "Oh, cursèd spite that ever I was born to set it right!" Wilhelm says:

In diesen Worten, dünkt mich, liegt der Schlüssel zu *Hamlet*'s ganzem Betragen, und mir ist deutlich, daß Shakespeare habe schildern wollen: eine große Tat auf eine Seele gelegt, die der Tat nicht gewachsen ist. Und in diesem Sinne find' ich das

Stück durchgängig gearbeitet. Hier wird ein Eichbaum in ein köstliches Gefäß gepflanzt, das nur liebliche Blumen in seinen Schoß hätte aufnehmen sollen; die Wurzeln dehnen sich aus, das Gefäß wird vernichtet.⁶

To indicate the role of fate a) in Wilhelm's conception of Hamlet's character and b) as a unifying element for the plot, perhaps no two other statements could be so central as the one above and another which culminates in the words, "der Held hat keinen Plan, aber das Stück ist planvoll." Elaborating on this assertion, Wilhelm explains that Claudius is not being punished in accordance with a rigid and stubbornly executed idea of revenge on the part of Hamlet. Rather, the "monstrous deed" – regicide by a blood brother – rolls on in its consequences, engulfing the guilty as well as the innocent. Neither purgatory, by sending the Ghost, nor the combination of favorable circumstances can advance the revenge because, "Weder Irdischen noch Unterirdischen kann gelingen, was dem Schicksal allein vorbehalten ist" (272-3).

Lüthi⁷ and Riemann⁸ offer excellent analyses of Goethe's notion of fate. While Riemann speaks in general terms, Lüthi is concerned directly with the *Hamlet* criticism in the *Lehrjahre*. Both point out that man's fate, as Goethe saw it, was composed of two elements. The first of these is an inner law in man that he must obey and in accordance with which he must act. The second component is the law of nature which places external demands on him. Tragedy results if man is unable to conform the resultant actions of the inner law to the necessary course of external events.

Und das Tragische im höchsten Sinne offenbart sich Goethe dann, wenn ein Einzelner, ohne sich seiner Empörung oder Verschuldung bewußt zu sein, vom notwendigen Gang des Ganzen rücksichtslos verschlungen wird, oder wenn gerade der ausserordentliche Mensch, der durch die Erfüllung einer besonderen Sendung für die Entwicklung des Ganzen notwendig gebraucht wird, dann doch untergehen muß, weil er gerade durch sein Ausserordentlich-Sein gegen das notwendige Gleichgewicht verstoßen hat.⁹

The early part of this analysis matches what Wilhelm had said about Hamlet. He is seen as a lone individual who must die because the task and circumstances into which he is placed by fate overpower him. The quotation summarizes very well a number of Goethe's statements on the subject of fate in tragedy which are spread out over several years. The first of them appears in his speech *Zum Schakespears Tag* where he wrote of the Briton:

Seine Plane sind, nach dem gemeinen Stil zu reden, keine Plane, aber seine Stücke drehen sich alle um den geheimen Punkt, den noch kein Philosoph gesehen und bestimmt hat, in dem das Eigentümliche unsres Ich's, die präntendierte Freiheit unsres Wollens, mit dem notwendigen Gang des Ganzen zusammenstößt.¹⁰

Here we have the insistence that Shakespeare's plays have no plan in the common sense but that their unity derives from the clash of the individual will with the necessary course of the whole. Goethe seems to have seen this as a recurrent element in Shakespeare's

dramatic works. In his essay *Shakespeare und kein Ende* the clash between internal and external forces is further elaborated upon. There Shakespeare's effective employment of these forces is said to constitute the greatness of his tragedies, because the internal force of "Wollen" and the external one of "Sollen" are managed by Shakespeare to provide powerful tragic conflicts. In the essay's second subsection, entitled *Shakespeare, verglichen mit den Alten und Neusten*, Goethe posits that in ancient dramatic poetry tragedy is brought on by an imbalance between "Sollen und Vollbringen," while modern tragedies usually show a disparity between "Wollen und Vollbringen." He applies these notions to Shakespeare and states:

Niemand hat vielleicht herrlicher als er die erste große Verknüpfung des Wollens und Sollens im individuellen Charakter dargestellt. Die Person, von der Seite des Charakters betrachtet, soll: sie ist beschränkt, zu einem Besondern bestimmt; als Mensch aber will sie. Sie ist begrenzt und fordert das Allgemeine. Hier entspringt schon ein innerer Konflikt, und diesen läßt Shakespeare vor allen anderen hervortreten. Nun aber kommt ein äußerer hinzu, und der erhitzt sich öfters dadurch, daß ein unzulängliches Wollen durch Veranlassung zum unerläßlichen Sollen erhöht wird. Diese Maxime habe ich früher am Hamlet nachgewiesen; sie wiederholt sich aber bei Shakespeare; denn wie Hamlet durch den Geist, so kommt Macbeth durch Hexen, Hekate und die Überhexe, sein Weib, Brutus durch die Freunde in eine Klemme, der sie nicht gewachsen sind; ja sogar im Coriolan läßt sich das Ähnliche finden; genug ein Wollen, das über die Kräfte eines Individuums hinausgeht, ist modern. Daß es aber Shakespeare nicht von innen entspringen, sondern durch äußere Veranlassung aufregen läßt, dadurch wird es zu einer Art von Sollen und nähert sich dem Antiken.¹¹

These words were written in 1813 and published two years later. Nearly twenty years had elapsed since *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* appeared. Still, they are of significance to this discussion. Most important, of course, is Goethe's statement that he has demonstrated the ideas forwarded here in some earlier treatment of *Hamlet*. To what treatment does the poet refer? There is no critical exposition of *Hamlet* in any writing of Goethe's other than in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. His 1797 translation of *Amlets Geschichte nach dem Saxo Grammaticus* deals with the old Hamlet legend and has no reference to Shakespeare. His brief review *The First Edition of the Tragedy of Hamlet by William Shakespeare* as reprinted by Fleischer in 1825 is the only other non-fictional paper of Goethe's on *Hamlet*. Here again Goethe does not discuss the Hamlet figure but comments on textual peculiarities and the stage directions of this edition. Therefore, when Goethe says he has proven his maxim in regard to Hamlet, he cannot be speaking of anything but the novel.

Furthermore, the quotation reveals that Goethe's conception about the central point in Shakespeare's tragedies had not changed since his speech *Zum Schakespears Tag*. It had been tested and reworded in the days of his intense *Hamlet* studies which preceded the writing of the pertinent chapters in *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*, later taken into the *Lehrjahre*. It is again offered in a more sophisticated and detailed form in

Shakespeare und kein Ende but essentially it remained the same. If one asks how the essay's concepts apply to the notion of fate in the Hamlet criticism of the *Lehrjahre*, the answer must be that fate is the agent which raises Hamlet's revenge from "Wollen" to "Sollen." His "unzulängliches Wollen" is not strong enough to move him to action; therefore, he chooses to withdraw into melancholy contemplation, but the Ghost forces him to act. As Goethe so beautifully expresses it, "a task is laid upon a soul unable to perform it." And it is precisely because Hamlet is not by natural inclination a man of great action, that the external force of fate acts as the unifying principle for the play. When Wilhelm Meister insists that Hamlet has no plan but that the play is "planvoll," he reiterates the idea Goethe had expressed in his speech *Zum Schäkesspears Tag* quoted above where he had made the blanket statement that all of Shakespeare's plays seem to have "no plan in the usual sense." It appears, then, that there exists agreement between Wilhelm Meister and Goethe at least with regard to the role of fate in Hamlet's character and in Shakespeare's management of the plot.

Aside from this mutual corroboration of fictional and expository accounts there is one more item of evidence indicating that at least the character assessment of Hamlet in the *Lehrjahre* can be attributed to Goethe. From August 23, 1794 to the completion of the *Lehrjahre* on June 26, 1796 and a short time afterwards Goethe and Schiller corresponded about the work. Schiller made certain suggestions which Goethe appreciated and used wherever practicable. For this reason Goethe sent the novel book by book, as the manuscript was completed, to Jena where Schiller would read them, make pencil marks in the margin, and either write to, or talk with Goethe about suggestions for changes. In the letter of February 22, 1795, Schiller writes with reference to the fourth book of the novel, which contains all three major statements about Hamlet's character and the long passage on how fate has drawn the plan of action:

Übrigens habe ich beim zweiten Durchlesen wieder neues Vergnügen über die unendliche Wahrheit der Schilderungen und über die treffliche Entwicklung des Hamlet empfunden. Was die letztere betrifft, so wünschte ich, bloß in Rücksicht auf die Verkettung des Ganzen und der Mannigfaltigkeit wegen, die sonst in einem so hohen Grade behauptet worden ist, daß diese Materie nicht so unmittelbar hintereinander vorgetragen, sondern wenn es angehe, durch einige bedeutende Zwischenumstände hätte unterbrochen werden können.¹²

In the return letter Goethe thanks Schiller for his helpful suggestions, promises to incorporate them – which he did – but does not say a word which indicates that he might disagree with Schiller's assessment of the Hamlet criticism. Goethe received similar praise in a letter from Wilhelm von Humboldt dated June 15, 1795:

... und das Raisonement über 'Hamlet' ist voll tiefer Ideen und trefflicher Bemerkungen. Der Unterschied zwischen Drama und Roman, den sie angeben, ist aus dem Innersten der Kunsttheorie geschöpft und verdiente wohl noch einer ausführlicheren Erörterung, als Ihnen die Stelle im Roman erlaubte.¹³

There was no response to this compliment Humboldt paid Goethe. If Goethe had put into Wilhelm Meister's mouth words with which he seriously disagreed, he would hardly have remained silent when two respected friends falsely attributed them to him personally.

If, on the basis of arguments in this essay, Wilhelm Meister's observations about Hamlet are to be accepted as Goethe's personal opinion, then it is not sufficient merely to demonstrate agreement between the *Lehrjahre* and its author's pertinent non-fictional statements, but a rebuttal of published contrary opinions is required. The scholars, who would have us believe that Wilhelm Meister's pronouncements are not criticism with which Goethe would or could identify, are Friedrich Schlegel, Gundolf, Diamond, and Blackall. Their approaches are basically of two types, although related: one, claiming that the Hamlet observations are not so much criticism but poetry, and the other, asserting that they have a place in the novel and only there. Schlegel is the originator of the first approach:

Die in diesem und dem ersten Buche des nächsten Bandes zerstreute Ansicht des Hamlet ist nicht so wohl Kritik als hohe Poesie. Und kann wohl etwas anders entstehn als ein Gedicht, wenn ein Dichter als solcher ein Werk der Dichtkunst anschaut und darstellt?¹⁴

Schlegel gives no detailed analysis to show where the criticism turns into "lofty poetry" nor does he show why it never was or could be criticism. He makes the above assertion and then continues to explain that anyone who spends sufficient time with a work of literature, can answer the questions concerning what a work is, where it stands in the world, and what it is there for. He continues, still only making claims without proving them, that the poet, on the other hand, will break a literary work of another into its basic components and then reassemble them as he wants and not as the author did. One could perhaps grant, and this too is doubtful, that Schlegel has proven that poets and critics look at literature in a fundamentally different manner, but he has not proven that Goethe could not have endorsed the views of Hamlet advanced in the *Lehrjahre*.

The other approach, trying to show that the criticism has its place in the novel but no outside value, has found an influential advocate in Gundolf who writes that Goethe in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* wanted to create a worthy monument for the poet he admired and for his then most popular work:

Man darf deshalb die Reden über den Hamlet nicht ausserhalb des Romans betrachten als eine selbständige "Erklärung" des Hamlet: sie gehören zur Komposition, zur Handlung und sind durchaus abgestimmt und bezogen auf ihre Umgebung, — ja es ist fraglich ob sie Goethes absolute Meinung über den Hamlet darstellen.¹⁵

Since Gundolf only asserts that it is "questionable" whether the criticism in the novel represents Goethe's views, we cannot press him too hard for proofs. He makes a conjecture and leaves it at that. Diamond is just as conservative in his claim. He states that although some ideas expressed by Wilhelm Meister might be like those of Goethe,

Wilhelm is “not the absolute mouthpiece of the author.”¹⁶ This is apparently under the influence of Gundolf, to whom he refers in a footnote. The rest of the article is devoted to showing how the Hamlet of the *Lehrjahre* is more typically a Goethean hero than a likeness of the prince we see in Shakespeare’s play. In closing Diamond states what Schlegel had said before him, namely, that Goethe was “foremost a creative genius” and that in his novel he did “not so much interpret Shakespeare’s Hamlet as create a new Hamlet.”¹⁷ Diamond has gone further than either Friedrich Schlegel or Gundolf in that he has proven that Wilhelm Meister’s exposition of Hamlet’s character is different from Shakespeare’s, if we assume that A. C. Bradley’s interpretation explains *Hamlet* as Shakespeare himself would do. Bradley, then the dean of Shakespeare criticism, is Diamond’s authority. Has Diamond proved, however, that Wilhelm Meister’s criticism differs from that of Goethe? The answer clearly must be that he has not. He did not consider any pronouncements of Goethe outside the novel. Diamond says of Goethe, “With hardly an exception, his literary criticisms lack intrinsic excellence. Most of them have merely extrinsic value because Goethe wrote them.”¹⁸ He should nevertheless have at least mentioned in a parenthetical note what objections he has to the type of comparison undertaken here between the fictional and non-fictional writings of Goethe.

Blackall’s article “Sense and Nonsense in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*” also fails to consider relevant material outside the novel, a fact which may be partially excused because the paper addresses itself to a different topic. Nevertheless, it contains the strongest denial that Wilhelm’s view of Hamlet is shared by Goethe personally. Blackall argues that Wilhelm, who experiences himself as the passive recipient of the provisions of fate, imputes a similar lot to Hamlet because he identifies with the Prince. To transfer responsibility from character to external circumstances is a consoling process of rationalization for Wilhelm, but leads to problems when he gains new insights:

Wilhelm, having so far interpreted the play from the character of Hamlet, exhorts the actors not to interpret the whole from any individual character. This is because he is becoming increasingly unable to identify with Hamlet. The only explanation he can give to Serlo and Aurelie is to say that Hamlet was blond and had blue eyes and was therefore prone to melancholy. This is merely an evasion. The truth is that Wilhelm has come to see that Hamlet *did* move out of his inactivity. It is highly significant that, having first been violently opposed to any cuts, Wilhelm produces an acting version which omits Fortinbras entirely and changes the external action so as to avoid Hamlet’s journey to England. Gone therefore is the contrast with the man of action, gone the fourth soliloquy (“How all occasions do inform against me”) with its turn toward action, gone the assumption of action in Hamlet’s boarding of the pirate-ship and his dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The parallel with his own inactivity has been artificially restored by excising all that interfered with it.¹⁹

This argument contains several weak points. The view is built on certain inconsistencies which become apparent through close study of the facts in the novel. The first two

sentences of the quoted statement seem to imply that considerable interpretation has preceded Wilhelm's exhortation to the actors. Although we must, of course, assume that Wilhelm thought about *Hamlet* before, the initial criticism is offered only after Wilhelm relates the failure of his attempt to perceive unity in *Hamlet* by identification with the hero and that he has shifted to other methods (232). If Wilhelm, as Blackall asserts, had already recognized at this early stage that he is unlike Hamlet and must change the play to preserve the parallel, why would he much later "violently oppose" the changes Serlo wants him to make? In the argument leading up to the above quotation Blackall holds that the concept of fate becomes important after Wilhelm's "one self-reliant assumption of responsibility for the fortunes of the troupe has ended in failure." The reference is to Wilhelm's leadership during the journey and the attack of the robbers. Yet Wilhelm's exhortation to the players, which according to Blackall contains an implicit admission that he can no longer identify with Hamlet, precedes even this incident in the novel. Here, we have, then two significant confusions of chronology which seriously weaken Blackall's argument. Concerning his next assertion it must be pointed out that it is not Wilhelm who begins the discussion about the identity of an actor with the character he is to portray. After Serlo expresses how happy he is to play Polonius, Aurelie mentions that she would be glad if she could say the same about her role — Ophelia. Then she continues, "Ich habe weder Jugend noch Weichheit genug, um mich in diesen Charakter zu finden" (328). At this point Wilhelm says, "Wir wollen es ja nicht so genau nehmen . . ." Only then, perhaps in response to Aurelie's remarks alone, does he state that he does not resemble Hamlet in physical appearance. Otherwise the point might never have come up. One additional note should be made about Blackall's interpretation. The elimination of Fortinbras from Wilhelm's version²⁰ could well mean, but does not necessarily imply, that the important fourth soliloquy with Hamlet's turn to action is deleted as well. In Schröder's version of the play, which also omits Fortinbras, the soliloquy is retained in slightly altered form as a long speech of Hamlet to Gustav, a new name for Horatio, in the first scene of the fifth act.²¹ It is not impossible that Wilhelm's altered version might have included a similar change had Goethe seen fit to present greater detail. After all, he used Schröder's text for several Hamlet performances at the Weimar theater.²²

Blackall claims that the novel's treatment of Hamlet's character does not represent Goethe's views but rather "belongs to Wilhelm Meister and is the product of his situation." Since the arguments adduced to vindicate this contention were shown to be contradicted by the novel, Blackall's statements — just as those of Schlegel, Gundolf, and Diamond — are reduced to nothing more than unsupported opinion.

This essay, on the other hand, compares passages in the novel with relevant non-fictional writings of Goethe. On the basis of their similarity and, in one case indeed, Goethe's later reference to the validity of the Hamlet analysis in the *Lehrjahre*, the assertion is made that Wilhelm Meister's observations about Hamlet are really Goethe's observations pronounced through a fictional character. To say so is not to do Goethe any disservice. While many later critics differed with his views, it must be remembered that Goethe's

Hamlet treatment in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* represents a significant step in the developmental process that won Shakespeare for the German stage.

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- ¹ August W. Schlegel, "Etwas über William Shakespeare bei Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters," in Edgar Löhrner, ed. *A. W. Schlegel Kritische Schriften und Briefe I: Sprache und Poetik*, Sprache und Literatur, 2 (Stuttgart, 1962), p. 94 (88-122).
- ² Friedrich Schlegel, "Über Goethes Meister," in Oscar Fambach, ed., *Goethe und seine Kritiker* (Düsseldorf, 1953), p. 55.
- ³ Claude C. H. Williamson, ed., *Readings on the Character of Hamlet 1661-1947* (London, 1950), pp. 23-24.
- ⁴ Paul S. Conklin, *A History of Hamlet Criticism* (New York, 1947), p. 105. Second printing 1957.
- ⁵ Eric. A. Blackall, "Sense and Nonsense in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*," *Deutsche Beiträge zur geistigen Überlieferung*, V (1965), 51 (49-72).
- ⁶ Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre vom Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler, (Zürich, 1948-1954), VII, 263. Page numbers in the text identify subsequent references.
- ⁷ Hans Jürg Lüthi, *Das deutsche Hamletbild seit Goethe* (Bern, 1951), pp. 11-25.
- ⁸ Carl Riemann, "Goethes Gedanken über Schicksal und Willensfreiheit," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, IX (1959/1960), 174-187.
- ⁹ Lüthi, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Goethe, "Zum Schakespears Tag," in *Goethes Sämtliche Werke (Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Eduard von der Hellen), (Stuttgart & Berlin, 1902-1907), XXXVI, 5-6.
- ¹¹ Goethe, "Shakespeare und kein Ende," *Gedenkausgabe*, ed. E. Beutler, XIV, 762-763.
- ¹² Goethe, *Briefwechsel mit Schiller vom Gedenkausgabe*, ed. E. Beutler, XX, 62.
- ¹³ Hans Gerhard Gräf, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen: Versuch einer Sammlung aller Äußerungen des Dichters über seine poetischen Werke* (Frankfurt/M., 1902), p. 771.
- ¹⁴ F. Schlegel, p. 55.
- ¹⁵ Friedrich Gundolf, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (Berlin, 1922), p. 317.
- ¹⁶ William Diamond, "Wilhelm Meister's Interpretation of Hamlet," *Modern Philology*, XXIII (1925-26), 91 (89-101).
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁹ Blackall, p. 51.

²⁰ In the question of altering *Hamlet*, Wilhelm Meister acts consistently as the champion of Shakespeare, at first in refusing to allow any changes and later, when he sees that circumstances demand some editing, by preparing and defending an acting version that maintains the play as an artistic whole and preserves its tragic outcome. To trace this assertion in detail would require another paper, however.

²¹ Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, *Hamlet, Prinz von Dänemark* in F. Brüggemann, *Die Aufnahme Shakespeares auf der Bühne der Aufklärung in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren*, Deutsche Literatur – Sammlung literarischer Kunst- und Kulturdenkmäler in Entwicklungsreihen, eds. Heinz Kindermann, Walter Brecht, und Dietrich Kralik, Reihe: Aufklärung, vol. XI (Leipzig, 1937), p. 220 (165-233).

²² C. A. H. Burkhardt, *Das Repertoire des Weimarer Theaters unter Goethes Leitung 1791-1817*, Theatergeschichtliche Forschungen, ed. Berthold Litzmann, vol. I (Hamburg, 1891), pp. 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 29, 32, 33, 37, 38.

