

# ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS

# Vision and Textuality in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the conflict between visual and textual forms of representation as a central theme of *Bildung* in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Wilhelm's earliest interest in the theater is clearly motivated by a desire for the exclusive vision promised by this institution. However, though Wilhelm wants a share in the illusive power of vision, he finds himself utterly seduced by security of textual representation. Through most of the novel, Wilhelm seems unable to believe his own eyes unless the validity of his vision is corroborated by some textual «evidence.» Wilhelm's relationship to representation changes when he learns of his potential fatherhood. For the first time he recognizes the deceptive potential of textual representation and truly desires to «see» Felix as his son. Therefore, Wilhelm ends his futile pursuit of vision through the theater and joins another *théâtron* — the panoptic Tower Society. Though the Tower Society will endow Wilhelm with some measure of the power of vision he so keenly desires, it comes at a cost. In submitting to the absolute ocular power of this society of visionaries, Wilhelm sacrifices his autonomy. His *Bildung* ends with the image of his own *Bild* — rendered in minute detail by the masterful and manipulative hands of the Tower Society.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el conflicto entre las formas de representación visuales y textuales como tema central de la formación en *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* de Goethe. Los primeros intereses de Wilhelm por el teatro están claramente motivadas por un deseo de la óptica exclusiva prometida por esa institución. No obstante, a pesar de que Wilhelm quiere compartir los ilusorios poderes visuales, al final se ve a sí mismo seducido por la seguridad de la representación textual. A lo largo de una buena parte de la novela, Wilhelm parece incapaz de dar crédito a sus propios ojos a menos que la validez de su visión sea corroborada por alguna «evidencia» textual. La relación de Wilhelm con la representación cambia cuando se entera de su probable paternidad. Primero reconoce el potencial desilusionador de la representación textual y realmente desea «ver» a Félix como a su hijo. Para ello, Wilhelm finaliza su inútil propósito de ver a través del teatro y entra a formar parte de otro *tetaron* —el panóptico de la Sociedad de la Torre. No obstante, la Sociedad de la Torre hará enfrentarse a Wilhelm con alguna medida al poder de la visión que tanto anhela. Al someterse a sí mismo al poder ocular absoluto de estos visionarios, Wilhelm sacrifica su independencia. Su formación concluye con la imagen de su propio ser, dibujada hasta el mínimo detalle por la mano maestra y manipuladora de la Sociedad de la Torre.

## KEY WORDS

Education  
Curtain  
Image  
Representation  
Secrecy  
Text  
Textile  
Theater  
Veil  
Vision

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Educación  
Cortina  
Imagen  
Representación  
Secretismo  
Texto  
Textil  
Teatro  
Velo  
Visión

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## I. Origins

### 1. Wilhelm's Apprenticeship?

*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is an exceedingly strange novel. Though it serves as archetype for the genre of *Bildungsroman*, as many critics have argued, neither the hero of the novel, the resolution of novel, nor the status of the «education» that has supposedly taken place in the course of the novel seem entirely satisfactory. As Hans Eichner points out: «Wilhelm ist nicht bloß, und vielleicht nicht einmal vor allem, der Held eines Bildungsromans. Er ist auch der Held eines pikaresken Romans [. . .]» (288).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the substantial fortunes of young Wilhelm, including those earned for him by Werner, and those he will acquire — along with an aristocratic title — upon marriage to Natalie, seem more the result of picaresque luck than the expected fruits of hard years spent cavorting around with pretty girls and indulging a mediocre talent for theater.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, though the ending of the novel seems to be a «happy» one it features a hero nearly devoid of any autonomy, who has resigned his entire future to the machinations of the Tower Society. As such, the status of Wilhelm's *Bildung* in the novel is most perplexing.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it would seem that the role of «Bildung» is not even clear to the assumed student, Wilhelm. At the end of Book 7, Wilhelm learns that his formal apprenticeship, in which he has unknowingly been participating, has come to an end. He is inducted into the Tower Society, a secret society of secretive men, and is given a scroll of pithy sayings. Although the Abbé assures Wilhelm of the important contents of the scroll, to one uninducted, the content seems blasé enough. Even to the newly apprenticed Wilhelm, the importance of his «Lehrbriefe,» and the purpose of his apprenticeship is hardly clear. He bemoans the state of his apprenticeship and the accompanying scroll to Jarno:

Also mit diesen würdigen Zeichen und Worten spielt man nur [. . .] man führt uns mit Feierlichkeit an einen Ort, der uns Ehrfurcht einflößt, man läßt uns die wunderlichsten

<sup>1</sup> Eichner, H., «Aus: Zur Deutung von Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1966).» *Goethes Wilhelm Meister: Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der Lehr- und Wanderjahre*. Ed. Klaus F. Gille. Königstein/Ts 1979, 277-291, here 233.

<sup>2</sup> Eichner 287

<sup>3</sup> There are many interesting approaches to the complex question of *Bildung* in the novel. For example, see Friedrich Kittler's analysis of «Bildung» in the novel through the lens of the distinct change in the structure of the

Erscheinungen sehen, man gibt uns Rollen voll herrlicher, geheimnisreicher Sprüche, davon wir freilich das wenigste verstehn, man eröffnet uns, daß wir bisher Lehrlinge waren, man spricht uns los, und wir sind so klug wie vorher. (VIII: 5, 548)<sup>4</sup>

Wilhelm learns that his apprenticeship has consisted of constant secret surveillance: nearly every stranger he encounters in the novel, returns to him, in a secret chamber of the Tower Society during his induction ceremony to inform Wilhelm of the role played in his apprenticeship. Although, as the above quote indicates, Wilhelm is frustrated with the lack of transparency offered by his «apprenticeship» and the accompanying cryptic collection of maxims, he seems utterly unconcerned with the lack of privacy he has experienced during the course of his young life — it seems that Wilhelm's every thought and action has been dutifully observed, recorded, and judged by these «masters.» What bothers Wilhelm is not this ocular invasion into his life, but that his «teachers» did not more stringently control it. Wilhelm asks: «Wenn so viele Menschen an dir teilnahmen, deinen Lebensweg kannten und wußten, was darauf zu tun sei, warum führten sie dich nicht strenger? Warum nicht ernster? Warum begünstigten sie deine Spiele, anstatt dich davon wegzuführen?» (VII: 9, 495), he is answered with a resounding: «Rechte nicht mit uns! [ . . . ] du bist gerettet und auf dem Wege zum Ziel» (VII: 9, 495). However, the voice doesn't inform Wilhelm what the goal toward which he is heading is, and from what, exactly, he has been saved.

## 2. The Seduction of Secret Vision

Though it is not yet clear to Wilhelm what learning has justified his induction into this secret society, he is clearly pleased with his inclusion. As Jarno sets out to educate Wilhelm about his apprenticeship and the history of the society, he begins by discussing the nature of secrecy:

Die Neigung der Jugend zum Geheimnis, zu Zeremonien und großen Worten ist außerordentlich und oft ein Zeichen einer gewissen Tiefe des Charakters. Man will in diesen Jahren sein ganzes Wesen, wenn auch nur dunkel und unbestimmt, ergriffen und berührt fühlen. Der Jüngling, der vieles ahnet, glaubt in einem Geheimnisse viel zu finden, in ein Geheimnis viel legen und durch dasselbe wirken zu müssen. (VIII: 5, 548-549)

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middle-class family occurring in the eighteenth-century — Kittler, F. «Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters,» Kaiser, G. and Kittler, F., *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel*. (Cöttingen 1978), 13-124. For a fascinating reading of the use of gender dynamics in the novel as a means through which Wilhelm's course of *Bildung* leads him from the feminine and erotic sphere of the theater to the masculine, economic order of the Tower Society see Helfer, M., «Wilhelm Meister's Women,» *Goethe Yearbook XI* (2002), 229-254. Also see David Wellbery's reading of the question of *Bildung* as an education toward fatherhood and authorship in «Die Enden des Menschen: Anthropologie und Einbildungskraft im Bildungsroman.» *Das Ende: Figuren einer Denkform* (München 1996), 600-639.

<sup>4</sup> Goethe, *Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe. 14 vols. Ed. Erich Trunz. (München 1998). Citations from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* are noted as «book: chapter, page number.» Quotations from other works by Goethe are noted with the volume number followed by the page number.

Jarno's description distinctly characterizes secrecy as a space – a space in which one can place things and find things, a place in which one can act. More specifically, however, this space of secrecy is directly related to the youth's attempt to grasp his essential nature. However, though Jarno establishes this interest in secrecy as a founding aspect of the society, he contrasts himself with such secrecy, recounting how he rebelled against this love of secrecy through a devotion to clarity. He explains: «ich hatte von Jugend auf klar gesehen und wünschte in allen Dingen nichts als Klarheit [. . .]» (VIII: 5, 549). This juxtaposition of secrecy and clarity is significant because it summarizes the motivation for Wilhelm's attraction to secret spaces. The seduction of the secret is the promise of hidden revelation – the promise embedded within the obscurity of the secret is of some hidden, exclusive clarity. Though the Tower Society is the most obvious presentation of secrecy in the novel, similar structures of secrecy have fascinated Wilhelm from his earliest youth. Wilhelm describes the secret spaces behind the locked door of his childhood as a «Heiligtum» that was occasionally revealed to him by his mother (I: 5, 19). More importantly, his recollection of his earliest childhood encounters with his first love – the theater – are almost ridiculously adorned with a nomenclature of secrecy. He describes the theater curtain as a «halb durchsichtige Hülle» (I: 2, 12) covering the «Heiligtum» (I: 5, 19) of the stage. As he tells Marianne and Barbara about his first ballet performance, he repeats this characterization of the stage curtain, noting his disappointment the next morning in finding «der mystische Schleier weggehoben» (I: 4, 17). It is clearly the structure of secrecy, embodied by the stage curtain, which so fascinates Wilhelm. This is punctuated by Wilhelm's obviously pejorative comparison of the way the Meister home is decorated to a stage curtain. As Wilhelm explains to his mother, the decorations, «kommen mir höchstens vor wie unser Theatervorhang» (I: 2, 12). Given his love for the theater curtain, one would expect this to be a compliment. However, he notes, there is a distinct difference: «Aber wie anders ist's, vor diesem [dem Theatervorhang] zu sitzen! Wenn man noch so lange warten muß, so weiß man doch, er wird in die Höhe gehen, und wir werden die mannigfaltigsten Gegenstände sehen, die uns unterhalten, aufklären und erheben» (I: 2, 12). Unlike the locked doors and the theater curtain, the house decorations neither conceal nor reveal any secret space or view behind them.

Wilhelm's initiation into the theater plays the important role of preparing him for his later induction into the secret Tower Society. When Wilhelm recalls how the Lieutenant introduced him to the workings of the theater, it is indeed described as if Wilhelm were being thus inducted into a secret society. He recalls that after the Lieutenant had expressed the wish, «[Wilhelm] in diese Geheimnisse einweihen zu dürfen» (I: 5, 21), that Wilhelm could not wait until the appointed time finally arrive. When the day finally came, and the Lieutenant led him upstairs to the theater, Wilhelm describes:

[ich] stieg auf den Tritt, der mich über das Theater erhob, so daß ich nun über der kleinen Welt schwebte. Ich sah nicht ohne Ehrfurcht zwischen die Brettchen hinunter, weil die Erinnerung,

welche herrliche Wirkung das Ganze von außen tue, und das Gefühl, in welche Geheimnisse ich eingeweicht sie, mich umfaßten. (I: 6, 22)

The repeated description of seeing behind the theater curtain as an «Einweihung in Geheimnisse» certainly foreshadows Wilhelm's induction into the mystical Tower Society. Furthermore, as suggested here, induction into the «secret society» of the puppet theater promises a unique visual perspective otherwise closed to Wilhelm. As Wellbery correctly notes, «das Puppenspiel [schreibt sich] der Einbildungskraft Wilhelms deswegen ein, weil es sich einem bestimmten Sehen präsentiert. Dem schauenden Kind enthüllt und verbirgt sich gleichzeitig etwas, das seine Begierde fesselt» (617). The conflation of secrecy and clarity associated with Wilhelm's induction into the puppet theater here echoes Jarno's description of the Tower society as seducing with secrecy but promising clarity. Wilhelm's interest in both the theater and the Tower society is inspired by the desire for a secret vision accessible only to those inducted. Interestingly, Wellbery employs the textually coded word «einschreiben» to describe Wilhelm's attraction to the theater. Indeed, though the promise of vision is central to both of these institutions, it should not be forgotten that both the theater and the Tower society are thoroughly imbued with textual elements. Wilhelm's inclusion into the Tower Society is marked by a text — his scroll of apprenticeship. And as Karl Schlechta argues, the wisdom of the Tower society is only accessible through maxim-like sentences: «In Denk- und Merksprüchen, in Grundsätzen und zusammengefaßten Lebensregeln kulminiert die Weisheit des Turmes»<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Wilhelm's interest in the theater is clearly motivated by his desire to visually penetrate a certain text-ile — the stage curtain.

### 3. The Textuality of the Theater

Though Wilhelm's interest in the theater is primarily motivated by a desire to «see,» and though he is clearly exhilarated by the vision of the theater, unmediated by a textile, offered to him on his day of initiation by the Lieutenant, he seems to be overly interested in the textual elements of his own theater productions. As Wilhelm recounts to Barbara and Mariane, as a child, he was obsessively interested in the composition of the written text and the costumes for his childhood theater productions. His interest in the textiles associated with the theater is also punctuated by Wilhelm's infatuation with Mariane. The narrator makes no secret of the fact that Wilhelm's love for Mariane is related to his love for the theater and that he perceives Mariane as the embodiment of theater itself: «in dem günstigen Lichte theatralischer Vorstellung, und seine Leidenschaft zur Bühne verband sich mit der ersten Liebe zu einem weiblichen Geschöpfe» (I: 3, 14). However, it appears that Wilhelm's love for Mariane is not unrelated to the theatrical textiles, in which she clothes herself. On their first embrace in the novel, it is not Mariane that the narrator describes

<sup>5</sup> Schlechta, K. *Goethes Wilhelm Meister* (Frankfurt a.M. 1953), 161.

Wilhelm as embracing, but rather her costume: «mit welchem Entzücken umschlang er die rote Uniform» (I: 1, 11)<sup>6</sup>. To erase any doubt of the significance of this uniform, it appears again at other points within the novel. In book seven Wilhelm learns from Barbara that after rejecting Norberg, Mariane had waited for him in vain, wearing the red uniform, hoping it would ignite in Wilhelm the same passion for her present upon their first embrace (VII: 8, 480). In book five, we also find Wilhelm seemingly convinced, on the basis of a similar red uniform, that the person wearing this uniform (whom he later learns is Friedrich) is his long lost Mariane (V: 15, 338). If Wilhelm's love for Mariane is determined by his love for the theater, and if Mariane is presented, at times, as fully exchangeable with her costume, it would seem that the importance of the «textual» nature of the theater is not overemphasized here.

The validity of reading the textile as related to textuality (as a representational medium) is supported by the repeated references to the «veil» in this novel. In Goethe's poem *Zueignung*, Goethe equates the veil, bestowed by the «Goddess of truth,» with poetry: «Der Dichtung Schleier aus der Hand der Wahrheit» (HA I: 152).<sup>7</sup> However, the symbol of the veil is distinctly ambiguous. Though the relationship with poetry stresses the *textual* nature of the veil as a web-like textile, as Kittler argues, the veil is also directly related to the problem of *vision*: «[der Schleier] hat die Funktion, sichtbar und unsichtbar zu machen, was ohne ihn nicht gesehen und gesehen werden könnte: die Sonne, die blendet, und/oder 'die Wahrheit', die Name der Göttin ist.»<sup>8</sup> Access to the «Goddess of truth» is thus mediated by two representational media — the hoped-for vision of the «Goddess,» and the textuality of the veil obscuring and revealing the promise of such vision. The most relevant citation of such a veil featured in the novel is, of course, found in Wilhelm's poem, «der Jüngling am Scheideweg,» which Wilhelm composed as a youth. As he recounts the poem to Barbara and Mariane several years later near the beginning of the novel, he explains that «die Muse der tragischen Dichtkunst und eine andere Frauengestalt, in der ich das Gewerbe personifiziert hatte, sich um meine wertige Person recht wacker zankten» (I:8, 32). Though this poem is staged by Wilhelm as indicative of the central struggle between art and economy, as Martha Helfer notes, his

<sup>6</sup> This point has been noted by many critics. Wellbery, for example, argues that this scene is an important example of the influence of metonymy on the poetics of the novel: «So wird Mariane, der geliebte Gegenstand, in die rote Uniform, die sie nicht ist, metonymisch versetzt, diese Uniform selber aber mit der ganzen Energie besetzt, die dem Liebesobjekt zukommt» (623). Also see Martha Helfer's reading of this and other textiles in the novel as a means through which women are commodified (236-240).

<sup>7</sup> The veiled Goddess of truth is an extremely common motif featured employed by many 18<sup>th</sup> century poets and philosophers, including Kant, Schiller, Herder, Schlegel, and Novalis — to name a few. For an excellent discussion of the literary and philosophical history of this motif, see Christine Harrauer's essay, «'Ich bin, was da ist ...': Die Göttin von Sais und ihre Deutung von Plutarch bis in die Goethezeit,» *Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie und Patristik*. 107/108.1 (1994/95), 337-355. The most popular source of this motif is Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*. Trans. John Gwyn Griffiths. (Cambridge 1970). Plutarch informs: «At Sais the seated statue of Athena, whom they consider to be Isis also, bore the following inscription: 'I am all that has been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle'» (131).

<sup>8</sup> Kittler 58.

retelling of the poem subtly introduces a third woman into the poem and introduces the possibility that this poem is also a programmatic symbol of another key conflict in the novel — that between vision and textuality as representational media. As he finishes his long-winded narration of the poem, Wilhelm attempts to revise his artistic «muse,» suggesting that if he had exchanged his Goddess of Poetry, with another Goddess — namely Mariane — his poem would have turned out much better and would have had a much more interesting ending.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is not accidental that the original «muse of art» is the personification of the textual art of poetry. Wilhelm goes to great lengths to emphasize her association with textuality by describing her almost exclusively in terms of *textile*:

[. . .] ihre *Kleider* ziemten ihr, sie *umhüllten* jedes Glied, ohne es zu zwingen, und die reichlichen *Falten* des *Stoffes* wiederholten wie ein tausendfaches Echo die reizenden Bewegungen der Göttlichen. [. . .] enterbt und nackt übergab ich mich der Muse, die mir ihren goldnen *Schleier* zuwarf und meine Blöße *bedeckte*» (I: 8, 32–33 my emphasis).

In contrast to this textually determined poetic muse, Wilhelm clearly characterizes her usurper, Mariane, as the embodiment of theater itself. The word «theater,» derived from the Greek word *theātron* is intimately related to vision, etymologically defined as «a place for looking at.»<sup>10</sup> Given the extent to which the *textual* aspects of the idealized muse of poetry are emphasized in the poem, and the strong visual associations invoked by Mariane as the muse of *theater*, it seems that Wilhelm's poem may thus be justifiably interpreted as symbolizing the tension between visual and textual forms of representation in this novel. This possibility is bolstered by the fact that the iconic image of the «veiled Goddess» thematizes both textual and visual representation.

#### 4. The Tension between Vision and Textuality

In his influential interpretation of *Wilhelm Meister*, Schlechta argues that the central theme of *Bildung* in this novel is presented as, simply, «das 'Wechselspiel' des Lebens gesehen [. . .] aus der unbestechlichen Gerechtigkeit des Dichters» (12). In this essay, I wish to examine the function of the «Wechselspiel» between visual and textual modes of representation as one aspect of Wilhelm's *Bildung* in this novel.<sup>11</sup> Though the tension between vision and textuality is clearly related to Wilhelm's fascination with the «secret spaces» of the Tower Society and the theater, this conflict operates as thread running through the entire course of the novel. Just as

<sup>9</sup> For an alternative reading of this «muse substitution» see Helfer (235).

<sup>10</sup> «*A theater* is etymologically, a place for «looking at» something. The word comes via Old French *theatre* and Latin *theātrum* from Greek *theātron*. This was derived from the verb *theasthai* 'watch, look at,' [. . .]» Ayto, John. *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York 1990), 526.

<sup>11</sup> The distinct artistic possibilities enabled by the visually and textually oriented artistic forms (i.e. painting vs. poetry) is a topic that is repeatedly addressed by Goethe (i.e. *HA* IX: 262f., 316f.; XI: 139; XIV: 252ff.). Wellbery addresses the central importance of vision in the novel (617), while several other critics note the importance of tex-



Wilhelm wishes he could replace the textual muse of poetry with the visual muse of theater in his poem, he clearly wants to endow vision with more significance than textuality. Throughout the novel, vision is characterized as a source of power. The seemingly all-powerful Tower Society is characterized as a nearly omniscient panopticon, and the narrator explicitly occupies a position of higher vision — invoking details and events that are purposely held beyond the view of the reader.<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm clearly wants to operate in this powerful world of vision — indeed, Wellbery even goes so far as to describe Wilhelm as suffering from a «visuelle Obsession» (617). However, though Wilhelm wants to place his trust in vision, he is constantly fettered by an apparent dependence on textuality. Portents of the difficulties Wilhelm will encounter in investing his trust in vision are apparent at the moment he finishes narrating his poem. Though Wilhelm desires to replace the «textual» muse of poetry with the «visual» muse of theater — embodied by Mariane — his muse is, at this moment of honor, fast asleep (I: 8, 33). Wilhelm is attracted to the theater because it promises a novel and clear vision not otherwise accessible. However, throughout his engagement with the theater, Wilhelm's dream of vision is constantly obstructed by his fetishistic attachment to textuality.<sup>13</sup> Through much of the novel, Wilhelm seems utterly incapable of trusting his own vision, relying instead upon the safe materiality of textual representation to secure the validity of his malleable visual recollections. At key moments in the novel, he cannot believe his eyes unless his vision is corroborated by some textual «evidence» — as in his poem, Wilhelm consistently relies on textuality to cover his nakedness. The following section of this paper is devoted to examining such moments in the novel through the lens of this representational tension and discusses the effect of this tension for the development of the novel. The beginning of the novel states «Das Schauspiel dauerte sehr lange» (I: 1,9) — however, the *Schau-Spiel* does not last forever.<sup>14</sup> At the moment Wilhelm truly desires to «see» his apprenticeship comes to an end. He stops «playing» with vision and leaves the *Schauspiel* of the theater. The final section of this paper addresses the resolution of Wilhelm's «education of representation» effected by his induction into the «seri-

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tuality in the novel. Schlechta devotes a section of his book to the significance of the numerous «maxims» given within the narration of the novel (161-176), and Kittler addresses the significance of the archival «Aufschreibesystem» employed by the Tower Society. For an interesting reading addressing the significance of textual representation in relation to the motif of death and the specific logic of the Tower Society see Hörisch, *J. Gott, Geld und Glück: Zur Logik der Liebe in den Bildungsromanen Goethes, Kellers, und Thomas Manns*. (Frankfurt a.M. 1983). However, none of these readings address the *conflict* of vision and textuality as representational media in this novel. Furthermore, while Kittler's, Wellbery's, and Hörisch's readings are strongly informed by an attempt to apply psychoanalytic and deconstructivist theories of subjectivity to this novel, my reading of this novel seeks merely to address the conflict of vision and text primarily in terms of their significance as representational media.

<sup>12</sup> The many comments in the novel similar to the following make it clear that the narrator is privy to much more information than the reader: «Lothario und Jarno saßen am andern Ende des Zimmers und führten ein sehr bedeutendes Gespräch, das wir gern, wenn uns die Begebenheiten nicht zu sehr drängten, unsern Lesern hier mitteilen würden» (VIII: 10, 603).

<sup>13</sup> See Wellbery's interesting discussion of the metonymic structure of the fetish in this novel (624).

<sup>14</sup> Wellbery also notes that the first sentence of the novel is «vielleicht nicht nur aus Barbaras Perspektive zu lesen, sondern auch aus der Sicht des Erzählers [. . .]» (617).

ous» *théâtron* of the Tower Society. Though his induction does endow him with some measure of the visual power he so keenly desires, it seems to be at the cost of his own autonomy.

## II. Trust in the Text

### 1. Mariane

Disregarding childhood recollections, the first moment in the novel, at which the collision of vision and textuality alters the course of young Wilhelm's life is at the end of Book I, when Wilhelm sits outside of Mariane's window thinking of her. Earlier in the evening, he had been inexplicably rebuked by Mariane and, upon leaving, snatched one of her scarves as a memento. After going home and realizing that he would not be able to see her that evening, Wilhelm returns, resolving to succor himself with some voyeuristic fantasies from beneath her window — fantasies which are, however decorated with a number of textual elements. As he thinks of her from below, he considers: «Wie oft ist mir's geschehen, daß ich, abwesend von ihr in Gedanken an sie verloren, ein Buch, ein Kleid oder sonst etwas berührte und glaubte, ihre Hand zu fühlen, so ganz war ich mit ihrer Gegenwart *umkleidet* (I: 17, 73 my emphasis). Recalling the earlier moment when Wilhelm bestows his passionate embraces upon Mariane's «costume,» here Wilhelm also strives to invoke the embodiment of Mariane through explicitly *textual* means. Similarly, as these thoughts of Mariane bring Wilhelm to a state of intense passion, it is her scarf — which he unfortunately left at home — that he reaches for: «Er fühlte nach dem Halstuch, das es von ihr mitgenommen hatte; es war vergessen, es steckte im vorigen Kleide. Seine Lippen lechzten, seine Glieder zitterten vor Verlangen» (I: 17, 73). At this point too, it is unclear if Wilhelm's intense passion should correctly be attributed to Mariane or to her clothing. As he imagines seeing Mariane in her room, while longing for her forgotten scarf, it is the textiles surrounding her that are emphasized: «Dann saß er wieder eine Weile stille und dachte sie hinter ihren *Vorhängen*, im weißen *Nachtkleide* mit dem roten *Band* um den Kopf in süßer Ruhe [. . .]» (I: 17, 73 my emphasis).

The contrast between Wilhelm engaging in the visual pleasure of looking towards Mariane's room and the prominence of textiles suggests Wilhelm's difficulties concerning the theater — while he wants to use the theater as a portal for gaining a unique visual perspective, he is consistently seduced by the texts, curtain, costumes, and other textiles associated with the theater. The juxtaposition at this point between Wilhelm's textually embellished fantasies of vision also foreshadows the imminent vision of the shadowy figure of Norberg that Wilhelm will see creeping away from the house. Just as he was heading home, as he looked towards the house once more, «[es] kam ihm vor, als wenn Marianens Türe sich öffnete und eine dunkle Gestalt sich herausbewegte. Er war zu weit, um deutlich zu sehen, und eh' er sich faßte und recht auf sah, hatte sich die Erscheinung schon in der Nacht verloren» (I: 17, 74). Wilhelm, who, at this point, is fully incapable of trusting his vision, simply banishes this «Gespent» from his soul: «Er hatte, wie er zurückkam, das unerwartete Blendwerk mit den

triftigsten Gründen beihäufig aus der Seele vertrieben» (I:17, 74). It is only as a superfluous action to confirm that his eyes tricked him and that he did not *really* see anything, that he, upon arriving home, once again turns to a textile: Mariane's scarf which he now has at his disposal. As he lifts the scarf, he discovers that the textile is enriched with another text, about a textile — a note to Mariane from Norberg, advising her on her clothing choices, and confirming Wilhelm's deepest fear that he is not Mariane's only suitor: «Höre, tu mir nicht wieder die schwarzgrünbraune Jacke an, Du siehst drin aus wie die Hexe von Endor. Hab' ich Dir nicht das weiße Negligé darum geschickt, daß ich ein weißes Schäfchen in meinen Armen haben will?» (I: 17, 75). Interpreted as a comment on Mariane's boudoir fashion, rather than as an emphasis of the importance of text/ile at this moment in the novel, this would be an undeniably strange conclusion to Book I and to Wilhelm and Mariane's relationship. Because of this three-layer text, Wilhelm reasserts the reality of the shadow that he saw, which he was heretofore so willing to dismiss. At this point he is so convinced that he saw his own betrayal in the form of Norberg's shadow, that he abruptly and without explanation ends his relationship with Mariane, never to see her again.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Natalie

The collision between vision and textuality that ends Wilhelm's relationship with his first love, Mariane, is the same recipe that begins his relationship with the idealized «Amazon» — later revealed to be Natalie. This parallel is not accidental. While Wilhelm attempts to access through Mariane the special vision promised by the theater, this attempt is in vain — Wilhelm's desire for vision is thwarted by his fetishistic attachment to textuality. In contrast to Mariane, the gleaming Amazon is painted in a distinctly visual register. Wilhelm first sees the Amazon in a hallucinatory sequence, during which he lapses in and out of consciousness, due to the pain caused by a recently inflicted wound. As the narrator describes:

Wilhelm, den *der heilsame Blick ihrer Augen* bisher festgehalten hatte, war nun, als der Überrock fiel, von ihrer schönen Gestalt überrascht. [. . .] In diesem *Augenblicke*, [. . .] wirkte der lebhafteste Eindruck ihrer Gegenwart so sonderbar auf seinen schon angegriffenen Sinne, daß es ihm auf einmal vorkam, *als sei ihr Haupt mit Strahlen umgeben*, und über *ihr ganzes Bild* verbreite sich nach und nach ein *glänzendes Licht*. [. . .] Die Heilige verschwand *vor den Augen* des Hinsinkenden; er verlor alles Bewußtsein, [. . .]. (IV: 7, 228 my emphasis).

The Amazon's affinity to Mariane is punctuated by a comparison with Philine. As Wilhelm sees the Amazon standing with Philine, the narrator remarks: «Philine war ihm noch nie in einem so ungünstigen Lichte erschienen» (IV: 7, 228). This comment, distinguishing Philine

<sup>15</sup> Hörisch also punctuates the importance of textual representation as validating vision in this case: «Die schriftliche Repräsentation des Dritten macht es unmöglich, ihn [Norberg] weiterhin als bloßes 'Phantom' zu gewahren» (43-44)

from the opulent and «günstigen» light, in which the Amazon stands, recalls Mariane, who first appeared to Wilhelm «in dem günstigen Lichte theatralischer Vorstellung.» (I: 3, 14). However, it is clear that Wilhelm has progressed somewhat on his path toward vision since leaving Mariane: in contrast to the way in which Wilhelm fetishizes the textuality associated with Mariane, in his vision of the Amazon Wilhelm fetishistically clothes her in elements of vision and light. However, perhaps because of his (seemingly permanently) «angegriffene Sinne,» Wilhelm is nevertheless unable to trust the reality of even this intense visual impression of the Amazon, and again relies on a text to secure the reality of his vision. In this case, Wilhelm finds his textual guarantee in the form of the cloak the Amazon leaves behind: «Oft kam ihm die Geschichte wie ein Traum vor, und er würde sie für ein Märchen gehalten haben, wenn nicht das Kleid zurückgeblieben wäre, das ihm die Gewißheit der Erscheinung versicherte» (IV: 9, 236).<sup>16</sup> The suggestion here that the Amazon's cloak serves as a *textual* guarantee of the reality of his vision is emphasized by the fact that, like Mariane's scarf, the Amazon's cloak also conceals a *text* — the Amazon's handwritten note inquiring about the health of her uncle (IV: 11, 240).

Before the image of the Amazon becomes flesh in Natalie, Wilhelm's encounters with her are limited to a series of «visions» — daydreams, a dream, and hallucinatory encounters or fantasies. Lest the importance of the textual security blanket of her cloak go unnoticed, it accompanies each one of Wilhelm's «visions» of the Amazon in some form. Even his most cursory daydreams about the Amazon punctuate the conflation of visually coded descriptive elements with the textuality symbolized by her cloak. His first recollection of the Amazon states that: «Die schöne Besitzerin des Kleides hatte mächtig auf ihn gewirkt. Er sah noch *den Rock* von ihrer Schultern fallen, die edelste Gestalt, *von Strahlen umgeben*, vor sich stehen [. . .]» (IV: 7, 229). Likewise, a couple of chapters later, the narrator reports: «Unaufhörlich rief er sich jene Begebenheit zurück, welche einen unauslöschlichen Eindruck auf sein Gemüt gemacht hatte. [. . .] Er sah das umhüllende *Kleid* von ihren Schultern fallen; ihr Gesicht, ihre Gestalt *glänzend* verschwunden» (IV: 9, 235).<sup>17</sup> This conflation of visuality and textuality remains apparent as Wilhelm experiences his next intense, hallucinatory vision of the Amazon. This vision not only conflates visual and textual vocabulary, but also thematizes this juxtaposition through uniting the visual symbol of the theater with the textual symbol of the written contract, which Wilhelm, at this «Augenblick», is signing:

Indessen wurden die ausfertigten Kontrakte unterschrieben, und durch eine unerklärliche Verknüpfung von Ideen entstand vor Wilhelms Einbildungskraft in dem Augenblicke, als er

<sup>16</sup> The parallel between Natalie and Mariane is also suggested by the fact that they are both dressed in men's clothing — Mariane in the officer's uniform and Natalie in, what Wilhelm immediately recognizes as, «ein weiter Mannsüberrock» (IV: 6, 227). See Helfer's compelling analysis of «Mannweiblichkeit» in the novel (236–240).

<sup>17</sup> While it is certainly tempting to interpret the cloak sliding from the beautiful shoulders of the Amazon as an erotic image, the power of such an interpretation is diminished somewhat by the fact that Wilhelm's interest in the

seinen fingierten Namen unterzeichnete, das Bild jenes Waldplatzes, wo er verwundet in Philines Schoß gelegen. Auf einem Schimmel kam die liebenswürdige Amazone aus den Büschen, nahte sich ihm und stieg ab. Ihr menschenfreundliches Bemühen hieß sie gehen und kommen; endlich stand sie vor ihm. Das Kleid fiel ihr von den Schultern; ihr Gesicht, ihre Gestalt fing an zu glänzen, und sie verschwand. So schrieb er seinen Namen nur mechanisch hin, ohne zu wissen, was er tat, und fühlte erst, nachdem er unterzeichnet hatte, daß Mignon an seiner Seite stand, ihn am Arm hielt und ihm die Hand leise wegzuziehen versucht hatte. (V: 3, 293)

Jochen Hörisch points out the many references to writing employed in the passage above (i.e. *unterschreiben*, *unterzeichnen*, *schreiben*).<sup>18</sup> While this is the case, there are also a number of words relating to vision in this passage (i.e. *Augenblick*, *Bild*, *glänzen*). Thus, it should be clear why the «Verknüpfung von Ideen» expressed above is anything but «unerklärlich.» At the moment Wilhelm secures his further pursuit of vision via the theater with a written guarantee, a vision of the *glänzende* Amazon appears — the reality of whom is only guaranteed by a text-ile. However, the «intertext» of the image of the Amazon within the signing of the theater contract is significant — for the first time, the Amazon is directly juxtaposed with the theater. Wilhelm's original image of the Amazon established a parallel between her and Mariane. Thus, the Amazon's appearance here indicates the first portents of a struggle between that original «muse of vision» — Mariane, as the embodiment of theater — and this new muse of vision, Natalie, who symbolizes the power of vision promised not by the theater but by the théâtron of the Tower Society.

### 3. Hamlet's Ghost

Following the signing of the contract, Wilhelm sets to work on his next engagement with the theater: the famous *Hamlet* production. The significance of this theater production for Wilhelm's representational apprenticeship is marked by the familiar conflation of vision and textuality embodied by the mysterious «ghost.» Dorrit Cohn astutely notes that this ghost is related to another ghostly apparition: «die Erscheinung [. . .] das Phantom [. . .] ein Gespenst der Mitternacht» (I: 17, 463) — namely, Norberg slinking away from Mariane's door.<sup>19</sup> The appearance of this ghost in the initial performance of *Hamlet* is staged by the Tower Society, which, in so doing, hopes to guide Wilhelm away from his fruitless attempt at accessing the power of vision through the theater. Originally, it was the shadowy vision of Norberg accom-

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Amazon/Natalie does not appear to be sexual. Though Kittler interprets Natalie as an erotic/maternal figure (97), many other critics have noted the almost hyperbolically desexualized nature of the ensuing relationship between Natalie and Wilhelm — i.e., Cohn (467), Eichner (165-196), Helfer (247-248). Helfer also interprets this particular gesture of «unveiling» as distinctly unerotic (236-237).

<sup>18</sup> Hörisch's interest in this passage is of a psychoanalytic nature and concerns the role in which written language plays in the construction of the subconscious (54).

<sup>19</sup> Cohn, D., «Wilhelm Meister's Dream: Reading Goethe with Freud.» *German Quarterly* 62.4 (1989), 459-472, here 463.

panied by the textual corroboration of a textile (Mariane's scarf) found to be enriched with a text (note from Norberg) that convinced Wilhelm to suddenly leave Mariane, his muse of theater, forever. In this instance, the Tower Society replaces the ghostly apparition of Norberg with an actual ghost. The ghost leaves behind a veil, which, in analogy to Mariane's scarf, Wilhelm later finds to be embroidered with the rather direct and personal message: «Zum ersten- und letztenmal! Flieh! Jüngling, Flieh!» (V: 15, 338). By employing the same conflation of vision and textuality that inspired Wilhelm to leave his muse of theater, the Tower Society hopes that this time Wilhelm will likewise be persuaded to abruptly and permanently leave the actual institution of the theater. Curiously, Wilhelm never doubts the reality of this uncanny specter, in whose voice Wilhelm hears some reverberation of his own dead father (V: 11, 322). To insure that Wilhelm would not simply banish this apparition from his mind as a visual delusion, the reality of this ghost is fully framed by textual guarantees — a mysterious text prepares Wilhelm for the ghost's impending arrival (V: 6, 304), and a cryptic textile informs Wilhelm that he has come.

Wilhelm is, however, at times a bit denser than one might imagine him to be, and seems to have no idea how to interpret this message. After Serlo declines to decipher the meaning of the words for Wilhelm, the veil disappears until Mignon produces it and packs for Wilhelm to take with him on his visit to Lothario.<sup>20</sup> Upon arriving at Lothario's estate, Wilhelm unpacks his things and again encounters the veil. He considers the veil's message, which he still fails to understand: «Was soll das mystische Wort heißen? Was fliehen? Wohin fliehen? Weit besser hätte der Geist mir zugerufen: 'Kehre in dich selbst zurück!'» (VII: 1, 425). As Cohn suggests, this is an appropriate segway into Wilhelm's dream, which immediately follows his rhetorical questions about the veil. Cohn argues that the veil introduces the dream's imagery, while indicating that Wilhelm is about «to 'flee' back into himself» for answers — into the subconscious interiority of his dream (461, n.24). The dream «imagery» to which Cohn refers is, of course, the Amazon's veil. In the dream, the Amazon's veil replaces her usual cloak as the textile guaranteeing her existence. Wilhelm sees the Amazon pulling Felix from a pond in which he had sought refuge from the Harper. Felix emerges from the pond dripping with fire. The Amazon then takes the veil from her head and smothers the fire and, as she lifts the veil, Felix becomes twins. Cohn suggests that the veil in this dream is not only linked to the veil of the ghost but that «[t]he Amazon's powerful and salvatory veil may also be related to the one with which the younger Wilhelm endowed the Muse in his allegorical poem» (n.24). Though this is certainly the case, the «reappearance» of the veil from Wilhelm's poem in his dream foreshadows the fact that the Amazon will soon fully replace Mariane and become Wilhelm's new «muse of vision.» This replacement symbolizes that Wilhelm will soon understand the import of the words «Flieh! Jüngling, Flieh!» He will soon recognize the futility of his search for vision

<sup>20</sup> Though he does not clarify the meaning for Wilhelm, the narrator suggests that Serlo *could* enlighten Wilhelm, but chooses not to: «Wie konnte Serlo mit jemanden einstimmen, der den vorzüglichsten Schauspieler seiner Gesellschaft zu entfernen die Absicht zu haben schien?» (V: 13, 329).

through the theater and will metaphorically leave «Mariane» to pursue vision through the *théâtron* of the Tower Society, symbolized by the Amazon, Natalie. Pursuant to this, as the dream imagery indicates, the significance of Felix will bifurcate: Wilhelm's new capacity for vision will transform Felix from Lothario's son into his own.

### III. Seeing is Believing

#### 1. Felix and Fatherhood

Upon awakening from this dream, Wilhelm finds himself in a room flooded with an important portent of vision to come — the light of the morning sun. Sometime later he finally meets Lothario, and though he is undeniably impressed with him, Wilhelm nevertheless finds an opportunity to express the purpose of his visit to the estate: to berate Lothario for shirking fatherly responsibility for Felix. After Lothario clarifies the great unlikelihood that Felix is either his or Aurelie's child, Jarno interjects, explaining that «[e]in altes Weib, das Sie oft müssen gesehen haben, brachte das Kind zu Aurelien» (VII: 7, 469). Lothario then suggests that they send Mignon to live with Teresa and that Wilhelm take charge of Felix. At this point, Jarno makes a comment, which seems, at first glance, to be utterly unrelated to the conversation, stating abruptly, «Überhaupt dünkte ich, [. . .] Sie entsagten kurz und gut dem Theater, zu dem Sie doch einmal kein Talent haben» (VII: 7, 469). Given the established relationship between the theater and the power of vision, this harsh estimation perhaps implies that Wilhelm should give up the theater because he has no talent for *seeing*. Wilhelm's bad eyesight is evidenced by the fact that though he has seen the old woman who brought Felix to Aurelie many times, he has failed to recognize the woman as Barbara, and thus has failed to see any relationship between Felix and himself. Apparently, though Wilhelm was attracted to the theater because he believed it would empower him visually, the theater has failed to further this goal and has, instead, only supported his dependence on textual representation.

If, indeed, Wilhelm's apprenticeship is, as Wellbery argues, a «Bildung zur Vaterschaft» (615), then it is not surprising that it is precisely at the point at which Wilhelm attempts to accept Felix as his son that the objective security of textual representation fails him and he, finally, truly desires to *see*. After his discussion with Lothario and Jarno, Wilhelm immediately returns to Felix and Mignon for what will be the major representational turning point of the novel for Wilhelm. Upon arriving home, Wilhelm finds Aurelie's old servant woman, Felix, and Mignon on the theater stage all busily engaged in distinctly textual activities:

Als er auf die Bühne kam, fand er Aureliens alte Dienerin beschäftigt, Leinwand zu einer neuen Dekoration zusammenzunähen; es fiel nur so viel Licht herein, als nötig war, ihre Arbeit zu erhellen. Felix und Mignon saßen neben ihr auf der Erde; beide hielten ein Buch, und indem Mignon laut las, sagte ihr Felix alle Worte nach, als wenn er die Buchstaben kannte, als wenn er auch zu lesen verstünde. (VII: 8, 471-472).

Wilhelm confronts the woman, and only now, after examining her «in vollem Licht» does he recognize her to be Barbara (VII: 8, 472). In the few short years since Wilhelm last saw Barbara, one might imagine that he would still readily recognize her face. In any case, though the initial recognition of the possibility that Felix may be his son is introduced by this moment of visual enlightenment concerning the identity of the servant woman, it immediately progresses to the familiar safety of textuality as Barbara rushes off to collect textual evidence, in the form of Mariane's letters, to prove to Wilhelm that Felix really is his son. Barbara produces countless letters, in which Mariane identifies Wilhelm as Felix's father, and even produces a letter from Norberg, evincing Mariane's faithfulness to Wilhelm. However, in this case, this ample textual evidence is not enough to fully convince Wilhelm of his paternity. Wilhelm doubts that he is Felix's father primarily on evidence of the note from Norberg, which fell from Mariane's scarf, which, as he explains to Barbara, contained «Die Aussichten eines verdrießlichen Liebhabers, in der nächsten Nacht besser als gestern aufgenommen zu werden. Und daß man ihm Wort gehalten hat, habe ich mit eignen Augen gesehen, denn er schlich früh vor Tage aus eurem Hause hinweg» (VII: 8, 477).

This recollection of the note indicates a subtle shift in representational emphasis. Originally, it was only the note that guaranteed the reality of the specter Wilhelm saw slipping away from Mariane's house. Here, however, Wilhelm secures the validity of the contents of the note through what he saw «with his own eyes.» When Wilhelm later reads Norberg's note, which supports Mariane's claim to fidelity, Wilhelm's trust in textuality falters. Norberg's letter is a text that contradicts an earlier text, which had originally been used as the guarantor of vision. The deception of textuality experienced by Wilhelm threatens his faith in the secure materiality of textual representation. Wilhelm is unable to fully believe that Felix is his own son because he fails to «see» Felix as his son; the ample textual evidence indicating Wilhelm's paternity fails to convince Wilhelm because textual representation no longer serves as the infallible representation of truth he had thought it to be. However, it is Wilhelm's shoddy vision that Barbara explicitly implicates as the source of his doubt: «[. . .] wenn Sie nicht nach und nach sich selbst wiedererkennen, so müssen Sie schlechte Augen haben. [. . .] es ist ein Glück für die Weiber, daß die Männer in diesen Fällen nicht so scharfsichtig sind» (VII: 8, 489).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as he compares himself with Felix in the mirror, attempting to construct similarity, he experiences joy at this visual «proof» of relation, then tears himself away from the child at the thought of the possibility of visual delusion (VII: 8, 489). Wilhelm clearly desires visual proof that Felix is his son — however, since text has lost its position as the guarantor of truth, the accuracy of Wilhelm's vision becomes indeterminate.

<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm's «shoddy eyesight» is also invoked concerning Madame Melina: «wenn Wilhelm nicht ganz blind gewesen wäre, so hätte er eine nie ganz besiegte Neigung in ihrem Betragen erkennen müssen» (VII: 8, 485).



## 2. The New Théâtron: The Tower Society

Thus, after experiencing how even the compelling texts of Mariane's and Norbert's letters are unable to secure the clear vision of Felix as his son, Wilhelm writes to Werner, informing him of his intention to leave the theater — his experiment with the theater failed to give him the *insight* he had hoped for and he is ready to give it up. The paragraph in which this is revealed — the end of Book Seven, Chapter Eight — directly precedes the chapter narrating Wilhelm's induction into the Tower Society. The theater was unable to fulfill its promise of vision and, instead, seduced with textuality. Armed with the keen desire to see Felix as his son, Wilhelm rejects the deceptive and unsatisfying version of truth provided by textual representation, and is finally ready to exchange the institution of the theater with the authentic *théâtron* of the Tower Society. The visually-oriented nature of his induction into the Tower Society is clear from the outset: Wilhelm is placed in a small room in utter darkness, he hears a voice, commanding him to «come in,» and, for the first time, sees a slightly translucent curtain in front of him. The veil-like curtain, through which Wilhelm sees light shining represents a passage from text into vision, and also recalls his poem, in which he sought to progress from textuality to vision. Wilhelm lifts the curtain and walks in the room, which is flooded with the ultimate symbol of vision — the rising sun — and is seated in a chair positioned to blind him with its light (VII: 9, 494). Wilhelm is born of the dark womb of textuality into light, the spiritual connotations of this room are emphasized by the cathedral-like setting, in which the light (of God) streams through stained-glass windows. The phrase, «[. . .] er hob den Teppich auf und trat hinein» (VII: 9, 493), recalls the first time Wilhelm attempts to gain access to the inner workings of the theater: «Ich hub den untern Teppich auf und guckte zwischen dem Gestelle durch» (I: 4, 19). In analogy to the inner sanctuary of the Tower Society, one recalls that Wilhelm also described the revealed theater stage in explicitly spiritual terms, as «Im Heiligtume» (I: IV, 19). The similarity between the theater and the Tower Society is further emphasized by Wilhelm's induction, which takes the form of a theatrical performance. A curtain (*Vorhang*) above an altar of sorts repeatedly opens and closes to reveal several individuals from Wilhelm's past who each present a pithy speech intended to clarify the secret role played in Wilhelm's «apprenticeship.»

Wilhelm's initial fascination with the theater curtain was for the enlightening, uplifting, and secret vision behind it. Wilhelm's involvement with the theater was thus an appropriate apprenticeship preparing him for his induction into the Tower Society. Through being inducted into the inner workings of the theater, Wilhelm was introduced to the seduction of secrecy for the purpose of gaining an exclusive and hidden visual perspective. However, the theater failed to provide him with the desired visual clarity: Wilhelm was consistently unable to trust his own vision, turning instead to the safe materiality of the text. Wilhelm's dependence on textuality, however, became insufficient at the moment he was faced with the possibility of his own fatherhood. When confronted with his own possible fatherhood, Friedrich confidently states that «Die Vaterschaft beruht überhaupt nur auf der Überzeugung» (VIII: 6, 559). Textual evi-

dence, in this case, cannot persuade (*überzeugen*) Wilhelm of his role in the creation (*Zeugen*) of Felix, because it is only vision that can serve as witness (*Zeugnis*) of his fatherhood.<sup>22</sup> In the moment that he desires «Überzeugung» of his fatherhood, Wilhelm confronts text as an inadequate «Zeugnis» of reality and must turn to vision as the only authentic representation of reality. Wilhelm is thus finally able to oust text from its position of power, investing his trust in vision instead, and his apprenticeship comes to an end. By joining this secret society, Wilhelm is virtually granted the visual power of this society of visionaries. To «see» Felix as his son, Wilhelm now simply turns to the all-seeing eyes of the society, which he trusts unconditionally: «Ihr sonderbaren und weisen Menschen, deren Blick in so viel Geheimnisse dringt, könnt ihr mir sagen, ob Felix wirklich mein Sohn sei?» (VII: 9, 497 my emphasis). All it takes to convince Wilhelm is their affirmative answer.

Wilhelm's «Certificate of Apprenticeship» marks, for the first time, a higher relationship between vision and textuality. The certificate is a text, the validity of which is guaranteed only by vision — namely by the external visual observation of Wilhelm's own life. Not only is it guaranteed by the objective vision of his life as seen through the eyes of the Tower Society, the «Bildung» that brought him to this point has finally provided Wilhelm with clear vision of himself through a «Bild.» In his certificate of apprenticeship Wilhelm «sah zum erstenmal ein Bild außer sich, zwar nicht, wie im Spiegel, ein zweites Selbst, sondern wie im Porträt ein anderes Selbst» (VIII: 1, 505). This is, however not the only *Bild* his *Bildung* has produced. The Amazon has become flesh in the form of Natalie; however, Wilhelm can never relate to her as anything other than the pinnacle of his education toward vision — as pure image. As Wilhelm contemplates being separated from Natalie, he realizes this can never be the case: «und doch wird leider Natalie dir immer gegenwärtig sein. Schließest du die Augen, so wird sie sich dir darstellen; öffnest du sie, so wird sie vor allen Gegenständen hinschweben wie die Erscheinung, die ein blendendes Bild im Auge zurückläßt. [. . .] nun sind ihre Eigenschaften so tief in dein Gemüt geprägt als ihr Bild jemals in deine Sinne» (VIII: 7, 569). Wilhelm's *Bildung* is complete — his life is now fully mediated through the *Bild*. As the narrator notes in the last book of the novel, following his induction into the Tower Society, Wilhelm «sah die Natur durch ein neues Organ» — namely, through that of vision (VIII: 1, 498). However, the ending does not seem to be entirely satisfactory. While Wilhelm now has access to some measure of the exclusive vision he had hoped for on his first day of his induction into the theater, he is not the artist of his own vision. The *Bild* of his life is rendered in minute detail not by himself, but by the masterful and manipulative hands of the Tower Society.

<sup>22</sup> My analysis here draws on Wellbery's elucidation of the ironic relationship between the words «Zeugung» and «Überzeugung»: «Vaterschaft wäre Über der Zeugung, also Überzeugung» (n. 27, sic.)