

**Renunciation in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*
and the Post-Theological Man**

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Abstract

This paper examines the practice of renunciation (*Entsagung*) as described in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* as the proper ethical disposition of man in a post-Christian secular age. This practice constitutes the recognition of one's insurmountable human limitation and the consequent acknowledgement of one's inability to overcome one's finitude. By examining the implications of the Kantian notion of the sublime and the instances of this experience in the novel, I propose to provide a hermeneutical standpoint to clarify the benefit afforded to the individual by such ascetic self-denial. The proper response to one's limitation consists of the dedication to one's daily task as a process of the purification of one's heart, by virtue of which the individual is permitted to hope for the successful fate of his endeavors despite his personal restrictedness. By renouncing, the individual attains to a certain consoling optimism in the post-theological world, despite his inability to overcome his basic finitude.

Wilhelms Mahnbrief

Jeder Mensch findet sich von den frühesten Momenten seines Lebens an, erst unbewußt, dann halb, endlich ganz bewußt, immerfort bedingt, begrenzt in seiner Stellung; weil aber niemand Zweck und Ziel seines Daseins kennt, vielmehr das Geheimnis desselben von höchster Hand verborgen wird, so tastet er nur, greift zu, läßt fahren, steht stille, bewegt sich, zaudert und übereilt sich, und auf wie mancherlei Weise denn alle Irrtümer entstehen, die uns verwirren.

Sogar der Besonnenste ist im täglichen Weltleben genötigt, klug für den Augenblick zu sein, und gelangt deswegen im allgemeinen zu keiner Klarheit. Selten weiß er sicher, wohin er sich in der Folge zu wenden und was er eigentlich zu tun und zu lassen habe.

Glücklicherweise sind alle diese und noch hundert andere wundersame Fragen durch euren unaufhaltsam tätigen Lebensgang beantwortet. Fahrt fort in unmittelbarer Beachtung der Pflicht des Tages und prüft dabei die Reinheit eures Herzens und die Sicherheit eures Geistes. Wenn ihr sodann in freier Stunde aufatmet und euch zu erheben Raum findet, so gewinnt ihr auch gewiß eine richtige Stellung gegen das Erhabene, dem wir uns auf jede Weise verehrend hinzugeben, jedes Ereignis mit Ehrfurcht zu betrachten und eine höhere Leitung darin zu erkennen haben. (Goethe VIII, 426)¹

Every person, from the earliest moments of his life, finds, first unconsciously, then half consciously and finally wholly so, that he is continually limited, restricted in his position; but since no one knows the purpose and aim of his existence, but rather the hand of the Almighty conceals this mystery, he merely gropes about, snatches at what he can, lets go again, stands still, moves, hesitates, and rushes ahead; thus in a host of ways arise the errors that perplex us.

Even the most sensible soul is forced in his daily life to do what is prudent for the moment, and therefore generally does not achieve clarity. Seldom does he know with any certainty where he should turn next, and what he really should do or not do.

Fortunately all these questions and hundreds of other odd ones are answered by your unceasingly active way of life. Continue with direct attention to the task of the day, and always examine the purity of your heart and the firmness of your spirit. When you then catch your breath in an hour of leisure and have room to contemplate higher matters, you will certainly achieve a proper attitude toward the Sublime, to which we must submit with veneration, regarding every

¹ Citations from Goethe's work in German are taken from the Hamburger Ausgabe of his work., and are cited by volume and page number. I have employed standard English translations where they are available, otherwise translations are my own.

occurrence with reverence, recognizing in it guidance from above. (*Wilhelm Meister* 393-394)

1. Introduction

Since the publication of its final edition in 1829, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's fourth and final novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, oder die Entsagenden* has been overshadowed by his magnum opus *Faust*, the complete second part of which was published three years later. Part of this neglect of the *Wanderjahre* is no doubt due to the obscure form of the text: although the *Wanderjahre* could loosely be categorized as a novel, its fragmentariness, non-linearity and inclusion of extended sequences of aphorisms and technical descriptions ensure that the attempt to force the text into a generic category will inevitably fall short. Nevertheless, the *Wanderjahre* remain a singular expression of the thought of the elder Goethe, expressed in a scope every bit as far-ranging as that of *Faust II*.

The status of the novel as a necessary counterpart to *Faust* can be gleaned from the very title, or rather subtitle, of the work: *The Renunciants*. Renunciation (*Entsagung*), asceticism, self-denial: all of these concepts denote the polar opposite of the endless striving of Faust. It is remarkable that the two concluding major works of Goethe depict protagonists who are in every respect the perfect foil of one another. Given this strange coincidence, it would seem to follow that a critical treatment of either work could only be accomplished with a minimal degree of reference to the other. The full scope of the notion of renunciation has not yet been explored in the libraries of Goethe scholarship. Needless to say, this is no easy task, as the form of the novel is itself "renunciatory": in addition to the narrative complexity of the novel, the novel lacks any extended conceptual treatise on the nature of renunciation, and the characters themselves only

use the term sparingly. Nevertheless, the fact that this term is included in the title of his most mature novel ought to indicate the importance of the notion of renunciation not only within the novel itself, but within Goethe's work as a whole.

In this paper, I hope to contribute to this topic by examining the reason for, and the benefit of, renunciation. The first part of the essay will attempt to reconstruct the connection between human limitation and renunciation by offering a brief overview of the most notable scholarly treatments of the topic. Second, I will draw attention to the use of the term "das Erhabene" (the sublime) in close connection to the problem of this limitation. I propose that the technical meaning of this term in the work of Immanuel Kant offers a certain hermeneutic standpoint from which to evaluate the question of renunciation, insofar as the invocation of the sublime in some sense "redeems" the individual's basic finitude. This paper will claim that the practice of renunciation constitutes the attempt to create a new ethical standpoint for the post-theological man; accordingly, I will conclude by examining the renunciatory qualities of the mysterious figure of Makarie. As will become clear, it is only through her renunciation that Makarie becomes the primary agent of social reconciliation in the novel, thereby conferring some degree of intelligibility upon the existence of the secular man.

2. The Question of Human Limitation

To introduce the notion of renunciation and the problem to which it purports to provide an answer, let us cast a brief glance at the history of the scholarly literature on the topic.² We will begin with Friedrich Gundolf's controversial biography, *Goethe* (1916), described by one reviewer as, "[das Buch, das] sich das Wesen Goethescher Entsagung erstmals und in einem

² For a detailed account of the reception history of the *Wanderjahre* as a whole, see Wright 50-68.

neuen Sinn erschlossen hat” (May 183).³ Gundolf’s interpretation of Goethe’s work represents the prototypical instance of what might be termed the biographical understanding of the *Wanderjahre*. For Gundolf, the entirety of Goethe’s poetic after 1806 consists of the attempt to come to terms with the trauma of Schiller’s death, the passing of the last great poetic companion with whom Goethe could assess modernity (528-529). Accordingly, Gundolf declares the origin of the novel to be “didaktisch” in nature (716), the entire text constituting “weit mehr ein Weisheitsbuch als eine Dichtung” (714).⁴ Given this interpretation, renunciation becomes a certain resignation to human transience which serves as the prerequisite for the establishment of utopian pedagogical province; Gundolf claims that the entire novel is a mere vehicle written for the sake of outlining this ideal society (719).

A major development in the literature on the *Wanderjahre* is to be found in Wilhelm Flitner’s *Goethe im Spätwerk* (1947), in which the author likens the literary project of the late Goethe to the attempt of the Renaissance to return to a sort of proto-paganism. Although it is not Flitner’s primary concern to account for the notion of renunciation, this study is notable on account of the fact that Flitner’s work comprises the first instance in which Wilhelm’s letter to Susanne in Book III of the *Wanderjahre* is noted as the most lucid expression of the problem of renunciation in the novel. This passage, quoted at the top of this paper, Flitner labels “Wilhelm Meisters Mahnbrief” (272), or letter of exhortation. Although his exposition of this passage does not offer an extended analysis of its content or formal qualities, Flitner successfully identifies the problem comprising the essence of the letter: the basic quality of human limitation. Flitner identifies the first paragraph of the letter with “das Stadium der Leidenschaft” (realm of passion), and the second with “das Stadium der Vernunft” (realm of reason) (275). The first section

³ “the book that has for the first time shed light on the essence of Goethean renunciation in a new sense.”

⁴ “far more a book of wisdom than of literature.”

expresses the restricted nature of man in his subjection to eros, whereas the second represents the attempt to come to terms with this restriction through rational thought. However, this attempt leads only to the recognition that human nature is just as limited in its rational aspect as it is in its sensibility. The only answer to this is a certain humanized expression of Christian asceticism, which allows the individual to minimize his subjection to his limitations (273). Thus, the third paragraph of the Mahnbrief signifies the “Stadium des ‘allgemeinen Glaubens’” (275), the general faith in the goodness of the world in spite of human finitude. Although Flitner does not provide an explicit justification as to why this universal faith is justified, he loosely indicates that the ground for this faith is to be found in the claim that human nature is an expression of the macrocosmos in which it exists (268-269).⁵

Arthur Henkel’s monograph *Entsagung: Eine Studie zu Goethes Altersroman* (1954) represents the first, and most famous, book-length study of the concept of renunciation in the *Wanderjahre*. This text represents an immense advance over Gundolf’s naive biographical understanding of the novel, insofar as it takes the *Wanderjahre* seriously as a literary endeavor, rather than as a didactic project or an arbitrary collection of various incomplete fragments which could not be published on their own merit (13). Henkel also takes the Mahnbrief to be the novel’s purest expression of the meaning of Wilhelm’s renunciation (40). Henkel’s study is notable for its extensive treatment of renunciation in its relation to the realm of romantic love, which tends inherently toward the tragic on account of human limitation: “Im Raum des Eros ist [Entsagung] überhaupt unausweichlich, selbst in der von außen unausgefochteten und unbeschädigten Liebe” (146).⁶ Henkel links the tragic outcome of non-reflective erotic desire to Goethe’s “self-education” in his chaste relationship with Charlotte von Stein, in which he is able

⁵ For a more extensive treatment of this theme, see Karnick 127-141.

⁶ “In the realm of eros, renunciation is absolutely unavoidable, even in apparently peaceful and unmarred love.”

to develop something of a mediated expression of this love, which Henkel terms “Liebe ohne Besitz” (love without possession) (125 ff.). Finally, Henkel locates the origin of the notion of renunciation in Goethe’s encounters with Spinoza (114-124) and Stoicism (165-168), through which Goethe derived the practical expression of the renunciatory attitude necessary to come to terms with human finitude.

Bernd Peschken is responsible for the second full-length monograph on Goethean renunciation, *Entsagung in Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahren* (1968). This study applies to the novel as a whole the interpretative model given in his earlier article “Das ‘Blatt’ in den *Wanderjahren*” (1965). In his essay, Peschken offers an analysis of the Mahnbrief passage identified by Flitner and Henkel, which he then applies to the narratives of the individual characters in his book of three years later. Peschken’s point of departure in the “‘Blatt’” article is the first paragraph of Wilhelm’s letter, which describes the “Bedingtheit des Menschen als Grundgegebenheit” (206), the contingency/limitation of man as a fundamental fact. Accordingly, man’s limitation cannot be overcome; he cannot eliminate his finitude, but must rather find a means of coming to terms with his finitude from within this very restrictedness. For Peschken, the process of renunciation consists of three steps. The first two paragraphs of the Mahnbrief describe the process whereby the individual recognizes his limitation, the necessary precondition of reconciling with his finitude. The third paragraph describes the second and third steps. Renunciation itself consists of renouncing one’s hopes at escaping human limitation, and replacing these hopes to daily dedication in one’s work; the third step is described in the “sich erheben” (to raise oneself up) of the final paragraph of the Mahnbrief, the moment in which the individual becomes capable of engaging in a certain “Zustimmung zum Geschehen” (220), a

satisfied consent to the happenings of the world and one's own limitation.⁷

A final interpretation of renunciation of more recent origin is to be found in Nicholas Boyle's biography, *Goethe, the Poet and the Age: Vol. II, Revolution and Renunciation* (2000). Boyle traces the conception of this notion to the early 1790's, claiming that it arose out of Goethe's simultaneous encounters with the French Revolution and Kant's critical philosophy: "Arbitrarily and with overwhelming force, 1789 overturned the 'happily ever after' which Goethe had intended his first forty years to culminate" (323). Boyle's claim is that the Kantian explanation of the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth *CPR*) both accounts for the failure of the attempted French utopia and necessitates a qualitatively different standpoint from which to assess one's efforts (ibid.). Because the ideal world is inaccessible to human reason and unrealizable in practical action, the ideal must be renounced in favor of the empirical, since any attempt to attain to that which transcends experience will inevitably fail.

3. The Experience of Sublime

The various scholarly efforts described above offer extensive insight into the circumstances necessitating a renunciatory disposition, namely, the fundamental limitation and contingency of the individual, on account of which his efforts must always to some degree fall short in their execution. The agreement among these authors seems to be that renunciation constitutes Goethe's attempt to come to terms with the finitude of man, a property that seems to be essential to the very fact of human nature and which therefore cannot be done away with. The more controversial question seems to revolve around the nature of the benefit attained by this practice of self-denial. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to answering the following

⁷ For a critique of this separation of *Entsagung* and *Erhebung* based on Goethe's morphological writings, see Meads, "Goethe's Concept of 'Entsagung.'"

question: apart from avoiding certain problems arising from a neglect of renunciation (e.g. becoming entangled in unrestrained passion), what does the individual gain through the ascetic practice of renunciation?

Following the majority of secondary literature concerning this novel, this paper will take Wilhelm's "Blatt" or "Mahnbrief" as the point of departure for the investigation of the concept of renunciation. As Peschken notes, the term "glücklicherweise" (fortunately) with which the third paragraph of the exhortation opens indicates that this section of the letter contains the proper response to the problems of human limitation raised in the opening paragraphs, and indeed, an optimistic response at that ('Blatt' 216). Let us turn to the last sentence of this section, from which Peschken derives his notion of Erhebung:

Wenn ihr sodann in freier Stunde aufatmet und euch zu erheben Raum findet, so gewinnt ihr auch gewiß eine richtige Stellung gegen das Erhabene, dem wir uns auf jede Weise verehrend hinzugeben, jedes Ereignis mit Ehrfurcht zu betrachten und eine höhere Leitung darin zu erkennen haben. (HA VIII 426)⁸

Upon closer inspection of this passage, it is remarkable that Peschken elected to emphasize the verb "erheben" as the locus of the meaning of this sentence, given its proximity to the mention of "das Erhabene", the sublime.⁹ Apart from the vast constellation of philosophical and literary connotations brought to bear in the invocation of this term, the interior grammatical logic of the sentence itself indicates that precisely what is earned in the moment of Erhebung is the "proper disposition toward the sublime": the entire value of Erhebung in this sentence seems to lie in the fact that it is a means of constituting a certain relation between the individual and the sublime. It follows from this that an investigation into the logic of renunciation ought to take into account

⁸ When you then catch your breath in an hour of leisure and have room to contemplate higher matters, you will certainly achieve a proper attitude toward the Sublime, to which we must submit with veneration, regarding every occurrence with reverence, recognizing in it guidance from above. (*Wilhelm Meister* 393-394).

⁹ This is likely a result of the latent tendency to uncritically place the respective worldviews of Kant and Goethe in opposition to one another; Erich Trunz, the commentator of the Hamburger Ausgabe of Goethe's works goes so far as to describe Goethe's efforts in the *Wanderjahre* as "ganz und gar nicht Kantisch" (HA VIII 538).

the nature of the experience of the sublime to determine if this concept offers something of a hermeneutical standpoint for the interpretation of this passage.

Although an exhaustive treatment of the description of the sublime as it appears in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) surpasses the scope of this paper, a brief summary of its essential characteristics is called for at this point. At the conclusion of Section 25 of the *Critique of Judgment*, entitled “Nominal Definition of the Sublime”, Kant arrives at the following description of the “mathematical” quality of the sublime: “That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small” (CJ 134) The immediate difficulty with such a definition is the apparent impossibility of the existence of such an object. Since Kant claims that “space is represented as an infinite given magnitude” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 159, henceforth *CPR*), it would seem that for any given object, regardless of how large it may be, it is possible to conceive of another object much larger in comparison that could fill a larger portion of the infinite breadth of space. For instance, despite the immense magnitude of the Milky Way galaxy, in comparison with which every astronomical body within it is miniscule in size, it is relatively simple to form the concept of an object twice the size of our galaxy. It is equally easy to perform the same operation on this new object, and indeed with any concept of an object possessing spatial magnitude. How, then, is it the case that the experience of the sublime is possible, if this experience consists in the encounter with an object in comparison with which everything is small?

Kant resolves this question by invoking what David E. Wellbery terms “the subjective interpretation” of the concept of the sublime (389). To account for the experience of a sublime object, which apparently cannot actually exist, Kant locates the sublime quality of the object in question not in the inherent properties of the object itself, but rather in the individual’s cognitive

faculties brought to bear in such an experience. The sublime “must therefore be a concept of the power of judgment, or derive from such a concept, and be grounded in a subjective purposiveness of the representation in relation to the power of judgment” (*CJ* 132), i.e. it is nothing other than a subjective contribution to the experience of an object judged to be sublime, rather than a quality intrinsic to the object itself.

This is not to say that the subject can experience the sublime in the perception of any object whatsoever. Rather, Kant posits a second feature of any object taken to be sublime, which he calls the “dynamic” moment of the sublime. For Kant, the experience of the sublime consists of “a **movement** of the mind connected with the judging of the object” (131), and the two moments of this movement consist in the two dispositions of the imagination in taking an object to be either mathematically or dynamically sublime. Thus, the range of objects that can give rise to the experience of the sublime is limited to those that can give rise to both of these moments. The dynamic moment of the sublime is characterized by certain objects of nature (Kant mentions in this context cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes and hurricanes) that surpass in their physical power the finite resistance of the individual to such an extent that the experience of them “makes our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power” (144). Simply put, these are objects that invoke fear in the subject. Note that the dynamic character of a sublime object is also a contribution on the part of the subject: the physical force inherent in such objects is nothing more than a physical property of the object. The fear inspired by such phenomena is brought to bear by the individual, even though such subjective fear might be a response to the objective physical force possessed by the object. Thus, in both the mathematical and dynamic moments of the sublime, the experience “involves a moment that takes as its point of departure an external, phantasmically distorted and hence fear-inducing object” (Wellbery 390). The

distortion to which Wellbery refers occurs when an object of experience surpasses the capacities of the subject: mathematically, the object must be large enough such that it surpasses “the aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude” (*CJ* 135), and the object must be dynamically powerful enough such that it dwarfs the human capacity to withstand its force.

The deeper aspect of the experience of the sublime lies in the knowledge afforded to the subject of his own faculties on account of his very ability to engage in such an experience, which so transcends his physical capacities. As noted above, the mathematically sublime is identified with the experience of an object in comparison with which everything is small. The only object which fits such a description is one of which the term “infinite” can be predicated; thus, in the mathematical moment of the sublime, the experience of the infinite is occasioned by the presence of a certain finite object. However, Kant quickly notes that “**even to be able to think** the given infinite without contradiction requires a faculty in the human mind that is itself supersensible” (138). This is because the human faculty of sensibility functions by giving rise to representations of material objects, and all material objects are finite in extension.¹⁰ Accordingly, the central presupposition of the experience of the infinite is that there is a faculty of the subject which surpasses his merely sensible capacities, and without which he could only conceive of finite objects: in the mathematical quality of the sublime, the subject experiences his own transcendence of the sensible world.

Likewise, the dynamic aspect of the sublime, that is, the experience of an object whose physical force could easily annihilate the subject, is a second moment in which the subject is occasioned by an external object to the recognition of his inner greatness. If such an experience

¹⁰ See *CPR* 158-159.

merely inspired fear in the heart of the individual, then the experience of the sublime would rightfully be loathed, and avoided at all cost. Nevertheless, Kant identifies a definite dimension of “joyfulness” (144) in such an experience: the sublime is at least to some extent pleasurable. The source of this pleasure is located in the fact that objects of tremendous natural power “elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind” (144-145). This is to say that in the willed proximity to an object that inspires fear, the subject becomes simultaneously aware of his ability to withdraw himself from such an object. For instance, despite the futility of the attempt to physically resist the force of, say, a tremendous waterfall, the individual nevertheless also experiences a certain superiority over such a powerful object of nature, on account of the fact that he is free at any point to remove himself from this experience. Herein lies the aspect of pleasure proper to the dynamic moment of the sublime: “nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination...to those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature” (149). In the experience of the sublime, the individual becomes aware not only of his supersensible constitution which sets him apart from his material environment, but also of his superiority over the world of physical force and material causality, despite the fact that the phenomenon which occasions such an experience could easily destroy the subject’s physical being.

The immediate parallel of the Kantian exposition of the sublime to the problem of renunciation lies in the fact that both are in some sense commentaries on the nature of human finitude and limitation. Kant explicitly identifies this connection in a lengthy passage at the end of his treatment of the dynamic moment of the sublime, which I will cite here in full:

For just as we found our own *limitation* in the immeasurability of nature and the *insufficiency* of our capacity to adopt a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation

of the magnitude of its **domain**, but nevertheless at the same time found in our own faculty of reason another, nonsensible standard...and thus found in our own mind a superiority over nature itself...likewise the irresistibility of its power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical *powerlessness*, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. (145, italics added)

The ground for citation of this passage at such length lies in the significant value that Kant here affords to human limitation: only on account of the fact of man's finitude and contingency can he become aware of the sublimity of his own vocation and superiority over nature. As a thought experiment, one could easily imagine a world in which human physical and intellectual capacities far surpass his physical environment. This superiority would ensure that man would never need to fear annihilation by natural phenomena, and no object encountered in experience would "escape" the grasp of his cognitive faculties to offer him the experience of the sublime described above. Under such conditions, both moments of the sublime would be inaccessible to man: despite his incontrovertible superiority over the material world, man would never experience the fear or insufficiency necessary for the experience of the sublime. However, since it is precisely within the context of such experience that man becomes aware of his supersensible nature, such superiority over the natural realm would conceal from him the very dignity of his nature, which possesses such dignity only on account of the fact that it possesses certain qualities surpassing the realm of physical causality.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that, for Kant, it is precisely on account of man's limitation and powerlessness in the face of the overwhelming physical forces of nature that he becomes capable of recognizing his superiority to those very powers which threaten to annihilate him. Only on account of his finitude can man ever seriously experience fear in the encounter

with powerful physical phenomena. Accordingly, the insurmountable restrictions inherent to human nature are the indispensable necessary condition for a human to become aware of his own greatness in the face of the natural world, despite the fact that such restrictions place a fundamental limitation on his ability to accomplish his plans, thereby subjecting him to a great deal of suffering and frustration.

As we have seen, for Kant, the very limitations and boundaries of human nature described in the first two paragraphs of Wilhelm's "Mahnbrief" are given a crucial role in the life of man, insofar as it is these very boundaries that enable him to become conscious of his own dignity. Having seen this positive evaluation of human limitation in Kant's description of the sublime, and the presence of this term in the primary exposition of human finitude in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, the next task would seem to consist of examining the reception of the notion of the sublime in Goethe's work to determine the extent to which the parallel noted above is explicitly relevant to the problem of renunciation. The interpretative question to be asked here could be posed in the following terms: does the invocation of the sublime in the third paragraph of the Mahnbrief indicate a similar value judgment toward human limitation? Even if this limitation cannot be overcome, is there nevertheless some dimension of solace afforded the individual by the very state of being "begrenzt in seiner Stelle" (HA VIII 426)?¹¹

Among the most explicit instances of the sublime in the late work of Goethe is the description of the Straßburg cathedral in Book IX of Goethe's autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. The initial description offered of the cathedral makes explicit its status as an occasion of the experience of the sublime:

Was ich mir weder das erstemal noch in der nächsten Zeit ganz deutlich machen konnte, war, dass ich dieses Wunderwerk als ein Uneheures gewahrte, das mich hätte erschrecken

¹¹ "restricted in his place," (*Wilhelm Meister* 393).

müssen, wenn es mir nicht zugleich als ein Geregeltes faßlich und als ein Ausgearbeitetes sogar angenehm vorgekommen wäre. (HA IX 359).¹²

The sublimation of fear into the experience of pleasure just is the experience of consciousness in the perception of the sublime, and brings with it all of the implications of this experience noted above. The entire description of the cathedral upon Goethe's second visit later in the chapter echoes the language of the Kantian sublime; I note here only the most explicit invocation of Kant's terminology:

Soll das Ungeheuere, wenn es uns als Masse entgegentritt, nicht erschrecken, soll es nicht verwirren, wenn wir sein Einzelnes zu erforschen suchen: so muss es eine unnatürliche, scheinbar unmögliche Verbindung eingehen, es muss sich das Angenehme zugesellen. (HA IX 382-383).¹³

Not only does this passage once more call upon the simultaneous inclinations toward fear and pleasure, but the characterization of this experience as an "unmögliche Verbindung" (impossible combination) hearkens back to Kant's likening of the experience of the sublime to the attempt to construct a "self-contradictory concept" (*CJ* 139), an experience that derives its pleasure precisely from the attempt to accomplish the impossible.

The immediate difficulty that arises with the application of the term sublime to the cathedral lies in the fact that Kant explicitly repudiates the possibility of anything created by man to provide an occasion for the experience of the sublime: "the sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude" (136). The idea here seems to be that since no teleological end is represented in the object taken to be sublime, and since a work of art is created by the artist with a specific end

¹² "But what I could not quite grasp, either the first time or for a while afterwards, was that I would have perceived this marvel as something monstrous and terrifying, had it not at the same time seemed comprehensible in its disciplined order and even pleasant in its planful execution" (*Poetry and Truth* 266).

¹³ "If enormousness, encountering us as a mass, is not to frighten and confuse us as we attempt to investigate its details, then it must accept an unnatural, seemingly impossible, combination: it must be joined with the pleasant" (*Poetry and Truth* 284).

in mind, no artwork can afford “the subjective non-purposiveness of the representation” (ibid.) necessary for the pure experience of the sublime; accordingly, objects of nature are the only possible phenomena capable of occasioning the perceptual conditions necessary for such an experience.

Despite this apparent incongruence with the description of the sublime offered in the *Critique of Judgment*, it seems that in transferring this experience from objects of nature to works of art, a certain social dimension is brought to bear in this experience that is completely absent in Kant’s exposition. At the conclusion of his description of the cathedral, Goethe notes that the construction of such a sublime edifice necessitates the combined efforts not only of various individuals, but also of successive generations. Goethe describes the state of the individual with such an ambitious project in the following way:

Nun gesellen sich aber zur menschlichen Beschränktheit noch so viele zufällige Hindernisse, dass hier ein Begonnenes liegen bleibt, dort ein Ergriffenes aus der Hand fällt, und ein Wunsch nach dem andern sich verzettelt. Waren aber diese Wünsche aus einem reinen Herzen entsprungen, dem Bedürfnis der Zeit gemäß; so darf man ruhig rechts und links liegen und fallen lassen, und kann versichert sein, dass...dieses wieder aufgefunden und aufgehoben werden muss. (HA IX 387).¹⁴

This passage deserves to be cited at such length on account of the fact that it directly parallels the language and structure of the Mahnbrief in the *Wanderjahre*. The problem discussed here likewise revolves around “Beschränktheit”, the state of limitation inherent to the finitude of the individual. In this context, the individual’s architectural endeavors are hindered not only by his intrinsic limitation (i.e., no man could construct a cathedral without the aid of others), but also by a variety of “zufällige Hindernisse”, the heteronomous forces beyond his control that foil his

¹⁴ “Now, in addition to his human limitations, so many incidental hindrances will arise that either a project begun does not progress, or something falls out of his hand, and one wish after the other disintegrates. However, if his wishes have issued from a pure heart and meet the requirements of the time, then he may calmly let things lie as they fall, right and left, in full confidence that...they will be discovered and picked up [aufgehoben] again” (*Poetry and Truth* 287).

aims. Nevertheless, this passage does not imply that the difficulties following from human limitation provide grounds for a pessimistic evaluation of the human condition. On the contrary, the individual is offered an optimistic hope for the fulfillment of his endeavors, given that his efforts proceed “aus einem reinen Herzen” (from a pure heart). The implication here is that despite the apparently futile nature of the efforts of the individual, an optimistic disposition toward these efforts is called for. However, this optimism seems to be contingent upon the intention grounding the individual’s endeavors: only the man with a pure heart is justified in his secure confidence that over the course of time his wishes will be fulfilled.

Furthermore, note that this is the precise terminology used to describe the benefit of the daily observance of duty called for in the Mahnbrief: “prüft dabei die Reinheit eures Herzens und die Sicherheit eures Geistes” (HA VIII 426).¹⁵ The parallel between these two passages provides a clue to the first benefit of the renunciatory disposition described in the Mahnbrief: the necessary condition for an optimistic assessment of one’s endeavors despite the apparent hindrances of basic human limitation is to be found in the “pure heart”. The attitude of renunciation, a crucial aspect of which seems to be the “tägliche Pflichtbeachtung” (daily observance of duty), is accordingly in the first place necessary because only through such a practice can the individual purify his heart and justify to himself his confidence in the meaningfulness of his efforts. Accordingly, the first benefit attained through renunciation consists of the cultivation of the sincere disposition necessary for maintaining some degree of optimism when confronted with his individual limitation.

To further develop the parallels between this passage of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* and the Mahnbrief of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, let us return to examining the central role played

¹⁵ “always examine the purity of your heart and the firmness of your spirit” (*Wilhelm Meister* 393).

by the notion of the sublime in the description of the Straßburg cathedral. Goethe concludes the passage cited above with the following statement:

Sehen wir nun während unseres Lebensganges dasjenige von andern geleistet, wozu wir selbst früher einen Beruf fühlten, ihn aber, mit manchen andern, aufgeben mussten; dann tritt das schöne Gefühl ein, dass die Menschheit zusammen erst der wahre Mensch ist, und dass der Einzelne nur froh und glücklich sein kann, wenn er den Mut hat, sich im Ganzen zu fühlen. (HA IX 387).¹⁶

Given the context of this passage within the description of the perception of the cathedral, the phrase “dasjenige von andern geleistet” likely refers to the perception of human achievements in particular reference the experience of the sublime, and which as such far transcend the productive capabilities of any individual. The implication here is that the experience of the sublime in works of human production, such as the Straßburg cathedral, constitutes the perceptual moment in which the individual is able “to feel himself as part of the whole” (“sich im Ganzen zu fühlen”). This is to say that the perception of the sublime functions as the moment of the confirmation of the optimistic standpoint described above: the observer of the cathedral perceives that the limitations of the individual can indeed be overcome over the course of generations, and that he too may hope for such fulfillment of his endeavors, given that his wishes proceed “from a pure heart,” as described above.¹⁷

¹⁶ “If, during the course of our life, we see others accomplish what we ourselves earlier felt it was our calling to do, but had to abandon along with much else, then we get the beautiful feeling that mankind in combination is the only true human being, and that the individual can be glad and happy only when he has the courage to feel himself part of the whole” (*Poetry and Truth* 287).

¹⁷ Note that this description of the self-recognition that occurs in the experience of the sublime represents a radical departure from that provided by Kant. For Kant, the consolation of the sublime resides primarily in the independence of the physical world of which the subject becomes aware; it is precisely because there is a “supersensible” property of the soul which transcends the fear of annihilation that pleasure in the sublime is possible. In other words, pleasure is derived from man’s independence of the material world, his ability to “withdraw” himself from it. It does not seem unreasonable to infer from this that the Kantian interpretation of the sublime implies a latent pessimism vis-a-vis the efforts of the individual in the material and social world: precisely what the subject realizes in the sublime is that he essentially transcends the world, and as such need not fear the apparent destructiveness of nature or the futility of his accomplishments. By transferring the object of the sublime from nature to art, Goethe arrives at an affirmation of man in his social being in such an experience. Thus, although Kant’s exposition offers few prospects for consolation with regard to man’s material being, Goethe’s interpretation provides a very robust optimism for the ultimate social and material fate of the individual who nevertheless remains

Based on this evidence, it becomes possible to offer an interpretation of the following passage from Wilhelm's Mahnbrief, from which Peschken derives his notion of "Erhebung": "Wenn ihr sodann in freier Stunde aufatmet und euch zu erheben Raum findet, so gewinnt ihr auch gewiß eine richtige Stellung gegen das Erhabene" (HA VIII 426).¹⁸ Given that one has observed the "duty of the day" and thereby proved the purity of one's heart, the positive outcome of experience of the sublime as described above becomes possible. "Eine richtige Stellung gegen das Erhabene" is only possible given the condition that the individual encountering the sublime has some degree of confidence in the purity of his heart, for only the pure heart ensures that one's wishes and efforts will be fulfilled in the course of time. Accordingly, the renunciatory attitude of dedication to one's daily duty, as the activity whereby the individual arrives at confidence vis-a-vis the purity of his desires, is the presupposition of the self-recognition that occurs in the experience of the sublime described in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

Moreover, the aspect of social optimism inherent in Goethe's description of the sublime provides something of an intelligible subjective disposition for the individual to adopt in light of his human finitude. As Peschken notes, the Kantian moral autonomy which frees the individual from the empirical world does not constitute a satisfactory solution to the problem of human limitation: "Jene höchste Freiheit, sich mit der sittlichen Weltordnung in Einklang zu bringen, kann die äußerliche Bedingtheit nicht überwinden. Nur durch Einrichtung innerhalb ihrer Grenzen könne eine Befriedigung möglich sein" ("Blatt" 216).¹⁹ Regardless of any ideal freedom that the individual might discover within himself, he remains fundamentally limited and subject to heteronomous powers beyond his control. In the language of the Mahnbrief: "Sogar der

fundamentally limited in his capabilities.

¹⁸ "When you then catch your breath in an hour of leisure and have room to contemplate higher matters, you will certainly achieve a proper attitude toward the Sublime" (*Poetry and Truth* 393-394).

¹⁹ Even the highest freedom, which brings the individual into harmony with the moral order, cannot overcome outer limitation. Satisfaction can only become possible by orienting oneself within one's boundaries.

Besonnenste ist im täglichen Weltleben genötigt, klug für den Augenblick zu sein, und gelangt deswegen im allgemeinen zu keiner Klarheit” (HA VIII 426).²⁰ Flitner identifies this passage as a reference to the inability of philosophical thought to overcome the basic problem of human limitation described in the first paragraph;²¹ however, despite any rational consolation afforded by the process of philosophical investigation, the basic condition described in the first paragraph of the Mahnbrief is in no way ameliorated. The perception of social totality in the experience of the sublime, on the other hand, provides an optimistic answer to the problem of human limitation as such. Although the individual still does not overcome his own limitations in such an experience, he perceives that they can indeed be overcome through the combined effort of a number of such limited individuals.²² This answer to the problem of human derives its particularly compelling nature by virtue of the fact that it neither represses the problem of limitation, nor offers a qualitatively different consolation to psychologically aid the individual in his confrontation with an unanswerable problem. Rather, the position described here claims to show that although the restrictedness of the individual cannot be overcome through any of his efforts, this very limitation is “healed” through the course of time and social cooperation. Although finitude can never be overcome, the negative consequences it entails are nevertheless offered a positive solution; the individual’s limitations are accordingly to some extent redeemed and freed of their tragic quality.²³

The most evident instance of the sublime in the *Wanderjahre* is to be found in Wilhelm’s

²⁰ “Even the most sensible soul is forced in his daily life to do what is prudent for the moment, and therefore generally does not achieve clarity” (*Wilhelm Meister* 393).

²¹ “Der zweite Passus schildert sodann das Stadium der Vernunft: den menschlichen Versuch sich in diesem Labyrinth durch kluges Denken zu orientieren.” (275); The second passage then depicts the realm of reason, the human attempt to orient oneself in this labyrinth by means of cunning thought.

²² See Henkel 148 f.

²³ A formal parallel in the novel to this social claim is to be found in its use of collections of aphorisms. These comprise a series of limited individual utterances that only find their complete interpretation within the context of the totality of the archive. Cf. Flitner, *Aus Makariens Archiv*.

experience in the observatory in the presence of Makarie's companion, the astronomer. Notably, this scene occurs immediately after Wilhelm's conversation with his hosts concerning mathematics, and its potential misuse (HA VIII 117). Although the specific content of the discussion remains concealed from the reader, Wilhelm's concluding summary is formulated in the following way: "Große Gedanken und ein reines Herz, das ist's, was wir uns von Gott erbitten sollten!" (HA VIII 118).²⁴ Although it remains something of an esoteric mystery as to how the speakers arrive at such a conclusion from the subject of mathematics, the point of emphasis in Wilhelm's synopsis ought to be placed on his use of the term "reines Herz," a term which, as noted above, plays a crucial role in both the Mahnbrief and the encounter with the sublime. Accordingly, by connecting Wilhelm's sole experience of the sublime in the novel with the notion of the pure heart, the episode in the observatory is situated within the much larger context of the role of this experience in the problem of renunciation.

Wilhelm's entry into the observatory is described in terms which denote the initial feeling of fear in the perception of the sublime, signified by his act of shielding his eyes:²⁵ "Das Ungeheure hört auf, erhaben zu sein, es überreicht unsre Fassungskraft, es droht, uns zu vernichten. 'Was bin ich gegen das All...wie kann ich ihm gegenüber?'" (HA VIII 119).²⁶ As we have seen, the encounter with an object whose immensity is capable of inspiring the terror of the physical annihilation of the subject is the perceptual occasion on which the fear of the sublime becomes possible. Again, it is important to note that the overcoming of the faculty of

²⁴ "Great ideas and a pure heart—that is what we should pray for from God!" (*Wilhelm Meister* 117).

²⁵ It is also significant that Wilhelm arrives at the observatory by means of a spiral staircase. Although the significance of this image of the spiral in Goethe's botanical science surpasses the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless relevant to note here that certain features characteristic of the spiralic form closely resemble those of the sublime: the "Spiralsystem" is simultaneously "gesetzlich und vollendend" and "ungesetzlich, voreilend und vernichtend", i.e. it constitutes a sort of contradictory concept, as in the sublime. (HA XIII 140).

²⁶ "The monstrous ceases to be sublime; it exceeds our power to understand, it threatens to annihilate us. 'What am I in the face of it all...how can I withstand it?'" (*Wilhelm Meister* 177, translation modified). For Kant's description of the relationship of "das Ungeheure" (the monstrous) to the sublime, cf. *CJ* 136.

understanding described in this scene is a direct expression of the condition of human limitation which serves as the starting point of renunciation. Nevertheless, it is precisely this quality of restrictedness that enables the experience in the observatory; it is only in the encounter with such tremendous natural forces that Wilhelm is brought to the realization of his inner worth: “‘Darfst du dich in der Mitte dieser ewig lebendigen Ordnung auch nur denken, sobald sich nicht gleichfalls in dir ein beharrlich Bewegtes, um reinen Mittelpunkt kreisend, hervortut?’” (ibid.).²⁷ In this moment, Wilhelm becomes aware of a certain interior power by virtue of which he is capable of such a quasi-mystical experience in the observatory.

To determine the precise nature of the interior faculty recognized by Wilhelm in this scene, we must compare it to the outcome of the experience of the sublime noted in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. It is important to note at the outset that the sublimity of the stars is an experience of the sublime in nature distinct from that of the sublimity of the artificially constructed cathedral. Here, the observation of the movement of the stars triggers the recognition of a parallel movement within the subject. As Henkel notes, “Die ‘Sterne’ sind in Goethes Bildhaushalt dasjenige, welches die ekstatische Paradoxie einer immanenten Ueberweltlichkeit bezeichnet, eine Grenzerfahrung der Welt in Gott” (150).²⁸ In the observatory scene, Wilhelm experiences an immanent manifestation of the transcendent world order; put differently, he recognizes within himself a microcosmos corresponding to the transcendent order of the macrocosmos that he perceives.²⁹

²⁷ “‘Have you the right even to imagine yourself in the midst of this eternally living order if there does not immediately manifest itself inside you something in continuous motion, revolving around a pure center?’” (*Wilhelm Meister* 177).

²⁸ In Goethe’s cosmology, it is the stars that represent the ecstatic paradox of an immanent other-worldliness, a borderline experience of the world in God.

²⁹ Although Henkel does not identify this “Grenzerfahrung” with the experience of the sublime, he concurs that the practice of renunciation seems to constitute the process whereby one becomes aware of the harmony between one’s soul and the cosmos: “Zugleich aber ist Entsagung die Bürgerschaft in der hohen Stellung des Menschen im

The essential difference between Wilhelm's experience in the observatory scene and the subjective experience described in the description of the Straßburg cathedral consists in the following: in the *Dichtung und Wahrheit* passage, the subject, despite his insurmountable individual limitations, becomes aware of himself as a contributor to the entirety of the social sphere, whereas here Wilhelm finds his limited significance as a sort of monadic reflection of the cosmos as a whole. In other words, Wilhelm's state of human restrictedness is alleviated insofar as he becomes aware of himself not only as an authentic contributor to the cosmic order, but also in that he himself is a reflection of the order to which he contributes. Despite the evident disparity between these two moments of the sublime, the outcome of both instances remains the same: the individual attains to a state of social agency, which is to say he becomes aware that he is justified in an optimistic assessment of the effectiveness of his actions, despite their essentially finite nature.

To make sense of this claim, compare the description of finite existence offered by Wilhelm from the observatory to that of the Mahnbrief: "Wer soll, wer kann aber auf sein vergangenes Leben zurückblicken, ohne gewissermaßen irre zu werden, da er meistens finden wird, dass sein Wollen richtig, sein Tun falsch, sein Begehren tadelhaft gewesen?" (HA VIII 119).³⁰ The use of the term "irre" to describe the confused state begotten by the apparent irrational course of the individual's life immediately hearkens back to the etymologically related words "Irrtümer" and "verwirren" that appear in the Mahnbrief. This reflection of Wilhelm's accordingly appears to represent a similar description of the limited status of man's abilities: despite the "good will" of the individual, which, for Kant, comprises the sole criterion of moral

Kosmos." 144 (Renunciation is simultaneously solidarity with the profound position of man in the cosmos). To this effect, see Karnick 132.

³⁰ "But who should, who can, regard his past life without becoming somewhat confused, for he will usually discover that his intentions were good, his actions wrong, his demands blameworthy?" (*Wilhelm Meister* 178).

action, the attempt to translate this good will into deed most often fails: the good will alone seems to be incapable of offering a satisfactory answer to the problems inherent to the fundamentally limited human nature, insofar as even the individual purest will (“der Besonnenste” from the Mahnbrief) is by no means assured of success in the application of his intention.

Nevertheless, the hindrances of human nature noted in this passage in no way lead to an occasion of metaphysical despair in the observatory. On the contrary, the experience of the sublimity of the heavens offers Wilhelm nothing but consolation in the prosecution of his intended efforts. This passage will be cited in full:

“Des gegenwärtigen Verhältnisses hab’ ich mich nicht zu schämen, meine Absicht ist, einen edlen Familienkreis in allen seinen Gliedern erwünscht verbunden herzustellen; der Weg ist bezeichnet. Ich soll erforschen, was edle Seelen auseinanderhält, soll Hindernisse wegräumen, welcher Art sie auch seien.” Dies darfst du vor diesen himmlischen Heerscharen bekennen; achteten sie deiner, sie würden zwar über deine Beschränktheit lächeln, aber sie ehrten gewiss deinen Vorsatz und begünstigten dessen Erfüllung. (HA VIII 119-120).³¹

The first notable element of this passage is Wilhelm’s acknowledgment that he ought not to be ashamed of his noble intentions. Given our working interpretation of Wilhelm’s Mahnbrief, Wilhelm is justified in making this claim precisely on account of his status as renunciant. If the ascetic practice of renunciation constitutes the praxis of purification whereby one refines the good will of the heart, then it is only on account of his engagement in this practice that Wilhelm can confidently claim that his intentions vis-a-vis Lenardo and his family do indeed issue from a pure heart.

The second aspect of this passage follows from the first: on account of the fact that

³¹ “‘In the present circumstances I have no cause for shame. My purpose is to bring all the members of a noble family properly together again...I am to investigate what keeps noble souls apart, and remove barriers, of whatever sort they may be.’ This is what you may safely declare to these heavenly hosts; if they noticed you, they would doubtless smile at your limitations, but they would surely respect your intention and favor its fulfillment” (*Wilhelm Meister* 178).

Wilhelm has “proved” the goodness of his will through the practice of renunciation, his experience of the astronomical sublime offers him a certain practical consolation with regard to the outcome of his efforts to ameliorate Lenardo’s situation. For at least this brief moment, Wilhelm perceives the possibility to “remove the barriers” that might impede his task. Of course, given the recurrent motif of human limitation, it is in truth impossible for Wilhelm of himself to overcome every obstacle arising from the fact of his heteronomous existence. It seems then, that the only way he can rationally make this claim would be to base it on a logic similar to the one described in the *Dichtung und Wahrheit* passage: although Wilhelm himself remains a contingent, finite individual, the cosmic and social totalities comprised of an endless number of such individuals offer a certain hope for the eventual redemption of his personal restrictedness. Furthermore, Wilhelm is warranted in an optimistic attitude toward the possibility of this redemption on account of the fact that he has proved the purity of his heart through the disposition of renunciation.³² This is made explicit when Wilhelm remarks that the heavenly bodies “would smile at his limitation,” and will surely aid in the fulfillment of the task that he could not accomplish of his own accord.

To recapitulate, the conclusion to be drawn in this passage is that in Wilhelm’s experience of the sublime, his human limitation is, as it were, symbolically overcome. It cannot be emphasized enough that this overcoming of finitude which necessitates *Entsagung* is not a literal overcoming, i.e. Wilhelm remains a finite human being subject to the same confusion and frustration that are typical outside of such an experience. Rather, what the incident at the observatory afford Wilhelm is a certain redemption of his limitations through the psychological solace that his individual nature is not restricted in such a way to render tragic all of his earthly

³² Cf. Peschken 53. Peschken notes that Wilhelm attains to a certain optimism at this point uncharacteristic of the remainder of the novel, although he fails to note the significance of the sublime environment in which Wilhelm finds himself.

efforts. Note that this consolation enables Wilhelm to become a social agent of reconciliation. In the moment of the sublime, Wilhelm is able to psychologically grasp that the necessarily imperfect nature of his efforts need not engender an attitude of despair, and it is precisely on account of the fact that he may hope for some degree of success that he is able to engage in any activity whatsoever. Only because he has renounced can Wilhelm take the sight of Jupiter as a happy omen (HA VIII 120), and only because of the optimistic hope offered to him in this moment of the sublime can he become a reconciling agent in the family of Lenardo.

Given the above, the practice of renunciation brings with it implications that reach much further than the mere individual, contra Kant, for whom the benefits of the experience of the sublime seem to be wholly restricted to the individual in question. Kant describes the outcome of the sublime in the following way: “the satisfaction here concerns only the **vocation** of our capacity...just as the predisposition to it lies in our nature; while the development and exercise of it is left to us and remains our responsibility” (CJ 147). There are two key points at which Kant’s understanding of the sublime diverges from the Goethean notion described above. The first is that there is no explicit social or cosmic dimension described in this context; as a reflective judgment of the individual, the only type of knowledge claim that can be inferred from this proposition are those concerning the cognitive structures of the individual that are the necessary condition for the possibility of such an experience.³³ The more significant issue, however, lies in the latter half of the sentence just cited. For Kant, the “super-sensible faculty” of which man becomes aware in the perception of the sublime does not entail any consequences for man’s

³³ Kant would, of course, claim that such propositions would also hold true for any other being with similar cognitive structures, thereby entailing a sort of secondary social dimension to the experience of the sublime. Nevertheless, in comparing judgments of the sublime with judgments of the beautiful, Kant explicitly associates the sublime with a certain hermetic (non-social) mode of life. Among other telling remarks, he notes, “To be self-sufficient, hence not to need society...is something that comes close to the sublime, just like any superiority over needs.” CJ 157.

sensible, material existence, apart from the indication that there is some dimension of moral autonomy not wholly subject to sensible conditions. However, insofar as the “development and exercise” of these conditions is in no way aided by the experience of the sublime as such, this experience offers to the individual nothing of the optimistic hope with which Goethe associates the sublime. Accordingly, although the occasion of the sublime provides the individual with the consolation that he is not wholly subject to the heteronomous forces of the empirical world, no hope is offered that these conditions might themselves be altered or overcome. Accordingly, although Kant’s notion of the autonomous self provides the subject with a very robust dimension of individual moral agency, this notion fails to provide any significant dimension of hope for the success of one’s social moral acts.³⁴

It follows from this that the primary development of the notion of the sublime as it occurs in Goethe’s late works could be said to consist of an application of the interior faculty recognized in this experience to the empirical world. In these works, the moment of the sublime translates itself back into empirical realm, insofar as this moment proffers to the individual a dimension of hope vis-a-vis the very limitations which allowed him to experience such an object. The individual does not recognize superiority over his limitations on such an occasion; rather, his very restrictedness is embraced and freed of its tragic dimension. Accordingly, the interpretative tradition surrounding *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* is absolutely correct in noting that renunciation does not function by overcoming the restrictedness of the individual. Rather, the benefit of renunciation lies precisely in the sublation of this restrictedness, providing a certain metaphysical consolation of optimistic hope, despite the constant and inescapable confusion

³⁴ The extent to which Kant seems perfectly content with a world in which moral action and correlative happiness are completely divorced in the empirical world, so long as they still correspond in the ideal world, can be seen from the “Transcendental Doctrine of Method” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, esp. 679-684. To take but one example: “The necessary connection of the hope of being happy with the unremitting effort to make oneself worthy of happiness that has been adduced cannot be cognized through reason if it is grounded merely in nature” (680).

which accompanies the state of human finitude.

4. *Entsagung* as the Ethical Disposition of the Post-Theological Man

To develop this interpretation of the ethical claims made in the Mahnbrief, I would like to examine the broader project of the *Wanderjahre* in relation to the question of *Entsagung* and the problem of human limitation. A clue to the nature of this larger project is to be found in the narrative context in which the Mahnbrief appears. Peschken notes that the letter which Wilhelm reads in Lenardo's journal was originally an exhortation to Susanne and her betrothed, as an attempt to advise them in their struggle with the anachronistic religious practices to which they are subject ("Blatt" 209). Thus, the occasion of the discussion of human limitation consists in the transition from a Christian age to a secular one. Accordingly, the letter is to some degree an attempt to come to terms with the position of man in a post-theological age.

The immediate relevance of Susanne's situation with regard to the Mahnbrief itself lies in the way in which she encounters her environment, which precedes her extended account of her dissatisfaction with the outdated religious customs to which she must conform. She describes this encounter in the following terms: "wir betrachteten die uns umgebende herrliche Welt bald von ihrer anmutigen, bald von ihrer erhabenen Seite" (HA VIII 422).³⁵ The mention of the sublime in this context invokes a heretofore unmentioned aspect of the sublime, namely, its relation to enlightenment and secularization. Toward the conclusion of his treatment of the sublime, Kant notes the religious implications of such an experience:

In this way alone does religion internally distinguish itself from superstition, the latter not providing a basis in the mind for reverence for the sublime, but only for fear and anxiety before the being of superior power, to whose will the terrified person sees himself as subjected without holding him in great esteem; from which of course nothing can arise but the attempt to curry favor and ingratiate oneself, instead of a religion of the good conduct of life. (CJ 147).

³⁵ "We regarded the glorious world around us sometimes as picturesque, sometimes as sublime" (*Wilhelm Meister* 391).

The mechanism of enlightenment at work in the moment of the sublime resides in the fact that this experience is only possible given freedom from fear. Kant understands superstition in this context as a religious practice driven by fear of the transcendent: the superstitious individual is the one who serves the divine only on account of his terror at the prospect of the possible consequences entailed by failing to do so. The properly religious individual, on the other hand, does not serve God out of fear, but rather out of the rational conclusion that he can only arrive at on account of the sublimity of his nature.

Insofar as the impetus for Susanne to begin to distance herself from confessional religious practice lies to some extent in her encounter of the sublimity of nature, the same process of the transition from superstition to reason is at work here. This represents another development of Kant in the *Wanderjahre*: here, enlightenment consists not only in the transition from myth to a quasi-Christian belief system, but also in the further transition from the Christian worldview to a sort of “natural religion.” Accordingly, what is at stake in the Mahnbrief is nothing other than the attempt to find a secure standpoint for man in a post-Christian age. This is precisely why the question of human limitation becomes so pressing: in the Christian ethos, the notions of the Resurrection and eternal life in some way confer meaning upon the human finitude with which man must contend in this life. This is to say, that, for the Christian, limitation is only a temporary dilemma which possesses little significance from an eschatological standpoint. The passing of this framework in the process of secularization brings about a pressing urgency to the problem of the restricted nature of man. The question that arises here could be posed in the following way: if the limitations of man are no longer accounted for by Christian theology, is it possible for man to resolve them in such a way as to avoid falling into perpetual despair?

In order to examine the extent to which the notion of renunciation as described in the

Mahnbrief provides an answer to this question, we will examine the mysterious figure of Makarie and her relation to both renunciation and the secular world in which she finds herself. Three reasons present themselves as to why Makarie might represent the most compelling character to examine in order to better understand the notion of renunciation. First, as Peschken notes, Wilhelm's mode of action fundamentally alters during his encounter with Makarie; throughout the majority of the novel, Wilhelm is largely passive, in the sense that he rarely speaks for himself, and is rarely the agent driving the narrative action of a scene.³⁶ Thus, there seems to be some singular trait to Makarie by virtue of which Wilhelm is enabled to shed his primarily passive character as seen in the rest of the *Wanderjahre*. The second reason lies in the fact that Makarie, who is described as a heavenly body orbiting the solar system,³⁷ represents a sort of literal embodiment of the sublime, whose concept has thus far functioned as something of a hermeneutic standpoint. Moreover, this union of a sublime heavenly body and a limited human being constitutes a certain fusion of the transcendent and immanent, of the empirical and ideal, and thus creates a paradoxical figure whose nature ought to be more closely examined. Finally, from a formal perspective, the novel concludes with a selection of aphorisms from Makarie's archive, just after a brief description of her biography. Thus, in some sense, Makarie has the final word on renunciation.

Makarie immediately presents herself as a renunciant in the description of her childhood.

³⁶ Peschken 54. Peschken notes, "Der Vergleich mit dem vorangehenden Kapitel zeigt, dass Wilhelm hier seine Passivität verloren zu haben scheint: Wilhelm lässt sich von den Versuchen des Astronoms, ihn von den Mitteilungen auszuschließen, nicht bewegen, auf die Teilnahme zu verzichten"; (In comparison with the previous chapter, Wilhelm appears here to have abandoned his passivity: allow himself to be deterred from the discussion by the efforts of the astronomer to exclude him).

³⁷ "Makarie befindet sich zu unserm Sonnensystem in einem Verhältnis, welches man auszusprechen kaum wagen darf. Im Geiste, der Seele, der Einbildungskraft hegt sie, schaut sie es nicht nur, sondern sie macht gleichsam einen Teil desselben; sie sieht sich in jenen himmlischen Kreisen mit fortgezogen," (HA VIII 449). "Makarie stands in a relationship to our solar system that one hardly dares to express. Not only does she harbor it, and see it in her mind, in her soul, in her imagination; she constitutes a part of it, as it were. She sees herself drawn along in those heavenly circles" (*Wilhelm Meister* 410).

Despite her constant visions, Makarie is described as diligent in her daily tasks, the central criterion of renunciation described in the Mahnbrief:

Alle Fähigkeiten wurden an ihr lebendig, alle Tätigkeiten wirksam, dergestalt dass sie allen äußeren Verhältnissen zu genügen wusste und, indem ihr Herz, ihr Geist ganz von überirdischen Gesichten erfüllt war, doch ihr Tun und Handeln immerfort dem edelsten Sittlichen gemäß blieb. (HA VIII 449-450)³⁸

Thus, Makarie, although the archetypal figure of transcendence and mysticism in the novel, remains a fundamentally inner-worldly figure. Makarie too, despite her gifts, does not live a purely contemplative life, but rather engages extensively in the activities of the material secular world. This implies an initial feature of the disposition of man in secular society: although the rational and enlightened movement away from a confessional theological framework does not go so far as to eliminate the experience of mysticism, this mysticism is no longer intelligible within the confines of the cloister. Even the most spiritual being of the novel finds her purpose within the context of her daily activity. Moreover, the astronomical object of her mystical experience constitutes an object of scientific knowledge, rather than theological, further indicating the essentially immanent character of even Makarie's mysticism.

The second aspect of Makarie's renunciation is to be found in her relation to the society in which she finds herself: "Was sie [von den Anschauungen] offenbarte, wurde nicht anerkannt oder misdeutet, sie ließ es daher in ihrem langen Leben nach außen als Krankheit gelten" (HA VIII 450).³⁹ Makarie is from the very beginning placed on the ascetic path of *Entsagung*, solely on account of her unique nature. To the majority of individuals whom she encounters, Makarie

³⁸ "All of her talents were awakened, all her activities were put to good effect, so that she satisfied every outward expectation, and while her heart and mind were wholly filled with superterrestrial visions, her actions and dealings always met the noblest moral standards" (*Wilhelm Meister* 410).

³⁹ "What she revealed of [her visions] was not acknowledged or was misinterpreted, so that in the course of her long life she passed them off as illness" (*Wilhelm Meister* 410).

must silently hide her interior gifts;⁴⁰ those to whom she divulges her secret (including her family) assume that her utterances are the result of some illness on her part, a misunderstanding which she allows to be applied to her, presumably for the sake of the family's peace.

Furthermore, Makarie is limited even in her simple physical motion. When she first encounters Wilhelm, she is brought in on a sort of wheelchair: Makarie is here completely passive with regard to the material world (HA VIII 115). It seems clear then, that not only does Makarie fulfill her duty in the practice of renunciation through her willing acceptance of suffering and moral behavior, but she represents the most extreme case of human limitation in the novel. The practice of renunciation in the context of such extreme restrictedness indicates that Makarie constitutes a supreme instance of renunciation in the novel, and in some way serves as a hermeneutic archetype for the renunciation of the novel's other characters.

Another trait of Makarie's that helps to elucidate the nature of renunciation is to be found in the description of her movement as a heavenly body: "Sie wandelt seit ihrer Kindheit um die Sonne, und zwar, wie nun entdeckt ist, in einer Spirale, sich immer mehr vom Mittelpunkt entfernend und nach den äußern Regionen hinkreisend" (HA VIII 449).⁴¹ Makarie's atypical orbit around the sun takes the form of a spiral, insofar as her distance from the sun constantly increases concurrent to her circular motion. The central image here, however, lies in the description of Makarie's development as the movement of an astronomical body. A planet in orbit exerts no force of its own to retain its orbital path; it remains on its elliptical path solely on account of external forces, namely, a combination of the gravitational force of the sun and Newton's First Law of Motion. This implies that the planet itself cannot alter its velocity, either by altering the speed at which it moves or by changing the direction of its orbit. Rather, the

⁴⁰ Note the parallel here with Wilhelm's own passivity and silence, conditions of his practice of renunciation.

⁴¹ "Since childhood she has moved around the sun, and, to be specific, as has now become clear, in a spiral course, moving ever farther from the center and circling toward the outer regions" (*Wilhelm Meister* 410).

astronomical body is, as it were, carried by forces completely beyond its control. Likewise, Makarie's orbit continues to bring her into the "outer regions" without any effort exerted on her part. This further emphasizes a certain passivity on the part of Makarie: the path of her astronomical development lies outside of her control, and it does not appear that she possesses the ability to either aid or hinder her progress.

The implication of Makarie's passivity with regard to her mystic-astronomical development throws a great deal of light on the secular character of renunciation. Makarie's spiritual fate, i.e. her continued passage to ever-more distant regions of the cosmos, seems to develop in an organic manner, wholly independent of her own actions: even if she failed to renounce, her orbit would continue to develop according to the interior logic of the physical principles at work within her. This indicates that Makarie's practice of renunciation is in no way a means to attain to a sort of "other-worldly salvation" of the type characteristic of Christianity. For the Christian, moral action and asceticism in the worldly realm serve the function of ensuring one's justification in the life to come; opposed to this, Makarie's ultimate spiritual fate is wholly determined by an organic process of development. To develop this image of Makarie as a heavenly body: just as an astronomical body cannot alter its orbit of its own accord, so too is Makarie unable to alter course of her spiritual development by engaging in or refraining from moral or ascetic praxis. The Christian framework offers a very robust justification of the sort of moral action and asceticism characteristic of renunciation, insofar as acting in such a way constitutes the only means to eternal salvation in the next life. The question that arises here consists of the following: if Makarie is "carried" to her spiritual destination through a process of organic development with or without her consent, what value does the moral praxis inherited from Christianity retain? In other words, what is the explicitly inner-worldly justification of

Entsagung, since meaning is no longer conferred upon human action by reference to the Christian afterlife?

In accord with the analysis given above, the central benefit Makarie gains through her practice of renunciation consists in her high degree of social agency. Not only is Makarie largely responsible for the resolution of Lenardo's situation, but she also becomes the confessor and spiritual guide of the Oheim circle. Makarie remains unable to establish a utopian state; Lenardo's fate remains in question at the conclusion of the novel. Nevertheless, she remains the single most successful figure in the novel with regard to navigating and aiding the social relationships of others. Perhaps the most significant expression of this social agency is to be found in the opening description of Wilhelm's first encounter with her: "es war, als wenn sie die innere Natur eines jeden durch die ihn umgebende individuelle Maske durchschaute" (HA VIII 116).⁴² Here, Makarie's gift vis-a-vis the social world in which she finds herself consists in vision, a type of intuitive insight which enables her to mediate the relationships of others. Nevertheless, this act of social mediation retains its renunciatory status: Makarie does not presume that she is individually capable of overcoming human limitation to personally solve the issues with which she is confronted.⁴³

To throw the figure of Makarie into further relief, let us contrast her with the protagonist of Goethe's other late fictional work, *Faust*. Faust's opening monologue indicates that the issue at stake in this work also consists largely in the fate of man in the secular world:

Habe nun, ach! Philosophie,
Juristerei und Medizin,
Und leider auch Theologie

⁴² "It was as though she penetrated the inner nature of each through the individual mask covering him" (*Wilhelm Meister* 175).

⁴³ Makarie seems to easily accept that she will not be able to provide for Lenardo's initial return on account of her illness. She quite trustingly hands over the issue to her nieces, although she is doubtless aware of the difficulties that will ensue from doing so. Cf. HA VIII 72-77.

Durchaus studiert, mit heißem Bemühn.
 Da steh' ich nun, ich armer Tor,
 Und bin so klug als wie zuvor! (HA III 20)⁴⁴

Faust's disenchantment with theological studies and the other sciences ordered toward the claims of this *scientia reatrix* provides an exact parallel to the crisis of secularization experienced by Susanne and her betrothed: in each case, the individual in question finds himself languishing under the irrational perpetuation of religious norms whose last trace of credibility has long since vanished. To some extent, then, these two texts represent two distinct confrontations of what essentially amounts to the same problem of the secular individual who finds himself in an anachronistically Christian society.

As Trunz notes, it is almost self-evident that the figure of Faust represents the perfect foil of the renunciants depicted in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (HA VIII 536). Unlike the process of renunciation, which must begin with the acknowledgment of human limitation, Faust attempts to explode his human boundaries, to incorporate within himself the entirety of the infinite human experience:

Dem Taumel weih' ich mich, dem schmerzlichen Genuß,
 Verliebtem Haß, erquickendem Verdruß.
 Mein Busen, der vom Wissensdrang geheilt ist,
 Soll keinen Schmerzen künftig sich verschließen,
 Und was der ganzen Menschheit zugeteilt ist,
 Will ich in meinem innern Selbst genießen. (HA III 58).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See *Faust I* 15:

“Well, that's Philosophy I've read,
 And Law and Medicine, and I fear
 Theology too, from A to Z;
 Hard studies all, that have cost me dear.
 And so I sit, poor silly man,
 No wiser now than when I began.”

⁴⁵ “Faust: Let us plunge into the rush of things,
 Of time and all its happenings!
 And then let pleasure and distress,
 Disappointment and success,
 Succeed each other as they will;
 Man cannot act if he is standing still” (*Faust I* 53).

Faust's means for attempting to find meaning in a post-theological age, symbolized in his despair toward the scholastic system of knowledge, indicates two key aspects in which he differs from the renunciant, and from Makarie in particular. The more obvious of these resides in Faust's desire to personally experience the entire domain of human existence, i.e. to shatter and overcome his limitations to become the unbounded man.⁴⁶ This constitutes the aim most opposed to renunciation, which can only begin with the humble acknowledgement of one's intrinsic finitude.

In addition to the attempt to overcome the finitude which he cannot escape simply by virtue of being human, Faust differs from Makarie in a much more subtle way. For Faust, the singular example for the collapse of the theological world lies in the decay of knowledge as such that is bemoaned in the opening passage of the drama's action; the passing of Christianity is symbolically embodied in the passing of knowledge. However, note Faust's response to this collapse in the passage cited above: rather than attempting to purify knowledge through a sort of sublation, a preservation and purification of the seed of truth inherent within theological knowledge, Faust responds by abandoning conceptual knowledge altogether. In this passage, knowledge mediated by a conceptual framework is to be wholly replaced by immediate knowledge, the sensible knowledge of experience. Faust's response to modernity seems to consist of the complete rejection of the theological age, rather than a distillation of its central expressions of truth. This seems to constitute a second respect in which Faust diverges from the renunciants of the *Wanderjahre*: the three stages of reverence described in the pedagogical province describe an almost dialectical development of religion in which the truth of each prior stage is preserved in the next, from the inception of religion in myth up to its purest and most

⁴⁶ For a more complete treatment of Faust and the modern man, see Boyle's *Faust*.

natural manifestation. Moreover, Makarie, the figure most limited in her capacity to encounter diverse human experiences on account of her illness, remains the administrator of the quasi-sacramental practice of confession in the Oheim circle, indicating that there is possibly still value to certain religious practices in the new age. Accordingly, the project of secularization presented in the *Wanderjahre* does not consist of the destruction of Christianity, but rather of the conservation and transformation of its essential humanist characteristics during the transition to a secular society.

To complete this comparison, consider the achievements of Faust in light of what has been identified as the primary outcome of renunciation: the ability to effect some minimal degree of social reconciliation within one's sphere. Faust's attempt to overcome his human limitation culminates in the attempt to establish a sort of personal utopia through the use of engineering in Act V of *Faust II*. Although the construction project itself proceeds well, this endeavor culminates in the murder of the old couple Philemon and Baucis for the sake of perfecting Faust's architectural efforts (HA III 340-342). The tragic outcome of Faust's regency can be traced back to his total rejection of renunciation and self-denial. If only by renouncing does the individual arrive at the ability to act socially with some degree of success, then Faust's refusal to do so ensures that his utopian attempts will fail, despite his mastery of the technology of engineering. In attempting to deny his human limitation, Faust is unable to reflectively engage in authentic interaction with the world, since any such engagement is only possible within the individual's acknowledgment of his own essential finitude. Furthermore, Faust's final earthly fate presents an image opposite to that of Makarie. Whereas the latter's fundamental traits consist of vision and insight, Faust dies having been cursed with blindness, unaware that he is surrounded by demons preparing his grave (HA III 346-349). The practice of renunciation thus

seems to have a normative value: he who does not renounce not only becomes incapable of any sort of effective social action, but also loses any dimension of insight into his relationship to the surrounding world.

However, it is important to note that Faust is nevertheless saved at the conclusion of *Faust II*. Faust's failure to adopt a proper moral attitude does not result in his eternal condemnation, as in the Christian framework. Although Faust is described as "impure" (HA III 357), he is still brought to "the higher spheres" (HA III 363). Note that the image of Faust's redemption consists of a physical movement similar to that of Makarie's spiralic orbit:

Das Ewig-Weibliche
Zieht uns hinan. (HA III 364).⁴⁷

Just as Makarie's astronomical destination is dictated by external (although benevolent) forces, Faust's salvation is only accomplished insofar as he is *drawn* by the Eternal Feminine. In terms of the analogy of the planetary orbit, Faust's attempts to stall, accelerate, or otherwise escape his "orbital pattern" ultimately fail, and he is drawn on to his redemption despite his striving against his human limitations and the heteronomous forces of the universe that condition his existence. The organic spiritual development and ultimate fate of Makarie and Faust thus constitute a non-tragic interpretation of reality. Makarie, the ideal of renunciation, develops steadily in her progress to the outer regions of the solar system regardless of her earthly actions, just as Faust is drawn to salvation despite his failure to acknowledge his limitations: even the absolute failure to adopt a disposition of renunciation is not a failure of tragic finality.

Despite this metaphysical optimism regarding the ultimate redemption of even the most wayward individual, it would appear that Goethe does not mean to thereby advocate a relativistic moral standpoint of absolute pluralism. Although he does not face eternal condemnation, Faust's

⁴⁷ "Eternal Womanhood/Draws us on high" (*Faust II* 239).

attempt to overcome his human limitation blinds him to his environment, particularly its social dimension; although he is ultimately saved, his earthly endeavors continually come to tragic, unfulfilled ends. In opposition to this, Makarie's acceptance of her finitude and her ascetic practice of renunciation enable her to engage in a certain dimension of social reconciliation, even though she is unable to completely resolve all of the dilemmas that come before her. Thus, even in a post-theological age, in which moral action is not justified by reference to heaven, there remains a crucial place for moral and ascetic praxis: only through such renunciation can the individual function within the world given the insurmountable status of one's human limitation.

5. Conclusion: The Viability of *Entsagung* as a Response to Modernity

To conclude this paper, I would like to return to a central aspect of the notion of renunciation outlined above: namely, the observance of duty mandated in the Mahnbrief to Susanne as the prerequisite for assuring oneself of one's goodwill. As we have seen, the ascetic resignation to fulfilling one's worldly obligations does not only purify the human heart, but also functions as the objective standard by virtue of which the individual becomes justified in asserting the goodness of his will. In this process, renunciation functions as the psychological confirmation of one's interior disposition, offering the psychological security necessary to avoid the epistemic crisis occasioned by the collapse of the religious institutions that had previously played this role.

In light of this, it becomes immediately evident why Hersilie states to Wilhelm, "Wir wenden alle Sorgfalt an, um nicht in Ihren Orden, nicht in die Gemeinschaft der Entsagenden aufgenommen zu werden" (HA VIII 84).⁴⁸ The members of the Oheim circle refrain from the practice of renunciation insofar as they attempt to derive their psychological stability from a

⁴⁸ "From this you can see that we exercise great care not to be taken into your order, the community of the renunciants!" (*Wilhelm Meister* 152).

certain secular practice of sacramental confession. For Hersilie and her family, it is not through the commitment to daily activity that confirms their purity of heart; rather, this group represents the attempt to fulfill this need through adherence to fading religious practices. However, these practices must ultimately collapse, as the rationale has collapsed in the secular age. This is exactly why Susanne struggles with the religious practices of her society: although such practices fulfilled a crucial function in previous religious eras, the attempt to sustain them in the modern day ultimately represents an anachronism.

Thus, the elder Goethe is intent to show in the *Wanderjahre* the inability of (especially Catholic) religious traditions to fulfill their social role in a secular society; likewise, the younger Goethe demonstrated in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* the futility of the attempt to find psychological solace through the Pietist-Protestant practice of unmediated scrupulous introspection. If the Catholic attempt to find satisfaction with one's place in the world has become anachronistic in its application, the Protestant attempt must ultimately collapse on itself, insofar as this path abandons any objective standard whereby the individual can confirm his interior condition with a minimal degree of certainty. The practice of renunciation proposes to fill this psychological void left by the passing of the theological age. Renunciation consists neither of immediate subjective self-scrutiny, nor of a cultic practice: rather, the individual is consoled precisely through his commitment to his secular activity. Thus, the renunciatory praxis is essentially an alternative to psychological despair in an epoch in which all other such paths have apparently been rendered inaccessible.

Does renunciation in fact offer a viable standpoint in the secular age? The dearth of scholarly literature of the past 40 years on Goethe's notion of *Entsagung* indicates that the answer to this question is no. There remain only two book-length studies of renunciation,

Henkel's monograph of 1954 and Peschken's of 1968. It is one of the most remarkable facts of Goethe scholarship that, despite the presence of the term "The Renunciants" in the subtitle of his most mature novel, no extended study devoted to the notion of renunciation has been produced since the outbreak of the student protests of 1968. By implication, the renunciation of overcoming one's limitation for the sake of recognizing one's place in the social and cosmic totalities seems unpalatable to the modern man, especially after the dawn of dialectical materialism. Perhaps even Goethe's sophisticated attempt to sublimate the passing religious ethos remained too grounded in mythical and dogmatic structures, making this attempt anachronistic to the modern reader. The question remains open as to whether a secure and enduring standpoint remains accessible to man in a world increasingly distanced from the eternal and transcendent order. Nevertheless, even if Goethe's response to modernity has been shown by history to be insufficient, the essential problem identified in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* remains immediately relevant in the contemporary age: only if the mortal, finite man can reconcile himself to his basic limitation can he ever hope to feel at home in the world in which the realm of the infinite and transcendent is no longer immediately accessible to him.

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