Reading and Not Reading Wilhelm Meister: Judgements and Entries

*The following sections have been taken from a longer text written September, 2021 in Vienna, Austria.*

*1. Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. That is a book that takes its time and doesn’t shy away from pure frivolity. That is why people tend not to like it. The chapters that go on and on in quotation marks (e.g. Wilhelm talking about his childhood), are not as boring and dry as they seem. Goethe is funny enough to have Wilhelm’s listener falling asleep the whole time - and this lets him continue in even more detail, rather than make his narrative more forgiving. Concision can’t *always* be a goal, or a good quality. Excess, on the other hand, makes itself seem every bit as necessary as brevity when handled correctly. Don’t forget all of the poetry today which is so painfully, disgustingly brief and self-satisfied. Its brevity doesn’t improve it. If poems like these were longer, like an analyzed proposition that has been expanded to show all the dirty tricks hiding in its pleasingly unanalyzed form, people wouldn’t have so much patience with them and would see right away what it was that, in the guise of brevity, kept them interested and searching before.

2. The disturbing lack of facility while writing is often connected with a coterminous defect in one’s reading. (A mind like a car in fifth gear trying to drive slowly down a residential street.)

3. Journals and diaries are necessary evils, especially when one finds oneself in a new place. A new city crushes you with stimulus and if you do not open up and accept it, you become a recluse. But what comes with this affirmative state of acceptance, of openness to the world of difference surrounding you, is a state of paralysis that is its negative corollary. Acceptance and paralysis have the same sense, and one goes a very short distance back and forth between them. What comes of this paralysis (also seemingly what causes it) is a wealth of undifferentiated data, of impressions not yet reflected into thoughts, of smells and sights that mean as much to you as the jumble of words pouring out of a cafe door. They have no reference, they slop around in a morass of other severed notes and letters. The outlines are submerged, blurred. The job of a diary, or a journal, is to begin the work of sifting through the signs, setting this one here, that one there, in hopes that things may become clearer if enough of them are pulled out and hung up to dry. That particular street (e.g.) has no actuality until you have *remembered* the white scratches covering its cobblestones from thousands and thousands of horse-shoe strikes over the years; the little boy and his smiling mother sitting in the back of the carriage, moving jauntily; the stoney faces of old Viennese buildings, brutal, iron criminals standing in line shoulder to shoulder for a rushed hearing. Remembrance is always creative, but it also destroys something, namely the stupefying potential for creativity and creation that before might have expressed itself in serene acceptance, but oscillates mercilessly into paralysis, a stillness that is anything but *serene*.

4. Good moods: You never know what is going to happen to you during the day. You have an empty skeleton of an idea, and sometimes what you get is actually *less* than that skeleton, just a few dry bones that may not even be human. But oftentimes the skeleton gets some meat on its bones, even a few organs, nerves, blood vessels, and if you are lucky, an eye or some gold teeth.

5. *Kunsthistorisches Museum*. Bruegel, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Rubens, Giorgione, “Tizian,” Cranach, Tintoretto, Bosch, *et al*. The totality of it left me cold. Only *The Tower of Babel* and some of Bruegel’s street scenes, one or two of Rubens’ (who usually does nothing for me), and the self portraits of Rembrandt stirred something real. The building itself, a neo-baroque palace of a museum built in the late 19th century was very imposing and maybe beautiful, but it did not help these works of art breathe - many of which are actually great and probably dying for air. It suppressed them so that they all looked as out of place as the people wandering through the halls. There was no natural light. Only the paintings in which a pair of eyes really looked out of the scene or out of the canvas broke the spell and made one feel that there was life in the room, trying at all costs not to die or fall asleep. There was a Rafael, and now that I think about it, a Titian, that successfully did this too. Rembrandt, in his painter’s smock, cut through everything; one would think that *that* self-portrait is the painting they should most like to hide from view in a palace. It makes everything ornamental and extravagant look silly and unsure. There was a whole floor of Egyptian relics and the entire *Kunsthammer* floor, along with an old comic room, that I skipped after seeing the Rembrandt. I didn’t care anymore. A similar feeling to being in the Louvre years ago, which I couldn’t stand.

A. The way Titian paints eyes. They have little pin-pricks of starlight in them that shine, giving the bodies and clothes of the people a proud earthiness.

B. Tintoretto’s fabric, specifically the red drapery and clothing. The blood of Christ in everything.

C. Bruegel’s coming *after* Bosch: sensitivity and acceptance. When looking at *The Tower of Babel*, which is already very imposing as a whole, I noticed the delicate placement of birds above the human complexities of the scene (builders, etc.). The birds give the Tower life and weight (an elephant balanced on the head of a pin). Also, the town in the middle left-hand portion. A detail I had never noticed before and wished I could get closer to, so obscure and interesting were the colors and dreamy outlines, though I’m sure that, even if my nose was pressed up against the canvas, it would look just as far away and inscrutable.

D. Rembrandt’s posture in his self-portraits automatically makes one straighten up. His portraits are like a cup of cool water poured on the soul.

6. Goethe writes as if he has all the time in the world. Because he trusts his beginnings, nothing that follows can be read as unnecessary or excessive.

7. Clouds have appeared. It was sunny and cool before, but now there is a chilly autumn wind. I get a jolt of excitement in my guts when I think that soon this weather will be the rule and not the exception (so strange that from the quasi-fixed perspective of people, weather is one exception falling upon another, and it is this succession of rules degrading into something slightly outside of themselves, into apparent exceptions, that makes up the whole cycle of rules itself…) When the rain comes, red ceiling tiles and the lead grey stones across from me shine the color of the clouds above them. This matted reflection, instead of throwing the sky back up to itself, brings the sky down *into* the structures and surfaces which reflect.

8. The age of a place can be heard in its church bells and in the response the birds give to their tolling (evenings).

9. It is surprising the degree to which one loses all understanding of non-verbal expression in a country where one does not speak the native language. E.g. I hear a woman scream in the rain like she is in danger. Is she not just getting wet while running down the street? I hear a man yell. He is either having a fun night or attempting to fight someone. Nothing is clear - not even the smiles of others can be read.

9. What if the time Proust was engaged in regaining was not the time he wrote *about*, but that time which he spent on the writing itself? (A naive idea, but the thought introduces an interesting distinction, if not an opposition, between retroactivity [first case] and reflexivity [second case], two concepts dealing with remembrance that are often conflated.)

10. Sometimes the first thing we say or write down on a subject becomes our position without our ever having meant to come to a position at all. This phenomenon is shown in the (re)telling of dreams, or anecdotes. If I describe something that happened to me in a short narrative, I will have a hard time telling someone about the same event in words other than those I used initially. So when you ask yourself why you like something, it might be best to admit that you don’t know why, unless you are prepared to go the route of overinterpretation, countering one thesis with another until you have opened up more possibilities than you could possibly ascribe to without flagrantly contradicting yourself.

11. My fear of sounding silly when asking questions in English and attempting bits of German here and there in between has turned into something else: the great pleasure of being laughed at by women. How could I have forgotten that this laughter not only crosses the borders of language with amnesty, but is amplified by that very gap which negates so much else?

12. A personal superstition: you get more done in an hour than in ten with regard to any kind of composition. I think of the things I have written that I don’t hate - they were knocked off in a few sittings. I think of the projects I spent months on - I don’t care if I ever see them again. It is not that work, or long work, is the enemy, but that when one finally hits the right tone, begins strongly, feels just right, keeps going, etc., then the work is facilitated and moves of its own accord, usually quickly. The real achievement is to be able to find these secret hours more often and to let them take control of your life.

13. Another superstition: I’m always thinking that in all of my reading, someday I will come across a line, an epigraph of a line that will set off the switch in my that keeps the book from being written. Think of the epigraph of *Black Spring*: “Can I be as I believe myself or as others believe me to be? Here is where these lines become confession in the presence of my unknown and unknowable me, unknown and unknowable for myself. Here is where I create the legend wherein I must bury myself.” I imagine Miller reading this line from Unamuno, knowing on some level what it covered, what it functioned as a touchstone for. Or; I cannot imagine him reading it and *not* knowing. And yet so many others before him read that line and connected it only with the lines that came before and after it, maybe with a few stray thoughts of their own. I wait for my *line* like a hungry man waits for the child to drop some food as they walk along, carefree. But this is almost as crazy as trying to read poetry in the cracks of the walls. The game of Borges’ librarians which teaches us that if we are searching for something hidden, it is not hidden out in the world but within ourselves. Still, it will show itself in the world.

14. One more superstition: I still fall into the belief that in order to write, one must be also *thinking* of something - but this is a mystification. If I had to have something before me in order to write, then I would always have to be looking at pictures, whether ‘in my mind’ or in reality, in order to speak the simplest questions and statements to people. When really writing, one’s head is empty, or at the very least, a nice shade of grey.

15. If I came to Vienna to run away from America, friends, family and life, then why stop there? I can run away from Vienna too. But no, I don’t mean that. The idea is not to run away but to hover, like Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*; except I touch the ground with my fingertips as much as I can, like an obsessive that must assure himself of the reality of the things in front of him - and then who laughs about doing so like an idiot.

16. In one of the windows across the street, someone has placed a photo of a woman smiling, facing out, pressed to the glass.

17. My friend who lived in Paris for 6 months and saw nothing, never a museum, never a monument, just stayed on his street, in his neighborhood: The Last Situationist.

18. There is so much about a long, undetermined window of time that is terrifying. There is nothing to indicate that it is not a waste.

19. Again, *Wilhelm Meister*: I was struck by the wildness with which certain scenes lead up and intertwine to finally produce a burst - not a dramatic or even a narrative climax, but a wealth of poetic, painterly images that give the ins-and-outs of the plot a far-away, unreal appearance, only for a moment, as the perspective hovers in these Vermeer-like spheres, and then descends again (slightly but significantly!) to the level of life. There is comedy, in the great human sense, for instance, in Mignon’s erratic handwriting and when Friedrich comes down the road with a bundle of sticks on his back, not to mention the old Harper. The images succeed one another rapidly without quite replacing each other. Like the stations of Spirit, each chapter seems to contain what came before it within itself - until it abruptly concludes.

20. An unspoken ambition remains a secret vanity.

21. Leopold Museum *contra* *Kunsthistorisches Museum*: the windows and the white walls let every painting speak for itself, instead of stupefying everything that dared step under its arches. There are no arches! Kokoschka, Schiele, a few Klimt which actually surprised me (I’ve never been as excited about him as about Schiele), and a few Gustave Courbet paintings that really were special. There was a Pillhofer exhibit on the lowest floor. I had mixed reactions and currently have a very neutral feeling about what I saw. His drawings and paintings were forgettable, but his sculpture was sometimes pretty striking, especially his nudes of women. There is one in particular that I’m thinking about that stood out from the rest. His transitional work from representation to abstraction was very cowardly, but his statues that actually leave the mimetic are interesting.

22. A very loose, unreliable, free translation of a Schiele poem taken from a postcard:

‘I am for myself - and for those to whom are given the drunken thirst for freedom - and for everyone too, because I love everyone too - love.

I am of the noblest - the noblest -

And of the return, the furthest gone.

I am human, I love death and love life.’

23. I dreamt I was reading a collected volume of St. Augustine (whom I have never read before). I was very surprised to find that his *Confessions* took up only 90 or 92 pages at the very beginning of the book. But the night before I had the dream I was looking through my copy of *The Essential Goethe* and was surprised that the selections at the end “On Philosophy and Science” only ran from pages 913 to 998 (or 1007, 998 being the beginning of the last selection, from *Maxims and Reflections*), 94 pages all the way to the end of the section. Seeing this relatively small number, I was disappointed that there were not more, but also excited by the idea that there were so many short pieces in the section to be read, probably fairly quickly. In my dream I felt similarly about the *Confessions*. I was disappointed to see that these 90+ pages were only an abridgement, partially because I wanted them to actually be short and quickly readable. The section in my *Goethe*, “On Philosophy and Science,” is at the very end of the book whereas the abridged *Confessions* was at the very beginning. The night before the dream I had been thinking of a person I recently met who blended certain rare qualities of both science and religion into one admirable character.