Weaving the labyrinth of the text — the novel poetics of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*

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In 1829 at the age of eighty Goethe published the second version of his last novel — *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Travel or Journeyman Years*]. The first version had already been published in 1821 without evoking any great response from the reading public. As the title indicates this novel was conceived as a continuation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*] of 1795-96. The length of time it took to complete — rather more than twenty years — can in part perhaps be explained as the difficulty of attempting to write a social novel in a society that was becoming ever more complicated. In this work Goethe presents a programme for a new poetics of the novel in which theory fuses with practice and the novel itself is simultaneously a literary work and a discourse on the construction and interpretation of literary works. As a literary project it has a certain affinity with the novel form which in the twentieth century has been called metafiction. This self-conscious, self-reflexive form of fiction is both new and as old as literature itself. In an interview in 1981 the Irish writer John Banville described his vision of a ‘new fiction’ which is:

> aware of its own possibilities and its own limits, an art which knows that truth is arbitrary, that reality is multifarious, that language is not a clear lens.

He ended his description with the cry:

> Did I say new? What I have defined is as old as Homer (*Irish University Review*, Vol. 11, No.1, 1981, p. 17).

This is the kind of poetic enterprise which Goethe is undertaking and describing in the *Wanderjahre* and through which he takes his place in a tradition which reaches back to the beginnings of story-telling and embraces Homer and Virgil, Cervantes and Laurence Sterne. In the twentieth century — from Thomas Mann to Christa Wolf, from André Gide to Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French ‘*nouveau roman*’, from Umberto Eco to Jorge Luis Borges — this self-questioning, anti-illusionist tradition of metafiction has become the dominant form of narrative literature.

The form of Goethe’s novel is consciously fragmented. The work embraces a great variety of types of writing — frame-narrative and novella, poem and song, diary and
letter, factual and scientific report, collections of aphorisms and maxims. The ending remains open — the last words are “ist fortzusetzen” [to be continued]. Goethe was attempting, in the open form and the variety of perspectives, to reproduce in a literary work an analogy for the infinity and diversity of life itself. All aspects of life find their reflection in this novel: the life of the individual with its experience of the joys and pains of love; and also the concerns of the larger community, which in the early nineteenth century included the beginnings of industrialisation and job-specialisation, emigration and the search for a new life and a new social order.

The eponymous hero, Wilhelm, and along with him the reader, makes his way through a series of labyrinthine social models. In the diverse world-views he is offered a variety of confusing possibilities which contradict and relativise each other. The author’s intention is not to offer solutions to the social and other problems of the dawning modern age, but rather to challenge the reader to look for answers for himself. Through deliberate use of ambiguity Goethe aims at the education of the reader. He sets himself the complex task of giving the reader the means of developing an active, productive reading practice — a reading practice which will not only help him to interpret the written text, but also offers him a useful metaphor for the continuous struggle to interpret the ‘text’ of his lived experience.

Stylistically the work is characterised by mirroring devices which highlight its self-reflexivity. It is a technique which is described by Goethe’s own distinctive term ‘wiederholte Spiegelungen’ [repeated reflections], and is akin to the device of ‘mise en abyme’ which is specifically associated with the French ‘nouveau roman’. The novel contains within it miniature analogues for the work itself, which reflect and accentuate its narrative structure and concerns. Central to this series of reflective devices in the Wanderjahre are the metaphors of the labyrinth and of weaving, which run throughout the text on the levels of content, metaphor and discourse and which are symbols both for the text itself as an artistic construct and for ways of pursuing its meaning. Both these images are made explicit in a central passage within the the novel which — as Terry Eagleton has said of modernist literary works in general — “lays bare the device” of the work’s composition (Eagleton, 1983, p. 170). The narrator says of his characters:

Erwarten wir also zunächst, einen nach dem andern, sich verflechtend und entwindend, auf gebahnten und ungebahnten Wegen wiederzufinden (H.A. Vol. 8, p. 244).

[We can expect them, therefore, to reappear shortly, one after the other, interweaving and disentwining, on well-trodden and on untrodden pathways]

It could be argued that both the labyrinth and weaving have become worn-out metaphors which are so much part of the everyday currency of speech — in such phrases as the ‘rich tapestry of life’, for example, or ‘the labyrinth of the world’ — that they have long since ceased to have any figurative potency. It is perhaps rather the case, however, that they are archetypal metaphors which retain their potency precisely because they are so
universal. The primordial image for human life is the image of the fates — Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos — spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of life, as described by Plato in Book 10 of the *Republic*, in the Myth of Er (Plato, 1974, p. 451). The metaphors have gained a new resonance today with the development of the communications labyrinth of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Both the labyrinth and weaving are metaphors used since time immemorial to describe the written text. The word text itself is derived from the Latin word ‘*texere*’ [to weave]. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* weaving and storytelling are brought together explicitly as Athene and Arachne vie with each other to prove who is the better weaver and each weaves tales of human and divine transformation into the fabric of her tapestry:

\[
\text{illic et lentum filis inmittitur aurum,} \\
\text{et vetus in tela deducitur argumentum.}
\]

[Pliant gold thread, too, was interwoven as old stories were pictured on the looms]*

In a letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1832 Goethe described the metaphor of weaving as: “*ein Gleichnis das ich so gerne brauche*” [an image that I very much like to use] (H.A. Letters, Vol. 4, p. 136). In the *Wanderjahre* weaving is both part of the contents of the novel, in the scenes describing the effects of industrialisation on the cottage industry of spinning and weaving in the Swiss mountains; and a metaphor for the way in which the novel itself is constructed. Commenting on this section of the novel Goethe described his concern that this weaving together of heterogeneous elements should prove effective:

\[
\text{Besonders erfreut mich, daß Sie durch unmittelbare Anschauung der Wirklichkeit meinen Webern und Spinnern günstig geworden. Denn ich war immer in Sorge, ob nicht diese Verflechtung des streng-trockenen Technischen mit ästhetisch-sentimentalen Ereignissen gute Wirkung hervorbringen könne (H.A. Vol. 8, p. 524).}
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[I am especially pleased that direct observation of the reality caused you to be favourably disposed towards my spinners and weavers. For I was always concerned whether this interweaving of strictly scientific technical elements with elements of an aesthetic and emotional nature could create a good effect.]

The idea of the text as an intricately woven fabric has been closely related since ancient times to the idea of the text as a labyrinth. In the *Aeneid* Virgil uses the metaphor of the labyrinth of Crete with its “*iter textum*” [woven path] (Book 5, line 589), thus illustrating how both elements are contained in the archetypal myth which is the origin of the metaphor: the story of Daedalus and Theseus and of Ariadne whose thread guided Theseus safely through the intricacies of the Cretan labyrinth. The tracery of the thread, the spider’s web, the woven fabric, the network of pathways in the labyrinth all create a spatial pattern which both represents and transforms the temporal linear nature of the narrated word.
The labyrinth has long been used as a metaphor for the difficult text or discussion: both in a pejorative sense to denote arguments which were unnecessarily complicated; and positively for the dialectic by which the wise teacher leads the student through the necessarily winding paths towards knowledge and understanding. In the Middle Ages the term ‘Aristotle’s labyrinth’ was used to denote a difficult philosophical text. Goethe, too, uses the image in this sense. In an essay he describes how, when he began to read Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* he experienced for the first time the attraction of a theoretical work, but nevertheless felt unable to enter fully into the labyrinth of the text:

... nun aber schien zum erstenmal eine Theorie mich anzulächeln. Der Eingang war es der mir gefiel, in’s Labyrinth selbst konnt’ ich mich nicht wagen (W.A. 2.11, p. 49).

[... now for the first time, however, a theory seemed to smile invitingly at me. It was the entrance that attracted me, but I didn’t dare to venture into the labyrinth itself.]

Both the labyrinth and the intricately woven fabric are ambivalent images, suggesting both order and chaos, harmony and threat. Weaving can create an intricate ordered whole out of a multitude of threads, but it can also create a net, a web to entrap the unwary. The labyrinth is a motif which has had an incomparable fascination for artists and writers from ancient times to the present day. It is at one and the same time a symbol of chaos and a symbol of cosmos. On the one hand the labyrinth-walker runs the risk of losing himself in the tortuous meandering paths of the labyrinth. It symbolises both the subjective confusions inside the human mind and also the difficult path through the objectively existing world around. On the other hand the labyrinth represents a complex order in diversity — a cosmos, for those who view it from outside, from a bird’s eye perspective. Both these aspects of the labyrinth, as chaos and as cosmos, are used frequently by Goethe throughout his writings. Looking back in 1821 over the previous sixty years he uses the image in a satirical epigram to describe the increasing complexities of the world he inhabits:

Seit sechzig Jahren seh’ ich gröblich irren
Und irre derb mit drein;
Da Labyrinthe nun das Labyrinth verwirren,

[For sixty years I’ve watched as all went far astray
And have myself strayed with the rest;
Since labyrinths without end confuse the labyrinth,
Where will we find a new Ariadne?]

In his autobiographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he suggests that literature can offer its readers the possibility of the bird’s eye perspective which makes cosmos out of chaos:
Wie ein Luftballon hebt sie uns mit dem Ballast, der uns anhängt, in höhere Regionen und läßt die verwirrten Irrgänge der Erde in Vogelperspektive vor uns entwickelt daliegen (H.A. Vol. 9, p. 144).

[Like a hot-air balloon it raises us, with all the ballast that we carry with us, into higher regions and allows us from a bird’s-eye perspective to see the pattern in the confused pathways of the world-labyrinth.]

The ambivalent aspects of the labyrinth are also part of the imagery of the Wanderjahre. One of the embedded novellas, a vivid and fragmentary evocation of the disintegration of a marriage, is introduced with the sentence:

Bis tief in die Nacht blieb man zusammen und verwickelte sich immer unentwirrbarer in die Labyrinthe menschlicher Gesinnungen und Schicksale (H.A. Vol. 8, p. 393).

[They stayed together until deep in the night and entangled themselves ever more inextricably in the labyrinths of the human psyche and its predicament.]

On the other hand Makarie, one of the major characters of the novel, is endowed with the Ariadne-like capacity of helping the lost to find their way and disentangling the entanglements of her fellow human beings precisely because “sie ins Labyrinth von oben herabsah und nicht selbst darin befangen war” (H.A. Vol. 9, p. 214) [she looked down into the labyrinth from above and was not herself entrapped in it].

The last words of the Wanderjahre — “ist fortzusetzen” [to be continued] — reflect Goethe’s idea of the infinite nature of the literary work. The kind of work of art which he undertakes in the Wanderjahre is that for which Umberto Eco has coined the term the open work (Cf. Eco, 1979, pp. 62-3): a work of art or narrative form which not only denies the possibility of resolution into one ultimate meaning, but also suggests the arbitrary nature of all beginnings and the impossibility of final closure, and which hands on the responsibility for continuation to the reader and interpreter. Like Eco, Goethe felt that openness was the essential quality of the work of art per se and he responded to this perception in the composition of the Wanderjahre by incorporating openness into the structure and organisation of the work. It is a text which makes disclosure of the intrinsic openness of the literary work part of its aesthetic programme. The labyrinth is an apposite image for this kind of open work of art. It offers, in a sense, the ultimate delusion. It is an artificial construct which offers within an enclosed and limited space the illusion of unbounded and limitless motion — a metaphor of infinity encompassed by finiteness.

The kaleidoscopic world of the Wanderjahre highlights many of the central issues of the early nineteenth century: the problems and opportunities of early industrialisation and technological and scientific progress; overpopulation, emigration and land-reform; educational reform and the pursuit of a system of values which can keep pace with the developing complexity of the world; the growth of both religious tolerance and anti-semitism; the relationship between the sciences and the arts; the increasing complexity of
human relationships and changing gender roles. The aim of the work is precisely this
delineation of issues: to highlight the areas where problems might lie and to give the
reader and interpreter pause for thought. It is a work which recognises the value of the
descriptive and the limitations of the prescriptive. Its insistence that everything “bleibt im
Schweben” (H.A. Vol. 8, p. 447) [hangs in the balance] points to the fundamental
uncertainty and indefiniteness, not only of every act of interpretation, but also of the
essential human condition. That this work is to be regarded as an affirmation of the
problematical was underlined by Goethe when he described it as a ‘Rätsel’ [riddle] and
said of it:

Jede Lösung eines Problems ist ein neues Problem (Gräf, 1902, p. 976).

[Every solution to a problem raises a new problem].

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Metafiction has been described as “fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (Hutcheon, 1981, p. 1). Patricia Waugh lists a range of characteristics which are commonly found in metafictional texts — including the obtrusive narrator, the dramatisation of the reader role, Chinese box structures, self-reflexive images (such as mirrors and mazes) and parody of literary conventions — and comments: “In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text” (Waugh, 1984, pp. 21-2).

‘Mise en abyme’ has been defined as “any internal mirror reflecting the narrative whole by simple, repeated or spacious reduplication” (Dällenbach, 1977, p. 52). The term originated with André Gide who derived it from the heraldic emblem of a shield in whose centre is reproduced a miniature version of itself. Gide used the device in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* where the central character, Edouard, is a novelist working on a novel with the same title as, and a strong resemblance to, the novel in which he is a character.
