

Pathologies of Care
in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

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As far as I can see, there is general agreement that care (*Sorge*) is an absolutely central and ubiquitous theme throughout Goethe's work. The excerpts from *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* that I have presented for our discussion are a semi-random montage, but they still manage to indicate long-term continuities.

At the same time, many prominent readings—from Heidegger to John Hamilton—have taken their understanding of care primarily or even exclusively from the scene at the end of *Faust II*, which culminates in Faust's blinding.¹ This relates partly to the compelling aspects of the scene itself, and partly to questions regarding the role of this scene in Heidegger's conception of Care in *Being and Time*. The Heidegger connection has directly and indirectly influenced much of the scholarship on Goethe and care.

Rather than going into Heidegger (which I am not prepared to do today), I want to establish the wider landscape of care in Goethe, with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in the foreground. Some materials for this were part of the selections I circulated. They might partly be interpreted as suggesting a “darkening” of the idea of care between Goethe's 1787 “Iphigenia” play and the late, posthumously published *Faust II*. Within this bracket of 45 years, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, from 1795-96, may already contain the whole spectrum. At least that is the direction in which my current reading is headed. However, as I work on this, I find it increasingly important to ‘factor out’ the reception of Goethe via Heidegger—and that is not easy to do. To show why this is necessary, I want to rehearse some elements of this reception. Let me quote it first from the post-war philosopher Hans Blumenberg:

Heidegger declared care to be the essence of *Dasein* and thereby discovers it as the key to temporality, as the horizon through which *Dasein* understands *Sein*. Care prevents *Dasein* from becoming identical with its own presence; it emerges out of a tense (*angespannt*) relation to time, which Heidegger calls ecstatic. Intentionality also means tension, and it also implies an expectant (*gespannt*) relation to time, in that it refers precisely to the property of consciousness that never allows it to take hold of its objects “in their entirety and each time always in the same way.”

Consciousness means *having to wait* and *being able to hesitate*.²

Blumenberg continues to pursue an investigation of states that are produced by a relaxation of the tensions associated with this definition of “consciousness” as the ontic-ontological norm of “care” and “self-care.” A more generalized paraphrase, which corroborates this understanding, can be found in Ellis Dye's 2009 essay “Sorge in Heidegger

¹ On this issue in Heidegger's 1927 *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), see Ellis Dye, “Sorge in Heidegger and in Goethe's *Faust*,” *Goethe Yearbook* 16 (2009), 207-218; John T. Hamilton, *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (Princeton, 2013).

² [my translation] Hans Blumenberg, *Die Sorge geht über den Fluß* (Suhrkamp, 1987), 207.

and in Goethe's *Faust*": "In the fable [of Hyginus] and in Goethe too, Heidegger suggests, care is constitutive of human being or 'Dasein'—Heidegger's word for the kind of being for whom its own existence is an issue. And care is the being of *Dasein* as such. Care is what makes us human."³

This is, however, already rather philosophical and decontextualized (even from the plot of *Faust*). Another problem, as I would see it, is the tendency to read *Sorge* as the precondition and element of Faustian striving and of its end and demise. As Dye puts it, purporting to echo Goethe and Heidegger, care is "constitutive of our very being."⁴ This relies on a generalization (which Blumenberg criticizes): namely, the assumption that "we" are "Faust." This is, moreover, not a problem that is unique to Dye's reading, but rather to the existential-theological-philosophical implications that the idea of care easily takes on (even in her speeches in *Faust*). In this sense, the figure of Care tends to speak for her own generalization—which in the end also includes Faust, who had previously been an exception.

A second aspect of this generalizing tendency is an approach that focuses on care, not primarily in Goethe's works, but in his life and in the relation between life and work. Not "us" or Faust, but Goethe himself becomes the primary exemplar of the existential analytic of care. Blumenberg in particular goes this direction, not by relying on biographies or other secondary documents of Goethe's life, but through what appears to have been his own painstaking analysis of the primary documentary evidence of Goethe's life. This results in even longer bracket of nearly 80 years, which starts with the six-year-old Goethe's distraught reaction to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. As Blumenberg tries to imagine it in his *Work on Myth* (1985), Goethe here already lays the groundwork for his later ideas, which will strive for a specific idea of the immortality of the soul, which is designed to immunize humanity, not only against care and anxiety, but against the existential threat of death and catastrophe. The drift of Blumenberg's reading is the reconstruction of an ontological position that leaves behind the Augustinian ideas of evil and original sin — which displace care into alternate arenas of transcendence. This vector of argument is anything but arbitrary, insofar as Heidegger's concept of care is typically held to be primarily derived from Augustine. Rather than seeing human freedom as essentially tied to care in the context of evil and guilt, Blumenberg sees in Goethe a "mythical imagination" of the "un-annihilability of man (*Unvernichtbarkeit des Menschen*)."⁵ At the same time, Blumenberg reads this conception not as a "solution" but as an acute symptom of the existential threat produced by the eclipse of theodicy. It is in this sense that Blumenberg focuses on examples of Goethe's life-long fear of earthquakes and, more generally, of death. This trajectory's biographical end-point may be found in one of Blumenberg's posthumously published fragments, entitled "Goethe's Mortality" (*Goethes Sterblichkeit*), in which Goethe's care for his own literary posterity becomes the vehicle for a new kind of immortality. The last sentence of Blumenberg's text reads: "The lifework (*das Werk*) is the true monad, the specific entelechy, which is able to give itself sufficient life-force to survive (*Das Werk ist die wahre Monade, jene Entelechie, die sich genügend Lebenskraft gegeben haben kann, um zu überleben*)."⁶ This is, I would argue, precisely the

³ Dye, 207.

⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁵ *Arbeit am Mythos* (Suhrkamp, 1979).

⁶ *Goethe zum Beispiel* (Suhrkamp, 1999), 106.

situation of Faust at the end of the scene with Care: after he is blinded, the first thing he does is get to work. Life's care for its lifework is thus imagined as a cryogenic time capsule, no less radical in intent than science-fiction scenarios of being frozen and reawakened in the far future.

I am not yet ready to bring this idea of care as a suspension of time and consciousness back into direct dialogue with Heidegger. I only wanted to show how Blumenberg is evidently pursuing a dialogue with Heidegger, by way of Goethe, in order to work out a more historically and individually specific account of the "ontology" of care. This project seems to me to be worth continuing, in Goethe's works and in general.

One small example, which suggested itself as I was rereading my own montage, is the close connection, in both *Faust II* and *Iphigenia*, between *Sorge* (care) and *Fleiß* (industry, diligence). Of course, considering the almost fifty years that separate the two texts, one might want to see this as a random juxtaposition, but I at least find it interesting that both the "speedy *Fleiß*" of *Faust II* and the *Fleiß* with which Iphigenia claims to have questioned her prisoners are either clearly ironized (in *Faust*) or ironic by virtue of disingenuousness (in *Iphigenia*). The implication in both cases seems to be that the activities provoked by care tend to be delusional and counterproductive, futile busywork, or self-serving claims whose main concern is to keep up the appearance of care.

As for the specific instance of the idea of "care" in *Wilhelm Meister* alone, I would again urge us to stick with specifics. My claim is that Goethe's novel, though it famously promoted generalized readings (e.g. "Bildungsroman"), contains many resources to resist such readings. Thus I prefer to think of a spectrum of different models of care in the work, rather than a single concept. This approach fits with how I have tried to work on Goethe elsewhere (in his concept of the demonic).

With these general qualifications out of the way, I will focus for a few minutes on one example: the novel's figure of the unnamed "uncle"—who is actually a great uncle in relation to the generation of the novel's protagonist. As a tribute to Orwell's Big Brother, I will call him "Big Uncle" since, despite his indirect or nonexistent biological paternity, it is nevertheless his "care"—his patrimony and aesthetic-managerial prowess—that gives rise to the secret society of the tower, under whose auspices the novel's surviving characters are endowed with a past, a present, and a future. Given this setup, who is Big Uncle? He is a figure who never emerges from the shadows, from the periphery of the novel's plot. He is known through his legacy more than through his presence and actions. You can already see that I am inclined to understand him as a rather sinister figure, even though this reading may be prone to the charge of anachronism. It is difficult post-Kafka, post-Orwell, and post-Oz, to see such a puppet-master—a tower- and castle-master—as anything but a sinister figure. The critical editions of *Wilhelm Meister* decisively discourage such a reading by emphasizing all that Big Uncle has in common with Goethe: both are Spinozists and visionaries who undertake far-sighted and far-reaching aesthetic-cultural initiatives. However, as I see it, the old Faust is also such a figure, who ends up getting blinded by Care; Care cures Faust of his magically prolonged youth, just as she causes Wilhelm's friend Werner to become prematurely aged. The song of the watcher on the tower (*Türmer*) from *Faust II* may also be read in this sense. Instead of understanding the tower-keeper's song as a reflection of Goethe's metaphysics and aesthetics of the visible, in the context of the plot, the watchman has much in common with the blinded Faust

(as Johannes Anderegk has recently argued). The tower-keeper is charged with seeing, but he becomes captivated by looking, by his song to his visual pleasures. He is hypnotized and doesn't notice threats and dangers—which were the whole point of keeping a lookout in the first place.

Big Uncle is also such a figure, a Faust-figure, a far-seer and far-planner. Here I would stress that it is not necessarily a compliment to identify someone as a Faust-figure. Rather, the identification with the Faustian is always, at best, ambivalent. Here I draw on Blumenberg for support, who argues that if someone is compared to Faust, it is never a compliment: “There is something rotten in this idea of the ‘Faustian.’ Because the blinded Faust, who relishes the sound of the digging spades, which seem to him to already be at work, is nevertheless deceived, in that what he hears isn’t the digging of a swamp-drainage canal, but of his own grave. [...] The ‘Faustian,’ therefore, in its precise sense is nothing but a self-deception.”⁷ I understand Big Uncle as “Faustian” in this sense, as a Faust-figure whose aspirations have not yet caved in—who, though dead at the end of the novel, has not yet lost his wager, because his spirit is still being enacted by a thousand hands (*Faust II*, 11520). Like Faust, however, Big Uncle, will lose in the end: there are many indications of this, including relatively obvious ones like the physical disrepair and institutional deterioration of the Tower. Also, the only other “uncle” (*Oheim*) in the novel is the usurper Claudius from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. More telling, however, are the persistent signs that Big Uncle, who loves the soothing harmonies of secularized sacred choral music, had an anything but harmonious relation with many members of his family and society. He managed to build some great works, a “small world” that is supposedly a microcosm of his own spirit, but the surviving members are as likely to liquidate his endowment as they are to carry out his last will.

Most telling, however, is the way in which Big Uncle receives his first extended introduction, at a point when the reader hasn’t “met” him yet and is unaware of the role that he will play later on. Big Uncle makes his first appearance as a young man, in “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul,” an autobiographical narrative written by an unnamed devoutly religious woman with strong Pietist leanings. Friedrich Schlegel refers to this character simply as “the Aunt” (*die Tante*), a clear signal that he understands her as a symmetrical counterweight to Big Uncle. This isn’t the standard reading though. Ever since Schiller, readers have tended to marginalize the Aunt and her religiosity as an example of one-sided and exclusively interior *Bildung*, which is ‘defeated’ by Big Uncle’s social-secular-pedagogical culture-building experiments. Following the hint from Schlegel, I would rather see the “beautiful soul” as Big Aunt, as the Queen of the Night to Big Uncle’s Sarastro.

Perhaps this goes too far. One would have to see where it leads. The smaller point is: Big Aunt is the one who first introduces Big Uncle to the reader. He is called “her father’s stepbrother.” He has left an influential position at court “because not everything was done his way (*weil nicht alles nach seinem Sinne ging*).” (FA 755). One could argue that even Big Uncles need to mature, but the novel doesn’t give any indication that he ever moderated this uncompromising and independent streak. To the contrary, his autocratic willfulness is enabled by a large inheritance (*Vermögen*), which he received from a wealthy mother and her various “close and distant relatives (*nahe und ferne Verwandten*).” In other words, Big Uncle can afford to be stubborn and independent. These

⁷ Ibid., 85.

habits of mind were further intensified by a “domestic misfortune”—*ein häusliches Unglück*, as Big Aunt calls it. Big Uncle tragically lost his wife and young son, and from that point onward, he wants to stay away from “everything that didn’t depend on his will (*alles ... was nicht von seinem Willen abhing*)” (FA 755). Admittedly, this isn’t the story of the young Faust, but it sounds a lot like the old Faust: Big Uncle tries to lock out care and seeks to exercise absolute prevention, instead ends up absolutely dominated by Care.

There’s more material that follows in this scene, for example on Big Uncle’s conflict-averse style of discourse and Big Aunt’s perception that, as much as he tries to accommodate himself to her discourse, “he evidently had not the slightest concept of the basis of all of her actions” (*daß er von dem, worin der Grund aller meiner Handlungen lag, offenbar keinen Begriff hatte*) (FA 756). I stop the close reading here, however, to cut to the chase: Despite the impressiveness of Big Uncle’s massive investments in monumental culture-building projects, there is no reason to think that these will turn out any better than Wilhelm’s infatuations with the theater. Of course, this doesn’t mean that Goethe thinks that culture is a bad thing, just as the novel is not simply a diatribe against the idealization of theater as a national-cultural aspiration or as a moral institution. Rather, as I would see it, Big Aunt represents a moment of self-critique with regard to such aspirations. The novel may limit her perspective and in many ways isolate her (as she isolates herself), but her critique thereby becomes all the more decisive, because it emerges from the point of view of the existential groundlessness of the Faustian ethics of care and security. Big Aunt sees Big Uncle (and perhaps also Goethe) as a figure of sublimation, of anxiety, and of hopeless striving for a false earthly immortality. Thus, what goes for the society of the theater also goes for the Society of the Tower, and even for the memorializing “Chamber of the Past” (*Saal der Vergangenheit*), whose dead residents are at one point referred to as “the quiet society” (*die stille Gesellschaft*). To try to support this idea of the groundlessness of all societies, I give the last word to Aurelie, the novel’s tragic heroine, whose voice for a moment ambiguously overlaps with that of the narrator:

Unfortunately, it is generally the case that something that is assembled by a variety of persons and circumstances rarely maintains its cohesion for long. Whether this be a theatrical company (*Theatergesellschaft*) or an empire, a circle of friends or an army, a moment is usually reached when it is at its zenith, its best, its greatest unity, well-being and effectiveness. Then personalities (*das Personal*) change, new individuals (*Glieder*) arrive on the scene, and the persons no longer suit the circumstances and the circumstances, the persons. Everything becomes different, and what had been unified begins to fall apart. (Blackall-Lange 208)

Überhaupt ist es leider der Fall, daß alles was durch mehrere zusammen-treffende Menschen und Umstände hervorgebracht werden soll, keine lange Zeit sich vollkommen erhalten kann. Von einer Theatergesellschaft so gut wie einem Reiche, von einem Zirkel Freunde so gut wie einer Armee läßt sich gewöhnlich der Moment angeben, wenn sie auf der höchsten Stufe ihrer Vollkommenheit, ihrer Übereinstimmung, ihrer Zufriedenheit und Tätigkeit standen; oft aber verändert sich schnell das Personal, neue Glieder treten hinzu, die Personen passen nicht mehr zu den

Umständen, die Umstände nicht mehr zu den Personen; es wird alles anders, und was vorher verbunden war, fällt nunmehr bald auseinander. (FA 712-713)