

# The Hamlet Impasse: theater creative process in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

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**ABSTRACT – The Hamlet Impasse: theater creative process in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*** – This essay analyzes the narrative of the process of creating a Hamlet staging, conducted by the character Wilhelm Meister in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The essay is based on the concept of self-formation (*bildung*), present in the book and also in other works by the German author, to trace relations between the theatrical creative process and its historical context. It also seeks to present the creative process described in the novel as a kind of synthesis of multiple concepts developed by German and European theater in the 18th century, showing the dialectical inspiration of the theatrical journey narrated by Goethe.

Keywords: **Theater. Creative Process. German Literature. Staging. Dramaturgy.**

**RÉSUMÉ – L'Impasse du Hamlet: le processus de création du théâtre dans *Les Années d'Apprentissage par Wilhelm Meister*, de Goethe** – Cet essai analyse le récit du processus de création d'une mise en scène de hameau, dirigé par le personnage Wilhelm Meister dans le roman *Les Années d'apprentissage de Wilhelm Meister*, de Goethe. L'essai part de l'idée de formation, présente dans le roman et dans d'autres œuvres de l'auteur allemand, pour tracer les relations entre le processus théâtral créatif et son contexte historique. Il cherche également à présenter le processus créatif décrit dans le roman comme une sorte de synthèse de multiples concepts développés par le théâtre allemand et européen au XVIIIe siècle, révélant l'inspiration dialectique du voyage théâtral raconté par Goethe.

Mots-clés: **Théâtre. Processus Créatif. Littérature Allemande. Mise en Scène. Dramaturgie.**

**RESUMO – O Impasse de Hamlet: processo criativo teatral nos *Anos de Aprendizado de Wilhelm Meister* de Goethe** – Este ensaio analisa a narrativa do processo de criação de uma encenação de *Hamlet*, conduzido pelo personagem Wilhelm Meister no romance *Anos de Aprendizado de Wilhelm Meister*, de Goethe. O ensaio parte da ideia de formação, presente no romance e também em outras obras do autor alemão, para traçar relações entre processo criativo teatral e seu contexto histórico. Também procura-se apresentar o processo criativo descrito no romance como espécie de síntese de múltiplos conceitos desenvolvidos pelo teatro alemão e europeu do século XVIII, revelando a inspiração dialética do percurso teatral narrado por Goethe.

Palavras-chave: **Teatro. Processo Criativo. Literatura Alemã. Encenação. Dramaturgia.**

## Theatrical bildungsroman

The almost infinite critical literature on the coming-of-age (self-formation) novel (bildungsroman)<sup>1</sup> has, as its model object, Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, published in 1795-1796. According to Mazzari (2018, p. 15), "it is not an easy task to precisely reconstruct the spatial and temporal dimension in which unfolds the plot of this work, populated by actors that are vagrants, adventurers, bourgeois, nobles, poets and artists"; however, it can be affirmed that "the hero's apprenticeship takes place approximately between 1770 and 1780, in Germany's countryside". The most lapidary definition of the formative experience narrated there comes, however, from the author himself, years after the work was published:

For very long have decanted the principles of *Wilhelm Meister*. They had been born of an obscure presentiment of this major truth: that when man tries enterprises for which Nature has denied him conditions and which he can never carry out, an intimate feeling then advises him to desist, but he is not right if he does not see it clearly in himself and perseveres in following a false path to false ends, without him himself knowing what to do. [...] Many are those who in this mistake consume the best part of their lives, finally falling into a rare confusion. But, undoubtedly, it may follow that all these false steps lead to the conquest of an invaluable asset: a presentiment that is increasingly clearer in *Meister* and confirmed in the last words of the book; 'To my mind, thou resemblest Saul the son of Kish, who went out to seek his father's asses, and found a kingdom' (Goethe, 1959, p. 519)<sup>2</sup>.

The biblical passage is mentioned in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* by the character Friedrich, to his friend Wilhelm, at the end of book VIII and was taken from a passage in the *Bible*, from the Book of Kings I, 9-10. The conquest of this kingdom, mentioned in the last sentence of the novel – the hero's apprenticeship – arises from the narrative structure elaborated by Goethe, which is inspired by the model of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*: the novel advances around the disproportion between the protagonist's illusion and the frustrations caused by the reality around him, constituting a journey of disenchantment. This process of revealing his "real Nature," to use Goethe's own terms, presents the main subject of the narrative as a unique individual, capable of evolving and progressing in time, of developing him-



self, of actualizing what was power in him. This not only presupposes the acquisition of skills, but also an integral subjective development, which implies, among many other objectives, disciplining one's individuality and desires, in an obligation of improvement, since individual development leads to the universal progress of humanity. Self-formation has here a historical and utopian component, because its goal is not only the learning of the isolated subject, but the development of the human race, as it appears in the fifth chapter of Book VIII, in which Jarno reads to the hero sentences of "Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship letter," promoting a certain relativization in the sense of individual formation: "Only all men together compose humanity; only all forces together, the world. These are often in conflict with one another and, while seeking mutual destruction, nature keeps them together and reproduces them" (Goethe, 2015, p. 4491).

This utopian aspiration, contained in Goethe's novel, which foresees self-formation as a capacity to advance social subjectivity to achieve harmony between the subject and the world, overcoming the opposition that marks modern thought, between subject and object, is also a response to a historical experience of alienation, fragmentation of the individual and of capitalist society, historically contextualized by the Industrial Revolution and its consequences. According to Hungarian philosopher György Lukács, Goethe's novel "is ideologically on the border between two epochs: it embodies the tragic crisis of bourgeois humanist ideals, and the beginning of the overcoming – provisionally utopian – of the framework of bourgeois society" (Lukács, 1972, p. 127). The path that Wilhelm will follow is one of integration with social rules and controls, and we find, during the narrative, that his steps – and his mistakes – have always been guided and determined, at a distance and secretly, by the Tower Society, a Masonic-inspired secret society, whose members form a community where Wilhelm will find loving happiness and a place to exercise a trade. As a model of the bourgeois ideology of the time, the hero will abandon his illusions about the theater and opt for a profession, that of surgeon, totally distant from his libertarian dreams of the beginning of his life trajectory.

There is a pedagogical and self-formative ideal, contained in the activity of the Tower Society, influence of Rousseau's treatise *Emilio*<sup>3</sup>, based on the goal of a kind of education through error, in which the subject is left free to

deviate from what would be their natural path, until they are reconciled with their true Nature, through disillusionment and hard errant learning:

It is not the duty of the educator of men to preserve them from error, but to instruct as to the wrong; and more, the masters' wisdom lies in letting the wrong sip from full cups their error. Whoever barely tastes their error, remains in it for a long time, rejoices in it as a rare happiness; but whoever exhausts it completely, must recognize it as an error, provided they are not demented<sup>4</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4417).

Having presented the general lines of the narrative and concept of the coming-of-age romance, in this article, I am interested in the symbol that structures Wilhelm Meister's learning movement, which presents the hero's wandering through a pedagogical path of discovery of theatrical art. This symbol consists in a staging of *Hamlet*, which expresses, in the protagonist's life trajectory, the moment of greatest artistic achievement. Theatrical education and subjective formation are intertwined in the novel, and Wilhelm's abandonment of the theatrical project means the learning of self-limitation, of acceptance of his legitimate role in social reality, undertaken by the protagonist. It is possible to identify, in the chapters dedicated to the staging of *Hamlet*, a spectacle starred and adapted by Meister in his theater company, a reflection that brings the path of subjective formation closer to the path of creation of a theatrical performance, through the detailed description, provided by Goethe, of the process of rehearsing the staging undertaken by the protagonist. Although in a fictional manner, it is possible to discover a vision, built on the importance of rehearsals for the production of the theatrical show as an artistic work, which contains notes, in a germinal character, of the creative practices and processes that lasted through much of the western theater of the twentieth century, structured through a concept of self-formation.

### Rehearsing Hamlet, Rehearsing Meister

The importance of theater in Wilhelm Meister's formative trajectory is so decisive that the character identifies with Shakespeare in the deep plane of his individuality, as pointed out by Machado (2012, p. 75): "Therefore, it was not gratuitous that in the Goethean novel the name of the protagonist, as the first element that forms the identity of the character, has a direct

link with Shakespeare's first name and the protagonist's surname means master [*Meister*]"'. Meister recognizes this similarity and mirrors himself in it: "his friend Shakespeare, whom with great pleasure he recognized as his godfather, rejoicing for also being called Wilhelm"<sup>5</sup> (Goethe, 1994, p. 211). However, this identification only occurs through the creative process of staging *Hamlet*, since, before that, Meister answers his friend Jarno's question about his knowledge of Shakespeare's oeuvre as follows:

'So you have never watched', asked Jarno, calling him aside, 'a Shakespeare play?'

'No', replied Wilhelm, '[...] everything I heard about these plays did not arouse my curiosity to know more deeply these strange monsters, which seem to surpass any verisimilitude, any conveniences<sup>6</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 3996).

The comment on "strange monsters" (*seltsame Ungeheuer*), which, according to the then hegemonic interpretation based on Aristotelian poetics, lacked verisimilitude and respect for the rules of classicism<sup>7</sup>, echoes the most common critical judgment in Germany at the time. However, according to Goethe, consistently with Lessing and Friedrich Schlegel, in the German context of the first romanticism, Shakespeare's dramaturgy would represent the apogee and the end of the second cycle of moderns (the first would be represented by Dante), followed by two centuries of decadence, whose recovery occurred only from the romantic eighteenth century onwards: "Goethe would then be, within the Schlegelian view, the dawn in the history of modernity" (Machado, 2012, p. 74), precisely through his recovery of the "monstrous" standards of the English poet.

The debate about the exact size of Shakespeare took place in eighteenth-century Germany far beyond the ideas signed by Goethe. Lessing had the role of introducing Shakespeare to a broader circle in Germany, "as a poet of the first order; Lessing not only wrote a text on the Shakespeare matter, but led consistent polemics during decades on both the aesthetic value of the poet's work and on [...] the interpretation of the critical principles used to deny it such value" (Fugita, 2006, p. 12). Thus, the history of the poet's critical reception in Germany begins with Lessing. The first document relevant to the reception of Shakespeare is the 17<sup>th</sup> of the Letters on the newest literature (*Briefe, über die neueste Literatur betreffend*), in which Lessing opposes the new "Frenchized" German theater, which Gottsched

would have adopted against the old theatrical forms and customs, in English style, according to him much better suited to the national inclinations. The German reality, according to Lessing, would tend not to the “affected, delicate, passionate” manner of French dramas, but much more to the “great, terrible and melancholic” style of English theater, whose greatest playwright would be Shakespeare.

To decide the matter according to the standards of the olds, Shakespeare is a much greater tragic poet than Corneille [...]. Corneille approaches the ancients in mechanical procedures and Shakespeare essentially. The English almost always achieves the goal of tragedy, however strange and in his own way he so does; and the French almost never achieves it, regardless of whether they are about to follow the path of yore. Compared to Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, there should be no more violence in the world about our passions than in Othello, King Lear, Hamlet, etc. [...] I could prove to you with little difficulty that our old plays really did have much of English. To name only the best known of them; Dr. Faust has many scenes that only a Shakespearean genius could conceive (Lessing, 1955, p. 354)<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, based on Aristotle, Lessing argues that French theater would not achieve the tragic ends systematized by the Greek philosopher, namely, the celebrated terror and piety, which would, on the other hand, be fully achieved in Shakespeare’s work. In the name of another interpretation of Aristotle, Friedrich Schlegel, inspired by Lessing’s reflections, states that: “In textbooks [...], separate genres as precisely as possible: but if a genius allows more than one to flow in the same work, forget the book and only examine whether he has achieved such intentions”<sup>9</sup> (Schlegel, 1975, p. 119). For Schlegel, as well as for Lessing, the pile of rules of French refinement, in vogue in the period, simply did not serve as a measure to value Shakespeare’s creations.

In the *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*..., *Hamlet’s* staging – and formation – path expresses this revaluation of Shakespeare’s theater. Thus, the staging process described in the novel expresses a theatrical pedagogy, which involves the rediscovery of the Elizabethan as a symbol of the poetics of the first German romanticism, and a perspective of collective formation for the “backward” Germany of the time<sup>10</sup>, in addition to Meister’s educational process. The formation of that *Hamlet* staging is also individual and national formation. Therefore, the first stage of the rehearsals, which involved

adapting Shakespeare's text to the reality of the German audience, should involve a learning, by the entire theater company, of the specific characteristics of that dramaturgical form:

'How much I should not be disappointed', cried he, 'if I had not found a way to contribute to the whole; I am convinced that Shakespeare himself would have acted so.... After a very thorough examination, after a more mature deliberation, I was able to distinguish two aspects in the composition of this play; the first refers to the great and intimate relationships of characters and events [...] — They cannot be changed by any kind of adaptation, not even disfigured. [...] However, in my opinion, many mistakes are made when considering insignificant, mentioning only in passing or simply omitting the second aspect that should be observed in this play. — I refer to the external relationships of the characters, by which they are taken from one place to another or linked in this or that way by certain fortuitous events. It is true that these threads are tenuous and loose, but they cross the whole play and support that which, without them, would be undone'<sup>11</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4156).

From the outset, it is necessary, through a "very thorough examination", to survey the purposes of the author of the text, seeking an absolute identification between text and scene: "I am convinced that Shakespeare himself would have acted so". What is at stake, in the rehearsal process that begins to be described at this stage of the novel, is not the construction of a scenic discourse independent of dramaturgy, through its own system of signs, such a view about theatrical staging would only be hegemonic from the twentieth century. However, the scene also does not mean the presentation of the narrative aspects of the text, already apparent in a superficial reading of the work: the work of adapting the text, which mainly involves cuts and deletions, must focus on a critical approach to the play, which aims to unveil what only the staging can undertake, by adding a new layer of meanings to those provided by the playwright. According to Meister's interpretation, this fabric of meanings can be divided into two aspects: one linked to the sequence of actions and relationships between the characters, which would be the main one; and a second, which involves "tenuous threads" but which are equally important, formed by the "external" movements of the characters, which frame the familial conflicts of the plot. For Meister, this external frame comprises the actions carried out outside the private scope of conflicts:

[...] the unrest in Norway, the war with the young Fortinbras, the embassy to the old uncle, the pacified discord, the expedition of the young Fortinbras to Poland and his return at the end, as well as the return of Horace of Wittenberg, Hamlet's desire to go there, Laertes' trip to France, his return, Hamlet's trip to England, his capture by pirates<sup>12</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4156).

Suppressing this bundle of “tenuous and loose threads” would mean maintaining only the scope of family and intersubjective relationships of the text, that is, it would be equivalent to transforming it into a “bourgeois drama”. This sort of drama, still quite attached to the rules theorized by Boileau and practiced by French classicism, began to be theorized at that historical moment and to expand throughout Europe. According to Diderot, one of the first theorists and playwrights of bourgeois drama, which was then called the “serious genre,” already in the first pages of his *Discourse on dramatic poetry*, the dramatic poet should be a philosopher and thus, he himself, in the 1750s, became a playwright: in his view, one activity should prolong the other<sup>13</sup>. What was at stake was to transform theater into a pedagogical instrument in defense of the rising values of the bourgeoisie, such as family, work, and commerce. To this end, it was necessary to replace the old Aristotelian characters, universal and seemingly timeless types, with individualized characters, socially and historically differentiated. Diderot formulates a general theater reform program, identifying as an opponent to be fought the contemporary scene, marked by French classical theater, characterized by a submission to conventionalism codified in the arbitrary form of “rules.” The bourgeois drama would be based, since then, on the correction of the verisimilitude defects of the classical conventional theater, seeking to establish itself as an imitation of the nascent capitalist world, infusing a lasting illusion on its spectators, always through private conflicts, grouped on a defense of sentimentality as a general trait of the self-determined individual, arising in the discourse of Enlightenment. Just as Meister would take Shakespeare's tragedy, Diderot, in the *Conversations on the Natural Son*, takes as a model the passage from Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* in which the parricide Orestes is pursued by the Furies, but based on that imagines “a domestic and common example” for the tragic scene:

A father lost his son in a singular combat: it's night. A servant, a witness of the combat, comes to inform the news. [...] – Oh! unhappy, exclaims his father, flinging from the bed in which he slept; he is deceiving me. There has



been some misfortune... Has my wife died? – No, sir. – My daughter? – No, sir. – It's my son, then?... The servant is silent; the father understands his silence; he throws himself to the floor, his rooms are filled with screams and pain. [...] The same man runs to the mother's room: she also slept. She wakes up with the noise of the curtains that open with violence. What transpires? she asks. 'Madam, the greatest disgrace'. It is time to be Christians. You no longer have a son. 'Oh God!' exclaims the afflicted mother. [...] Meanwhile, they had taken their son's body to the father's chambers; and there was a scene of despair, while a pantomime of pity was made in the mother's room. [...] I wonder what would happen to the viewer during this movement!... It is a husband, it is a father stretched out over the son's corpse, which will deeply hurt the mother's eyes! (Diderot, 2008, p. 116-117).

It is important to observe the domestic character of the scene, which moves individuals, of a bourgeois family, in their private space. By transporting the plot of the Attic tragedy to the scope of the individual, Diderot overthrows the so-called three-state clause, which from the poetics of antiquity established that the protagonists of theatrical intrigue should be of noble condition. While, in Aeschylus' tragedy, the absence of the absent son is cause for concern about a possible shock to the public space (the son would be conspiring to take the royal throne), in Diderot's recreation, the sentimental conflict is organized around the laceration of the family.

The choice to keep in the scene the "loose threads" that were detached from the familial line of action in *Hamlet's* tragedy indicates that Meister is concerned so as not to reproduce a staging in the mold of bourgeois drama, as Diderot prescribes above. In this excerpt, Meister is even more direct about what to remove and what to keep from Shakespeare's original text:

These defects are like momentary supports of a building, which cannot be removed without first erecting a solid wall. My proposal, therefore, is not to touch the first and great situations at all, conserving them as carefully as possible both in their whole and in their detail, but to reject once and for all these external, particular, dispersive and dispersing motifs, replacing them with one only. 'And what would it be?' Serlo asked, getting up from his comfortable position. 'It's already in the play itself', Wilhelm replied, 'it should simply be used correctly. That is the unrest in Norway'<sup>14</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4156).

Maintaining the "unrest in Norway" means that, in the rehearsal process that begins with the adaptation of the text, Meister intends to highlight

*Hamlet's* conflicts that have a public dimension and that frame and, ultimately, overdetermine the familial relationships of the characters:

'You were able to understand very well', he said, among other things, "that external circumstances must not only accompany this play, but also be simpler than those indicated by the great poet. What goes on outside the theater, what the spectator moves, what he has to imagine, is like a backdrop against which the characters in action move. — This great and simple perspective of the fleet and Norway will be of great value to the play; if we removed it completely, there would only be one family scene left, and the major idea that an entire royal dynasty is annihilated here by virtue of intimate crimes and vileness would not be represented in all its dignity<sup>15</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4159).

Thus, the first stage of the creation process only ends, according to the coming-of-age narrative of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, when those responsible for the staging of the text commit to update the text, through a detailed study of the characters, relationships, conflicts and historical contexts, and through a purpose of dialoguing with their own time and space, the spectators present in 18th century Germany:

Once again, Wilhelm took Shakespeare's side, justifying that he wrote for islanders, for Englishmen, who, deep down, are only used to seeing ships and sea voyages, the coasts of France and privateers, and what for them is something entirely habitual, distracts and confuses us<sup>16</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4159).

The apparently simple exercise of adapting and cutting the text gains new dimensions here, of a true aesthetic program: at the same time, the ideals of the French classical theater and its opponent, the nascent bourgeois drama, are challenged. The challenge is in the name of a view that, if it still intends to identify itself with the dramaturgy and the themes present in the text ("Once again Wilhelm took Shakespeare's side"), opens up to the importance of staging, as capable of creating and recreating theatrical meanings, overlapping them with the original dramaturgical work, through a historicization of the context that encompasses each artist responsible for the scenic staging.

The narrative of Wilhelm's self-formation and of the play staging continues, and it is possible to identify in the next chapter a new step in the process of creating that *Hamlet*. Once the text adaptation is finished, there

is the start of the theoretical study, collective, of both Shakespeare's play and related aesthetic issues:

The company began one afternoon to discuss which of the genres would be superior: drama or novel. [...] They spoke much, both of one and another aspect of the matter, until they finally reached this approximate result: — In both the novel and the drama we see human nature and action. [...] In the novel, feelings and facts should preferably be presented; in the drama, characters and actions. The novel must evolve slowly, and the protagonist's feelings, in whatever way, must slow the progress of the set until its development. The drama must be in a hurry, and the character of the protagonist must accelerate towards the end and not be restrained. The hero of the novel must be passive or, at least, not active to a high degree; the dramatic hero is required effectiveness and action<sup>17</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4171).

*More than a superficial discussion of Shakespeare's text, the analysis undertaken by the theatrical company, as a step in its creative process, delves into a theme that would be fundamental to German Romanticism.* In a letter written to Goethe on December 26, 1797, Schiller presents a definition of drama similar to that reached by the artists involved in the staging of *Hamlet*, emphasizing the attachment of this genre to the present: "dramatic action moves before me, around the epic I move myself" (Schiller, 1957, p. 105). According to Schiller, if the event moves before the dramatic subject, then it is rigorously attached to the sensible present, "my fantasy loses all freedom, [...] I always have to stay close to the object, being denied to me all retrospective gaze, all reflection, since I follow a strange power" (Schiller, 1957, p. 105). If, on the other hand, the subject moves around the event, which cannot escape him, then it is possible, in a different genre, the epic, to maintain an uneven pace, one can remain more or less time according to subjective need, one can go backwards or anticipate, etc. This is related "to the concept of being past," which can be thought of as a "quiet state," and to the concept of narrating, because the narrator already knows at the beginning and in the middle what the end is, therefore each moment of the action is indifferent to him and thus he maintains a quiet freedom all the time. "The fact that the epic poet has to treat his event as entirely past and the tragic his as entirely present, is quite clear to me" (Schiller, 1957, p. 105). For the company in the theatrical process, its *Hamlet* should enact a kind of synthesis between the epic and dramatic genres:

These considerations also took them back to the admirable Hamlet and the particulars of this play. The hero, they said, has, in fact, only feelings; it is only the facts that impel him, and that is why the play gains, in terms of extension, something from the novel; but, since fate has traced its plan, since the starting point of the play is a terrible action, and the hero is always propelled forward, towards a terrible action, the play is therefore tragic in the extreme sense<sup>18</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4173).

The synthesis reached by the artists is yet another example of the creative role bequeathed to the staging, which is no longer just a manufacturing work, dependent on the dictates of the text. This process is based, initially, on the premise that philosophical reflection and theoretical work are important to the construction of a theatrical staging. In addition to being prolonged and rigorous (“They spoke much”), this process is also creative: through the elaboration of a philosophical thought, driven by the rigor of aesthetic categories – the theory of genres –, the company elaborated its own conceptualization for Shakespeare’s play, based on a dialectical exercise of suspension<sup>19</sup> of contradictions. In his essay on *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, György Lukács (1972, p. 63) pointed to the philosophical context of the novel: “Let us be limited to recalling what was said before about the birth of dialectics. For what counterfeit fashion likes to call irrationalism of German Illustration is in most cases an effort at dialectics, an attempt to overcome the dominant formal logic”. This dialectical effort, which aimed to suspend the impasses of the Enlightenment – between classicism and bourgeois drama, epic and dramatic, reason and feeling<sup>20</sup> – and of the theater influenced by this period, is narrated in Goethe’s novel as a step in the formation of the theatrical staging and of Meister as an artist and human being. If in the social arena the contradictions of the enlightened ideals seemed impossible to resolve, the theater functions in the novel as a territory in which the crisis can be “suspended”.

It is important to note that Goethe’s novel does not describe for a long time the performances of the play when finished. The option to describe the creative process of Meister’s *Hamlet* aims to express the long process of learning and concretizing the solutions found, in which the step-by-step narrative of the rehearsals symbolizes the path of accomplishment of the formative aspects as elaborated by the Enlightenment:

This conception — that the free development of human passions with an adequate direction, other than the violent ones, has to lead to the harmonious collaboration of free men — is an old and dear philosophical idea of the great thinkers since the Renaissance and Enlightenment [...]. But precisely because the practice of this theoretical formulation of humanist ideals is unrealizable in bourgeois society, there appears the contradiction between them and the social economic foundation thanks to which they could be thought (Lukács, 1972, p. 108).

On the basis of this contradiction, Lukács points out that, throughout the nineteenth century, attempts at a utopian solution emerged. Thus, Goethe's "very fine and profound" irony in the *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, consists in that the ideal of free humanity is realized in the novel through the pedagogical collaboration of two groups of human beings on two different islands: the Tower Society and the theater. The fact that the realization of a reconciled humanity is only possible in a utopian way – in island refuges – consists, according to Lukács, in a testimony to the "lowering" of bourgeois civilizing ideals, in the exposition that Wilhelm Meister is on the border of two epochs: the novel would embody the tragic crisis of liberal humanism and the beginning of its stagnation. Hence the theatre would be presented as part of this impasse, and the staging of *Hamlet* presented as a major failure. Hence Wilhelm's choice to abandon, soon after, his theatrical career:

It fully corresponds to this conception of theater [as a utopian island] that the action of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* lowers theater, that theater is no longer for Wilhelm Meister a 'vocation', but a starting point. [...] The later Wilhelm, already mature, explicitly considers this life as an error or a deviation from the goal (Lukács, 1972, p. 93).

For Lukács, in Goethe's novel the culmination of Wilhelm Meister's theatrical efforts, the staging of *Hamlet*, becomes only an artistic configuration of the fact that theater, and even poetry in general, are no more than one aspect, a minor part of the major problem of education and self-formation, of the development of human personality: "For the proper description of society, the criticisms of the bourgeoisie and the nobility, the configuration of exemplary humanist life can only really be employed once the conception of theater as a form of humanism has been overcome" (Lukács, 1972, p. 94).

The reading of the importance of *Hamlet*'s creation process for the rest of the novel's making is also questioned by Marco Aurélio Werle, according to whom it would be necessary to avoid making simplistic relations between theater and life, such as these scopes arise in Meister's self-formative trajectory:

The novel that initially places the theater at its center, returns from this elevated perspective to the prosaic terrain, to affirm its own being, which is the novel. Theater can no longer be the only genre of post-revolutionary epochs that promotes the ideal of freedom, because the world it represents and to which it is committed to the root has ceased to have full effectiveness and to give its mark to reality. What matters now is man in his many aspects. Shakespeare's model, and especially Hamlet's subjectivism, no longer explains the complexity of existence (Werle, 2013, p. 118).

According to Werle, the fact that Meister has abandoned his artistic vocation indicates that theatrical creation provides him with an interiority-oriented formation, an interiority, in a certain aspect, artificial, of escape from the true world of social relationships, since it disregards the external world, contact with the real world. "Meister suddenly feels the need to leave the stage and put himself on a real basis for his formation" (Werle, 2013, p. 117). I believe I have demonstrated above, during the analysis of the description of the first stage that involves the staging process of *Hamlet*, how much the theatrical creation promoted by Meister considers the outside world, making choices of form and content based on the comparison between Shakespeare's historical reality and the panorama of Germany then. Thus, it would be difficult to argue that Meister's resignation involves some sort of critique of theater as fictional language that overshadows contact with the real world. But I understand Lukács and Werle's assertions as follows: in fact, *Hamlet*'s performances do not satisfy Meister and his later refusal to continue doing theater indicates a disillusionment with the activity. What seems fundamental to me here is to demonstrate, based on the very disproportion found in Goethe's narrative, in which several chapters are dedicated to describing the play's rehearsal process, while the presentations are quickly abandoned – both by Meister and by Goethe himself, who fails to mention them – that the fundamental relationship of the novel is not between "theater and life," as Werle already problematizes, or between "deviation" and main "goal," as Lukács argues: in fact, if we choose these terms,

theater is always presented unfavorably, as a provisional and “utopian” passage.

The term I would like to favor in this essay is not “theater,” as an abstract language: it is the process of theatrical creation. It seems to me that Goethe does not intend to represent the situation of “theater” in Germany, but chooses to trace, through a detailed description, a rehearsal process. This process does not involve any way of rehearsing, but presents procedures of work and construction of the theatrical work totally different from those employed by the theaters of French classicism or of the rising bourgeois drama of the time. This difference aims to bring not the theater, but the process of theatrical construction – dialectical and collective, capable of combining theory and practice, reason and feeling, mind and body, individual and group – closer to the ideal of humanist self-formation of the Enlightenment. Let us examine another stage of this process and how we can bring it closer to this conception, inspired by the French Revolution and its crises and fractures, of human formation for freedom.

### **Rehearsing the actors and actresses, rehearsing the formation**

The new step of the rehearsal process, described in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, comprises that which Wilhelm and his team called a “reading rehearsal”:

The reading rehearsal could now be done, which Wilhelm properly regarded as a party. He had previously collected the papers, so there could be no embarrassment in this regard. All the actors knew the play, and he only sought, before they began, to persuade them of the importance of a reading rehearsal. Just as every musician is required to know how to play at first reading, so every actor, or even any well-educated person, must exercise himself in reading at first sight, in immediately capturing the character of a drama, a poem or a narrative and present it skillfully. It will not help to memorize everything if the actor has not previously penetrated the spirit and thought of the good author; the letters, themselves, will not produce any effect<sup>21</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4173).

The reading rehearsal therefore involves two objectives: the first is joint reading of the play, with each actor and actress already defining their respective characters. This reading involves understanding the actions and intentions described in the play and also seeking the most appropriate ways

to present them. However, this “skill” to expose the paper means, in yet another tear of suspension of the opposition between theory and practice, understanding the entirety of the play, based on the “spirit of the author”:

‘It is not enough’, he said to them when they met the next day, ‘that the actor only superficially examines the play, that he judges it by the first impression and conveys the perception, without further examination, of his preference or his discontent. [...] — The actor, on the contrary, must be able to convey the reasons for his praise and censure, and how can he do so, if he is not able to penetrate the author’s spirit and intentions? [...] Because I have perceived in myself, very clearly, in these last days, the mistake of judging a play based on a role, without relating it to the whole<sup>22</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4044).

Unlike the rehearsal methodology widely used until the beginning of the twentieth century, in much of Western theater, Meister preaches that each actor or actress should not be content only to memorize only his or her role, but that they know and study, through the reading rehearsals and discussions that follow these procedures, the entire Shakespearean play, being able to relate each role to the whole. More than that, Meister advocates that no one in the cast memorize their role before the reading rehearsals and reflections to be undertaken, on the text and on the author, collectively. The rehearsal process is again presented as the formation of the subject, as a procedure of understanding and analysis – about the text and its contexts – and not only as a technical reproduction of words and actions.

The aesthetic objective, of evoking illusion, arises as a consequence of this adequate understanding of the dramaturgical work, the adaptation made and the audience for which it is intended:

But few are given a vivid understanding of what the author thought when writing the play, how much personal sacrifice it takes to satisfactorily play the role, how, through the very conviction of being a person in everything different, to lead the viewer to that same conviction, and how, through the intimate truth of representative force, to transform this stage into a temple, this cardboard into a forest. This intimate force of the spirit, which alone gives the Illusion to the spectator, this fictitious truth, which alone produces all the effect and alone obtains the illusion, who of all this has any idea? — [...] The safest way is to first explain to our friends, calmly, the sense of the letter and open their intelligence<sup>23</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4174).

It is important to note here that understanding the “sense of the letter” and “opening the intelligence” is a necessary goal to produce the scenic



illusion. Thus, this new sought-after theater, which presents a synthesis between the renewal of illusion and realism, through the breach of conventions intended by Diderot's bourgeois drama, and a recovery of the public ambience of Elizabethan tragedy, will only obtain such dialectical suspension if it is able to undertake a rehearsal process also based on the suspension between manual and intellectual labor. The aesthetic form arises from the opening of intelligences during the creative process, and is not a mere effect of technique. Imagination, as a synthesis between creation and reflection, is considered the most important skill for the acting work:

'Imagine, most vividly', cried he, 'this young man, this prince; bear in mind his situation, and then observe him well, on learning of the apparition of his father's specter; place yourselves by his side on that terrible night when the venerable spirit also presents himself to him. An immense dread seizes him; he challenges that strange shape, sees that it makes a sign to him, follows it and hears it... Resounds in his ears the terrible accusation against his uncle, the exhortation to revenge and the urgent and repeated request: 'Remember me!' And as soon as the spirit disappears, who do we see before us? 'A young hero, thirsty for revenge?' A prince by birth, who is glad to see himself exhorted against the usurper of his crown? No! Awe and sorrow assail the solitary; he becomes bitter against the merry malefactors. He swears not to forget the disappeared and concludes with this significant sigh: 'The times are disjointed: poor me, I was born to put them back in place!'<sup>24</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4087).

Instead of memorizing Shakespeare's words, Meister calls on his acting team to imagine each sentence uttered by the characters, as well as their contexts within the narrative of the tragedy. All bodily senses are mobilized for the proper construction of the character: "an immense dread seizes him," "resonate in his ears," "what do we see before us?" Finally, there is a critical analysis of the character, which escapes the common sense of the most hasty reading in search of submerged layers in the text, based on the proposed staging: "A young hero with a thirst for revenge? No!". The theme of the traditional readings of Hamlet, which saw in the hero the hesitation between the fury for revenge and the fear of condemnation for his crime, is replaced by the highlight that Meister suggests to the phrase: "the times are disjointed". The phrase expands the meaning of the prince's trajectory, framing it in a historical time of crisis, such as that experienced by Goethe, such as the staging proposal that Meister intends to implement, based on the "unrest in Norway".

He loved music and claimed that, without such love, an actor could never form a precise idea and feeling of his own art. Just as one acts more easily and more distinctly when gestures are accompanied and directed by a melody, the actor should also compose in spirit, in a way, his prosaic role, so that monotony did not make him bungle, according to his individual style and manners, but treating him with the appropriate modulations of measure and tone<sup>25</sup> (Goethe, 2015, p. 4088).

However, it is important to remember that in Goethe's time the processes of theatrical rehearsal and construction of characters to be staged were quite different from those we have followed so far. According to Ana Portich, in a study dedicated to the work of acting in the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a confluence between the oratory and acting methodologies during this period:

From this branch of Counter- Reform comes the scenic use of the same exercise that Ignatius of Loyola had taken from rhetoric: stimulating the senses and appealing to the feelings of the audience, so that the comedian could persuade them, sensorily connecting actors and spectators. [...] In addition, stimulating the comedian's senses, during the preparation of the role or during the performance, is a resource compatible with theological criteria that grant to feelings a direct link with the divinity (Portich, 2008, p. XXVII).

The stimulus to the senses and imagination here goes back to the *Spiritual Exercises*, written by Ignatius of Loyola, which "prepared the monk to overcome himself and order his own life, without being determined by any excessive affection" (Portich, 2008, p. XXIV). The Jesuits resorted to fantasy at every stage of their spiritual exercises, from imagination about the heat of the flames of Hell to joy in Christ. However, the idea of "persuasion" was ahead of the need to create the illusion: therefore, the reference to the speaker's discursive work, based on the rules of oratory and Aristotelian conventions, was sufficient for the creation undertaken by the actors.

Describing the beginning of French classical theater, the author mentions that the success of the actors was due to the habit of the audience, "fond of the bizarre of declamation. [...] Prejudices about the excellence of French bombastic theatrical declamation were instilled in the spectators, making them unable to discern" (Portich, 2008, p. 93). At that time, the actors found inspiration in some chapters of *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian's famous treatise, which served as a source to codify the actor's performance.

Regarding the reduced importance of gesture, for example, which should always be subject to the primacy of the word, Quintilian prescribes: “it is particularly inadmissible for the speaker to resemble a dancer, because this type of gesture is more appropriate to the way of thinking than to words; such a procedure was used by unprofessional comedians” (Quintiliano, 2016, p. 313). Declaiming well meant, therefore, to distinguish oneself from the dance of the body and thought, and “firstly, to free the soul from the slavery of the senses and to deny the comedian access to reflection” (Portich, 2008, p. 93). Reflection, the basis of the methodology described in Goethe’s novel, was considered an opponent of the “exploration of the depths of the soul, where one finds the source of varied and adequate pronunciation, of expressive looks and features, of graceful and dignified body movements” (Portich, 2008, p. 93).

As for the theatrical performance, the escape from conventions and a certain inclination towards disregard for standards seems to be part of the German theater of the period as a whole, when we compare it to the French production of the 18th century. According to Steffen Höhne (2012, p. 31),

The reality of the theater [...] of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries apparently included talking to neighbors and playing as much as serving beer and smoking tobacco. Children and dogs were included in the presentations. Loud whistle noises during performances were as common as a backstage walk. [...] The audience exercised their right to have an opinion in terms of staging and roles [...]. [There were] regular riots in the theatre, reported even by the director of the Weimar court theatre, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Höhne (2012, p. 31) continues his description by stating that, when compared to the French theater, in Germany “the audience was no more disciplined than the actors of a rather dubious institution in the eighteenth century”. According to reports and documents of the period, for the German researcher it would be possible to affirm that “the settings were pitiful; the actors, wrapped in rags and wearing reused old wigs, looked like old teachers hired to dress up as heroes; in a word, comedy was a pleasure only for the crowd” (Höhne, 2012, p. 31). In the same letter cited above, Lessing (1955, p. 356) stated that “We have no theater. We have no actors. We have no spectators”. The contradictions with the French theatrical universe of the time continue:

The French at least still have a stage; since the German have almost no place. The French's stage is at least the pleasure of a whole great capital; since in German capitals the stage is the mockery of the crowd. The French may at least boast, often of their monarchs, of an entire magnificent court, of the greatest and most worthy men of the empire, to entertain the best world; since the German must be very pleased if two dozen honest and mean individuals, who shyly hide themselves in the audience, want to hear them<sup>26</sup> (Lessing, 1955, p. 357).

Following the clues of another German researcher, Peter Huber (1996, p. 21), around the middle of the eighteenth century, at the time of Goethe's birth, German theater "still had the hatred of vice and amorality". Although discovered by the Enlightenment as a moral educational tool and a forum for the constitution of a bourgeois public, "there were still too few plays presentable in the German language so their newly defined social function could be affirmed" (Huber, 1996, p. 21). Specifically, this meant that even in larger cities, the audience's response was not enough to present the plays of a repertoire, necessarily limited by low attendance. "Wandering was therefore an inevitable consequence, and therefore there were no fixed theaters in Germany – except for a few court stages, which, however, were generally not accessible to the bourgeoisie" (Huber, 1996, p. 22). The fact that a rich cultural life develops in Weimar, despite the adverse circumstances, is mainly due to Duchess Anna Amalia, educated by elite standards and with musical talent. When she married in Weimar in 1756, she tried to transfer her familial Swiss tradition of opera and theatre to the provincial city of Thuringia.

It was only in 1767 that actors appeared again in Weimar, including the ensembles of Carl Christian Starke, Gottfried Fried Koch and Abel Seyler, on whose trail Ekhof worked in Weimar until the burning of the castle in 1774. In the early 1770s, Duchess Anna Amalia laid the foundations for the cultural metropolis of Weimar, installing writers Christoph Martin Wieland and Johann Karl August Musäus and hiring musicians (Huber, 1996, p. 21-22).

Supported by the favorable conditions in Weimar, Goethe would consider Shakespeare as a kind of antidote to the degeneration present in French-influenced theater, by combining the virtues of the old and the new, 'granting, as in classical tragedy, the importance to fate in fables, but keeping it in balance with the will and character of the characters. Antidote,

but not absolute model for German theater, Goethe believed: Shakespeare's poetic vision would be too broad and complex for physical embodiment and only suitable for a theater of the mind. The first authors who wrote about Shakespeare deplored the primitive conditions of Elizabethan theater as obstacles to its genre, but Goethe affirmed, on the contrary, that the crude and rudimentary theater of Shakespeare's time exempted him from thinking about the material limitations of the performance and left his poetic fantasy free to develop.

Goethe considers Shakespeare's productions as playwright brilliant but intermittent: his theatrical works were 'only moments, sparse jewels, which are separated by much that is not theatrical'. Goethe's idea of what constitutes these 'jewels', however, is very different from that of eighteenth-century critics and is closer to the modern concept of a 'poetry of theater'. It is only theatrical, he says, 'that which is immediately symbolic to the eye: a significant action that evokes an even more significant one'. As an example, Goethe cites the moment when Prince Hal takes the crown from his sleeping father, puts it on his own head and stands upright proudly (Carlson, 1978, p. 176).

### Rehearsing a dialectic of formation

I suggested above that, in order to understand the symbology that the theatrical universe expresses in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, it is necessary to shift our attention from the theatrical phenomenon seen as a product to its creation process. In fact, the concept of self-formation present in the novel and other works of Goethe can be better understood if we can compare it with the process of theatrical rehearsal described in the novel.

The philosophical tradition on the concept of self-formation is large and varied, and dates back to classical Greek antiquity, as can be read in Plato's *Republic*, to mention just one example. However, it is a common reflection that the idea of self-formation owes much to Goethe's important contributions. In an essay on the *bildungsroman*, Mikhail Bakhtin (2011, p. 229) points out that the German poet

[...] behind all static diversity saw the diversity of times. The different was arranged for him in different phases (epochs) of development, that is, it acquired temporal meaning. [...] The simple temporal continuity of phenomena was for Goethe profoundly strange, he saturated it, penetrated it with *time*, discovered in it the process of formation, development, distributed in

series what was distributed in space by different temporal phases, epochs of formation. For him, actuality – both in nature and in human life – manifests itself as an essential diversity of times: as remnants or relics of the different degrees and formations of the past and as embryos of a more or less distant future.

Contrary to the idea of progress, linear and constant, the self-formation conceived by Goethe would be governed by different temporalities, in a complex of differentiated internal temporalities, none of which correspond to the objective duration of his life. And it is these multiple times that determine his learning: as an individual, as an element of a social set and concretely as a real economic subject that synthesizes and suspends, at all times, these various – and usually contradictory – temporalities in his actions.

An illustration of this formative vision, present during the creative process led by Meister, can be found in Goethe's travel diary *Italian Journey*:

When we contemplate the mountains, whether near or far, and see their summits sometimes shining with sunlight, sometimes misty, sometimes shrouded in storm clouds, sometimes buffeted by rain or covered with snow, we attribute all these phenomena to the atmosphere, because we can see and understand its movements and its modifications. The mountains, however, in their traditional form, offer themselves immobile to our senses. We take them to be dead because of their rigidity, being at rest, we believe there is no activity there. For a long time, however, I have not been able to avoid attributing the changes that are present in the atmosphere, in large part, to a veiled and secret action of the mountains themselves (Goethe, 1999, p. 21)<sup>27</sup>.

For the ordinary observer, mountains are the very materialization of immobility and immutability. For Goethe, on the contrary, the mountains have nothing of absence of life, they are only immobile: they are not inactive, but only seem to be so because they are at rest, they rest. In fact, there would be a secret pulse in the mountains, capable of exerting influence on the changing atmosphere. What once seemed a solid and immutable background for any movements is incorporated into the formation, as an underground stream, impregnated with time to the end, becoming a more substantial and creative mobility than appears on the surface of the phenomena. Goethe wants to see in this interior and ancestral movement of the mountains the necessary ties of this past with the living present, to understand the necessary place of this past in the continuous series of formation processes. The past

thus becomes creative, effective in the present, also providing a direction for the future. When Goethe chooses to describe in his novel not a theatrical spectacle but a process of creation, divided into distinct stages and temporalities – time of adaptation of the text, time of reading and reflection, time of the work of acting – what is presented is a symbol for the greater concept of formation, which includes the rehearsal process but expands and frames it in the historical context of the German political and economic crisis and the impasses of the Enlightenment in that country.

A profound reader of Goethe, when Marx refers to “German misery”, he tries to describe to us this truncated process of historical formation that was already experiencing its convulsions at the time of Meister’s apprenticeship. Marx focused on the distinction between the classical or European forms of the French process of capitalist development and the backwardness of Germany, marked by a bourgeoisie that, unlike the French, developed slowly and always opting for non-revolutionary solutions, which sought reconciliation with feudal and absolutist forces. The German proletariat, on the other hand, few in number and disorganized, acted as a political axis of the bourgeoisie. Comparing the French revolution of 1848 with the upheavals that occurred in Germany, Marx states that there had not been a European-type revolution there, but only “the delayed weak echo of a European revolution in a backward country”, which had as its “ambition to form an anachronism”, since it was not the “establishment of a new society, but the Berlin renaissance of the society dead in Paris” (Marx, 1991, p. 43-44).

In narrating a process of theatrical creation, which establishes ruptures with both the theatrical concepts and practices of his time, what is at stake for Goethe is the validity of the “creative effectiveness” of the German feudal past and its ability to generate the future that seemed necessary to the thinkers of romanticism in that country. In the essay “On morphology”, Goethe establishes a difference between the terms *Gestalt* and *Bildung*, “form” and “formation”:

[...] the German have for the complex of the existence of a real being the word form (*Gestalt*). The German abstract movement with this term, assuming that a concept formed by related units is defined, closed and fixed in its characteristics. If we observe, however, all forms, especially organic ones, we then discover that nowhere is there anything that endures, remains at rest or is completed, but that, on the contrary, everything oscillates in an in-



cessant movement. Hence the need to use, in our language, the word formation (*Bildung*), both to refer to what is already finished and to what is in the process of production. If we want to introduce a Morphology, we cannot then speak in form (*Gestalt*), but rather make use of the word only when we think of the Idea, the concept or the experience as a thing fixed for just an instant. What was formed soon transforms again, and if we want to somehow achieve a living intuition of nature, we have to remain as mobile and as plastic as nature itself (Goethe, 1989, p. 13).

In considering this process of formation in its eternal unfinishedness, Meister aspires to a development of another kind, based on the “incessant movement”, a movement not carried out by the promises of a democratic modernization to be promoted by the German bourgeoisie. It is only by considering formation as an unfinished creative process that Meister does not choose to continue doing theater. A theater that was not a perennial movement, a process of permanent creation, with no object and no product, perhaps, without spectacular performances and without seasons of circulation, a theater that did not mean endless formation and not form, did not interest him, just as Goethe was not interested in the progress of German misery.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Critical literature that can be traced, as the main sources and references for reflection that guide this article, from the classic essay, written in 1916, by György Lukács (1999), *The Theory of the Novel*, to issues 27 and 28 of the electronic journal *Literatura e sociedade*, published in 2018. (<https://www.revistas.usp.br/lis/issue/view/10760>). I do not intend to promote here a discussion about the coming-of-age novel and not even about the entirety of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* – there is endless bibliography, and impossible to be covered in this space, on both themes –, but I would like, modestly, to outline a constellation of concepts, about the theatrical phenomenon, present in Goethe's novel.
- <sup>2</sup> Free translation. Whenever not mentioned, the translation is a free translation. In the original: “Die Anfänge Wilhelm Meisters hatten lange geruht. Sie entsprangen aus einem dunkeln Vorgefühl der großen Wahrheit: daß der Mensch oft etwas versuchen möchte, wozu ihm Anlage von der Natur versagt ist, unternehmen und ausüben möchte, wozu ihm Fertigkeit nicht werden kann;



ein inneres Gefühl warnt ihn abzustehen, er kann aber mit sich nicht ins klare kommen und wird auf falschem Wege zu falschem Zwecke getrieben, ohne daß er weiß, wie es zugeht. [...] Geht ihm hierüber von Zeit zu Zeit ein halbes Licht auf, so entsteht ein Gefühl, das an Verzweiflung grenzt, und doch läßt er sich wieder gelegentlich von der Welle, nur halb widerstrebend, fortreißen. Gar viele vergeuden hiedurch den schönsten Teil ihres Lebens und verfallen zuletzt in wundersamen Trübsinn. Und doch ist es möglich, daß alle die falschen Schritte zu einem unschätzbaren Guten hinführen: eine Ahnung, die sich im Wilhelm Meister immer mehr entfaltet, aufklärt und bestätigt, ja sich zuletzt mit klaren Worten ausspricht: “Du kommst mir vor wie Saul, der Sohn Kis’, der ausging, seines Vaters Eselinnen zu suchen, und ein Königreich fand”.

- <sup>3</sup> In one of several reflections on error-driven learning, Rousseau writes about children: “Nevertheless, it will be necessary, without a doubt, to guide [the child] a little, but very little and without appearing so. If they are wrong, let them do it, do not correct their mistakes, wait in silence that they are in a position to see them and correct them themselves. [...] If they were never wrong, they would not learn so well (Rousseau, 1979, p. 136).
- <sup>4</sup> In the original: “Nicht vor Irrtum zu bewahren ist die Pflicht des Menschenerziehers, sondern den Irrenden zu leiten, ja ihn seinen Irrtum aus vollen Bechern ausschöpfen zu lassen, das ist Weisheit der Lehrer. Wer seinen Irrtum nur kostet, hält lange damit haus, er freuet sich dessen als eines seltenen Glücks, aber wer ihn ganz erschöpft, der muß ihn kennenlernen, wenn er nicht wahnsinnig ist”.
- <sup>5</sup> In the original: “Sein Freund Shakespeare, den er mit großer Freude auch als seinen Paten anerkannte und sich nur um so lieber Wilhelm nennen ließ” (Goethe, 2015, p.4035).
- <sup>6</sup> In the original: “Haben Sie denn niemals”, sagte Jarno, indem er ihn beiseite nahm, “ein Stück von Shakespearen gesehen?” “Nein”, versetzte Wilhelm, [...] “Indessen hat mich alles, was ich von jenen Stücken gehört, nicht neugierig gemacht, solche seltsame Ungeheuer näher kennenzulernen, die über alle Wahrscheinlichkeit, allen Wohlstand hinauszuschreiten scheinen”.
- <sup>7</sup> According to the greatest theorist of French classicism, Boileau, the principles that should follow the tragic genre are about pleasing the audience, awakening terror and compassion; obeying the rules of concise and clear exposition and submission to the three units, verisimilitude, convenience and dramatic progression. “We, who reason engages to its rules, want action to develop with art:

in one place, in one day, a single fact” (Boileau-Despréaux, 1979, p. 42). Evidently, such rules do not serve to define Shakespeare’s dramaturgy.

- <sup>8</sup> In the original: “Auch nach den Mustern der Alten die Sache zu entscheiden, ist Shakespear ein weit grösserer tragischer Dichter als Corneille;. [...] Corneille kömmt ihnen in der mechanischen Einrichtung und Shakespear in dem Wesentlichen näher. Der Engländer erreicht den Zweck der Tragödie fast immer, so sonderbare und ihm eigene Wege er auch wählet; und der Franzose erreicht ihn fast niemals, ob er gleich die gebahnten Wege der Alten betritt. Nach dem Oedipus des Sophokles muß in der Welt kein Stück mehr Gewalt mehr über unsre Leidenschaften haben, als Othello, als König Leer, als Hamlet etc. [...] Daß aber unsre alten Stücke wirklich sehr viel Englisches gehabt haben, könnte ich Ihnen mit geringer Mühe weitläufig beweisen. Nur das bekannteste derselben zu nennen; Doctor Faust hat eine Menge Scenen, die nur ein Shakespearsches Genie zu denken vermögend gewesen.!”
- <sup>9</sup> In the original: “In der Lehrbüchern [...] sondre man die Gattungen so genau ab, als möglich: aber wenn ein Genie höherer Absichten wegen, mehre derselben in einem und demselben Werke zusammenfließen läßt, so vergesse man das Lehrbuch, und untersuche bloß, ob es diese Absichten erreicht hat”
- <sup>10</sup> Reflecting on Lessing, Paula (2008) brings an important contribution on the social stage of Germany of the period: “In the case of Germany in the first half of the eighteenth century, still perfectly fragmented and, therefore, diminished in the face of already constituted National States, such as France and England, for example, the strategy of overcoming “backwardness,” of the reach of European powers, mobilized, among other instruments, a questioning of French cultural hegemony. Lessing posed this problem through the construction of a specifically German dramaturgy, which immediately meant a confrontation with the “Theatrical Reform” of Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766), a critic and highly renowned teacher then, who wanted to introduce, in the German scene, the rules of French classical theater, by Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), by Jean Racine (1639-1699). Lessing will combat Gottsched’s project by opposing the French classical “genre” with Shakespeare’s genius, the excesses, the furor, the encyclopedia of human feelings contained in his theater” (p. 219-220).
- <sup>11</sup> In the original: “Ich müßte mich sehr irren’, rief er aus, ‘wenn ich nicht gefunden hätte, wie dem Ganzen zu helfen ist; ja ich bin überzeugt, daß Shakespeare es selbst so würde gemacht haben [...] Ich unterscheide nach der genauesten Untersuchung, nach der reiflichsten Überlegung in der

Komposition dieses Stücks zweierlei: das erste sind die großen innern Verhältnisse der Personen und der Begebenheiten, die mächtigen Wirkungen, die aus den Charakteren und Handlungen der Hauptfiguren entstehen, [...] Sie können durch keine Art von Behandlung zerstört, ja kaum verunstaltet werden. [...] Nur hat man, wie ich glaube, darin gefehlt, daß man das zweite, was bei die- sem Stück zu bemerken ist, ich meine die äußern Verhältnisse der Personen, wo- durch sie von einem Orte zum andern gebracht oder auf diese und jene Weise durch gewisse zufällige Begebenheiten verbunden werden, für allzu unbedeutend angesehen, nur im Vorbeigehn davon gesprochen oder sie gar weggelassen hat. Freilich sind diese Fäden nur dünn und lose, aber sie gehen doch durch's ganze Stück und halten zusammen, was sonst auseinanderfiel, auch wirklich auseinanderfällt, wenn man sie wegschneidet und ein übriges getan zu haben glaubt, daß man die Enden stehenläßt”.

- <sup>12</sup> In the original: “ich die Unruhen in Norwegen, den Krieg mit dem jungen Fortinbras, die Gesandtschaft an den alten Oheim, den geschlichteten Zwist, den Zug des jungen Fortinbras nach Polen und seine Rückkehr am Ende; ingleichen die Rückkehr des Horatio von Wittenberg, die Lust Hamlets, dahin zu gehen, die Reise des Laertes nach Frankreich, seine Rückkunft, die Verschickung Hamlets nach England”.
- <sup>13</sup> In the chapter called “On a Kind of Philosophical Drama,” Diderot seeks to specify the role of this playwright-philosopher: “There is a kind of drama in which morality would be successfully presented directly. [...] Pay attention to what our judges will say: if they consider it cold, you can believe that they have no energy in the soul, no idea of true eloquence, no sensitivity, no entrails” (Diderot, 1986, p. 45). The model cited for such a drama would be the death of Socrates, narrated in three dialogues by Plato: *Apology of Socrates*, *Criton* and *Phaedo*.
- <sup>14</sup> In the original: “Diese Fehler sind wie flüchtige Stützen eines Gebäudes, die man nicht wegnehmen darf, ohne vorher eine feste Mauer unterzuziehen. Mein Vorschlag ist also, an jenen ersten, großen Situationen gar nicht zu rühren, sondern sie sowohl im ganzen als einzelnen möglichst zu schonen, aber diese äußern, einzelnen, zerstreuten und zerstreuenden Motive alle auf einmal wegzwerfen und ihnen ein einziges zu substituieren. ‘Und das wäre?’ fragte Serlo, indem er sich aus seiner ruhigen Stellung aufhob. ‘Es liegt auch schon im Stücke’, erwiderte Wilhelm, ‘nur mache ich den rechten Gebrauch davon. Es sind die Unruhen in Norwegen’”.

- <sup>15</sup> In the original: “Sie haben’, sagte er unter anderm, ‘sehr richtig empfunden, daß äußere Umstände dieses Stück begleiten, aber einfacher sein müssen, als sie uns der große Dichter gegeben hat. Was außer dem Theater vorgeht, was der Zuschauer nicht sieht, was er sich vorstellen muß, ist wie ein Hintergrund, vor dem die spielenden Figuren sich bewegen. Die große, einfache Aussicht auf die Flotte und Norwegen wird dem Stücke sehr gut tun; nähme man sie ganz weg, so ist es nur eine Familienszene, und der große Begriff, daß hier ein ganzes königliches Haus durch innere Verbrechen und Ungeschicklichkeiten zugrunde geht, wird nicht in seiner ganzen Würde dargestellt”.
- <sup>16</sup> In the original: “Wilhelm nahm nun wieder die Partie Shakespeares und zeigte, daß er für Insulaner geschrieben habe, für Engländer, die selbst im Hintergrunde nur Schiffe und Seereisen, die Küste von Frankreich und Kaper zu sehen gewohnt sind, und daß, was jenen etwas ganz Gewöhnliches sei, uns schon zerstreue und verwirre”.
- <sup>17</sup> In the original: “Einen Abend stritt die Gesellschaft, ob der Roman oder das Drama den Vorzug verdiene. [...] Sie sprachen viel herüber und hinüber, und endlich war folgendes ungefähr das Resultat ihrer Unterhaltung: Im Roman wie im Drama sehen wir menschliche Natur und Handlung [...] m Roman sollen vorzüglich Gesinnungen und Begebenheiten vorgestellt werden; im Drama Charaktere und Taten. Der Roman muß langsam gehen, und die Gesinnungen der Hauptfigur müssen, es sei auf welche Weise es wolle, das Vor- dringen des Ganzen zur Entwicklung aufhalten. Das Drama soll eilen, und der Charakter der Hauptfigur muß sich nach dem Ende drängen und nur aufgehalten werden. Der Romanheld muß leidend, wenigstens nicht im hohen Grade wirkend sein; von dem dramatischen verlangt man Wirkung und Tat.
- <sup>18</sup> In the original: “Diese Betrachtungen führten wieder auf den wunderlichen *Hamlet* und auf die Eigenheiten dieses Stücks. Der Held, sagte man, hat eigentlich auch nur Gesinnungen; es sind nur Begebenheiten, die zu ihm stoßen, und deswegen hat das Stück etwas von dem Gedehten des Romans; weil aber das Schicksal den Plan gezeichnet hat, weil das Stück von einer fürchterlichen Tat ausgeht und der Held immer vorwärts zu einer fürchterlichen Tat gedrängt wird, so ist es im höchsten Sinne tragisch und leidet keinen andern als einen tragischen Ausgang” (Goethe, 2015, 4173).
- <sup>19</sup> The concept of *aufhebung*, used in Hegel’s dialectical philosophy, is usually translated as “overcoming,” if not as “supersumption,” a term created by Paulo Menezes when translating the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The difficult attempt is

to reproduce in a single word the junction between abolishing, elevating and conserving, present in *aufhebung*. Following Leandro Konder, Jorge de Almeida and Gabriel Cohn, I chose to adopt “suspend” in the translation of the concept.

- <sup>20</sup> According to Lukács, the great impasse faced by Goethe and the German Romantics was to face “the mechanical opposition between reason and feeling. [...] This undoubtedly expresses a crisis of the predominant philosophical tendency in the Enlightenment, the transition to a higher stage of thought. But this is also an international trend of all Enlightenment, albeit with a corrective function precisely of the last current that comes into action, the German one (Lukács, 1972, p. 64).
- <sup>21</sup> In the original: “Nun sollte Leseprobe gehalten werden, welche Wilhelm eigentlich als ein Fest ansah. Er hatte die Rollen vorher kollationiert, daß also von dieser Seite kein Anstoß sein konnte. Die sämtlichen Schauspieler waren mit dem Stücke bekannt, und er suchte sie nur, ehe sie anfangen, von der Wichtigkeit einer Leseprobe zu überzeugen. Wie man von jedem Musikus verlange, daß er bis auf einen gewissen Grad vom Blatte spielen könne, so solle auch jeder Schauspieler, ja jeder wohlerzogene Mensch sich üben, vom Blatte zu lesen, einem Drama, einem Gedicht, einer Erzählung sogleich ihren Charakter abzugewinnen und sie mit Fertigkeit vorzutragen. Alles Memorieren helfe nichts, wenn der Schauspieler nicht vorher in den Geist und Sinn des guten Schriftstellers eingedrungen sei; der Buchstabe könne nichts wirken”.
- <sup>22</sup> In the original: “Es ist nicht genug”, sagte er zu ihnen, als sie des andern Tages wieder zusammenkamen, “daß der Schauspieler ein Stück nur so obenhin ansehe, dasselbe nach dem ersten Eindruck beurteile und ohne Prüfung sein Gefallen oder Mißfallen daran zu erkennen gebe. [...] Der Schauspieler dagegen soll von dem Stücke und von den Ursachen seines Lobes und Tadels Rechenschaft geben können: und wie will er das, wenn er nicht in den Sinn seines Autors, wenn er nicht in die Absichten desselben einzudringen versteht? [...] Ich habe den Fehler, ein Stück aus einer Rolle zu beurteilen, eine Rolle nur an sich und nicht im Zusammenhange mit dem Stück zu betrachten”.
- <sup>23</sup> In the original: “Aber mit Lebhaftigkeit zu umfassen, was sich der Autor beim Stück gedacht hat, was man von seiner Individualität hingeben müsse, um einer Rolle genugsutun, wie man durch eigene Überzeugung, man sei ein ganz anderer Mensch, den Zuschauer gleichfalls zur Überzeugung hinreißt, wie man durch eine innere Wahrheit der Darstellungskraft diese Bretter in

Tempel, diese Pappen in Wälder verwandelt, ist wenigen gegeben. Diese innere Stärke des Geistes, wodurch ganz allein der Zuschauer getäuscht wird, diese erlogene Wahrheit, die ganz allein Wirkung hervorbringt, wodurch ganz allein die Illusion erzielt wird, wer hat davon einen Begriff? [...] Das sicherste Mittel ist, wenn wir unsern Freunden mit Gelassenheit zuerst den Sinn des Buchstabens erklären und ihnen den Verstand eröffnen”.

- <sup>24</sup> In the original: “Denken Sie sich”, rief er aus, “diesen Jüngling, diesen Fürstensohn recht lebhaft, vergegenwärtigen Sie sich seine Lage, und dann beobachten Sie ihn, wenn er erfährt, die Gestalt seines Vaters erscheine; stehen Sie ihm bei in der schrecklichen Nacht, wenn der ehrwürdige Geist selbst vor ihm auftritt. Ein ungeheures Entsetzen ergreift ihn; er redet die Wundergestalt an, sieht sie winken, folgt und hört. – Die schreckliche Anklage wider seinen Oheim ertönt in seinen Ohren, Aufforderung zur Rache und die dringende, wiederholte Bitte: »Erinnere dich meiner!“ Und da der Geist verschwunden ist, wen sehen wir vor uns stehen? Einen jungen Helden, der nach Rache schnaubt? Einen gebornen Fürsten, der sich glücklich fühlt, gegen den Usurpator seiner Krone aufgefordert zu werden? Nein! Staunen und Trübsinn überfällt den Einsamen; er wird bitter gegen die lächelnden Bösewichter, schwört, den Abgeschiedenen nicht zu vergessen, und schließt mit dem bedeutenden Seufzer: “Die Zeit ist aus dem Gelenke; wehe mir, daß ich geboren ward, sie wieder einzurichten” (Goethe, 2015, p. 4087).
- <sup>25</sup> In the original: “Er liebte die Musik sehr und behauptete, daß ein Schauspieler ohne diese Liebe niemals zu einem deutlichen Begriff und Gefühl seiner eigenen Kunst gelangen könne. So wie man viel leichter und anständiger agiere, wenn die Gebärden durch eine Melodie begleitet und geleitet werden, so müsse der Schau- spieler sich auch seine prosaische Rolle gleichsam im Sinne komponieren, daß er sie nicht etwa eintönig nach seiner individuellen Art und Weise hinsudele, sondern sie in gehöriger Abwechslung nach Takt und Maß behandle”.
- <sup>26</sup> In the original: “Der Franzose hat doch wenigstens noch eine Bühne; da der Deutsche kaum Bu- den hat. Die Bühne des Franzosen ist doch wenigstens das Vergnügen einer ganzen großen Hauptstadt; da in den Hauptstädten des Deutschen, die Bude der Spott des Pöbels ist. Der Franzose kann sich doch wenigstens rühmen, oft seinen Monarchen, einen ganzen prächtigen Hof, die größten und würdigsten Männer des Reichs, die feinste Welt zu unterhalten;



da der Deutsche sehr zufrieden sein muß, wenn ihm ein Paar Dutzend ehrliche Privatleute, die sich schüchtern nach der Bude geschlichen, zuhören wollen”.

- <sup>27</sup> In the original: “Betrachten wir die Gebirge näher oder ferner und sehen ihre Gipfel bald im Sonnenscheine glänzen, bald vom Nebel umzogen, von stürmenden Wolken umsaust, von Regenstrichen gepeitscht, mit Schnee bedeckt, so schreiben wir das alles der Atmosphäre zu, da wir mit Augen ihre Bewegungen und Veränderungen gar wohl sehen und fassen. Die Gebirge hingegen liegen vor unserm äußeren Sinn in ihrer herkömmlichen Gestalt unbeweglich da. Wir halten sie für tot, weil sie erstarrt sind, wir glauben sie untätig, weil sie ruhen. Ich aber kann mich schon seit längerer Zeit nicht entbrechen, einer innern, stillen, geheimen Wirkung derselben die Veränderungen, die sich in der Atmosphäre zeigen, zum großen Teile zuzuschreiben” (Goethe, 1948, p. 20).

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