

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## Wrong Move 1975

Wim Wenders. (1945-

### STORY

Wenders turns for his raw material to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjare*. (1821), a classic German tale of youthful world-quest; German Romanticism's version of that eternal young man longing, to discover the world, which is out there in western literature as early as Gilgamesh (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. or as the setting out of Telemachus, in Homer's *Odyssey*, to discover the world into which his father, Odysseus, has disappeared. While respecting many details and implications, Goethe's narrative, Wenders transforms the young-man quest into contemporary post war Germany, and fills the landscapes with figures and scenes familiar to our current world. ,

**Plot.** The plot opens inside the mind of a young, rebellious German graduate, who, in the midst of a painful conflict with his widowed mom, is announcing his intention to leave home; a leave taking which we experience in terms of the classic youthful Bildungsroman. In other words, there is no stopping the guy, who wants no more of the small complacent postwar town where he has been raised, and which he wants to abandon for the larger world. Wilhelm leaves the flat northern town he is from, and takes the train toward Bonn, Germany's capital. At the change of train lines in Hamburg he sees a beautiful woman, Therese, whose phone number he manages to acquire, while meantime he takes stock of the unexpected pair occupying his section of the train he is riding on.

**Assemblage** The man in his compartment is a dreamy late midlife chap named Laertes; he is accompanied by a young mute girl, who is a juggler, who works with Laertes to earn money as a street performer; both of them figures taken directly from Goethe's *Bildungsroman*). This pair appear to be penniless, so Wilhelm puts them up in the fleabitten hotel where he himself is staying that night. They are soon joined by a loser-type Austrian, who wants to be a poet, and finds them attractive; through a comedy of events he is able to put them up in a sumptuous mansion, which for the rest of the film will serve as a home base for the adventures of this improbable band.

**Outcomes.** Tensions mount in the mansion, especially because Wilhelm will not give Therese the attention she needs from him. (Wilhelm grows increasingly intent on his writing, and the importance of it in making his Bildungsreise a success. In concentrating thus, he reaches back into the world of Goethe, for whom, almost two centuries earlier, the romantic impulse had been deeply associated with a writing mission; Wilhelm also takes us into the Wenders who, in the film *Alice in the Cities* is engaged in a mortal struggle with the challenges of making a testimony in writing, choking on the issue of writer's block.). Meanwhile Mignon and Laertes press their attentions against the Wilhelm, who is already regretting that he has lost the main thread of his world-discovery journey; Mignon wants the sex, Wilhelm cannot give Therese, while Laertes foists onto Wilhelm disgusting revelations about his own role in the Holocaust.

**Finale.** Things fall apart quickly, from this point on. The wealthy owner of the mansion hangs himself. The Austrian 'poet' goes off alone, Therese takes the other three to her small flat. Soon, in the midst of growing tension, Wilhelm leaves the group and goes on his way, finally making it to a kind of terminus of his Wanderjare, the Zugspitze, one of the highest and bleakest points in southern Germany.

### CHARACTERS

**Wilhelm.** Wilhelm is the principal figure, who has mobilized all the actions of the film, by bringing together a small crew, as parts of his romantic quest. He is sick of life in his small town, and heads south

by train, to see the wider world, and eventually to reach some isolated dramatic end point in the mountains of southern Germany.

**Therese.** Theresa is the attractive and statuesque woman who catches Wilhelm's eye, at a train stop on his route south. They catch up with each other, shortly down the line, and she becomes part of the five person traveling crew that make up the film's journey. She is very soft on Wilhelm, and is eventually infuriated, when he will not respond to her advances.

**Laertes.** The street performer partner of Mignon, the mute juggler. Laertes is a man with a past, which includes disgusting involvements with the Nazi Holocaust. He is a figure plucked directly out of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### WILHELM

**Character** The main character is Wilhelm, whom we meet at the point where he has had it with his small north German town, and is ready to explore the world. He is entering his 'romantic stage.' He sets off by train, heading south, and on the way gathers a small collection of fellow travelers, who continue on with him, finally settling down for a spell in a mansion-castle, until the tensions pulling at them become too uncomfortable, and they go their separate ways. Wilhelm's path, like that of the Romantic writer he wants to be, is south toward the isolated mountains where Germany meets Austria.

**Parallels.** Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* (1935) speaks to the primal lure of the highway, especially in the young man seeking to find his own life; Willie Nelson, in 'On the Road Again,' 1980, picks up Wolfe's flair for the highway, as did the great sixties film *Easy Rider*, 1969. One of the greatest American novels, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), digs deeply into the American drive to be free and discover the world for yourself.

### Illustrative moments.

**Reflecting.** In its opening scene, the film shows us Wilhelm in his room, in his mother's house, looking out onto the placid small city central square. We can just feel the young guy's yearning for freedom, and the kind of discovery that Goethe himself indulged, in his own *Wanderjahre*, the prototype imagined for Wilhelm Meister.

**Eyeing.** In the train, leaving on his self-discovery journey, Wilhelm is intensely observant, of landscape, of fellow passengers, and especially of the mute female sitting across from him. Wilhelm is all eyes, fascinated as a new world opens around him.

**Assaulted.** Wilhelm is aware that Therese, whom he had drawn close to him at first, has fallen for him—and that he no longer wants to reciprocate. While he sits in the mansion, writing concentratedly, Therese wants him to flirt with her, and more; he cannot bear to interrupt the text he is creating. At this point she attacks him and beats him up.

**Jubilant.** After the group's departure from the mansion, William is ready to continue his journey to the south of Germany, to which his inner quest has been directing him. The desire to enjoy a solitude within the whole of creation is at last to be fulfilled.

### Discussion questions

Does Wilhelm seem inherently unhappy or frustrated, at the beginning of the film? Or is he positive and motivated to find out about the world? What is his mother's attitude toward his departure?

What function do Laertes and Mignon exercise, in the development of the plot? Have they benign attitudes toward Wilhelm? Have they a direction of their own?

What is the meaning of writing, for Wilhelm? What does he seem to be wanting to express for himself? Does the act of writing, in and of itself, have special meaning for him?

## THEMES

**Romanticism.** Wilhelm is driven by a Romantic impulse, to get out of his small town, and to see the world. Armed with romantic literature (Eichendorf, *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*) and a train ticket, Wilhelm heads toward Frankfurt, and has fairly soon collected a ragtag bunch of traveling companions, with whom he will continue 'seeing the world' until they break up, and he, the true Romantic in the group, continues onward to his remote goal at the southern tip of Germany.

**Writing.** For Wilhelm, on his Romantic quest, writing is the key activity—a place of meditation and self-inspection, a place for search, a constant challenge. Writing is also the quiet place within where Wilhelm can protect himself from the demands of others—like Therese and Mignon—who want his attention.

**Tension.** Wilhelm is eager to escape from tension, though he keeps being immersed in it—the tension of his Mother, nudging him out, the tensions of Therese and Mignon, seeking sex and affection from him, the tension of Laertes, pressing against Wilhelm the disturbing confessions of his own role in the Holocaust.

**Sexuality.** Wilhelm is on a romantic/literary quest, and fundamentally not in a sexual mode on this trip—although his initial fascination with the statuesque Therese launched many of the events of the film. As he feels the women around him closing in, he grows increasingly petulant and eager to continue his trip solo, toward new and strange lands that will fulfill his romantic quest.