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Article

Economic Narratives in Zum Wilden Mann

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Abstract: Wilhelm Raabe's *Zum wilden Mann* transcends the conventional classification of the nineteenth-century regional novel. Its narrative structure is deeply embedded in the economic transformations of Germany's *Gründerzeit*. At its core, the novel articulates an economic narrative that encodes the specific forms of social alienation characteristic of the period, giving literary shape to the disintegration of traditional communities and the pervasive estrangement of interpersonal relations in the entrepreneurial age. Moreover, the text anticipates the systemic crises inherent in modern capitalist expansion. Through a close analysis of the reciprocal construction of narrative form and economic logic, this article argues that *Zum wilden Mann* exposes the profound disorientation of values accompanying Germany's nineteenth-century social and economic transformation.

Keywords: Wilhelm Raabe; *Grü*nderzeit; economic narrative; bourgeois ethics

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1. Introduction

The genesis of *Zum wilden Mann* is inseparable from the emergence of economic modernity in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Germany. The novel is situated within the historical upheavals of the *Gründerzeit*, a period marked by accelerated capitalist expansion, speculative investment, and the destabilization of traditional bourgeois value systems. Throughout his works of this phase—such as *Meister Autor* and *Die Innerste*—Wilhelm Raabe repeatedly interrogates the shock inflicted upon bourgeois ethics by the new economic order, with *Zum wilden Mann* constituting one of the most paradigmatic articulations of this concern [1].

Rather than offering a mere realistic depiction of provincial life, the novel constructs what Theodor W. Adorno describes as a form of 'mimetic cognition' of social alienation, in which literary form itself becomes a mode of knowledge production. Although Raabe did not explicitly conceive his narrative as an economic critique, the novel nonetheless encodes the structural violence of capitalist logic through its character constellations and its transformation of material symbols. Economic relations—credit, debt, patronage, and exchange—are not external themes imposed upon the narrative but are instead woven into its very fabric, shaping both plot development and narrative perspective.

At the centre of the novel stands Philipp Kristeller, a provincial pharmacist in the Harz Mountains whose existence is defined by passivity, melancholia, and a profound reluctance to engage with the realities of economic agency. Kristeller's attempt to preserve a self-contained moral world is materially manifested in the back room of his apothecary, which he curates as a miniature museum adorned with historical imagery, most notably Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I.* This space symbolically condenses the vast and unsettling forces of the modern world into a Biedermeier interior, offering the illusion of stability and continuity. By accepting capital from his former companion August Mördling three decades earlier and framing his role as that of a mere steward rather than an economic actor, Kristeller suspends himself in a state of existential stasis [2]. The return of August—now re-emerging as the colonial entrepreneur Agostino—forces the violent dissolution of

this illusion, resulting in the liquidation not only of Kristeller's property but also of his moral self-conception.

Zum wilden Mann thus stages a complex interaction between economic practice and narrative construction. While economic relations propel the plot, their significance is continually refracted through competing narrative perspectives: Kristeller's romanticised self-narration and the implied narrator's realist irony. This tension signals the collapse of a moralised economic narrative under the pressure of capitalist rationality. By analysing the narrative encoding of economic acts alongside the reconstruction of their meaning, this article demonstrates how material exchange and storytelling are mutually constitutive in Raabe's text [3]. In doing so, it reveals the existential crisis of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie as it confronts the disruptive forces of commodity culture and global capitalism.

2. The Romantic Veil: Kristeller's Self-Construction of an Economic Narrative

As a narrated narrator, Kristeller's fundamental narrative strategy consists in veiling economic relations beneath a moral and sentimental mythology. The pivotal event of his life—the acceptance of 9,600 Thalers from August Mördling—undergoes, in his retrospective narration, a systematic semantic transformation. What is in material terms a financial advance is retrospectively re-coded as an act of benevolent grace, thereby neutralising its economic implications. Following the suggestion of his fiancée Johanna, Kristeller reframes the transfer not as a loan but as a morally elevated bond of gratitude, a manoeuvre that reflects the ethical idealism of the traditional bourgeoisie and its resistance to recognising economic dependency.

Kristeller consistently designates the sum as a *Gottesgeschenk*, a term that displaces the logic of obligation with that of providence. This narrative manoeuvre allows him to construct an identity as beneficiary rather than debtor, shielding his bourgeois self-image from the destabilising recognition of financial subordination. The economy of the novel is thus initially filtered through Kristeller's romantic optics, within which capital appears not as an instrument of domination but as a miraculous intervention aligned with fate, friendship, and moral worth [4].

2.1. The 9,600 Thalers as 'Godsend': Romanticising Patronage

The romanticisation of the 9,600 Thalers reaches its climax during the jubilee celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Kristeller's apothecary. In recounting his personal history, Kristeller narrates his rise from poverty in a tone of retrospective wonder, transforming the material origin of his prosperity into a quasi-mythical episode. Adolf Muschg incisively characterises this self-narration as a romantic miracle tale, marked by striking pictorial fissures (*interessante Bildrisse*) and ultimately reducible to a fairy tale (*Märchen*). Kristeller fashions himself as a composite of romantic archetypes: the abandoned orphan reminiscent of Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, the emotionally unguarded wanderer of Eichendorff, and the nature-revering youth of Stifter's prose. Endowed with these attributes, he becomes a figure seemingly destined for redemption through an act of grace [5].

Within this narrative framework, the donor of the capital—August, Kristeller's former forest and botanical companion (*Wald- und Botanisiergefährte*)—assumes the role of a mysterious benefactor. The funds appear as an illusory inheritance or even as divine favour, enabling Kristeller to fulfil the core aspirations of nineteenth-century bourgeois existence: marriage and the establishment of an independent business. Muschg's reading punctures this romantic veneer by exposing the narrative's defensive function. The fairy-tale structure does not merely embellish Kristeller's biography; it actively conceals the reality of economic dependence underpinning his social ascent [6].

Raabe reinforces this strategy through an intertextual allusion to the folklore motif of the Wild Man's treasure. Kristeller's designation of the sum as a *Gottesgeschenk* echoes the

legend popularised in Johann Karl August Musäus's fairy tales, in which a poor man receives a miraculous treasure from a Wild Man, only for it to dissolve into worthless leaves.[4] In *Zum wilden Mann*, however, this moment of disenchantment is deferred. Through narrative transmutation, Kristeller converts the precariousness of the gift into the apparent legitimacy of his bourgeois identity [7]. The capital is stripped of its status as a loan and reimagined as a benevolent bequest, thereby stabilising a self-image that would otherwise collapse under the recognition of debt.

2.2. The 'Spiritual Stomach Solace': De-commodifying the Commodity

A comparable strategy of narrative transfiguration governs Kristeller's treatment of the apothecary's flagship product, the eponymous distillate. Within his discursive framework, the substance is not presented as a commodity oriented towards profit, but as a 'spiritual stomach solace' (*geistiger Magentrost*), whose primary function lies in providing emotional compensation following his wife's premature death. In conjunction with the visual programme of the apothecary's back room—its display of historical artefacts, representations of 'high history and expansive life' (*hoher Geschichte und weitläufigen Lebens*), and Dürer's *Melencolia I*—the distillate contributes to the construction of a private sanctuary insulated from the pressures of the market [8].

Kristeller deliberately refrains from patenting or industrialising the product. Instead, he dispenses it selectively among neighbours, thereby preserving its non-commodity status and embedding it within a network of communal exchange rather than market circulation. This narrative of de-commodification constitutes a symbolic resistance to the logic of the nineteenth-century commodity economy. By spiritualising his principal economic output, Kristeller attempts to stabilise a Biedermeier microcosm governed by affect, memory, and moral obligation—a space designed to evade the imperatives of capitalist rationality.

2.3. The Empty Chair of Honour: Materialising Gratitude

The most conspicuous materialisation of Kristeller's romantic economic narrative is the empty chair of honour (*leerer Ehrensessel*) permanently reserved for August in his household. In Kristeller's narration, the chair functions not as a reminder of debt but as a monument to benefaction, embodying gratitude rather than obligation. He and his sister Dorette consistently maintain the chair as the best seat in the house, treating it as the spiritual centre of the domestic sphere. Its emptiness signifies not absence or lack, but waiting: an anticipatory vigil for August's return, which would retrospectively validate the narrative of grace upon which Kristeller's identity rests [9].

Muschg perceptively identifies the chair as a monument (*Denkmal*) to Kristeller's deficit (*Defizit*). Through the valorisation of this object, Kristeller transforms an unresolved financial obligation into a moralised symbol of honour. The chair thus functions as a narrative device that stabilises bourgeois respectability by converting economic dependence into ethical distinction. By monumentalising gratitude, Kristeller suppresses the disruptive potential of debt, maintaining the illusion of moral autonomy required for the coherence of his bourgeois self-conception.

3. Disenchantment in the Realist Economic Narrative: The Irony of the Implied Narrator and the Restoration of Economic Logic

The nineteenth century has often been characterised as the 'century of things', a formulation that captures the unprecedented centrality of material objects within both social life and literary representation. In *Zum wilden Mann*, Wilhelm Raabe displays a distinctive mastery in the narrative disposition of objects, deploying them as sites of semantic tension rather than passive elements of realist description [10]. Günter Oesterle has argued that the poetics of the novella are governed by a structural principle according to which, first, every object corresponds to a pendant, and second, every object embodies

a fundamental duality: it is simultaneously concrete and material, yet also abstract, virtual, or symbolic. This intrinsic duality provides the formal mechanism through which the implied narrator systematically dismantles Kristeller's romantic economic narrative and restores the suppressed logic of debt, interest, and commodification [11].

The process of disenchantment unfolds through a sequence of decisive economic acts that puncture Kristeller's moralised self-narration. These acts do not merely correct a subjective misunderstanding; they reveal the objective dominance of capitalist rationality during the *Gründerzeit*. In this sense, Raabe's narrative anticipates Karl Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, which diagnoses the estrangement of human beings from their labour, their products, and one another under conditions of capitalist exchange. In *Zum wilden Mann*, this alienation is rendered tangible through the collision between bourgeois affective investment in objects and the irreducible commodity status that those objects ultimately assume.

3.1. Liquidating Patronage: Debt Replaces Grace

The return of August Mördling from Brazil, now styling himself Dom Agostino Agonista, marks the decisive intervention of realist economic logic into Kristeller's insulated moral world. While Agostino initially frames his return as a search for the friend 'dead or alive' (*den Freund tot oder lebendig finden*), the implied narrator gradually exposes the instrumental logic underlying this gesture. The value of friendship proves contingent upon the material assets of the apothecary, which are subjected to systematic scrutiny and eventual liquidation.

Agostino's demand exceeds the original 9,600 Thalers, amounting instead to a sum of 12,000 Thalers. The surplus of 2,400 Thalers represents accumulated interest, retroactively revealing the alleged *Gottesgeschenk* to have been nothing more than a deferred loan. Muschg aptly observes that Agostino functions not as a benefactor (*Wohltäter*) but as a liquidator, whose actions dissolve Kristeller's narrative of gratitude into a stark contractual relation [12]. The romantic fiction of grace collapses under the weight of economic calculation, exposing the temporal logic of capital accumulation that had remained invisible for three decades.

This moment exemplifies the irreversible subordination of moral narrative to economic rationality. The demand for repayment does not merely impoverish Kristeller materially; it annihilates the ethical framework through which he had interpreted his own existence. The restoration of economic logic thus operates simultaneously as a narrative and existential disenchantment, stripping away the symbolic insulation that had sustained bourgeois identity.

3.2. The World Market Proposition: Commodifying the 'Spiritual Solace'

The realist logic of capital asserts itself even more forcefully in Agostino's proposal to transform Kristeller's distillate into an industrially produced commodity destined for the world market. What Kristeller had carefully preserved as a non-commodity—dispensed among neighbours as a gesture of communal care—is reimagined by Agostino as a scalable product capable of generating profit on a global scale. This proposition violently negates the narrative of de-commodification through which Kristeller had endowed the distillate with spiritual significance.

Within Agostino's economic calculus, the 'spiritual stomach solace' is stripped of its affective and ethical dimensions and reduced to its liquidation value. The imperative of profit supersedes that of consolation. Kristeller's instinctive rejection of the partnership signals his refusal to submit fully to the logic of commodification; yet this refusal paradoxically culminates in an act of economic self-annihilation. By relinquishing the formula to Agostino without compensation, Kristeller abdicates control over his principal asset, confirming Muschg's diagnosis of him as the archetype of the bourgeois who no

longer comprehends the world he inhabits. His moral resistance proves structurally impotent in the face of capital's systemic dominance.

3.3. The Empty Chair Liquidated: The Final Commodification of Honour

The ultimate collapse of Kristeller's romantic economic narrative is staged through the fate of the empty chair of honour. Drawing on the folkloric tradition exemplified by Musäus's *Der Schatzgräber*, Raabe reconfigures the motif of the miraculous gift that ultimately reveals its illusory nature. In Musäus's tale, the treasure bestowed by supernatural agents dissolves into withered leaves, exposing the futility of wealth divorced from labour, reality, and ethical accountability. Raabe adapts this logic by substituting the transient treasure with a permanent vacancy: the empty chair that Kristeller maintains as a ritualised symbol of gratitude.

As Michael Schmidt has shown, Raabe deliberately omits the fairy tale's moment of dissolution and replaces it with the prolonged fixation on an object whose emptiness is never resolved. The chair thus becomes a static monument rather than a dynamic symbol of expectation. By immobilising it within the apothecary's back room for three decades, Kristeller transforms a gesture originally oriented towards future redemption into a relic of the past. The messianic logic of anticipation—dependent on openness and temporal movement—is thereby emptied of substance and reduced to ritualistic form.

Agostino's reappearance consummates this profanation. Seating himself unceremoniously in the chair and covering it with account books, he converts the symbol of honour into a platform of economic domination. The chair's abstract moral significance is evacuated, revealing its susceptibility to commodification. Its eventual sale following Kristeller's insolvency marks the final triumph of economic logic: the object that once embodied gratitude and ethical distinction is reduced to junk, valued only insofar as it can be exchanged.

From the perspective of the implied narrator, the chair's emptiness no longer signifies waiting but a vacuum of value. When traditional bourgeois virtues such as honour and gratitude cannot be converted into exchange value, they are expelled from the commodity economy. Muschg aptly describes the chair as an 'embodied minus' (*verkörpertes Minus*), whose liquidation signifies not merely material loss but the implosion of an entire moral economy.

4. Global Undercurrents: The Narrative Encoding of Colonial Economic Logic

Raabe's critique of economic narrative does not remain confined to the domestic sphere of German bourgeois society. With the return of Agostino, the novel decisively opens itself to the global horizon of nineteenth-century colonial capitalism. Through a dense network of narrative allusions, material objects, and semantic displacements, *Zum wilden Mann* embeds the logic of colonial extraction within its realist framework, thereby exposing the entanglement of provincial life with global systems of exploitation.

Agostino's transformation from a marginal, persecuted figure into a Brazilian colonial officer and latifundium owner (*Latifundienbesitzer*) marks a structural rupture in the narrative. His success is not portrayed as the result of individual merit alone but as the outcome of a transnational economy grounded in violence, coerced labour, and the systematic conversion of life into capital. The implied narrator deploys colonial references not as exotic embellishments, but as analytical instruments designed to dismantle Kristeller's romantic moral economy and reveal its complicity with global capitalist processes.

4.1. The Frigate Juan Fernandez*: Colonial Mobility and Capital Expansion*

Agostino's departure from Europe aboard the Chilean frigate *Juan Fernandez* constitutes one of the novel's most concentrated instances of colonial narrative encoding. Far from serving as a neutral detail of maritime realism, the ship's name operates as a

densely layered intertextual reference. It invokes the sixteenth-century navigator Juan Fernández, whose voyages contributed to the opening of transoceanic routes that would later facilitate European colonial expansion. Simultaneously, it evokes the archipelago immortalised in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a foundational narrative of colonial capitalism.

Through this allusion, Raabe situates Agostino within a Robinsonian genealogy. Robinson's mastery over nature, his establishment of private property, and his transformation of isolation into sovereignty constitute the mythic core of capitalist colonial ideology. Agostino's exile thus emerges not as a fall from civilisation but as the inaugural moment of colonial accumulation. Yet Raabe also marks a historical escalation. Whereas Robinson's accumulation is primarily based on the appropriation and domestication of nature, Agostino's wealth derives from the systematic exploitation of human labour within the plantation economy of Brazil.

The designation of the *Juan Fernandez* as a Chilean frigate further complicates this logic. Although Chile had achieved political independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, it remained structurally integrated into a global economy dominated by European capital. The vessel thus embodies a hybrid instrument of postcolonial collaboration, facilitating the circulation of capital, labour, and violence across ostensibly sovereign boundaries. Through this single narrative detail, Raabe condenses the historical transition from early colonial adventure to industrialised imperial exploitation.

4.2. The Black Doctor and the Ideology of Colonial Fear

A particularly charged episode in Agostino's self-narration concerns his medical treatment aboard the ship *Diablo Blanco* by a Black doctor. Agostino recounts this encounter not with gratitude but with hostility, characterising his healer as a devil standing at his left elbow. On the surface, this gesture appears as an expression of racial prejudice; yet within the novel's narrative economy it functions as a far more complex ideological inversion.

The ship's name, *Diablo Blanco*, carries a historical resonance that extends beyond individual animus. In colonial discourse, the term was deployed by European colonisers to demonise indigenous and enslaved populations who resisted imperial domination. Moreover, it evokes the spectre of Haiti—the first Black republic, founded through a successful slave revolution—which haunted the collective imagination of slaveholders throughout the Atlantic world. Agostino's demonisation of the Black doctor thus refracts a broader colonial anxiety: the fear of racial and social reversal that threatened the foundations of the plantation economy.

Raabe intensifies this critique through a deliberate narrative omission. The text withholds any detailed account of the doctor's life-saving intervention, while subsequently emphasising Agostino's rise as a colonial officer and slave-dependent landowner. This asymmetry exposes the moral economy of colonial capitalism: debts of gratitude are erased, while systems of exploitation are normalised. The figure of the 'devil' serves not to describe the healer but to obscure the violence of primitive accumulation, projecting guilt onto its victims in order to legitimise domination.

4.3. Meat Extract and Herbal Liqueur: Commodities of Colonial Modernity

The global logic of colonial capitalism is further articulated through the contrasting narrative trajectories of two commodities: meat extract (*Fleischextrakt*) and herbal liqueur (*Kräuterlikör*). These substances function as symbolic condensations of industrial modernity and pre-modern folk knowledge, respectively, revealing how both are subsumed under the logic of capital.

Meat extract is explicitly linked to the industrial processing of cattle in South America, where animals were slaughtered primarily for their hides, with the flesh discarded as waste. The development of extraction technology—associated with figures such as Justus

von Liebig—enabled European capital to transform this refuse into a marketable commodity, promoted as a scientific remedy for malnutrition and disease. By the 1870s, however, the medical efficacy of meat extract had already been widely questioned. Its continued circulation relied less on nutritional value than on the authority of scientific discourse mobilised in the service of profit.

Agostino's enthusiasm for meat extract epitomises the ideological fusion of science, colonial exploitation, and capitalist accumulation. Marketed to soldiers, workers, and colonial subjects as a restorative tonic, the product embodies a double exploitation: the extraction of raw materials from the colonial periphery and the commodification of health itself. Raabe's narrative exposes this process as a perversion of Enlightenment ideals, revealing progress to be inseparable from domination.

In contrast, Kristeller's herbal liqueur originates in pre-modern traditions of folk medicine rooted in local knowledge and communal exchange. Its ingredients are gathered from the Harz Mountains, and its circulation is restricted to a network of neighbours. Yet this apparent alternative proves equally vulnerable. When Agostino acquires the formula and proposes its industrial deployment as a sedative for colonial labourers, the liqueur is stripped of its cultural context and repurposed as an instrument of labour control. The transformation of folk medicine into a tool of exploitation underscores the novel's bleak diagnosis: neither industrial innovation nor traditional knowledge can escape incorporation into the machinery of colonial capitalism.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between economy and narrative in *Zum wilden Mann* is not governed by a unidirectional logic of economic determinism, but by a process of reciprocal constitution. Economic relations provide the narrative impetus of the novella, while narrative structures in turn determine how those relations are interpreted, moralised, or concealed. This dynamic tension reveals the central existential predicament of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie: under the shock of the commodity economy, traditional systems of value become increasingly detached from economic reality. Narrative emerges as a compensatory mechanism designed to bridge this rupture, yet it ultimately proves incapable of withstanding the structural force of capitalist rationality.

Within the narrative architecture of the text, two competing voices are locked in a sustained dialectical struggle. On the one hand stands Kristeller's romantic self-narration, which systematically obscures economic relations by transfiguring debt into divine grace, commodities into spiritual surrogates, and honour into a symbol detached from exchange. On the other hand, the implied narrator's realist irony relentlessly dismantles these constructions, restoring debt to capital, grace to obligation, and objects to their status as commodities. This opposition mirrors the internal conflict of the bourgeois subject itself, torn between the psychological necessity of moral self-preservation and the inexorable demands of economic reality.

Kristeller's failure is therefore not merely financial but axiological. His attempt to sustain identity through non-economic values—gratitude, honour, friendship—renders him structurally incompatible with the dominant logic of the *Gründerzeit*, in which profit and accumulation function as supreme imperatives. As Adolf Muschg has observed, Agostino's success derives precisely from his unreserved conformity to the logic of the commodity economy, while Kristeller's tragedy lies in his insistence on attributing incommensurable moral value to both subjects and objects. The resulting asymmetry condemns Kristeller's narrative to obsolescence.

The fate of the empty chair of honour crystallises this process in material form. Its transformation from a symbol of gratitude into an object of liquidation visualises the collapse of the bourgeois moral economy under capitalist pressure. What cannot be converted into exchange value is expelled from the system, reduced to residue. In this sense, Raabe's novella does not merely depict the alienation of individuals and objects; it

stages the hollowing out of character itself. Both Kristeller, clinging to anachronistic ideals, and Agostino, embodying the expansive logic of capital, appear less as autonomous subjects than as carriers of economic forces that exceed individual intention.

Through its dense semiotics of objects, its ironic narrative structure, and its global colonial horizon, *Zum wilden Mann* offers a remarkably prescient diagnosis of the contradictions inherent in nineteenth-century capitalist modernity. By translating macro-economic transformations into conflicts between everyday practices, material culture, and narrative self-understanding, Raabe exposes the profound disorientation of values that accompanied Germany's transition into modernity. The novella thus emerges as a literary reflection on the impossibility of reconciling traditional bourgeois ethics with the totalising logic of the commodity economy—a conflict that ultimately destabilises not only social relations, but narrative form itself.

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