

MARTIN SWALES

The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse



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For
Barker Fairley

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Preface

By any standards, the German Bildungsroman is not an easily accessible novel tradition for the Anglo-Saxon reader. In the concluding chapter of his study *The German Novel* Roy Pascal summarizes both cogently and sympathetically the salient features of this novel genre: its tentative relationship to practicalities, the lack of plasticity in its treatment of personal development, its obstinate tendency toward narrative discursiveness. All this sounds very forbidding—as, indeed, is the length of most actual Bildungsroman texts. In view of these obstacles in particular, I have endeavored to keep this study short and (I hope) approachable. The novels themselves are, of course, highly complex texts, and in my analyses much has been omitted. On the other hand, I have tried to illuminate the structuring principle which, in my view, is at the heart of the genre, and to suggest something of the overall import which the specific works generate. I hope specialist readers will forgive me if certain detailed aspects of the texts receive somewhat cursory consideration.

I would add finally that throughout my work on these novels I have been insistently aware of the foreignness of the Bildungsroman tradition to me as an English novel reader. I believe that this foreignness has supplied creative provocation for my study: I have been concerned to stress the need for a greater awareness in the English-speaking world of this specifically (but not narrowly) German contribution to the European novel tradition. I have been particularly conscious of this need because of both the difficulty and the enrichment that have attended upon my own discovery of the Bildungsroman.

In conclusion, I should like to thank those people who have helped me by discussing many of the issues involved in this study. I think particularly of my wife Erika, of Roy Pascal, of Modris Eksteins, and of the many members of the May 1976 Amherst Colloquium on German Literature who were kind enough to give me the benefit of their reactions to my paper on the Bildungsroman. I am also grateful to my students at London University for the patience, skepticism, and interest with which they greeted my various attempts to lecture on the Bildungsroman.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Barker Fairley, who during the academic year 1975-1976 (which I spent in Toronto) gave me consistently the benefit of his superb critical instinct, of his incisive enthusiasm for German and English literature, and, above all, of his friendship. To him I dedicate this study.

Translations throughout, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. I am grateful to the editors of the *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, and to the editors and publishers (J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart) of the *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* for allowing me to draw on material which first appeared in the pages of their journals. My thanks are due to Doris Lessing, to Jonathan Cape Ltd., and to John Cushman Associates Inc. for allowing me to quote the passages from Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* which figure in the excursus.

Finally, I wish to express my profound gratitude to Princeton University Press for agreeing once again to publish my work, and to their advisers, whose comments and criticisms have helped me more than I can say. R. Miriam Brokaw, Associate Director and Editor at Princeton University Press, has brought her customary blend of kindness, patience, and good sense to bear on the whole process of converting a somewhat chaotic

typescript into manageable form. To her, to all her colleagues, and especially to Gretchen Oberfranc, my exemplary copyeditor, I should like to extend my warmest thanks.

Martin Swales

May 1977

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The highest form of the novel was the novel of personal development: a man passed through the richness of the phenomenal world and attempted to discover its meaning. The idea was good, but the distribution of forces was wrongly perceived: the circumstances, the conditions of the world were taken as given, as overwhelmingly real, the wanderer through them was weak, humble, obedient. Put more clearly one could say that the novels were dualistic in structure: on the one hand, an a priori moral, theological meaning in the phenomena—and on the other, the quester after meaning. If he was a nuisance and knew of a multiplicity and simultaneity of viewpoints, he was left with no alternative but to take up the linearity [Nacheinander] of experience, and in the process it constantly happened that he would declare the last viewpoint to be the true one. Abandoning the struggle in resignation or harmony, he would make his peace, the novel was over, nothing had been said, simultaneity had not been expressed.

Otto Flake
(1913)

Introduction

Critical literature on the Bildungsroman has for many years¹ followed in the wake of Wilhelm Dilthey's famous definition, derived from his analysis of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and of Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion*: "A regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony."² Dilthey's definition is essentially concerned with the subject matter of the Bildungsroman, and this in itself supplies a certain limitation. No mention is made of how such a thematic statement is generated. Moreover, it seems debatable, to say the least, whether even *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* depicts that fulfillment and harmony which Dilthey sees as the necessary goal of the Bildungsroman. Yet, in spite of its problematic aspects, Dilthey's *aperçu* has acquired almost canonical status within German literary history.

Given the limitation of this genre definition, it is hardly surprising that there have been a number of iconoclastic voices raised, voices which proclaim that the notion of the Bildungsroman is little better than a pedantic fiction coined by overzealous academics.³ Such summary dismantling is, of course, very appealing. But it tends to ride roughshod over the whole theoretical

¹ For a summary of the relevant secondary literature see Lothar Köhn, *Entwicklungs- und Bildungsroman* (Stuttgart, 1969).

² *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (Leipzig and Bern, 1913), 394.

³ See for example W. Pabst's onslaught in his article, "Literatur zur Theorie des Romans," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 34 (1960), 264ff. (hereafter cited as DVLG).

question of the nature—and definability—of literary genres. The reaction against the "Dilthey school" has led to a jettisoning of the baby with the bathwater.

Of late, a number of innovative attempts to deal with the Bildungsroman have been made, attempts which emphasize structural and narrative (rather than thematic) features. Despite their many differences, the recent studies by Jürgen Scharfschwerdt, Gerhart von Graevenitz, Michael Beddow, and Monika Schrader have in common the desire to see the Bildungsroman as a highly self-reflective novel, one in which the problem of *Bildung*, of personal growth, is enacted in the narrator's discursive self-understanding rather than in the events which the hero experiences.⁴ Schrader, for instance, argues that *Bildung*—the quest for organic growth and personal self-realization—is essentially an epistemological concept and that it finds its exploration within the realm of the specifically narrative (that is, aesthetic) process. For her, the story told is an allegorical field in which the discursively formulated insights can be tried out.

There are many valuable insights to be gained from such an approach. Yet there is also the danger that the Bildungsroman becomes increasingly defined as a discursive essay in the aesthetic mode, whereby the plot, the events chronicled, are relegated to the level of contingent illustrative material. I think that the major Bildungsromane in fact suggest that actual experience is not such a disposable commodity as this. As a result, the Bildungsroman sustains a greater relationship to the traditional *donnée* of the novelist's art than such arguments allow.

⁴ Scharfschwerdt, *Thomas Mann und der deutsche Bildungsroman* (Stuttgart, 1967); Graevenitz, *Die Setzung des Subjekts: Untersuchungen zur Romantheorie* (Tübingen, 1973); Beddow, "Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* and the Traditions of the Picaresque Novel and the Bildungsroman" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1975); Schrader, *Mimesis and Poiesis: Poetologische Studien zum Bildungsroman* (Berlin and New York, 1975).

These two conflicting approaches to the Bildungsroman, the "thematic" and the "aesthetic," serve to remind us of an established debate within novel theory: the novel, more than any other literary mode, has been seen as both the vehicle for a massively referential artistic concern, and as a highly structured and *durchkomponiert* aesthetic construct. The novel should, it has been claimed, recreate an existing world, and it should also create its own artistic totality. The debate about the Bildungsroman is, when viewed in this light, part of a longer debate about the novel as such. In more general terms, however, the two schools of Bildungsroman theoreticians can be seen as participants in that literary controversy which is at the forefront of present methodological discussion. I am referring to the battle between Marxists and Structuralists. There is, I think, no need to go into details (or indeed the various subgroups) here. What I have in mind is the conflict between those critics who insist on the referentiality of the work of art and those who insist on its structural integrity—between, at the crudest level of generalization, those for whom the work of art is "about life" and those for whom it is "about itself." I want to suggest in my analysis of the Bildungsroman that, in general terms, the literary work is both referential and self-constituting, that, more specifically, the Bildungsroman is a novel genre which derives its very life from the awareness both of the given experiential framework of practical reality on the one hand and of the creative potential of human imagination and reflectivity on the other. The contemporary methodological debate finds a fascinating thematic correlative in the German Bildungsroman tradition.

One final word about the range of texts treated in this study. I have made a conventional choice in the sense that the six major novels I have selected for detailed analysis would commonly be regarded as the finest

examples of the genre. It should, however, be stressed that the tradition does not consist only of a few high points. There are a large number of German novels which concern themselves with the growth and change of a young man through adolescence and which take this period as precisely the one in which decisive intellectual and philosophical issues are embedded in the psychological process of human self-discovery. Speaking of the growth of intelligence in the adolescent, Roy Pascal rightly observes: "no novelists have shaped this process, and the world in which it takes place, so subtly and tenderly as the Germans."⁵ In this context one thinks of such novels as Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbald's Wanderings*, Jean Paul's *Unfledged Years*, Joseph von Eichendorff's *Intimations and the Present*, Karl Immermann's *The Epigones*, Gustav Freytag's *Debit and Credit*, Wilhelm Raabe's *The Hunger Pastor*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Andreas*, Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, and many others. Such novels constitute the transmission of a particular kind of fictional concern which is, as it were, the breeding ground for the high points of the German contribution to the novel form. What, for me, separates the minor texts from the major ones is precisely the fact that the great works meet and explore the thematic possibilities of adolescent flux and change with a differentiation and generosity that is lacking in the minor works. Put in more specific terms, I mean that the great texts sustain the dialectic of practical social reality on the one hand and the complex inwardness of the individual on the other, whereas the minor writers tend (to borrow D. H. Lawrence's term) to put their thumb in the scales, to load the issue either in favor of the hero's cherished inwardness or in favor of the practical accommodation to society. The result is a number of less than distinguished novels. But on the

⁵ Pascal, *The German Novel* (Manchester, 1956), 305.