



Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends

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Abstract

The term *Bildungsroman*, or “novel of formation,” remains at once one of the most vexing, but also one of the most fruitful contributions that German letters have made to the international vocabulary of literary studies. This article presents a survey of critical trends in *Bildungsroman* studies, from the early twentieth century to the present, but with an emphasis on scholarship from the last decade. Special attention is paid to work done in modernist studies. The article is divided into three parts. The first presents a broad historical overview and explores the problems raised by diverging critical traditions in Germany and the English-speaking world. The second focuses on the rise of feminist and historicist modes of inquiry between 1980 and 1995. The final part explores some of the most recent contributions to the genre, with special emphasis on colonial and post-colonial studies.

The term “*Bildungsroman*,” or “novel of formation,” remains at once one of the most successful and one of the most vexed contributions that German letters have made to the international vocabulary of literary studies. More, perhaps, than with any other genre designation – romance, picaresque, historical novel, novel of manners, to name just a few examples from the realm of narrative long fiction – the heuristic value of the *Bildungsroman* label has been disputed, defended, taken for granted, and otherwise muddled. The term is sometimes – especially within English departments – used so broadly that seemingly any novel (and on extreme occasions even verse epics, such as *The Prelude*) might be subsumed by it. Specialists of German literature, on the other hand, have shown an almost masochistic glee in decimating their own canon, on occasion disqualifying even such seemingly incontestable examples as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* from its ranks. Fredric Jameson dismisses the *Bildungsroman* as a “natural form,” an example of precisely the kind of unhistorical thinking that his own dialectical criticism sets out to crush (145). And Marc Redfield begins his recent excursion into the genre with the titular premise that the *Bildungsroman* is a “phantom formation,” a mere construct of aesthetic ideology.

The field of modernist studies has for the most part been only a subsidiary battleground in these genre wars. Most scholars regard the novel of formation

as primarily a nineteenth-century phenomenon; the modernists' obsession with synchronic models of human experience (epiphany, vortex, shock) and with small-scale diachrony (the stream of consciousness) are often blamed for the demise of a form that by its very definition requires narrative attention to minute and long-term changes. There are canonical modernist *Bildungsromane*, of course – Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain* being perhaps the most prominent examples – but most scholars have treated these as limit-cases of the genre. Much of this has changed within the past few years, however. The rise of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional *Bildungsroman* definition; the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models. In the wake of this expansion, scholars of modernism began to see their period as an era of transition from traditional metropolitan novels of formation and social affirmation to increasingly global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion. This development, in turn, has had profound effects on the reception of canonical European modernists, such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf. The following pages will first provide a brief historical overview of *Bildungsroman* scholarship, and then offer some suggestions as to how recent interventions might help reshape the field of modernist literary studies.

General definitions and historical dimensions

The term "*Bildungsroman*" was introduced to the critical vocabulary by the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1941), who first employed it in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and then popularized it with the success of his 1906 study *Poetry and Experience*. Selections from Dilthey's work were not translated into English until the 1950s, but the word itself made its way across the Channel as a part of the lexical infusion that arose from Edwardian interest in the writings of German thinkers such as Freud, Weber or Simmel. The OED credits the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1910 with the first English occurrence of the term, which then quickly entered into more common usage as a handy designation for any novel that "has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person" (II. 188). The first English academic work on the subject, Susanne Howe's *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen*, appeared in 1930.

For the last several decades, however, the principal reference on the British novel of formation has been Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, published in 1974, which proposes a broadly taxonomic definition of the genre. According to Buckley, a *Bildungsroman* is a novel that portrays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics, among them "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love,

the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18). *Season of Youth* contains analyses of a number of modernist texts, most centrally Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist*, and Golding’s *Free Fall*, but Buckley is interested primarily in pointing out continuities with a longer tradition and has little of interest to say on how modernist experimentation might problematize or otherwise relate to the *Bildungsroman* form.

Buckley’s inductive, thematic, and taxonomic approach to the genre corresponds well with the generally free-floating use to which the term *Bildungsroman* has been put in the English-speaking world. Amongst specialists of German literature, however, a much more restrictive usage prevails. Generic classification is here carried out according to deductive principles, and texts are subsumed under the label if and only if they represent a specific aesthetic ideology. This approach derives directly from the pioneering work of Dilthey, who regarded the *Bildungsroman* as the poetic expression of the Enlightenment concept of *Bildung*. Using the most reductive of terms, *Bildung* (from *das Bild*: “image” or “form”) might be described as a process of teleological and organic growth, in the manner of a seed that develops into a mature plant according to inherent genetic principles (Kontje, *German Bildungsroman* 1–2). Implicitly referring to this concept, Dilthey argued that in a *Bildungsroman*, “[a] regular development is observed in the life of the individual: each of the stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage” (390). His specimen texts were Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprentice Years* (1795–96) and Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* (1797–99). To this aesthetic precondition of the genre, Dilthey added an ideological one. The nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, he suggested, is a product of sociological circumstances that obtained only in the German principalities, and therefore has to be explicitly contrasted with the high realist works produced in England and France. Specifically, Dilthey claimed that repressive state power and the absence of a legitimate public sphere during the Romantic period led to the creation of novels that featured self-involved protagonists who withdraw from active engagement with the social world. Precisely those novels that Anglophone scholars like Buckley tend to invoke as paradigmatic examples of the genre (*Great Expectations* or *David Copperfield*, for instance) are thus in the German view antithetical to the organizing principles of the *Bildungsroman*.

For more than fifty years following the publication of *Poetry and Experience*, German scholars occupied themselves with differentiating between ever finer gradations of *Bildung* and with honing the thesis that the novel of formation possesses an inherent national particularity. During the Wilhelmine Empire, the Weimar Republic and the Nazi reign, this was often done in an expressly chauvinist fashion: the *Bildungsroman* was celebrated as the German answer to “decadent” French and English “novels of society” (*Gesellschaftsromane*). After 1945, polarities reversed, and critics now performed extensive post-mortems on a genre that was decried as indicative

of the German *Sonderweg*, the separate path into modernity that had led the country towards fascism.

The 1960s and the advent of reception theory in Germany led a new generation of scholars to question the ideological premises of genre criticism. In 1961, archival research conducted by Fritz Martini uncovered that the term *Bildungsroman* was invented not by Dilthey, but by the obscure Romantic critic Karl Morgenstern (1770–1852), who held a professorship in aesthetics at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu in Estonia) and gave two long lectures on the topic in 1819 and 1820, after which his new designation promptly sank into oblivion for the next five decades (Martini 1–25). Scholars began to ask themselves why a genre that supposedly found its highpoint in the early nineteenth century received a lasting name only at the beginning of the twentieth, by a critic whose work was immediately misappropriated for the purposes of nationalist propaganda. The general tendency by scholars of German literature to depopulate the *Bildungsroman* canon derives from this era and finds its most forceful English expression in an influential article by Jeffrey Sammons (“Mystery” 229–46), who argues that the notion of the novel of formation as a continuous tradition is a critical hoax. As Sammons sees it, the genre flourished only briefly, during the Romantic period, and was already on its way to the scrap heap of intellectual history when Morgenstern first described it. Sammons further argues that the general neglect into which the term falls during the nineteenth century corresponds to a similar decline in the production of novels that might be subsumed by it. Looking for a “legitimately German” art form that might productively be contrasted with the overwhelmingly successful French and English realist novels, Dilthey and his followers artificially revived an extinct genre, and succeeded in convincing modernist novelists such as Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse to write novels of formation in the fictitious Goethean tradition.

Sammons’s dissatisfaction with the German definition of the *Bildungsroman* should not be taken as an indication that he would like to use the term in the looser taxonomic sense employed by Buckley. Indeed, Sammons minces no words when, in a follow-up to his polemic written ten years later, he dismisses Buckley’s book as “arrogantly provincial” (“*Bildungsroman* for Nonspecialists” 36). In a similar vein, Frederick Amrine has suggested that literary critics drop the term *Bildungsroman* from their vocabulary altogether, in the light of competing traditions that are oppressively restrictive on the one hand and irresponsibly promiscuous on the other (119–39).

Feminism and other new directions in Bildungsroman criticism

The respective polemics by Sammons and Amrine eloquently summarize many of the recurring problems of *Bildungsroman* criticism, but also mark the end of a scholarly era. For by the early 1980s, new conceptual approaches to the novel of formation were radically transforming the discipline. Several

factors contributed to this development. First, a number of outstanding studies made the fruits of German research available to English speakers for the first time (Bruford; Beddow; Miles 980–92; Swales). Secondly, the impact of structuralism encouraged comparatively minded scholars to approach the genre no longer merely as an inductive and taxonomic construct, but to look rather at large-scale symmetries across European traditions.¹ Thirdly, the immediate impact of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* introduced a dialectical and historical dimension to genre criticism that did much to break up ossified structures. Jameson rightly stresses that literary genres are “experimental constructs” (145) which are constantly being renegotiated by new works that come into contact with them.² Finally, and perhaps most importantly, feminist critics began to examine the phallogocentric premises of both traditional novels of formation and of the secondary literature that dealt with them. By thus calling attention to the link between aesthetics and ideology, rhetoric and reality, these critics entered upon territory that was sorely neglected in previous Anglophone *Bildungsroman* scholarship.

A groundbreaking contribution in this regard was the anthology *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland. In the introduction to this volume, the editors show how Buckley's seemingly innocuous taxonomic definition of the *Bildungsroman* excludes female experience from the genre and leads him to some questionable conclusions about George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, which Buckley reads as a chronicle of the *Bildung* of Tom Tulliver, rather than of the more central heroine Maggie. In two important essays that follow this introduction, Marianne Hirsch and Susan J. Rosowski present alternate models and alternate canons of female formation. Both authors concur that social pressure directed feminine development in the nineteenth-century inward and towards the spiritual realm – their essays thus touch upon and recontextualize some of the themes that had long occupied scholars of German literature.

The Voyage In foreshadows several of the principal issues that have occupied recent interventions in the novel of formation from within modernist studies. For one thing, this anthology is perhaps the first major scholarly work on the *Bildungsroman* to privilege the twentieth over the nineteenth century, devoting two thirds of its pages to case studies of modernist and contemporary texts, including works by Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys, and Clarice Lispector. This is only logical considering the editors' central claim that social conditions in the nineteenth century stifled female expression. Even more importantly, however, feminist criticism continues to inspire some of the best writing on the *Bildungsroman* right up to the present. Besides Susan Fraiman's 1993 study *Unbecoming Women* (which only goes up to George Eliot, however), the principal name that needs to be mentioned in this context is that of Rita Felski. In her 1986 essay “The Novel of Self-Discovery,” Felski argues against the grain of feminist criticism when she refuses to condemn the *Bildungsroman* with its

emphasis on integrative development as necessarily patriarchal. Instead, she celebrates “the historical process of women coming to consciousness of female identity as a potentially oppositional force to existing social and cultural values” and condemns the so-called “novel of awakening” (already described by Rosowski) in which the protagonist retreats from society into narcissistic care of the Self (“Novel of Self-Discovery” 131).³ A similar argument also appears in her *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* of 1989.

Felski’s most important contribution to contemporary modernist studies, however, is her 1995 volume, *The Gender of Modernity*, which uses theoretical approaches drawn from feminist cultural studies to argue against the often-perceived binary opposition between a self-consciously “masculine” high modernism and a feminized mass culture. *The Gender of Modernity* is one of the foundational works of what is now sometimes called “the New Modernist Studies,” a critical movement that seeks to relate high-modernist and avant-garde literary experiments to broader cultural transitions within the modernist period. Felski does not refer to the *Bildungsroman* tradition directly, although she does examine the works of Olive Schreiner, including, tangentially, her feminist novel of formation *The Story of an African Farm* (1885). The interest of the volume lies, rather, in the conceptual tools that are developed in the provocative chapter, “Visions of the New: Feminist Discourses of Evolution and Revolution.” Here, Felski reads suffragette manifestos from the early twentieth century with a keen eye toward how rhetoric and narrative condition temporal experience. She uncovers that nineteenth-century writers often approached both historical and individual experience through evolutionary tropes, and that first-generation feminists at first participated in this trend before abandoning it for a new rhetoric of upheaval and revolution: “the narrative of long-term evolutionary change was replaced by an impassioned description of the founding moment of the revolutionary body, as a spontaneous process of self-creation almost *ex nihilo*” (*Gender of Modernity* 165).

This opposition between narratives of “long-term evolutionary change” and “spontaneous process[es] of self-creation” perfectly mirrors the binary logic by which modernist texts have often been excluded from the purview of studies in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Felski’s central insight is that the nineteenth-century post-Hegelian and post-Darwinian impulse to conceive of *history* in teleological and evolutionary terms (two lines of thought that, although in reality opposed to one another, were often fused together by the Victorians) found a correlate in narratives of *individual* development that obey the same rhetorical logic. But if this is true, then the turns towards spontaneous self-creation in the modernist era need not be read as a turn away from the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Novels such as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* might instead be read as preserving a central link between individual and social development, while framing both in a new rhetorical vocabulary.

This move to reinterpret the novel of formation as a genre that intimately links personal to historical development was first made in two seminal scholarly contributions that appeared in English translation during the 1980s. Mikhail Bakhtin's "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism" was actually written about forty years earlier, but the manuscript tumbled into obscurity together with its author, until a scholarly renaissance led by Michael Holquist, Caryl Emerson, and several others introduced it to an English-speaking audience in 1986. Unfortunately, what had originally been a book-length manuscript now survives only in fragmentary form; Bakhtin, a heavy smoker, literally consumed his own pages when he used them as rolling papers during the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Fortunately, the surviving passages are from the introductory portions of the book, so that at least Bakhtin's central intention is clear. He argues that the *Bildungsroman* presents to the reader "the image of *man in the process of becoming*" (19) and situates its protagonist on the threshold between different historical eras:

[The hero] emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him . . . It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them. (23–4)

The first edition of Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* appeared in English translation in 1987. In this far-reaching and broadly comparative study, Moretti makes a bold claim for the *Bildungsroman* as the "'symbolic form' of modernity" (*Way of the World* 5). He argues that the defining characteristic of the novel of formation is to be found not in the protagonist's organic or accretive growth, but rather in his youth – the gendered pronoun is intentional, for as feminist scholars were quick to observe, Moretti pays scant attention to female development. On the surface, this definition seems to recall the earlier work of Jerome Buckley, but Moretti is interested in cultural history rather than thematic taxonomy. As he explains:

in the dreams and nightmares of the so called "double revolution," Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the "great narrative" of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*. (. . .) Youth is, so to speak, modernity's "essence," the sign of a work that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past. (*Way of the World* 5)

The heedlessness of youth allows narrative to symbolically represent the "formlessness" and revolutionary vertigo that attend the experience of modernity – but at the same time also to bind and contain it, for youth must invariably end. The hero grows up, enters into a position, and the social order reasserts itself. Echoing a division first proposed by Georg Lukács,

who in his *Theory of the Novel* distinguished between the *Bildungsroman* and the “romance of disillusionment,” Moretti then draws a distinction between German and English novels of formation, in which a “classification principle” obtains, and French novels, which are governed instead by a “transformation principle” (*Way of the World* 7). Literary works ruled by the “classification principle” value stable resolutions and definite endings; the return of the protagonist into the social fold is celebrated as an assertion of organic society. The “transformation principle” instead privileges change in its own right; narrative resolutions are ultimately unmasked as meaningless and idiotic. A novel such as Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* perfectly captures the revolutionary anxiety that held France in its grip for much of the nineteenth century.

A final work that needs to be mentioned alongside Moretti’s is Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, which first appeared in English translation in 1990. Like Moretti, Kittler views the *Bildungsroman* as a product of the “dual” social revolutions (French and industrial) that occurred around 1800. Unlike Moretti, however, he finds the roots of the genre in the rise of the nuclear family and particularly in the new pedagogic strategies with which mothers home-schooled their children. Kittler then jumps to the beginning of the twentieth century, where he examines how new communications technology such as the typewriter or gramophone, and new discursive modes such as the psychoanalytic exchange influenced personal formation. His valuable but eclectic analyses focus mainly on the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, but include useful readings of Mann, Joyce, and several other modernist authors.

Recent trends in modernist Bildungsroman studies

A 1996 article by Joshua D. (Jed) Esty, “Nationhood, Adulthood, and the Ruptures of *Bildung*: Arresting Development in *The Mill on the Floss*,” usefully draws together some of the principal scholarly currents that were outlined in the last section and points the way towards some of the concerns that have more recently animated the discipline. Drawing in equal parts on the works of Bakhtin, Moretti, and Lukács, Esty argues that “*The Mill on the Floss* throws into question the most typical modern narrative of social identity – nationalism – and, in a tightly coordinated allegorical logic, undermines the most typical modern narrative of individual progress—the *Bildungsroman*” (144). He contends that Eliot’s “strong commitment to historicism—the idea that different epochs are irreducibly different” (147) leads to an irreconcilable break with the traditional novel of formation. Development, whether personal or historical, is portrayed not as a gentle organic process, but as a violent and discontinuous upheaval. Ultimately, Maggie, Tom, and the pastoral life of Dorlcote Mill are swept away in a flood brought about by modern approaches to irrigation technology. Although Esty investigates a Victorian text, his attempt to document a narrative shift from an evolutionary

to a revolutionary register in *The Mill on the Floss* in many ways parallels Rita Felski's project in *The Gender of Modernity*. More recently, Esty has developed some of his central insights from this early essay into a perceptive study of how tropes of uneven development inform national culture in late-modernist England (*Shrinking Island* 23–53).

An entirely different approach towards the novel of formation is presented in Marc Redfield's *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*. Redfield self-consciously situates his argument in the tradition of de Manian deconstruction, and argues that the *Bildungsroman*, more than any other genre, demonstrates the aporias of aesthetics, because in it "content" instantly becomes a question of form, precisely because the content is the forming-of-content" (42). Redfield agrees with Jeffrey Sammons that the *Bildungsroman* "exemplifies the ideological construction of literature by criticism" (vii), but he considerably expands upon this claim by suggesting that the novel of formation also reveals how genre criticism is premised on a self-referential aesthetic ideology. For

since the *Bildungsroman* narrates the acculturation of a self – the integration of a particular "I" into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into to the universal subjectivity of humanity – the genre can be said to repeat, as its identity or content, its own synthesis of particular instance and general form. (38)

Redfield's survey of the genre once again stops with Eliot, but his insights are productively applied to Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* in a recent essay by Sigi Jöttkant (67–86).

In 2000, Franco Moretti published an expanded second edition of his 1987 study, *The Way of the World*, which now included a short appendix on the modernist period. In a whirlwind tour of works by seven major authors from at least four national literatures (Conrad, Mann, Musil, Walser, Rilke, Joyce, and Kafka), Moretti puts a new face on the old argument that the broadly diachronic and evolutionary *Bildungsroman* gives way to a more fragmentary and synchronic ("spatialized," in Joseph Frank's influential term) form of narrative during the early twentieth century. Moretti identifies the First World War as a pivotal event because the trauma of the trenches precludes a peaceful development into maturity and social acceptance. Youth is cut short, meaning remains enigmatic. In the light of such experiential adversity, Moretti claims, the modernists abandoned their prior tinkering with novels of formation and moved towards literary structures built around narrative "satellites": inherently meaningless episodes which cannot be strung together into an accretive chain (*Way of the World* 233). According to this argument, painted in broad but suggestive strokes, novels such as Musil's *The Perplexities of Young Törless*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*, or Kafka's *Amerika* should be seen as the final harvest of nineteenth-century literary aspirations, and as an obstacle to the development of "real" modernist masterpieces, such as *The Man Without Qualities*, *Ulysses*, and *The Trial*.

The year 2000 also saw the publication of Pericles Lewis's *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, which contains a chapter on Joyce's inheritance of the disillusionment plot structure in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As was previously indicated, the term "romance of disillusionment" was coined by Georg Lukács, who opposed it to the *Bildungsroman* in his *Theory of the Novel* (1920). For Lukács, the disillusionment plot is characterized by an essential disjuncture of Self and world, in which the prosaic and materialist world ultimately proves to be unaccommodating to the poetic ideals of the protagonist. The *Bildungsroman*, by contrast, is defined by the happy resolution of poetic ideal and prosaic reality. Subsequent scholarship has basically discarded this opposition, however, and the romance of disillusionment is now generally treated as a pessimistic subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*. As Lewis shows, Joyce developed *Portrait* in close dialogue with Balzac's *Illusions Perdues*, the novel which Lukács identifies as a paradigmatic example of the disillusionment form: "For Joyce, however, unlike for Balzac, the recognition of the close interrelationship between the individual and society leads to a solution of the problem of disillusionment: the idea of the conscience of the race, which the individual experiences as a pure interior realm but which is also the emanation of society" (29–30). Lewis identifies this internalized conscience of the race as a decisive break from the form of the realist novel, in which a social, rather than racial, consciousness was enshrined in the figure of the omniscient narrator.

During the past few years, attention within twentieth-century *Bildungsroman* studies has increasingly shifted towards post-colonial and minority writing. As a result, it has become obvious that the critical commonplace of a decline of the genre during the modernist period is a myopic illusion. In reality, the novel of formation continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide. Nor is it true that the diachronic *Bildungsroman* plot is too inflexible to accommodate avant-garde experimentation. Novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrate that the form can be adapted to suit modernist and post-modernist literary techniques. Given the demonstrated exclusivity of the genre as it is traditionally understood, however, post-colonial critics have rightfully asked themselves whether the very notion of *Bildung* does not serve to reify hegemonic ideology. Thus, Maria Helena Lima, in a recent investigation of the novel *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, asks:

I cannot help but continue to wonder what dangers lie in the form itself, given its central historical role in determining our notions of human identity. Since humanism's unstated goal . . . was to constitute a "center of humanity" . . . , what is the *Bildungsroman* genre, recognizably one of the main carriers of humanist ideology, indeed helping to reproduce? (859)

Lima discovers Marc Redfield's critique of aesthetic ideology as a useful starting point for her own post-colonial project, and ultimately concludes that

while the traditional *Bildungsroman* requires a constructed harmony between external and internal factor, to provide, according to Franco Moretti, “a homeland to the individual,” Kincaid’s novel of development exposes the impossibility of such a fictional harmony. (860)⁴

Other critics have pointed out that coming-of-age narratives from non-European and subaltern cultures often differ in form from the traditional *Bildungsroman*, and have proposed to expand the genre definition. Thus, Claudine Raynaud notes that

[c]oming of age—reaching the age of “maturity” or “discretion” — is variously a process, a moment, or a scene akin to the structural “scenes of instruction” inherent in African American narratives . . . The discovery of American society’s racism is the major event in the protagonist’s development and in his “education.” (106)

Mark Stein, in an excellent recent book, proposes that the Black British *Bildungsroman* “has a dual function: it is about the formation of its protagonist as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions” (22). Whereas traditional novels of formation figure society as a normative construct, the novel of *transformation* portrays a dialogical process. The hero no longer merely changes with the world; instead, the world also changes with and through him. In the words of Hanif Kureishi:

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn’t what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. (quoted in Stein 21)

Given the explosion of *Bildungsroman* writing in post-colonial and minority literatures of the late twentieth century, other critics have begun to reconceptualize the modernist era as a period of transition from metropolitan, nationalist discourses to post-colonial and post-imperial ones. Unsurprisingly, so-called “semi-colonial” authors, such as James Joyce or Joseph Conrad, have played a central role in this reorientation. Gregory Castle, in his “Coming of Age in the Age of Empire,” argues that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* replaces the “transcendental space for the pursuit of edification and wisdom” that characterizes the traditional German *Bildungsroman* with

scenes of instruction and ideological interpellation, in which the subject resists a social system that seeks to produce rational individuals capable only of serving the needs of what Louis Althusser calls “ideological state apparatuses.” (674)

Chief amongst these are the British government and the Catholic church, two colonizing powers. Castle concludes that *Portrait* documents how Stephen’s fragile subjectivity is ultimately crushed by these social pressures; his final resolution to leave for Paris represents not an act of defiance, but a retreat into a world of inner illusions.

Jed Esty, in a recent article on “Virginia Woolf’s Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction,” sets out “with one guiding question: is

there a significant symbolic relationship between uneven development in colonial modernity . . . and anti-developmental plots in canonical fiction of the same period?" (n.p.). Esty begins with the familiar premise that modernist novels feature protagonists who do not grow up, but considerably complicates it by pointing out that works such as *Lord Jim*, *The Voyage Out* or *A Portrait of the Artist* replace biographical development with plots of colonial migration. Instead of growing up, Conrad's Jim, Woolf's Rachel, and Joyce's Stephen drift in and out of colonial backwaters and "underdeveloped zones." Amending the work of Franco Moretti, Esty then postulates that the colonial setting lacks the established discursive conventions of nationhood that provided closure to the traditional *Bildungsroman* plot. Imperial expansion challenges the pretense of an organic relationship between culture and state, creates zones of uneven development and negates traditional narratives of formation. The imperial subject is instead portrayed as endlessly immature and thus "not-yet-ready" for self-governance. In his careful reflections on the relationship between a "developing" metropolitan core and an "underdeveloped" imperial periphery, Esty expands upon his previous argument in *A Shrinking Island*.

In my own "Beyond the *Bildungsroman*: Character Development and Communal Legitimation in the Early Fiction of Joseph Conrad," finally, I argue that the young Joseph Conrad, about to embark on a new career as a writer, turned towards the novel of formation and social integration to legitimate himself as an "English" subject to his putative audience (n.p.). Finding the conventions of the form inadequate to address his own semi-colonial experience, however, Conrad was forced, in such texts as "Youth" or *Lord Jim*, to supplement his narrative with the authoritative presence of an imagined oral storyteller. I devote the bulk of my analysis to *Lord Jim*, and employ the work of the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben to show that claims for social integration and political membership in the modernist period (Marlow's repetitive insistence that "he was one of us") can only be resolved through an "inclusive exclusion," a speech act that divides at the same time in which it unites.

Summary

Perhaps nowhere are the recent changes in the field of *Bildungsroman* criticism as readily apparent as in the way in which the generic designation is rendered into English. Traditionally, English critics have spoken of the "novel of formation," the "apprenticeship novel," or the "novel of education" – terms that approximate the meaning of *Bildung* and imply a stable and integrative end point to personal growth. Mark Stein, however, who is himself German and intimately familiar with the semantic nuances that attend the term, thumbs his nose at tradition when he speaks of a "novel of transformation." Jed Esty and several other critics, myself included, prefer to render *Bildung* with the more neutral term "development," in order to highlight the intimate

connection between personal and historical change. Amongst traditionalists, such usage is bound to provoke outrage. To use the word *Bildungsroman* as an umbrella term erases the national particularity of the genre. And have German critics not coined the term *Entwicklungsroman*, which literally means “novel of development,” for just this occasion?

Franco Moretti, in his recent “Conjectures on World Literature,” cautions against the tendency to build generic definitions from a local, and usually national, corpus (73–81). In a globalized world, he advises, literary scholars would instead do well to look for broader patterns and treat local variations as nothing more than just that. Recent comparative *Bildungsroman* criticism has in many ways been exemplary in this regard, and while one might wish that the term *Entwicklungsroman* had been adopted instead, this is a minor concern to which traditionalists will have to reconcile themselves. In the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Franco Moretti, and more recently Jed Esty and many others, the “novel of development” has emerged as an exciting symbolic locus of modernity, and with it also of modernism, the era in which developmental processes reach their global breaking point. While the term *Bildungsroman* continues to vex literary criticism like very few others, it has also proven to be an unparalleled success as a model by which writers and critics alike can understand the world around them.

Notes

¹ See especially Hirsch, “Novel of Formation as Genre” 293–311. Although it appeared a decade later, I would also subsume Moretti’s *Way of the World*, which is heavily influenced by Roland Barthes, under this category.

² Once again, F. Moretti provides a good illustration of this sea-change in *Bildungsroman* criticism, although his principle reference point is Lukács, rather than Jameson. T. Kontje, who applies New Historicist principles to his *Private Lives in the Public Sphere*, might also be cited in this context.

³ Susan Rosowski’s essay, “The Novel of Awakening,” may be found in Abel, Hirsch and Langland, eds., *The Voyage In* 49–68.

⁴ The Moretti quote can be found in Moretti, *Way of the World* 116.

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