

Cosmopolitan Sociality and the Bildungsroman

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3 TOBIAS BOES, *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca:
4 Cornell UP, 2012), pp. 214, cloth, \$67.95.

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6 Few genres have proved as elusive as that of the bildungsroman, an observation confirmed
7 by many of the critical studies devoted to it, beginning with Jeffrey Sammons's 1981 land-
8 mark essay ("The Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*") and culminating in Marc Red-
9 field's distinguished 1996 monograph (*Phantom Formations*). In his new exploration of the
10 genre, Tobias Boes partially concurs when remarking on the bildungsroman's constitutive
11 "nonfulfillment" (25) of its generically coded objectives and on the "stylistically dissimilar"
12 (3) nature of many works associated with the genre (Stendhal, George Eliot, James Joyce,
13 Alfred Döblin). At the same time, *Formative Fictions* seeks to extricate itself from the bil-
14 dungsroman's formal and conceptual maze and its seemingly intractable epistemology.
15 Having made a valiant effort in his introduction to sort through the by now quite compre-
16 hensive critical literature on the genre and its rich bearing on broader critical issues of novel
17 criticism, Boes draws a distinction between an "essentialist" and a "universalist" view of the
18 bildungsroman (19). The universalist view of the genre developed by Georg Lukács, Franco
19 Moretti, Fredric Jameson, and others can be traced back to Karl Morgenstern (1770–1852),
20 widely acknowledged as the one to have coined the concept of the bildungsroman and
21 who, in his quiet and peripheral ways, turns out to be something of an early hero in Boes's
22 account. Unlike his idealist-nationalist contemporaries (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Wilhelm von
23 Humboldt, F. W. J. Schelling), Morgenstern held a "'performative' rather than 'normative'"
24 view of the bildungsroman, one that "aims to theorize the nation-state *as such*, rather than
25 just . . . its particularized German expression" (23). On this account, "rather than *revealing* it at
26 the end of its plot, the novel of formation produces a national form by means of its mimetic
27 capacities as well as its direct rhetorical address to the reader" (28).

28 Boes's study helpfully traces the peculiar genesis of the bildungsroman as a literary-
29 historical concept to the peripheries of early nineteenth-century Prussia, as exemplified by
30 the low-key career trajectory of Morgenstern. An expatriate, trained at one of the centers of
31 German intellectual life in Halle, Morgenstern spent the bulk of his career (1798–1833)
32 lecturing on philology, rhetoric, and aesthetics at the University of Dorpat in Imperial
33 Russia. As a member of a "diasporic collectivity" (2), he was auspiciously positioned to
34 approach the bildungsroman as the dramatization of both inner estrangement and geo-
35 graphic errancy—that is, as a genre whose teleological self-assurance, to the extent that it
36 exists at all, ought to be regarded with considerable skepticism. With his emphasis on the
37 tension between national or, rather, "statist" (31) and cosmopolitan models of community in
38 the bildungsroman, Boes offers a valuable correction to the often near-exclusive concen-
39 tration on the genre's preoccupation with vacillating development, agonized introspection,
40 and conflicted sexuality. In framing the "hero's emergence into 'national-historical time' [as
41 a] performative process that takes place within the mimetic confines of the novel and outside
42 of them," Boes draws out a fundamental tension between the closed system of the nation-
43 state and the emergentist logic of the bildungsroman—a genre giving "poetic shape to a
44 world that is newly felt to be in flux, and in which events succeed one another in empty
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homogenous time" (34). Whereas nations "contain within their very fabric a desire for teleology, totality, and normativity, qualities that . . . are difficult to adduce in actual *Bildungsromane*" (31), Boes, following Homi Bhabha, frames the genre as an early instance of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" and as the consummate realization of Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*, a form of writing "decoupled from state institutions" (36).

Throughout his study, Boes is particularly attentive to the spatial dimensions of the bildungsroman genre, one whose nineteenth-century protagonists "were almost universally creatures of the provinces" (146). His discussion of urban, cosmopolitan space and its hybridized linguistic framework—for example, in Döblin's Berlin, where "Flemish, French, Polish, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew all intermingle with German to form an utterly creolized patois" (143)—is both illuminating and convincing in its material detail and intellectual generosity. Intimations of Boes's interest in the spatial-linguistic hybridity of the bildungsroman already surface in his first chapter on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, a critical encounter as inevitable in an academic monograph on the bildungsroman as is the *Lehrbrief* in which the Masonic Society of the Tower details for Wilhelm the inexorable logic of his own development. Noticing a "structural change from a hypotactic to a paratactic organizing principle in Goethe's narrative" (45), Boes entwines *Wilhelm Meister* and the concurrently flourishing interest in dynamic models of formation (*Bildung, bilden*) as articulated by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Goethe, among others. Yet here the contention that *Bildung*, "a process that would actively create identity rather than merely reveal it" (50), signally "contributed to the rise of historicism" (51) might be deemed excessively monocausal and overly generalizing. The "undoubtedly dynamic" view of historical time found in Giambattista Vico, whom Boes invokes, obviously predates the rise of the bildungsroman genre (assuming that there is such a thing); and to qualify Vico's contribution by remarking that his account "still lacks any notion of Walter Benjamin's 'homogeneous, empty time' through which history progresses" (56; emphasis added), raises, though notably does not answer, the question as to why the absence of such a monochrome conception of historical time ought to be considered a "lack."

On the face of it, any narrative of development pivots on phenomenologically distinctive experiences of significant events and time spans. An epiphanic model of time and narrative, which to this reviewer seems dominant in most representative instances of the bildungsroman genre (Goethe, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Eliot, Joyce) would seem to comport much better with the cultural work that this type of narrative means to perform than does a strictly procedural notion of homogeneous time. The hero of Goethe's novel, after all, is Wilhelm, not his onetime friend and (by book 8) prematurely aged accountant, Werner. While Boes is right to resist idealist interpretations of the bildungsroman, which "tend to privilege finality, and focus on the perfect form revealed at the end" (59), the presentation of figures such as Daniel Deronda or Konstantin Levin at the end of Eliot's eponymous novel and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* shows how an epiphanic model of narrative need not imply, let alone impose, notions of perfection and formal closure. A closer engagement with the primary texts might have helped here; as matters stand, Boes's partially successful alignment of Goethe's novel with the rise of historicism and cosmopolitan thought seems more the vicarious fruit of a contextualizing effort than of close hermeneutic work with the formal, symbolic, and even syntactic presentation of his primary texts. As a result, the connections between the story of Wilhelm and the emergence of what Boes calls "the larger 'temporalization of history'" (63) remains somewhat elusive. Friedrich Kittler's reading of Wilhelm's

1 complex socialization—powerfully advanced in his “Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meis-
 2 ters” (surprisingly not mentioned in an otherwise well-researched study)—would have
 3 offered considerable support for the argument that is here attempted.

4 If Boes’s discussion of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* leaves one pining for less insistently
 5 mediated and conceptually front-loaded engagement with Goethe’s abundantly suggestive
 6 and deceptively simple prose, something of an obverse scenario presents itself in the next
 7 two chapters. For here it is the evident lack of aesthetic and rhetorical merit of Boes’s choice
 8 of (German) *bildungsromane* that complicates things. To be sure, a study wishing to fore-
 9 ground the cosmopolitan and open (“emergentist”) structure of the *bildungsroman* is well
 10 advised to move beyond the confines of German national literature. Yet whereas the choice of
 11 Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, and Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist* makes
 12 intuitive sense, and in Boes’s treatment pays interpretive dividends, the choice of Karl
 13 Immermann’s *Die Epigonen* and Gustav Freytag’s *Soll und Haben* as pre- and post-1848
 14 representatives of the genre perplexes. If nothing else, it ends up supporting Hegel’s dis-
 15 missive view of the *bildungsroman* as a kind of secular theodicy of philistinism. While Boes
 16 manages to offer fine discussion of the multiple entanglements of *Bildung* and commerce in
 17 Freytag, nonexpert readers of *Formative Fictions* will find little that would induce them to take
 18 up *Soll und Haben*. A form of criticism whose argumentative lucidity is achieved in spite
 19 (rather than by means) of its primary materials is bound to leave readers wondering whether
 20 the detour through manifestly inferior literary materials was necessary at all. Far more
 21 accomplished canonical instances, such as Joseph von Eichendorff’s *Ahnung und Gegenwart*
 22 (1815), Gottfried Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich* (1st ed., 1855), and Theodor Fontane’s *Frau Jenny*
 23 *Treibel* (1892), would arguably have furnished much richer and more compelling narratives
 24 of *Bildung* while at the same time generating from within a strong critique of the ethnic and
 25 nationalist bigotry, petit bourgeois self-satisfaction, and cramped idealism that so abounds in
 26 Freytag’s novel. *Formative Fictions* offers us no sustained readings, no startling hermeneutic
 27 engagements with specific passages in these works; and if the ineffably turgid prose of
 28 Immermann’s *Epigonen* admittedly would repay no such efforts, the matter stands rather
 29 otherwise in the case of Stendhal or George Eliot. Yet here, too, *Formative Fictions* mostly
 30 traverses familiar critical terrain, with spotlights now and then pointing out previously
 31 unknown or underappreciated features. Too often, *Formative Fictions* settles for capturing the
 32 nature and implications of plot and character in these novels by way of descriptions that
 33 stand at too great a remove from the text itself.

34 Happily, no such problems beset the closing chapter on Joyce and Döblin and the con-
 35 cluding discussion of Thomas Mann, respectively. More than in earlier chapters of the book,
 36 Boes’s discussion of high modernism’s take on the *bildungsroman* appears driven by a
 37 strong thesis and insightful readings. With good reason and to strong critical effect, Boes
 38 rejects the recent critical appraisal of Döblin’s dystopic metropolitan space as generative of
 39 posthuman “urban paranoia.” Recognizing that the choice between “the territory of classical
 40 humanism (which is, after all, the logical domain of the novel of formation)” and the “the-
 41 oretical allure of the posthuman” may be inherently false, Boes instead detects in Döblin’s
 42 Franz Bieberkopf and Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus “the creation of a new rhythmic synchrony
 43 between the *Bildungsroman* hero and his environment” (150). In this closing chapter, then,
 44 Boes engages his primary materials (Joyce and Döblin) with more ease and directness, which
 45 yields some fine and perceptive readings of episodes such as Joyce’s description of Stephen
 46 Dedalus traveling to Cork and finding that as the familiar landscape is swallowed up by the

gathering darkness, “his primary markers of experience become the passing telegraph poles, which no longer frame recognizable vistas but instead measure out the relentless advance of empty time” (134). Yet if the protagonist’s transformation into “a monadic entity cutting a solitary path through historical time” (134) confirms the defeat of epiphanic, cyclical time by monochrome *durée*, Joyce’s vivid depiction of that very shift paradoxically retains epiphanic intensity. More could be said here about the apparent bifurcation between the poverty of modernist consciousness and the insistent splendor of its literary figuration.

Boes’s closing discussion of apocalyptic temporality (“the exact inverse of historicism” [157]) in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) makes for a strong conclusion to an engaging, if somewhat uneven, book. Framing Mann’s novel in Oswald Spengler’s and Friedrich Meineke’s deeply problematic attempts at coming to terms with Germany’s catastrophes in 1918 and 1945, respectively, Boes dwells specifically on Mann’s unique first-person narrator, Serenus Zeitblom and on a series of typological correspondences in the book. As he notes, Zeitblom’s narrative gradually transitions from a “leitmotivic technique that stresses growth and development to one in which continuities between earlier developmental stages are privileged.” In so doing, the novel highlights an “essential fatalism that underlies so much historicist thought during its late phase in the twentieth century” and alerts the reader to Leverkühn’s peculiar regression. In stressing the eerie resemblance of the composer’s final dwelling at Pfeiffering to his childhood home at Buchel, the narrative’s “protagonist allegorically acts out an inevitable destiny.” Mann here draws attention to the bildungsroman’s perilous susceptibility to “infantilizing” and deterministic, regressive patterns and to a model of cultural and personal identity informed by pervasive “cultural pessimism.” All that is required, Boes notes, “is a slight change in optic, “a change that was all too commonly performed in Germany during the interwar period” (170). Mann’s astonishing last novel makes for a perfect capstone to a study that, with much justification and often effectively, asks us to consider the geopolitical and disciplinary entanglements of a genre whose formative fictions have far too long been appraised from within an essentialist, teleological, and intrapsychic framework of its own devising.

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