

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1996

Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman

Marc Redfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Redfield, Marc, "Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman" (1996). *The George Eliot Review*. 320.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/320>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*

(Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1996), pp. xiv+220. ISBN 0 8014 32367

Marc Redfield has written an ambitious, challenging and closely argued book with a scope extending even beyond what its title may suggest. While focusing in the German tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, it engages the whole significance of aesthetics in Western culture since the Enlightenment and, through this in turn, the nature of the modern literary academy and the recent function of literary theory within it. The argument draws deftly on a formidable knowledge of relevant debates and contexts.

The term *Bildungsroman* has suffered a peculiar bifurcation. Outside specialist Germanist circles it has become to mean, as for example in Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World*, any novel involving the moral and emotional development of a main character. This makes it almost uselessly general. At the same time, the small familiar list of German novels to which it otherwise refers has itself been repeatedly adduced to question whether they truly constitute a substantial genre, or a common project, at all. Marc Redfield argues from this the 'Phantom' nature of the genre and, through that in turn, of the formative project of *Bildung* on which the acceptance of the genre normally relies. Indeed, he sees the German *Bildungsroman*, classically instantiated in Goethe's Wilhem Meister novels, as revealing the ideological loading and internal difficulties of the whole ideal of aesthetic education which has effectively underwritten institutional literary study in Europe and America ever since. The nub of the matter is the aspiration to disinterested aesthetic judgement and appreciation which was given its most eloquent expression in Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1796). In the British tradition this ideal of disinterestedness had its most influential purveyor in Matthew Arnold.

Goethe's two novels of education are notoriously elusive in their irony which is often taken to be focused on the hero in a way that is ultimately protective both of him and of the assumed project of *Bildung*. But Redfield argues a more radically critical case which is especially furthered by his welcome treatment of the less discussed second novel, the *Wanderjahre*. Without quoting him, Redfield takes up the spirit, while reversing the letter, of Friedrich Schlegel's dictum that 'Every theory of the novel must itself be a novel'. For, in his reading, the special self-consciousness of the *Bildungsroman* is Goethe's means of radically exposing the internal incoherence of the Schillerian notion of aesthetic education as such, and it is the continuing momentum of this same question which leads him to the late twentieth-century concern with theory in the literary academy. The novel as a genre is inextricably mixed up with the concerns underlying the academic turn to theory. To indicate that the theme is not bounded by the German tradition, the argument passes to a close reading of the aesthetics of sympathy in George Eliot, in which the omniscient author is seen through the image of telepathy, and then the illusions of history in Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* in which argument exploits particularly several notions of fetishism.

Despite its range and cogency, it is likely that this study will not persuade all readers for there is a point at which the ideological critique of liberal humanism reaches a stalemate. These rad-

ically different standpoints cannot persuade each other because they typically see the same phenomena but with different priorities or valuations. As several of the critics dismissed parenthetically by Redfield have argued, the vulnerability of *Bildung* is acknowledged within the form itself and especially by the over-arching recognition of its fictional nature so that within the education novel the educative process is itself a form of fiction. The tendency of the ideologically critical reading, on the other hand, apart from assuming other readers to be unable critically to filter their reading, is to take particular elements in the text and reify them into absolutes. This makes it possible to present what another reader might see as balances and proportions as contradictions and aporia. This is surely the real objection to Paul de Man who is the acknowledged principal influence on the mode of reading exemplified in the present study. At the same time, even when less than convincing, such a style of reading can provide unique and telling analytic insights within a consistent viewpoint as Redfield shows over and again.

There are, therefore, several points at which one might respond differently to the same evidence. The whole question of the *Bildungsroman* being a phantom genre is such a case in itself. The vagueness of its use by many non-Germanists, coupled with the internal dispute about its true meaning, does not make it a phantom; nor does the fact that the term was a largely retrospective invention of later literary history make it somehow invalid. So too, Schiller's notion of the 'Aesthetic State' provides a focal point for the political implication of the ideology of the aesthetic and a connection is made, after all due qualifications, with twentieth-century fascism. But Schiller's caveats about not confusing semblance with deception, or mixing the orders of semblance and reality, might be said rather to anticipate precisely Walter Benjamin's critique of fascism as the aestheticisation of politics. Likewise, in his reading of George Eliot, Redfield brings out a focus on art, or artistic discourse, which may not always be evident. The view of Will Ladislaw, for example, as a Paterian aesthete *avant la lettre* is particularly illuminating. Yet the tendency of this is to present the aesthetic as the prior category governing Eliot's ethics of sympathy whereas one might rather see the sympathy as primary and the conception of art as arising from this.

The question of sympathy, indeed, is at the centre of the dispute. What is the role of sympathy in ethics and in reading? What is the proper sympathy with an historical author? Some readers will have a different view of this from Marc Redfield but no one interested in the *Bildungsroman* itself, or in these broader questions, can afford to overlook his concentrated and cogent treatment of them.

Michael Bell
University of Warwick