

## Moderne dannelse

*Goethes Wilhelm Meister  
og dannelsesromanens aktualitet*

[Modern Bildung. Goethe's Wilhelm Meister  
and the relevance of the Bildungsroman]

**By Birgit Eriksson**

**Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2013**

**312 pp. DKK 349.95**

Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1795–96) plays a central, but not unproblematic role in the history of the novel. Usually construed as the origin of the typically German novelistic genre of the Bildungsroman, it is not uncommon that interpreters reduce this extremely complex narrative, which Goethe himself labelled his most 'incalculable production', to either its generic elements or its relation to the – also very German – concept of Bildung, which is almost untranslatable into any other language. Its English equivalents are formation and education, though neither of them is able to grasp the polysemy of the German concept. The multitude of themes, motives, characters, events, and techniques are in these types of readings subjugated to the ambition to understand either the genre of the Bildungsroman or the concept of Bildung.

At first sight, Birgit Eriksson's book constitutes yet another contribution to this long line of interpreta-

tions, which primarily construe Goethe's novel as the origin or an exemplum of the concept of Bildung and the genre of the Bildungsroman. As the title reveals, the aim of the book is to analyze the concept of Bildung, dannelse in Danish, its relation to Goethe's novel, and its role in present-day discussions of education, canon, and tradition. Taking the point of departure in the current debate on these matters in Denmark, Eriksson's scope is a fairly wide one. Rather than accepting the 'culturally conservative and bourgeois notion of national formation' that epitomizes the Danish debate on the national canon, she acknowledges the contemporary diversity of the concept, which we find in the notion of, for instance, 'digital Bildung' and 'democratic Bildung' (p. 11; all translations from Eriksson's book into English are by the reviewer).

Then again, it soon becomes apparent that Eriksson's ambition is indeed a new one and that we are in fact dealing with a highly intelligent

and fascinating reading of this super-canonized novel that has been reread so many times. Rather than offering a new interpretation of the protagonist Wilhelm Meister's education or lack of education, Eriksson effectively relocates the centre of the concept of Bildung from the novel and its characters to the reader. The first signs of this relocation and re-evaluation of the novel can be seen in Eriksson's restoration of the reputation of the founder of the concept of the Bildungsroman, Karl Morgenstern, who in a series of lectures held in the 1810s articulated the essential features of the genre. In the last of the three lectures, Eriksson argues, Morgenstern abandons all forms of essentialism as he turns his attention to the impact of the text on the reader.

However, not only Morgenstern's original conceptualization of the Bildungsroman in the early nineteenth century, but also the first reading of the novel, that is, Schiller's reading of the work in progress, documented in his correspondence with Goethe, are crucial, as Eriksson's novel interpretation of this correspondence shows. As it were, Schiller could in fact be labelled the first reductive reader, and throughout the correspondence Eriksson distinguishes a kind of resistance on Goethe's part to Schiller's insistence on a fundamental idea in the novel. Eriksson argues convincingly that Goethe, prefiguring much of what was to come in the twentieth century with regards to reader-response and reception theory, construes the process of Bildung in the novel, not primarily as something that the protagonist,

Wilhelm Meister, has to undergo and that is usually interpreted as a kind of synthesis between individual and common interests, but as something that pertains to the reader of the novel. What Goethe does in the letters to Schiller, Eriksson maintains, is to 'insist on reading as a free and positive productivity' in which the reader partakes as 'co-producer' of the work (p. 87). This, I believe, is a new and, as it turns out, extremely productive way to look at the function of Bildung in Goethe's novel and – and this is important – at the role of Bildung in today's discourses on education and individual formation.

What is at stake, then, is the Bildung of the reader. However, the reader of Eriksson's book must wait almost 200 pages before the theme reappears in the argument. If there is one thing for which one could criticize Eriksson, it is her thoroughness. The book consists of a whole string of analyses of themes, characters, and problems that are often very familiar to Goethe scholars. The opposition between the individual and society, the attempt to reconcile these two, and the contrast between the naive protagonist and the ironic narrator are merely a few of the themes that Eriksson discusses and which are well-known in Goethe scholarship. But just when you think you have Eriksson all figured out, she unexpectedly makes a quick turn and presents a dazzling insight into the novel, the processes of modernity, and our present-day endeavours.

As the reader reappears in the last chapters of the book, one understands the need for thoroughness.

Just like Wilhelm, who wanders the world, and the reader, who wanders the novel, Eriksson wanders her own interpretations. The point of this wandering is that Wilhelm Meister effectively offers 'a new form of realism in which the narrator and the other characters of the novel jointly underscore that the events have, not merely one, but many potential meanings and that also the reader has to choose between them' (p. 230). According to Eriksson, this constitutes Goethe's radical modernity, which makes time an essential factor, affecting 'all aspects of human life and simultaneously altering both individual and world' (p. 230). Everything, both man and his world, undergoes change, and it is with this ubiquitous changeability that the reader must learn to deal. This, in short, is Eriksson's concept of Bildung.

This is also why Wilhelm Meister is relevant today. As Eriksson in the last chapter turns her attention to typically contemporary issues, such as self-realization, social and technological progress, and globalization, it becomes apparent that Goethe's

open, reader-oriented, and interpretative novel and the genre which it created, may still work as a point of departure for a better understanding of the world and of our selves. If we understand that 'formation at the same time means reformation', as Goethe writes in an essay ('Die Absicht eingeleitet') on morphology (!), we have the necessary skills to orient ourselves in the postmodern, postindustrial, and posthuman world of today. As a result, the Bildungsroman is still a vibrant and productive genre. Today, the tradition is continued by writers from outside the originating Western culture. These writers, who have experienced first-hand the sometimes conflicting encounters between different cultures in the globalized world, are probably better suited than writers born and bred in Europe and North America to depict the demand for education and interpretation, to depict Bildung.

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