

## Forum: *Bildung* and the State

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### *Bildung* and the State in the Long Nineteenth Century

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#### 1. Nation and Narration Once More

In the last few decades, the study of the relations between literary forms and political formations has figured prominently on research agendas in the humanities. These investigations focus almost exclusively on the quintessentially modern form of community: the nation. Emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the nation conjures up the simultaneously rousing and soothing image of a human collective connected by common descent, language, and history. The nation claims to ground the contingency of contiguity in the biological fact of commonality, and to contain the experience of historical change in the observation of natural continuity. The key insight propelling research into the relation between the nation and literature is that literature not merely celebrates this continuity but actively constructs, invents, and imagines it.

The titles of two agenda-setting books published in 1983, both of which have survived as powerful intellectual idioms, capture the extent of this construction work. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, his study of the emergence and consolidation of the nation as the dominant modern form of community, underlines that emerging technologies such as the newspaper and the novel provided the means "for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (25). They make it possible for their audiences to apprehend their simultaneity with people whom they will never meet face-to-face, and to think of that simultaneity as a condition for co-belonging to the same nation, "conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26). The title of the second book fulfills the need to add an imagining of historical continuity to this apprehension of co-belonging and simultaneity: in their introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger note that practices that seem historically established and self-evident in fact use "ancient materials

to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes,” one of those purposes being the consolidation of a sense of shared nationality (6). Invented traditions, they write, “seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past,” and more specifically with “a suitable historical past” (1).

There are at least two reasons why literature has historically played a privileged role in the imagining of community and historical continuity: first, and trivially, its ability to target the affects, anxieties, and desires of its readership, which is a vital asset in the project of inculcating values and norms and in transcribing readers into citizens; second, and almost equally trivially, literature almost always takes a narrative form, and the narrative concatenation of multiple events is an obvious way of forging a connection between the present and a suitable historical past, and of convincingly conveying the natural necessity — rather than the historical contingency — of that connection. Narrative, that is, helps the citizens of the nation to recognize the past events to which it connects them as the historical roots that bind them together. The nation relies on a narrative that aims to dissemble its reliance on the human, and always to some extent arbitrary, performance of narration and to pass itself off as a natural growth to which narrative deferentially refers. This is how Etienne Balibar, in his seminal analysis of the *nation form*, renders the nation’s reliance on fictions of continuity:

The history of nations . . . is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject. The formation of the nation thus appears as the fulfilment of a “project” stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness [which] all fit into an identical pattern: that of the self-manifestation of the national personality. (86)

Balibar makes clear that the imagining of the nation requires a particular fiction of continuity, in two respects. First, the nation posits itself as the fulfilment of a project, and as such it functions as the last stage of a purposive scheme, even if this sense of direction is merely “a retrospective illusion” (86). And second, what the nation realizes is nothing but itself: it is a process of “self-manifestation,” in which what is retrospectively revealed to have been a potential community actualizes itself as a historical formation. Thus the well-known story: through narratives that naturalize patterns of self-regulation and purposive development, the nation legitimizes itself as a natural fact rather than an unnatural imposition. It has been the job of much literary criticism in the last few decades to worry about this displacement.

## **2. *Bildung* and the State: The Interface**

In the field of literary studies, this unavoidable moment of disavowal — variously named “aestheticization,” “aesthetic ideology,” or simply “ideology” —

has become an important target of critique. The present forum contributes to this research program by exploring the interface of two notions deeply implicated in the articulation of nation and narration in the long nineteenth century; yet because they do not exactly correspond to the two terms of that fateful meeting — terms that, in their turn, as we saw, never perfectly map onto one another — a critical investigation of this imperfect overlap turns these notions into powerful tools for a novel interrogation of the interface of modern political and literary history.

The first of these terms is the notoriously untranslatable notion of *Bildung* (in English, “formation” and “cultivation” probably come closest, though it is worth recalling that Matthew Arnold transcribed it as “culture”). Around the turn of the eighteenth century, discourses of *Bildung*, which had been circulating in the life sciences since the middle of the century when the term had begun to complicate (without fully abandoning) its religious provenance (Kontje 7–9), began to migrate between the domains of, most notably, the life sciences, aesthetics, pedagogy, and cultural philosophy. The notion of *Bildung* conjures tropes of organic flourishing — patterns of development that actualize their own potential in a self-regulating process. Such movements of ontogenetic and phylogenetic self-actualization only depend on foreign input to the extent that this input furnishes opportunities for recognizing and appropriating previously unrecognized dimensions of reality as, in the last analysis, one’s own. Apart from presenting a definite sense of direction and an assured sense of self-regulation, the main selling point of *Bildung* is that it offers a developmental pattern in which increased self-reflexivity does not come at the expense of self-identity; instead of leading to abysmal alienation, moments of reflexivity are continuously naturalized as part of a plan of self-actualization. In an authoritative exposition of the concept, Hans-Georg Gadamer notes that “[i]n *Bildung* . . . that by which and through which one is formed becomes completely one’s own . . . in acquired *Bildung* nothing disappears, but everything is preserved” (qt. Redfield 1996: 47). The appeal of *Bildung* is that it provides the outlines of a process — that is, a narrative pattern — that consists in the “fusion of process, telos, and self-presentation” (48).

The combination of orientation and self-manifestation explains the flourishing of the narrative schema of *Bildung* at a historical threshold where order and direction were no longer self-evidently provided by a divine transcendence — a threshold that also saw the rise of the nation form as a compensatory frame of reference (Anderson 9–12). The idea of *Bildung* makes it possible to derive norm and necessity from developmental processes themselves, without recourse to a divine instigator of such processes. It furnishes a systemic rather than an intentional model of rationality; it conveys “a type of purposive causality that outstrips mere artifice” (Cheah 48). The magic of *Bildung* is that it transforms the “inventory of discrete, dissimilar, and ephemeral objects and interests” that we call the world into a totality reflecting “an order and goal-directedness that positively transcends human intelligence” (Pfau 2010: 581). By providing a pat-

tern to present the development of the modern subject or the modern nation as a continuous campaign, it couches the foundational (symbolic as well as historical) violence of the modern nation-state in patterns of organic growth, and thus allows it to misrecognize its own contingency.

We propose that one name for the limit of this naturalization of the political fiction of the nation-state is, surprisingly perhaps, “the state.” Even if Romantic nationalists like Fichte, Herder, and Humboldt worked hard to theorize the state as just one more stage in a process of *Bildung* to which it naturally belonged, and to embed it “within the warm embrace of vernacular language and literature” (Hart and Hansen 505), the intellectual afterlife of this project has failed to cement the wishful linkage of nation and state. While this afterlife has quite consistently reserved the name of the nation for the fiction of a people unified by birth, customs, or language, it has used the name of the state to acknowledge the reality of less comforting aspects of social and political life: in Nietzsche’s (Zarathustra’s) unforgettable phrase, the modern state is “the coldest of cold monsters” — cold enough, at the very least, to withstand the warmth of national custom and habit; for Nietzsche, the state signals “the death of peoples” (34). The *state* in *nation-state*, that is, serves as a reminder of the difference between “‘spontaneous’ and ‘concrete’ bonds” on the one hand (the things we normally attribute to the nation or to civil society), and the reality of “an *outside* coercion” on the other (Moretti 53). More often than not, the state represents “a ‘mechanical’ and ‘abstract’ form of social cohesion, intrinsically remote and foreign to the countless articulations of everyday life” (53). The dysphoric affect that the signifier “state” tends to evoke pries open the things that discourses of *Bildung* so self-evidently seem to link.

As is well known, antistatism has become a widespread critical disposition across the political spectrum in the last two centuries. Yet even in the early nineteenth century, the state figured only as a necessary evil in theories of *Bildung*: “[i]n the ideology of *Bildung* descended from Humboldt, the state fundamentally remains a necessary transitional arrangement dedicated to its own dissolution once the universal *Bildung* of all is achieved in a second innocence saving humankind from the alienations of artifice” (de Graef and Gilleir 7). The state is always only a means to an end, a dispensation that is difficult enough to accommodate for an ideology that thrives on the ultimate indistinguishability of means and ends in a continuous process of auto-generation. The state does not readily lend itself to the patterns and the rhythms of *Bildung*. Indeed, as Ian Baucom has remarked, it seems to resist narrativization altogether: while “we are accustomed to thinking of the nation, and to posing questions regarding the relation between literature and nation, in temporal terms,” the state “has yielded a thinner grammar of time, in significant part because it has seemed to succeed in putting the question of time outside itself or, at most, in producing a simple binary code of before and after” (713).

The mismatch between *Bildung* and the state testifies to the impossibility of subsuming the political under the rubric of culture. In spite of Matthew Arnold's wishful apposition "the State — the nation in its collective and corporate character" (qt. Redfield 2003: 13), the state is *not* the nation, and very few have been fooled into believing it was. Arnold's qualified defense of the state is uncommon enough in a British intellectual context, where the state was, in the nineteenth century, often dismissed as a mere continental freak. Franco Moretti has remarked that "[h]ostility toward the state — or at least indifference" is also endemic in the *Bildungsideal*, which combines a commitment to spontaneous and solid forms of authority with "the conviction that the State must confine itself to punishing crimes and conducting wars" (52). Among many other things, the state functions as a placeholder for all that interrupts the continuity that patterns of *Bildung* plot for the nation. Nor is "state" the only name that the critical tradition has coined for this interruption: we can also think of materiality, gender, time, difference, *techne*, and class — all faces of the self-difference that spoils the nation's fiction of self-evident purposiveness, and ruins the solidity and unity of the nation-state.

And *self-difference* it is. Historically, the idea of *Bildung* has not only served to dispel the threat of irreducible alterity, its tenuous career has also been determined by its tendency to spawn matter that exceeds its organic grasp. *Bildung* is not a merely spiritual process: its attempt to blend matter and form has given rise to institutions — museums, universities, philosophies, monuments, books, buildings — whose dynamics no longer obeys the wishful logic of self-manifestation — a logic that continuously betrays itself. This process of constitutive betrayal can be related as the decline of the idea of *Bildung* in the long nineteenth century — a process that does not prevent its remarkable persistence in, for instance, Margarete Susman's reflections on Jewishness around the Great War, as Anke Gilleir's contribution to this forum makes clear. This is how Thomas Pfau, following Georg Simmel, describes a logic in which the drive for self-manifestation undermines itself:

In continually devising objective vehicles or, really, *institutions* that are to mediate the psyche's development . . . cultivation necessarily draws *on* and gradually succumbs *to* a lifeless, extraneous and artificial dimension . . . the processes theorized by Romantic organicism necessarily give rise to the vast and variegated objective domain of mediating institutions that gradually usurp the meaning of "culture": books, theories, education systems and norms, social and moral norms, technologies of memory (the archive, the museum, the idea of a curriculum, etc.). Hence, . . . the dynamism of *Bildung* calcifies into the inert, "stony" bulk of so many institutions consolidating and guarding cultural literacy (*Bildungsgut*) as a terminal possession (2007: 235)

The organic patterns that models of self-cultivation attempt to inculcate inevitably produce ever more lifeless stuff: in the influential terms established by Coleridge, imagination collapses into fancy. When he articulated this distinction, between “imagination” as the “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation” and “fancy” as the mere “play” with “fixities and definites” (304–305) Coleridge stopped short of imagining that the statesmen whose unread manual he was drafting at that time would be working in the brilliantly dead machine of a Victorian state that barely dared to speak its name, guarding the public secret of its constitutive betrayal of the organicist ideology of life it hoped to inherit. This paradox is often analyzed as the tension between culture and *techne*, or what Marc Redfield calls the “tense intimacy between aesthetics and technics” (2003: 14). A critical interrogation of this intimacy in the name of *Bildung* and the state focuses on how from the very beginning “living nature, which creates itself spontaneously from itself without mediation from anything foreign or other, becomes constitutively infected with its very opposite or other, *techne*” (Cheah 50). The confrontation of the two terms that give this forum its name returns us to the tenuous historical and theoretical articulations of nation and narration in order to remind us of “the cogs and cables of technical mediation at work under the skin of the aesthetic social body” (Redfield 2003: 15).

### 3. Aesthetic Technologies: The Cases

In her contribution to this forum, Nicola Minott-Ahl approaches the ever imminent descent of vitality into petrification in the ideology of *Bildung* by teasing out the implications of “Bildung” as manifested in “building.” Minott-Ahl reads Victor Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) as an attempt to transcribe the cathedral and other architectural relics of feudal Christendom as elements of French identity. Hugo’s novel asserts (without ever simply assuming) the powers of literature to absorb the energies liberated by the Revolution, and to perpetuate art’s ability to embody a national community — a power that is seemingly self-evidently on display in the cathedral. Hugo’s architectural conceit enables his forging of a national tradition and a national identity; at the same time, it literalizes the insight — which Minott-Ahl’s article arrives at by paying meticulous attention to the transfers and displacements between literature, architecture, and national culture — that this national identity is the tenuous result of cultural construction work.

Frederick Ahl’s article traces the confrontation between literature and the state in one of the main institutions through which nineteenth-century *Bildung* sedimented itself: education. Ahl traces the distortions that were (and still are) imposed in editions and translations of Sophocles and Virgil in order to streamline them with moral, social, and political agendas. The (mostly unconscious) campaign of deforming the Classics in order to enlist them for purposes of acculturation and education illustrates the slippage from *Bildung* to mere *Bildungsgut*

that marked the history of the idea in the long nineteenth century. Ahl juxtaposes his discussion of the doctoring of the Classics with an analysis of the cultural life of the libretti of W. S. Gilbert, the most widely performed English theatrical writer of the nineteenth century. The mobilization of the literary as a cultural commodity entails a process of impoverishment that flattens out what Ahl calls these writers' "associative style": their use of syllables, words, sounds, and ideas in a way that does not just rely on overt links, but that make all "detectable connections" among them operative in complex and often paradoxical intricacy" (274). Ahl's own attention to minor rhetorical shifts and linguistic displacements advertises his own practice of associative reading — which does not restrict itself to the links that are visible on the surface of the text — as one vital critical strategy for insisting on the tension between literature and the state. Ahl's approach resonates with Marc Redfield's reminder that all aesthetic recreations of organic unity are empowered (as well as undone) by "the trace of a randomness within language that can neither be comprehended nor entirely effaced" (1996: 48). In the case of ideologies of *Bildung*, this intractable excess is generated by the embarrassment that it has to construct what it claims to describe, as well as by the uncontrollable transfers and leaps between the different discursive domains that the term inhabits.

Stephanie Hilger's contribution foregrounds two other transfers that have marked this ideology. First, there is the issue of gender. Hilger underlines the fact that *Bildung* has often been considered an exclusively masculine achievement, and that its mobilization by Henriette Frölich in her novel *Virginia oder die Kolonie von Kentucky* (1820) questions this privilege. The novel also expands and explores the geographical reach of this tradition, which is a second aspect: it is a German novel that imagines how the French Revolution inspired the establishment of a utopian settlement in America. While the notion unsettles the ingrained racial and gendered assumptions of *Bildung*, the result remains a compromise at best. The mismatch between utopia and *Bildung* reminds us that the latter has historically been a discourse not only of self-fashioning but also of social accommodation; it informed "a form of social discipline that requires personal resignation" (Kontje 7).

Such an uneasy compromise also emerges in the forgotten chapter in the afterlife of *Bildung* which Anke Gilleir's contribution recalls. Gilleir focuses on the role of the German-Jewish philosopher Margarete Susman as a "mediator" between different political and cultural discourses around the First World War. Gilleir paints a fascinating cultural and intellectual canvas against which Susman connects matters of state, Jewishness, and high culture in a singular constellation that cannot be reduced to the better-known positions on Jewish and German identity of (decidedly more glamorous) interlocutors such as Theodor Herzl and Stefan George. Torn between the desire for a Jewish nation and the mixed blessings of the *Bildungsnation*, Susman's case demonstrates that, in Gilleir's words, "the sense of idealist culture need not always lead to a solipsistic

frame of mind and holistic ideas about state power. It may also function as a spur to institute a more humane and ultimately democratic society” (320).

Hilger’s and Gilleir’s contributions to German cultural history share a refusal to condemn the fact that the history of *Bildung*, or indeed the state, has delivered mixed results at best. Their analyses tie in with recent developments in critical theory, codified in special issues of the journals *Occasion* and *Contemporary Literature*, that aim to move beyond the fashionable antistatism that can, as we have seen, be traced back to the nineteenth century. In much intellectual work in a Foucaultian, Marxist, poststructuralist, or postcolonial vein, the state has routinely been viewed as “an almost intrinsically totalitarian institution” (Goodlad and Rothberg 3). As Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen have noted, the tendency to “represent the state as a merely totalitarian regime blind to the slaughter of innocents and contemptuous of civil liberties” works to occlude the state’s “long (if ambivalent) history as an agent of liberty, equality, and fraternity” (493). Both these special issues call for a recognition of “the Janus-faced dimension of the state” as both a “massive disciplinary power” and the provider of “domestic welfare” (Goodlad and Rothberg 3). In a comparable way, the powers of culture (or *Bildung*) have not only served to legitimate state violence, but have also worked as a strategy for imagining a more positive role for the state. Bruce Robbins has argued that there is such a thing as “the literary history of the welfare state” — the subtitle of an important 2007 book that shows how literature has played a crucial role in reminding us that the state, instead of being a mere repository of procedurally legitimate violence, also encompasses “the daily functioning of the institutions that educate the young, protect the old, or step in when the status of temporarily able-bodied is suddenly withdrawn” (2010: 29).

While the work of Michel Foucault earlier inspired the outright condemnation of the state as a disciplinary power, his later work on governmentality and biopolitics (most of it developed in several of his series of lectures at the Collège de France) has provided the tools for a more nuanced perspective of the relation between culture and the state (see Marx). Lauren Goodlad’s *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (2003) made these resources available for the study of Victorian literature (13), and Anne Zwierlein’s article in this forum presents one prominent nineteenth-century form — the British *Bildungsroman* — as a governmental technology for articulating the individual with the state and society. Zwierlein offers a panoramic perspective that reveals how the transfers between novels of formation and different forms of biological thought — anthropometry, theories of habit formation, and organic memory — entail processes of social stratification and differentiation. Zwierlein’s analysis underscores Redfield’s understanding of the *Bildungsroman* as a phantom genre: called upon to provide a narrative example of the template of self-actualization that ideologies of *Bildung* celebrate, the genre has only repeated the paradoxes undermining and enabling these ideologies, to such an extent that it is uncertain “whether this genre exists to be described in the first place” (1996: 40). The *Bildungsroman*, Redfield



writes, is supposed to narrate “the acculturation of a self — the integration of a particular ‘I’ into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity” (38). Zwielerlein’s attention to the genre’s work of social stratification shows that it ends up laying bare the rifts that disfigure the social body to the point that it ceases to be what it never was in the first place, a body. No amount of aesthetic nation-body-building can ever truly deny this constitutive disfigurement.

The question whether the *Bildungsroman* as a genre exists to be described solicits the question whether the state with which this genre would articulate the self is available for description. Going by the literary evidence, the answer would have to be negative: while there is no shortage of nostalgic nation-fiction, dystopic state-fiction, and anarchic individualist fiction demonizing both nation and state (typically by eliding the difference between them), literary work convincingly entertaining a sustained enabling idea of the state is virtually non-existent. More particularly, an empowering imagination of the state as a positive alienation engine, liberating the human from the economy of self-interest into new constellations of systematically engineered universal altruism, remains in abeyance. The Hegelian heritage arguably does not help (Avineri), except insofar as it creates a vacuum of conceptual space still waiting for literary contamination. The Marxian heritage, too, remains a problem (Derrida), especially in its sentimental resistance to the powers of alienation, but it harbours a utopian challenge so easy to formally dismiss as misguided materialist idealism that the dismissal itself becomes a form of denial, complicit with the nostalgic eschatology domesticating that challenge in Marx’s name. The work documented in this forum testifies to the measure of this challenge and recalls the work to be done.

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