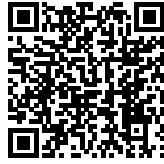




THE PURSUIT OF UNITY AND PERFECTION IN HISTORY

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The achievement of unity and perfection in human action begins with a struggle for these ideals in human thought. In [The Pursuit of Unity And Perfection In History](#), a collection of essays that span four decades, Dr. Klaus Vondung explores examples of this struggle in different fields of human inquiry: striving for harmonious existential unity of talents and morals, intellect and emotion; seeking to make natural sciences consonant with the humanities and thereby moving toward a more universal, "perfect" science; and establishing unity in political structures and cultivating in this unity a homogenous society. Dr. Vondung has given special devotion to National Socialism as a context wherein he revisits its perverted motivation and the consequences of this despite noble ideals.

Dr. Vondung also explores the points of contact between apocalypticism and Hermetic speculation. Despite the independence of the religious and philosophical doctrines of Hermeticism, there are parallels to be found. Apocalypticism and Hermeticism originated in antiquity and yet each represents a tradition that still holds footing today. Dr. Vondung furthermore leads the reader to see the project of salvation found in both, even as each operates with a different scope.

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[The Pursuit of Unity And Perfection In History](#) is now available from St. Augustine's Press.

Unity through *Bildung*: A German Dream Of Perfection

"Unity" is something people long for in many ways: they seek to bring their lives, their talents, emotions, beliefs, and actions into a state of existential unity; they strive for the social unification of different classes; they struggle for the political unity of a divided nation; they speculate about the unity of knowledge and faith, reason, and sensuality, matter, and spirit, essence, and existence. In all these

cases, and in many more, "unity" is a symbolic equivalent for "perfection." The state of unity is understood as perfect because it dissolves and abolishes differences, discrepancies and contradictions which are experienced as disturbing and deficient.

Despite this general frame of meaning, the symbol "unity" can stand for very different aims and imply a wide variety of contents, as I indicated in my first sentence. In what follows I want to discuss a particular meaning the symbol "unity" took on in Germany in close connection with the symbol *Bildung*. In order to analyze this connection, I have to first explain the German term *Bildung*, especially the meaning applied to it by the philosophy of idealism. On the basis of this clarification, which will also clarify the connection with the symbol "unity," I will trace some major developments of the aspirations hidden behind these concepts. The time-span I have in view stretches from the decades around 1800 to World War I. The justification for dealing mainly with this period will become plausible in the course of my analysis. As the source for my analysis I shall use, apart from the philosophical texts in the beginning, works of literature. That there are material reasons for this choice will also be shown in due course.

I.

Bildung is an extremely complex and particularly "German" concept which makes it impossible to translate into foreign languages. Among the English terms the dictionary lists for *Bildung* are formation, education, constitution, cultivation, culture, personality development, learning, knowledge, good breeding, refinement. *Bildung* indeed can mean all this—and it most often means all this together—but it means still more, and this leads to the core of the problem.

Originally the term *Bildung* meant "form" or "formation" of material phenomena including the bodily appearance of human beings. From here the term's usage was extended to man's "inner personality" so that one can talk about the *Bildung* of a person also with respect to his talents, manners, morals, intellect, character, or soul. *Bildung* can mean a certain stage of personality development as well as the process that leads to it. Since this process can be influenced from outside as well as spring independently from an inborn potential, *Bildung* comprises both planned education and independent self-realization. (This understanding took advantage of the fact that the verb *bilden* can be transitive—*etwas bilden*—as well as reflexive—*sich bilden*). Transferred from the individual to society and history, *Bildung* can become synonymous with culture and the historical development of culture.

The genesis of this wide scope of figurative meaning goes back to German mysticism of the fourteenth

century. The many possibilities of using the terms *bilden* and *Bildung*—transitive/reflexive, process/result, material form/spiritual content—made them suitable for the symbolic articulation of very complex matters. And German mysticism took the lead by giving them a new and particular spiritual significance: *bilden* and *Bildung* became symbols for man's advance toward God. The twofold possibilities of usage mentioned above were preserved: the reflexive on the one hand in order to signify God's activity in the movement: *Gott bildet sich in des Menschen Seele*—God reveals himself in man's soul; the transitive on the other hand in order to signify man's activity: *Der Mensch bildet sich Gott ein*—man makes God present in his soul, he 'forms' God in his soul. But also preserved was the double meaning that *Bildung* as the advance toward God signifies the process of this movement as well as its result, i.e., the unification with God in the *unio mystica*. The connection between the symbols *Bildung* and 'unity' which was established here had important consequences for the further development of the concept of *Bildung*.

It would be most interesting and certainly very important to follow this way step by step via Martin Luther, Jakob Böhme, Pietism, Leibniz and Herder, who all helped to modify and gradually change the meaning of these symbols. In the present context I have to confine myself to marking the final breakthrough of a fundamentally new meaning which found its explicit articulation in the philosophy of idealism. Here, as before, the aim of *Bildung* is a state of perfection: unity. But it is no longer unity with God. In the meantime, God had been driven out of the whole of reality. What remained was the immanent "world" and a man who had fallen out of God's hand: the "individual" who found himself confronted with this "world" as an alien reality. At the same time, and in correlation with this development, man had emancipated himself from the old social order and had become an individual also in a social respect. The unity which now is striven for as the aim of *Bildung* is unity with the world in its appearance as nature and society. Through the process of *Bildung*, i.e., through appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the world, the individual seeks to find himself, to realize himself in perfection.

Fichte described the existential dimensions of this process: He defined the Ego as being real only in opposition to a Non-Ego, because the Ego can experience itself only in its restriction by a Non-Ego. The restriction, however, can be felt only insofar as the Ego "impinges" upon the Non-Ego, "attacks" its resistance. Thus the Ego becomes real, i.e., realizes itself, *bildet sich*, in a continuous process of appropriating the Non-Ego, i.e., the world. In a way similar to Fichte, Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the *Bildung* of the individual as "the connecting of our Ego with the world" by which the individual gains "perfect unity."

Hegel outlined the universal and historical dimension of the process of *Bildung*: "The task," he says in the introduction to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, "of leading the individual from his *ungebildete* standpoint to knowledge has to be defined in its general meaning, and the general individual, the independent spirit, must be viewed in its *Bildung*." The independent spirit for its part achieves knowledge by passing through "the stages of *Bildung* of the general spirit." And the general spirit forms itself, *bildet sich*, in the course of world history by appropriating the world it is confronted with in successive dialectical steps until it is unified and reconciled with itself.

The connection between the aims of individual and universal unity, which in Hegel's complicated argument is almost obscured, is established more clearly in Humboldt's words. At first he brings the aims of individual and universal *Bildung* close to each other by using in both cases the symbol "the Whole" (*das Ganze*) for the state of unity and perfection: "The true purpose of man is the highest and most proportional *Bildung* of his powers to a Whole." On the universal scale the task is "to accomplish the *Ausbildung* of humanity as a Whole." Then he draws the conclusion: "I feel that I am driven to a state of unity [...]. I find it absurd to call this unity God, because this would mean throwing unity out of oneself unnecessarily. . . . Unity is humanity, and humanity is nothing else than I myself." The triple identification of "unity", "humanity" and "I myself," together with the refusal to accept God as the realization of unity, reveals the "drive" to unity as the aspiration to become a God of the immanent world, i.e., a perfect being, who is unified with himself in perfection insofar and because he is unified with the world he has absorbed. Clemens Menze's summary of Humboldt's concept—"In his *Bildung* man deifies himself"—grasps the core of the new meaning which *Bildung* has assumed in many minds by the end of the eighteenth century, although not everyone put it in such precise terms as Friedrich Schlegel: "To become God, to be a human being, *sich bilden*, are notions that have the very same meaning."

II.

There are two reasons why I now turn to an analysis of literature. The first reason is given by the sources. In Germany we have a particular species of novel which originated in the late eighteenth century, inspired by the new concept of *Bildung*, and which flourished throughout the nineteenth century. The concept of *Bildung* determined the form as well as the structure and content of these novels so strongly that a special term was coined for this literary species: *Bildungsroman*. Wilhelm Dilthey defined the general structure of a *Bildungsroman* as the story of a young man who enters life in the happy mood of dawn, who seeks friendship and love, has to struggle with the realities of life, grows to maturity after various experiences, finally finds himself and reaches fulfillment as a harmoniously

developed personality. It can be mentioned in passing that Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* can be viewed as a philosophical *Bildungsroman* in which a "hero," the "world spirit," struggles with the world he is confronted with and realizes himself (*bildet sich*) by appropriating it. There is, however, a considerable difference between the philosophical concept and a novel, and this difference marks the second reason for my turning to literary sources.

A novel, if it aspires to be good, cannot speculate about *Bildung* and unity in general terms and abstract notions ("deification through *Bildung*"—what does that mean in a concrete sense?). It has to represent the process and results of *Bildung* in a concrete person and in the course of a story. Because of that, literature reveals the existential dimensions of the concept of *Bildung* much better than philosophical speculation, and, what is even more important, it reveals the practical problems of the concept which a story about people and their concrete doings cannot conceal so easily. To be sure, the *Bildungsroman* tends toward the same aim of *Bildung* as in the concept's philosophical manifestations: godlike unity and harmony of the individual with himself and the world. In Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96), we find the proclamation that man should be a "God of the earth" (although its meaning is not unambiguous there). But literature (again: if it is good) does not speculate but visualizes reality and represents experiences. And we have no experience of a man who became God. The dilemma between the aspiration for perfect *Bildung* and the opposing forces of reality which become effective in the literary presentation of the process of *Bildung*, led to different solutions in the various *Bildungsromane*. This is what makes this genre so interesting for the analysis of *Bildung*.

The paradigm of the German *Bildungsroman*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, provides an excellent example of this dilemma. The hero of the novel, Wilhelm, develops his personality in the course of his conflicts and struggles with the world. He makes an advance toward a state of perfection, but this state is not visualized. Schiller's judgment was correct: "He refuses to give us the direct satisfaction that we demand, and he promises a higher and higher satisfaction, but we have to postpone this into the distant future." Considering Schiller's own tendency toward philosophical speculation, this judgment sounds rather critical. As a matter of fact, many interpreters found a certain weakness in this lack of absolute fulfillment, if not even an element of resignation. My own opinion is different. I think Goethe was conscious of the problem the individual encounters if he tries to deify himself. He saved his novel from derailment and kept it in a delicate balance. The pivot of this balance was the renunciation of the central aspiration of the concept of *Bildung*, the decision, as Camus called it, "to refuse to be a god." Ultimately Wilhelm owes his maturity not to his own activities of self-realization. "Basically," Goethe remarked to Eckermann, "the entire novel attempts to say no more than this: that despite all his foolishness and confusion, man, guided by a hand from above, can achieve

happiness in the end." And in a discussion with Boisserée, Goethe sharply condemned the "madness and rage of attempting to reduce everything to the single individual and to be a God of one's own right." Instead of deifying himself, Wilhelm accepts the *conditio humana*, and this means: integration into a world and society which are not experienced as absolutely alien and hostile. This can be criticized as resigned and passive only if the self-deified individual is the criterion for judgment. I want to stress that integration into the world and society does not necessarily lead to passivity. For Wilhelm it means action indeed, although not in the sense of appropriation or conquest. At the end of the novel the aim of *Bildung* is defined as "being active in a dignified way," "without wanting to dominate."

In opposition to Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, Novalis presented quite different a solution in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799). He criticized in Goethe the fact that Wilhelm Meister is made to adjust himself to reality. Novalis, on his part, adhered to the ultimate aim of *Bildung*: "All *Bildung* leads to something which can only be called freedom, certainly not meant to denote a mere name, but to designate the creative principle of all being. This freedom is mastery. The master exercises free power according to his intention [...]." However, Novalis could not visualize this aim in a story about the development of a realistic person in everyday life, since obviously God-like mastery cannot be achieved in ordinary reality. He transferred his story into the legendary scenery of the Middle Ages, which was supposed (the novel is fragmentary) to gradually change into a second reality of dreams and fairy tales. The aim of unity and perfection, which again implied appropriation and domination of the world, was to be achieved through the magic of poetry.

Novalis' novel represents one of the two extreme possibilities of falling out of the delicate balance which Goethe had tried to establish between the aspiration for perfect *Bildung* and the opposing forces of reality: If the attempt is made to visualize the state of perfection, the connection with reality is lost. The result is, at best, a fairy-tale of paradise, or at worst, if the poetic abilities are weaker than in Novalis' case, bloodless abstraction. The other extreme results from the experience that self-deification must fail: If this experience cannot be endured, then the world, and with it the individual, is hurled back into alienation and meaninglessness, ending in nihilistic despair. (An example for this possibility will be shown later on.) Between these extremes we find all sorts of variations and compromises. In what follows I want to interpret some of these variations as they were represented in the course of the nineteenth century. Because of the peculiar tension between *Bildung* and reality, above all material and social reality, it will be interesting to view the different representations of the striving after unity and perfection with special regard to a particular aspect: Goethe and Novalis had shown, each in his own way, that the question of whether or not one should try to dominate reality, and how this could be brought about, becomes a central issue of *Bildung* when the process and results of *Bildung* have to be

visualized in a work of literature. This problem remained constant as long as such literary attempts were made. Therefore, it will be of special interest to investigate how different authors solved this problem under the changing circumstances of material and social reality.

The [*featured image*](#) shows, *"Berlin, Opernhaus und Unter den Linden"* ("Berlin, The Opera House and Under den Linden"), by Eduard Gaertner, painted in 1845.

