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The German Novel: A Theory

John Francis Gadway



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Quick, name a German novelist from the nineteenth century you would rank alongside the great British, American, French and Russian novelists of the same period. Stumped? Don't feel bad--there really were not any world-class novelists writing in German during this period. In his doctoral dissertation (The Castle in the Bildungsroman, Tulane, 1972), Gadway offered an explanation for this lack in terms of the long shadow that was cast in German literature by Goethe's Wilhelm Meister. His dissertation director, Professor Margaret Groben, had this to say of the highly original work: I have, underneath my pleasure in your work, the uneasy feeling that it can't be true, that I cannot have read it carefully enough! Your study gives me a new view of the Bildungsroman and invalidates my idea of why it is no longer possible in its pristine form. That dissertation is reprinted here with a new preface and an appendix that revisits the question Gadway had attempted to answer earlier, but now with a deeper understanding of Goethe's importance, not just to German cultural identity, but, more significantly, for his impassioned critique of scientific reductionism and the attendant mechanical view of nature. Gadway argues that with Wilhelm Meister, the prototypical Bildungsroman, Goethe infused this peculiarly German novel form with an extraliterary moment that became unwieldy in lesser hands. By following the evolution of a striking poetic space that features prominently in the representative novels in this tradition (the castle or castle-like place where the quasi-orphan figure of the Bildungsroman meets one or more foster father figures who mentor him in how to be in the world) Gadway is able to show how the great German novelists of the first half of the twentieth century mined this tradition to make statements about man's place in modern society that are easily misunderstood by readers not familiar with the vocabulary that is peculiar to the universe of discourse in which they are expressed. Approximately 15% of the original dissertation is in German, as the work was intended for expert readers. Because the German portions serve principally to support statements made in English, the non-German speaker may follow the development of the analysis easily enough. The German portions cited in the Appendix, consisting of a 24-page chapter reprinted from a work intended for the general public, are rendered in English by the author.

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