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Review

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Ästhetik der Tragödie von Aristoteles bis Lessing  
by Hans Wagner

Review by: Mark W. Roche

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## 18th/19th-CENTURY LITERATURE

### I. LITERARY THEORY AND COLLECTIONS

WAGNER, HANS. *Ästhetik der Tragödie von Aristoteles bis Lessing*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1987. 112 pp. DM 10, paper.

Hans Wagner, known to philosophers for his excellent application of transcendental arguments in *Philosophie und Reflexion* (1959), presents in this book a history of the aesthetics of tragedy. He does this, first, by following the well-known tradition that focuses on the specific aesthetic pleasure of tragedy as a form of catharsis, and second, by suggesting there is a competing definition of tragedy, not fully articulated until Schiller, whereby the distinguishing feature of the genre is the audience's experience of the sublime.

The major portion of Wagner's book consists of an account of the tradition that runs from Aristotle to Lessing. After briefly discussing Plato's views on poetry, against which Aristotle's definition of tragedy is partly directed, Wagner distinguishes the various elements of Aristotle's definition, focusing on the specific aesthetic effect of tragedy on the viewer. Wagner covers familiar ground here, but he also offers a few independent insights: he tries, for example, to solve the initial paradox of tragic pleasure by suggesting that we are willing to enter into the experience of tragedy in part because we already carry with us traces of everyday suffering from which we desire release (pp. 32-34).

Wagner also treats the French classicism of the seventeenth century, the first period in which one finds theoreticians of tragedy who are also tragedians. Corneille and Racine are the subjects of this chapter. Corneille stresses the moral import of tragedy and differs from Aristotle, and later Racine, in suggesting, first, that either fear or pity suffices (they needn't be employed together), and

second, that admiration is a third and legitimate tragic emotion.

In a section on Lessing Wagner breaks down the components of Lessing's complex theory of tragedy and focuses on similarities and differences vis-à-vis Aristotle. According to Wagner, a common element in Corneille, Racine, and Lessing is the attempt to defend tragedy in the light of Christian morality. Herein lies much of the reason for the various rereadings of, and deviations from Aristotle.

With Schiller we see a drastic change: the Aristotelian model no longer holds. Before discussing Schiller's theory directly, Wagner recounts definitions of the sublime in Pseudo-Longinus, Burke, and Kant. Burke is important, for he recognizes pain and terror as elements that accompany the inception of the sublime; Kant's theory is particularly significant insofar as Kant locates the sublime not in the vastness or power of nature but in man's superiority to nature and knowledge of reason. Wagner analyzes each of Schiller's essays on the tragic and the sublime. The four essays are somewhat confusing, and Wagner attempts to bring clarity to Schiller's seemingly inconsistent thoughts by focusing on ambiguities in the poet's use of language. Thus, morality has several separate meanings, and there are multiple concepts of the sublime. Wagner's careful distinctions, which follow in the tradition of some of the best recent Schiller scholarship, are of great help to the reader of Schiller's texts.

A few objections might be raised to Wagner's study. First, if Wagner wants to look for the *principle* of tragedy, as he states at the outset of his study (pp. 7-8), one wonders why he proceeds in an inductive manner, reviewing previous theories in a historical, rather than systematic, framework. Second, Wagner follows a long, and I think partially misguided, tradition that focuses on the *effect* of tragedy and the role of emotion. Though the element of aesthetic pleasure is important and uniquely paradoxical, I fail to see why so many writers (Szondi is one of the major exceptions) view it as the *essence* of tragedy. Third, many will want to

challenge Wagner's claim that Schiller, whose definition, despite Wagner's efforts, still comes across as somewhat limited, is more important for the history of the theory of tragedy than, let's say, Hegel, to whom Wagner devotes only a few cursory pages. Related to this, no arguments are given as to why Schiller's theory should be viewed as the last classical theory of tragedy. Finally, the brief discussions of four plays (Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Racine's *Phèdre*, and Schiller's *Maria Stuart*) do not satisfy in themselves, nor do they illustrate Wagner's theoretical claims particularly well.

On a more positive side, the book can be used, along with other paraphrases of the tradition, to supplement survey courses on tragedy and the theory of tragedy. The elevation of Schiller alongside Aristotle is clearly unique, and stimulating in concept if not in practice. Finally, Wagner successfully argues against particular misreadings of the authors he considers, especially Lessing and Schiller. Though the book does not please in every respect, it will be useful to some.

MARK W. ROCHE  
*Ohio State University*

MORETTI, FRANCO. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987. 256 pp. \$16.95, paper.

*The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* is apparently an abbreviated English translation of the Italian original, *Romanzo di Formazione* (Milan, 1986). I say "apparently" because without a copy of the 364-page original at hand it is impossible to ascertain the relationship between the two works; oddly, the English translation gives no information about the Italian version.

Moretti, professor of comparative literature at the University of Verona, provides a wide-ranging discussion of this celebrated literary genre that treats—among other works—Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* and *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Balzac's *Illusions perdues*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and Dicken's *David Copperfield*. As can be seen, Moretti works with a broad brush, including as he does some works that many critics do not consider Bil-

dingsromane. Now, as we all know, definitions of the Bildungsroman run the gamut: from a "liberal," virtually all-embracing understanding of the genre to much more highly differentiated definitions. The debate about the Bildungsroman thus resembles the controversy about the "picaresque" novel: quite aside from broad disagreement as to whether formal, aesthetic considerations or philosophical, socio-historical factors determine which works belong to the genre, there are numerous competing theories about how best to distinguish it from other sub-genres, such as, in this case, the "Erziehungsroman" and "Entwicklungsroman."

In short, the problem is complex and unlikely ever to be resolved. And so Moretti's book has a certain charm in that it insouciantly ignores the entire issue and refers repeatedly to the "classical *Bildungsroman*" without ever questioning the existence of such an animal. The "classical" form referred to is that of *Wilhelm Meister*, as if it were progenitor of numerous other "classical" Bildungsromane. We now know that things are not so simple, that it is difficult to find—even in Germany, the presumed stronghold of the genre—other "classical" examples of the Bildungsroman. What the present work provides is a somewhat disorganized and diffuse but still thought-provoking discussion (the book reads in a breezy way as though it had been dictated) about the historical and sociological changes of Europe from the time of the French Revolution to the mid-nineteenth century and how they are reflected in the novel. What the book tells us, in effect, is that the seemingly *heile Welt* of Wilhelm Meister has collapsed, that the idealistic individualism of the "classical" Bildungsroman has been supplemented, early in the century, by the opportunism of such men as Julien Sorel, and later by "mass culture." "The rich variety of life's domains, the great lure and torment of the classical *Bildungsroman*, has collapsed like a house of cards. The conflict with the world—individuality as risk, burden, and perhaps parody—has been abolished by organic culture" (p. 227).

This is a book for the comparatist, for the adept familiar with critical theory on the Bildungsroman. Although the book reveals a fine grasp of the connections between the novel and this historical flow of the nineteenth century, its lack of organization and failure to deal with fundamental questions about the subject it purports to treat make it unsuitable for the nonspecialist.

JAMES HARDIN  
*University of South Carolina*