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Through a Glass, Darkly: The Struggle of Perfecting Humanity

Review: Jennifer A. Herdt,

Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition,
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 312 pages.

Jennifer A. Herdt's book *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (hereafter FH) traces the post-Kantian secularization of *Bildung* from its roots in Pietism through its development into the human autocracy of Herder and Goethe, to the reconciliation and expression of the concept in Hegel. In the journey through the history of *Bildung*, Herdt specifically focuses on the role of Christianity in human formation, the tension between human formation and divine formation, and the failures of *Kunstreligion* to achieve the formation of humanity. *Forming Humanity* is a meticulously researched foray into the history of a question that has haunted humans since it emerged as the Greek *paideia*: How do we form humanity? For any scholars of the German philosophical or theological tradition, or any scholars of the aesthetic purpose of education, Herdt's book is a vital library addition.

Herdt's text might be described as more theological than philosophical, though that is not a surprise, considering Herdt's position at the Yale University Divinity School. However, to describe her book as *only* or *merely* theological is a mistake. As her research so clearly demonstrates, the line between the philosophical and the theological is not so evident; the philosophical concept of *Bildung*, readers learn, is heavily based – both historically and conceptually – in theological considerations. For example, in her penultimate chapter on Hegel, Herdt carefully explicates not only Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – and the complicated dual points of view, and ensuing failures of self-consciousness – but also the vital role that Christian theology plays in Hegel's system

of thought. Here, we see that the Trinity is the Conceptual ground of reality, and we see Jesus as the Subjective Spirit wherein Absolute Spirit achieves self-consciousness. Thus so she demonstrates for each main thinker in her book; either Christianity plays a vital role as a ground of human (re)formation in the divine image, or Christianity is the impetus of reaction to valorize and secularize human autonomy. Either way, though, Christianity is shown as vital to *Bildung*.

Herdt begins her book by tracing the trajectory of self-formation from the Greek *paideia* to Roman *humanitas* and beyond, specifically focusing on later notions of transformation as that which stems from interaction with the divine. The story told in the preliminary chapter is a story that bridges a vast swathe of time and space, to bring her audience from the Ancient Greeks to the Christian mystics. The stages that formed the historical foundation for *Bildung* include three main stages (among many): *paideia*, *humanitas*, and the medieval *imago Dei*.

Both *paideia* and the Roman *humanitas*, she explains, were processes of educating a human into his true form, achieved only through formative laws. *Paideia* was dependent on the laws of the *polis* and a political life. Likewise, Roman *humanitas* was a virtue attained by rules. Both processes of development formed not just an ideal human, but rather, an ideal *citizen*. Both contained a strict hierarchy of who could be fully human (citizens) and who could not be (non-citizens). As we see throughout the unfolding of Herdt's text, this unsettling division within transformation still haunts such concepts today.

However, a discussion of *paideia* and *humanitas* alone do not get us on the path of the *imago Dei* that is prevalent in the German idea of *Bildung*. As Herdt asserts, there is also an older sense of humanism that influenced *Bildung*, which she traces to the systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas. The world, no longer chaotic, is now a world that was ordered, and a world which humanity could understand. Knowledge of God could be gained through reflection upon nature, and humans, though still sinful, were made in the image of God (FH, 39). Tracing the *imago Dei* through Aquinas' systematic theology, Herdt poses two questions: "First, who was the agent of *Bildung*, God or humankind, and how was human agency to be understood in relation to divine agency?" (FH, 40).

Meister Eckhart, Martin Luther, and Paracelsus each wrestled with these questions, providing a variety of answers while still focusing on the God-bearing image of humanity. For Eckhart, it is a place in the soul in which no limited and distracting image resides, a "silent middle," a place where the soul can turn inwards away from the senses, to prepare a space for the birth of the Son within it (FH, 43). While Eckhart ultimately believed that, with the right amount of shaping, we could be fully one God, Luther believed that our inherent sinfulness after the Fall prevented that level of unity. Reason itself was corrupt and will not pursue goodness. For Luther, it was only by way of God and Christ that humanity can be formed to be in the image of God. Humans cannot understand without images; thus, God's self-revelation comes to humans as *Bilder*.

Finally, we have Paracelsus, for whom humankind was created so that they may study science and medicine, so that they may discover God's "secret works" in nature (FH, 50). Paracelsus focuses on the process unfolding and expressing one's inner character, in contrast to being shaped from external sources. However, nourishment does come from outside of us, and we incorporate it into our bodies. Humans, unlike other creatures, are "free self-formers" due to our imagination (FH, 52). His major contribution to later expressions of *Bildung* is this formation-from-within, development-from-within "and on the positive character of human imagination and natural diversity, and his confidence that human freedom and wisdom can work creatively in harmony with the power of nature. It is due to Paracelsus that the project of natural science becomes bound up with the project of forming humanity" (FH, 53).

With such an extensive historical background, Herdt has provided the foundation for readers to understand two of the main "problems" within *Bildung*: 1) the division between those who are "human" and those who are not; and 2) the tension in formation between the human power to self-form, and reliance upon the

divine to transform. How much power do humans have to form themselves, and how much do we rely on God to *transform* us?

Herdt turns to Pietism as the Christian inheritor of the struggle with human imagination (a mirror of the world, not of God), human works, and the divine. Pietism focused on turning inward and on self-reflection on our divine transformation for two reasons: as a response to the charges of works-based righteousness, and as a response to the rise of secular rationalism, which claimed that humans are autonomously self-formative through reason and rationality. Deeply suspicious of human imagination and its activities, Pietism focused on the English Calvinistic and German mystic traditions. In particular, their understanding of conversion was based around that mystical tradition of the “birth of Christ within,” a space within the soul – free from the workings of human imagination – for Christ to be born, for the human to mirror God. This conversion was a formation that was not solely a self-formation, for it could not be done without the help of God. This Christ formation in the soul was a passive formation; the activity was God’s activity – *bilden*. In contrast to this inner “birth of Christ,” were *Menschen Kunst* – human products of imagination. *Kunst*, based on *Bilder* (images) led us away from God and away from true reality. *Bilder*, as human formative activity, is thus viewed with suspicion, for we must be passive to God’s activity of *bilden* instead (FH, 74). We can see here the contribution that Pietism made to even the very language of *Bildung*.

Despite this suspicion of *Menschen Kunst*, Pietism did, in fact, end up producing a new movement of such *Kunst*, through their focus on self-reflection and subjective experiences. We see the fruition of this later in Herdt’s discussion of the novel. Thus, their “inward move” in an attempt to foreclose the autocracy of human reason ultimately failed. As Herdt writes, “Pietism was an important source of the ideal of poetic authenticity and of the notions of poetic genius and inspiration central to the Sturm und Drang movement” (FH, 80). Pietism’s goals to foreclose “autocratic humanism,” in other words, was unsuccessful; “tracing the world of an external Providence in one’s life ended up authorizing the human author’s self-formation capacities” (FH, 80).

Johann Herder provides what is quite possibly the crowning achievement of *Bildung* thought. In Herder we see a move away from the inward turn and divine solipsism of the Pietist movement, and rather a move toward cosmopolitanism, anti-colonialism, and cosmic processes expressed in all of nature, leading to his famous “harmonious harp” analogy. In Herder, we see *Bildung* as something not restricted to just humanity, but rather something that pervades *all* of nature. In this understanding of *Bildung*, it becomes a process, it is part of the very organization of nature itself. Herdt explains this succinctly, stating that Herder’s *Bildung* is “basically any process by which the inner capacities of an organism, working together and in selective engagement with outer forces, enable it to develop into a mature whole” (FH, 85).

Since *Bildung* is part of the organization of nature itself, there becomes no “one right way” to *do Bildung*. Every organism, every species, every culture, every peoples, every world, “is capable of arriving at its own peculiar form of perfection or completeness, capable of its own happiness or blessedness” (FH, 86). The earth sounds like a harmonious harp in which all tones have been attempted or will be attempted (FH, 86). This harp analogy points to Herder’s broader position regarding cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism. We realize humanity by “way of ever-expanding webs of mutual recognition and respect” (FH, 88). This emphasis on self-organization, however, is not an emphasis on fully autonomous, spontaneous formation. We, for Herder, are genetically determined predispositions, but the development of our dispositions depends on external circumstances. Thus, we are not solely formed, but are also formed by others. We also do not find within Herder a complete *denial* of human agency; we *choose* what to imitate, and transform those imitations within ourselves in an expression of creativity.

Here, Herder rejects the required assistance of any supernatural aid; natural law, and coming to know the goodness of the laws of nature, is how we come to know God. Following these natural laws freely, recognizing their goodness, is how we come to resemble God, thus reconciling both the *imitatio Dei* and *imago Dei*.

Herder's theory of *Bildung*, which reconciles the tension between inner agency for formation, and outer agency in transformation, which places *Bildung* as a cosmic process present in all of nature, cements Herder's place as a counter-Enlightenment philosopher. His theory of *Bildung* allows him to reject the Monism of typical Enlightenment thinkers, a Monism which not only permits but encourages colonialism for the "good" of other peoples. Language, culture, art, customs, must all be respected for self-forming creatures to flourish. Herder denied the claims that Europe brought culture to the world, for there is no central "European culture," as such. The culture of *humanity* is not the culture of *Europe*, for there are infinite amounts of ways to express God. For Herder, the formation of humanity is accomplished through "the harmonious self-realization of individuals and collectives in all their malleable and overlapping richness" (FH, 94).

We find the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt – possibly the greatest influence on Western culture in relating the liberal arts to self-formation – a contrast to Herder's cosmic-and-divine-process. For Humboldt, self-formation: 1) is an individual activity, to develop the capacities of the individual into a harmonious whole; 2) demands engagement with the world, even if the world does not form us; this encountering of others prevents self-formation from becoming a self-interested, narcissistic endeavor, and allows us recognize that *Menschheit* (humanity) transcends our individuality; and 3) is a human process that does include the *imago Dei*. We do not achieve *Bildung* by imitation or mirroring (aka mirroring *imago Dei*). *Menschheit* in our own person is nothing other than our individuality, and there can be no model for its expression (FH, 117).

Like Herder, Humboldt establishes a system in which one "trusts" the human imagination; humans, both sensual and rational, but never *purely* either, *symbolize* the idea of perfection via art. Art is ultimately ethical, though it cannot make us into better people; what art *does* do is make sensuous the transcendent. Art also has a strong relation to politics; the *telos* of the state of *Bildung* is not economic well-being, but rather human development. The state's only purpose is to provide the space and structure for self-formation. Humboldt's "On the Spirit and the Organizational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin," encapsulates this line of thought. For Humboldt, both the freedom *and* the social bonds necessary for self-formation could only be provided by the university.¹ This formation cannot happen if the state intervenes. He writes that the state's only role in a university should be to provide organizational framework and resources for scholarship.²

In contrast with Humboldt, who, as we have seen, advocates for a minimalist state that provides the space for self-formation, Schiller offers up a reversal of the state-formation relationship. Civic virtue, Schiller asserts, is necessary for political freedom to survive. Thus, rather than a minimal state providing the condition for self-formation, aesthetic education is a precondition for any sort of lasting political freedom to be accomplished. Previously in our discussion, we saw the main tension to be between divine transformation and human formation; now, we can see that once the focus is on human activity, the tension becomes that between political freedom and self-development: which comes first?

For Schiller, aesthetic education gives form to matter. Aesthetic education requires the development both of our receptivity to the "complex particularities of the world and of our active capacity for imposing form via rational comprehension, and allows us to grasp the possibility of harmonizing these" (FH, 127). Drawing from Kant's critical works, Schiller contends that aesthetic education is important not just for epistemology, but for our moral autonomy. We are not just observers of the world, but creators; this is how we "rise above passive slavery to natural inclinations" (FH, 128). The harmony between active and passive powers in the aesthetic also leads to a joy in acting, which allows us to act in accord with the moral law, not against, but *because of* inclina-

1) Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Spirit and the Organizational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin," in "University Reform in Germany," *Minerva* 8 ([1900]1970): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01553214>.

2) *Ibid.*, 244.

tion. Thus, aesthetic education becomes key to recognition of our own freedom and moral development, both necessary for a free political state.

Recall our previous discussion of the Pietist distrust of human imagination, and the inward turn, which focused on the authenticity of individual experience. As stated, the Pietist endeavor to forsake human imagination's products ultimately failed, precisely because of this focus on authentic subjective experience. Pietism, when paired with the influence of Herder, Humboldt, and Schiller, paved the way for the rise of *Bildungsroman*, the rise of the novel, which focused on human agency and self-transformation.

The novel allowed the reader to closely connect with its protagonist, through a portrayal of the protagonist's subjective experience of everyday activities. The hope was that in reading the novel, the reader would also be changed; *Bildung* occurred in the dialogue between fiction and reality, in the connection between the reader and the character. What the novel did particularly well was "subjectivity, the experiential life of the individual as it unfolds in time" (FH, 139). What is most crucial to the novel is the "notion of the individuality and subjective experience and of its significance. Pietism had ably paved the way" (FH, 140). Novels were particularly appealing, for they were not bogged down with theory, and the formatted, uniform text made, in a way, the novel less personal, which allowed the reader to project her own images and illusions upon the text. Thus, the novel was seen as "an ideal fictional arena for delving into subjectivity, [t]he inner life of individual feeling, emotion, and reflection, and for tracing the gradual development of a character worthy of being claimed as one's own" (FH, 146).

However, *Bildungsroman* authors – such as Goethe and Schiller – began to distrust the popular novel. The literary market was focused less on self-formation than on the consumption of literature, and *Bildungsroman* wanted to subvert this tendency. However, their novels, which required intense reading and self-reflection, eventually shifted the genre to a circle of elites, thus not contributing to any widespread accessibility to self-formation. The *Bildungsroman* became trapped in its own tower.

Another flaw with *Bildungsroman* was that the authors failed to grasp that the formation of character through imitating an authoritative model never occurs. From the focus on human agency in *Bildung*, *Bildungsroman* eventually – if not consciously – shifted to formation of character through imitation, though this time not of God, but of a protagonist. *Bildungsroman*, then, was doomed to fail in some way.

There is no better example of the rise and failure of *Bildungsroman* than Goethe's masterpiece, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (and Hegel's ensuing critique). The "crisis" of secular literature was, as Herdt writes, "if we are not to be remade after the image of God in Christ, after whose image, then, and how can any form or norm that is *imposed* on the self become what the self truly *is*?" (FH, 156). What young Wilhelm in fact discovers is that he needs the mirrors of *others* in order to realize himself. A transcendent God and his *imago Dei* is thus replaced, in secularized *Bildung*, with the mirror of others (FH, 178–81).

So, what is the moral of the story of Wilhelm? First, we could say, as Herdt does, that secular literature provides a universal truth to all humans, but this is a truth that is far more entertaining than that of Pietist self-reflections! (FH, 186). Secondly, Wilhelm's success at "becoming human" is achieved only through his relations with others, who are the "mirrors" by which he can regard and measure his progress. Thirdly, Wilhelm succeeds at becoming human insofar as "he remains open to what lies beyond his selfhood as currently constituted, recognizing that whatever obscure truths he grasps, final truth lies beyond them" (FH, 187).

Hegel, however, remained unconvinced at any purported success of young Wilhelm to demonstrate self-formation. To begin with, for Hegel, religion and philosophy were necessary for the task of *Bildung*; aesthetic education was simply not adequate, on its own, to the task at hand (FH, 191). The novel *in particular*, though, also failed, not only as a means of aesthetic education, but as what it was in itself. As Herdt writes, modern novels "falsify the process of *Bildung* by offering a premature reconciliation, one that never fully comes to terms with the failures of subjective consciousness to arrive at harmony between its self-conception and the truth about

itself” (FH, 193). Herdt’s chapter on Hegel is, due to the subject matter, her most complicated chapter. Hegel’s project is one of reconciliation, a reconciliation which the novel fails to provide. Rather than reconciling, the protagonist – such as Wilhelm Meister – prematurely *resigns* to society and institutions. This does not mean that art has no place in *Bildung*; rather, art allows the truth to appear to our sensuous nature; it allows humans to creatively express their self-understanding. But, art without religion or philosophy is simply not up to the overwhelming task of *Bildung*.

The task of *Bildung* is achieved in the reconciliation of all opposites: subject and object, self and world, particular and universal. As Herdt demonstrates, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* takes us through the failures to achieve this reconciliation; the master-slave dialectic, for example, is one-sided and fails in the task of reconciliation. Appeal to universal law is equally, though contrastingly, one-sided; only in culture is consciousness truly reached, and culture demands a grasping of the Concept through reconciliation. We must grasp the ways our concepts and categories are defined by their interrelatedness with one another and with the whole (FH, 212). What the authors of the novel failed to see, but what Hegel did see, is that self-transformation without a complex social web of mutually reinforcing practices loses its formative power. Pietist devotionals “worked” because of the web of social practices surrounding pietism. However, novels were read in private, and rarely become objects of collective reflection (FH, 155).

It is our task to let go of forms of particularity which inhibit reconciliation. When we grasp one thing as “other to” something else, we must recognize that their identities are interdefined (FH, 213). This is the dialectic of Hegel. Thus, for community, for a shared life, we must achieve the demanding task of mutual recognition. Agents are transformed “through social practices and institutions that work through their own self-interested desires to transform them” (FH, 219). The social conditions for genuine freedom are those that protect citizens’ rights and provide space for the public exchange of reasons, that seeks the common good in social practices and institutions of civil society (FH, 221).

Theology plays a particular role in this task of recognition. For Hegel, Christianity is the religion of revelation. The Absolute Concept is revealed as truth and ground of finite reality. Jesus is the Subjective Spirit and the Absolute Spirit comes to self-consciousness (FH, 216). Evil is the refusal of recognition and reconciliation. Love, in contrast to evil, is what characterizes reconciliation. Despite this view, however, Hegel is shown to be hoisted by his own petard; his comments regarding race show his own failure at mutual recognition.

Unlike Herder, who was a strong champion of anti-colonialism and universal diversity, Hegel supports colonialism. While he establishes, for example, that racial differences do not justify lack of equality before the law, and that racial differences are nature and do not justify different ethical or political treatment, he does justify colonialism and imperialism, by stating that Africans are *capable of Bildung* but have no natural drive to it (FH, 225). Thus, in spreading Christianity and culture, Europeans are “helping” other cultures that do not have a culture of their own. We can see in this justification of colonialism – and all acts that accompany it – also a justification of evil. Evil, a lack of mutual recognition – which Hegel himself fell prey to – furthers the process of consciousness and “becoming adequate to the Concept” (FH, 228).

And so, Herdt has taken us on the harrowing journey of *Bildung*, from its ancient beginnings in Greek and Roman culture, to the mystifying and powerful works of G.F.W. Hegel. But we do not end with Hegel; lack of mutual recognition is still present in the world today – in racial violence, in a widespread lack of having discussions with any who disagree with us. What we learn from *Bildung* is that we *must* exist in a social and cultural web with others, and that we *need others* on a fundamental level if we will ever have a hope of becoming truly human.

At this point, I will level two small criticisms against Herdt’s book. Chapter 6, on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, is, by far, the weakest chapter, insofar as there *is* a weak chapter. Granted, this was an

incredibly illuminating chapter on Goethe's work *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. However, this chapter has the feel of a "side conversation" within a much longer conversation regarding *Bildung*. Chapter 5 established key differences between Pietist sacred literature and the rise of the novel as secular literature. This chapter simply emphasizes one particular novel, and how Goethe, in that novel, provided a national treasure in terms of secular literature. However, since Goethe himself refrained from replacing domesticated Providence with his own theories, we could not say with complete certainty that an analysis of *Wilhelm* provides a resolute insight into Goethe's own philosophy of *Bildung*. Thus, this is not so much a chapter on *Goethe*, as it is a chapter on *Wilhelm*. While it is a brilliant example of and analysis of secular literature, Herdt's book can do without it. In most works, a chapter like this would elevate the complete work; however, given the quality and rhythm of the rest of the book, this chapter does not quite fit in, and somewhat lessens its overall harmony.

Finally, Herdt's book is missing any substantial discussion on Kant. She does reserve a special place for Kant in her Conclusion, seen through the interpretive lens of Karl Barth. As she details, Barth reserved for Kant a great amount of praise, due to his acknowledgement of radical evil. For Barth, Kant's failure is that to admit the reality of radical evil "means that we are not after all suited to be the measure of all things" (FH, 244). We need to be corrected by something beyond ourselves. For Barth this is "a failure to recognize divine sovereignty" (FH, 245). Stating that, "Kant did not speak for the *Bildung* tradition as such," Herdt instead presents the thinkers – Herder, Humboldt, Schiller, Goethe, Hegel – as respondents to Kant (FH, 245). Thus, Kant's place in the story of *Bildung* is the *impetus*, insofar as he is the one who is criticized. However, Kant's works *The Conflict of the Faculties*, *On Education*, and even his *Critiques* either speak directly to *Bildung* or are certainly driven by questions of human self-formation. Kant himself, in a 1778 letter to Marcus Herz, stated that his central aim is "of spreading good dispositions based on solid principles, securing these dispositions in receptive souls, and thereby directing people to cultivate their talents in the only useful direction."³

Despite these two small quibbles, Herdt's book is rather a masterpiece on the history of *Bildung*, including its secular and Christian foundations. And, as she emphasizes in her own conclusion the import of mutual recognition, she emphasizes in her method the mutual reconciliation of secular and theological commitments. To paraphrase her concluding thoughts: to achieve ourselves we must first receive others. "We are in one another's hands" (FH, 251). Not only is her book scholastically important, but it is a vital reminder to all of us, that there is an "all of us," in this time or another.

3) Immanuel Kant, "To Marcus Herz," in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 10:231.