

Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre

To the Editor:

David Miles's recent article "The Picaro's Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German Bildungsroman" (*PMLA*, 89, 1974, 980–92) is provocative in its interpretations and comparisons of individual works. I object, however, to Miles's identification of the picaresque and the confessional as two poles of the Bildungsroman; these forms exist as independent genres in their own right, genres from which the Bildungsroman must be distinguished. Miles's view of the Bildungsroman simply as "a novel that 'educates' by *portraying* an education" (p. 981) is so broad as to be useless. His own inclusion of *Tom Jones*, *Emile*, and *La Nausée* in a Bildungsroman genre clearly demonstrates how misleading a failure to define our literary terms can be. Most novels do portray some kind of education, and most educate someone—the author, the reader, or the protagonist; if the Bildungsroman is to be treated as a genre, and Miles uses the term, it must be defined according to more specific characteristics. This is especially important if, one sets out, as Miles does, to change accepted notions about the genre.

I find that Miles's article suffers from a misapprehension due to his failure to circumscribe carefully the limits of the Bildungsroman as a genre. He begins by distinguishing between "two basic hypostatizations of the literary hero: the 'picaro' . . . and the 'confessor'" (p. 980). Yet he defines the *Bildungsheld* not according to his relation to these two predominant fictional types but according to his ultimate assimilation into existing society. He stresses the psychological introspective side of the Bildungsroman to the point of suggesting that perhaps *Wilhelm Meister* is not a Bildungsroman at all. He calls it "strangely *unpsychological*," speaks of the "simplicity of Wilhelm's mental growth," and continually searches for "psychological elaboration," "self-questioning" (pp. 981–82), self-awareness, and self-consciousness, attributes which Goethe clearly denied a figure who was meant to conform to the values of a bourgeois world. For Goethe, *Bildung* is the organic unfolding of a totality of human capacities by the contact with worldly experiential powers, a process which results in an accommodation to those powers. Wilhelm states his goal as a "harmonische Ausbildung meiner Natur." There is a fundamental contradiction here between Miles's own view of education and the concept of *Bildung* in the eighteenth century.

Miles's vision of the *Bildungsheld* as an introspective figure leads him to identify Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* as the modern development of the genre. His argument, a most unpersuasive one, is based on the fact that Malte's life "follows precisely the pattern common to the nineteenth-century Bildungs-

roman . . . : beginning with a secluded childhood spent on landed estates in Denmark and followed by several years of formal schooling at a military academy, his 'education' had been completed by an extensive *Bildungsreise* through Russia, Italy, and France" (p. 987). Miles fails to take into account that these events do not constitute the plot of the novel, but can only, as he himself says, be "reconstruct[ed] . . . from the scattered entries in his diary" (p. 987). While the comparison of *Malte* with the Goethe and Keller novels leads to some interesting insights, it is ultimately confusing.

Rilke's novel is unique and thus I hesitate to label it at all, but certainly it belongs in a generic category of the modern confessional novel with Dostoevsky's *Notes*, Sartre's *La Nausée*, and Camus' *La Chute*. While a form of education takes place in each of these, they deal neither with the hero's growth from youth to maturity, nor with his assimilation or nonassimilation into society, but with the protagonist's act of self-questioning.

It is precisely between the picaresque novel, on the one hand, and the confessional novel, on the other, that the Bildungsroman must be situated generically. In such a study one might distinguish between the picaresque hero who is an outcast, the *Bildungsheld* who is a representative and often exemplary member of society, and the protagonist of the confessional novel who is a spiritual outsider. Structurally, the picaresque novel is composed of a number of episodes loosely strung together; the Bildungsroman represents a progression of connected events that lead up to a definite denouement, while the confessional novel is a retrospective search for a pattern that is often not chronological. The picaresque novel stresses the material side of life and concentrates on the hero's adventures and actions in particular; the Bildungsroman concentrates on actions, thoughts, and reflections equally and attempts to portray a total personality: physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral; the confessional novel stresses thoughts and reflections alone. While the picaresque novel is turned outward toward society, and the confessional novel is turned inward toward consciousness, the Bildungsroman maintains a peculiar balance between the social and the personal and explores their interaction. It is this double focus that is its distinguishing feature. Miles's essay, while offering illuminating insights into the three works he discusses, conflates generic terms which, if they are to be used at all, must be kept as distinct and as precise as possible.

MARIANNE HIRSCH GOTTFRIED
Dartmouth College

Mr. Miles replies:

Let me answer Marianne Gottfried's letter point by point. First, the notion that the Bildungsroman is "a novel that 'educates' by *portraying* an education" was