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Virtue and the Veil of Illusion: Generic Innovation and the Pedagogical Project in Eighteenth-Century Literature.

By Dorothea E. von Mücke. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991. xiii + 331 pages.

This original and wide-ranging comparative study examines how emergent literary genres in eighteenth-century Europe participate in the pedagogical project of male subject formation. The author focuses on the intersection of semiotics, pedagogy and aesthetics, and demonstrates how changing models of signification give rise to new strategies in subject formation. Drawing on Foucault, she identifies two major semiotic paradigm shifts in the eighteenth century: first the “transparency model” of the mid-eighteenth century, which presumes that the sign is an ideal representation of the signified; and second the “intransitive” or “self-referential model” that emerges late in the century. With each of these paradigms is associated a conjunction of pedagogical and aesthetic concerns, which the author discusses under the following rubrics: the “project of *Anschaulichkeit*” and the “project of *Bildung*.”

In the first section, devoted to the project of *Anschaulichkeit*, the author argues that the transparency model accommodates a view of fiction as illusion: the reader or spectator is drawn into the represented world in such a manner that the artificial character of the representation is forgotten. Two emergent literary forms in mid-eighteenth-century Europe, the epistolary novel and the bourgeois tragedy, realize this semiotic ideal by employing “anti-theatrical strategies” that veil the materiality of the signifier. These genres are conceived as instruments for disciplining the male bourgeois subject through the pedagogical ideal of *Anschaulichkeit*, where the absorbing illusion of virtue reorganizes the subject through the internalization of authority. Drawing together a wide range of aesthetic and semiotic writings from England, France, and Germany (Richardson and Lessing on the fable, Condillac’s “Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines,” and Diderot’s “Lettre sur les aveugles” and “Lettre sur les sourds et muets”), von Mücke identifies their common focus on “graphic” representations, which, by producing a perfect illusion within the soul, function as a means of controlling the operations of the soul. Von Mücke then elucidates the gendered nature of *Anschaulichkeit* in a discussion of Rousseau’s *Emile*: the image of the ideal Woman regulates the male subject’s desire. This theoretical framework informs von Mücke’s detailed, often provocative readings of *Clarissa*, *Miß Sara Sampson*, and *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, which complete the first section.

In the 1770s the project of *Anschaulichkeit* yields to what von Mücke calls the “project of *Bildung*.” In part a function of a European-wide shift to a self-referential model of signification characteristic of European Romanticism, the concept of *Bildung*, argues von Mücke, was peculiar to Germany insofar as it

addressed the need for loyal civil servants within the rapidly expanding state bureaucracies in the German-speaking lands. Thus she narrows her focus in the second part of the book to the German national tradition, specifically two generic innovations within German Classicism, the classical tragedy and the *Bildungsroman*.

Von Mücke defines “the project of *Bildung*” as the emergence of a new conjunction of semiotics, aesthetics, and pedagogy whose underlying structure is informed by a model of self-reflection or narcissism. Beginning with Herder’s “Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache,” the author argues that language is conceived not as a system of signs but as a narcissistic act of self-construction, where paternal authority is internalized in the form of a retrospective account of one’s self as ideal-ego. The pedagogical ideal of *Bildung* follows this construct, where through self-reflection the male subject is disciplined for service to the state. In this context the aesthetic object assumes the function of representing the ideal-ego to the subject. A model of aesthetic autonomy emerges (elucidated with aesthetic writings by Moritz and Schiller) which valorizes aesthetic distance and spectacle: “classicist aesthetics both holds the object at a certain distance, which prevents the identification with an other, and produces an emphatic or enthusiastic identification with an ideal self” (207). Von Mücke concludes the volume with close readings of Schiller’s *Maria Stuart* and Wieland’s *Agathon* in light of the project of *Bildung*.

It is impossible to do justice to the complexity and breadth of von Mücke’s discussion in this brief space. The author has succeeded in synthesizing a wide range of theoretical concerns—semiotics, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis, theory of gender—in an articulate, unfailingly lucid analysis that offers a comprehensive structure for understanding major literary developments in eighteenth-century Europe.

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–Priscilla Hayden-Roy