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Palmås, K. (2025). Bildung, and How That Concept Sits with Traditional Notions of Teaching Students "How to Think"
Like Engineers. Philosophy of Engineering and Technology: 115-130.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-86581-7_8

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Chapter 8
Bildung, and How That Concept Sits with Traditional Notions of Teaching Students "How to Think" Like Engineers

Karl Palmås

Abstract Starting from the proposition that higher education is a matter of "learning how to think", this chapter investigates the meaning of *Bildung* in the context of engineering education. Following recent calls for a re-evaluation of classical *Bildung*—more specifically for a turn to a more politically-oriented critical-reflexive version of *Bildung*—the chapter studies one earlier instance of a re-evaluation of classical *Bildung*. By exploring how Erik Gustaf Geijer and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist challenged dominant conceptions of *Bildung* in Sweden during the 1830s and 1840s, the chapter argues that the classical *Bildung* ideal of forming original human beings who can think for themselves remains a valid objective of higher education. As such, the chapter suggests that recent, more politically-oriented versions of *Bildung* jeopardize the classical *Bildung* ideal of intellectual autonomy—an ideal which holds particular value in engineering education.

Keywords Liberal education · Classical *Bildung* · David Foster Wallace · Erik Gustaf Geijer · Carl Jonas Love Almqvist

8.1 Introduction: Learning "How to Think"

It is sometimes held that higher education is about teaching students "how to think". Indeed, I remember hearing this repeated to me when I was an engineering student, having ploughed through the initial maths-intensive phase of the program. Doing engineering, a teacher told me, is not so much about learning to solve this or that

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K. Palmås (✉)
Department of Technology Management and Economics, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: karl.palmas@chalmers.se

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A. Buch, S. H. Christensen (eds.), *Bildung for Engineering Education and Practice*, Philosophy of Engineering and Technology 49,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-86581-7_8

equation. Rather, it is about learning to think in a specific manner. As such, each particular, specific solution of a mathematical problem is a drill exercise that hones one's skills in more general problem-solving. As such, engineering education is really about instilling a habit of mind; about teaching students to engage with the world in a specific problem-solving manner. The same *modus operandum*, over and over: Breaking large and complicated problems into manageable components, solving each lower-level problem one by one, thus deriving a higher-level solution.

This description of engineering education is hardly unique: In his recent monograph about *Bildung* in engineering education, Jacobsson (2019, p. 44) suggests that the problem-solving trope constitutes the most pervasive notion of what it means to think like an engineer. Similarly, when the UK Royal Academy of Engineering describes what it means to "think like an engineer", problem-finding and problem-solving are promoted as key "engineering habits of mind" (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2014). Again, from this perspective, engineering education is a matter of teaching students to think in such problem-solving terms.

However, the proposition that higher education is about teaching students "how to think" is not confined to engineering education. The idea is as prevalent in the Anglo-American tradition of liberal arts education. Due to the fact that they do not—like technical universities—present their *raison d'être* in terms of educating for a specific profession, liberal arts institutions are more strongly wedded to the abstract purpose of "learning how to think" (Harford, 2022; Schwartz, 2015). As such,

> the goal of liberal education cannot simply be the acquisition of content knowledge, but the development of thinking skills, and more specifically the skills of thinking insightfully, critically, and creatively. (Hadzigeorgiou, 2015, p. 263)

American novelist David Foster Wallace comments on this proposition in his famous 2005 commencement speech to the graduating class at the prestigious liberal arts institution Kenyon College. In the meditation subsequently published as *This is Water*, he even suggests that the idea of teaching students how to think is the "single most pervasive cliché" in the liberal arts commencement speech genre. (Foster Wallace, 2009) For him, the problem is not only that it is a hackneyed trope: It is also somewhat insulting to students. The young minds that he was addressing were already capable thinkers before they arrived at the highly selective Ohio-based college.

Nevertheless, Foster Wallace concludes, the cliché of learning "how to think" actually *does* contain an element of truth, but this truth requires some qualification. For one, a liberal arts education does offer the student a distinct set of tools with which to understand the world. This includes what Foster Wallace calls the "standard liberal arts analysis", which prompts the student to accept that "the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people's two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience". This understanding of the world breeds tolerance, and an appreciation of diversity of belief—two virtues that are key to liberal education. Similarly, Schwartz (2015) demystifies the notion of learning how to think by

spelling out a series of intellectual virtues that should be fostered by liberal education. These include honesty about one's failings; fair-mindedness; humility and willingness to seek help; good listening; perspective-taking and empathy. Schwartz are keen to bill them precisely as virtues—a term that implies moral imperatives—which are distinct from cognitive skills such as quantitative abilities, conceptual flexibility, analytical acumen, and expressive clarity. Similarly, when the American Association for the Advancement of Science promotes liberal education in the sciences, it describes it in the following terms:

> Ideally, a liberal education produces persons who are open-minded and free from provincialism, dogma, preconception, and ideology; conscious of their opinions and judgments; reflective of their actions; and aware of their place in the social and natural worlds. (AAAS, 1990: xi)

Still, Foster Wallace refrains from positing that this "standard" liberal education habit of mind is the be-all and end-all of liberal education. The value of such studies cannot be reduced to individuals learning how to think in tolerant and open-minded ways. "Learning how to think", he tells the graduating class, really means "learning how to exercise some control" over what to think about. It is about learning to *choose* what you think about, as you find yourself in the "day-to-day trenches of adult existence".

For him, then, the value of a liberal education is deeply personal, as it may assist in coping with the emptiness of contemporary life. Through the liberal arts, students may escape feelings of boredom and loneliness—major themes of Foster Wallace's novels—but only through exercising control over their thoughts. Actively choosing what to think about in the context of the contemporary world is crucial, especially as the standard "socially conscious" liberal arts criticality may sometimes increase one's sense of emptiness. In short, Foster Wallace seems to suggest that the virtues and habits of thought cultivated by a liberal education are noble pursuits—but ultimately students must be capable of *transcending* "standard" procedures, "standard" habits of thoughts, and become autonomous subjects.

This reading of Foster Wallace's argument—one that emphasizes the cultivating of individuals capable of thinking for themselves—places it squarely within a long-standing discussion on *Bildung*, as conceived in the continental European setting as well as Anglo-American liberal education tradition. This idea will occur throughout this chapter, which will argue that this aspect of classical *Bildung* should remain central in current discussion on how to interpret the notion of *Bildung* in contemporary engineering education.

The argument runs as follows. The next section will review central themes in the literature on *Bildung* in engineering education, focusing on the five different conceptions of *Bildung* outlined by Sjöström et al. (2017), as well as the kind of updated, politically oriented critical-reflexive *Bildung* that they themselves promote. It will also introduce Erik Gustaf Geijer and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, whose work was central to how the notion of *Bildung* was introduced and re-interpreted in the Swedish educational setting during the nineteenth century. Neither Geijer nor Almqvist were associated with technical universities, but their concerns—what is

the place of classical *Bildung* in the context of new social challenges?—overlaps with the issues at stake in this argument.

The subsequent section (8.3) goes into the specifics of Geijer and Almqvist's understanding of the place of classical *Bildung* in a modernizing society, emphasizing their point of not lapsing into static modes of reading that merely mimic the classics. The section then transposes their work into the issue of teaching engineering students: In contrast to the close readings associated with the humanities, the context of the engineering education requires creative readings that make the problems inherited from the classics come alive in the context of present concerns. More generally, Geijer and Almqvist's work underscores the importance of promoting creativity rather than fidelity in engaging with the classics. This imperative is somewhat at odds with recent interpretations of a critical-reflexive *Bildung* that suggest that STEM education should be aligned with social critique and the agendas of societal challenges. Much like liberal education is about more than repeating the "standard liberal arts analysis", *Bildung* in engineering education cannot be reduced to teaching students the "standard" procedures for social critiques of engineering, or standard critiques of technology in general.

The chapter ends with a concluding discussion (8.4) that joins the threads of the argument. Combining the arguments of Foster Wallace, Geijer, Almqvist and others, the argument ends with an attempt to describe and name that "excess" faculty that we seek to promote when fostering *Bildung* among engineering students.

8.2 Shifting Conceptions of *Bildung*

Thus far in this chapter, two versions of *Bildung* have been discussed: The classical *Bildung* tradition of continental Europe, and the liberal education tradition of the Anglosphere. In a useful systematic review of international literature on the concept, Sjöström et al. (2017) list three further versions of *Bildung*: The Scandinavian folk-*Bildung* tradition, the United States-based tradition of democratic education, and the more recent critical-hermeneutic version of *Bildung*. This section will describe these in further detail, and then briefly describe where the work of Geijer and Almqvist fit into this taxonomy.

8.2.1 Five Versions of Bildung

Classical *Bildung* has its roots in continental Europe and tends to be associated with Vilhelm von Humboldt. In this original statement of the term, *Bildung* is 'a process of individualization where humans develop their personality through studies and reflections in a diverse, harmonious, and unique way, and thus become a human original rather than a copy of others' (Burman, 2014, p. 127, cited in Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 169). Thus, the term emphasizes a process of personal development, which

serves a purpose that transcends any professional or instrumental ends. This sentiment is inherited from German romanticism. There is value in seeking knowledge for knowledge's own sake because the end of *Bildung* is self-realization. Not only does this end transcend professional imperatives—it also trumps ends like the common good, or the unity of the state. (Beiser, 2003, p. 91) This is why autonomy is crucial: The Humboldtian university should be autonomous—free from outside interference—and the end of the education is the autonomous, fully developed human being.

The tradition of classical *Bildung* also inherits another sentiment from German romanticism—the primacy of the humanities and fine arts. For one, there is Humboldt's own preoccupation with language. For him, *Bildung* is about overcoming a fundamental alienation from the external world (von Humboldt, 2000, p. 59), and thus about establishing a connection between the self and the world. This connection can only ever be structured as language, ranging from everyday speech to the adoption of alternative worldviews through the learning of foreign languages. (von Humboldt, 1963) However, there is also the influence of the German romantics' focus on *Bildung* through art, not least through Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic education. This idea emerged in response to what the romantics saw as a failed enlightenment: The thinkers of the enlightenment had sought to explain (*aufklären*) the world though reason, but by spreading their ready-made concepts to the public they had contributed to revolutionary chaos. Their approach was flawed, Schiller suggested, because it did not encourage individuals to think for themselves, or thinking spontaneously, since the enlightenment philosophers had already done the thinking for them. The public had become passive recipients of knowledge, not autonomous individuals, and could not translate the philosophers' ideals into reasoned action. (Beiser, 2003, p. 94) Schiller thus proposed that aesthetic experience of the beautiful could develop sensibilities that compel the individual to act in reasoned ways. The inspirational power of art would fill the moral void left after enlightenment's demolishing of religious authority. In this way, aesthetic education serves as a higher order mode of learning—rather than building formal knowledge, it shapes the character of autonomous human beings.

As hinted in the previous section, the Anglo-American tradition of liberal education is shares many of the traits of classical *Bildung*. It too emphasizes the formation of individuals who can think for themselves, and the idea of seeking knowledge for its own sake. However, given that its ties are not as strong to the romantic tradition of continental Europe, it has traditionally not placed as strong of a focus on the humanities. Rather, liberal educational programs are generalist in nature, encompassing the sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences. In studying a broad range of fields—mathematics, science, literature, fine arts, history, and philosophy—liberal arts students are attuned to different "forms of knowledge". (Hirst, 1972) As such, the liberal education "trains the seeing of connections" (Kallenberg, 2015, p. 133) across knowledge domains.

Aside from the above, there are two versions of *Bildung* that are more directly oriented towards the education of all citizens. In Scandinavia, there is the folk-*Bildung* tradition, which emerges in the late nineteenth century. As a part of the

social-democrat ambition to build an inclusive society, it is an endeavor to provide education for the whole people, outside of the confines of academia. In the United States, the democratic education—which is associated with pragmatist philosopher John Dewey—represents a similar ambition.

Finally, Sjöström et al. (2017) traces a critical-hermeneutic *Bildung* tradition, that starts with Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), runs via Wolfgang Klafki (1927–2016), and on to present-day thinkers. As a continuation of this tradition, they propose a critical-reflexive *Bildung*, updated for the present time. This involves a stronger socio-political orientation, enabling it to "function as a bridge between traditional liberal education and activism-oriented education", promoting "constructive participation in society, and solidarity towards persons limited in the competence of self-determination and participation". (Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 180).

This more politicized version of *Bildung* is deemed useful in today's "late modern risk society with all its socio-scientific and technological challenges". The present time is one that places demands on educational institutions, and one may wonder how the ideals of classical *Bildung* fare in the context of such challenges. Let us now turn to an earlier time in history—to the 1830s and 1840s—when similar anxieties about social challenges prompted similar re-evaluations of classical *Bildung*.

8.2.2 Geijer and Almqvist's Challenge to Classical Bildung

By European standards, Sweden was a late bloomer in terms of democratization and modernization. Major advances in political participation and socio-economic welfare set in a few decades into the twentieth century. However, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Swedish intellectuals were closely monitoring the onset of modernity that was raging on the European continent.

Erik Gustaf Geijer—historian, poet, statesman and Rector at Uppsala University—was one of those who saw the modern groundswell coming and adjusted his political orientation accordingly. He had spent the early 1800s as a conservative intellectual, championing the proposition that only nobility and clerics should learn how to think. Here, he was heavily influenced by the German romantic idea of *Bildung*, and its concomitant focus on the humanities. (Geijer, 1928a [1810]; Landquist, 1924) In the late 1830s, he would then reject this position, announcing his defection from conservatism to liberalism, and spearheading an educational reform that saw the state assuming responsibility for offering *Bildung* to the broader citizenry of the emerging middle class. (Geijer, 1928b [1838]) This would later pave the way for the development of the Swedish folk-*Bildung* tradition. Crucially, his departure from his previous views also represented a departure from the idea that humanities should hold a privileged position when cultivating *Bildung*.

Geijer's experience is emblematic of a specific period in history, in which a conservative, feudal state of affairs was crushed by a modernity that—paraphrasing Marshall Berman—not only brought "adventure, power, joy, growth,

transformation of ourselves and the world" but also threatened "to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are". (Berman, 1982) Geijer personified the shift from conservatism to liberalism, but also an abandonment of a specific reading of *Bildung*, and a shift towards a new one.

The liberal reform of the educational system that Geijer promoted was also supported by the novelist and educationalist Carl Jonas Love Almqvist. Their joint engagement on the issue constituted a challenge to what classical *Bildung* had become in Swedish public life. In the next section, this chapter will explore the specifics of this challenge to classical *Bildung*. At this point in the argument, however, it is worth noting two things. First: Our moment in history—the "late modern risk society with all its socio-scientific and technological challenges" (Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 180)—is not unique in generating calls for a revision of what *Bildung* entails. Second: Then, as now, classical *Bildung* was challenged by progressives who suggested that new times call for new interpretations of the term. However, as we shall see in the next section, their proposed revision of the term differed significantly from today's calls for a more activist- and societal participation-oriented interpretation of *Bildung*.

8.3 Learning from Geijer and Almqvist

This section will first explore the specifics of Geijer and Almqvist's critique of what classical *Bildung* had become in the 1830s. It will then transpose some of their points to current concerns with how to cultivate *Bildung* in contemporary engineering education, focusing specifically on how to read classics, and how to inherit the legacy of classical *Bildung* today.

8.3.1 From Romanticism to Realism

As hinted above, Geijer defected from conservatism to liberalism, and this shift also amounted to a new interpretation of *Bildung*. This transformation can be described as a shift from romanticism to realism, and this shift affected not only Geijer. In the intellectual circles in Stockholm and Uppsala of the 1830s and 1840s, romanticism was in decline, and there was a "realist urge to get away from empty abstractions". (Norberg, 1944, p. 67) Realism is, however, a particularly apt description of Geijer's position. His turn to liberalism can be understood as emerging from an experience of being a conservative "mugged by reality".[1] In light of the new social, economic, and technical realities he observed in Europe, he realized that the feudal structures

[1] This is a paraphrase—a near-reversal of Irving Kristol's famous saying that a neoconservative is a liberal mugged by reality.

(and the conservative views that defended them) were about to crumble. This caused him some concern—he feared that modernity may spell doom—but he nevertheless felt compelled to face what he saw as new facts about the world. His defection from conservatism to liberalism caused an outcry, and there is no coincidence that it was announced in the context of a debate on education.

Both Geijer and Almqvist concluded that they were living in a time when the affirmation of the individual was inevitable. This understanding was, in part, a result of a reading of the social circumstances, but it was equally a reflection of their inspiration from classical *Bildung*; the celebration of self-actualization. They both referred to the "personality principle"—a phrase coined by Geijer that implied that we become fully formed individuals in the meeting with others. Such meetings must, however, be meetings among equals. Thus, Geijer—like Tocqueville, his major source of inspiration—held that the gravitation towards equality was both desirable and inevitable. The personality principle contained both political and pedagogical dimensions. First, the primacy of the individual and the inevitability of equality implied that the remnants of the feudal system of government had to be abolished. However, the personality principle connected the question of rights—*one person, one vote*—with the question of *Bildung—education for all*. (Ullman, 2014, p. 46).

This is where the critique of classical *Bildung* surfaced. On one level, this critique was directed at the problem of what constitutes proper education for political representatives. On this matter, Almqvist provided a scathing critique, stating that some of the elements of classical *Bildung*—such as knowledge in Greek or Latin—was as useless as knowledge in heraldry. (Almqvist, 1995 [1844–1845], p. 393) Instead, the new times required knowledge in governance, relating to military matters, as well as fundamentals of finance and economics. (p. 394) Almqvist railed against how the nobility and clergy referred to classical *Bildung* when legitimating their power—especially as their *Bildung* constituted a shallow one. The only thing that distinguished the rulers from the ruled was the fact that the rulers could use French, German, English or Latin to say what the ruled could say in Swedish. The nobility and clergy made use of hackneyed sayings that "sound more than they contain" but held little relevance for the political matters at hand. Their modes of thought were convoluted, and they lacked the capacity to continue a train of thought to their logical end. (p. 395).

However, Almqvist and Geijer's intervention also had effects beyond the issue of how political representatives were to be educated. Their efforts contributed to the establishment of a public school system for all, aimed at the education of citizens into self-government and self-actualization. This development also implied a toppling of the hegemonic status of Latin course of study (consisting of classical languages) as the education for the ruling classes. Latin was thus complemented by a new course of study—fittingly titled Real—which focused on mathematics and natural sciences.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is worth examining the details of Almqvist's account of how the Latin course of study had failed the original ideals of classical *Bildung*. In his critique of the supposedly "learned" ruling classes, one can trace his

animosity towards how the study of classical languages had been reduced to an empty mimicking, devoid of creativity. This ran counter to the imperatives of forming autonomous human beings who could think for themselves. According to the personality principle, the point of education must always be for individuals to seek their own originality. When engaging with the classics, he suggested, the challenge is to avoid shallow repetition of dead sayings, and instead probe the deeper meanings that such classics contain. Indeed, as Ullman (2014, pp. 53–54) suggests, his position is in alignment with the more suggestion by Donald Broady (1984)—that classical *Bildung* cannot be inherited through mere "aping". The only way to inherit it is through constructive engagement with the experiences and ideas of the classics. The chapter will now move on to examine what import these historical developments may have on contemporary engineering education.

8.3.2 Inheriting the Ideals of Classical **Bildung** *Today*

As suggested above, the debate on classical *Bildung* in early- to mid-nineteenth century Sweden is illuminating when placed alongside contemporary discussion on how to inherit the ideals of such *Bildung* in engineering education. Then, like now, a sense of societal dislocation provides the impetus for a re-evaluation of what *Bildung* really means. Beyond these similarities, there are however further things to take away from Geijer and Almqvist. One concerns the specific question of how to read the classics, another the broader question of how to foster constructive participation for engineering students in society.

In the North American context, there are recent attempts to formulate what a "liberal studies in engineering" program would look like. (Bucciarelli & Drew, 2015) For instance, this could imply adding a broader understanding of the socio-political context of engineering, through "schooling in certain 'fundamentals' […] in political philosophy and social theory, for example, Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Tocqueville". (Bucciarelli & Drew, 2015, p. 117) In response to this proposal, Donna Riley (2015) warns against shallow appropriations of the liberal arts approach, where it becomes reduced to "a haphazard smattering of superficial exposures". She describes such cringe-worthy practices in the following manner:

> Add an element of history here, a writing assignment there, an ethics case study every blue moon and presto! Liberal education. The most dangerous aspect is that engineering faculty dilettantes can mischaracterize or reduce entire genres of knowledge, damn the consequences. (Riley, 2015, p. 139)

This is, of course, a valid concern. It is wise for faculty of technical universities not to overstep the mark and mislabel their approaches. Established course titles like "Technology and Society" (van der Vleuten et al., 2017, p. 157) are perhaps more useful for describing the teaching activities that seek to instill *Bildung* in engineering curricula—which, after all, are more instrumentalist in nature than either liberal

education or the humanities. Still, it is worth remembering that such activities at technical universities are not *meant* to act as torchbearers of the liberal education or classical *Bildung* traditions.

Furthermore, as suggested by Almqvist, one must resist the tendency for classical *Bildung* to gravitate towards non-creative repetition, towards the shallow mimicking of dead sentences. This constitutes a betrayal of the ideals of classical *Bildung*. Again, the challenge when reading classic texts—be it Plato, Machiavelli, or Hobbes—is to move from shallow repetition to the deeper meanings. In the end, the timeless character of such texts—their capacity to speak to people across ages and contexts—is precisely what makes them classics. This implies that they can indeed speak to today's engineering students, provided their reading of them is a creative one. Such readings require that the teacher manages to convey some deeper meaning of the text that remains valid in the context of the students' future life. The means by which this meaning is acquired are, nevertheless, of a lesser importance: As compared to the humanities, there is less need for back-to-back readings of complete works, or for readings in original language.

In other words, the creative readings that may be productive in the context of engineering education must not be confused with the *close* readings that are the mainstay of the humanities. Such close readings remain crucial for safeguarding our collective ability to inherit from classic texts. Riley (2015) is correct in arguing that engineering faculty members may be well served with a bit of humility towards the rich tradition that they are poaching from. Nevertheless, that should not stop them from persisting in their attempts to assign classic texts to their students. After all, in doing so, they breathe new life into such texts.

The question of how to inherit the ideals of classical *Bildung* is also at stake in the recent proposition by Sjöström et al. (2017) that *Bildung* today should prompt students to engage in "constructive participation in society". Again, one may compare this re-evaluation of the meaning of *Bildung* to that of Geijer and Almqvist. While both proposals for re-evaluation point to an urgency created by social circumstances, there are clear differences between the two.

Sjöström et al. (2017)—along with other scholars—point to the need for a critical-reflexive form of *Bildung* that forms "a bridge between traditional liberal education and activism-oriented education", tying the *Bildung* agenda to specific political challenges, notably social and ecological justice. (Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 182) This position also includes the fostering of critical literacy, in which reflection breeds action. In this view, critical *consciousness* is invariably tied to critical *agency* (Ebenezer, 2013): Critical literacy implies a disruption of the commonplace, an interrogation of multiple viewpoints, a focus on socio-political issues, tied to political action and promoting social justice. (Lewinson et al., 2002) The kind of citizenship that is at stake is a critical one, and this includes the fostering of political emotions. For Ruitenberg (2009, p. 277, cited in Sjöström et.al., 2017, p. 180) this may—in accordance with the political theory of Chantal Mouffe—imply "the ability to feel anger on behalf of injustices committed against those in less powerful social positions".

In contrast, Geijer and Almqvist's re-evaluation of classical *Bildung* concerned the domains of knowledge that are to be privileged: Away from a sole focus on classical languages, to more focus on social sciences and natural sciences. It also concerned the methods of engaging with the classics, with a focus on deep understanding rather than shallow regurgitation. The objective of these revisions was, however, to stay true to the original ideals of classical *Bildung*, inherited from the romantics—the cultivation of unique human beings, which possess the capacity to think for themselves. This was, in turn, into their view of citizenship: The very point of democracy is to release the originality of each singular individual.

Here, the position of Geijer and Almqvist is at odds with the more recent formulation of a critical-reflexive *Bildung*. In short, the highly prescriptive orientation of the latter approach leaves little room for autonomous individuals who are to think for themselves. There is a risk that critical-reflexive *Bildung*—at least when operationalized into everyday teaching—moves beyond the idea of teaching students *how* to think, instead prescribing *what* to think. There is also a risk that students call teachers out to prescribe what to think *about*, as well as how to *act* and *feel*. What to think about? Social and ecological justice. How to act? In accordance with such justice movements. How to feel? Anger.

Thus, much of Almqvist's critique of the shallow Latin-based *Bildung* of his time could be directed toward such prescriptive tendencies of contemporary critical-reflexive *Bildung*. True—for Geijer and Almqvist, the issue of cultivating responsible citizens was at stake, but this process could not be traded off against the process of forging individuals' ability to think for themselves. After all, shallow regurgitation was precisely what Almqvist objected to.

These propositions may be transposed onto *Bildung*-oriented teaching in contemporary engineering education contexts. When studying classics like Plato, Machiavelli, or Hobbes, there is ample space *not* to prescribe what students must take-away from the class. The teacher may encourage a particular way of understanding the text—for instance, that one of the concerns of Plato is the place of expertise in decision-making. However, the question of what to think about Plato or his critics, what to feel about such views, or whether the discussions in class should prompt political action is best left to the students themselves. Yet, as stated before, classics are classics by virtue of their ability to invite new thoughts and feelings—to suggest new potential waypoints for student's continued travels. In the end, it is up to them which waypoints to follow as they develop their own original character. In the end, an all too prescriptive approach places teachers in a position perilously close to the false impression that *Bildung* is a readymade bundle of ideas, rather than a process of personal formation.

As such, classical *Bildung* implies that education is to produce something more—or perhaps something else—than whatever their teachers convey to students. This problem will be pursued in the concluding discussion.

8.4 Concluding Discussion: The Excess of Education

This chapter has argued that the current discussion on a re-evaluation of classical *Bildung* may be well served by reviewing one such earlier re-evaluation—the challenge posed by Geijer and Almqvist in the 1830s and 1840s. For one, the work of Almqvist is useful for thinking about how to engage with classic texts in engineering education. For engineering students, *creative* readings are more productive than the *close* readings conducted within the humanities. However, Almqvist is also interesting considering recent proposals for a more politicized form of critical-reflexive *Bildung*. It is worth noting that his sentiments are not grounds for dismissing critical-reflexive *Bildung* because it challenges some ideal of an "objective" technical education: The political ramifications of engineering practice should indeed be conveyed to students. The point is, rather, that students must use their education to figure out their own political or ethical positions.

This reading of Almqvist partly dovetails with Hadzigeorgiou's (2015) concerns that 'science education as socio-political action' (SEASPA) approaches downplay "the importance of knowledge for its own sake". (Hadzigeorgiou, 2015, p. 259) However, while Hadzigeorgiou's disquiet is primarily directed towards a neglect of the "personal/aesthetic dimension of science"—encompassing a sense of awe, mystery, and wonder—the argument above is not solely relating to personal matters. Given the long history of engineers running errands for the powers that be (Berner, 1981; Riley, 2008), a focus on teaching engineering students to think for themselves can be understood as a safeguard against future abuses of power. Intellectual autonomy not only serves the private human being—it may also serve the wider community. If personal originality of mind is the final objective of education, then the *Bildung* efforts of engineering schools should steer clear of becoming too prescriptive on matters socio-political. If not, education fosters subservience rather than autonomy.

At this point, we may return to Foster Wallace's meditation on learning how to think—or rather, on how to learn to *choose* what to think about. His message can be read as one that celebrates the very same autonomy described above. Yes, the "standard liberal arts analysis" taught during the education may be useful, but in the end, the true gift is the ability to choose to *transcend* that formal "take-away" from the education. This begs the question of what an education should offer, if its value really resides in that which is not formally taught. This paradox goes all the way back to the German romantics. Thus,

> there was nothing more important to the romantics than *Bildung*, the education of humanity. This was the central theme and goal of their ethics, aesthetics, and politics. But, from a more practical perspective, there seems to be *nothing less important* to the romantics than education. When it comes to concrete suggestions about how to educate humanity—about what specific institutional arrangements are to be made—the romantics fell silent. (Beiser, 2003, p. 105, italics added)

In his own way, Foster Wallace seems to be making a similar point. So is Swedish educationalist Ellen Kay, who famously argued that *Bildung* is that which remains

once you have forgotten what you have learnt. The classical *Bildung* ideal of forging autonomous thought presents something like a reversed version of Bataille's (1991) "accursed share": It is not the excess of an education is accursed; it is *only* the excess that is *not* subject to disposal. Formal knowledge must be squandered for the "formed" human being to come into view.

Another way to approach this paradox is to ask what critical thinking really implies. As Bruno Latour (2004) has suggested, it all too often implies reducing something more to something less, when in fact criticality should be generative. Here, he engages in Alan Turing's discussion on intelligence among humans and computers. Turing suggests that most of the minds that one encounters among humans are "sub-critical", which means that an "idea presented to such a mind will on average give rise to less than one idea in reply". However, a "smallish proportion" of human minds are "supercritical":

> An idea presented to such a mind may give rise to a whole "theory" consisting of secondary, tertiary and more remote ideas. (Turing, 1950, p. 454)

Turing suggests that animal minds are always sub-critical, but the question is whether "a machine be made to be super-critical?". Turing's analogy is, of course, sourced from the idea of critical mass in fission: A sub-critical mass is not sufficient for setting off a chain reaction—nothing "more" can emerge from the sub-critical. For Latour, on his part, is more interested in human minds, and in what the notion of "super-criticality" means for our understanding of the term "critique". What would it mean if by "critical" we always mean a habit of mind that yields something more, not less? A habit of mind that is generative, not reductive? A fostering of that mode of critical thinking among engineering students may be the proper way to inherit the tradition of classical *Bildung*.

In summary, there are several overlapping figures of thought that may capture the meaning of classical *Bildung*. They all point towards the idea of *Bildung* as the excess of education: For Almqvist and Geijer, *Bildung* must transcend the empty mimicking of classical languages, and instead contribute to the formation of unique, individual "personalities". For Foster Wallace, a liberal arts education should provoke something more than the "standard liberal arts analysis" and enable students to choose for themselves what to think about. The German romantics were passionate about *Bildung* as the general objective of education, but agnostic about the practical means of formal schooling. Similarly, Kay suggested that while you may forget the formal knowledge acquired during an education, *Bildung* is that which remains. In this way, *Bildung* can be understood as an inverted version of Bataille's "accursed share". Finally, one may understand *Bildung* in relation to Latour's and Turing's simile about "super-critical" intelligence: *Bildung* should forge minds that go beyond simply reducing the world to the pre-existing knowledge imparted through education.

While all these figures of thought are evocative, the question still remains: How should engineering education be organized in order to promote such *Bildung*? Here, it is important to not retreat to the above-mentioned agnosticism about educational practices displayed by the German romantics. However, one must also recognize

that there are no educational silver bullets or quick fixes on this matter. The notion of classical *Bildung*, understood as the excess of education, *does* rest on a fundamental paradox. Any educational effort to promote *Bildung* must start from recognizing this vexing fact. Indeed, the problem of how to teach something as elusive as *Bildung* looms large in the above-mentioned discussions on the place of the humanities and liberal arts in engineering education.

Aside from such scholarly discussions, however, it is also productive to invite engineering students to consider this paradox. Simply by discussing the wider objectives of higher education—the fact that an engineering education involves *both* instrumentalist knowledge *and* an excess of *Bildung*—students may become more cognizant of the *Bildung* aspect of their education. Thus, they may form their own ambitions for the years they spend at university. They may recognize that while acquiring formal knowledge, they are also in a process of forming their personality, becoming unique human beings. Placing their attention on this fact is important: A process of becoming easily goes unnoticed by the person being subject to it. Further, in becoming attuned to Ellen Kay's insight into the ephemeral nature of formal knowledge and the lasting impact of *Bildung*, students may consider the longer-term benefits of acquiring an education, beyond landing their first job.

There is one further merit in presenting engineering education as an inheritor of the ideals of classical *Bildung*. In so doing, it is possible to clarify the rules of engagement between teachers and students. Again, the point of the education is for students to transcend whatever the teacher tells them. As proposed by Hannah Arendt, the role of the teacher is to merely present "what the world is like", but "not instruct in the art of living". (Arendt, 2006, p. 195) The teacher can only represent the present and the past world; the future belongs to the students.

> Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. (p. 192)

This is one way of understanding the stakes of classical *Bildung* in the context of contemporary engineering education. We teachers are educating the caretakers of a future world we know very little about. All we know is that the formal technical knowledge of today will become obsolete. The best we can do is to assist in the formation of unique, whole human beings to whom we can safely pass the torch.

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Karl Palmås Associate Professor at the Division of Science, Technology and Society, Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. Originally trained as an engineer, he holds a PhD in Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science. His teaching involves training the professional judgment of future engineers by learning from classics in social thought. His research entails sociological studies of design activities—be it in architecture, automotive industry, nanotechnology, or spatial planning—and his most recent English-language book is *The Corruption of Co-Design: Political and Social Conflicts in Participatory Design Thinking* (Routledge, 2023), co-authored with Otto von Busch.