2010

Review of Goethe's Modernisms

William H. Carter

Iowa State University, wcarter@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs

Part of the European History Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, German Language and Literature Commons, and the Translation Studies Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/75. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the World Languages and Cultures at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Cultures Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Review of Goethe's Modernisms

Abstract
Imagine for a moment that you are not a Goethe scholar, and consider these questions: Why read Goethe, or his contemporaries, for that matter? Is it worth the time and effort required? Are there not more relevant issues deserving of our attention? It is the year 2011 after all. What might we learn from this fellow Goethe that we don't already know? With the ever-increasing pressure on educators in the liberal arts, in general, and Germanists, more specifically, to make a case for their continued existence, these are deadly serious questions. They require answers that are accessible to an audience who may not be familiar with Goethe or his Age.

While reading Goethe's Modernisms, I was contemplating career options other than teaching German language, literature, and culture at an institution of higher learning—not by choice, mind you. What transferable skills do I possess? Where does one start? What is a Goethe scholar to do? As I have taught numerous courses dealing with the Goethezeit, I am used to discussing with students the relevance of this time period, its texts, and its contexts for contemporary life—all of which I take great pleasure in doing. However, speaking with motivated, self-selecting students about this is one thing. Justifying to administrators—provided that is even an option—the value of such discussions is quite another. What might all this have to do with Goethe's Modernisms? A great deal, I contend. Astrida Tantillo, President of the Goethe Society of North America as well as Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has written a book that addresses many of the questions I posed above. In it she presents nuanced readings of Faust, Werther, and the Wilhelm Meister novels that have much to offer to Goethe studies. At the same time, her analyses are framed by the broader issue of Goethe's contribution to and critique of modernity, with a particular eye on America.

Disciplines
European History | European Languages and Societies | German Language and Literature | Translation Studies

Comments

This book review is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/75

Imagine for a moment that you are not a Goethe scholar, and consider these questions: Why read Goethe, or his contemporaries, for that matter? Is it worth the time and effort required? Are there not more relevant issues deserving of our attention? It is the year 2011 after all. What might we learn from this fellow Goethe that we don’t already know? With the ever-increasing pressure on educators in the liberal arts, in general, and Germanists, more specifically, to make a case for their continued existence, these are deadly serious questions. They require answers that are accessible to an audience who may not be familiar with Goethe or his Age. While reading Goethe’s Modernisms, I was contemplating career options other than teaching German language, literature, and culture at an institution of higher learning—not by choice, mind you. What transferable skills do I possess? Where does one start? What is a Goethe scholar to do? As I have taught numerous courses dealing with the Goethezeit, I am used to discussing with students the relevance of this time period, its texts, and its contexts for contemporary life—all of which I take great pleasure in doing. However, speaking with motivated, self-selecting students about this is one thing. Justifying to administrators—provided that is even an option—the value of such discussions is quite another. What might all this have to do with Goethe’s Modernisms? A great deal, I contend. Astrida Tantillo, President of the Goethe Society of North America as well as Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has written a book that addresses many of the questions I posed above. In it she presents nuanced readings of Faust, Werther, and the Wilhelm Meister novels that have much to offer to Goethe studies. At the same time, her analyses are framed by the broader issue of Goethe’s contribution to and critique of modernity, with a particular eye on America.

In her case studies of Faust, Werther, and Wilhelm, Tantillo calls attention to Goethe’s “principle of compensation,” which she describes as follows: “First, it provides the dynamic structure with which to understand Goethe’s complex works, and second, it is a useful tool to analyze the contemporary issues that so divide us today” (5). Among the issues she addresses are capitalism and technology (Faust), religion and secularism (Werther), and progressive education (Wilhelm Meister). Tantillo’s reading of Faust concentrates on Part II. She discusses the principle of compensation here in terms of gains and losses. In his effort to create wealth, she argues, Faust loses aesthetic appreciation and concern for nature. Ultimately, Faust is condemned to heaven, she argues, and this is the tragedy: “Faust’s final end is tragic in that he is rendered incapable of further activity. In this sense, the play signals its ultramodernity: a scientific, naturalistic understanding of the world replaces a religious one” (29–30). Faust’s land reclamation project—complete with piracy, colonization, and the murder of Baucis and Philemon—offers another example of Goethe’s modernisms. Faust’s demise
presents us with a negative example that can help us reflect on contemporary business practices, both within and beyond academia. His loss is our gain.

While one can make the case that we have become increasingly Faustian, striking individual or collective deals with the devil, Tantillo suggests that “our society has also become more ‘Wertherized’ in its focus on individuals and their emotions, personal quests toward spiritual discovery, intense appreciation for nature, and environmental advocacy” (74). In her analysis of Werther, she traces the rise of this modern individual against the backdrop of Pietism and Catholicism. In Werther, Goethe offers another negative example. If Faust is too instrumental in his reasoning, Werther is too passionate. His self-centered, inward-turning nature eventually leads to his suicide. He isolates himself to the point that he feels the need to cut himself off entirely from the world. “Werther,” Tantillo concludes, “failed not only to achieve the balance of reason and passion in his own life, but he rejected the attempt even to try to do this” (102). Her reading of Werther is followed by a fascinating account of its shared history with American Evangelicalism, its connection to American spiritualism, and contemporary debates about the use of grammar.

The third and final chapter addresses education in the Wilhelm Meister novels vis-à-vis issues concerning contemporary education. Tantillo begins with the question of teacher-centered versus student-centered pedagogy. Starting with Aristotle and Rousseau, she brings us up to date on the current debate surrounding the best method of teaching. What lesson might Goethe have for us with regard to this matter? “Both novels make the case that a practical and useful education does not need to be a soul-deadening one, and that the arts can and should flourish alongside business and trade” (159). Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship together with Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years demonstrates both the costs and benefits of a liberal arts education. The principle of compensation applies to education as well, and unlike Faust or Werther, Wilhelm is more adept at applying this principle. For those who may be familiar with portions of Faust and/or Werther but might not have read the Wilhelm Meister novels, Tantillo offers an excellent reason to take the time to read them.

Tantillo convincingly demonstrates why Goethe should be read for today. He has much to offer with respect to contemporary issues. At one point, she writes of his “prescient criticisms,” a phrase that nicely characterizes Goethe’s many insights. Goethe’s Modernisms is an outstanding contribution to Goethe scholarship, one that is very accessible to a larger audience, a pleasure to read, and deeply insightful.

Iowa State University

William H. Carter
