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Review of Goethe's Modernisms

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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

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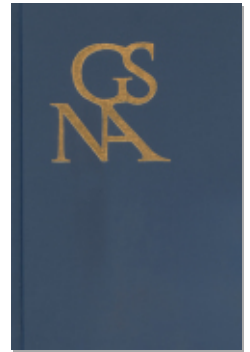
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Goethe's Modernisms (review)

William H. Carter

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zu Goethes Briefen, insbesondere zu Datierungsfragen, wurden eingearbeitet. Allen Goethe-Forschern steht mit dieser Ausgabe nunmehr ein verlässlich-unerlässliches Hilfsmittel beim Studium der Quellen zur Verfügung. Mit dieser immensen editorischen und wissenschaftlichen Leistung ist ein weiterer wichtiger Schritt in der Goethe-Philologie gelungen. Man wird dem Erscheinen aller weiteren Bände mit großen Erwartungen entgegen sehen dürfen.

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Constanze Breuer

Astrida Orle Tantillo, *Goethe's Modernisms*. New York: Continuum, 2010. 198 pp.

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.

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Kristina Skorniakova, *Moderne Transzendenz: Wie Goethes Wilhelm-Meister-Romane Sinn machen*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010. 423 S.

Während *Werther* und *Wahlverwandtschaften* nichts von ihrer Attraktion verloren haben, bereiten die *Wilhelm-Meister-Romane* unseren Studenten Schwierigkeiten. Ist es die Fülle der Realien der Theaterwelt, der Shakespeare-Rezeption, des Pietismus, der Geheimgesellschaften, der Pädagogischen Provinz, der Heimarbeit der Weber, der plastischen Anatomie, der amerikanischen Utopie, die die heutigen Leser überwältigt? Oder ist es die umstrittene Gattung des Bildungsromans, die ihre Relevanz verloren hat? Jane V. Curran hat für die *Lebrjahre* einen Leserkommentar auf Englisch vorgelegt, der die Lektüre erleichtern soll