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Review of Geld und Magie: Eine ökonomische Deutung von Goethes Faust

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Abstract

The first thing that must be said about this book is that, despite the claim that it is a “vollständig überarbeitete Ausgabe,” this is simply not the case. Although the subtitle may have changed (originally “Deutung und Kritik der modernen Wirtschaft anhand von Goethes Faust”), the story it tells twenty years later remains in effect the same. I shall return to the significance of this for those of us interested in Goethe Age economics, but first I will address Binswanger’s argument, the additions made to the second edition, and the value of this type of economic commentary on Goethe and Faust.

Disciplines

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

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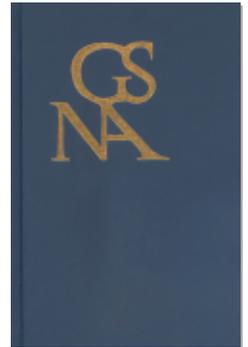
Geld und Magie: Eine ökonomische Deutung von Goethes Faust (review)

William H. Carter

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Reschke's multifaceted analysis cannot be reduced to any single interpretive paradigm or methodology, but the book does embody much of the best that new historicist approaches have to offer, and it testifies to the power of such approaches to shed new light on canonical works. At the same time, through his reflections on Goethe's transformative and sometimes parodistic appropriations of period discourses, Reschke avoids the new historicist danger of obliterating the distinctiveness of the literary work and transforming it into just one more expression of a monolithic *Zeitgeist*. If anything, he runs into the opposite problem. We come away from the analysis with a sense of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* as a literary-political intervention of mind-boggling depth and complexity. In other words, Reschke's study raises what may seem like an old-fashioned question—that of authorial intent. By their very nature, his allegorical readings of various aspects of the work would seem to presuppose an authorial intelligence doing the allegorizing, and in general the study leaves us with the impression that Goethe has complete control over his art. But surely the notion of discourse, which also figures prominently in the study, suggests that one could tell a similar story about the historical-political content of the novel without placing such an emphasis on self-conscious virtuosity. Reschke is by no means unaware of this tension, but to this reader's mind he never addresses it in adequate detail. Measured against the value of the study as a whole, however, this criticism is a bagatelle. The bottom line is that Reschke's book constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the novel and of Goethe's aesthetics, one that no serious scholar will be able to ignore.

Washington University in St. Louis

Matt Erlin

Hans Christoph Binswanger, **Geld und Magie: Eine ökonomische Deutung von Goethes *Faust***. Hamburg: Murmann Verlag, 2005. 166 pp.

The first thing that must be said about this book is that, despite the claim that it is a "vollständig überarbeitete Ausgabe," this is simply not the case. Although the subtitle may have changed (originally "Deutung und Kritik der modernen Wirtschaft anhand von Goethes *Faust*"), the story it tells twenty years later remains in effect the same. I shall return to the significance of this for those of us interested in Goethe Age economics, but first I will address Binswanger's argument, the additions made to the second edition, and the value of this type of economic commentary on Goethe and *Faust*.

One need not read far to determine that Binswanger places a great deal of emphasis on alchemy in his interpretation of *Faust*. Goethe, we learn in the first paragraph, "erklärt die Wirtschaft als einen alchemistischen Prozess" (13). Binswanger proceeds to argue that the alchemical attempt to create gold was transformed into the economically successful creation of value as exemplified in the creation of paper money. With respect to economic theory of the *Goethezeit*, he maintains that Goethe's economic insight extended beyond the classical labor theory of value proposed by Adam Smith and forecast the potential of the modern economy to create value *ex nihilo*. For Binswanger, the creation of surplus value is equivalent to magic (24). Rather than exploring further the question of value in *Faust* and/or economic value theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Binswanger returns to his alchemical analysis, one apparently influenced by the work of the psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung, who described *Faust* as "ein alchemistisches Drama von Anfang bis Ende" (17, note on page 129). According to

Binswanger's reading, the alchemical process in *Faust* proceeds in three stages. The first is the creation of paper money, followed by the acquisition of property, and finally the formation of real capital. "Das alchemistische Werk," he concludes, "gipfelt schließlich in dem von Faust geleiteten großen Unternehmen der Kolonisierung. . . . Das von Faust geplante Unternehmen ist das größte aller alchemistischen Werke" (43). In the second part of the book, Binswanger elaborates on Faust's colonial endeavors and presents Philemon and Baucis as impediments to progress, who must be removed at the behest of Faust, "der moderne Mensch" and the personification of "Geldkapital" (126, 128–29). Many a reader, I expect, would balk at this description of Faust and the interpretation of the events that unfold in Part 2. In the end, Binswanger's argument fails to convince, largely because he sees alchemy in everything. Mephistopheles, Wagner, and Faust are all described as alchemists. An even great problem with this text is that it defies scholarly convention. Line numbers are not given for *Faust* quotes, and there are a number of missing citations from Goethe, Schiller, Baudelaire, and others. This was also the case in the first edition. As mentioned above, additions to this edition are not substantial. Although a comparison of the table of contents for both volumes reveals one new section titled "Die Zwei Wetten im *Faust*-Drama," it is an expansion of previous material. On the topic of the two wagers, Binswanger writes: "Die Tatsache seines Scheiterns, die Tatsache, dass Faust die Wette in dem Irrtum verliert, die Verewigung des Diesseits erreicht zu haben, ist die Voraussetzung dafür, dass der Herr die Wette mit Mephisto gewinnt" (82). In the second part of the book, Binswanger focuses on attempts to overcome time via *Wissenschaft*, *Kunst*, and *Wirtschaft*. As with the first part, he raises relevant questions, however, his alchemical approach and frequent failure to contextualize and comment on quotes makes one suspicious of the text's value as scholarship.

In her 1996 review of the English translation of *Geld und Magie* for *Goethe Yearbook* vol. 8, Jane Brown wrote: "Binswanger may have something to say about the modern economy, though the quality of his thinking about Goethe makes me skeptical. It is a poor commentary on the state of our discipline that this book should pass for *Faust* scholarship" (325). Unfortunately, since its original publication, Binswanger's book has been frequently cited along with Bernd Mahl's *Goethes ökonomisches Wissen* (1982), which is an important piece of Goethe scholarship. Ulrich Gaier, for instance, refers a number of times to both Binswanger and Mahl in the "Ökonomische Lesart" section of the second volume of his *Faust* commentary. While lately there has been renewed interest and serious investigation into Goethe's economic knowledge, as evidenced by Joseph Vogl's *Kalkül und Leidenschaft: Poetik des ökonomischen Menschen* (2002), there is a great deal more to say about Goethe and his relationship to economic thought of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Binswanger, drawing upon Mahl, deserves credit for highlighting in the final section of his monograph a number of Goethe's economic sources including: Justus Möser, Johann Georg Schlosser, Georg Sartorius, Gustav von Gülich, Johann Georg Büsch, and Georg von Buquoy. He also mentions, however briefly, Goethe's role as a senior political and financial advisor to Carl August. Binswanger references Willy Flach's seminal first volume of Goethe's *Amtliche Schriften*, published in 1950, but does not consult other, more recent volumes. This is another indication that his contribution to this area of Goethe scholarship remains dated and, indeed, out-dated. Goethe's understanding of economic issues, which he drew from the latest in

economic thought as well as his own and others' practical experience, is deserving of rigorous scholarship, which I am confident my colleagues will continue to pursue despite or perhaps because of Binswanger's book.

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Johannes Anderegge and Edith Anna Kunz, eds. **Goethe und die Bibel**. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005. 344 pp.

The editors preface this volume of fifteen essays by Swiss, German, and North American scholars with the claim that, while the topic could seem old-fashioned, rightfully understood it contains "erhebliche Sprengkraft" (9). Given the tremendous shifts and metamorphoses that the Bible went through in its status as text in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, an explosive volcanic or tectonic metaphor seems not out of place. If the Bible serves as a "Substrat" (15) of Goethe's work—or, one might add, of European literature in general—what happens to the whole cultural edifice when hermeneutic assumptions abruptly change, when divine scripture emerges as an historically contingent, composite text?

The conventional answer is that biblical meaning becomes secularized and absorbed into the Enlightenment project. But Anderegge and Kuhn argue—very much in line with recent historiography of religion—that the term "secularization" does not do justice to the complex status that the Bible not only retains but also attains in Goethe's work (14–15). At the same time, the editors assert, the book is not concerned with Goethe's "Religiosität" (12). To be clear: the agenda here is not religious apology.

So how do these contributors articulate Goethe's relationship to the Bible in such a way that it falls neither into a one-way narrative of secularization nor into a speculative affirmation of belief? As a matter of fact, not all contributors do eschew these more conventional approaches. Thomas Tillmann advances a paradigmatic secularization thesis concerning Goethe's representation of speaking in tongues in his essay "Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen." He comes to the conclusion, "[Das Lallen löst] sich aus seiner Bindung an die Sphäre des Religiösen und wird als ästhetisch-individueller Selbstzweck der Säkularisation verfügbar" (33). Meanwhile Hans-Jürgen Schrader identifies in both *Werther* and the conclusion of *Faust* a theological message colored by radical Pietism: "die ... Verkündigung der Allliebe Gottes, der endlichen Wiederbringung auch des Getrübten. ..." (88).

But while not all the contributors share the editors' interpretive framework, lively paradoxes and tensions in Goethe's relationship with the Bible emerge here in great variety. A few examples will have to suffice. Anne Bohnenkamp, in her analysis of Goethe's lifelong preoccupation with the Song of Songs, shows how he wrests the poetry from the allegorizing, redemptive-historical framework of Christian hermeneutics and brings it closer to the less dualistic outlook of ancient Judaism (and twentieth-century Jewish philosophy). Goethe thereby lends religious accents to the material, sensual, and erotic realm, a process Bohnenkamp calls, in contradistinction to "Säkularisierung," "Sakralisierung" (94). Clark Muenzer's essay on Job might suggest another name for it—"Spinozierung." Goethe reads out of Job a paradoxical divinity, unbounded by human moral categories, manifesting itself as a dynamic, ever-creating and destroying nature. According to Muenzer, Goethe thus finds support in the Book of Job for a