Theology and Dehumanization: Trauma, Grief, and Pathological Mourning in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century German Thought and Literature (review)

Bethany Wiggin

Goethe Yearbook, Volume 17, 2010, pp. 382-383 (Review)

Published by North American Goethe Society

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/gyr.0.0044

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372019

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=372019
Baudrillard and Foucault and the question of commitment in a postmodern world.

Lorna Fitzsimmons’s *International Faust Studies* vividly illustrates the enduring legacy and the seminal qualities of Goethe’s *Faust*, a reminder that it truly represents a work of world literature, resonating far beyond the canonical boundaries of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German literature. The essays are well written, sophisticated without becoming opaque. The volume as a whole is well put together and supplied with an excellent index. This collection of essays is a refreshing and valuable contribution to Faust studies.

*Armstrong Atlantic State University*  
*Thomas L. Cooksey*


The pages of Jill Anne Kowalik’s posthumous *Theology and Dehumanization* swim in grief. Afloat with the mourning rituals of seventeenth and eighteenth century Germany, the book sketches a rising tide of unresolved grief, its waters teeming with repressed affect, rage, and trauma. The editors’ preface—co-authored by Gail Hart, Ursula Mahlendorf, and Thomas P. Saine—reminds us that Kowalik refused “to evade the personal issues her research raised and she used the intellectual task she set for herself to confront her own traumatic illness, the knowledge and fear of her own impending death, and her grief” (9). One senses that the editors too adroitly used this intellectual task to do their own mourning work. They have had to navigate treacherous waters, creating a scholarly monograph *cum* memorial.

In *Theology and Dehumanization*, lead editor Hart and her collaborators—Ursula Mahlendorf, Thomas P. Saine, and Hans Medick—have gathered nine essays authored by Kowalik over some fifteen years. Four have appeared previously as journal articles, two in these pages. The first introduces the book Kowalik had planned to write had she but world and time enough, a work which would have included a final chapter on “the meaning of dehumanization” intended to “clarify the impact of early modern forms of grief on the development of modern pathologies” (22). The editorial preface elucidates, “the finished work as she visualized it would have encompassed the loss and grieving of all the centuries from Homer to the Vietnam War” (11). While that goal ultimately eluded Kowalik, the eight subsequent chapters suggest the quality of what has been lost with her death.

Varied in length and polish, the essays range ambitiously: from Achilles’s rage at Patroclus’s death (in chapter two) to twentieth-century German scholars’ “profoundly judgmental approach to emotional experience” (117). Tracing a genealogy of grief beginning with Homer, Kowalik asks how Paul’s frequently cited suggestion in I Thessalonians 4:13–14—grief may be remedied by the belief in resurrection—came to entail its proscription altogether. Grief, Kowalik argues, was not banned by Augustine, nor with Luther. Instead, it was outlawed in the seventeenth century, although not by Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (52–54). Grief’s “demonization,” Kowalik argues, was a particularly German phenomenon, one bound inextricably with the intense and prolonged reception of Johann Arndt’s bestselling *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum* (1606–). Pietism, and particularly Francke, Kowalik’s argument continues, bears responsibility for a host of
pathologies explored in the book’s final four chapters on Werther, Anton Reiser, Wilhelm Meister, and Die Wahlverwandtschaften.

An intervening chapter on trauma in the seventeenth century, presented here with what the editors nicely call the “Mut zum Fragment” (15), explores the genre of the Protestant Leichenpredigt which flowered from the end of the sixteenth into the eighteenth centuries and has bloomed again more recently in scholarship inspired no doubt in part by Kowalik’s work (Niekus Moore, Kobelt-Groch). Drawing on work by Jonathan Shay on combat trauma, Kowalik proposes to examine trauma, particularly after the Thirty Years’ War, in Leichenpredigten measured in terms of one of its universal features: rage. “The question before us,” she writes, “is not whether trauma occurred—thousands of victims have testified that it did—but what the quality of trauma was and what kinds of mechanisms evolved that did or did not allow victims to come to terms with extraordinary violence, injury, and loss” (96).

Unlike much recent historical and theoretical work on early modern Europeans’ practices of spiritual and bodily mortification, particularly among mystics (de Certeau, Hollywood, Strasser, Temme), Kowalik hardly shies from moral judgments of the book’s actors. Leading Pietists come away particularly badly. We read, for example, that unlike in England, “across the channel Francke’s orphanage in Halle was exploiting child labor, abusing its charges, and creating depressives at an astonishing rate—and, worse, it was becoming the model for Prussia as a whole” (34). Her introduction intriguingly proposes that absolutism required this affective regime and suggests that her work should be read as a contribution to “The History of Central European Sadism” (25). While the work on the Leichenpredigt does not here bear this out, the proposition demands further attention. It certainly might be explored profitably in readings of Trauerspiele, epicedia, and other lyric forms missing altogether from these pages.

Recent years have witnessed vigorous study of historical affect (Sabean and Medick, Roper, Rublack, and others) and of trauma (Scarry, Hermann, Caruth, LaCapra, Butler, and others). One will look in vain in the pages of Theology and Dehumanization for most of these references. One must mourn what might have been created had Kowalik been able to read them—or to consult comparative studies, such as Jill Lepore’s The Name of War. Yet, in seeing Kowalik’s essays into print, Hart, Mahlendorf, Saine, and Medick have provided valuable thought for later readers. Hardly only troubled waters, these pages are also remarkably rich. May the talent of their future navigators equal that of their source.

University of Pennsylvania

Bethany Wiggin


In a review of the literature, the author finds that “in all these works there is a curious omission: the absence of any detailed discussion of Jung’s relation to Weimar classicism, and specifically to Goethe” (7). He examines particularly Richard Noll’s thesis “that analytical psychology was originally founded as a neo-pagan cult” (6) and that this thesis had its “inaugural moment” in 1916 when Jung addressed the “newly founded Psychological Club” (8) with references to Goethe’s poem “The Mysteries” (Die Geheimnisse) from 1816. The book begins here, where the author discovers his own critical moment in a new thesis that despite all the studies and poems on Greco-Roman and Germanic pagan mythologies, “Weimar