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Review of: The Spell of Italy: Vacation, Magic, and the Attraction of Goethe by Richard Block

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The Spell of Italy: Vacation, Magic, and the Attraction of Goethe by Richard Block

Review by: Jennifer Driscoll Colosimo

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die achtundsechziger Generation weiterhin auf eine poetische Stimme, die ihrem utopischen *Summer of Love*—jenseits von politisch schlechtem Gewissen—euphorischen Ausdruck, oder zumindest nostalgische Verklärung verleihen könnte.

Das theoretische Unterfutter, aus dem sich die Interpretationen speisen, ist zumindest für amerikanisch-germanistische Verhältnisse recht bescheiden. Nur sporadisch finden sozialgeschichtliche und psychoanalytische Werke von Elias, Freud, Foucault, Fromm, Luhmann et al. Erwähnung und Berücksichtigung (am umfassendsten noch in Simone Wecklers Ausführungen). Hilfreich wäre auch ein abschließendes Sach- und Namensregister sowie ein Verzeichnis der zitierten Literatur gewesen. Insgesamt gesehen stellt der Band jedoch ein fundiertes und oft faszinierendes Kompendium dar, in dem die Jahrhunderte alte Erfahrung und Gestaltung der Liebe in der deutschen Dichtung facettenreich zur Anschauung gelangt. In seiner Faktenfülle und verständigen Deutungsvielfalt kann er Wissbegierigen in Sachen Liebe und Lyrik fast ohne Einschränkungen empfohlen werden.

FREDERICK A. LUBICH, *Old Dominion University*

Richard Block. *The Spell of Italy: Vacation, Magic, and the Attraction of Goethe* (Kritik: German Literary Theory and Cultural Studies). Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006. Pp. xi, 310. Cloth \$54.95.

In attempting to establish both the exact nature of Goethe's relationship to Italy, the country and the concept, and its impact on German(-language) intellectual history over the course of the following century and a half, Richard Block's *The Spell of Italy* undertakes a highly ambitious program. In the Italy of Goethe's journeys, Block identifies the locus of a tradition of attempted self-discovery, denial, and rejuvenation that is prepared, in fact, by Goethe's predecessor, Winckelmann; carried on with varying degrees of success by such luminaries as Heine, Freud, Nietzsche, and Thomas Mann; and finally brought to a halt by the preemption or subversion of the aggressively paternalistic Italian ideal by Ingeborg Bachmann. The result of his interpretive efforts is a work that is well-constructed, impressive in scope, frequently challenging, and usually interesting.

One of Block's central, and most compelling, arguments is that the Italy identified as the birthplace of German classicism is illusory. The author provides a judicious discussion of the means by which the absence of Italy is first created then concealed, by which the conceptual space Italy marks is simultaneously emptied and filled—the cuts and substitutions necessary to cobble together the Italy of the imagination. Block's ability to maintain and evolve in a convincing way the metaphor of removal, of cutting and cutting off, throughout the entire book—from Winckelmann's homoerotic shame and fascination with the figure of the castrato; to circumcision and Heine's failure, as an outsider to German culture, to reproduce Goethe's Italian journey; to the issue of censorship—is both gratifying and noteworthy.

The greatest, and in my opinion interconnected, weaknesses of this work are

the often frustratingly associative style of argumentation and the rather impacted prose in which this argumentation is set forth. (It should be noted, with respect to the latter, that the prose becomes a bit kinder to the reader as the work progresses and the author seems to hit his stride.) Block's interpretive zeal appears to get the best of him, for instance, when he writes of Goethe's reluctant voyage to Sicily, "The seasickness he endured during the trip (*hin und her gebogen*) was a reenactment of the spiritual teetering produced by journeying beyond the father." (97) Similarly, his eagerness to tie in Winckelmann's practice of removal or "cutting off" in his art historical writings with the circumstance of his death by an assassin's knife, ascribes to him a death-wish, "Apparently it is far better to turn back on a knife—or to place oneself in a position to have the knife turned in on oneself—than to return to German soil," (42) which cannot help but arouse skepticism, the effect of which is not entirely effaced by the subsequent disclaimer, that it is "only a suggestion" (43).

These criticisms notwithstanding, I believe that Block has made a valuable scholarly contribution to a truly fascinating subject in German cultural history. Given the topic's inherent and timeless appeal, however, it seems doubtful that his will be the last word on the subject.

JENNIFER DRISCOLL COLOSIMO, *University of Puget Sound*

Helen Chambers. *Humor and Irony in Nineteenth-Century German Women's Writing: Studies in Prose Fiction 1840–1900*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007. Pp. 222. Cloth \$75.

Students in my literature seminars often bemoan the dearth of comic characters and plots in canonical German literature. Heroines, in particular, appear destined for death. A very different picture emerges, however, from Helen Chambers' new book, in which she inquires whether there is "a tradition of humorous and ironic writing in women's literature in German before the twentieth century" (1). To answer this question and its implications for a gendered reading of German literary history, she analyzes in chronological fashion irony and humor in selected works of nine women authors. Given the constraints of their gendered cultures, these authors had "plenty to laugh at" (196), and Chambers' study is a persuasive and elegantly written guide to how these women wielded the weapons of humor and irony.

In her succinct introduction, Chambers provides a brief overview of nineteenth-century women's writing, outlines humor and irony—the first described as anything to provoke laughter, the latter as a literary technique (4)—and argues that the literature in question features "an important and unbroken strand of humorous and ironic writing [...] which is not unrelated to works in the male canon, but which has distinctive qualities of its own" (2). Chambers supports this thesis through perceptive and highly nuanced interpretations that focus both on canonical and less well-known authors and works. Though her selection includes numerous tragic texts, she uncovers in each instance the often overlooked use of humor and irony.