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Book Review

Gelassene Teilnahme: Formen urbaner Muße im Werk Goethes

by by Peter Philipp Riedel, Mohr Siebeck, 2021. 271 pp. \$79.84

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Gelassene Teilnahme: Formen urbaner Muße im Werk Goethes stands as the seventeenth installment in *Otium: Studien zur Theorie und Kulturgeschichte der Muße*, a series of publications produced by the DFG-funded research initiative *Muße* based at the Universität Freiburg. The series undertakes the estimable task of (re)examining the concept of *Muße* in its varying forms within differing social and historical contexts, making the case for a radical revision of the term as representing something more than just a retreat from the world or even as something conceptualized in opposition to work. In his *Gelassene Teilnahme: Formen urbaner Muße im Werk Goethes*, Peter Philipp Riedel provides a significant addition to this project through an exploration of Goethe's *Italienische Reise* and a selection of closely related works. Bringing together seemingly oppositional terms, such as *Gelassenheit* and *Teilnahme*, Riedel demonstrates that they actually come to operate in a complimentary fashion, finding their most profound expression in the perception of the *Flâneur* figure that comes to characterize a revived Goethe as he strolls through the urban centers that dot the Italian landscape.

Riedel's analysis begins with Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, allocating considerable space to the author's time in Rome. It is there that Goethe is finally able to leave behind the utilitarian ideology that is so dominant in his native land, embracing instead the more equanimous lifestyle for which the southern reaches of Europe were known and, in the case of the northern protestant context, mocked. Goethe's assumption of that new mindset leads to the unique and paradoxical perspective from which Riedel derives the name of his work. Yet, far from imposing the sort of creative block due to which Goethe originally traveled to Italy (the author's stated goal was to undergo an artistic

rebirth), the seemingly self-contradictory ideas of “bestimmte Unbestimmtheit, tätige Untätigkeit, produktive Unproduktivität” (239) that mimic the notion of *gelassene Teilnahme* actually succeed in generating the conceptual conditions necessary for the author’s renewal. In his analysis, Riedel brings his and his fellow contributors’ knowledge to bear by invoking the figure of the *Flâneur*. Especially when roaming the streets of Rome, Venice, and Naples, Goethe’s sedate pace and detached mode of observation strongly resemble the literary figure of the urban wanderer; yet, Goethe’s figure has the peculiar tendency, as Riedel notes, to not avoid the crowd (240). And so, again, one is confronted by a contradiction, as Goethe finds in the immediate proximity and chaotic ambulation of the crowd precisely the sort of willful anonymity and solitariness, the kind of concentration and quiet he requires to fully engage his creative capacities. That is the constellation that Riedel recognizes throughout the *Italienische Reise*, and he endeavors to identify variations of it in several proximate works by Goethe: *Das Römische Carneval*, the *Römische Elegien*, and his *Venezianische Epigramme*.

Riedel’s *Gelassene Teilnahme* presents a highly detailed and stimulating engagement with the concept of *Muße* in those of Goethe’s works centered on his time in Italy. Yet, it is precisely this focus on Italy—an understandable and likely necessary act of restraint—that leaves one wondering at the meanings and forms of *Muße* one might encounter in the remainder of Goethe’s oeuvre. How is *Muße* depicted in *Wilhelm Meister*? How might the *Flâneur*-like figure of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* compare to, for example, the restless figure of his *Faust*? That being said, if one were to endeavor to broaden the scope of that inquiry in hopes of discovering further variants or intersections, one would have to begin with Riedel’s indispensable contribution to the field.