

Ziolkowski, Jan M. *Nostalgia and the German(ic) Past: The Medieval Poem of Walthare*, Zürich, Chronos, 2024, 82 pp.

Those of us who have perused Jan Ziolkowski's magisterial six-volume *The Juggler of Notre Dame* (2018) will be surprised by this slim *vademecum* of 82 pages (including paratextual features). Rather than a compendious all-embracing reception history, this *essai* focuses on the role of nostalgia from the early Middle Ages through the 21st century in the reception of the medieval Latin poem, *Waltharius*. The epic was composed in the 10th century, but recounts the heroic feats of arms of the fictional Visigothic Walter of Aquitaine, whose fight against the Huns shows numerous intersections with the *Nibelungenlied*.

Ziolkowski begins by asking why most cultural critics in the 20th and 21st centuries simplistically condemn all nostalgia as a pervasive social and political affection for an imagined past that endangers civil society and democracy. He discusses Neo-Nazi tendencies, the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, and nationalist medievalism in general as rationalizations for considering most nostalgic medievalisms as reactionary. However, so he inquires, how does a medieval Latin text fit into this general pattern of reception? Medieval Latin doesn't have much cultural prestige in the academy compared to Classical Latin and, instead of inciting nationalist sentiment, the *Walthare* may have prepared the way for various forms of Europeanism, for example in viewing Charlemagne as the medieval founding father of the modern European Union.

Ziolkowski calls the poem of 1456 lines "a sleeper," which received little attention during the Middle Ages, "caught the eye of no Renaissance man" (19), was printed incompletely in 1780, translated into German in 1782, reedited in its entirety in Latin in 1792, and received its first scholarly edition by none other than Jacob Grimm in 1838. Grimm's interest in the Latin poem was "to plug gaps" (20) in the emerging history of medieval German literature, one of his dearest goals at a time when "Germany" consisted of Prussia and at least 30 other states and principalities. To subsume

his (and his contemporaries') desire for a (re)united Germany as "romantic" (29) may be appropriate, but it should not be considered "retrograde" or "reactionary" and synonymized with the abuse of medievalia during the Wilhelmine or Nazi eras. Nostalgia can be "backward looking and even backward," Ziolkowski concedes. However, anything but homogeneous and monolithic, "it is now always expected to restore or even just preserve the past. Instead, nostalgia can enhance the exercises in 'compare and contrast' and 'know thyself' that learning demands. Alternatively, it can constitute a reservoir of strength and optimism that buffers against despair. And it can be conducive to the construction and reconstruction of identities" (29).

Ziolkowski adduces multiple uses of "nostalgia" from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds to ask if the term might be applied to human responses in late antiquity or the Middle Ages, and to do so without committing the cardinal sin (according to some historians) of anachronism. He answers in the affirmative, claiming that nostalgia for olden times "can correlate strongly with disquiet about what lies ahead. Golden ages and apocalypses complement each other" (35). He concludes that nostalgia stems "ultimately from a soldierly context" (40), specifically Ulysses' return home from Troy by sea. This is where Ziolkowski reconnects with *The Poem of Walthare*, whose author will have been familiar with crucial components of soldierly nostalgia expressed in the Homeric tradition, albeit via the Latin epics. Writing in Latin, the author of *Walthare* would have been "engrossed in the warrior ethos" (42) and eager to construct a hero for whom nostalgia and exile unite. The poet situates his plot for *Walthare* in a momentous period in European history, the *Völkerwanderung* (375-568 CE), a time when diverse cultures collided, intersected, and refashioned their ethnic identities. And he shows himself fascinated with the imagined past of a mix of peoples once preeminent, but long vanished in the poet's lifetime, especially Hunnic and Germanic tribes, but also with mentions of and commentary on Burgundians, Aquitainians, Saxons, Avars, and Franks. Surprisingly, nostalgia for *Romanitas* is entirely absent from the poem.

It is easy to see how this kind of narrative, even if originally in Latin, could be viewed as a candidate for appropriation, like the Germanic or

Nordic emblems coopted by white supremacists at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. Ziolkowski asks provocatively, “how far back” we should “sniff out precursors to censure for the eventual stench” of National Socialism, white supremacy, and toxic nationalism? Or, applied to *Walthare*, what bearing does “the inception of racialized thinking and anti-Semitism have on an early medieval poem?”

Should the tarnish of the nineteen thirties and forties compel us to refrain from studying what was made of the epic during the horrible ascendancy of the Nazis? When the past veered in directions of which we rightly disapprove, does it still offer nothing from which we may learn? Do we risk corruption even by contact? (45)

And, surveying the cooption of Norse runes and crusade imagery in Charlottesville, “would such cooption vitiate the old texts themselves?” (47). Ziolkowski questions some medievalists’ virtue signaling and “self-flagellation” (49), reminding us that presentist readings of *Beowulf*, J.R.R. Tolkien, or the term “Anglo-Saxon” can turn out just as “facile and anachronistic” as various simplistic nationalist readings of the past.

To be sure, there was at least one German Latinist, Karl Langosch (1903-1992), who first instrumentalized Medieval Latin texts for Germany’s national destiny and then, after 1945, reframed *Walthare* as a prototype for the European Union. And the poem does offer language that lends itself to this retooling as it mentions “Europe” as one of the three parts of the world, distinct in peoples, customs, languages, and religion.

In the highly polarized world of today’s academe, Jan Ziolkowski despairingly seeks for a *via media* that would allow scholars “to do our best neither to replicate the past in the present nor to superimpose today and yesterday” (61). He advocates for a “responsible” and judicious kind of nostalgia, one that “interrogates the past, maybe chiding or cherishing it in alternation,” never excluding the opportunity “to learn for the future, which may entail cultivating hope” (62). He resolves that nostalgia is not only retrospective, but also prospective. As we gently resuscitate, via literary interpretation, the *Walthare* hero’s stubborn unwillingness to let go of the past, and meditate on the *Walthare* poet’s own disquieted depiction of a bygone world, we can avoid both: “crumpling an imagined past into

the present” and “palimpsesting a fictitious present upon the past (64). We can rather “look back affectionately” (64) to compare and contrast past and present, employing our historical and aesthetic imagination and simultaneously confirming our shared humanity.

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