

KURT MUELLER-VOLLMER, *Transatlantic Crossings and Transformations: German-American Cultural Transfer from the 18th to the End of the 19th Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2015), 418 pp.

Usually, book reviews evaluate whether a study provides an original, innovative, or new contribution to scholarship. However, Kurt Mueller-Vollmer's book almost exclusively reprints chapters and essays previously published (since the 1990s; in both English and German). Thus, the question changes from originality to enduring significance. My review also assesses the volume's brief introduction as Mueller-Vollmer's attempt to unify these essays under a critical umbrella and arrange separate essays into a coherent whole.

In this case, however, the whole amounts to *less* than the sum of its parts, because Mueller-Vollmer's retrospective critical framing results in an overbearing, field-encompassing critique that sadly diminishes the scholarly merit of the essays collected here. Also, the compilation lacks either the authorial or editorial attention that could have fleshed out a coherent argumentative progression. Instead, readers encounter overlapping investigations of several spheres of German-American cultural transfer that repeat and loop back to earlier discussions of critical concepts, such as cultural transfer, literary discourse, literary field, and inscription. Explaining this pattern, Mueller-Vollmer uses the "notion of multiple reflexion or mirroring (*Wiederholte Spiegelungen*)," derived from Goethe, in order to "yield a different view of the same phenomenon, revealing a different aspect of it" (9). Granted, network theory must by definition eschew linear narratives in favor of multiple spaces of interaction, contact, and transfer—creating inevitable intersections and imbrications. This book, however, very basically repeats critical formulations and even entire sections almost *verbatim*. For example, in chapter two, "Anglo-American Literature and the Challenge of Germany: Transcendentalism as a Problem in Literary History," Mueller-Vollmer critiques Perry Miller deriving the nationalist origins of U.S. literary history and culture from the singular regional beginnings of New England Puritanism in his "monumental study" (68) *The New England Mind*:

The new emphasis on regional history did not change the basic assumptions characteristic of the traditional teleological view of Ameri-

can history. Consequently, Transcendentalism, and Emerson in particular, represent for Miller an end-phase in the evolution of Puritanism, a process that comprises the Puritan orthodoxy of the seventeenth century, the neo-Calvinist fundamentalist position of Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth and the Unitarian movement of the early nineteenth century. (69)

Miller's characterization of Emerson's notion of original sin in his essay "From Edwards to Emerson," Mueller-Vollmer further asserts, seems to be "[a] curious way of putting things, since the ex-minister Emerson knew only too well, as would his German reader Friedrich Nietzsche later, what the concept of original sin meant and why he did no longer believe in it" (69). Miller's understanding of Emerson, Mueller-Vollmer avers, was "limited and antiquarian (at best)" (69). As Miller's work has already received a widespread re-evaluation in American studies scholarship, such a critique dates the book's critical positioning.

Moreover, in chapter eight ("Regionalismus, Internationalismus, Nationalität: Amerikanischer Transzendentalismus und Deutsche Romantik"), the reader is exposed not just to a "mirroring" of foundational critical concepts but a carbon copy of the earlier critique of Miller:

In seiner oft zitierten Abhandlung, *Von Edwards zu Emerson*, stellt Miller daher das Denken Emersons als quasi selbstverständliche Fortsetzung und Endprodukt der Evolution des Puritanismus dar, ein historischer Vorgang, der über den fundamentalistischen Neocalvinismus des Geistlichen Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) und den die eingesessene Orthodoxie zu Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts ablösenden Unitarismus schliesslich zu Emerson geführt habe. (208)

Mueller-Vollmer further returns to Miller's characterization of Emerson's thought on original sin, which the author deems "[e]ine befremdliche Aussage sicherlich, denn der Exgeistliche Emerson kannte, wie auch sein Leser Nietzsche nach ihm, den Begriff der Erbsünde nur allzu genau, konnte ihm gerade deswegen keinen Glauben mehr schenken" (208). Mueller-Vollmer declaims that Miller's work is only "historisch antiquarisches und schablonenhaftes Interesses" (208). Such *déjà-vus* sadly distract from the book's considerable achievement in illuminating multiple spheres of German-American literary and cultural exchange in the early nineteenth cen-

tury that have indeed received scant scholarly attention: from the mediation of German Romanticism via the American dissemination of Anne Germaine de Staël's *Germany* to Francis Lieber's compilation of the *Encyclopedia Americana* as a clearing-house of information about Germany, and from George Bancroft's advocacy of Herder's concept of cultural nationalism to George Ripley's ambitious program of literary translation.

Readers could see past such lapses in editorial attention if the book's critical and disciplinary framing did not resort to a rhetorical grandstanding that is ultimately not borne out by the book's scope or its claims to scholarly uniqueness. Written in 2014, the introduction to this volume sees the book operating in a "largely neglected no-man's land" and claims "to present for the first time a comprehensive view of the momentous process of German-American cultural transfer that took place during the 18th and 19th centuries" (9). Mueller-Vollmer's book paints a dire picture of Germanist and Americanist scholars working largely in isolation from each other (9-10), while itself lacking any notion of the transatlantic and transnational work of the last 15 to 20 years: Mueller-Vollmer nowhere acknowledges the scholarship done (well before the publication of this volume) on transatlantic literary and religious (especially Pietist) cultural transfer throughout the colonial and early national period (e.g. Fluck, Fogleman, Nolt, Riordan, Roeber); he ignores the "multilingual turn" in American Studies initiated by Werner Sollors; and, unforgivably for a book that traces German cultural transfer among American Transcendentalists in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mueller-Vollmer nowhere mentions Jan Stievermann's masterful German-language study on Emerson (published in 2007).¹ Though it has become an

¹ Winfried Fluck and Werner Sollors, *German? American? Literature?: New Directions in German-American Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-75* (Philadelphia: U Penn Press, 1996); Steven M. Nolt, *Foreigners in their Own Land: Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic* (University Park: Penn State UP, 2002); Liam Riordan, *Many Identities, One Nation: The Revolution and Its Legacy in the Mid-Atlantic* (Philadelphia:

overwrought cliché for book reviews to fault books for neglecting scholarship that the *reviewer* considers formative, the latter case reveals a deeper flaw in Mueller-Vollmer's positioning and rhetorical stance. Even a cursory comparison reveals why this absence is so stunning: like Mueller-Vollmer, Stievermann focuses on Emerson's idealistic philosophy of history, his construction of literary history, his aesthetics of imitation, and the development of a national literature. Yet Mueller-Vollmer stringently faults American scholars and studies, such as Philip Gura's *American Transcendentalism*, for their ignorance of research done across the Atlantic: "His book appeared in 2007 and there is no mention of any relevant European publication of the preceding years or decades" (17).²

Methodologically, Mueller-Vollmer's book traces German cultural influences in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American literature primarily by listing relevant authors and titles rather than analyzing closely how this transfer unfolded on a concrete, textual level. One of the chapters originally written for this compilation, "German Missionaries, Native Americans and the Multicultural Origin of American Linguistics and Ethnology" (ch. 1), rightfully locates the beginnings of American linguistics in the Native American language work of Moravian missionaries David Zeisberger and John Heckewelder; a page from an Onondaga-German vocabulary compiled by Zeisberger in manuscript (located at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia) also decorates the book's cover. The chapter surveys American linguists who either concurred with or rejected Zeisberger and Heckewelder's sanguine assessments of Native American language and culture, from Peter S. DuPonceau's appreciate

UPenn Press, 2007); Gregg Roeber, "German and Dutch Books and Printing," *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 298-313; Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 1998); Jan Stievermann, *Der Sündenfall der Nachahmung: zum Problem der Mittelbarkeit im Werk Ralph Waldo Emersons* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).

² Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

stance to Lewis Cass's harnessing of linguistic hierarchies to justify Andrew Jackson's virulent removal policies. Missing is any kind of direct attention to Zeisberger's voluminous linguistic works. Mueller-Vollmer announces in the introduction that he "was able to locate and obtain copies of the grammars of Native American languages produced by German Moravian missionaries, notably those by David Zeisberger written in German and translated subsequently into English" (15). Yet, the respective chapter, though mentioning Zeisberger, neither discusses explicitly nor quotes from his linguistic publications and manuscripts.

Far from reviving New-Critical close reading strategies, my point here is that an Anglo- and U.S.-centric readership desperately needs

to receive tangible evidence of the crucial contributions and interactions of German-language writing and culture in the construction of a US-American national literature. Since Zeisberger's work is still largely neglected in American scholarship, it is all the more important to do the work of introducing and interpreting it for an English-only American readership. A study like Mueller-Vollmer's *Transatlantic Crossings and Transformations* that touts the significance of German-American cultural and linguistic transfer without making it truly visible fails to accomplish something that is needed now more than ever—performing acts of familiarization and translation across borders and differences.

Patrick M. Erben (Carrollton)