

Roland Borgards. *Poetik des Schmerzes: Physiologie und Literatur von Brockes bis Bhner* [Poetics of Pain: Physiology and Literature from Brockers to Bhner]. Mchen: Wilhelm Fink, 2007.

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## Preview

[Book Review] Andrzej Wiercinski reviews Roland Borgards.

*Poetik des Schmerzes: Physiologie und Literatur von Brockes bis Bhner* [Poetics of Pain: Physiology and Literature from Brockers to Bhner]. Mchen: Wilhelm Fink, 2007.

Roland Borgards. *Poetik des Schmerzes: Physiologie und Literatur von Brockes bis Büchner* [Poetics of Pain: Physiology and Literature from Brockers to Büchner]. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007.

Borgards voluminous monograph (501 pages) has an intriguing *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It originated as an interesting and very important debate regarding the relationship between literature and knowledge, (Roland Borgards, “Wissen und Literatur: Eine Replik auf Tilmann Köppe,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, vol. 2 [2007]: 425 and Andreas Dittrich, “Ein Lob der Bescheidenheit: Zum Konflikt zwischen Erkenntnistheorie und Wissensgeschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, vol. 3 [2007]: 631); (Tilmann Köppe, “Vom Wissen in Literatur,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, vol. 2 [2007]: 398; idem., “Fiktionalität, Wissen, Wissenschaft: Eine Replik auf Roland Borgards und Andreas Dittrich,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, vol. 3 [2007]: 638).

Borgards establishes the relationship between medicine and literature with particular focus on their respective contribution to the description and interpretation of pain. Acknowledging the disciplinary differences between medicine and literature, Borgards emphasizes their mutual concern for the understanding of pain in the Greek sense of *poiesis*. Etymologically derived from *poieo*, to make, *poiesis* describes an activity that results in the creation of a product. In all begetting and bringing forth there is a moment of becoming something else. Hermeneutically speaking, *poiesis* is a revealing of something in its presence as itself. In this respect we can speak of the “poetics of pain,” hence the title of this impressive monograph. Even though Borgards’s research centres on the period in the German literature between Brockes and Büchner, which in his own account is “relatively pain poor,” the author convincingly demonstrates the reasoning for his choice. The main shift of paradigms, from Descartes’s mechanical model of the body with the notion of pain originating outside of the body, to the integrated notion of pain as a vital existential process, has inspired poets and writers to discover the influence of pain on cultural and artistic productivity.

Literary and medical texts cover the wide spectrum of interpretations on the notion of pain. The main concepts of pain are presented in the work of Barthold Heinrich Brockes (*Earthly Enjoyment in God*), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (*Prometheus*), Carl Anton Bitzcius (*An Attempt at a Theory of Pain*), and Clemens Brentano (*Godwi, or The Stone Image of the Mother*). The research attempts at tracing the logic of representing pain in Christian literature (Brockes’s *Passion*), medical literature (Brockes’s *Cypresses Spread over the Coffin of the Virtuous Youngling*), and poetologic texts (Bodmer’s *Poems of the Father Mourning over his Son*). The experimental logic of pain is analyzed in Haller (*On the Origin of Evil*), Lessing (*Miss Sara Sampson*), and Herder (*Philoctetes*). The author further examines the legal,

medical, and literary logic of pain literature (tension, torture, experiment, interrogation). The inclusion of the legal discourse broadens the relationship between medicine and literature. The monograph concludes by outlining three dimensions of pain: physiology, historicity, and poetics of pain.

The phenomenon of pain always appears as culturally moulded and mediated. The perception of our being in the world and our sensitivity to pain are intrinsically linked. In modernity the historical transmission of the sensation of pain begins with Albrecht von Haller's distinction between "irritable" and "sensible" fibres within the body elaborated in his dissertation, *A Treatise on the Sensible and Irritable Parts of Animals* (1732). Based on his theory of irritability (contractility) of muscle tissue, the scientists completed physiological charts of nerve and muscle action, which fostered great advances in modern neurology. The scientific work on pain was complemented by his *Swiss Poems* (1752), of which "The Alps" (1729) are the most famous. In his poetry and novels he pours out his pain as a troubled genius struggling with a strange life.

In Borgard's poetics of pain, Johann Wilhem von Goethe's "Prometheus" (1773) holds a central position. Goethe asks:

Ich dich ehren? Wofür?	I honour you? What for?
Hast du die Schmerzen gelindert Je des Beladenen?	Have you eased the pain I am burdened with?
Hast du die Tränen gestillet Je des Geängsteten?	Have you stilled the tears Of my moments of anxiety?
Hat nicht mich zum Manne geschmiedet	Was I not forged into manhood
Die allmächtige Zeit Und das ewige Schicksal, Meine Herrn und deine?	By almighty time And eternal destiny, My lords and yours?

"Have you eased the pain I am burdened with?" Prometheus's question to Zeus opens up the possibility of reassessing the meaning of pain. It invites a rediscovery of the fundamental structure of human being and acting in order to reconstruct human life on the basis of autonomy, prompting the research into the meaning of the physical signs of pain. Goethe's "Prometheus" stands for the anthropological revaluation of the

pain in the Eighteenth Century with the overcoming of the religiously motivated understanding of pain as a penalty of God or mere physiological disturbance.

Borgards's impressive study takes an integrative approach to pain, trying to balance medicine and literature. This monograph offers an extensive material to investigate the primordial meaning of pain. Borgards stresses the importance of grasping pain as the primary sensation, which calls for a complex reflection on life and self-reflection, thus allowing us to fully embrace the manifold meaning of our being-in-the-world. Borgards acknowledges the importance and influence of the contribution to the understanding of pain made by philosophy, psychology, theology, and pedagogy. Regretfully, his book does not address the advances of those disciplines, a move that is somewhat justified by the subtitle, "Physiology and Literature." Borgard's *Poetics des Schmerzes* is an important anthropologically-grounded and phenomenologically accessible study of the meaning of pain. Along with other recent studies, such as Roland Borgards, ed., *Schmerz und Erinnerung* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2005), Iris Hermann and Anne-Rose Meyer, eds., *Schmerzdifferenzen: Physisches Leid und Gender in kultur- und literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Königstein: Helmer 2006), and Thomas Macho, Karin Harrasser, and Burkhardt Wolf, eds., *Torture: Politics and Technology of Pain* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), it represents a valuable contribution to understanding the condition of the human being at the beginning of the Twenty First Century.

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