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Journal Article

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Version: Accepted (Refereed)

Citation:

Richards, A. (2010)
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Eine Klostergeschichte (1776)
Publications of the English Goethe Society 79(3), pp.147-158

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The Sentimental Novel as *Trostschrift*

Johann Martin Miller's *Siegwart. Eine Klostergeschichte* (1776)

(abbreviated title: The Sentimental Novel as *Trostschrift*)

Abstract

Late eighteenth-century consolatory texts for bereavement employed traditional consolatory arguments, but also set new emphasis on sympathy, on a recognition of the individuality of the sufferer and on the benefits of an entertaining or ‘playful’ approach. This essay suggests that the sentimental novel took on some of the functions of the *Trostschrift* in this period. As well as offering the reader providential accounts of bereavement and of the prospect of reunion beyond the grave, Miller’s popular novel *Siegwart* (1776) establishes the sense of a virtual sympathetic community and offers the reader the cathartic opportunity to indulge grief, then distracts him/her from it with the aesthetic pleasures of the text. The negative reception of the sentimental novel by enlightened consolatory authors is ascribed to their distrust of the apparent ‘instability’ of fiction—its lack of ‘real’ referents.

There were different views on how to console the bereaved in late eighteenth-century Germany. In a short tale published in a collection of consolatory writings ('Trostschriften') in Leipzig in 1779,¹ August Hermann Niemeyer illustrates three different consolatory strategies, only one of which is portrayed as successful.

'Amyntor und Philotas' is the story of a young man called Amyntor, a reader of sentimental literature, who is overcome by grief for his deceased wife. The traditional, experienced consoler figures who sit with him for hours reciting well-known consolatory arguments ('Trostgründe')—the fact, for example, that his fate is decreed by heaven, or that death comes to us all—, who praise his wife in a half-hearted way and express the hope that her place will soon be occupied by another, do not manage to rouse Amyntor from his apathy. Amyntor's friend Phanias, who is of the sentimental school of thinking, has little more success. He waxes lyrical about the joys of suffering for love, takes Amyntor on moonlit visits to his wife's grave, sings songs with him about yearning to die and, pleased with the melancholy mood induced in Amyntor, describes him as a second Siegwart—a reference to the hero of Johann Martin Miller's bestselling sentimental novel of 1776, *Siegwart. Eine Klostergeschichte*. Amyntor's manly friend Philotas does not approve: he dismisses Phanias as an 'empfindsamer Thor' ('Amyntor und Philotas', p. 197) and his consolatory methods as counter-productive. He takes a third approach, listening to Amyntor's complaints and encouraging him to cry, and then introducing *Trostgründe*—that Amyntor should consider himself lucky to have had his wife for the time he did, for example—subtly, at appropriate moments. Amyntor and

¹ August Hermann Niemeyer, 'Amyntor und Philotas', in *Philotas. Ein Versuch zur Beruhigung und Belehrung für Leidende und Freunde der Leidenden*, Leipzig, 1779.

Philotas talk about death together, but about the joy of death after a virtuous life, and, slowly, Niemeyer writes, Amyntor comes to terms with his grief in a manly way.

Finally Philotas encourages Amyntor to look outward, to devote himself to his child and the welfare of the peasants on his estate. When Philotas visits him again a year later, Amyntor has cast his socially unproductive grief aside: he is reconciled to his loss, leading an active life, and remarried.

The judgement Niemeyer passes in this text as to the best method of consolation is consistent with the views on mourning and its cure typically expressed by the authors of popular psychological and consolatory texts in the late eighteenth century, as we shall see below. Niemeyer's text also sheds light on a relationship I want to examine further in this essay: the relationship between the *Trostschrift* and sentimental fiction. Niemeyer underlines the opposition, but, taking Miller's *Siegwart* as an example, I illustrate the similarities between the two. As the popularity of religious *Erbauungsbücher*, including *Trostschriften*, declined in the second half of the eighteenth century, sales of fiction, and of sentimental novels, increased. Without equating works of fiction with non-fictional texts, I take seriously the view that Phanius seems to entertain: that novels such as *Siegwart* are composed in such a way as to help readers come to terms with losses, and that late eighteenth-century readers looked to novels in part to fulfil the function of the traditional *Trostschrift*. If this is the case, a question remains: why, if their agenda was a similar one, were Niemeyer and other eighteenth-century consolatory authors so critical of sentimental novels and their effects?

Late eighteenth-century *Trostschriften* were part of a long tradition dating from ancient authors such as Seneca and Cicero,² who formulated Platonic or Stoical arguments against grief—the fact that grief is pointless, for example, or that the deceased has been freed from earthly suffering. During the medieval period these arguments were supplemented with theological ones, such as the idea that earthly loves distract people from God, or that grief should be tempered by the hope of resurrection. Ancient and Christian consolatory arguments continued to be used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period which Jill Anne Kowalik characterizes as largely repressive of grief and of the feelings of anger which accompany it.³

In the late eighteenth century, the age of *Empfindsamkeit*, there seems to have been more tolerance, or even encouragement, of the expression of grief than there had been in the previous age.⁴ Consolatory authors still employed the traditional *Trostgründe*, but they conceded greater validity to the emotional and irrational aspects of human nature in their attempts to bring mourning to a socially acceptable end. As one author, Hermann Demme, explains in 1792, it must be recognized that the mourner has an investment in his pain and is therefore loath to be consoled out of it,

² See Horst-Theodor Johann, *Trauer und Trost: Eine quellen- und strukturanalytische Untersuchung der philosophischen Trostschriften über den Tod*, Munich, 1968.

³ Jill Anne Kowalik, *Theology and Dehumanization: Trauma, Grief, and Pathological Mourning in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century German Thought and Literature*, ed. Gail K. Hart, Frankfurt/Main, 2009.

⁴ See my article ‘Providence and Sympathy: Consoling the Bereaved in the Late Eighteenth Century’, *German Life and Letters*, 59:3 (2006), 361–378, for a detailed discussion of certain trends in consolation in the late eighteenth century.

that he or she ‘hält [ihn] für gerecht, für pflichtmäßig, für heilig, gewinnt ihn lieb, und liebt dann um seinetwillen alles, was ihm ähnlich, und haßt alles, was ihm fremd ist.’⁵

Old-fashioned consolers, whose approach was seen as formulaic and impersonal, came in for criticism, as they do in ‘Amyntor und Philotas’.

Modern consolatory authors believe that effective consolation involves, first, the consoler offering his sympathy, displaying his own sadness at the bereaved person’s loss and/or speaking of a loss he himself has experienced in the past, or one suffered by a third person.⁶ This belief in the importance of sympathy was by no means new, but late eighteenth-century authors tend to lay more emphasis on it than their predecessors.⁷ They believed that expressing sympathy with the mourner conveyed to him/her a sense of community in grief and encouraged him/her to express his/her own suffering. This is illustrated by Demme’s text, which relates the story of a newly bereaved wife who displays an unnerving lack of emotion until a consoler figure arrives on the scene, laments the death of her husband, and tells her about his

⁵ Hermann Christoph Gottfried Demme, ‘Ein kleiner Beitrag zur Beantwortung der grossen Frage, wie man Leidende trösten müsse’, in *Der Pächter Martin und sein Vater* [1792-3], reprinted in Dr. Ludwig Vogel, ed, *Seelendiätetik, oder Anleitung zu der Kunst dauerhaft ruhig und zufrieden zu leben, Geisteszerrüttungen zu verhüten und bereits entstandene glücklich zu behandeln*, Erfurt, 1803, p. xxiii. See also review of La Roche, *Erinnerungen aus meiner dritten Schweizerreise*, in Johann Samuel Fest, *Beiträge zur Beruhigung und Aufklärung über diejenigen Dinge, die dem Menschen unangenehm sind oder sein können, und zur näheren Kenntniß der leidenden Menschheit*, 5 vols, Leipzig, 1789-97, iv (1795), p. 888.

⁶ Consoler figures were usually men, hence the use of the masculine pronoun.

⁷ See e.g. Fest, v (1792), p. 119.

sister, whose husband and son have died, upon which the widow cries herself. As well as gaining a gratifying proof of his/her own sensibility, the mourner experiences the cathartic effects of allowing his/her feelings to ‘flow’ in tears and laments. Ideally, it was thought, his or her fixation on the deceased would thereby be ‘loosened’ and he/she would be able to focus on other things.⁸ The expression of emotion is not an end in itself: it opens the sufferer up to a new perspective.

The danger existed, however, that rather than moving freely on to happier or more consoling thoughts, the grieving person would become entrenched in the first, seductive phase of the healing process, substituting its emotional compensations for those of cure, crying at length, and compulsively repeating the story of his/her bereavement to anyone who would listen. The author of the essay ‘Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns’, published in a late eighteenth-century consolatory journal entitled *Beiträge zur Beruhigung und Aufklärung über diejenigen Dinge, die dem Menschen unangenehm sind oder sein können, und zur näheren Kenntniß der leidenden Menschheit* (1789-97), using the first person pronoun, describes the experience of the mourner who derives pleasure from his/her grief: ‘darum spreche ich so viel von meinen Schmerzen, und lasse mich doch so ungern

⁸ Johann Joachim Bodmer expresses this idea in his *Critische Betrachtung über die Poetischen Gemälde der Dichter*, Zurich, 1741, when discussing the famous odes on grief by Besser, Canitz, Haller and other bereaved husbands in the early eighteenth century: ‘Wenn die Seele den Klagen ihren Lauf lässt, wird sie dadurch gleichsam entladen, losgebunden, und abgespannt. Mithin sieht sie die Sachen mit einem freyern Verstand an, und giebt den Vorstellungen, die ihr von andern gelindern Regungen gemacht werden, Platz,’ p. 335, quoted in Thomas Anz, *Literatur und Lust: Glück und Unglück beim Lesen*, Munich, 2002, p. 124.

davon heilen. Ich weine gern, denn ich weine nicht ohne Wollust'.⁹ In such cases, it fell to the consoler to find indirect or inconspicuous ways of leading the mourner away from his/her feelings and introducing different, more consolatory ideas. The word 'unvermerkt' and its variations are frequently used in this context. Casting the consoler as a sympathetic friend and using a vocabulary of gentle persuasion, in contrast to the sterner, more admonitory language typically used by consolers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, another contributor to the journal *Beiträge zur Beruhigung*, in an article entitled 'Einige Gedanken über den Umgang mit Leidenden', puts it thus:

der theilnehmende Freund muß die Kunst verstehen, den Empfindungen des Klagenden sanft zu folgen, nicht ihnen zuvorzukommen; er muß sie aufzulösen und unvermerkt in das Gebiet tröstender Vorstellungen hinüber zu leiten wissen.¹⁰

Various tactics can help achieve this end. The consoler can keep the bereaved person on the subject of his/her grief, but encourage him/her to analyse it in rational terms. Without his/her noticing it, the mourner's feelings are thus tempered. As the author of 'Einige Gedanken über die Trennung' explains: 'das giebt meinen Vorstellungen eine bessere Richtung, wenigstens Beschäftigung, welche der herrschenden Empfindungen des Herzens in solchen Stunden nicht allzu offenbar

⁹ 'Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns', in Fest, ed., *Beiträge zur Beruhigung* (1789-97), ii (1791), p. 9.

¹⁰ 'Einige Gedanken über den Umgang mit Leidenden, besonders mit Traurenden und über die beste Art sie zu trösten. Eine Stelle aus Wolfraths Charakteristik edler und merkwürdiger Menschen', in Fest, ed., *Beiträge zur Beruhigung* (1789-97), v, p. 119.

entgegen gesetzt noch unähnlich ist, und doch den Strom dieser Empfindung selbst unvermerkt hemmet'.¹¹ Second, the consoler can use his discussion of another bereavement to introduce consolatory arguments in indirect fashion. In ‘Amyntor und Philotas’, Philotas tells Amyntor about his deceased sister Auguste and his grief over her death, but he emphasises as he does so that Auguste is now at peace and spared from suffering. Other consolatory texts illustrate the workings of providence in the narrated case¹² or hold out the prospect of reunion in heaven.¹³

Finally, the consoler should attempt to distract the mourner entirely onto other subjects, ‘[seine] Phantasie unmerklich auf andere Gegenstände zu lenken’ (‘Einige Gedanken über den Umgang mit Leidenden’, p. 122). ‘Playfulness’ as well as subtlety will come in handy in such attempts at diversion, or as the popular philosopher J. D. Salzmann puts it in 1776: ‘Wer [...] unseren Neigungen eine andere Wendung, als die sie von sich selbst nehmen, geben will, der muß es spielend und von uns unbemerkt thun’.¹⁴ For example, the consoler can encourage the bereaved person to engage in

¹¹ ‘Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns’, in Fest, ed., *Beiträge zur Beruhigung* (1789-97), ii (1791), p. 35.

¹² See e.g. ‘Ueber die weisen Absichten Gottes bey dem Tode hoffnungsvoller Kinder’, in David Gottlieb Niemeyer and August Hermann Niemeyer, *Trostschriften zur Aufrichtung für Leidende, die über den Tod ihrer Gatten, Kinder und Freunde trauren: Ein Buch für Familien*, Halle, 1783, pp. 55-72.

¹³ See e.g. Fest, *Beiträge zur Beruhigung*, ii (1791), p. 58 and iii (1793), p. 774.

¹⁴ J. D. Salzmann, ‘Fünfte Abhandlung über Gemüthsbewegungen, Neigungen und Leidenschaften vorgelesen den 9ten Wintermonat 1773’, in *Kurze Abhandlungen über einige wichtige Gegenstände aus der Religions- und Sittenlehre*, Frankfurt/Main, 1776, pp. 106-7.

amusing pastimes, as Philotas does Amyntor, taking him to rural celebrations and local beauty spots, or he can recommend travel or a change of scene, which will make the mourner less likely to encounter dangerous prompts to memory. If the mourner remains at home, friends and consolers are advised to remove as many such objects as possible from his/her perceptive field.¹⁵

As well as recommending strategies to counteract grief once it has arisen, consolatory authors suggest ways to avert the danger of grief being too powerful in the first place. It is important, writes the author of ‘Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns’, for people to remind themselves at regular intervals on the path of life of the mortality of their friends (p. 37). This means that they will appreciate them more while they are alive and that they will collect a hoard (‘Schatz’) of comforting memories (pp. 56-7). Another strategy is to build up a greater supply (‘Vorrath’) of potential friends; one or few loved ones can never give absolute ‘security’: ‘Wird wohl ein Capitalist sein ganzes Vermögen an einen Einzigen oder allzu wenige Menschen auf Wechsel geben? [...] diese geben, auch bei dem besten Herzen, doch niemals volle Sicherheit’ (p. 40). J. D. Salzmann also uses an economic image to warn against conceiving too great a passion for, and directing all one’s attention to, a single object. This, he writes, is to behave like a miser who hoards his treasures: ‘Dieser Zustand ist dem Geitz ähnlich, welcher seine Schätze verschliest und dabei verhungert. Aber wahre Gemüthsbewegung und Neigung, ist Reichthum und Ueberfluß’ (‘Fünfte Abhandlung’, p. 111).

¹⁵ See e.g. *Trostreiche Unterhaltungen für Mütter bei dem Tode ihrer Kinder* (Gera, 1790), reviewed in Fest, ed., *Beiträge zur Beruhigung* (1789-97), iii (1793), p. 237.

* * *

Johann Martin Miller's sentimental novel *Siegwart. Eine Klostergeschichte* was a great popular success when it was first published, in two volumes, in 1776. Initially, the critical reception of the novel was varied, including praise for the novel's realistic details and its morally edifying aims, as well as criticism of the lack of consistency in the portrayal of hero¹⁶ and its *lack* of realism.¹⁷ According to critic Edgar Bracht, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that *Siegwart* was widely seen by critics, as it often is today, as an example of 'Empfindeley', which encouraged sentimental excesses in its readers.¹⁸

The characters in *Siegwart* are afflicted with many losses. The eponymous hero's mother and brother are deceased when the novel begins, and his friends Sophie and Gutfried and his father die in the course of the story. Because the father of the beautiful Mariane, Siegwart's beloved, has destined her for another man, she decides to enter a convent and dies there shortly afterwards, as Siegwart believes. In fact she is still alive, but Siegwart only discovers this when, having taken orders himself, he is called to a nearby convent to hear her deathbed confession. Before long he has

¹⁶ See the anonymous review in *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 33: I, p. 48 ff., cited in Alain Fauré, 'Nachwort' to Johann Martin Miller, *Siegwart. Eine Klostergeschichte*, Stuttgart, 1971, p. 14.

¹⁷ See Johann Heinrich Merck's review of *Siegwart* in *Deutsche Merkur*, Juni 1777, 18, p. 255 ff, cited in Alain Fauré, 'Nachwort', p. 12.

¹⁸ Edgar Bracht, *Der Leser im Roman des 18 Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt/Main, 1987, p. 532.

expired his last on her grave. In the novel's subplot, Siegwart's sister Therese and his friend Kronhelm fall in love and end up happily married, but not before they have suffered the agonies of loss, believing that they are to be parted forever. In this novel the pains of frustrated love are depicted as very similar to those of bereavement.

Grief is fatal for Siegwart, but the novel need not be read as a manifesto for prolonged, morbid melancholy. Far from encouraging readers to mimic those of his characters who long for death, Miller suggests that their behaviour is pathological. His depiction of the monks' obsession with the afterlife, for example, is part of his critique of the monasteries (Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 16); Sophie's reaction to unrequited love—she wastes away, drawing of pictures of her grave and writing to Siegwart of their eternal togetherness (Miller, *Siegwart*, pp. 527-531)—is portrayed as an excessive and immature, if poetic, response; Father Anton reprimands Siegwart for his longing for the grave (Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 1033).

The novel as a whole can in fact be read as a consolatory text whose melancholy elements provoke a cathartic process in the reader. The losses the novel portrays are aimed at provoking his/her pity and tears. When Kronhelm is parted from Therese, Miller formulates the demand explicitly: 'Jedes zärtliche und liebevolle Herz, das auch einmal gelitten hat, denke sich noch Einmal in sein Unglück zurück! Fühle noch einmal die Leiden seiner Liebe, und wein unserm Edeln, mit mir, eine mitleidige Zähre!' (Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 464). What is expected of the reader is true 'Mitleid', suffering *with* the fictional character. The reader is asked to draw on, indeed to reexperience, his/her own suffering in order to be able to understand Kronhelm's. Just as, in the consolatory text by Demme discussed above, the consoler's mention of his sister's bereavement releases the widow's tears for her own loss, so in crying for characters, the reader of the sentimental novel is also crying for him/herself. This

process is depicted within the text on several occasions. For example, when Siegwart enters the monastery sick with grief for Mariane, rather than asking Siegwart to speak about what has happened, Father Anton tells him the story of his own unhappy past. As he listens, Siegwart is reminded of his own fate and the tears the two shed are for him more than for Anton:

Unser Siegwart hörte ihm mit tiefer Rührung zu; oft vergaß er dabey seine eignen Unglücksfälle; oft aber ward er wieder durch die entfernteste nur anscheinende Aehnlichkeit aufs lebhafteste an seine eignen Schicksale erinnert, so daß Anton manche Viertelstunde in der Erzählung inne hielt, und mit ihm weinte. (Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 1031)

The reader's renewed experience of loss brings with it the emotional gratifications of self-sympathy and the implied sympathy of a virtual sentimental community which includes the author and other readers. In prefaces and in their narratives it was common for sentimental authors of this period to obscure the new commercial, anonymous basis of the relationship between them and their consumers with a rhetoric of friendship and presence. Miller's invitation to the reader to cry 'mit mir' for Kronhelm, whom he describes as '*unserm Edeln*'—just as Siegwart is called 'unser Siegwart' in the quotation above—is indicative of the attempt to establish the impression of a community. Such a direct address to the reader also reinforces his awareness of other people reading the same text with the same sensibilities. As Denis Diderot observes with reference to Samuel Richardson's novels in his 'Eloge de Richardson' (1762), sympathetic readers who understand themselves as part of a sentimental community assure themselves that they, like the characters in the novels,

would receive sympathy in adversity: ‘venez, nous pleurerons ensemble sur les personnages malheureux de ses fictions, et nous dirons, si le sort nous accable: “Du moins les honnêtes gens pleureront aussi sur nous”’.¹⁹

As in consolatory texts, so in *Siegwart* the rehearsal of the mourner’s grief is not an end in itself, but a stage in the consolatory process, which renders the mourner more likely to accept new insights. The quotation cited above describing how Siegwart listens to Father Anton’s story is suggestive in this respect. First, Miller writes that Siegwart is reminded of his own misfortunes ‘durch die entfernteste *nur anscheinende* Aehnlichkeit’: in other words, Siegwart is so preoccupied with his own suffering that he can find an echo of it anywhere. The tone here is typical of the narrative stance generally to Siegwart’s grief: it is indulgent, but not without irony regarding his self-absorption. Second, Miller writes that listening to Anton’s story involves forgetting himself as well as remembering, ‘oft vergaß er dabey seine eignen Unglücksfälle’. In reading the novel *Siegwart*, similarly, the reader should be led away from the direct experience of his/her own feelings.

One way this happens is by means of a detailed anatomy of the subject close to the reader’s heart. As discussed above, consolatory texts recommend encouraging the bereaved person to analyse his/her grief intellectually, as a way of distancing him/herself from it. In a similar tone to that of a late eighteenth-century literary critic who criticizes the ‘Sterbescenen [...], Thränen [...], Kirchhöfe, Todesbetrachtungen’

¹⁹ Denis Diderot, ‘Eloge de Richardson’, in *Lettres Angloises, ou l’Histoire de Miss Clarisse Harlove, augmentée de l’Éloge de Richardson, des Lettres posthumes & du Testament de Clarisse*, Paris, 1766, vol. i, p. viii.

which sentimental fiction typically contains,²⁰ Alain Fauré argues in his 1971 ‘Nachwort’ to *Siegwart* that Miller employs stereotypical images such as fountains, arbours and moonlit nights so frequently that they become clichés.²¹ But the reader of *Siegwart* is not only offered a catalogue of empty motifs of loss and melancholy. Miller’s novel also depicts with some sophistication the work of mourning, its vicissitudes, its twists and its turns. His characters are caught in a ceaseless struggle with images of the lost beloved, images which take on an independent life, colouring the world around them and stripping them of the power to act during the day, pursuing them into the watches of the night, plaguing them with fantasies of remorse, and making it impossible for them to think or speak of anything else (e.g. Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 533, p. 928, pp. 966-7). When Siegwart believes Marianne to be dead, for example, his mood at first shifts repeatedly from numbness to intense pain, from silence to lamentation (pp. 1017-19). Taking orders distracts him for a while, and he resolves to overcome his grief in the interest of his duties as a monk, but this rational decision proves powerless against his suffering (p.1034). Left much in solitude, he endlessly peruses the past, seeking out new causes for sorrow and guilt, and castigating himself for giving in to his obsession (pp. 1036-7). The idea of Mariane’s death influences his entire perceptive field: when he goes out into the countryside, for example, birdsong sounds like funeral hymns and death sprouts forth from the flowers (p. 1042). Miller convincingly portrays this process as that which he names it, a ‘schrecklichen Kampf seiner Seele’ (p. 1037). Only after many years is Siegwart’s

²⁰ AdB, 31, 2, 1777, see Wolfgang Doktor, *Die Kritik der Empfindsamkeit*, Bern, 1975, p. 22.

²¹ Fauré, ‘Nachwort’ to *Siegwart*, p. 17.

grief reduced to a quiet melancholy (p. 1055). This depiction is typical of the novel: grief in *Siegwart* is a tortuous, restless process.

As well as a description of the torments of grief, Miller offers his reader consolatory arguments and interpretations. The characters in the novel impress upon one another the mourner's duty to submit to the will of God, preserve his/her own health and contribute productively to society (pp. 1033-4), and they frame their losses in providential narratives. For example, a farmer's wife with whom Siegwart finds shelter tells him how, when her first husband died, she was inconsolable, but that she has since found greater happiness with his successor (p. 931). In the consolatory essay 'Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns', the author concludes his psychological study with an exclamatory promise of eternal, blissful union with the deceased in the afterlife: 'keine Thräne fließt dann wieder einem Geliebten nach, und nichts stört jemals die Freuden wahrer Freundschaft und Liebe!' ('Einige Gedanken über die Trennung', p. 59). In Miller's novel, too, the greatest consolation for Siegwart and other characters is the hope of reunion with the beloved in heaven (e.g. Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 808, p. 915, pp. 1021-3), and it is a hope the narrator reiterates in the novel's concluding lines in a similar tone to that used in 'Einige Gedanken'; he speaks of the 'Land der Ruhe [...], wo Zärtlichkeit und Menschheit keine Thränen mehr vergieissen' (p. 1072). In the same way that Amyntor accepts a peaceful reconciliation with bereavement when Philotas clothes it in a personal narrative about his deceased sister, so the grieving reader is open to these consolatory interpretations through his engagement with the characters.

Finally, after the reader's grief has been released and reframed, the narrative diverts his/her attention from it. Within the novel characters often use this consolatory technique: we read that Father Philipp, for example, tries to distract Siegwart from his

love-sickness, that he ‘gab sich alle Mühe, [Siegwart] zu zerstreuen, und seine Aufmerksamkeit auf andre Gegenstände zu lenken’ (p. 322). Reading Siegwart’s story, the reader is led away ‘unvermerkt’ from the topic of loss by the meanderings of the sentimental plot. Sentimental plots are typically not tightly-woven sequences of cause and effect, but loose webs of episodes, subplots and digressions, often linked by associations or chance encounters. In *Siegwart*, the narration of Siegwart’s story and the subplot concerning Kronhelm and Therese repeatedly branch off into tales of other characters, who, their story told, may never be heard of again. The second volume of the novel, for example, begins with the tale of a young man who has entered the army because his mother has forbidden him to marry his sweetheart Kathrine, and Kronhelm’s attempts to persuade the captain to let Kathrine accompany him to the field. In Niemeyer’s consolatory text Amyntor is encouraged to devote himself to benevolent occupations such as caring for his child and ensuring the well-being of the inhabitants of his estate; in the sentimental novel the diversions and digressions are often, as in this example, stories of wrongs to be righted and/or of charitable acts on the part of the protagonists.

The novel had a salutary lesson for those not in the immediate throes of grief as well: that separation and bereavement are part of life and should be prepared for in advance. As Father Philipp tells Siegwart, it is important to prepare for bereavement ‘im Voraus und in frohen Tagen’ (p. 503). As does the author of the consolatory essay ‘Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns’, Miller demonstrates how an awareness of mortality enhances relationships. It is after Therese and Kronhelm have attended the funeral of a farm worker who has left a young bride behind him, and considered the pain such a loss must cause, that they first realize their affection for one another (pp. 344-47). Later, when Therese almost dies in childbirth,

they appreciate their happiness more as a result: ‘Sie und ihr Kronhelm empfanden nun das Glück der Zärtlichkeit zehnfach mehr, als vorher, ehe das Unglück der Trennung sie bedrohet hatte’ (p. 984).

It is clear that Miller’s aim in *Siegwart* is similar to that of authors of late eighteenth-century *Trostschriften*; he encourages the reader to experience, reflect on and reconcile him/herself to grief. In fact it could be argued that the sentimental novel is better suited to the consolatory task, as that task was understood in the late eighteenth century, than non-fictional consolatory texts. The sentimental narrative can immerse the reader in an aesthetic, ‘playful’ realm, which allows him to identify with the characters, and can offer him a sustained psychological illustration of the work of mourning.

* * *

We saw at the beginning of this essay that, in the view of Niemeyer, the author of ‘Amyntor und Philotas’, sentimental novels such as *Siegwart* were very far from fulfilling a therapeutic aim. In Niemeyer’s short text, Phanias’s sentimental style of consolation and the reading of sentimental novels such as *Siegwart* leave Amyntor, not with an acceptance of loss and a renewed interest in the world, but fainting on his wife’s grave in the moonlight and sitting for hours in front of her picture, sighing and speaking to her image (p. 197). Why did this gap exist between what I have argued is the potential of *Siegwart* to be read as a consolatory text, and its reception by eighteenth-century commentators such as Niemeyer? Their criticism may have stemmed in part from motives of competition fostered by the commercial book

market. But their reception of the novel must also be understood in the context of late eighteenth-century ideas about the pathological effects of certain kinds of reading.

Excessive *Empfindsamkeit*, it was believed, was a kind of psychopathology, consisting in a lack of correspondence between an individual's mental images and the world around. As the enlightened commentator Joachim Heinrich Campe puts it in 1785, overly sentimental people privilege 'bloße Vorstellungen' over fact; they are moved by what is absent rather than what is present.²² Campe argues that, because it involves constructing images of absent objects, reading is always an 'empfindsam' or sentimental activity. In contrast to the theatre-goer, who responds to 'real' sense impressions, '[n]ach Campe könnte sich sehr wohl der ganz in Vorstellungen aufgehende Leser empfindsam nennen, und zwar *jeder* Leser', as Lothar Pikulik explains.²³ Campe makes a connection between this process and being separated from a loved one. He writes that the lover is 'empfindsam' when he is thinking of his beloved from a distance, but not when he sees her face to face.²⁴

In mourning, of course, thinking of the beloved can only ever take place from a distance, at least as soon as the body is interred: mourning is a work of the imagination and of memory. The author of the essay 'Einige Gedanken über die

²² Campe, ed., 'Von der nöthigen Sorge für die Erhaltung des Gleichgewichts unter den menschlichen Kräften: Besondere Warnung vor dem Modefehler die Empfindsamkeit zu überspannen', in *Allgemeine Revision des gesammten Schul- und Erziehungswesens von einer Gesellschaft praktischer Erzieher*, iii, Hamburg, 1785, p. 395.

²³ See Lothar Pikulik, *Leistungsethik contra Gefühlskult: Über das Verhältnis von Bürgerlichkeit und Empfindsamkeit in Deutschland*, Göttingen, 1984, p. 218.

²⁴ See Pikulik, p. 218.

Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns' explains that when a loved one dies, the person's sudden absence imposes a barrier on mental activity, which the mourner's imagination steps in to fill, occupying the mind constantly with idealized thoughts and memories of the deceased and fantasies of missed opportunities for the future ('Einige Gedanken über die Trennung', p. 17). Reading and mourning exercise the same mental capacity: for conjuring up unreal images.

The consolatory texts by Niemeyer and Demme which were discussed above offer models for consolation delivered in person. This form of consolation allows the consoler figure closely to control the course of grief and to intervene to ensure the bereaved person makes the required step from the psychical work of mourning to activity and to the world—Philotas takes Amyntor out onto his estate to revive his sense of duty towards its inhabitants, for example. When consolation is offered in writing, on the other hand, the reader is beyond the author's control, left to his own devices and mental processes. Of course, written consolatory texts were intended to be read by the bereaved themselves as well as their consolers, as the subtitle of the collection in which '*Amyntor und Philotas*' appears indicates: *zur Beruhigung und Belehrung für Leidende und Freunde der Leidenden*. But consolatory collections are 'attached' to reality in a way that the novel is not. In them short tales such as '*Amyntor und Philotas*' or first-person accounts of grief are framed by discursive passages or essays which analyse grief in 'scientific' terms. In 'Einige Gedanken über die Trennung geliebter Freunde von uns', for example, a powerful first-person account of grief by a young man whose mother has died is followed immediately by a commentary which appropriates and neutralises it in generalizing terms: 'So ist es in der That', insists the author, before going to analyse in an authoritative tone what the pain of grief consists of ('Einige Gedanken über die Trennung', p. 34). Editors also

make a point of informing their readers that the first-person accounts of grief which their collections contain are genuine autobiographical texts, tied to a ‘real’ referent.²⁵

The novel, on the other hand, constructed fantasies. With the expansion of the book market, late eighteenth-century novelists such as Miller were reaching a broader section of the population than their predecessors, one which included young people and women—readers considered vulnerable—who sat alone in their rooms, bypassing the academic or religious authorities which had traditionally guided access to the written word. The danger enlightened critics espied in the novel was the danger of immersion, for some length of time (sentimental novels were often several volumes long) in an idealized, illusory world.²⁶ They distrust the consolatory power of sentimental novels such as *Siegwart*, not because of the power of emotion expressed in them—*Trostschriften* such as Niemeyer’s depict emotion in equally emphatic terms—but because they exercise the reader’s capacity to occupy him/herself with the world of the imagination and thus reinforce the psychological mechanism that underlies mourning. Miller gives an indication of this way of thinking himself. When Father Anton wants to help the unhappy Siegwart distract himself from his unhappiness over Mariane, ‘er gab ihm [...] allerley Bücher, und besonders historische, zu lesen’ (Miller, *Siegwart*, p. 322). ‘Historical’ books are the best when a cure is needed because they are factual.

²⁵ For example, Niemeyer and Niemeyer insist ‘Beynahe alle sind auf wirkliche Veranlassungen bey Todesfällen geschrieben’ in the ‘Vorrede’ to their edited collection, *Trostschriften zur Aufrichtung für Leidende*, p. viii.

²⁶ According to Campe some novels are written, ‘den Geist des Menschen aus der wirklichen Welt in eine schimärische zu entrücken’, *Väterlicher Rat für meine Tochter. Ein Gegenstück zum Theophron*, Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1790, p. 61.

It seems that in the late eighteenth century there are clear similarities between popular sentimental fiction and *Trostschriften*, but that the novel appeared an unstable, hence dangerous kind of text in the eyes of some enlightened consolatory authors, one that was more likely to reinforce the mourner's potential for idealization and solipsism than to dispel it. Of course, what impact novels or *Trostschriften* actually had on the emotional health of their readers is impossible to ascertain, although Jill Anne Kowalik offers an interesting psychoanalytic reading of the unhealthy effects of eighteenth-century Pietist discourses on grief and their proscription of rage, considered today to be an essential stage in the mourning process.²⁷ It is not improbable, however, that the demands of the increasingly commercialized book market in the late eighteenth century came progressively to stand in tension with the psychological rehabilitation of readers, since turnover depended on the grieving reader's need to repeat the emotionally gratifying reading experience. It was shown above that late eighteenth-century writers on grief sometimes use economic metaphors—concepts of circulation, investment and return—to describe the healthy functioning of the mind, the movement of impressions and ideas between the outside and the inner world. The commercial health of the market for ‘consolatory’ fictional texts may have come to rely on the opposite—on a kind of psychological fixity.

²⁷ Kowalik, *Theology and Dehumanization*.