

## **Mysticism and Modernism: The World of Margarete Susman**

*Graduate Student Conference, Princeton German Department*

*February, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025*

“The form in which modern humanity has most fully preserved the substance of religion is art,” writes Margarete Susman, in *Das Wesen der modernen deutschen Lyrik* (1910). Susman, an under-recognized essayist, critic, and scholar of religion whose career spanned the early and mid 20th century, challenged traditional distinctions between philosophy, theology, and literary criticism in her writings on religion and modern culture, which to her were not merely antonymous. Myth and spirituality would become central to her widely ranging theoretical and literary discourses, from that of the lyrical “I” of modern poetry (*Das Wesen der modernen deutschen Lyrik*) and the metaphysics of love and sexuality (*Vom Sinn der Liebe*, 1912) to Germany’s war-time feminist movement (“Die Revolution und die Frau,” 1918) and the rise of Nazism and the crisis of German-Jewish identity after the Shoah (*Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes*, 1945). For Susman, the metamorphosis of mysticism and religion, and the meaningful interrelation of ethical, spiritual, and political life, would be the foundation of a new modernism, one that blended secular philosophical inquiry, Judeo-Christian hermeneutics, and literary criticism.

Although Susman was a respected poet and journalist in her lifetime, she received little recognition during her career, especially for her theoretical writing. As a woman she was barred from pursuing an academic degree in Germany, and as a writer in exile she supported herself mainly through her journalism. Notwithstanding her many contributions to German-language theory, theology, and literary history, and her early reckoning with the politics of religion and identity after the Holocaust, Susman remains an obscure figure in anglophone scholarship, and a missing voice in current histories of mysticism and modernism.

*To expand the scholarly conversation around Margarete Susman, and to contextualize her work within the “world” of mystical-secular debate in the 20th century, this conference invites proposals for 25-30 minute presentations that engage with the relationship of mysticism and modernism in German-language political philosophy, theology, art history, and literary studies.* How is mysticism imbricated in the intellectual history of the early to mid 20th century? How are mystical experiences important to modernist writers? How do Susman and contemporary scholars, critics, novelists, and poets (including, but not limited to, Stefan George, Georg Simmel, Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil, Georg Lukács, Paul Celan, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno) rely on — and depart from — theological- and literary-hermeneutical tradition to make sense of modernism and modernity?

While this conference focuses on 20th century modernism, we also welcome presentations on related “modernisms” and inter- and extra-disciplinary fields – including Psychoanalysis, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Media Theory, Marxism, and Environmental Humanities. Related inquiries may also include, but are not limited to:

- How has the historical development of mysticism in the medieval and early modern period influenced political philosophy and literature in continental Europe (including, but not limited to, that of Meister Eckhart, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Martin Luther, Jakob Böhme, and Paracelsus)?
- What role does mysticism play in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of such thinkers as Kant, Goethe, F. Schlegel, Schelling, and Hegel, and how do they relate to an evolving sense of historicity, modernity, and subjectivity?
- In what ways do political theorists relate mysticism and religious institutions to the emergent phenomena of modernity, and how has mystical and mythical belief been assimilated into authoritarian techniques of governance? How can, for example, mysticism and myths of national identity be used to justify state-sponsored violence and oppression?

Abstracts of about 500 words and a brief bio should be submitted to [ab1752@princeton.edu](mailto:ab1752@princeton.edu) by November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (this is an extended deadline. The previous deadline was November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024).