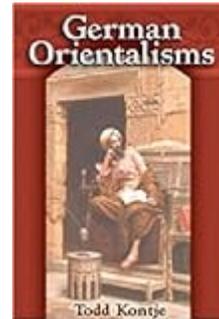




Todd Kontje. *German Orientalisms*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. v + 316 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11392-7.



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German Orientalisms?

It is well known that Edward Said omitted German scholarship from his landmark study of 1978, *Orientalism*.^[1] The omission has stimulated crossings of this terrain by both historians and Germanists.^[2] Todd Kontje's *German Orientalisms*, one of the most recent works to appear, takes a literary historical look at the topic. Kontje departs from Said in his exploration of the phenomenon, claiming that orientalism "must be understood in a more nuanced way that allows for historical and national differences" (p. v). So can one speak of a "German orientalism"? According to Kontje, the answer is yes. Representations of the "orient" were central to Germany's symbolic mapping of the world, and an imaginative focus on the "East" in its numerous permutations—India, the Ottoman Empire, the Holy Land, Eastern Europe—was a constitutive factor in defining German national culture. To uncover this "symbolic geography" (p. 1), Kontje focuses on literature that "make[s] use of the Orient in [its] effort to define what is German" (p. 13). His chosen texts are from authors "that have been considered typically, representatively, quintessentially 'German'" and which have Germany as their referent (p. 1). Through a series of "multifaceted" readings Kontje explores a making

and remaking of German national culture that takes Germany's position in both Europe and the world as its starting point. What he calls the "long tradition of German orientalism" (p. 11) in literature is characterized by complexity. The texts he explores reveal networks of shifting relations; they abound in unresolved tensions and ambiguity.

In his literary historical look at national culture, Kontje situates his texts between two poles. They occupy an intellectual space between an orientalism that lays the "groundwork for a theory of Germanic racial superiority that led to Hitler and the Holocaust" (p. 8) and an orientalism that has "a degree of openness toward the foreign and critical distance toward their [the authors'] own German backgrounds" (p. 10). In keeping with this choice, Kontje's own text can be situated between older works—Leon Poliakov's *The Aryan Myth*, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, and Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* with their project to uncover the intellectual roots of the Holocaust—and Russell Berman's *Enlightenment or Empire*, which takes the opposite position. Berman's point that "the German intellectual tradition also contains mo-

ments of genuine openness to foreign cultures and significant cross-cultural exchange” (p. 9) strongly influences Kontje’s work, and his readings uncover many such moments of openness.[3] He advocates a “rereading” of “the history of the national literature from today’s decentered, diasporic, postcolonial perspective” as a way to “take a fresh look at canonical authors and texts” (p. 244).

The “orientalisms” of the title is apt. Kontje tracks through his texts a range of references to the Orient, a term that often changes its geographical position and alters its symbolic meaning. “[T]he ‘Orient’ was not a stable category, either in terms of its geographical location or in terms of its symbolic significance” (pp. 147-148), Kontje writes with reference to the early twentieth century but with a characterization of the “complex and contradictory role” (p. 148) played by references to the “East” that also fits his description of earlier periods. His many orientalisms reference the complex articulations of national culture that the texts exhibit. The question of what Germany was is often answered in relation to what it was not. Kontje’s chosen texts, from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (1200-1210) to Botho Strauss’s *The Young Man* (1984), work through comparison. Germany is defined in relation to its “orients” and with the “world powers” of France and Britain, and later the United States, with which it sees itself in competition. Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind* (1774) with its romantic view of India and baleful look at France is a case in point.

Kontje relies on close readings, and through this method he teases out a panoply of representations of the Orient. References to the “East” change and multiply across texts but also within single works. Kontje shows two different orientalisms at work in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *West-Eastern Divan* (1819)—the one a cosmopolitan conduit to multicultural understanding, the other a national chauvinism invested in German cultural superiority. In Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* there are four Oriental geographies: “eastern Europe, the Ottoman Empire ... the Far East, as well as ... the ancient myths of the Mediterranean world” (p. 148). In a wonderful reading of Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, Kontje brings out instabilities of all sorts. Orients and Occidents multiply, change places, and transform into one another. Claudia Chauchat is revealed not just a representative of the dangerous, feminized East—the familiar passionate and diseased Orient of Mann’s work—but also as an agent of a French imperialism that aimed to subdue and plunder that East. Kontje reminds the reader that her husband, a French citizen, lived in Daghestan, and worked presu-

ably in the oil industry (p. 154). Close and complicated readings of this sort reveal canonized works of national literature as bristling with references to many worlds, most of them imperial, many of them Oriental. We are reminded that Mann’s rendering of the landscape of Davos was anything but placid and homogenous.

Kontje’s main focus is on the making of national literature, and his book takes in many topics along the way, most notably an extended discussion of the *Bildungsroman*. He raises important questions for the teaching of German literature and for the curricula of German departments today. At times, however, the range of topics can be bewildering, and this reviewer often wished for more definition, context, and analysis. Themes such as the “feminized Orient” and topics of sexual politics are treated carefully and imaginatively yet often only in the specific textual contexts in which they arise. Topics, including orientalism itself, receive descriptive treatments; as a result it becomes difficult to know how to connect texts across periods. This is particularly true for the middle section of the book, which moves rapidly from the early nineteenth century to the period following World War I. Many of the seminal figures of a more traditional study of orientalism—Schopenhauer, Gobineau, Nietzsche, Wagner—are mentioned only in passing. In short, the connections between literary text and historical context need to be more rigorously drawn. Might a solution to this problem lie with Said’s *Orientalism* itself? At this juncture do we need more Said rather than less?

It has become fashionable to dismiss Said’s work from explorations of orientalism, to reject as too rigid his analysis of the power/knowledge nexus that intellectually supported European imperialism in favor of seeing something much more plural, fluid, and open. The certainties of Said’s study are thus undone; his *Orientalism* in the singular becomes the plural orientalisms of this book’s title. While this approach has its productive side—topics such as the strongly religious character of German orientalism can be brought out that didn’t find a place in Said’s secular study—it also yields analyses that can be disconnected and apolitical. The intellectual authority exercised by orientalist scholarship, its connections to the making of policy and the exercise of power is lost to view. Orientalism in Kontje’s work is at a far remove from Said. Here it is a form of literary imagination, a “long history of Germany’s literary encounters with the East” (p. 227). The ideological work of literature, which Said took seriously, is replaced by a narrative of cultural exchange. We get textual drama rather than the construction of hegemony. While this brings out a fascinating wealth of ev-

idence on the complexities of German national culture, the connections between literature, politics, and society, which Kontje wants to draw, begin to blur. Moreover, the real bite of German orientalist narratives, the points where such imaginings turned nasty, brutish, and powerful, is blunted. This is particularly evident in the chapter on “Fascist Orientalism” (chapter 3). It focuses on Thomas Mann and Botho Strauss, the first writing before the heyday of “fascist orientalism,” the second afterwards. The imaginings of Germany’s Aryan past, and the use made by Nazi writers of the Romantic Orientalists of the early nineteenth century in assessing German racial and cultural superiority left their tracks across popular literature, scholarly activity, and government policies. It would have been important to have seen more of this material. Here fruitful connections could have been drawn to the literature on Germany’s “Nearest East” in Eastern Europe (which Kontje discusses in chapter 4), as imaginings of the “order” brought by German “settlement” and the fear and loathing associated with “Asiatic hordes” from the “East” motivated concrete plans for expansion and annexation during both world wars and provided intellectual support for genocide in the latter conflict. Literature did do heavy ideological work. While sympathetic to Kontje’s opening up of the topic and his emphasis on multiple and contradictory articulations, I wanted to see more evidence of the lines of discursive continuity connecting the two centuries and which tied literature to history, politics, and policy.

To be fair, the latter is not Kontje’s aim. Rather he wishes to open up the texts of German literature to raise new questions for their relevance today. He wishes “to use their voices to reawaken the past—and not only to find those writers who were marginalized back then, but also to take a fresh look at canonical authors and texts” (p. 244). As he continues, “[w]e soon discover that many of the figures deemed central to the German national literature were themselves products of border zones and contested identities, and that they write about these conflicts

in their most famous works” (p. 244). In this goal the book succeeds admirably.

Notes

[1]. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

[2]. Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: M and P, 1997); Sheldon Pollock, “Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 76-133; Tuska Benes, “German Linguistic Nationhood, 1806-1866: Philology, Cultural Translation and Historical Identity in Preunification Germany” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2001); Jonathan M. Hess, “Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 2 (January 2000): pp. 56-101; James Pasto, “Islam’s ‘Strange Secret Sharer’: Orientalism, Judaism and the Jewish Question,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 40:3 (July 1998): pp. 437-474; Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Cambridge: Brandeis University Press, 2004); and the special issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2004) on the topic of “German Orientalism” guest-edited by this reviewer and with contributions by Nina Berman, Tuska Benes, Susan R. Boettcher, Gottfried Hagen, and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous.

[3]. Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). In this context Kontje also cites Susanne Zantop’s *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

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