
Todd Kontje. *German Orientalisms*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 316p.

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In *Orientalism*, Edward Said's groundbreaking analysis of "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient," he focused primarily on the way this institution manifests itself in modern British and French representations of the Middle East. Ever since the 1978 publication of what is regarded by many to be the founding text of postcolonial theory, there have been attempts to build upon Said's example (and success) by expanding the examination of western conceptions of the Orient. For example, Malini Johar Schueller in 1998 sought to apply the kind of colonial discourse analysis pioneered by Said to 19th-century American literature in her book *U.S. Orientalisms*. Now, more than a quarter century after the original, comes Todd Kontje's *German Orientalisms*, a superb new addition to the growing library of *Orientalism* spin-offs.

This book is far more than a mere appendix to Said's seminal text. While Kontje does fill in a glaring gap in *Orientalism* by discussing various German representations of the East, his real ambition appears to be a *re-orientation* of German literary studies, in effect rewriting an entire literary history from the point of view of Orientalism by examining "the role of symbolic geography in German literature" (1).

And I mean the *entire* history: Kontje begins with medieval literature around the time of the first Crusade and ends with contemporary German migrant literature. The vast historical scope of his book is matched only by its equally vast geographical range. For the "Orient" of *German Orientalisms* is significantly more diffuse than the Middle East of Said's *Orientalism*. Depending on the author and the period, the "German Orient" can refer to any territory between East Germany and East Asia, with everything in the middle and parts of Southern Europe thrown in for good measure. This conceptual overstretch is not a fault of the author, but rather a function of the term's actual vagueness in German literature itself.

Any concerns about the huge scope of this book are soon dispelled by Kontje's deft handling of his subject-matter, and the author deserves praise for maintaining an admirable degree of nuance in spite of his project's breadth. In his subtle and original readings of (mostly) canonical German texts, Kontje analyzes the different kinds of Orientalism as well as the ways in which these representations of the Orient have contributed to the formation of German national identity.

One reason why Germans and Germanists are particularly fond of questions of national identity is that, unlike Britain or France, Germany has been, for much of its history, anything but an unequivocal part of "the West." Kontje reminds us

that Thomas Mann referred to it as “the land of the center” (*das Land der Mitte*), and German history is full of agonizing questions about where this country (once it had been decided that it should be one in the first place) really belongs. Given this precarious position, it is not surprising if “German Orientalism thus oscillates between a compensatory Eurocentrism and an anti-Western, anti-Semitic Indo-Germanicism” (8).

The book’s first chapter is devoted to the ways in which medieval and early modern German literature about the Orient helped to define both Europe and Germany. Kontje offers a fascinating analysis of race and religion in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, teasing out some of the surprising encounters between Christianity and Islam in this text. In his discussion of Baroque writers’ representations of the Orient, he compares Grimmelshausen’s extremely popular novel *Simplicissimus* with the lesser-known *Arminius* by Daniel Casper von Lohenstein. He compellingly reads the former as “a transitional work” (42) in which the fascination with the Orient cannot be silenced by the familiar vilification of Islam, and points out how fluid and multifaceted the seemingly monolithic and stagnant East is in Lohenstein’s texts.

In chapter two, Kontje goes on to examine 19th-century German Orientalism, which differed considerably from its British counterpart. If the East for the British was, as Disraeli famously wrote, “a career,” the East for the Germans was still more of an idea. Germanists may find the overview of Herder’s historicism and its influence on both Orientalism and German nationalism a little heavy on exposition. Non-specialists, however, will no doubt greatly appreciate the service Kontje does them by introducing the work of Herder, including some of his lesser-known texts, to cultural studies and postcolonial theory.

In what seems like a missed opportunity, Kontje gives us a brief glimpse of Fichte as a kind of proto-Foucault in the wake of Prussia’s defeat against Napoleon (101). That this tantalizing idea should remain so underdeveloped is a pity, particularly considering the crucial importance of Foucault’s notion of discourse to Said’s project of Orientalism. What we do get is an intriguing account of the development of *Germanistik* as a discipline in the context of German nationalism. (It will be for future scholars to examine the parallels with the colonial heritage of English literary studies analyzed in Gauri Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest*.) The chapter ends with a discussion of the different kinds of Orientalisms in Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan* and the range of responses this ambiguous work continues to elicit even today.

The third chapter, titled “Fascist Orientalism and Its Discontents,” centers on the oeuvre of Thomas Mann, which surpasses even Goethe’s in its complexity and ambiguity. Focusing on Mann’s *Zauberberg*, Kontje shows how the “relations

between Germany, Europe, and the East are often depicted in terms of gender or sexuality” (12).

In the book’s final chapter, Kontje turns toward the westernmost part of Germany’s Orient, Eastern Europe, and, to an extent, even East Germany. His discussion of the “Nearest East” begins with the Teutonic Knights’ medieval conquest of Eastern Europe and ends with Günter Grass’ most recent works. With hindsight, Grass’ portrayal of Germany’s reunification as “the Western colonization or annexation of the East” (180) seems ironic. After all, some economists have argued that its economic effect has been the exact opposite, with the *alte Bundesländer* transferring wealth to the East. Still, Kontje successfully shows the continuity of German national interest on its eastern border and of German writers’ representation of this Orient on Germany’s doorstep.

Kontje concludes *German Orientalisms* with a brief look at contemporary German literature about the Orient, and he remarks that, in the run-up to the recent U.S.-led war against Iraq, Germany (and arguably the European Union) was once again stuck in the middle “between East and West, between the latest incarnation of Oriental ‘barbarians’ and a new generation of ugly Americans” (226).

Readers familiar with postcolonial theory will be struck by the fact that Kontje’s book contains only a minimum of academic jargon and no more than a few perfunctory nods to the usual suspects of critical theory. This welcome restraint may be an indication of where Kontje expects his main audience to be: in that beleaguered discipline currently undergoing a transition from *Germanistik* to German Studies. With *German Orientalisms*, he is making a compelling case for the relevance of the literary imagination in an age of Cultural Studies by reading “the history of the national literature from today’s decentered, diasporic, postcolonial perspective” (244). Perhaps German Studies was destined to be a “belated discipline” in the same way that Germany was a “belated nation.” Be that as it may, Todd Kontje’s energetic intervention may well rush his field into the age of postcolonialism and ensure Germanists their place in the sun. ✱