

Germany and the Imagined East

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Edited by

Lee M. Roberts



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PREFACE

I emphasize...that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance—much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, “we” Westerners on the other—are very large-scale enterprises.¹

-Edward W. Said

The passage above is from the preface of Edward W. Said’s 25th Anniversary edition of *Orientalism* (2003), but it serves well to illustrate the guiding principle behind the Twelfth Annual Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference, “Germany and the Imagined East,” held on March 13-14, 2004, at the University of California, Berkeley.² Although East and West presently seem charged with the same energy as North and South during the American Civil War, this conference focused not on drawing specific boundaries, like the infamous Mason and Dixon line, but on examining the countless perceptions of East-West relations.

It seems altogether appropriate that German Studies take up this question, for twentieth-century Germany witnessed within its own national borders the power of West-vs.-East mentalities. For many in the West, Germany represented a shield against the Soviet East; for their counterparts on the other side of the Wall, Germany was a barricade against the capitalist West. Whichever side one found oneself on, however, Germany was the middle country, the place that belonged to neither side completely.

But Germany was not always as simple to find on a map as the lands on either side of the former divide between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Adalbert Stifter’s protagonist says at the end of the nineteenth-century novella *Brigitte*: “In Spring I took up my German [*deutsch*] clothing, my German [*deutsch*] walking stick and wandered toward the German

¹ Said, *Orientalism*, xvii.

² Heartfelt thanks go to The Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, The Institute of European Studies, and the German Department of the University of California, Berkeley, for their generous support of this conference.

[*deutsch*] fatherland” (My translation).³ As *Brigitte* takes place largely in present-day Hungary, the clothing and stick referred to as “*deutsch*” distinguish the narrator’s possessions from the eastern variety. The location of this German (“*deutsch*”) fatherland is less clear, however, as Germany (*Deutschland*) did not exist politically until 1870/71. Stifter’s wanderer probably took “*deutsch*” simply to mean “where German language is spoken,” which would include present-day Austria (*Österreich*), the eastern part of the German-speaking realm nearest to *Brigitte*’s Hungary.

Today solidly a part of the political map of Europe, Germany is arguably a portion of an imagined cultural sphere called the “West,” but some claim that Germany has been a part of the West for only a short time. Complementary to Said’s *Orientalism*, Ian Buruma’s and Avishai Margalit’s *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (2004) presents the so-called Occidentalist perspective, in which the West appears as a world without human feeling, increasingly hungry for material comforts. Like *Orientalism*, *Occidentalism* “strips its human targets of their humanity.”⁴ Within Buruma’s and Margalit’s argument, Germany played a role in the creation of this image of the Occident. They write:

[It] is clear from the writing of German nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s that their view of the West was of an old world, effete, money-grubbing, selfish and shallow. The danger, in their eyes, was that the seductions of this old world were corrupting and enervating young Germans who should be fighting for a glorious future. Only their sacrifice in a storm of steel would save them from being ruined by the banality of the West.⁵

Not so long after the end of World War II, when writers in *Gruppe 47* attempted to recreate a German language without the taint of Nazism, vestiges of earlier ways of thinking were still prevalent. Buruma and Margalit explain the sort of notions of the East that may still have had a hold on post-World War II German consciousness:

German heroic propaganda [...] different from its counterpart in Western Europe, [proposed] the idea that Germany was different, the Reich in the middle, culturally distinct from the West, beyond the civilizing borders of the old Roman Empire. This is what made Konrad Adenauer, the conservative but unromantic German politician from the western Rhineland, mutter “Asia” every time his train crossed the Elbe into Prussia.⁶

³ Stifter, *Brigitte*, 64.

⁴ Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

Adenauer, a Westerner with possibly Orientalist opinions, thus is implicated in the creation of the conceptual division between the Orient and Occident. But he was perhaps merely part of a system of expression that conceived of the East in such terms.

These views may seem jarringly similar to present-day friction in the Middle East, but differences between the East and West have not always been depicted so negatively. As early as 1786, Gottfried August Bürger's *Baron von Münchhausen* told German readers of his bizarre adventures in Russia, which the Baron described as a wondrous place more interesting than anything found in the French West.

I will not bore you, gentlemen, with idle talk of the constitution, the arts, sciences and other oddities of this magnificent capitol of Russia. Instead, I will keep to greater and more noble objects of interest, namely to knightly deeds and praiseworthy behavior, which fit the nobleman far better than a bit of dusty Greek or Latin or any snuff boxes and fancy things from French intellectuals, and the like (My translation).⁷

Of course, we know better than to mistake the Baron's word for anything real, but his point might be clear to anyone embroiled in the debate over literary models: the East has virtues different from but equal to those of the West.

In the nineteenth century, when Germany had entered the race for colonies, Theodor Fontane wrote *Effi Briest*, a novel that treats most explicitly problems inherent in societal ideals, especially pertaining to marriage. In this fiction we find evidence that Germany had discovered a larger world around its empire. The protagonist Effi marries the debonair Baron Innstetten and moves to Kessin in the German-speaking East, where she is surrounded by people of varied backgrounds and ethnicities. Her first reaction to the new world is both shock and interest; upon seeing a man in a fur hat and coat, she remarks: "He looked like a *Starost*... although I must admit that I have never seen a *Starost*" (My translation).⁸ Effi's understanding of her surroundings draws on some scant knowledge of the Slavic East, in which the so-called *Starost*, a sort of village official in Polish, exists; in this respect, she is an Orientalist. But she finds the East exciting, nonetheless, from the Japanese screen, which she imagines might be in a home in the East,⁹ to her enthusiasm for the Slavs in the region.¹⁰ Despite her seeming openness towards the world, however, Effi is frightened by a small picture of a Chinese man, and she dreams that it comes to life and visits her bedroom one night. She admits: "A Chinese person always is somehow creepy [*gruselig*]" (My

⁷ Bürger, *Bürgers Werke in einem Band*, 232-3.

⁸ Fontane, *Effi Briest*, 203.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

translation).¹¹ Although Effi is still within German-speaking territory, her sentiments illustrate Buruma's and Margalit's point that some conceived of the Prussian East as Asia, something frightfully foreign.

As a land in the middle, as Germany has often been called, its literature contains an astounding number of references to the East. Hermann Hesse's *The Journey to the East* (*Die Morgenlandfahrt*) is a prime example. The narrator, cleverly called H.H., recounts his experiences in a secret league that endeavors to travel to the East, a place that holds for each person something different but always valuable. For the narrator, the East promises the unparalleled beauty of Princess Fatima. For others, the East holds such treasures as a thing called *tao* or a fabled snake with special powers. For all, the East promises something extraordinary. The narrator explains: "[A]t certain stages of our Journey to the East, although the commonplace aids of modern travel such as railways, steamers, telegraph, automobiles, airplanes, etc., were renounced, we penetrated into the heroic and magical."¹²

As the tale unfolds, the unusual nature of the narrator's East becomes apparent. So much of the heroic and magical experience is just a figment of the League members' imagination in a place that is not so far from the journey's starting point. Indeed, the first great phenomenon in the journey takes place in a chapel in a region called *Spaichendorf*, obviously still within German-speaking territory. Herein, perhaps, we find the true nature of the narrator's East, a fictitious world created with the myths one finds at home. The narrator admits even that the journey is "only a wave in the eternal stream of human beings, of the eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the East, towards Home."¹³

How, you might ask, can the East be home to this narrator from the German-speaking West? The answer is simple: This East, both familiar and foreign, is a literary invention. The narrator travels in a group that encounters during the journey various other members of the League, and "[each] one of them [has] his own dream, his wish, his secret heart's desire, and yet they all [flow] together in the great stream and all [belong] to each other, [share] the same reverence."¹⁴ The journey defies space and time, permitting visits with both actual historical personages in ancient China and fictitious characters in German literature, but each of the experiences is, for the reader, only a glimpse into the mind of the narrator. *Journey to the East* is the narrator's attempt to write a history of the League, but the result is little more than a narrative used to make sense of his life. While writing, the narrator realizes: "In order that something like cohesion, something like causality, that some kind of meaning might ensue and that it can in some way

¹¹ Ibid., 205.

¹² Hesse, *Journey to the East*, 6.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23-4.

be narrated, the historian must invent units, a hero, a nation, an idea, and he must allow to happen to this invented unit what has in reality happened to the nameless.”¹⁵

Almost a demonstration of psychoanalysis, *Journey to the East* is, as a text, the medium through which we readers can acquaint ourselves with the narrator. That is, we learn in this tale more about the narrator than about the East; he is his own East.

Our Journey to the East and our League, the basis of our community, has been the most important thing, indeed the only important thing in my life, compared with which my own individual life has appeared completely unimportant. And now that I want to hold fast to and describe this most important thing, or at least something of it, everything is only a mass of separate fragmentary pictures which has been reflected in something, and this something is myself, and this self, this mirror, whenever I have gazed into it, has proved to be nothing but the uppermost surface of a glass plane.¹⁶

As a reflection in the surface of a mirror, the narrator sees in his own story that his journey through life was a path to self-discovery.

Self-discovery seems a most fitting way to categorize such present-day writers in German as Yoko Tawada, as her themes often involve some aspect of self-critique in connection with an exploration of the Other. Tawada’s work resists traditional methods of literary classification, however. Like so many writers of non-German descent writing in German, she stands on the border of the national and the foreign. German film maker Wim Wenders wrote in the preface of *Where Europe Begins* (2002) the following comments on Tawada’s book *Talisman*: “Yoko Tawada...has written this complex, subtle intelligent and poetic book in German [!]....At the same time, this is definitely not a ‘German’ book, if I may put things in simplistic terms. No one else but a Japanese woman could have had these experiences.”¹⁷

While Wenders’ words seem to make sense, one must wonder how exactly he means them. Why could only a Japanese woman have had such experiences? Perhaps Wenders tapped into a discourse alive from as early as the nineteenth century, when Friedrich Nietzsche made similar claims about an alternate, eastern experience of the world in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886):

The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is an affinity of languages...everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical

¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Wenders in Tawada, *Where Europe Begins*, XI.

systems [.] It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages (where the concept of the subject is least developed) look otherwise “into the world,” and will be found on paths of thought different from those of Indo-Germanic peoples and the Muslims.¹⁸

Did Nietzsche and Wenders draw the same conclusion: That the Ural-Altaic experience—in this case, Japanese—must be different from the so-called Indo-European experience? It is a question for scholars to consider.

Most recently, Todd Kontje’s *German Orientalisms* (2004) appeared, ushering in this new direction in German Studies, which will seek to elucidate the complex tangle of metaphors used in the German-speaking world to grasp the so-called East. Kontje writes:

Geographic locations...have symbolic connotations....It is one thing to say that Germany lies in central Europe and another when Thomas Mann says that Germany is “das Land der Mitte” (the land of the center) that must find a balance between Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism. Geography, at least as it is conventionally understood, dwells in the realm of facts; symbolic geography, in contrast, is the province of the literary imagination.¹⁹

“Germany and the Imagined East” takes part in the same trend in research, one that seeks to situate the German-speaking world into a series of discourses on the Self and the Other. Similar to both Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, research on Germany’s imagined East will highlight how easily artistic and everyday expression can impose a hierarchy on the world that otherwise might not exist. Kontje demonstrates this very point most aptly, explaining how German civilization moved toward an intellectual colonization of the East:

One can bring the benefits of civilization to non-European peoples—or impose civilization on them by force—but one cannot turn “natives” into Germans. Or can one? Beginning in the late eighteenth century, German ethnographers, historians, and linguists began to view themselves as the direct descendants of an “Aryan” culture originating in the Caucasus or in the mountains of northern India, as distinguished from the Semitic culture of the Middle East. From this perspective, the Germans had no need to conquer and colonize eastern lands, for they were already part of a greater Indo-European whole. The politically fragmented Germans could thus adopt a high moral ground in condemning the violent conquests of other colonizing nations, while quietly absorbing selected portions of the Middle East and Central Asia into a pan-German *Kultur*.²⁰

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 27-8.

¹⁹ Kontje, *German Orientalisms*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

While most of the essays in this collection address neither Kontje's Indo-European question nor Nietzsche's concept of Ural-Altaiic philosophy, they do offer a spectrum of views that elucidate the wealth of the topic, Germany and the Imagined East. Divided according to four geographic regions, the essays each treat an aspect of German culture in relation to a perceived East. Part I, "Eastern Germanies," features the former German Democratic Republic and Austria. An examination of both film and literature, these essays treat the problems of German reunification, as well as the threat of a multifaceted Other and the concept of national borders in Austria. In Part II, "Eastern Europe," three essays analyze the connections in literature, philosophy and politics between the German-speaking world and former Yugoslavia, Romania and Russia. The essays in Part III, "The Near East and Nearby," visit a range of connections between Germany and Turkey, ancient Persia, and India. From architecture to philosophy to literature, these essays underscore the various ways in which East and West have both threatened and complemented each other. Finally, in Part IV, "The Far East," the examination of intercultural exchange spreads beyond the linguistic boundaries once called Indo-Germanic to include the German perception of China and Japan. These final four essays combine views on film, literature, history and music in a multidisciplinary collage that invites scholars from all departments to explore just how varied East-West relations have been.

As any discipline is also part of the discourse of its time, "Germany and the Imagined East" illustrates that German Studies have evolved to encompass Germany on a world scale. No longer simply the study of a national literature unaware of the many perspectives it affords its fellow countries and disciplines, German Studies are quickly becoming a field that reaches beyond traditionally established borders to place the "Germanies" into a global context. Just a little more than eighty years ago, Oswald Spengler published *The Decline of the West* (1918-23), in which he explained the historical development of the so-called West and made predictions about its future. While some scholars have argued that Spengler did not intend his title to be taken fatalistically, some in both the imagined West and the imagined East have reacted as if both hemispheres were locked in constant struggle. Similarly, Robert D. Kaplan has written in the introduction to the 2004 translation of *Taras Bulba*, Nikolai Gogol's tale of the fearsome Cossacks, that we "need more works like *Taras Bulba*, to better understand the emotional wellsprings of the threat we face today in places like the Middle East and Central Asia."²¹ Kaplan's words will ring true to many in the world, but perhaps it is also time that we grasp the East and West not as opposites but as complementary sides of the same coin. To accomplish this, it will take committed scholars and enthusiastic students in dialogue on a topic that perceives

²¹ Kaplan in Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, xii.

negotiated the revision of unequal treaties with Western powers, emerged victorious from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5, and become allied to Britain by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902. In addition, most importantly, Japan had a surprising victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. These events required a change of view about Japan and the Japanese people. By this period, Japan had successfully made the transition “from feudal isolation to World Power.”

We do not know exactly how the German reading public perceived this change and in turn how this changing image of Japan reflects reality or the minds of German people. In addition, we do not know how the intellectuals, ethnographers and anthropologists viewed Japan or how these intellectuals influenced ordinary German citizens' conception of Japan. Still much remains to be done and discovered.

Before 1905, however, it would be fair to say that the image of Japan in *Die Gartenlaube* was determined through complex interactions among the century-long European tradition of Japan as a lost paradise, the European assumption of superiority over non-Western people, Germany's fascination with modernization and progress, and Japan's own initiative. At some point, the image of Japan was used to show the greatness of the German unification and, on the other occasions, it was utilized as an “antidote to modernization and industrialization of Germany.” Also, it was used to reinforce bourgeois family values. On the whole, it clearly proves the complex and ambiguous process of adaptation of modern Germany to its own modernization, nation-building process, and outward expansion.

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