

Recensioni



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Hanna Nohe, *Fingierte Orientalen erschaffen Europa. Zur Konstruktion kultureller Identitäten im Reisebrieffroman der Aufklärung*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2018, 332 pp.

From Homi Bhabha and Edward Said to Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida: how the self relates to the other has taken a place as a cornerstone of postcolonial theory and philosophical debate. It is precisely this question, when framed as a point of cross-cultural contact, that animates the present study, a Bonn doctoral dissertation published as part of the *Laboratorium Aufklärung* series. Hanna Nohe adopts a comparative and fine-grained approach to elucidate the significance of the Oriental ‘Reisebrieffroman’ (epistolary novels of travel accounts), a genre which gained currency from the late sixteenth to the mid eighteenth century.

In Nohe’s first chapter, Hegel’s account of the relationship between self and other from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is given centre stage. Hegel is useful for Nohe since the *Phenomenology* outlines the same movement she tracks in the texts she examines: that the European authors in question relinquish or externalise themselves in the other, in the foreign – here in the form of fictive Oriental letter-writers. This externalising move, or ‘Entäußerung’ in Hegelian terms, serves to help perceive the collective self, that is, European society, from a foreign perspective.

Such recourse to Hegel is not in itself innovative. It is a well-known trope that the Orient can function as point of European identification, as a counter-model that holds up a mirror – Nohe references Lacan’s mirror stage – to European practices, and that Oriental figures can be a vehicle for critique, by embodying an (idealised) Enlightenment position. The term Oriental may still have an unsavoury ring to it, but Nohe neatly justifies its use because the corpus that she is dealing with is Eurocentric, but in a manner that is not burdened with the moral implications of European hegemony. Rather, Nohe productively reframes what is Eurocentric as being concerned with the very concept of Europe, one that current scholarship suggests first took shape in the eighteenth century.

This focus on the European over the Oriental, in turn, leads to the central question of Nohe’s work: how do these texts help construct the idea of Europe and European cultural traits, specifically those of Western Europe (England, France, Spain, German-speaking and Italian-speaking lands)? Nohe’s explicit aim is explore the span of ‘Reisebrieffromane’, and how this genre was a product of transnational European networks – of grand tours, exiles, military service, diplomatic journeys, as well as scholarly and religious missions.

In the second chapter, Nohe lays the contextual groundwork and elaborates upon the circulation of texts, knowledge, and individuals which,

according to Nohe, led to a specifically European cultural space that was enacted and (re)produced by various actors. Particularly useful is Nohe's close attention to tracking intertextual references and motifs. The section on the circulation and publication history of Paolo Marana's epistolary novel *L'esploratore turco* (1684) is a particularly intriguing example of transnational textual reception and production, and this history uncovers some of the cloak-and-dagger aspects of the book market at the turn of the eighteenth century. It was translated, imitated, and expanded upon, to the point that the line between reception and production became blurred. This section serves another function: it allows Nohe to make the interesting observation that the most well-known of her texts – Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* – was understood at the time as an imitation of Marana. The chapter concludes with a narratological analysis of the genre – drawing on the work of François Jost and Jan Herman – that emphasises the polyvocality of these epistolary texts.

The third chapter addresses the literary construction of a European cultural space, dealing with variants of stereotypes (autostereotypes as well as heterostereotypes), and how the texts adopt strategies to encourage the reader to become an active participant in constituting the texts' meaning. The fourth and final chapter focuses on the reflection on European cultural space and practices of cultural comparison; here Nohe enlists the work of Bernd-Dietrich Müller and Geert Hofstede on cross-cultural comparison and communication to provide a suitable framework. What is meant by European cultural space is not only a series of collective practices that fall under the banner of 'European', but rather a particular mode of aesthetic judgment that presupposes collective standards.

Nohe's corpus consists of representative texts and incorporates a pleasing mix of familiar and unfamiliar titles from a period that ranges from the late sixteenth century, when the first of these 'Reisebriefromane' was published, to the French Revolution. The corpus itself is intended as representative rather than comprehensive, and encompasses, in chronological order: Paolo Marana's *L'esploratore turco* (1684), Daniel Defoe's *A continuation of the letters written by a Turkish spy in Paris* (1718), Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), George Lyttleton's *Letters from a Persian in England to his friends at Ispahan* (1735), Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens' *Lettres chinoises* (1739), Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World or, Letters from a Chinese philosopher residing in London* (1762), Ange Goudar's *L'espion chinois ou, L'envoyé secret de la cour de Pékan* (1764), José Cadalso's *Cartas marruecas* (1774), Johann Pezzl's *Marokkanis-*

che Briefe (1784), and Friedrich Wilhelm von Meyern's *Abdul Erzerum's neue persische Briefe* (1787). This corpus is worthy of comment, not only because it is impressive in scope, but also since it places certain practical demands on the reader. The works are quoted only in their original languages, with some elaboration in German. Since Nohe's approach is to proceed via close textual analysis of each text in turn, translations into German alongside the original would have eased overall comprehension of both the analysis and argument.

The fruits of this study lie in its consistent close and comparative attention to the individual texts. Its thesis that these texts constitute a specific European form is convincing. There are a few points to critique. The structure does at points betray its formulaic roots in a doctoral dissertation. In addition, what is on occasion lacking is a certain metalevel of analysis. Nohe consistently draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks to proceed with her close textual analyses. One question that is not always adequately addressed is why one theoretical construct should be deemed fruitful and chosen over another. That is not to say they are not judiciously selected, since they do prove illuminating. The question remains: why, for example, is Geert Hofstede's influential theory of intercultural communication particularly useful as a lens through which to read the corpus Nohe has selected? The same applies to the section on the active role of the reader. After outlining the reader-response theories of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, Nohe turns to the work of Teresa Hiergeist. Hiergeist, as Nohe argues, offers a way to step beyond the notion of the implied reader to a theory of the various levels on which the reader may respond to a text. Yet, at this point the narrative leaves something to be desired, since it proceeds by a moment of compression that makes arriving at, in this case, Hiergeist's work, appear insufficiently motivated. More context on theories of reading – the recent field of cognitive literary studies has shed light on literature as part of human cognition –, and on the pragmatics of what the text does to the reader and vice versa, would have bolstered Nohe's overall argument.

Overall, with these few caveats, the strength of this study lies in its close attention to the individual texts. It is a dense, well-researched and stimulating read to any scholar working in the field of Eighteenth-century literary studies, particularly for those interested in the development of (fictionalised) travel literature.

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