



IMPERIAL MESSAGES

Orientalism as Self-Critique in the Habsburg *Fin de Siècle*

Robert Lemon

Imperial Messages

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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For Ellen, Ben, and Eliot

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Abbreviations

- CS Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1995).
- DL Franz Kafka, "Schakale und Araber," in *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, ed. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch, and Gerhard Neumann (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1994), 270–75.
- MN Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Das Märchen der 672. Nacht," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 28, *Erzählungen I*, ed. Ellen Ritter (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1975), 15–30.
- NS Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1993).
- PR Hermann Broch, *Pasenow oder die Romantik*, in *Die Schlafwandler: Eine Romantrilogie*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), 9–181.
- SI *The Sleepwalkers*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Pantheon, 1964).
- T *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, in *Prosa und Stücke*, vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978), 7–140.
- Ta Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1990).
- TB Wolf Kittler, *Der Turmbau zu Babel und das Schweigen der Sirenen* (Erlangen: Verlag Palm & Enke, 1985).
- TN Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Tale of Night Six Hundred and Seventy-Two," trans. Michael Henry Heim, in *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008), 39–56.
- YT Robert Musil, *Young Törless*, trans. Eithner Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York: Noonday, 1958).

Translations in this book are my own except where otherwise credited.

Introduction

“ORIENTALISM AS SELF-CRITIQUE”: the juxtaposition of these terms warrants immediate explanation. In his groundbreaking study *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said at once defines and denounces orientalism as a hegemonic discourse, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹ As the ideological cohort to occidental imperialism, orientalism as described by Said appears to be exclusively concerned with European self-aggrandizement rather than self-critique, invariably casting the Orient as the feeble Other dominated by the mighty West (40). However, in recent years, some postcolonial critics have argued against such a monolithic interpretation. Indeed, for Ziauddin Sardar, Said’s elision of diversity and heterogeneity within the discourse “amounts to Occidentalism, stereotyping in reverse”, since it “ignores all manifestations of counter-hegemonic thought” and creates the illusion of a unified and constant European/Western identity.² Other critics, such as Lisa Lowe, have also argued for a conception of orientalism as “heterogeneous and contradictory,”³ a pluralist discourse that can even encompass critical representations of the West.⁴ My purpose here is to advance this line of enquiry by addressing the orientalist fiction produced by a European empire that receives no mention in *Orientalism*: Austria-Hungary. Through close analysis of works by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, and Franz Kafka, I seek to demonstrate that far from promulgating Western imperialism, these texts subvert received notions of national and cultural identity and thus problematize the very practice of orientalism. Moreover, my readings of these fictions show how all three authors adopt politically or culturally self-critical stances, invoking the oriental “Other” not to bolster Occidental imperialism but rather to express concerns about their own troubled empire. This is not to say, however, that Said’s definition of the discourse has no relevance for my study. On the contrary, his analysis of British, French, and American orientalisms represents the standard against which the subversive, anti-imperialist exoticism of the Habsburg authors can be properly judged. Furthermore, in order to identify the transgressive tendencies in these Austrian texts, I adapt strategies developed by postcolonial theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Mary Louise Pratt, and Homi Bhabha, who were in turn inspired by Said’s seminal study of orientalism.

To begin, let us address those factors peculiar to Austria-Hungary that gave rise to what I will argue is a type of orientalist fiction marked by

self-reflection and self-critique. Firstly, as the name Österreich or “eastern empire” suggests,⁵ Austria traditionally had a foot in both the East and the West, occupying a liminal position vis-à-vis the Orient and serving as a gateway to the Ottoman Empire. (As a *porta Orientis*, Vienna also experienced the trauma of reverse traffic in the form of the Turkish sieges of 1529 and 1683, as well as numerous wars.) The eastward sprawl of the Dual Monarchy resulted in a multi-ethnic empire, which in 1910 encompassed, in descending order of population, German Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians, Romanians, Croats, Slovaks, Serbs, Slovenes, and Italians.⁶ Not surprisingly, this patchwork of peoples produced internal divisions between “East” and “West” that transcended the customary orientalist notion of a global dichotomy between two clearly demarcated hemispheres.⁷ At the turn of the century many Viennese German-speakers held that the Orient began not at the border with the Ottoman Empire, but rather at the doors of their Slavic, Jewish, and (following the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908) Muslim compatriots. To unite these increasingly restive minorities, Austria-Hungary offered the Habsburg myth, the notion of a supra-national allegiance to the imperial throne. This unique conception of imperialism marks the most important distinction between the Dual Monarchy and the other European powers. For Britain, France, and, belatedly, Germany, imperialism represented the overseas expansion of nationalist ideology. In contrast, as a contiguous territory devoid of overseas colonies, the Habsburg authorities conceived of imperialism as a matter of domestic, rather than foreign policy, a foundational myth that did not harness, but rather repressed the nationalist energies of its diverse population. In light of Austria-Hungary’s easterly orientation and imperial ideology, we can begin to read ostensibly exotic texts such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s poetic monologue “Der Kaiser von China Spricht” (The Emperor of China Speaks) (1897) and Franz Kafka’s Chinese stories “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (“The Great Wall of China”) and “Ein altes Blatt” (“An Old Manuscript,” both 1917) as invocations of the authors’ own “eastern empire.” Thus the location, ethnic composition, and imperial self-mythologizing of the Dual Monarchy all influenced orientalist works that tend towards self-critique and thereby subvert the fundamental dichotomy between East and West found in conventional orientalism.

However, before situating this study in the broader discussion of orientalism in German and Austrian literature, we should consider its relation to current scholarship that addresses the issue of postcoloniality in Germanophone Central Europe. In claiming that Austrian orientalist fiction harbors anti-hegemonic tendencies, this book seeks to intervene in the ongoing debate among critics and historians on both sides of the Atlantic regarding the application of postcolonial theory to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its culture.⁸ This discussion has generated controversy, and with good

reason. Indeed, most critics agree that Austria-Hungary cannot qualify as a colonial power in the strict sense of the term.⁹ Several factors distinguish the situation of the Dual Monarchy from the empires of Britain and France. First, as we have already noted, the Habsburg Empire lacked overseas colonies, and indeed, some of its territorial possessions, such as Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, had not been conquered or seized by force but instead shared a political union with Austria that stretched back to the Medieval Holy Roman Empire.¹⁰ Further, the Habsburg Monarchy formally granted equal rights to all its multi-ethnic citizenry, in stark contrast to the systematic racist oppression inflicted on indigenous populations under overseas colonialism.¹¹ Finally, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of colonialist economic exploitation with the fact that just before the First World War the regions of Bohemia and Moravia enjoyed a higher per capita income than all but one of the provinces of Austria proper.¹² No, the argument for the use of postcolonial theory cannot rely on retrospective analogies between the disparate historical and geographical situations of the Dual Monarchy and those European empires with remote colonial possessions. Rather, it draws strength from observing contemporary depictions of the relations between the Germanophone population and its various “subject peoples,” which frequently imply assumptions of ethnic and cultural superiority in the manner of a colonial power.¹³ Consequently, most critics agree that it is in the realm of cultural expression, in the construction of images of the self and the Other, and in the subsequent establishment of a hierarchical relationship, that postcolonial theories have the most relevance.¹⁴ For this reason I have restricted my consideration of Habsburg orientalism to fiction, since this realm not only offers the semantically richest expressions of cultural identity and alterity but also provides insights into the psychological processes by which protagonists develop their views of the self and Other.

Granted, the idiosyncratic situation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire sometimes does make for an awkward fit with postcolonial theories that draw largely from British and French imperial models. However, the proliferation of colonialist and orientalist scenarios in late Habsburg fiction compels the critic to explain why writers in an empire devoid of colonies should show such a marked interest in such themes. By arguing that the Austrian authors Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, and Franz Kafka deploy oriental motifs and topoi to engage in self-critique rather than advance imperialist hegemony, this study will show how Austrian fiction challenges the conventional post-Saidian view of the orientalist discourse. Thus we will examine not only how postcolonial studies inform readings of Habsburg fiction, but also how Austrian texts question received notions found in postcolonial theory. In this way, the tensions between the generalizing tendencies of the theoretical approach and the particularities of the region emerge not as obstacles to dialogue but as opportunities for reciprocal reevaluation.

The fact that critics on both sides of the Atlantic have started calling for a postcolonial approach to Habsburg texts only in the last decade or so can be attributed to the pervasive influence of German studies on discussions of Austrian literature and culture. Here we must first consider that the belatedness and brevity of the German colonial experience, which consisted of a mere thirty-five years between 1884 and 1919, have led critics to question its cultural significance, particularly compared to the lengthy colonial histories of Britain, France, and other European nations. In their introduction to *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (1998), Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop explain that it was US scholars who from the mid-eighties played a vanguard role in opening up the fields of colonialism and postcoloniality in German studies.¹⁵ The authors cite several historical factors that “occluded Germans’ view of European colonialism and their complicity as Europeans in it”: the absence of postcolonial literature, that is “writing by formerly colonized people in the language of their colonizers”; the lack, until very recently, of “a diasporic presence of formerly colonized peoples in Germany”; and the “German focus on the Holocaust and the central and unavoidable fact of German history” (3–4). Clearly, all the historical factors that have obscured German understanding of their imperialist past are also applicable to the Austrian experience and account for the further delay in the introduction of postcolonial theory into Habsburg and Austrian studies. However, Austria-Hungary offers a radical departure from the German model in its utter lack of overseas colonies and in its supranational imperialist ideal. Thus while Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop contend that in pre-1871 Germany “the coincidence of these two desires — for nation and for empire — had [. . .] ramifications for Germans in their attempts to understand themselves as a political entity” (19), I argue that the inherent conflict between nationalist and imperialist impulses in Austria-Hungary, between the restive “subject peoples”’ desire for self-determination on the one hand and the Habsburg myth of supranational and dynastic loyalty on the other, gave rise to that empire’s self-conception, which was unique among Western European powers.

The introduction by US critics of postcolonial theory into German studies has had a discernible impact on current research in Germany. Axel Dunker’s 2008 study of colonialism in nineteenth-century German-language literature is a case in point.¹⁶ Drawing on Edward Said’s notion of a contrapuntal reading that takes into account the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized, Dunker raises issues regarding German nineteenth-century literature that are of direct relevance to this study. For example, he argues that colonialism was a global phenomenon that influenced German-speaking areas beyond Imperial Germany, such as Austria-Hungary and Switzerland, despite their lack of overseas territories (8–9). He also raises the possibility that canonical works of German fiction may

subvert, rather than support, the inequality between European and non-European ethnic groups that is a feature of much colonial literature (12). However, when he cites the works of Franz Kafka, “a Jewish writer from Prague,” as an example of the global reach of colonial fantasies, he runs into taxonomical difficulties (8). According to Dunker, the example of Kafka shows that *from a German perspective* the concept of colonial fantasies must not be limited to the establishment of a German colonial empire or the standing of the colonial in Germany’s imagined position in the world (8, my italics). While Dunker’s central point about the imaginative and geographic scope of colonial fantasies is well taken, his assumption of a *German perspective* with regard to Kafka, a German-speaking Jewish writer born in the largely Czech city of Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, does not do justice to the complexities of that author’s ethnic and cultural situation. In this way, Dunker maintains the longstanding quasi-colonial territorial claim of German *Germanistik* over Austrian and Austro-Hungarian literature and culture.

This tendency to subsume Austria under the rubric of its northern neighbor has long been standard practice in discussions of Germanophone orientalist literature. In the pre-Saidian era, scholars often aimed for a transhistorical overview of the topic that tended to ignore national divisions within the field of German-language literature. Thus Otto Spies’s 1949 account of the Orient in German literature refers to the Austrian Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s early poems as among the most beautiful German ghazals without mentioning his nationality,¹⁷ and Franz Babiniger’s 1957 contribution on the same topic enfoldes references to the Austrian *Türkendrama* into a general account of “the Orient and German literature.”¹⁸ This unexamined incorporation of Austrian orientalism continues in the work of Ingrid Schuster, whose investigations into the cultural interrelations between German literature and China and Japan span three decades, from the pre-Saidian era of her initial 1977 study of the topic to her most recent publication in 2007.¹⁹ It is particularly telling that although both these works discuss Hofmannsthal’s orientalist texts,²⁰ neither ascribes any significance to his Austrian nationality. Indeed, in her discussion of the Austrian Hofmannsthal and the German writer and philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz, Schuster refers to the events after “the cultural crisis” of the First World War in Germany, that is, the Weimar Republic and the catastrophe of Nazism, as if they both represented a shared national experience for the two authors.²¹

Schuster’s interest in the cultural interrelationships between Europe and China and Japan brings us to another reason why the critical discourse often omits specific discussion of Austrian orientalism: the Janus-faced nature of orientalist literature, which simultaneously looks East and West, and, by extension, of the scholarship surrounding it. For many critics focus not on Western depictions of the East but rather on the oriental influences

on occidental literature. Often such studies posit a spiritual affinity between orientalist authors and Eastern philosophy or religion. For example, Joo-Dong Lee argues for a “Taoist world-view” in Kafka’s works,²² while in a more recent article Dennis McCort discerns a shared “mystical insight” between Kafka and the Zen tradition.²³ By conceiving the author’s relation to the East in purely spiritual terms, such arguments tend to reinforce the stereotypical notion of the mystical East in opposition to the rational West.²⁴

Although the tendencies described above predate Said’s 1977 *Orientalism* and persist after it, Said’s work nevertheless exerts a pervasive influence over many critics’ conception of German orientalism. In *Orientalism* Said offers a relatively benign view of German orientalism as an academic and literary discourse operating outside the bounds of nationalist imperialism. According to Said, Germany, which had no possessions in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century corresponding to the British and French territories in the East, had no opportunity to develop “a close partnership . . . between Orientalists and a *sustained* national interest in the Orient” (19, Said’s italics). He then contrasts the German Orient, which he characterizes as “almost exclusively a scholarly, or at least a Classical, Orient” with the “actual” Orient experienced by nineteenth-century British and French writers through their colonial presence in the region (19). Said finds it significant that “the two most renowned German works on the Orient, Goethe’s *Westöstlicher Diwan* [*sic*] and Friedrich Schlegel’s *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder*, were based respectively on a Rhine journey and on hours spent in Paris libraries” and sums up the German contribution to orientalist scholarship as the refinement and elaboration of techniques applied to “texts, myths, ideas and languages almost literally gathered from the Orient by imperial Britain and France” (19). The sedate German theory undertaken on Rhine journeys and in Parisian libraries is of course preferable to the sanguinary British and French practice of actual imperial conquest. Nevertheless, Said does align German orientalism with its British, French, and American equivalents in its assumption of an intellectual authority over the Orient (19), an authority that arises from its textual appropriation of the region. For Said, German orientalism thus emerges as a kind of scholarly subaltern to the British and French discourses.

Said’s fairly uncritical portrayal of German orientalism leads subsequent critics to challenge not only the applicability of his definition of orientalism to German literature but also the viability of his definition in general. For example, Andrea Fuchs-Sumiyoshi borrows freely without citation from Said’s account of German orientalism to support her claim that his critique of the discourse does not pertain to the German tradition and that a new definition is therefore required. Exaggerating Said’s claims, she argues that the relationship of Germany *and* Austria