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Abstract

Review of Joseph Twist. *Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature. Openness to Alterity.* Camden House, 2018. xii + 216 pp.

Keywords

Zafer Şenocak, SAID, Feridun Zaimoglu, Navid Kermani

Joseph Twist. *Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature. Openness to Alterity*. Camden House, 2018. xii + 216 pp.

Horst Seehofer, Germany's Minister of the Interior, is known for not mincing words. "Islam is not part of Germany" was only one of the many statements by Seehofer, then chairman of the Christian Social Union party in Germany, that sparked yet another controversy when he took up office in the spring of 2018. At about the same time, Joseph Twist's highly topical monograph *Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature* had just left the printing press. As before, Chancellor Angela Merkel disagreed with Seehofer's assessment and maintained that "with the 4.5 million Muslims living among us, their religion, Islam, has become part of Germany by now." Joseph Twist disrupts three assumptions regarding the so-called "Islam debate" in his impressive reading of contemporary German-language poetry and prose by Zafer Şenocak, SAID, Feridun Zaimoglu, and Navid Kermani. First, the essentialist notion of Islam, "*der Islam*" '*the Islam*,' caters to one-dimensional imaginations of a foundational concept guiding Muslim faith(s), customs, and practices, ignorant of the heterogeneity of how Islam is lived and thought about in the twenty-first century, not to mention all those past centuries shaping current approaches to Islam. Second, speaking of "Germany" and "us," in turn, gratifies an Orientalizing image of Islam and Muslims, framing both as Other, a "they" within "our" federal nation allegedly populated by an ultimately Christian "we." And third, both Seehofer's and Merkel's call for "inter-religious" and "inter-cultural dialogue" between Germans and Muslims—the golden path to a so-called integration of Muslims—not only ignores the various intersections of Muslim and Christian heritage, but also supports the notion of a cohesive link between (non-)religious communities and cultural identities on the one hand and the formation of self on the other.

Joseph Twist's book is a powerful counter-model of both conventional ideas about (post)religious identities and academia's traditional way of reading (and thereby constructing) Muslim authors as representatives and cultural mediators of their faith and their sense of (not) belonging to what many critics somehow obscurely conceive as a liberal-secular "cosmopolitan" Germany. *Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature* instructively and persuasively intertwines Jean-Luc Nancy's deconstruction of monotheism, subjectivity, and identity with in-depth readings of selected texts by four of the most prominent contemporary German Muslim authors (148).

Throughout the book, Twist coherently, thought-provokingly, and mostly convincingly argues that the selected texts investigated in his study destabilize both orthodox and fundamentalist, as well as moderate or Orientalizing notions of Islam. In this respect, Twist asserts, these texts contribute "toward the deconstruction of Islam . . . , leaving behind a worldly sense of the sacred that undermines closed religious identities and shifts meaning toward the world, away from a transcendent Other" (16). Introducing the theory of a "postmonotheistic spirituality" (11 et passim) inspired by

Nancy's philosophy, Twist carefully explores how Şenocak's, SAID's, Zaimoglu's, and Kermani's fiction hints at nonfoundational, non-dualistic ways of experiencing the divine as that which is immanent in the world but can neither be attained nor represented. As such, the divine only becomes sensible in fleeting, often profane instances of sensuous, embodied engagements with others or in aesthetic practices. The book invites its readers to think of these literary implications in terms of a non-universalizing, post-Enlightenment "cosmopolitanism without an *-ism*" (146), a stance (and a faith) valuing ambiguity and alterity and rejecting both monotheistic doctrines as well as the idea of "self" and "community" as finite entities. To emphasize this point, Twist aptly links his Nancyean reading of the selected texts with Şenocak's, SAID's, Zaimoglu's, and Kermani's debts to Islamic mysticism, Sufism in particular, but also maps out the texts' engagement and dispute with Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism, the Bible, the Koran, and the authors' positions in current public discussions, political contexts, and academic scholarship, thus providing a comprehensive analytic approach which does justice to the diversity of the texts presented in the study.

Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature complements the growing body of research departing from a traditional culturalist approach to fictions from or about authors with supposedly "hyphenated identities" (Abdelrazek).¹ While inter-/transcultural studies regard these fictions as articulations of or means of negotiating particular identities produced and made necessary by different sets and "clashes" of cultures within German-speaking contexts, Twist's "postrepresentational" (148) deconstructivist theory presents a fresh and capturing perspective on some of Şenocak's, SAID's, Zaimoglu's, and Kermani's work.

It is also worth noting that Twist provides excellent English translations of the German originals. Nonetheless, his rather shallow engagement with existing scholarship on German Romanticism in his chapter on "Zaimoglu's Romantic argument" (107) might be considered at least a bit disappointing. Neither the specific historical context of a/n (early) Romantic cosmopolitanism (i.e., most importantly, the French Revolution), nor the Romantics' infatuation with "the Orient" (Andrea Polaschegg's pertinent *Der andere Orientalismus* is not even mentioned) are taken into account. Furthermore, it would have been of no small interest to compare the literary realization of a postmonotheistic cosmopolitanism in the works of the four authors with texts written by authors without Muslim backgrounds.

Finally, considering the fact that the differences between love and desire as well as the divine implications of erotic experiences and sexual intercourse play a prominent role in the texts Twist investigates, it is also surprising that gender issues hardly come to be mentioned, neither in terms of a deconstruction of Islam nor regarding the fact that these male writers are often concerned with

¹ Abdelrazek, Amal Talaat. *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*. Cambria Press, 2007.

writing about heterosexual relationships. Surely, these issues will have to be addressed in future research, which will greatly benefit from the insights that can be gained by reading Twist's monograph. It will be of particular interest not only for scholars working in fields related to transcultural and postcolonial literatures but also to those working in cultural studies, political theory, and intellectual history. The book represents one of the latest and most valuable contributions to reimagining Islam toward an immanentist spirituality, a worldly, cosmopolitan faith that appreciates and acknowledges differences and interconnectedness in and beyond German literature.

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