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Abstract

Review of Todd Kontje. *Imperial Fictions: German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State*. U of Michigan P, 2018. 329 pp.

Keywords

Germany literary history, empire, nation

Todd Kontje. *Imperial Fictions: German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State*. U of Michigan P, 2018. 329 pp.

In his most recent monograph *Imperial Fictions: German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State*, Todd Kontje further expands the horizons of his previous contributions to German literary and cultural studies beyond the individual author, the organizing principle of the nation-state, and the project of literary historiography more generally. Kontje's investigation into the relationship between the German nation-state and empire(s) follows an historically delimiting approach established by scholars such as Susanne Zantop in her groundbreaking *Colonial Fantasies* (1997), which reframed a cultural debate about German colonial history. Works with such scope exceed the historical period of the Age of Empire, conventionally marked by the year of unification (1871) and bracketed by the late-nineteenth-century event of the Berlin Conference and the loss of colonial possessions with defeat and surrender sealed with the Treaty of Versailles (1884-1919). Contemporary German studies scholarship is increasingly invested in reframing an understanding of the Age of Empire as a constitutive element in decentering and decolonizing not only the curriculum, but the discipline. This collective effort is variously articulated across disciplines. Kontje's project primarily realigns literary history with a series of often surprisingly paired and contrasted close readings of authors and texts, ranging from the Middle Ages to the present. Unlike Heinz Schlaffer's short history of German literature (2002), or the ambitious, multi-volume, multi-authored work edited by David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan (2004), Kontje, as an individual author with great range and depth, retells the national narrative vis-à-vis its imperial unconscious. The result is a lucidly written, profoundly researched, and illuminating study; *Imperial Fictions* ultimately argues the value of not discarding the nation-state as an organizational category for literary scholars, the hegemonic force of globalization notwithstanding.

Few studies by individual authors can take account of multiple national histories, literatures, and theoretical frameworks with such scope. Kontje's approach draws from the rich and growing archive of cross-disciplinary work that sheds light on the delimited concept of the imperial in relation to the national. His previous work *German Orientalisms* (2004) and his established expertise on Thomas Mann, the *Bildungsroman*, German realism, and German-language European modernisms, is variously recapitulated in *Imperial Fictions*. The literary history departs from works such as Lora Wildenthal's *German Women for Empire* (2001), for example, and her coedited collection with Eric Ames and Marcia Klotz (*Germany's Colonial Pasts*, 2007), in looking beyond the African colonies. Significant in this archive is Sara Lennox and Sara Friedrichmeyer's *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (2005), among other

more recent titles that foreground transculturality and the imperative to decenter European epistemologies. In that regard, *Imperial Fictions* limits the focus to canonical literature, read innovatively. Kontje's approach is admittedly a selective one. He notes, for example, that the focus on the canon accounts for the absence of minority and women writers (11). His intention is to read the mainstream from the perspective of the margins.

The clarity of purpose and evenness of approach, with no pretense to the type of "coverage" promised by so many literary histories, constitute a major strength of this study. The introduction defines the scope of the enterprise, escorts the reader from the concept of national to world literature, and posts warning signs about the deliberate limitations. The second chapter examines the centrality of Hermann as a "German" hero and the legacy of that bellicosity for the relationships between Imperial Germany and Rome. Kontje follows this trajectory through the *Song of Anno*, political poetry by Walter von der Vogelweide, and the German patriotism of Conrad Celtis in early modern Nuremberg. Silesia of the seventeenth century grounds Kontje's deft reading of dissenting political works by Andreas Gryphius and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, who write against the grain of Hapsburg hegemony. Departing from the approach of paired authors, Kontje devotes chapter five to Goethe, himself a canonical icon and author of the concept *Weltliteratur* as constitutive of cultural heritage and cosmopolitanism. Romanticism is represented by Friedrich Schlegel and Joseph von Eichendorff. From there, we move to the "worldly provincialism" of Gottfried Keller and Theodore Fontane. Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann combine to lend insight into two different yet compatible critiques of empire. Siegfried Lenz and Günter Grass, another unlikely pair, nonetheless furnish a fresh take on the literary politics of *Heimat* after the Third Reich. Kontje devotes the final chapter on popular fiction to Christian Knecht and Daniel Kehlmann. The conclusion revisits the purpose of the project, i.e., engagement with the persistence of national literature and influential theories of challenges to reading cultures, largely determined by national literatures (close versus "distant readings," the title of Franco Moretti's 2013 book, for example). Indeed, Kontje's achievement in this work is to reread a centuries-long history of the fractured identities produced and inscribed by the clash between the national and imperial.

Some readers may wonder, as did I, if the selection of canonical writers could not have been more representative, or the peripheries of the imperium not extended beyond the legacies of the Habsburg empire. What if one were to pair Maria Katharina Stockfleth and Anna Ovena Hoyers for a different perspective on early modern gender and politics? Arguably, the canon is a corollary of the national; to invoke it as a principle for exclusion runs the risk of tautology. That said, this approach yields rich readings of interest to German studies scholars and literary historians. Individual chapters would be assets on a range of advanced

undergraduate and graduate reading lists. Certainly, other possibilities of non-canonical pairings spring to mind, but these do not detract from Kontje's accomplishment with this work, which also inspires scholars to continue reading in the shadows cast by nation and the empire to shine light on the women writers and minorities whose invisibility cannot be sustained.

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