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Towards an Aesthetics of Sameness: Literary Counter-Voices to the Rise of Nationalist and Colonialist Thinking in Late Austria-Hungary

Most “contextualist” and postcolonial narratological research and the broader literary analysis of identity discourses over the last decades have mainly been focusing on unmasking rhetorical strategies of Othering and difference-making. Studies on identity discourses in late nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary are no difference, having critically examined notions of cultural superiority within hegemonic Germanophone culture, as well as the creation of binary ideologies of identity and difference which characterized the Dual Monarchy’s emerging nationalist movements.

However, recent revisions in Habsburg historiography have questioned how far the exclusionary logics of identity/alterity truly mattered to Austria-Hungary’s populace. Studies have pointed out the “situational” quality of national identification (Judson 2016, 274), the fact that the adoption of nationalist ideology could as well fail (Brubaker 2004, 12), and phenomena of “national indifference” (Zhara 2010, 93) which crossed linguistic and ethnic divides. On a theoretical level, Bhatti and Kimmich (2015) have highlighted the need to examine constellations of “similarity” in Cultural Studies in order not to remain analytically trapped in, and inadvertently reproduce, the binary conceptions of identity/alterity that the investigated discourses might promote themselves.

My PhD project combines these considerations with a narratological investigation of how a range of German-language writers from various intersectional positionalities in Austria-Hungary developed what I am terming a narrative “aesthetics of sameness” – formal narrative languages which stood against the divisive rhetoric of their time. The investigated aesthetic strategies range from an implicit bilinguality in the works of Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830–1916), to metalepses and autofiction as narrative modes of supranational allegiance in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s (1836–1895) oeuvre, or the antinationalist thrust in the handling of focalization by the German-Jewish author Auguste Hauschner (1850–1924). Overall, my project seeks to demonstrate how writers from late Austria-Hungary reflected, enacted, or actively promoted an ethos of commonality through narrative form.

Methodologically, my PhD project has two aims. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate the value of a distinctively narratological approach to examining identity discourses in nineteenth-century Central Europe. After all, colonialist and ethno-nationalist ideologies were a product of deliberately constructed cultural narratives in the long nineteenth century (Beller 2018, 274), often consciously exaggerating inner-European “differences” that were not politically charged heretofore. The question of how these exclusionary notions were constructed or undermined through formal techniques therefore constitutes a fundamental, yet understudied aspect. This is even more the case for the counter-narratives united in my corpus. I will explore what characterizes formal aesthetics of national indifference, anti-nationalism, and sameness, but also their limits in the face of

increasingly divisive discourses of identity/alterity in late Austria-Hungary. Secondly, narratology-oriented postcolonial studies have so far heavily centered on Anglophone literature, a context of highly asymmetric power structures between colonized and colonizing cultures. This focus has hardly produced modifications of narratological concepts (Heinen 2021, 22). In this respect, investigating formal aesthetics within the context of the multiethnic and multilingual complexities of the Habsburg Empire might promise to add nuance to and reinvigorate the recently stalled efforts to advance a postcolonial narratology and its discussion of the politics of narrative form.

Works Cited

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