

Proposal for an ESF Exploratory Workshop to be held in 2009

- **Workshop title**

West reads East – Interdependent Hermeneutics of European and Middle Eastern Literatures

- **Proposed dates and location of the workshop**

Spring 2009, Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (ZfL), Berlin / Germany

- **Abstract of the proposed workshop topic (50-70 words)**

The workshop is meant to explore the new research fields that emerge from making the European perspective(s) on Middle Eastern literatures the starting-point for a reflexion about the interdependence and reciprocity of cultural self-assurance and the production of collective identity. Examining the premises on which the study of Middle Eastern literatures is based will yield insights into the mechanisms through which normative and generally accepted genre and period terminology is produced.

- **Background and rationale (2-4 pages)**

The reception of modern Middle Eastern literatures in the West is as young as these literatures themselves. The reflection about this reception is even younger. Why do Europeans (and ‘Westerners’ in general) read and study Middle Eastern (or should we say ‘Oriental’) literatures? Why are some texts translated, others not? Is the way ‘we’ read, study and ‘exploit’ these literatures, up to the texts themselves? Questions like these became asked only after Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) had initiated a lively debate. Within the disciplines that dealt with Middle Eastern literatures, discussions led, from the 1980s onward, first and foremost (and also for the first time) to an insight into the basic deficiency of our own discourses: until then those who had studied and interpreted MEL had been historians, sociologists, anthropologists/ethnologists specializing in the Middle East, and/or Islamologists, and they had approached literary texts as if they were ‘documents’ that provided 1:1 representations of (or ‘mirrored’, as it was said) Middle Eastern realities; no attention was paid to the *fictional character* and the *aesthetic* dimensions of the texts. This, it was felt since the 1980s, had to be changed: literature should be read by people trained in literary theory and methodology, because a reflexion about aesthetic dimensions was necessary in order to make proper use of *literary* ‘documents’.

Therefore, literary theory became introduced into the study of MEL from the 1980s onwards. This yielded some remarkable results, but it did not take long until it became clear that operating with concepts developed for *European/Western* literatures was not so easy, and also not adequate in many cases, because ME literary cultures differ in a number of ways from the literary cultures for the analysis of which Western literary theories had been developed. ‘Westerners’ describing and analyzing literature with ‘Western’ theories and

methods either produced ‘Western-type’ results, or ‘zero scores’ (because the approach was essentially tautological), or made the inadequateness of their approach apparent.

In this situation, the introduction of postcolonial theory into the study of MEL opened a new ‘round’ / started a new stage/phase. Not only did it describe and explain the specific kind of blending of seemingly heterogeneous ‘ingredients’ and the complex interaction between ‘autochthonous’ traditions and ‘foreign’ elements in these literatures,¹ it also established ‘hybridity’ as a *positive* term in that it broke with the old Orientalist narrative that used to see the West as the ‘sender’ and the East as a ‘recipient’ of ‘influences’ only; now, deviation from Western standards was no longer something inferior and/or to be ashamed of; it was a means of self-assertion, yes, but ‘hybridity’ turned out to be a highly original and creative cultural expression also, very often possessing even outstanding literary quality.

The implications/impact of this new approach(es) are however far from being sufficiently exploited, and neither the challenges nor the chances have been satisfactorily explored so far:

- Postcolonial approaches have not been sufficiently tested in their applicability, or non-applicability, to MEL. Aren’t these theories, too, developed on the basis of non-Middle Eastern texts, so that operating with them may lead the Western researcher into a similar tautological trap as s/he was caught in before? In how far, e.g., is postcolonial literary ‘theory’ applicable to the literature of Turkey (which had not been colonized) or modern Hebrew literature?
- For modern *Arabic* literature, a number of studies have recently begun to revise older (Orientalist-type) narratives, to give the literatures of ‘the others’ a ‘right/value of their own’ and to explore into their own ‘rules’ and premises (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*).² These studies provided new and most valuable insights not only into a major Middle Eastern literary tradition but also, *via* literature, into peculiarities of Arabic culture, the interaction between literary and other fields, into imagery and forms and mechanisms of aesthetic representation. Many questions however remain open (e.g., what about Turkish, Persian, and Hebrew literature?), or have not yet been asked; most probably, a whole complex of related aspects has not even come into sight. Fundamental questions – most challenging perhaps the one about possibly different ways of perception and the role of literary representation, rooted in cultural differences – can only be posed and approached when mechanisms of cultural transfer as well as the techniques of their description will have undergone self-assessment and critical evaluation. The question, for instance, so central for the (visual/fine) arts, whether Reality can be ‘portrayed’ or ‘represented’ at all – the so-called ‘ban on images’ (*Bilderverbot*) in Islam being still the

1 For the dialectics of alignment with and attempted distinction from the West, cf. the ‘classic’ ASHCROFT/GRIFFITHS/TIFFIN (1989).

2 Cf., e.g., MEYER (2001), JACQUEMOND (2003), SELIM (2004), BARDENSTEIN (2005), HALLAQ & TOELLE (eds., 2006).

paradigm for an ornamental, ‘arabesque’ rather than object-oriented aesthetics – should be asked also, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to representation in and through literature. Is there a tradition of ‘representation’ in MEL that is less object-oriented than in Europe? Here, as elsewhere, hermeneutical premises³ will have to receive much more attention than they have received so far.⁴

- Shedding light on, and breaking up, tautological entanglements/ensnarements in our approaches to MEL and illuminating aspects/dimensions of the latter’s autonomy and specificity makes it however also possible to ‘unearth’ and delineate those areas or layers where Western and Middle Eastern literary cultures intersect and overlap – Middle Eastern history has always been a history of attempted distinction from, but also of alignment with, the Other. These areas or layers owe their existence not only (though certainly to a large extent) to modern globalisation, but also to a shared cultural heritage: Middle Eastern and European literary traditions are not facing each other as clearly definable separate units but have common roots (Antiquity, Hellenism, monotheism, ...) and to a considerable extent developed under similar or even identical conditions/circumstances. Similarity or identity may already exist at the surface, when both cultures use the same, or similar, aesthetic tools and forms to express certain ideas (e.g., the countryside as a symbol for ‘nation’; there is also much overlapping with respect to gendering). In other cases, it is the *function* (e.g., realism, or modernism) which is similar/identical, but is expressed in terms of the autochthonous tradition (realism and modernism in the Western tradition may look quite different from its representations in the East). Many new directions of research may result from this: as the ‘translational turn’ was able to show, for instance, a closer look at *translation* from one culture into another offers the possibility of differentiating forms and functions of literary life (on the producers’ as well as the recipients’ side), in Europe as in the Middle East. Replacing the old ‘West=sender/East=recipient’ model and acknowledging the East to contribute, with its own specific forms of literary expression, to global ideas such as Realism or Modernism, will have an impact on the very definition of Realism and Modernism themselves: the Eurocentrism inherent in them will become apparent, and they will have to be modified. Insights to be gained here will be directly relevant also in the context of the discussion about the concept of ‘world literature’, which has flared up again recently under the impact of cultural globalization and the spread of transnational literatures.⁵ New insights into the modernisation process in the East can be another result of research in this direction. At the same time, new light may be shed, reciprocally, also on

3 For a basic theoretical framework in this respect, cf. Peter SZONDI’s seminal introduction into literary hermeneutics (*Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt/M. 1975).

4 The ideas proposed by Stefan WEIDNER in *Fes* (2006) may provide an inspiring starting-point in this respect. –

5 See, e.g., David DAMROSCH, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, Oxford 2003)

the modernisation process in the *West* (which is still seen as *the* exemplary process of modernisation).⁶

- Within the same framework, other important questions which have remained un- or underresearched so far could be approached, e.g., the relation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature, or between established and emerging literatures (as Islamist literature is one); the role and influence of diaspora/exile literature; the multilingualism of contemporary MELs; readerships and the forms and mechanisms of ‘literary life’, so important for the sociology of literature, have likewise not been studied sufficiently until now.

In all this, it is not only Middle Eastern literatures which are at the center of attention, but also the European perspective(s) on these literatures itself: The study of non-European literatures offers the chance to gain new insights into our own, European, Western tradition, the reading of MEL literature challenges Western concepts and terminology.⁷ So, the project is neither interested in ‘them’ nor in ‘us’ alone, its main focus is rather the surplus/added value (*Mehrwert*) which arises/emerges from the tension and difference between both.⁸

Needless to say that a discussion about Western discursive dominance and the normativity of tools used in literary theory may serve as a paradigm also for non-literary contexts, e.g. history (how do Western historians ‘read’ Middle Eastern history in general?).⁹

The operation of making our own ‘being outside’ a topic in itself, whereby the view from the margins will become included into theoretical reflection and thus a ‘triangular’ test arrangement be experimented with, this operation can be expected to yield new and very significant insights for the study of the literatures and cultures involved. As not the least among these insights may count a sharpening of terminology (periods, styles, genres, etc.), since it can be hoped that the triangular test arrangement will overcome the tautological processes mentioned above, or at least lead to new questions.

The European ‘factor’ is thus part and parcel of the project. It is the European perspective itself that becomes the focus of scientific attention. And because most of the terminology used so far is rooted in European tradition(s) the project cannot fulfill its aims without cooperation on an all-European scale. It needs a networking of European specialists on Middle

6 Cf. Shmuel N. EISENSTADT’s discovery of the “multiplicity” of modernity (“multiple modernities”), Aziz AL-AZMEH’s ideas in *Islams and Modernities* (1993).

7 Cf. GUTH (2003), where a comparison between the histories of the Arabic and Turkish novels and the crosschecking of periodizational terminology not only leads to the detection of shared ‘Turco-Arabic’ traits (and a readjustment of existing terminology), but also to the discovery of a ‘global’ layer, shared by Turkish and Arabic as well as, simultaneously, many other literatures. The last chapter (“Ausblick”, on future perspectives) deals with conclusions to be drawn from this with regard to the concept-imposing power of the discourses of the dominant literatures and their theoreticians.

8 For a similarly open approach that compares European with Central American literatures, cf. O. ETTE (2001), (2004), and (2005).

9 For an illuminating discussion of how seemingly well-established Western knowledge becomes questioned when crosschecked with data taken from non-European contexts, cf., among others, OSTERHAMMEL (1997) and REINHARD (1994).

Eastern literatures – not the least because there are so few of them. The workshop (and the follow-up research program which it is meant to initiate) will thus contribute to and strengthen interdisciplinary exchange between, on the one hand, specialists on modern Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew literatures, an exchange which has been (re-)initiated in the field of studies on modern Middle Eastern literatures only recently and is still far from being rooted (but has already proven to be of utmost importance); on the other hand, the workshop is planned to design bridges of cooperation and synergy between specialists in modern MEL (who can provide non-European source material) and specialists in Culture and (Western) Literature Studies (who tend to be better versed in theory and methodological approaches).¹⁰ The workshop topic is therefore not only interdisciplinary, but also related to the building of new infrastructures.

The follow-up program which the workshop is going to outline will initiate innovative research and develop concepts for middle-term (3-5 years) activities and collaboration. The project is going to profit from the experience of many of the workshop's participants who have been involved in related projects and/or attended conferences on topics of direct relevance for our *West reads East* program, e.g., the program on *Europe in the Middle East / The Middle East in Europe* organized by the Institute for Advanced Studies Berlin and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences with funding from the Thyssen. A great advantage for the workshop will also be the place where it will be held. The *Centre for Studies in Literature and Culture* (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturstudien), Berlin, is a place where innovative cross-disciplinary research is always on the agenda and where there is an atmosphere that encourages new test arrangements, as *West reads East* will be one.

Select bibliography

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10 Similar combinations are currently being tried out at the *Wissenschaftskolleg (Institute for Advanced Study)*, Berlin, as well as at the *Centre for Literature and Culture Studies* (ibid.). A workshop in Tübingen/Germany (*Literatur, Kultur und Migration*, Nov. 07), produced highly inspiring discussions. Quite a number of those who attended all or some of these events will participate in the *West Reads East* workshop, too, and will thus be able to bring in their experiences.

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- WEIDNER, Stefan (2006): *Fes. Sieben Umkreisungen*. Ammann, Zürich.

- **Preliminary workshop program**

The workshop will have 4 panels (app. 3 hrs each). Topics:

- 1) In-/adequateness of Western terminology for the description of MEL – Genres and periods
- 2) Does the ‘Empire write back’ in the Middle East? – Applicability and inapplicability of approaches taken from postcolonial studies
- 3) The dynamics of identification under & through dominant discourses – MELs finding their ‘selves’ between distinction and alignment
- 4) Reading the Others’ literatures: Consequences for literature studies in general

Each panel...

- lasts approx. 3 hrs (i.e. one morning/afternoon, incl. coffee break);
- opens with a theory-oriented keynote paper (30 min.), which is
- followed by 2-3 case studies that supply the panel with practical examples related to its respective topic (15-20 min. each);
- ample discussion (1-1:30 hrs.). Discussions will be prepared and structured by discussants who will have received abstracts/papers in advance. The second half of each discussion shall be dedicated to the identification/specification of those areas where further research is needed and to suggestions as to how this should be translated into the follow-up research program.

Total duration: 2 days