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BOOK REVIEW: Nicholas A. Germana, The Orient of Europe

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Journal

TRANSIT, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T791022877

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Book Review

Germana, Nicholas A. *The Orient of Europe: The Mythical Image of India and Competing Images of German National Identity*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 272 pages. Paper, £39.99.

Nicholas A. Germana's monograph shines light on the scholarly use of India in the decades leading up to and following the German Campaign in the Napoleonic Wars (1813–14). He addresses major figures of the German intellectual tradition and their varied attitudes to India in order to argue that their image of India helped conceptualize, and even realize, notions of German national identity in the nineteenth century. Germana's book follows in the tradition of scholarship on German Orientalism that deals with India, from Leslie A. Willson's groundbreaking *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism* (1964) to Kamakshi Murti's *India: The Seductive and Seduced "Other" of German Orientalism* (2001). The crux of Germana's argument is that German scholars around 1800 used India less to understand or dominate a cultural Other than to come to terms with their own national identity. *The Orient of Europe* centers, then, on the heated debates surrounding August Wilhelm Schlegel's declaration (from which this book takes its title): "If the regeneration of the human species started in the East, Germany must be considered the Orient of Europe" (1). Although another reviewer claims that Germana is not fully aware of postcolonial theory, this is an unfair objection. Not only are the theoretical underpinnings of his argument evidently influenced by the works of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm on the *constructedness* of national identity, we must understand the perspective of some of his allegedly problematic formulations. When Germana writes about the "malleability of [India's] image due to its novelty and exoticism" (245), he is referring to the use *and* abuse of the image of India as seen from the perspective of German scholars around 1800.

Throughout this monograph, Germana does not focus solely on the scholarly use of India, but threads its use through the familiar fabric of German intellectual history around 1800, a valuable approach that shows how the discourse on India was embedded within the debates on German national identity as much as it was embedded within other discourses on religion, mythology, history, philosophy, philology, and even biology. He explains the writings of many German intellectuals (only a handful of which are mentioned here) in a way useful for those unfamiliar with their work or unfamiliar with how profoundly it was influenced by the transmission, translation, interpretation, and integration of Eastern texts. Germana also successfully points out the problems that arose in later centuries when many Germans' zealous identification with the East led to claims of authenticity and racial superiority, which helps underscore the central point of Germana's argument, that "the 'mythical image' of India was not really about India at all; it was entirely about Germany" (12).

Over the past few decades, there has been a steady increase in scholarship on German Orientalism that deals with India, especially in literary studies and philosophy: close readings of German-language literature set in Indian landscapes (e.g. Vridhagiri Ganeshan's or Kamakshi Murti's analyses of particular stories) or comparative readings of philosophy (e.g. Wilhelm Halbfass's essays on mutual understanding). By contrast, Germana's monograph is primarily a book of intellectual history, distinguishing it from Todd Kontje's notable *German Orientalisms* (2004), which makes similar arguments based on close-readings of predominantly literary texts. *The Orient of Europe* engages with heavyweight intellectuals, philosophical debates, changing political landscapes, and the emergence of Indology as a discipline in Germany. Impressive sections full of meticulous and abundant historical details (taking its cue, perhaps, from books like Raymond Schwab's behemoth *The Oriental*

Renaissance (1984)) will be of interest to scholars of German intellectual history. For Germanists and scholars interested in national identity formation, the book becomes captivating when Germana explains what these ideas mean for national identity. In the first chapter, he explains Johann Gottfried Herder's veneration of the organic, of Indian origins of language, and of human culture as a means to dethrone the French Enlightenment's idea of *reason*. Herder, who helped establish the foundations for comparative philology, argued that the unification of the German nation was possible through identification with the Indian as a noble savage. In the last chapter, Germana explains Hegel's writings on history and his thoughts on India as antithetical to Herder. Hegel embraced the colonial subjugation of India as a sign of its weaker, unsophisticated nature, and explained German progress and superiority via the nation's gradual dissociation from India. When Germana addresses the inextricable connection between India from German Romanticism, he portrays the complexity of this relationship through the about-face turns in thought that took place over the course of individual careers, such as that of Friedrich Schlegel.

The first chapter focuses on Johann Gottfried Herder as an unexpected champion of cultural pluralism who nevertheless struggled with his belief in a superior, Christian Germany. When Herder linked his ideas on the origins of language to the formation of culture, he contrasted languages/cultures that are closer to nature (e.g. India) with those that are removed from nature (e.g. France) as a means to extol German language/culture. For Herder, modern languages speak *with* images; obsessed with correctness, they are removed from the purity of expression and the poetic sense of older, more ancient languages that spoke *through* images. In Herder's formulation, Nature=Childhood=Imagination=India, whereas Modernity=Advanced Age=Enlightenment Reason=France. Herder identified French-occupied Germany with British-colonized India. For Herder, the Orient, and especially India, becomes what Germana calls an ideal mirror, reflecting precisely what Herder wanted to see.

In the next two chapters, the focus shifts to the eminent Romantics Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. Germana contends that Novalis, building on Herder's identification with India, suggested that German political weakness and disinterest, like Indian political weakness, was a mark of cultural excellence. Accordingly, the "role of the poet/priest in Indian society [became] a reflection of [Novalis's] own views about the role of the poet in constructing the new mythology in the modern world" (75). Germana examines Novalis's work more closely than any other figure in this book, perhaps because the extant references Novalis makes to India are so few. To make these references more significant, Germana formulates many bold, commendable statements about the importance of Indian mythology and literature for Novalis's new mythology and his new semiotics. Similarly invested in the creation of a new mythology, Friedrich Schlegel drew influences from many religious and mythological traditions, placing the European medieval feudal society and the Indian caste system in especially high regard and on equal footing. Germana makes clear that Friedrich Schlegel's work and his relationship to India cannot be viewed as static. He elucidates the progression of a scholar who arguably became "the most knowledgeable German student of Sanskrit and Indian literature" and how that knowledge shaped his influential hypothesis of the Indian origin of the Germans (115). In articulate summaries of Herder's and Friedrich Schlegel's main writings on India, Germana also shows how F. Schlegel treated origin differently than Herder: Sanskrit was not a language related to some primitive animalistic nature (Herder), but was, owing in part to its wildly imaginative nature, philosophically sophisticated.

The fourth chapter deals more directly with the birth of German nationalism and emergent patriotism in the face of defeat at the hands of the French. In the early nineteenth century, scholars such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte longed for a historical, racial unity entirely distinct from the French. Germana brings to light the political radical Joseph Görres, who

believed that “the greatest problem that faced Germany was its fragmentation” and sought to assemble a nation regardless of social class (152). Görres “traced German mythology back to the source of all mythology and religion—India” (153). Similarly, philologist and archaeologist Friedrich Creuzer concluded that the Greeks had their origins in India—a claim that infuriated academics, especially Johann Heinrich Voss who would not tolerate the orientalizing of western culture. In this section, there is only a cursory mention of the unabashed Indophile Karoline von Günderrode who, more than just being Creuzer’s wife, was a noteworthy Romantic poet. One could readily compare her work to that of Novalis. Here would have been a great opportunity for Germana to include an unfortunately forgotten female intellectual perspective into the debates on the use of India in building German national identity. Günderrode would serve as a strong counterpoint to Hegel, who, as Germana describes in the last chapter, built up a gendered metaphor of India: an intoxicating, feminine poison that saps the reasonable power of men. But Germana focuses on Herder as Hegel’s counterpoint. The same things that Herder lauded as natural and poetic in India, Hegel derided as historically immature and ripe for colonization. Hegel’s view was that India served “as an ideal mirror, but for antithetical reasons” (207). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes that the unfolding of the World-Spirit away from the East indicates India’s lack of sophistication and development. According to Hegel, scholarship on India was brought into prominence in the West by force, which was a clear sign, for him, that India is best understood through subjugation.

Before this sixth and final chapter on Hegel, the fifth chapter covers the establishment of Indology as a discipline (which included the hiring of the first three Sanskrit scholars at German universities: August Wilhelm Schlegel, Franz Bopp and Peter von Bohlen from 1818–30) at a time when funding was tight and budgets were controlled. This chapter has much to offer our contemporary academic landscape, which is undergoing a dismantling of many area studies programs and the institutionalization of new interdisciplinary programs, especially because the university system in Germany served in large part as a model for our current research institutions. At this point in the book, having shown the formation of a German national identity vis-à-vis India, Germana’s argument now revolves around how state power, under the direction of Sanskrit enthusiast Wilhelm von Humboldt, greatly influenced the university and the establishment of Indology. In this respect, Germana argues that Humboldt’s categorization of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in western literary form (as a philosophical poem) was his attempt at the gradual canonization of Eastern texts.

Though this book is a manageable size for any scholar interested in this period of European intellectual history or in topics related to nation formation, it certainly contains a large amount of information, references, and details. However, Germana’s presentation of the material is enviable: he writes in a clear prose with consistent reminders of the important themes at hand. Overall, the book’s organization is strong with each chapter offering succinct conclusions that review the pivotal points of the chapter’s argument. Unfortunately, there are a number of typographical errors, which detract from the value of this worthy accomplishment. Germana grapples with many different thinkers, in mostly chronological fashion, and his argument builds on their different approaches to India in order to clarify the multifaceted and sometimes discordant scene of German national identity that was developing in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, he has produced an important new intellectual history that dismisses the disregard for global influences on local, national politics and culture.

—Ashwin J. Manthripragada (University of California, Berkeley)