

West-East Divan or Procrustean Bed?

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A Review of *Die Verschwulung der Welt. Rede gegen Rede. Beirut - Berlin* by Rashid al-Daif and Joachim Helfer. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006. 199 pages. ISBN 978-3-518-12477-2.

In 2002, the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, Germany, initiated a project of "new forms of literary encounters aimed at improving the mutual awareness of German and Middle Eastern literature." Taking its inspiration from Goethe's famous essay, the project was entitled "West-East Divan" (West-?stlicher Diwan). Over the last four years, the Institute organised and sponsored - in cooperation with the Berlin Festival (Berliner Festspiele) and with the support of a number of well-known German cultural institutions, such as the Goethe Institute - visits of German writers to Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran to meet fellow-authors there, and return-visits of these Arab, Turkish, and Iranian authors to Germany to meet their German "partners" on their home-ground. At the end of their respective visits, each of a pair's authors was asked to put his or her experiences and impressions of the literary encounter into an essay. The idea was then, to bring the two essays, in translation, together in the form of a book to be published in Germany and possibly, in the partner-country as well. The "West-East Divan" is, no doubt, a very ambitious project. In its conceptual design as a serious, deep intercultural dialogue, it could, potentially, offer new and productive ways of intercultural communications, an important alternative to the current climate of political and ideological antagonism.

The well-known, widely read and much translated Lebanese writer Rashid al-Daif was 'paired' with Joachim Helfer, a younger, little known and as of yet not translated German author. They met in 2003-2004, first six weeks in Berlin, then four weeks in Lebanon. As Rashid al-Daif explains on the first pages of his text, he was initially a bit puzzled by the fact that the German project leader giving him some information about Helfer emphasized that this German author was homosexual. Eventually, though, Joachim Helfer's sexual identity - which he describes himself as "metrosexual" that is, aiming at fluid, multiple gender and sexual identities - came to play a prominent role in their intercultural and literary encounters. At the end of their respective sojourns, Rashid al-Daif translated, as it were, his observations of their meetings into a reportage-cum-novel, which takes as its focal point Joachim Helfer's proclaimed homosexuality and lived bisexuality. Al-

Daif's text, first published independently in Arabic to critical acclaim, is not, however, a mere depiction of a young German male author's explorations of same-sex and/or heterosexual relationships. Rather, Rashid al-Daif's narrative is, it seems, aimed first and foremost at his Arab readership and engages them, subtly and with considerable humour, in a reflection on home-grown notions of masculinity and male sexualities. A reader versed in both languages and familiar with both the Arabic original and the German book, will certainly be irritated, to the say the very least, by the deeply flawed 'translation' process imposed upon Rashid al-Daif and his text for the German edition.

The German book published by Suhrkamp, a Frankfurt publishing house renown for its intellectual profile, comes with the utterly misleading, yet programmatic title (chosen by Joachim Helfer) *Die Verschulung der Welt* ("Queering the world"). On first sight, a reader might regard the book to be, indeed, a dialogue between Rashid al-Daif and Joachim Helfer, as text passages by the two authors alternate at irregular length. After a few pages, however, a perceptive reader should find it odd that these alternating passages seem to contain only comments by Helfer on al-Daif's text but not the other way round. Is this book really a dialogue and co-production? Only a reader familiar with the background of this project through al-Daif's statement and aware of the independent German translation of his narrative on the Suhrkamp website, will be able to grasp that the book in print is anything but a dialogue. A German reader, on the other hand, who is unaware of how this book came into being, may well read it as a conversation/dialogue and remain ignorant of the violence involved in its making. Only the subtitle, "Rede gegen Rede" (i.e. speech/narrative vs. speech/narrative, which can also be understood as thesis-antithesis or thesis-disputation), is less ambiguous and hints at the possibility that this may not have been an unmediated, direct dialogue.

Deceptively veiled and hailed (in the epilogue) as the product of a dialogue between two writers, the German book is not just another case-study of "lost in translation" but also an appalling example for the all too familiar politics of Orientalism. But why is that? Why is this not a dialogue? For a start, and an essential one at that, a dialogue would require that both participants in this conversation were considered equal and treated evenly. What we find instead, is yet another example of the "West" representing the "Orient," speaking for him, and telling him in the process what there is to know about himself. If the result and effects weren't so terrible, dangerous, and saddening, one could almost

be bemused by this book's lesson in "how to do Orientalism." So, how is it done?

First, Rashid al-Daif's Arabic narrative was translated into German. Already in this first step of the 'translation' process, at least two crucial aspects of the original text were lost. One of the aspects that went missing in translation is the subject-specific socio-political and cultural context, in which the Arabic narrative is written and read. To 'translate' this dimension of al-Daif's narrative for a German readership would have required a corresponding epilogue or a concise commentary, but even that might not suffice to capture the narrative's gesture of targeting particular issues for a specific readership. Joachim Helfer alludes, ever so briefly, to the fact that the original narrative was aimed at an Arab readership, but these allusions raise more questions than they answer. The second aspect of Rashid al-Daif's text lost in the German translation is the humour that characterizes the narrative in Arabic.

Al-Daif's text stripped, literally, in translation of its humour, its socio-cultural, literary and linguistic contexts is then handed to Joachim Helfer, presumably for the purpose of reading and engaging with it. Thanks to al-Daif's insistence and internet technology, we have the German translation of his text in one piece on the Suhrkamp website and can thus witness what happened next: For Joachim Helfer's engagement with the text takes the form, politely stated, of a de(con)struction which affects both the form of the 'narrative' and its 'story.' I shall deal first with the ways in which Helfer's destruction affects the rhetorical structure of the overall text and the political implications of these effects.

The text passages are not simply alternating between the two authors; this is by no means a conversation. Rather, it is Helfer who decides unilaterally when to interrupt al-Daif's narration - or let's say the speech of its character "I" - and to insert his narration, the comments of his "I." He decides how long both "I" are allowed to speak and this with little, if any concern for the flow of al-Daif's narrative, the flow of his thoughts. Helfer chops up al Daif's narrative at will, his will - and thereby seems to cut, like Procrustus, the other "I" down to size. In other words, he claims implicitly for himself the right and power, to disrupt and to silence al-Daif and his narration - and this not even metaphorically, but quite literally. Dialogue??? In the beginning of the book, he grants al-Daif only a few sentences or a paragraph before he launches into his 'response,' often of several pages length. It all reminded me awfully of the strategies which most American and British

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media employ in their reporting on, for instance, Palestine, Iraq, or Lebanon, where the Arab "Other" is rarely allowed to speak for himself, or where what is transmitted as speech and viewpoint is purposely selected and has, at best, the length of sound bites.

To make matters worse - and a German reader unaware of al-Daif's statement could not even guess this - Helfer's narrative was not, in turn, translated for Rashid al-Daif. He was thereby deprived of any chance whatsoever to engage with Helfer's text, let alone to respond to his comments. Dialogue???

How can a writer who, like Helfer, cherishes (and claims to live by) the ideal of freedom - and I should think that such claim would also entail the freedom of speech, that is the freedom and right of this "Other" to answer - how can an illustrious programme such as the "West-East Divan" with its laudable intentions and sponsoring institutions of high repute, and how can a publisher of such intellectual standing - how can all of them, collectively, get the practice of dialogue so shockingly and inexcusably wrong?!!

The visible unevenness caused by Helfer's interruptions and extensive commentary is exacerbated by a marked difference in rhetorical styles. Al-Daif's narration seems unpretentious, natural, and deceptively simple - Helfer once describes his narrator's stance as "fearlessly naive" (p.36). Helfer's narration, on the other hand, is "wortgewaltig." The German word "wortgewaltig" is a compound of "Wort" (word/speech) and "gewaltig" (power) and is usually translated as "powerfully eloquent." But "gewaltig" has also the meaning "violent" - "wortgewaltig" can thus also be understood as violence of/in one's speech. Eloquent violence, violently eloquent: Indeed, Helfer pulls out all his philosophical and rhetorical guns and aims, dead serious, at al-Daif's narrative, his thoughts, his observations. He does so, he claims rather pathetically, in a gesture of self-defence of his persona as narrated by al-Daif's "I." To be fair, Helfer's style - by itself (!) - can be considered elegant, in the best tradition of German literary language and philosophical rhetoric. Though from a feminist perspective, the self-conscious profusion with which he uses that particular German language seems at times to flow straight into the dead end of a Narcissus' whirlpool.

However, the effect is not just one of a difference in styles but of a hierarchy of speech styles, in which the philosophical is considered superior. This is not to say that Helfer should have adjusted his style -

this would, I believe, go against the spirit of this project. But it seems to me that the whole project of this German book is severely undermined by a mismatch of two very different genres. Rashid al-Daif's text can be read as reportage-cum-novel, though for the 'average' German reader his narrative may have been more effective, I think, if it had taken on the clearly discernible guise of the novel. Helfer's narrative, on the other side, draws on the generic conventions of the German philosophical essay (thus "disputation" - "Gegenrede"). These two genres informed, moreover, by very different cultural and literary conventions do not go together, side by side, without creating a hierarchy of difference. It was therefore from the start a flawed and politically thoughtless decision (by the publisher?) to arrange these two narratives and genres into one text. Al-Daif's idea of two independent narratives in however generic form but then published together in German, perhaps complemented by a conversation between the two authors, was certainly more in the spirit of a dialogue than this forceful, one-sided manipulation of one narrative into a 'thesis-antithesis' framework could ever pretend to be.

Helfer's apparent understanding, or rather misunderstanding, of his narrative's function in this exercise as "Gegenrede" (disputation) consequently shapes his comments: They are driven, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, by the stereotypical dichotomy of "the Occident" and "the Orient" (Helfer uses these terms throughout!) or to be precise, by a sequence of binary oppositions, in which the first term is marked as positive and superior such as, for example, "Occident"/"Orient," German/Arab, us/them, enlightened/backward, liberated sexuality/ patriarchal oppression, and so forth. This hierarchy of differences underlies every aspect of this text: from its layout and translation procedure, its juxtaposition of styles and languages, to the respective positioning of its narrators and its subject matter of sexuality/homosexuality/masculinity. Crucially, it also informs the Orientalist discourse that propels Helfer's narrative.

This dichotomization, like any of its kind, is achieved, however, at the price of suppressing differences within "us" (i.e. the "Germans" of Helfer's text). For example, the positive legal recognition of same-sex partnerships in German civil law does not - as Helfer wants us to believe - necessarily or automatically, let alone factually, entail a wholehearted, public acceptance of homosexual couples and their lifestyles by German society. To pretend that it does, is wishful thinking, but it also means to brush over existing, crucially diverging perspectives on gender in German society for the sake of upholding the dichotomy of Occident/Orient, on which Helfer's argument rests. Social approval of

homosexuality depends as much on factors such as class, educational and generational background, sexual orientation, or political stance in Germany as it does in other cultures of whatever denomination (Japan would provide a good example to demonstrate my point). And one would have to distinguish further between privately voiced social approval (or disapproval, for that matter) and publicly expressed social approval of same-sex relationships. For instance, most heterosexual men of my father's generation would regard Joachim Helfer's "queer manifesto" with some disgust as 'in your face (i.e. flaunted) homosexuality' but would not, of course, voice their views in public. Paradoxically, Helfer undermines his own argument for fluid, multiple gender and "metrosexual" identities by maintaining a narrative perspective that relies on an assumed dichotomy of "us" vs. "them" (i.e. "German" vs. "Arab") and thereby on rather stereotypical concepts of fixed identities.

In marked and refreshing contrast, Rashid al-Daif's narrative rarely draws on such binaries to tell its story so seemingly effortless. It does not need to hark back to questionable "fixed" identities (e.g. German/Arab) - except, perhaps, at the end of his narrative - to make us think, seriously. The "I" in his text thereby assumes a humanistic ideal of universalism - an irony that was obviously lost on Joachim Helfer. For a feminist reader, this humanistic universalism in Daif's text poses, admittedly, some problems since the "world view" in the narrative is defined solely by the male gaze. The main female figures in the text - e.g. the young, "boyish" Lebanese woman and the equally "boyish" Ingrid - thus appear flat in both physical appearance and character. Since the central concern of his narrative is, however, a questioning of men's notions of masculinity and male sexualities (hetero- and homo-) and evokes to great effect the sense of disorientation this kind of questioning engenders, the flatness of the female characters might be forgiven...

A similar contrast emerges in the approaches of the two authors towards understanding the "other." Whereas the "I" in al-Daif's text repeatedly questions the usefulness and validity of his own "alphabet" in reading the behaviour and thinking of "Joachim," Helfer apparently does not doubt for a second that he may not have the "alphabet" at his disposal to understand al-Daif's behaviour and opinions 'correctly.' Not only does he represent himself as the holder of knowledge, he also sees himself in a position to order the thoughts of al-Daif's "I" in categories, to judge what he considers lacking in his knowledge (for instance, of German classical music) and to correct what he depicts as weaknesses in al-Daif's understanding of his own culture (for example, of the

homosexual subculture in Beirut)! Even though Helfer is clearly aware that al-Daif's narrative was aimed, first and foremost, at an Arab readership, he takes issue with the observations of al-Daif's "I" and interprets, with an often revolting air of righteousness, the thoughts of this "I" for him. This righteousness becomes truly unbearable when he insinuates that al-Daif has anti-semitic views, as when he alleges that al-Daif did not want to touch the food offered in his household, because Helfer's partner is Jewish (p.78).

There are, later on in the book when Helfer visits Lebanon, instances of intense communication between the two narratives, perhaps because Helfer becomes less aggressive in his self-defence. Likewise, there are moments of great lucidity when the difficulty to "know" the "other" comes to the fore and takes centre-stage through the juxtaposition of al-Daif's narrative with Helfer's. Those are the points, where real dialogue could and should begin! But these precious moments are lost again and again, when Helfer finds it apparently necessary to enlighten al-Daif's "I" about, for example, gay subculture in Beirut, or to highlight what his host did not do in Beirut, namely to invite him, the homosexual German author, to his university or to arrange for an invitation to its German Studies Department (p. 149). In short, with the publication of the German text in this particular un(w)holy form an important opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue was carelessly, and offensively, wasted.

This is perhaps due to the chosen, highly sensitive subject matter of sexuality. For one thing does become absolutely clear in the book, a discourse on sexuality does not lend itself easily to 'translation' but leads onto troublesome terrain. Interestingly, it also appears to raise immediately the spectre of western Orientalism. That sexual politics are an integral part of Western power-politics towards Arab countries and Islamic cultures should be blatantly obvious to all of us aghast by the photos of abuse and sexualized violence that American occupying forces inflicted upon Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. Irritatingly, Helfer does not mention these photos and their implications, but dwells at length on what he regards as wide-spread homophobia in the Arab world. Perhaps sexuality is not so much "the battlefield between Arab tradition and Western modernity" as Rashid al-Daif suggests, but a weapon ill-suited, yet much misused, in attacking or fortifying the towers of cultural identity be it one's own or that of the other.

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