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BOOK REVIEW: Sonderzeichen Europa, by Yoko Tawada and László Márton.

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Yoko Tawada and László Márton, *Sonderzeichen Europa*. RanitzDialog1. Ottensheim an der Donau, Austria: Edition Thanhäuser, 2009. 72pp., Paper, 20€.

Although billed as a dialog, this exchange on topics ranging from the history and protean definition of Europe to the sartorial choices of Japanese teenagers is hardly a standard conversation or interview. Rather, Tawada, a Japanese-born writer who lives in Germany and writes in the languages of both countries, and Márton, a theater director born and living in Budapest who has published books in both German and Hungarian, engage in an extended correspondence that addresses the question of what it means to be (or not to be) European. Tawada challenges the expectations of a dialog from the beginning of her first letter:

Lieber Laszlo,

Y: Meine erste westliche Stadt war Moskau. Welche war deine?

L: Wien. (Danach sagtest du noch etwas wie „wenn überhaupt“ oder „wenn Wien eine wäre“. Jetzt erst fange ich an, darüber nachzudenken. Vielleicht hat dieser Dialog gar nicht stattgefunden.) (9)

As this opening suggests, in the letters that follow the authors will reflect not only on their respective notions of East and West, but also on their mode of communication: a conversation in German, conducted by email from sites including Tokyo, Paris, Budapest, and Astoria, Queens, at times on keyboards lacking the “Sonderzeichen” that come to represent the small but persistent differences employed to mark the boundaries of European identity.

From the outset, it is clear that Tawada and Márton will be addressing two different versions of the West, as seen from two different versions of the East. For Tawada, Europe may extend as far eastward as the Sea of Japan. She writes:

1979 fragte ich mich, wo Europa anfängt, und fuhr von Japan durch Sibirien nach Moskau. 2004 stellte ich mir die Frage, wo Europa endet, und fuhr von Deutschland aus in die umgekehrte Richtung, bis ich das Meer zwischen der

russischen Insel Sachalin und der japanischen Insel Hokkaido erreichte. „Europa direkt vor der Tür! Fahren Sie nach Sachalin!“ stand auf dem Plakat eines Reisebüros in Sapporo. Europa gab es überall und Europa gab es nirgendwo. (9)

The Europe that Tawada describes is an imaginary unity with asymptotic borders: however close the observer may come to Europe, it seems she can never arrive there. Likewise, with respect to the question of identifying herself as a European, Tawada writes, “mir kommt es verlogen vor, würde ich mich als Europäerin definieren, denn Europa versucht, im Unterschied zu den USA, seine Identität auf eine ältere Vergangenheit aufzubauen, die die Geschichte der Einwanderung der Nichteuropäer ausschließt” (32). The perspective that Tawada adopts is thus one of an immigrant to Europe who, even after spending more than half of her life in Germany, could never presume to claim European identity.

The borders of Márton’s Europe fluctuate within somewhat narrower limits, and the anxieties of identity that he describes are of a different sort. Márton writes of his first encounter with the West as a visitor from the Eastern Bloc. For Márton as for Tawada, Europe is a concept defined by exclusion: he writes of “die Angst, in Europa als Europäer nicht akzeptiert zu werden,” reflecting that “die echte Freiheit besteht unter anderem auch darin, einen Ostblockbewohner ... vom Kontinent ausklammern zu können” (37). Nevertheless, Europeanness for Márton is not a tantalizing impossibility, but an identity that can be inhabited, at least provisionally. Borrowing an image from the Hungarian poet Endre Ady, he writes of Hungary as a “Fährenland” that, along with “zehn bis fünfzehn hin und her pendelnde Länder in der Fahrenregion ... befindet sich zur Zeit am westlichen Ufer” thanks to its EU membership. This berth is hardly assured – Martón speculates “daß es sich ebenfalls als ein provisorischer Zustand erweisen wird” (40) – but unlike Tawada, Márton imagines Europe as a shoreline that can actually be reached, rather than one that is infinitely receding.

Also notable is the difference in the chronological scope of the two authors' treatments. Tawada's letters tend to focus on the present or future, and her observations frequently challenge the validity of any received notion of European identity as such. The untenability of such an idea is suggested by her description of an "Europa-Supermarkt" located in the largely immigrant neighborhood of Astoria, Queens, "in dem man Europa kaufen kann.... In diesem Laden ist der Balkan der Mittelpunkt oder um konkreter zu bleiben der Bauch Europas. Und weil das Wort ‚Balkan‘ die EU-Grenze sprengt, stellt der Laden seine eigene Identität in Frage" (28). Even seen from a distance, in inviting packaging displayed in New York supermarket aisles, the myth of a unitary Europe appears no more convincing to Tawada than that of a unitary Asia invented by European geographers. The reduction of each country to a product – "Zwei Sorten Schokolade aus der Schweiz, Knäckebrot aus Schweden. Deutschland wird durch die Spreewaldgurken präsentiert" – reveals itself as a transparent cliché (28). This critique is borne out in Tawada's further accounts of her own travels: to Tokyo, the "Stadt der Zukunft" (18), as well as to Paris, where in the apartment of a Japanese friend she meets with an Israeli director who will direct Tawada's translation of Chekov's "Cherry Orchard" in a Tokyo theater. In these scenarios, Tawada presents a cosmopolitan image of the present that rejects historical essentialisms: "Die Gegenwart besteht nicht aus dem Rest der richtigen Tradition und vielen Verfälschungen oder ausländischen Einflüssen, sondern alles, was in der Gegenwart existiert, macht die Gegenwart aus" (32). Tawada thus complicates any attempt to create a definitive and exclusionary concept of European identity founded on a historical model, suggesting that such ideologies fail to correspond to contemporary realities.

Márton's treatment of Hungary's vexed status with respect to Europe, on the other hand, is more concerned with what he calls "unsere allerliebste, bittersüße, heilige Vergangenheit" (22). Márton explores Hungary's history, with its shifting allegiances from East to West and

back again, suggesting that at times it has become unclear on which bank the “Fährenland” has cast its anchor: “war das osmanische Reich von damals mit seinem griechisch-byzantinischen Erbe wirklich ein nichteuropäisches Gebilde?” (39). This perennial preoccupation with Europeanness seems to have fostered a particularly tenacious faith among Hungarians in that concept’s reality. Yet the history buried under Budapest offers Márton an image that speaks against such a view. In lyrical passages reminiscent at times of W.G. Sebald, Márton uncovers traces preserved in the present-day city, such as the grottoes beneath the city’s western half: “Wenn irgendwo im ersten Bezirk plötzlich Rauch aufqualmt, kann man nie ganz genau wissen, ob er vom Lagerfeuer einer unterirdischen Homelessgruppe oder noch von den brennenden Dörfern aus der Türkenzeit (vielleicht sogar den urchristlichen Katakombenbewohnern aus der Römerzeit) herrührt” (23). The layers of the past that Márton explores offer a sort of counterpart to Tawada’s cosmopolitan present: seeking “nach Elementen des Fremden im Eigenen” (54) – including the Japanese-patterned tiles that might still be hidden in Budapest’s former Japán Kávéház, behind the bookshelves of its current owner and under layers added to the walls by the Communists – Márton destabilizes the contemporary European face of Hungary by appealing to its history.

Given the potentially productive contrasts between their approaches to the question of Europeanness, one might wish at times that the two authors responded more directly to each other’s letters and pursued these differences in greater detail. Such direct exchanges are rare in the book, though revealing when they do occur. For instance, Márton responds to Tawada’s question regarding her own right to claim European identity: “Ob Du dich als Europäerin definieren kannst, liebe Yoko? Du kannst Dich als Berlinerin definieren und behaupten.... Ob ich mich als Europäer definieren kann mit einer Ostblockvergangenheit (und -gegenwart)?” (44). Here Márton demonstrates the contrast between a cosmopolitan, inclusive conception of Europe,

represented by contemporary Berlin, and a more parochial, exclusionary Europeanness still defined by outdated borders. His suggestion, and the suggestion of the volume as a whole, seems to be that these two Europes might exist in parallel: that recognizing the irreality and instability of the concept of Europe does not necessarily detract from its concrete power to both attract and repel.

Readers already familiar with Yoko Tawada's literary works will find that her letters in this collection display the same distinctive talent for illuminating the familiar with unexpected observations. Tawada's treatment of European identity and language in these pages expands on central themes of her work that have already been the subject of significant scholarship. Márton's letters offer a striking and intriguing counterpart to Tawada's, and the exchange between the two authors provides fascinating insight into two significantly different yet overlapping views of European identity. Illustrated throughout with delicate drawings of cityscapes and landscapes by publisher Christian Thahäuser, with an additional woodcut depicting the Japán Kávéház and a street scene folded into its French flaps, this book is an elegantly produced contribution to ongoing discussions of European, multinational, and multilingual identity.

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