

Europe's Compass: Flight Discourse and Mediterraneanism in Contemporary Novels¹

Europas Kompass: Mediterranismus und Flucht-Geschichten in der Gegenwartsliteratur (Kirchhoff, Énard)

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ABSTRACT

Mediterraneanism – as an “other heading” of Europe at its southern peripheries, including and fending off the other (according to Tomislav Zelic) – is a new topic in contemporary literary works on refugees. This essay draws some lines of research, focussing on the Mediterranean Sea as a narrated passage between the continents, an area of a clash of cultures, a heterotopic space, and a political hotspot of flight tragedies in Bodo Kirchhoff’s “Novelle” Widerfahrnis (2016) and Mathias Énard’s novels “Erzähl ihnen von Schlachten, Königen und Elefanten” (2010/2013) and “Straße der Diebe” (2012/2013).

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Mediterranismus – als „anderes Kap“ (Derrida) Europas an seiner südlichen Peripherie, welches „das Andere negiert und zugleich integriert“ (Tomislav Zelić) – taucht in der Gegenwartsliteratur in literarischen Flüchtlingsgeschichten auf. Dieser Essay skizziert am Beispiel von Bodo Kirchhoffs „Novelle“ „Widerfahrnis“ (2016) und Mathias Énarfs Romanen „Erzähl ihnen von Schlachten, Königen und Elefanten“ (2010/2013) und „Straße der Diebe“ (2012/2013) einige Schwerpunkte der Erforschung des Mittelmeers als erzählter Passage zwischen den Kontinenten, als Kampfplatz der Kulturen, als heterotopischer Ort und als politischer Brennpunkt der aktuellen Flüchtlingstragödie.

1 This essay was originally delivered as a paper on the 42th Annual Conference of the German Studies Association in Pittsburgh on September 28, 2018. It marks first research topics and is to be extended.

In September 2018, Khaled Hosseini, the author of the famous novel *Kite Runner* (2003), published an illustrated story, titled *Sea prayer* (2018) and dedicated to the little boy who drowned in the Aegean Sea while fleeing to Europe on September 2nd, 2015. The photo of the three year old Aylan Kurdi lying dead on the waterfront immediately became an icon of the refugee tragedy in Europa and was compared with the photo of the Napalm Girl taken in Vietnam in 1972. Hosseini does not want to teach an ethic lesson, he simply writes a prayer, imploring the sea to respect its precious cargo, the refugees. The address of the prayer is the Mediterranean Sea illustrated by Dan Williams with apathetic impressionistic green and blue colors and a boat so tiny that the people on board were only dark daubers. Hosseini's book is telling of the fascinating and frightening aspects of the sea (Elvert 2018: 508-512), its demonic aura and frontier (Blumenberg 1997: 9-12). Among the terms coined for the Mediterranean Sea there are friendly ones like „the faithful sea“ (Abulafia 2015: 818) or the „Big Green“ (as the Egyptians say) as well as pejorative ones like „The bitter sea“ (Ball 2009) or, for the Serbians, the „blue graveyard“ (Leggewie 2012: 47), possessive ones like „mare nostrum“, „our sea“, as the Romans called it, and neutral ones as the „Mediterranean Sea“, the sea surrounded by territories. Recently, the Mediterranean Sea has become a tragic space of migration, because, among other things, the closing of the Balkan Route in February 2016 has forced many migrants to cross the sea. Almost 34.000 refugees were missed or drowned in the Med between 2000 and 2017 (registered by IOM = International Organization of Migration, cf. Meier Braun 2018: 40).

These figures open up maritime studies to an array of approaches – discursive, historical, cultural, eco-geographical, narratological. Maritime studies are not only European studies. They contain the sea and its coasts, the lands, regions, and nations surrounding them. Mediterraneanism – in terms of Foucault – is an order of knowledge and interpretation of the Mediterranean Sea. It is also a topic in recent literary works on refugees, especially journals and novels. While spatial aspects of refugee literature mostly are related to land routes as in Navid Kermani's *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit. Auf dem Flüchtlings-treck durch Europa* (2015), the real flight tragedies nowadays on the Mediterranean Sea draws our attention to the waterways and intercontinental transfer routes through the Sea. One interesting question in this new field of research is what happens with the Mediterranean when it is told in the age of mass exodus. My focus is on two authors, on the one hand on Bodo Kirchhoff's „Novel-

le“ *Widerfahrnis* (2016) distinguished with the *Deutscher Buchpreis* in the year of its publication, and, on the other hand, the novels *Erzähl ihnen von Schlachten, Königen und Elefanten* (2010/2013) and *Straße der Diebe* (2012/2013) by the French writer Mathias Énard. Kirchhoff and Énard tell different stories of refugees coming to Europe across the Med, being confronted with European travelers with their own special interests and images of the Mediterranean Sea.

MEDITERRANEANISM AS A NEW NARRATIVE?

Mediterraneanism has been understood as a cornerstone in European history, a renewal of the „südlicher Blick“ and the concept of the Bildungsroman with its Grand tour to the South (Richter 2009; Leggewie 2012), an invention of postcolonial discourse (Heimböckel 2017), a representation of a literary „Erinnerungs- und Bildungslandschaft der Deutschen“ (Richter 2015: 151). In 1949, the French historian Fernand Braudel published his pioneer work *La Méditerranée*. He described the Mediterranean Sea as an eco-geographical unity with an own identity (of landscape, seascape, food, and culture). This is an eminent political statement. French president Sarkozy confirmed this, when he announced the *Union pour la Méditerranée* in 2008 with the argument that he had read “his Braudel” (Leggewie 2012: 51). Objections to Braudel were that he reduces the complexity of the Mediterranean area to a construct of unity that does not exist. So, the British historians Peregrin Horden and Nicholas Purcell wrote another history of the *Corrupting Sea* (2000), avoiding the postcolonial trap and emphasizing the diversity and connectivity of the diaspora communities (traders, pirates, sailors) in the Mediterranean area for whom routes are more important than roots. The „history in the Mediterranean“ turned to be the „history of the Mediterranean“ (Borutta/Lemmes 2013: 389). The third work of research to be mentioned here is *The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean* (2011), written by David Abulafia, a Cambridge historian born in Galilee. The German translation *Das Mittelmeer. Eine Biographie* (2014) invites us to read Mediterraneanism as a “narrative” in the sense of Jean-Francoise Lyotard, implementing a supracontinental identity, a trans-European story in the age of global migration. Abulafia organizes Mediterranean history within five periods with crucial caesuras: the fall of Troy 1200 before Christ, the end of Athen’s thalassocracy 500, the rage of the pest in

the 14th century, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the explosion of migration since 2008 (in 2008 36.900 asylum seekers came to Italy, 75 percent more than in 2007; cf. Abulafia 2014: 797; in 2016, 280.000 refugees were registered in Germany, in 2017, 890.000; cf. Ther 2017: 24). One may discuss if this is the end of Mediterraneanism as a period of mass tourism, food culture, and the poetics of the South. Beyond traditional storytelling of the Sea – like F.C. Delius' Seume-adaptation *Spaziergang von Rostock nach Syrakus* (1995) or Hanns-Josef Ortheil's coming of age-novel *Die Mittelmeerreise* (2018) – Kirchhoff's and Énard's novels focus on the Mediterranean Sea as a narrated passage between the continents, an area of a clash of cultures, and a political hotspot of flight tragedies. These refugee stories are the profounding components of the narrated Sea (cf. Abbott 2009).

MATHIAS ÉNARD'S NOVELS: TRANSMIGRATION AND BRIDGES OVER TROUBLED WATER

Mathias Énard was born 1972 in Niort, a village between Poitiers and La Rochelle. He studied contemporary arts and, in the early Nineties, came to the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* in Paris where he learned Arabic and Persian. Afterwards, Énard was living and teaching in Teheran, in Beirut, in Damascus, in Rome, in Berlin, and in a Syrian village. In 2000, Énard moved to Barcelona, opened a Lebanese restaurant in the multicultural district El Raval, and wrote for cultural magazines.

Énard's first novel is a pioneer work of Mediterraneanism in literature. *Zone*, published in France in 2008, four years later translated into German, has been distinguished with the Candide-Award and the Prix Décembre. *Zone* is an interior third-person-monologue of almost 600 pages, most of which are without full stop and comma. The narrator is a secret service agent and French-Croatian Ex-mercenary during the Yugoslav war who now is logging „vergessene verehrte anonyme oder in der großen Geschichtsrolle verzeichnete Leichen Überreste Bruchstücke Schreie Gebeine“ (translation by Holger Fock and Sabine Müller) of Mediterranean history. „Zone“ is just another word for the Mediterranean Sea, the cradle and wound of Western civilization, since Homer the territory of angry gods, who left us mass graves and networks of roads built by warriors. *Zone* has 24 chapters, as many as Homer's *Iliad*. But Énard's

„homerische Reise“² to the Mediterranean roots of Balkan wars is neither a war report nor a James Bond novel. Énard tells how to deal with the traumata of Mediterranean history, its tragedy and its hopes.

One may regard Énard's following novels as gatekeepers at the ends of the Med. *Erzähl ihnen von Schlachten, Königen und Elefanten* is set at the Bosphorus, in the age of Michelangelo. The plot of *Straße der Diebe* takes place at the contemporary Strait of Gibraltar. These straits are connecting Europe with Asia and Africa. They are places of historical and political interest, bloodlands, *lieux de mémoire*, but also spaces of cultural exchange and of the transfer of knowledge.

The Michelangelo novel is based on a 16th century anecdote. Michelangelo is instructed by the sultan of Constantinople to design plans for a bridge across the Bosphorus. Indeed, Michelangelo was in Constantinople in 1506, and indeed a competing draft of a bridge across the Golden Horn by Leonardo da Vinci did exist. Énard's title reminds of a neglected Mediterranean history of lost battles, forgotten kings and disappearing animals.³ Énard's Michelangelo is architect and sculptor, diplomat in the Pope's service, and a gifted storyteller. Suffering from a writer's block, he is fleeing into the nightlife of Constantinople. In a bar, the vision of a bridge connecting orient and occident overcomes him. It is a vision of beauty and art craft. However, Michelangelo will leave the Bosphorus, secretly, without achieving what he wanted to build. Énard's novel, awarded the *Prix Goncourt des Lycéens* in 2010, is a slim book, structured in segments, ornamented with Western and Oriental motifs, like a bridge of the Mediterranean imagination itself.

In 2012, Énard's *Rue des Voleurs* was published (and translated into German in 2013: *Straße der Diebe*). It is an adventure novel and a political warning sign, placed between Arab Spring, Spanish revolution and the political movement *¡Democracia Real Ya!* („Echte Demokratie Jetzt!“ / ‘Real democracy now’) in 2011 (SD 61). The main character is a young Moroccan, Lakhdar, who is working on a ferry between his home town Tanger and Barcelona. However, the sea is not a passage to a better future, but a barrier: „ich war nicht mehr hier und noch nicht da, ewig auf der Abreise, im *Barzach*, zwischen Leben und Tod“ (SD 172). On the sea he loses his identity, his religion, and his fatherland. The final plot twist is a cruel one. Lakhdar murders his terrorist friend Bassam and

2 Cf. Katharina Teutsch's review in: FAZ, 29.10.2010.

3 The title is taken from Rudyard Kiplings collection of Indian tales (*Dunkles Indien*).

is sent to prison, like Camus' *L'Etranger*. However, it is not this melodramatic ending, but the heroes' permanent crossing between the continents that makes the story interesting. Énard is telling of transfers and connections. The maritime passages between Europe, Africa and Asia create a new status of transmigration (cf. Baltes-Löhr 2016: 22) allowing migrants to live in two or even more cultural networks. Possibly, Lakhdar is a hero between the continents who is fighting for the good, but with bad means, and the street of the thieves also could be the straits in the Mediterranean Sea where convictions, hopes, and people get shipwrecked.

2. KIRCHHOFF'S WIDERFAHRNIS: MIGRANT STORY AS AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

Bodo Kirchhoff, born in 1948, is regarded as a storyteller at the heart of postmodernism. He was ambitious enough to ennoble his book *Widerfahrnis* with the genre subtitle „Novelle“, although with more than 200 pages, it is rather a novel. „Novelle“ is, in the tradition of Goethe, an exceptional story of an unheard-of occurrence that has taken place („eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit“). And this eventfulness guarantees the narrativity of the story in terms of facticity (the event could have taken place), singularity (it is one special event), deviancy (which is very unusual), and resultativity (the event must have a conclusion) (Hühn 2009).

The framing event in Kirchhoff's story is an unusual love plot. An older ex-publisher, Julius Reither, living at the German-Austrian border is visited by Leonie Palm, an ex-milliner, both are in their “best years” which is a blank euphemism that serves to lift the novel up to a love story. Palm visits Reither on a Sunday night, they smoke and drink together and then spontaneously (it was a „Augenblickssache“; W 35) decide to make a trip with her car, a dark blue BMW convertible, „Richtung Süden“ (W 43). The course of events is quite predictable, they get closer to each other, once they have sex, but by the end of the trip they leave each other, for different reasons. Behind the curtains of this love story however there is a migrant story which is much more important and which is foreshadowed in some refugees Reither sees waiting on railway platforms in Germany. It is also foreshadowed in the life story of the receptionists in Reither's apartment. The Eritrean woman Aster – much more than her

Bulgarian colleague Marina – is a lost child of the Mediterranean tragedy. Her story is told by Reither in fragments. She worked in Khartoum for a fat host who abused her, then she travelled on a truck to the Libyan coast, for 300 Dollar, and paid 500 Dollar for the transshipment to Lampedusa (W 43). When the engine broke, the boat with refugees drifted for eleven days until it landed at Catania (W 100).

The migrant story begins with a girl dressed in red rags, wearing a necklace with a shard, one of the important details in this story. It is no coincidence that this happens in Catania, in the center of the novel, when the ninth chapter ends (the book consists of 18 chapters). The girl doesn't say a word, it is without a name, and any recognizable values are missing. She accompanies the couple, but more for their sake than for her own. Reither and Palm both suffer from a lost child, and due to this backstory wound they are looking for compensation. The unholy family ends up in a melodramatic crisis on the ferry back to Italy when the girl wants to escape from the car. She cuts Reither, who is trying to stop her, in his hand with the shard of her necklace. The injury is also a cut of Reither's and Leonie's *coup de foudre*. However, there is an ending which might be conciliatory. In an epilogue (the last three chapters), we see Reither returning to Germany with an African migrant and his family (wife and child) who had helped him to open a bottle of wine and patch up his wound.

For the main characters and the migrants, the Mediterranean Sea is a passage in the sense of what Foucault called a heterotopic space: a spaceless space,⁴ a paradoxical place between the continents which is uncanny („verstörend glatt“; W 91) and finally only a word: „als sei das Meer ein Ort, wo es doch nur ein Begriff war“ (W 80). In the seventh chapter of Kirchhoff's story there is a metaphor for this heterotopic quality of the Med. Reither says (quoting Marguerite Duras): The sea is what you cannot see; „Das Meer ist das, was man nicht sieht“ (W 96). The book's title, *Widerfahrnis*, also is a metaphor for the disaster of Mediterranean imagination, of the love tragedy and of the frustrated *Bildungsgeschichte*. „Widerfahrnis“, a religious term close to Heidegger's

4 Foucault (1992: 46) writes: „Bordelle und Kolonien sind zwei extreme Typen der Heterotopie, und wenn man daran denkt, daß das Schiff ein schaukelndes Stück Raum ist, ein Ort ohne Ort, der aus sich selber lebt, der in sich geschlossen ist und gleichzeitig dem Unendlichen des Meeres ausgeliefert ist und der, von Hafen zu Hafen, von Ladung zu Ladung, von Bordell zu Bordell, bis zu den Kolonien suchen fährt, was sie an Kostbarstem in ihren Gärten bergen, dann versteht man, warum das Schiff für unsere Zivilisation vom 16. Jahrhundert bis in unsere Tage nicht nur das größte Instrument der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung gewesen ist (nicht davon spreche ich heute), sondern auch das größte Imaginationsarsenal. Das Schiff, das ist die Heterotopie schlechthin. In den Zivilisationen ohne Schiff versiegen die Träume, die Spionage ersetzt das Abenteuer und die Polizei die Freibeuter.“

philosophy,⁵ means something that happens to somebody by accident – and that sometimes happens due to an accident. The main characters realize the confrontation with a migrant child as a kind of „vergessene Heimsuchung“ (W 37), a fate without religion, a situation out of control. What happens on the Mediterranean Sea can be regarded as a „Widerfahrnis“ forcing all characters to change their minds and also their lives. Is there a third way beyond empathy with the Goethean type of the wild girl (Mignon) and safe distance vis-à-vis unknown migrants? The novel leaves this question open.

Mediterraneanism is a narrative representing the problem of cultural transfer across the Mediterranean Sea. Kirchhoff and Énard highlight the conflict in the straits of the Sea (Gibraltar, Bosphorus, Messina) where the maritime distance between the territories is small. But whereas Kirchhoff is telling of a broken South in terms of a helpless or fragmented *Bildungsroman*, Énard is asking how bridges of transmigration can be built in the age of mass exodus. In his latest novel, we can also find an interesting metaphor for Mediterraneanism. *Kompass* (2015/2016) is the title of this novel, and the compass indeed is an instrument for information and orientation in the sense of a direction. Furthermore, the compass is a narrative key for Mediterraneanism. Énard tells us an anecdote of Beethoven's *Kompass* (this real compass is part of an exhibition in the Beethovenhaus in Bonn). Énard invented a compass pointing to the East, to the Orient (K 280-282). Thus, we may conclude, it is important to tell stories of cultural transfer across the Med. If David Abulafia is right saying that the Med now separates nations, religions, and ethnicities, then literature could be Europe's compass for reconnecting these cultures across different continents.

5 Cf. Bern Amos: *Widerfahrnis. Eine Untersuchung im Ausgang von Heideggers "Sein und Zeit"*. Phil. Diss. Münster 2006. Cf. also Kirchhoff's statement in an interview with the *Prager Zeitung* in 2016: <http://www.pragerzeitung.cz/index.php/home/kultur/21484-die-sprache-des-erzaehlens>

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