Orientalism, Occidentalism and Colonialism in Freytag's Images of Jews and Poles

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Gustav Freytag's bestseller *Soll und Haben*, published in 1855, offers a range of different images of the “East,” from the underdeveloped, almost extra-historical space of Eastern Europe via a biblical past to the alluring Orient. These ideas inform the novel's racializing images of Poles as well as the highly problematic representation of the Jewish characters, and serve in various ways as projection screens and contrast foils for imaginations of German identity. The text thus offers particularly rich material for an investigation of the interrelation of racism and antisemitism, and of the interplay between what could be called “orientalizing” or “easternizing” and “westernizing” features in the image of the Jew. Characteristically for German nineteenth-century discourses, the Jews appear in this text both as strangers and as all-too-close, as members of an ancient race with an archaic culture, and as nesting at the heart of modernity, thus complicating a simple subsumption of antisemitism under forms of “Orientalism.”

The book's historical significance seems hard to dispute. It was by all accounts one of the most widely read novels of the second half of the nineteenth century, its author one of the leading liberal writers of his day, a successful novelist, playwright, journalist, literary theorist and co-editor of the *Grenzbote*, one of the most influential liberal journals for culture and politics of the time. Freytag's political affiliations, together with the fact that later in life, he explicitly attacked the growing antisemitism of his day, also make the novel an interesting object for an investigation of the characteristic ambivalences of German liberals regarding what was then called the “Jewish Question.”

*Soll und Haben* is chiefly a Bildungsroman, i.e., a novel of education, tracing the development of its hero, Anton Wohlfart, from romantic youth to sober and steadfast merchant. Early on in the narrative, on his way to the capital to take up his first employment as an apprentice in the merchant house of Traugott Schröter,

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1 I would like to thank Barbara Breysach for valuable comments and references.

Anton encounters the young noblewoman Lenore von Rothsatter, who will henceforth be the object of his secret desires, which shall threaten to lead him astray on his way to a solid middle-class existence. On the same journey, Anton also meets the future anti-hero of the novel, the young Jew Veitel Itzig, who travels to the capital to start a new life in the services of the Jewish trader Ehrenthal. The lives of the two young men will from now on take an outwardly parallel, but morally markedly different course. Itzig and Ehrenthal, in league with an assortment of Jewish cronies, succeed in swindling the von Rothsattels out of their fortune, and the family is forced to relocate to their last remaining property, a dilapidated estate in Poland under Prussian rule. Anton joins them to take care of their financial affairs, supported by the young aristocrat Fritz von Fink. The recurring conflicts and battles with the rebellious Poles strengthen Anton’s national and middle-class identity, and he eventually turns his back on the temptations of the life of the nobility. Back in the capital, he manages to find the von Rothsattels’ mortgage deeds that Itzig had stolen and saves the family from ruin. Unable to withstand the pressures of the investigation, Itzig murders his accomplice and eventually drowns himself, driven to madness by his feelings of guilt. Anton’s return into the fold of the middle classes is finally sealed by a marriage proposal from Schröter’s younger sister Sabine and an offer to become an associate in the merchant house. In one of the many side-plots of the novel, we also learn about Anton’s friendship with Ehrenthal’s son Bernhard, a young orientalist scholar and the only positive Jewish character of any substance in the novel. This friendship is, however, brief, as Bernhard succumbs, barely halfway into the text, to his unrequited passion for the unattainable Lenore, his dismay about his father’s dishonest business practices, and his own sickly disposition.

The various oppositions that structure the novel – middle class and nobility, Germans and Poles, Germans and Jews – and the somewhat more complex gender discourses the novel develops all come together in the construction, by way of contrast, of a “German” way to modernity that is allegedly free of conflict and alienation. This picture is governed by what the novel calls “labour in the German way” as a form of concrete mediation that is productive, morally guided and community-building. None of the other groups in the novel are able to work in this way; the Poles and the nobility because they do not work at all, and the Jews because their labor is not morally guided but motivated by egoism, not productive, but destructive, and not community-building, but fragmenting.

The Polish East

The backwards and rebellious Poles appear in two important roles in the text. Firstly, the lurid descriptions of chaos and destruction brought about by the Polish rebellion — recognizable as the Greater Poland uprising of 1848 — could be seen as a kind of displaced engagement with the contemporaneous German revolution of 1848–1849, which is only once indirectly alluded to in passing. As I will further discuss below, this displacement can be seen as emblematic for the various constructions of alterity that structure the text. Despite their crucial differences, all of them can be understood as ways of dealing with immanent tensions, contradictions and ambivalences produced by capitalist modernity. By projecting one pole of these contradictions outside the national community and associating it with, variously, the Pole, the Jews or America, internal contradictions are symbolically represented as an external threat; socially and historically produced features of modernity appear as rooted in trans-historical ethnic or national characteristics.

Secondly, Poland appears as a colonial space, a barren land outside of history that has to be made productive and dragged into modernity by the Prussian colonizers. In this way, the text is also an example for the fact that German colonialist discourses even before the late nineteenth century do not just appear in the form of “colonial fantasies.” While German colonies in the southern hemisphere were indeed of a younger date, the much older process of German settlement in Eastern Europe and Prussian rule over parts of Poland produced its own quasi-colonial discourse. This fact seems to have been partly obscured in German cultural studies until fairly recently due to the dominance of imperial rule over Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent as paradigms of colonialism in scholarly debates. These colonialist patterns in the novel are vividly illustrated in the description of the town of Rosmin, for example, one of the German settlements on Polish soil, which is presented as seed crystal of a productive and progressive social order in a feudal, pre-modern space. Rosmin is described as one of the “Knots in a firm net that the German has laid over the Slav, artful knots tying together innumerable threads through which the small laborer of the field is com-

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7 For a new approach systematically analyzing the specific (post)colonial German perception of Poland, i.e. drawing on the example of Freytag, see Joschimshaler, *Text-Räume*, 2011, i.a. Bd. 1, pp. 179ff.
age of the city as an emblem of modernity: whereas Rosmini was a place of order, structure and permanence, the face of the city associated with Itzig is that of the modern metropolis, dirty, chaotic, fragmented and ruled by antagonism and self-interest.10

Similarly, Freytag contrasts two types of industry. On the one hand, we encounter descriptions of a “natural,” productive industry, presented as a quasi-organic continuation of the improvement of agricultural methods, that seems to grow out of the soil, its pipes mimicking the stems of the plants.11 On the other hand, industry built on credit and for profit interests – the kind of industry Ehrenthal and Itzig entice the Baron von Rothschild into establishing on his estate – enslaves its owner, imposes external economic imperatives that run counter to the inherent developmental laws of nature, and leads to failed harvests, proletarianization and social decay.12

Like production, distribution also has two faces: Itzig’s and Ehrenthal’s business is solely concerned with exchange value and profit. Veitel only buys in order to sell, to turn money into more money in unending, breathless activity.13 His activity is not governed by specific human needs, but directed towards ever more of the same, measured in purely quantitative terms; it knows no natural end point, thus mirroring the movement of capital.14 To Itzig, concrete, material qualities, those of his merchandise as well as the specific character of his own activities and the identity of his customers, become insubstantial. The German merchants, on the other hand, only seem to be engaged in the distribution of use values. Freytag’s text features long descriptions of all the different exotic commodities in the cellar of the German merchant’s house and their sensual qualities, their colors, shapes and smells, as well as where, how and by whom they have been produced.15 This evocation of a global community of producers renders both the immediate violence of colonial relationships and the abstract compulsion of the market invisible. In conversation with Bernhard, who despairs about his father’s dubious business practices, Anton Wohlfeil extols the virtues of German trade: “Whenever I put a sack of coffee onto the scales, I am tying an invisible thread between the colonist’s

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10 Ibid., p. 42.
11 Ibid., p. 447.
12 Ibid., pp. 449ff.
13 Ibid., pp. 116ff.
14 It is noteworthy that in Soll und Haben, the German middle-class world is presented through metaphors of equilibrium, measure and circular trajectories. Even the flow of money – in the rare cases where money is ever explicitly mentioned in this world – is compared to blood circulation, the national economy to a human body: Freytag, Soll and Haben, vol. 1, p. 360. The Jewish and the American world, on the other hand, are governed by metaphors of a boundless dynamic beyond human control and without natural end point, e.g. when the subject-less imperatives of American speculation is compared by Pink to the icy force of an avalanche, sweeping humans along towards the abyss; Freytag, Soll und Haben, vol. 2, p. 14.
daughter in Brazil who has picked the beans and the young farmhand who is having the coffee for his breakfast." Bourgeois economic activity German style is here presented as creating conscious and concrete connections between producers and consumers, rather than as blind and abstract mediation through money and the market.

In a world where supposedly different stages of social development are mapped onto the European space as backwards, pre-modern Polish East and modern, progressive "German" or Prussian West, then, Itzig and Ehrenthal clearly do not belong to the East in terms of their social role and the kind of society they represent. They call into question attempts to understand antisemitism as a variant of Orientalism that sees the "other" in contrast to Western modernity. On the contrary, they represent an excessive form of capitalism that is unrestrained by moral controls or by what is imagined as a grown, quasi-natural form of community and mutual obligation. They represent the threatening underside of a supposedly good, productive form of modern society. It is hence no coincidence that they also have much in common with what is presented as the ruthlessness, materialism and unstoppable dynamic of American culture, which is introduced into the novel through Fink's foreign adventures, a connection that would become a staple of German presentations of Jewishness in the decades to come.

On the other hand, though, even the Jews in the capital remain strangers whose origins lie in the East. While the Polish external enemy outside the Prussian borders serves to define the German nation through opposition, the Jews take on the role of an enemy who is simultaneously within and without and thus undermines stable geographical, national and social boundaries, as will be further discussed below.

Schöne Fremde – the Orient as a Space of Poetry

Poland as inert, barren, empty space, as landscape of a dismal past is, however, not the only guise in which the "East" appears in the novel. In the margins of the narrative we also encounter fleeting images of the Orient as an almost utopian space of poetry and sensuality. This Orient likewise appears as a counter-image to the sober world of German labor, but one that holds out a promise that cannot be fulfilled in that world. This image of the East and its charms is associated with Ehrenthal's son Bernhard, who is in every respect the opposite of the other members of his family. Rather than a hardened businessman like his father, he is an idealist who abhors the cutthroat world of money and trade, and rather than being a social climber like his mother and sister, he is unworlthy and shy. Even though he is a scholar, he also has nothing in common with the stereotype of the Jewish intellectual that emerged at the time, to whom nothing is holy and who uses his critical,

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16 Ibid., p. 268, my translation.
skeptical, purely negative intelligence in destructive ways (illustrated, e.g., in the contemporary discourse on Heine). 17 Instead, Bernhard is a romantic soul, a philologist and Orientalist who enthuses about Persian love poetry.

Unlike the Polish East, this oriental East is not characterized by a lack of civilization and creativity, but by a rich and alluring, albeit foreign, culture. Its connection to Bernhard's Jewishness remains visible, his way has led him, he says, "through Hebrew to the other Asiatic languages" whose "strange beauty" fascinates him. 18 This strange beauty is also visible in the objects that surround him in his dark study, such as the Persian manuscript of a poem he shows to Anton, whose silken cover is "wrought with golden thread in strange ways" and whose "intricate form and heightened expression made a great impression" on Anton. 19

For some few paragraphs, then, Bernhard's life as a scholar appears as rich and meaningful even to the sober Anton. In this way, the friendship between Anton and Bernhard seems to gesture, at least briefly, towards a conception of German-Jewish coexistence beyond either exclusion or assimilation, in which difference is not conceived as a deficit, in which scholarship seems reconciled with labor and practical sense, and in which Jewish and German culture seem to mutually enrich each other.

Against this ephemeral vision, though, the paradigm of German efficiency and discipline soon asserts itself again. Bernhard's enthusiasm increasingly appears as a withdrawal from the here and now, his love of poetry motivated by desperation about the prosaic and ugly character of his father's world. In spite of the diametrical opposition between Bernhard and his father, the relationships of either to the world thus ultimately appear as two sides of the same coin. Both crude materialism and romantic escapism appear as grounded in the same inability to find poetry, meaning, and moral values in the bourgeois world as it is. Ehrenthal actively destroys these dimensions in his obsessive hunt for profit, and Bernhard can therefore only find them in distant climes.

Against Bernhard's despair about the "prosaic" nature of a merchant's activity, though, Anton maintains that with the right attitude, it is possible to experience the "Poesie des Geschäfts," the "poetry of business," 20 in the world of work and in the multiple connections to exotic places and foreign people it creates— we have already heard about the "invisible threads" that the merchant ties. According to Anton, his profession knows "no lack of passion and great emotions," and "great and beautiful things" can also be found in the world of trade. 21

On a more abstract level, the positions of Bernhard and his father seem to mirror different literary approaches to the world that Freytag equally condemns in his

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19 Ibid., p. 267, my translation.
20 Ibid., p. 366.
21 Ibid., p. 269, my translation.
rected at Ehrenthal are: "It is enough, you are hurting me," and when Ehrenthal falls to his knees at the bed of his son, "a white hand was lifted threateningly once more, then a dead body sank back."25

In this way, the role of the Orient as a corrective or positive counter-image of the disenchantment of modernity is ultimately revoked in the narrative, just as the ability of the character of Bernhard to correct the otherwise almost uniformly negative presentation of Jews is undermined, if not turned into its opposite.

Orient and Occident

The different images of the East apparent in the novel are thus all counter-images of German modernity, but they have very different functions and inform images of very different "others." This fact calls into question approaches that see such discourses within a simple binary framework of German "self" and invented "other," of "West" and "East." Furthermore, with its depictions of the colonial space of Eastern Europe and the alluring Orient, the text seems to separate out two different imaginaries of the East that in other colonial discourses are frequently fused in ambivalent ways.

Most of the Jewish characters, and in particular Vittel Itzig and Hirsch Ehrenthal, stand in opposition to both these images of the East. They represent bad modernity versus bad pre-modernity in the case of Jews and Poles, and immoral, excessive pragmatism as against escapist poetry in the case of father and son Ehrenthal. Yet in other ways they nevertheless remain connected to the East, or the "East," through an implicit and explicit narrative of origin. The panorama of Jewish figures presented in the novel illustrates a continuum from the unassimilated Eastern Jew with side locks and caftan who constantly crosses the border to make small business deals, to the assimilated Jews in the capital, Ehrenthal and Itzig who, towards the end of the novel, "can in bad lighting hardly be distinguished from an elegant gentleman any longer."27 The text thus offers a kind of synchronous presentation of what, in other parts of the text, is described as diachronic stages of a history of migration and assimilation. The novel suggests that the true origins of even the most assimilated Jew lie in the shtetl of Poland. In a similar way, the "oriental" orient also makes an appearance every now and then in passing allusions to the even more distant biblical and Middle Eastern origins of the Jewish people.

Despite its points of contact, this representation of the Jewish characters, then, is clearly distinguishable from "classical" colonial and orientalist discourses. Anne

26 As "der Vater am Bett seines Sohnes niederfiel, hob sich noch einmal eine weiße Hand drohend in die Höhe, dann sank ein toter Leib zurück." Ibid., p. 61.
27 Ibid., p. 158.
McClintock describes nineteenth-century colonial narratives as a projection of the “axis of time... onto the axis of space.” Assumed stages of a linear, directional developmental process are associated with the inhabitants of different geographical areas, whereby Western societies, or more specifically German, French or English society, are imagined as representing the supposedly latest stage. The “oriental” elements in the representation of the Jewish characters in Soll und Haben, though, work in a different way. Here, alterity in terms of geographical origin is not aligned with alterity in terms of the type of society these characters represent. German modernity is not defined here through a simple opposition against: an oriental and backwards “other” outside. Instead, what the Jews come to stand for are the threatening features of the very same capitalist modernity whose positive features are claimed as the core of “Western” or “German” identity. Through their association with the Jews, these negative features are apparently externalized — if not outside in a strictly geographical sense, then at least “outside” of the national community defined and united by origin. This effects a kind of projection or purgation. This process also serves to symbolically turn the opaque dynamics and abstract imperatives, the social fragmentation and the loss of immanent meaning that are necessary aspects of capitalist modernity, into nothing but the contingent — and hence avoidable — effects of a faulty Jewish attitude.

At the same time, by projecting the origins of this “Jewish character” back to biblical times and far away to Poland or the Orient, these features of modernity do not even appear as historically specific features of modern society at all any more, but as expressions of an ancient and foreign culture. What is social appears as cultural or even racial “essence.” This combination of “occidentalist” and orientalist elements in the presentation of the Jews turns the threat of dissolution at the heart of German bourgeois society into something that comes from outside, declares the negative sides of modernity to be relics of an ancient culture, and presents the social as cultural or racial, as capitalism orientalized.

Works Cited


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ERGON VERLAG