

**The Periphery is the Center: Closing Thoughts on European Memory and Identity
in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's Poem 'Altes Europa' (1995)**

Rob Leventhal

German Studies, Modern Languages and Literatures
Student-Faculty European Studies Conference
The College of William and Mary
European Encounters, March 25, 2006

Reading Craig Calhoun's interesting piece that Diane Fournay sent us and thinking about Enzensberger's poem, two things struck me: first, that any adequate framing of European Studies and the idea of "Europeanness" would require us to continually articulate anew not merely the *contrastive* identity of Europe in terms of its exclusions or marginalizations, its opposition to and juxtaposition with non-Europe, but the *integrative* identity of Europe as "a product of circulation and interconnection," (6) as a set of historical linkages, affiliations, relationships that continue, perhaps transformed, to this day. Secondly, Calhoun's insightful remark concerning the "second" critique of Eurocentrism, namely, the fallacy of treating European identity, culture, and politics as "internal developments of Europe itself." (10) The notion of Europe has been made and remade, as Calhoun says, by "ventures outside of Europe," (10), by "borrowings and appropriations from non-European sources." (11-12) It is this second intervention in particular that bears directly on my reading of Enzensberger's poem.

The poem, published in 1995, demands and deserves a contextualization before I proceed with the more difficult task of interpretation. I do this with great trepidation as I do not want to in any way define or delimit its voice, restrict its semantic possibilities.

Nevertheless. By 1995, the euphoria of 1989, the Fall of the Wall, and the reconciliation fest of the 1990 re-unification of Germany is definitively over. Unemployment, especially in the former GDR states such as Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Thuringia, Meckelenburg-Vorpommern, and Brandenburg soared into the double-digits. The flow of capital from West to East, that is, what little that hadn't already disappeared in the still corrupt passages of the former GDR, had started to dry up. Most importantly for our purposes, perhaps, xenophobia, right-wing-extremism, Neo-Nazism, and actual assaults against "foreigners" were once again on the march...It is in this historical context that Enzensberger's poem find its speech-situation as it were, its enunciative "moment."

With its free line structure and its irregular rhythm, Enzensberger's poem belies its indebtedness to tradition, its three strophes approximating, *mutatis mutandis*, the classical sonnet form. Or, perhaps more precisely, its adherence to the *Meistersaengerdichtung* of Hans Sachs and his fellow sixteenth century guildmembers, which derived from medieval love-song—the *Minnesang* – which, reaching back farther, came from the songs of the provençal troubadours, which in turn derived their own origins from, yes, a non-European culture, most likely, as we now suppose, Arabic and the Arabic poetic tradition.

In the first two strophes, we encounter a constant almost contrapuntal oscillation between two levels of meaning: on the one hand, an "indigenous" or "*einheimische*" system of references, indices that evoke the "Old Europe:" the bakery, the "*Graubruedergasse*" or "Grey-Brothers Alley," "the Holy Ghost cemetery;" And, on the other, a "foreign," "strange" in any case "non-european" set of figures, symbols, and devices: the plump

magician from Guinea, the wiry drug dealers in their enormous sneakers speaking the incomprehensible language of the *barbaros*, which originally meant “one whose speech is rude, rough and harsh,” “one who speaks a foreign or strange language which is not understood by another.”

At first, no mediation whatsoever between the two levels. As if they were separate worlds, linguistic, cultural “spheres” with absolutely no interconnection. The bakery with its golden sign in the *Graubruedergasse* elegiacally referring back to the German middle-ages, the Holy Ghost Cemetery at the “Wall” of the church to the Christendom of the West; the immigrant from Guinea, perhaps illegal, and the “snarling,” aggressive language of the dealers, similarly marginalized and allocated to the streets. And, at the end of both strophes, the critically reflecting and reflective, provocative parenthetical: “who were those grey brothers?” and “who was the holy ghost?”

And yet. The black magician from Guinea, from the coast of West Africa, beyond the obvious cue to colonialism and the place of departure of slaves and other “black market goods” -- does he not remind us of the animistic, superstitious, mystical cults of our own Europe? Does he not also register the element of myth and the irrational that resides even, or precisely in, the most Enlightened of cultures? Meister Eckhart, Paracelsus, Jakob Boehme, Franz von Baader, Johann Georg Hamann. Does he not, with his key rings, call forth the fetishism of our own religious and mystical cults and sects? And the wiry dealers for their part, do we not trace in them the “Tastes of Paradise,” the distinction and the strangeness and the fantastic, the arabesque, the carnevalesque of the Western Orient,

Asia, and of the Middle and Near East that was always already the sign of the nobility, what distinguished the worldliness and the “sophistication” of the ruling elites of “Old Europe”?

The final strophe with its caesura “And then...” This cut that interrupts the oscillating structure and separates the last strophe from the previous two. Here, the messenger comes not from a non-European, African, Middle or Near Eastern or Asian “other,” but from *within Europe itself*, or at least from what was previously thought to be the “boundary” or “border” of Europe. With her “stiff leg,” perhaps the result of an assault or ethnic cleansing, the old Bosnian woman too no less than the African and Middle-Easterners seeks and finds asylum in the “Old Europe,” her questionable stay marked by the “few minutes” she is able to stop to rest. Here the place is even more auspicious. For the date of the House at the Elephant, 1639, not only forces us to traverse the path back to the horrors and slaughter of the Thirty-Years War, but forward to the present, to the Balkans of 1995, to Sarajevo and Srebrenica, to the genocide, crimes against humanity, and grave breaches of the Geneva convention, thereby creating the historical linkage only hinted at up to this point. Bosnia not only brings Islam directly into the very “center” of Europe, the House and its “elephant’s” memory span the two cultures and the four centuries. A poem, as Reinhold Grimm has essayed, of “mythological-historical intertextuality?” Or a poetic staging of our problematic misrecognition and misprision of Europe, in both senses of the genitive: how we have forgotten its violent origin in Zeus’ kidnapping of the Phoenician princess that defines the beginning of “Western” civilization; and, the disingenuous ways in which we sever precisely what is constitutive of and to Europe, its

intrinsic indebtedness and reliance on those elements which have always already been at its very center: the Grey Brothers, the charitable monks who would assist the stranger on his way, and the Holy Ghost, who acts as translator and decipherer, specifically with regard to the redemptive force of God. The double meaning of the twice mentioned “dark-green” permits of no closure: is it the green of the prophet’s flag, or the green of hope and of promise?

Has Enzensberger unwittingly fallen into precisely the type of euro-centrism he sought to avoid? Do the Guinea-Magician as *Haendler*, the “snarling” drug dealers, and the old asylum seeker not simply reproduce the tired clichés of the foreigner in Europe and thereby replay the entire history of domination, control and subjugation? I think not. The rhetorical figures who inhabit Enzensberger’s “Old Europe” open up for us the multifarious strands of the interweave we call Europe, including its own nominations and problematic occupations. Moving between past and present, inner-, inter- and extra-European relational structures and *topoi*, and finally excavating the linguistic and cultural catacombs, Enzensberger has denaturalized and destabilized his object, made what seems most natural – “Old Europe” – quite strange, and rich, and deep once again, a rhizome capable of seemingly infinite exploration of its all-too-forgotten identities.