

## **Conference Report on the 2013 Hermes Consortium Seminar "New Worlds, New Literatures, New Critiques"**

University of Wisconsin – Madison, 9th - 14th June 2013

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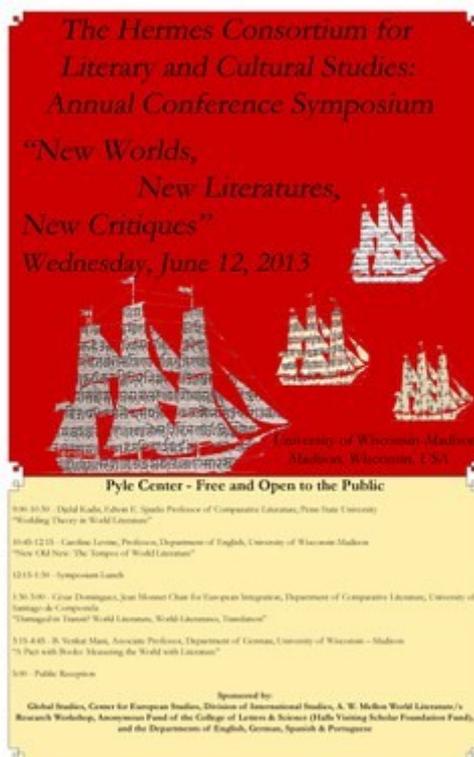
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## Conference Report on the 2013 Hermes Consortium Seminar "New Worlds, New Literatures, New Critiques"

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The 2013 Seminar organized by the Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies took place at the beginning of June at the University of Madison-Wisconsin. The title of the seminar, "New Worlds, New Literatures, New Critiques" referred to the explicit focus of the event on various manifestations of globalization throughout human history. The depth of the subject was matched by the variety of topics discussed by individual participants. Doctoral students from as many as nine different graduate schools (University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Santiago de Compostela, University of Oulu, The Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies (Tilburg), Justus Liebig University, University of Amsterdam, University College (London), Radboud University (Nijmegen), University of Lisbon) presented papers at one of the seven panel sessions. In addition to the doctoral students' panels, four professors gave keynote lectures during a public symposium day.

Everyone had a first chance to mingle at the Opening Reception, organized the evening before the official start of the Seminar. Throughout the event, the opportunities to get to know each other, both during the Consortium activities and outside working hours, were excellent. By the end of a very intense and stimulating week, the group had become very tight-knit. This became evident by the turnout at the unofficial closing dinner. Parts of the group also used the opportunity to meet in Chicago after the seminar had ended.

## TRANSNATIONAL LITERARY TRANSFERS AND PRACTICES OF TRANSLATION

The very first to present in the opening panel of the seminar was GABRIELLE EKMAN (UW- Madison). Gabrielle handled this weight of responsibility with calm and grace, discussing transformations of nineteenth century British poetry after it had travelled as far as Sierra Leone. Poets in Freetown published numerous works in periodicals. The analysis of this corpus of texts yields exciting outcomes for the study of both Victorian poetry and the transformations this poetry has undergone outside the metropolis. Poetry was the topic of the following two papers as well, presented by ALBA CID



FERNÁNDEZ and MARCO PAONE, both from University of Santiago de Compostela. Alba presented three case studies by looking at the works of the Galician poet Chus Pato together with the Canadian poets Erín Moure and Anne Carson. The paper's main research question centred on the transposition of the basic aspects of the essayistic genre onto recent lyric poetry. The hybrid poetic works of the three authors discussed in the paper presented innovative ways of dealing with this recent poetic phenomenon. The concluding paper of the panel, presented by Marco, aimed at providing a transatlantic perspective on the phenomenon of the migration of poetry. By analysing the examples of anthologies of Italian poetry published in Argentina and in Spain, Marco discussed the role of these volumes as spaces of production and preservation of transatlantic, transnational memory.

The afternoon panel of the first day of the seminar dealt with heroic figures across times and national contexts. From heroes with impairment in Icelandic sagas (TODD MICHELSON-AMBELANG, UW-Madison) to contemporary Finnish writer Rosa Liksom and her epic heroes (KASIMIR SANDBACKA, Oulu) and back to Baudelaire's Dandy as heroic myrmidon (GEERTJAN DE VUGT, Tilburg), the audience was given the opportunity to trace new trajectories of the heroic in literature and popular imagery.

After such a stimulating start to the seminar, the participants took part in the Library Research Workshop organized by Todd Michelson-Ambelang. Todd gave us a tour around the UW-Madison Library, during which we learned a lot about the history of the university, as well as about the impressive collection of volumes (including very special books in various Asian languages) owned by the library.

## LITERARY TRANSGRESSIONS AND GLOBAL LITERARY TRAJECTORIES

The third panel, entitled "Colonial Trajectories," opened the second day of the seminar. Once again, the variety of the national contexts and temporal frameworks discussed was extremely refreshing. REINHARD M. MÖLLER (Giessen) focused on the case of the German-British traveller Georg Forster. In order to explore the systematic links between specific aesthetic conceptions of foreignness, the literary configuration of encounters with Otherness, and the

role of literary criticism in the reception of works from other national contexts, Reinhard analysed the articulation of these links throughout Forster's oeuvre. LISANNE SNELDERS (Amsterdam) discussed the case study of the contemporary Dutch academic journal *Indische Letteren*. She argued that this journal functions as a mnemonic community that actively constructs the cultural memory of the country's colonial past in the Dutch East Indies. TOM GOULD (London) focused on the most recent examples of the travelogue genre. Barthes's *Empire of Signs* and Baudrillard's *America* were read by Tom as 'anti-travelogues', by dint of their refusal to accommodate cultural differences within the rigid Eurocentric value system.

CHRISTOPHER McVEY (UW-Madison), BEATRICE SELIGARDI (Giessen), and AMMAR NAJI (UW-Madison) presented their papers in the panel dedicated to Postcoloniality and/in the Novel. Christopher offered an impressive, in-depth, close reading of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. He argued that the book eloquently transcends the national peculiarity of historical traumas by, on the one hand, highlighting the limitations of representing the repressed and silenced, and, on the other hand, by offering new and more inclusive concepts of community and citizenship. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* was the case study in the analysis of the ever-evolving genre of campus fiction discussed by Beatrice. The scope of the paper was to identify the tendencies that have had major influence on the development of the genre which, since its first hybrid-formulaic configuration in the nineteenth century, has continued to be further hybridized. Ammar talked about contemporary Anglophone Arab writing and its focus on the new migratory understanding of identity, which manifests an original "diasporic consciousness" whose evolution takes place in connection with the increased mobility of Arab migrants both in Europe and in the United States.

At the last panel of the day, TOM IDEMA (Nijmegen) focused on the application of notions of "worlding" to literary texts which represent transgressions of the nature/culture or human/animal boundary, using Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy as a point of reference. The notion of "world literature" can, as the work of theorists like Donna Haraway suggests, be fruitfully applied to the literary construction of alternative 'worlds' as environments that are not exclusively centred around the figure of the human being. LAURA BRU (UW Madison) emphasized the complex strategies by which literary narratives represent movements through cultural spaces in terms of (un)homeliness as an aesthetic as well as a cultural issue: the complex interplay between aspects of familiarity as well as disruption can, as Bru argued with reference to texts by Nadine Gordimer and Latife Tekin, be seen as a literary strategy of worlding which impugns fixed cultural standpoints and ideologies.

## DIFFERENT NOTIONS AND FACETS OF WORLD LITERATURE IN DIALOGUE

In the one-day faculty symposium on Wednesday, all four speakers provided ample food for thought by focusing on crucial and complementary aspects of a possible working notion of



'world literature': DJELAL KADIR (Penn State) focused on the theoretical, i.e. self-reflexive and meta-reflexive aspects of literature as an element that allows us to bring into fruitful dialogue the most chronologically and geographically diverse texts, such as the European novel and ancient Sanskrit epics. World literature is thus constituted as an aesthetic and poetological, but also historical and political community of texts spanning thousands of years and a wide range of cultures. This, according to Kadir, makes transnational world literature appear not so much as a recent discovery (according to a presentist notion of the concept), but a very ancient or almost perennial phenomenon. In her talk, CAROLINE LEVINE (UW-Madison) highlighted the impact of anthologies of world literature as an important factor of canon formation. Therein she points out that anthologies may strongly influence and govern processes of reception and modes of readership: coming from her position as an editor of the Norton Anthology of World Literature, Levine traced the historical development of Anglophone anthologies of world literature in relation to the consolidation of this field of study at major US universities. Her results emphasized the challenges of trying to create an anthology canon of globally relevant or representative literary works without a traditional Western bias. CÉSAR DOMÍNGUEZ (Santiago de Compostela) problematized the importance of multilingual processes of translation as a crucial factor for the 'worlding' of literary texts which makes them accessible for "common readers" and, consequently, strongly influences the emergence of world literature as literature that "gains in translation" (David Damrosch) or, according to a question posed in Domínguez' title, may possibly be "damaged in transit". As a case in point, Domínguez focused on translations of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán's 1926 novel *Tirano Banderas* on the Anglophone and Latin American book markets. B. VENKAT MANI (UW-Madison) focused on another key aspect of world literature, namely on historical trajectories in the creation of a world literary sphere through the activities of libraries, publishers, and sponsored institutional translation projects, which have accelerated the circulation of non-Western texts in Europe, especially since the late 18th and 19th century: examples for this heightened interest in the cultural products of distant parts of the world can be seen in the so-called 'Sanskrit mania' in 19th century Britain and Germany and, respectively, in subsidized translation projects for "oriental" literature. As Mani pointed out, these processes of circulation reflect the complicated position of world literature as a project situated between the acknowledgment of particularity and the construction of universality. While their genealogy can be traced through a study of institutional "borrowing privileges," at the same time, the reception of translated works in a different cultural context may also contribute to cultural and literary change on a larger scale by creating a "reader-in-translation."

## WORLD LITERATURE, GENDER, PERFORMATIVITY, AND HISTORY

The last two days of our Seminar started on Thursday morning with a panel entitled "Gender, Nation, Body, Politics". This panel engaged with the problematic of World Literature by focusing on how this new critical concept challenges some of the most important topics in Cultural Studies. The first paper was given by KEVIN BOETTCHER (UW-Madison). In his paper, Kevin showed how English authors writing on 17th century colonial Virginia situated themselves as emblematic eaters when presenting the food knowledge offered by the "Indians" to their readers. This "exotic food writing", however, often served to reinforce the European national perception of selfhood. The second panelist, FEMKE ESSINK (University of Amsterdam) drew attention to the relationship between nation and gender. She investigated the critical potential of adaptations by analysing the case of a 1947 novel, *Evenings* (*De avonden*), which was transposed first into film and later into a stage play. Femke was especially interested in looking at how the representation of the protagonist's homosexuality has changed according to different cultural influences. The last paper of the morning was given by ALAINYA Kavaloski (UW-Madison). Alainya continued the reflection on national identities by considering how contemporary representations of homelands under conditions of violence are translated between languages, texts, and images.

After lunch, we dedicated the afternoon to some rest from exciting intellectual discussions. The organizers gave us an opportunity to see something completely different and totally unexpected: The House on the Rock. One hour away from Madison, this architectural complex lies in the bucolic and idyllic Wisconsin countryside. However, if the landscape invites the spectator to enjoy the peacefulness of hills and forests, The House on the Rock is something completely different. Designed by Alex Jordan during the second half of the 20th century, this place is a tour de force. The house itself is a reinterpretation of some oriental influences, with a Japanese Garden, and small, dark rooms full of tapestries and exotic furniture. The Infinite Room is composed of a bridge that extends up into the woods that surround the building. But after the proper 'house', the visitor gets a taste of a series of mad collections of all kinds: dollhouses, butterflies, clocks, the reconstruction of a 19th century street, a circus, an orchestra, a series of musical machines, a big whale in a huge room – and these are just a few of the unbelievable things that you can see, and that definitely prove that there is no limit to human imagination (or madness).

Literature and Performance was the title of the very last panel on Friday, and JESSICA GROSS (UW-Madison) began with a paper on graphic novels in which she presented two case-studies: *The Rabbits* by Shaun Tan and John Marsden, and *Déogratias* by J.P. Stassen. Her analysis focused on the ways the new worlds are created in violent encounters between cultures. The second presentation shifted to theatre performance. BRUNO HENRIQUES (University of Lisbon) discussed the near-absence of Ibsen and the strong preference for Brecht as a model for the construction of Portuguese modern theatre. The aim of his paper was to show how political dynamics can interfere and shape the reception of culture in a specific society. The Summer School got wrapped up with rap: POLINA SHVANYUKOVA (Giessen) offered a lively

presentation about multilingual Italian rap. She demonstrated how new musical genres arise from the interaction between cultural artefacts like American traditional rap and new social dynamics, such as the ever-increasing presence of immigrants in the Italian context.

All in all, the HERMES Seminar 2013 offered a lot of valuable insights and suggestions on world literature as a literary phenomenon as well as a versatile reading method. Fortunately we had the chance to develop them in a fittingly international, transatlantic environment during a highly productive week on the beautiful campus of UW-Madison.