

Conference Report on “Literature and Cultural Change”

"Literature and Cultural Change: International Conference",
Justus-Liebig-Universität/International Graduate Centre for the Study
of Culture, Giessen, May 20 - 23, 2015

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“What are the connections between literature and culture, and between literature and cultural change?” The conference organisers delimited the scope of this fascinating but formidable question by inviting “systematic and historical perspectives in English and American literary studies from the early modern period to the present”. Participants were asked to consider literature’s “particular role in motivating, instiga-

ting or hindering cultural change, and the influence of cultural change on the evolution of literature”. In his introductory lecture, HERBERT GRABES (Giessen) provided a historical grounding for the discussion by presenting an expansive survey of Anglophone literature and culture since the Renaissance. Carefully observing the distinction that historical change is ‘constant’ but not ‘uniform’, Prof. Grabes highlighted four historical moments during which the pace of change in both literature and culture was particularly high, namely: the Renaissance, Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Throughout the lecture, Prof. Grabes demonstrated how writers (in the broadest sense) served as ‘hidden persuaders’, helping to usher in and disseminate new political, philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic ideas. Narrowing his focus towards the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism in the late 1960s, Prof. Grabes raised one of the defining questions of the conference when he suggested that the pace of literary and cultural change had in fact attenuated in the recent wake of Postmodernism.

In the paper which he sent to be circulated in advance, WINFRIED FLUCK (Berlin) argued that ‘narratives about literature and cultural change are based on a priori assumptions about the state of the subject’, positing a turn from a model of ‘self-alienation’ towards one of ‘intersubjectivity’ in recent literary criticism, and concluding that: “society and culture will be of interest mainly as a site of struggles for recognition in which literature can be an important driving force, because as a realm of imaginary free play it is ideally suited to register misrecognition and articulate renewed claims for recognition”. Prof. Fluck’s paper also engaged with one of the key critical figures of the conference, Raymond Williams, whose works played a prominent role in several of the subsequent contributions. With such a variety of authors, texts, periods, and critical approaches under discussion, it would have been reductive to group the panels according to an overarching narrative or chronology. Instead, the panels were structured around a series of interconnected dialogues which opened up between papers, an approach which proved very fruitful. As a result, the following subsection headings are emergent rather than definitional.

Humanism, Historicism, and (Early) Modernity

Providing the first case study of the conference, SONJA SCHILLINGS (Giessen) offered a reading of concepts of human dignity in Flannery O’Connor’s story *Good Country People*, showing how the US’s decision to drop atom bombs on Japan in 1945 forced a shift in the conception of humanity from being ‘essentially rational’ to being ‘essentially unknowable’. Shifting back to the Early Modern period, ANN LECERCLE (Paris) provided an equally contextualised reading of the Shakespearean theatre, resituating Shakespeare’s *Globe* from the idealised space of the literary imagination to the real cultural space of Elizabethan and Jacobean London. Remaining in this period, MARTIN SPIES (Giessen) then analysed the ‘pedigree craze’ in Jacobean England and Scotland, showing how individuals used ‘genealogical propaganda’ to fashion their identities during the personal union of James I of England and Scotland. CHRISTINE SCHWANECKE (Giessen) developed the discussion of Early Modern theatre by offering a reading of Richard Brome’s play *The Jovial Crew*, showing how this play used narratives to negotiate between alternative political realities in the looming political climate of the English Civil War. In her contribution, ELAINE HOBBY (Loughborough) considered the cultural importance of Aphra Behn from the seventeenth century to the present day, demonstrating the unparalleled role which questions of gender play in shaping debates about literature and cultural change.



Throughout these papers, questions of identity and definitions of the human emerged as central to the process of cultural change, as literary texts influence the ways in which subjects think of themselves and relate to their societies. It was fitting, therefore, that JEAN-JACQUES LECERCLE (Paris) then offered a reading of Raymond Williams’s concept of ‘structures of feeling’, which complicated the relation between feeling and thought, private and public. Quoting Marx on Feuerbach, Prof. Lecercle noted that “the essence of man is a totality of

social relations” and explained how Williams blurred Marx’s definition between base and superstructure. DANIEL HARTLEY (Giessen) then continued the interpretation of Williams’s work, by situating him alongside Badiou and mounting an argument for a transhistoricism as an “immanent self-conscious traditionality”: a method which realises afresh many of the aims of Williams’s work by breaking open the present at the levels of literary form and politics.

Markets, Technology, and the Post-human

Day two of the conference began firmly in the twenty-first century, with ROY SOMMER (Wuppertal) using a Systems theory approach to analyse the costs of supposedly ‘free’ online services, specifically by reading Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle* alongside Jaron Lanier’s non-fiction work *Who Owns the Future?*. Moving back to the Romantic period, TOM CLUCAS (Giessen) then analysed how the author Isaac D’Israeli helped to shape Coleridge’s concept of the ‘Clerisy’, and how his ideas were promulgated by his son, the novelist and later British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. In the next paper, INGO BERENSMEYER (Giessen) analysed the different temporalities of literary, technological, and cultural change in the 1950s, taking as his examples Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Bell*, Muriel Spark’s novel *The Comforters*, and N. F. Simpson’s play *A Resounding Tinkle*. Prof. Berensmeyer highlighted an important theme of the conference by discussing the ways in which literature opposes, as well as promotes cultural change. Staying in the Modern period, JED ESTY (Pennsylvania) then discussed the practice of ‘discontinuous historicism’ and offered a parallel reading of two novels: Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Prof. Esty showed how both of these novels, by novelists writing in their third or even fourth languages, depicted the nuclear family as the supposedly ‘historyless’ ideal of British and American society. KATE MACDONALD (Ghent) and CORNELIA WÄCHTER (Paderborn) investigated the relation between cultural change and the literary canon, positing a ‘middlebrow turn’ in literary criticism and arguing that ‘producerly’ middlebrow texts brought about a ‘domestication of Modernist themes’ during the twentieth century. Continuing the focus on reader response, GERO GUTTZEIT (Ghent) then analysed the popular success of Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘Sherlock Holmes’ stories, suggesting that their success lay not only in Doyle’s use of clues in the narrative, but also in the ‘narrative instance’ provided by Watson, whose questioning serves as a foil for the reader’s curiosity. Throughout these papers, the discussion turned towards the ways in which authors and their readers work in conjunction to shape conceptions of the present, by expressing positive and negative perceptions of modernity and by presenting utopian/dystopian images of the future. Questions of the ‘lag’ between literary and technological change came to the fore, as literature emerged as a medium which assimilates cultural change but does so critically, helping to set the social agenda for posterity.



Global Horizons: The Social and Natural Environment

The final group of papers introduced a more global perspective, as they moved to consider the cultural impact of World Literatures in English. MICHAEL FRANK (Giessen) opened this section by tracing the ‘translocalisation’ of the Caribbean landscape to London in the lyrics of the Calypso song London is the place for me by Aldwyn Roberts (a.k.a Lord Kitchener). MARIA LÖSCHNIGG (Graz) developed the environmental theme by arguing that recent ecopoetry written about the mining of the Athabasca oil sands in Canada encourages ‘literary biodiversity’ and offers a ‘regenerative force’ by presenting ‘imaginative counter-discourses’. JENS KUGELE (Giessen) then considered the importance of rituals in the German and English versions of Ruth Klüger’s Holocaust memorial *Weiter leben*, highlighting the way in which Klüger’s concept of ‘inveterate truth’ challenges commemoration cultures which steer away from individual memory towards grand narratives. In the final presentation of the day, MICHAEL BASSELER (Giessen) developed the discussion of cultural responses to crisis by considering the concept of resilience as a new governing rationality in US literature and pop culture, focusing on Bruce Springsteen’s albums *Wrecking Ball* and *The Rising*, Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones*, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. The following morning, ALEXANDER SCHERR (Giessen) introduced the twenty-first-century genre of ‘genomic life writing’. He argued that Richard Powers’ novel *Generosity: An Enhancement* provides a sceptical response to the telling of life through the ‘perpetual present’ of the genome and demonstrates the ways in which narrative precedes the data. NORA BERNING (Giessen) then tracked the recent emergence of the ‘world novel’ to document a new ‘structure of feeling’, taking as her example the ‘multi-strand narrative’, ‘cosmopolitan ethics’, and ‘intercultural alterity’ of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s recent novel *Americanah*. In the final paper of the conference, SNEŽANA VULETIČ (Giessen) considered the selective use of elements from Igbo folklore for the purposes of ‘cultural repair’ before and after Nigerian Independence in the narratives of Chinua Achebe’s novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Throughout this final group of papers, the discussion focused on the ways in which literary forms and genres adapt in order to keep pace with cultural changes in our increasingly mobile, international, and technologised world.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In his closing remarks, INGO BERENSMEYER (Giessen) drew attention to the array of authors, texts, and periods that had been presented during the conference. Prof. Berensmeyer also signalled the multiplicity of approaches which the speakers had brought to bear on the question of literature and cultural change, including: actor-network theory, systems theory, ecocriticism, various types of Marxism, narratology, close reading, distant reading, as well as New, discontinuous, and trans-historicism. During the closing discussion, HERBERT GRABES (Giessen) emphasised the fact that literature has a tradition of its own and that many major

changes have arisen from within that tradition. Once again, questions were raised about inertia and the resistance to change, as ELAINE HOBBY (Loughborough) noted that in some key aspects of culture (e.g. attitudes towards gender) centuries passed with very little change. Overall, the perception was that one of literature's most important functions in diagnosing, reflecting, propagating, and driving cultural change is its capacity for 'consciousness raising', which inevitably involves the agency of readers as well as writers. Developing this idea further, ALEXANDER SCHERR (Giessen) proposed a systems theory approach in which literary texts respond to perturbations within their cultural environment: 'literature observes itself' and is therefore able to internalise and respond to changes in the relation between the literary system and culture at large. There was a strong consensus that the conference had raised intriguing possibilities and given rise to fresh questions, especially concerning the future of Postmodernism, the possible recurrence of earlier literary forms, and the developing practice of literary historicism. From the conversations between the panels, it also became clear that the participants gained a great deal from being introduced to so many new authors, texts, and perspectives. To borrow a phrase from MARIA LÖSCHNIGG (Graz), one of the great strengths of literature as an agent of cultural change is its capacity for 'biodiversity'; and one of the particular achievements of this conference was to overcome traditional period divisions in order to make this diversity felt. The conference organizers and their team deserved to be thanked for enabling so many new contexts and perspectives to be shared.