
CONFERENCE REPORTS

“Interdisciplinary Approaches to Spirituality in the Literatures of the English-Speaking World,” University of Vienna, 5 – 9 July 2009

John S. Bak (Nancy, France)
& Franz Wöhrer (Vienna, Austria)

The English Department of the University of Vienna and the research groups I.D.E.A. (“Interdisciplinarité Dans les Études Anglophones”) of Nancy-Université and “Écritures” of the Université de Metz organized an international conference last July in Vienna entitled “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Spirituality in the Literatures of the English-Speaking World.” The conference brought together over sixty participants from nearly thirty different countries around the world. Religious historians, literary specialists, cultural studies practitioners, and linguists all examined the concept of spirituality (e.g., paganism, Aboriginal worship, Buddhism, Christianity, Hebraism, and Islam) in English texts from the Middle Ages to Postmodernism.

Werner Huber, chair of the English Department of the University of Vienna, opened the conference by explaining the importance of the Vienna-Nancy connection. In August 1784, Holy Emperor Joseph II de Hapsburg-Lorraine, son of the Duc de Lorraine, inaugurated one of Europe’s premier hospitals, the *Allgemeines Krankenhaus der Stadt Wien* (AKH), which now serves as the campus for the University of Vienna.



(Joseph & Peter Schaefer engraving of AKH, 1784)

The first session was devoted to “The Creative Mind and Spiritual Experience” and demonstrated how prior artistic renderings of spirituality served as sources of inspiration for later artists. Halvard Johannessen (Norway) spoke about the hermeneutical approach to spirituality per Sister Sandra

Schneiders, Zsuzsanna Váradi-Kalmár (Hungary) talked about the notion of “One” in the poetry of Kahlil Gibran, Hélène Fau (France) compared Francis Bacon’s *Utopia* (17th c.) with Francis Bacon’s abstract painting series on the Popes (20th c.), and Nathalie Collé-Bak (France) examined William Blake’s iconographic treatment of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.”

The second session, “Sufi Mysticism, Hindu Mysticism and Anglophone Literature(s),” studied the influence of Eastern religions on Western literary texts. Abdulla Al-Dabbagh (U.A.E.) raised the debate about the limits of colonialization in the West’s importation of Sufi mysticism. The next three speakers, Saudamini Siegrist (USA), Kusumita Pedersen (USA), and Harashita Sunaoshi (Japan) all addressed similar aspects of the debate specifically related to the teachings of the Indian spiritualist Sri Chinmoy.

The day’s final session, “Postmodernist Approaches to Spirituality and (Pseudo-) Spiritual Literature,” presented the many facets of spirituality in the postmodern world. Monica Latham (France) talked about how the Bible has been repackaged and pastiched for 21st-century readers, and Jean-Philippe Heberlé (France) compared the rendering of the *Book of Job* in two English oratorios, *Job* (1892) by Hubert Parry and *Job* (1997) by Peter Maxwell Davies. Paul McDonald (England) then spoke about laughter and spirituality in the work of Douglas Coupland and Bill Hicks, while Christophe Lebold (France) dealt with Leonard Cohen’s Holy Hoaxes and pop culture’s uses of spiritual traditions.

Tuesday morning’s session, “Spirituality, Society and Politics,” opened with Miriam Wallraven (Germany) speaking about spiritual models of culture and methods of worldmaking in postmodern utopian texts, and Pauline Chakmakjian (Wales) then talked about freemasonry as an alternative form of spiritual textuality. Gender, cultural diversity, and spirituality with respect to Indian women was the topic of Vibha Agnihotri’s (India) presentation, and Demelza Marlin (Australia) presented a paper about incarnation and the spirit of the social. A second session was devoted to “Aboriginal / Native Spirituality,” where Isabelle

Benigno (France) discussed how Australian Aborigines used art to avoid the eradication of their culture and spirituality, and Susana Amante (Spain) closed with a paper on the cosmological view of the Canadian Cree. The final session of the morning, "The Spirituality of the Medieval English Mystics," presented Tibor Fabiny's (Hungary) research on etymologically the use of the word "Stirring" in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th c.) and in the writings of the reformer and Bible-translator William Tyndale (16th-c.). Camille de Villeneuve (France) concluded with a paper on the castrating function of mystical vision in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich and the *Book* of Margery Kempe.

The afternoon sessions began with "The Spirituality of the Metaphysical Poets," where Jan Van Dijkhuizen (Holland) spoke about references to pain and the mystical experience in the poetry of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and George Herbert, and Noémi Maria Najbauer (Hungary) untangled the Jack Donne / Dr. Donne duality evident in the metaphysical poet's and pastor's contradictory writings. Conference co-organizer Franz Wöhrer (Austria) then introduced an innovative methodological approach to the hermeneutics of spiritual literature and illustrated the potential of the interdisciplinary approach through a reading of George Herbert's mystographical poems. The next session, "Spirituality in 18th-century English Religious Poetry," heard Magdalena Ozarska (Poland) discuss the spiritual and the non-spiritual poetic personas and audiences of Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* (1759–63). The day's final session, "The Spirituality of the English Romantics (I)," offered talks by three scholars: Viona Au Yeung (China), on the "spirit of place" in Wordsworth's "An Evening Walk" and Chiang Yee's *The Silent Traveller in Lakeland*; Svetlana Makurenkova (Russia), on the theological controversy between *homooisian* and *homooiousian* in Shakespeare's and Donne's writings within the aesthetic framework of Coleridge; and Éva Antal (Hungary), on William Blake's spiritual theory of vision as confronted in his writings and his illustrations.

Wednesday began with the session "Spirituality in Modern British and Anglo-Irish Literature." Nada Al-Ajmi (Oman) spoke about Thomas Hardy and his struggle with faith in spiritual and the institutional church in a scientific age, and Sandra Josipovic (Serbia) talked about the affirmation and negation of spirituality in the work of James Joyce per six edicts about the relationship of God to literary works. The next session, "Spirituality in Modern British Literature (II)," gathered papers from Naomi

Toth (France), who offered insights on the notions of transcendence, sensation, and the self in the work of Virginia Woolf, and Paula Alexandra Guimarães-Ribeiro (Portugal), who talked about contradictory representations of the divine and the human in Stevie Smith's poetry. The morning's final session, "Spirituality in Contemporary American and Canadian Women Writers," presented research by Françoise Couturier-Storey (France) on the antithetical natures of spirituality and religion in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and Mirjana Daniëæ (Serbia) on the spiritual powers of Toni Morrison's female characters who view past, present, and future as coexistent and who question the divinity of a religion founded on the principle of exclusion.

In the afternoon session, "Spirituality in 19th-century American Literature," Hyesook Son (South Korea) offered a Levinasian reading of Emily Dickinson's religious poems, and Lobna Ben Salem (Tunisia) examined the allegory of spiritual alienation in Dickinson's poetry. Claude Le Fustec (France) then spoke of the spirit and the letter in American literature and the quest for kerygmatic power in a literature whose biblical intertextuality helped establish the nation's canon, while Stéphanie Carrez (France) discussed the notion of fire worshipping and dreams in Hawthorne's works to explain the author's fire idolatry as a creative process.

The final day offered a battery of topics on the impact of spirituality in American literature of the 20th century. "Spirituality in 20th-century American Women Writers" presented the research of Brigitte Zaugg (France) on Ellen Glasgow's unending spiritual quest for reconciliation to her reason-emotion dialectic and answers to her ontological questions concerning the spiritual makeup of the universe. Isabel Ferreira (Brazil) then spoke about Janie's spiritual journey in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a celebration of African American mysticism rooted in slavery. Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd (France) concluded with a talk on mystical bewilderment of Fanny Howe's female characters. A second session was on "Spirituality in Contemporary American Male Fiction," where Florentina Anghel (Romania) spoke on conflict between religion and philosophy in John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and their relationship to the notion of freedom, and Mehmet Atalay (Turkey) looked at J. D. Salinger's lonely hero of spirituality and the holistic approach to spirituality (Christian, Buddhist, Sufism) in modern thought. Mokhtar Ben Barka (France) then discussed premillennial eschatology in the popular post-

apocalyptic series *Left Behind* as an example of the intersection between fiction and fundamentalist Christianity in America. Sina Vatanpour (France) next presented a talk on Paul Auster's hermeneutics in *City of Glass* where the principal character's quest for meaning becomes a pastiche of American transcendentalism. Véronique Alexandre (France) concluded the morning session with a talk on the middle class's aspirituality in Richard Ford's latest stories and their oscillation between pessimism and apologetics.

The afternoon held a variety of sessions that put into relief the interdisciplinary methodology applied to spiritual and profane texts. "Spirituality in Contemporary Caribbean Literature and Culture" found Kathie Birat (France) speaking about syncretism and spirituality in contemporary Caribbean fiction and how this hybridization has made spirituality an integral party of an artistic vision rather than a marker of cultural or social difference. "Cross-Cultural Reception of Buddhist and Christian Spirituality" presented Jacques Coulardeau's (France) linguistic approach to the betrayal of

Buddhist concepts, notably in the translation of Eknath Easwaran's *The Dhammapade*, while Jean Dsouza (India) discussed the constructs and limits of representing the Christian God as male in Genesis and the Gospels. The conference closed with a session entitled "Spirituality in Contemporary Children's Literature," where Maria Kissova (Slovakia) looked into the spiritual powers of shamanism in Michelle Paver's *The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* and how spirituality, magic, the supernatural, the uncanny, and evil can be presented to a child reader.

The conference had obviously touched on a topic relevant to interdisciplinary researchers and intriguing to members of the community lay and religious alike. Conference participants and attendees were provided a palette of talks that satisfied the spiritual appetites of all, and no one left hungry. The three universities—Vienna, Nancy, and Metz—are currently looking into publishing opportunities for one or two volumes of essays from the conference. Interested parties should look for the volumes to be published some time near the end of 2010.

“Postcolonial TranslocatiOns”: 20th Annual GNEL/ASNEL Conference, University of Münster, Germany, 21-24 May 2009

Peter H. Marsden (Aachen, Germany)

The 20th Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) took place in Münster from 21–24 May this year and was attended by a total of some 300 delegates from 35 countries. The event was organized with efficiency, enthusiasm and panache by a team from the Chair of English, Postcolonial and Media Studies at the University of Münster. Chairholder Mark Stein, in tandem with lecturers Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz and Silke Stroh, was backed up a team of students and administrative staff. The conference featured three keynote speakers and four authors. Around 250 academics had responded to the call for papers; about half the abstracts submitted were ultimately accepted. The conference theme – “Postcolonial TranslocatiOns” – had clearly been a fount of inspiration. The resulting outpourings were channelled into intriguing-sounding sections and sessions, the promise held out by the likes of “Transcultural cityscapes”, “Imagining translocal space”, or “Translocal foods and travelling goods” being more often kept than not.

All of this took place in a highly atmospheric setting, in a historic university city with an undeniably Oxbridge charm, what with all those bikes, all

those cobblestones, all those grave groves and hallowed halls. After registration in the local *Schloß*, the conference adjourned to the seat of the hosting Department, the *Fürstenberghaus*, no less. And as for the inner-city *lake*, that's a feature neither Ox nor Bridge can boast. Plus, as we apparently say these days – the blazing sunshine helped and the general holiday mood of summer in the city rubbed off onto the conference proceedings.

The inner structure of the conference was satisfyingly tripartite, punctuated as it was by three keynotes and three round tables (one on each full day of the event). The keynotes (in order of ‘sounding’) were delivered by Edward W. Soja (UCLA) on: “Postcolonial spaces and the struggle over geography”; Ien Ang (University of Western Sydney) on: “Intercultural dialogue without guarantees”; and Diana Brydon (University of Manitoba) on “‘Difficult forms of knowing’: Enquiry, injury and translocated relation of postcolonial responsibility”. This triad (of papers, rather than people) offered the gathering a framework of theoretical, almost metaphysical, underpinnings and orientations towards “turns” old and new, spatial and traumatic, without wholly neglecting to pepper the theorems

with actual instances from real life, notably in the case of Ien Ang's down-to-earth, pragmatic examples of how a sorely needed "cosmopolitan multiculturalism" can be cultivated in everyday life.

As for the three round tables, these panels all had something to do with celebration, memorialization and stock-taking: 25 years of *Wasafiri*, 20 years of GNEL / ASNEL, a now-vs.-then look at "The institutionalization of postcolonial studies". Despite the general conclusion that PoCo as an established university subject and/or department is here to stay, it did become apparent that there are cases where it can rapidly disappear off the radar when those who have been teaching it retire from active service. Feelings were somewhat mixed as to whether institutionalization itself might not be a mixed blessing. For many observers the presence at the conference of more than the usual quota of "Old Members" was testimony to the overall success story. This was just as gratifying as the continuing presence and influx of *young* members and *new* members – ASNEL has always justly prided itself on a healthy age spread and it's good to know and see that a generation is indeed there for the torch to be passed on to.

At four, the number of writers present was well below the ASNEL average. Three of them were showcased by the *Wasafiri* round table: "Clearing new spaces", chaired by editor Susheila Nasta. In this context, Bernardine Evaristo (London), Tomáš Zmeškal (Czech Republic), and Samir El-youssef (Palestine) came across convincingly as living evidence of the broad and varied spectrum of

imaginative writing promulgated by this unique journal. The fourth writer at the conference, Sridhar Rajeswaran (India), gave his reading in a lunchtime slot on the Saturday.

In my view, and I was not alone in this, the great cultural highlight of the conference was a performance by a youth theatre group (*Cactus Junges Theater*). No, *not* students, let alone students of English – just young people from the local community who were themselves heavily translocated. No, *not* directed by a member of the English Department but by a freelance theatre person, Barbara Kemmler. *s/w remix* was impressive precisely because it was not academic, not theoretical, not abstract, but "simply" dealt head-on with the central conference issues of translocation, dislocation, displacement, migration and the way these forces impact on human beings. The performance was moving – in various senses of the word, powerful and poignant, treating as it did the very real problems of "*Deutschafrikaner*", i.e. people – in this case, especially *young* people – of African descent living in Germany.

Amid all the stocktaking there is a very real danger of overlooking the future, so let me conclude by noting that there is indeed life after 20 and that the 21st ASNEL conference will be duly held next year, from 13–16 May – at the University of Bayreuth. The conference theme is: "Contested Communities: Communication, Narration, Imagination"; the Convenor is Prof. Susanne Mühleisen (contact: <gnel2010@gmail.com>).

"Staging Interculturality": 18th Annual Conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE), Vienna, 4-7 June 2009

Mark Berninger (Mainz, Germany)
Ines Detmers (Chemnitz, Germany)

As the title "Staging Interculturality" already indicates, the 18th annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) centred on performative representations of cultural identities across national or ethnic borderlines, a field that might appear as somewhat amorphous. However, the defining characteristic of this area is not only that the buzz-term 'interculturality' is applied in a myriad of forms across different disciplines but also that the concept is used within specific disciplines in varying contexts. As a consequence of the great variety of approaches to, and definitions of, this term, the conference showed to what extent a notion which is 'sent travelling' through various cultural, theoretical

and methodological territories, both gains new meanings and opens up innovative insights along the way.

In his opening key-note speech "Writing Black People", the dramatist Simon Stephens (London) shed light on the estrangement, prejudices and pitfalls a 'white' writer may have to confront while attempting to create his ethnic or gendered 'other'. With reference to his recent plays *Motortown* (2006), *Pornography* (2008) and *Harper Regan* (2008), Stephens pointed to the significance of socio-political sensitivity and demonstrated his idea of interculturality as a productive dramatic mode which makes cultural heterogeneity visible.

The first presentation of the following panel, "The

‘Cultural Mulatto’ in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks”, was given by Lenke Németh (Debrecen). She examined Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) and Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) with reference to Trey Ellis’s term of the ‘cultural mulatto’ as a cultural embodiment of transgressive native African-American identities. Németh argued that both plays employ intertextual and bio-fictional strategies in order to not only undermine racial binaries but to negotiate with the fluid-fixities of mixed-racial selves. The second paper, “‘Among Unbroken People Next Door’: Henry Adam’s Drama of Interculturality”, discussed three recent Scottish plays, *Among Unbroken Hearts* (2000), *The People Next Door* (2003) and *Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5: In the Time of the Messiah* (2006). Tracing Adam’s formal and aesthetic development from local ‘Trainspottingish’ youth drama via farcical multi-cultural community drama to cynical politico-religious drama, Holger Südkamp (Düsseldorf) demonstrated the plays’ commitment to Scotland as a multi-ethnic society. The panel was rounded up with the second key-note lecture entitled “Performing Interculturality: Arabs in the West” held by Marvin Carlson (New York). He gave an overview of the current trends, topics and tendencies of Arab drama and theatre cultures in the US after 9/11. Carlson outlined how playwrights with an Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Tunisian, or even an Iranian or Iraqi background address the situation that ‘Arabs’ now serve to replace ‘the communist’ as the former US-American arch-enemy and how they have dealt with the ensuing near-breakdown of positive intercultural communication.

The second panel dealt especially with aspects of staging diasporas and migration. It was introduced by Giovanna Buonanno (Modena). Based on Patrice Pavis’s definition of intercultural theatre, her paper “1001 Nights Now: Diaspora Narratives on the Contemporary English Stage” examined the liminal space created by negotiating with performative representations of ‘cultures in translation’ in Yellow Earth’s 58 (2004), Tanika Gupta’s *Sanctuary* (2002), and the Copenhagen/Nottingham production *1001 Nights Now* (2002/05). Marilena Zaroulia’s (Winchester) presentation, “Travellers in Globalisation: From Near to Elsewhere and Back”, discussed David Greig’s *San Diego* (2003) and *A Disappearing Number* (2007) by Theatre de Complicité. Using Marc Augé’s concept of the ‘non-place’, Zaroulia demonstrated to what extent transitional quests for identity correlate with the cultural dynamics of super-modernity and may thus function to design new utopian communities on a global scale.

The third panel surveyed the paradoxes of interculturality from intracultural perspectives, starting with Claudia Georgi’s (Göttingen) contribution “Intercultural Relations and Intracultural Diversity in Richard Bean’s *The God Brothers*”. Analyzing the play’s fictional Tambian community in Africa as an epitome of cultural alterity, Georgi argued that Bean questions the concept of culture as a pristine category by exploring the dangers of unilateral assimilation or Westernization. The following paper, “*England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre, London*”, stayed with Richard Bean but turned the attention to interculturality as a social process in the UK. John Bull (Reading) used Bean’s *The English Game* (2008) and the controversy created by *England People Very Nice* (2009) to show how these plays effectively highlight the current political confusion about the rivalling ideologies connected with the concepts of interculturality, multiculturalism and integration.

The opening paper of the next panel was “Mapping Polish Identities on the British Stage”, presented by Monika Pietrzak-Franger (Siegen). She looked at two plays which thematized Polish labour migration: Gappard Theatre’s 2007 production *RE-ID* and *Cherry Blossom* (2008), a cooperative stage production of the Traverse Theatre and the Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz. Pietrzak-Franger highlighted that identities are shown as subject to change through migration in these plays and she investigated how theatre might serve as a trans-cultural contact zone through the use of multi-media and bi-lingual stage aesthetics. In the following presentation, “Intercultural Encounters in debbie tucker green’s *random*”, Marissa Fragou (London) set out to examine how green’s experimental one-act piece not only challenges representations of the black female self but also notions of sameness and otherness by foregrounding the dynamic interaction between race, age and gender. The concluding paper of this panel, “The Whiteness of Irish Drama: The Irish and Their Black Other”, discussed the shifting constructions of Irishness in plays as different as Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and Donal Kelly’s *The Cambria* (2005). From the critical perspective of Whiteness Studies, Sarah Heinz (Mannheim) revealed blind spots of whiteness by exploring the epidermal discourses constituting the highly ambivalent notion of Irishness.

The third key-note speaker, Nicholas Grene (Dublin), rounded off this Irish focus in his lecture “Contemporary Irish Theatre: The Way We Live Now?”. Through an extensive survey of new

productions in Dublin theatres in 2006, Grene shed light on the current heterogeneous trends and tendencies which characterize the contemporary Irish theatre scene.

The second playwright to speak at the conference was Tanika Gupta, who considered her own practice of "Writing Beyond the Stereotypes". In conversation with the theatre critic Aleks Sierz she related how her Bengali background and London upbringing shaped her writing. She explained that in her plays she both addresses biographical issues and transcends the confines of the typical 'Asian family story', e.g. in *Sanctuary* (2002), a play concerned with the genocide in Rwanda, or in *Sugar Mummies* (2006), which deals with the mutual exploitation going on between white women travelling to Jamaica and their black lovers.

The final panel of the conference brought together the British theatre experts Keith Peacock (Hull), Graham Saunders (Reading), and Kathy Smith (London). In his paper, "Youth, Multiculturalism and Hybridity", Peacock introduced the formation of youth identity as special theme of multicultural drama. He drew on Hanif Kureishi's *Borderline* (1981), Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East* (1996) and Tanika Gupta's *Fragile Land* (2003) to show how generational conflicts interact with cross-cultural conflicts in drama and how the search for a gender identity is sharply accentuated against a background of hybridity. Saunders addressed a great paradox of contemporary British theatre in "'The Great Chinese

Takeaway': The Strange Case of Absent Orientalism in Contemporary British Playwriting." His point was that, in contrast to Caribbean or South Asian playwrights, BBC (= British-Born Chinese) authors are almost non-existent on the British stage. The scarce instances of British-Chinese playwriting, e.g. Yellow Earth's *Running the Silk Road* (2008) and Ben Yeoh's *Yellow Gentlemen* (2006), only highlight this relative absence, which Saunders took as significant for the special intercultural relationship of Britain and China. In "'[There is nothing] Outside of Text?' – Towards a Psychoanalytic Model of the Transcultural Spectator", Smith investigated the relationship created between theatrical texts and transcultural audiences. Her examples were Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001) and productions by the theatre groups Kneehigh and Graeae. By introducing the aspects of audience involvement, queerness and disability to the debate about interculturality in drama, she suitably widened the focus of the conference in the final paper.

The conference location in Vienna also offered a whole range of possibilities to test the theoretical debates against practical theatre work and consequently visits to current theatre productions were an integral part of the conference programme. CDE is especially grateful for the very fruitful cooperation with Volkstheater Wien, which culminated in a discussion with members of the cast and the production team of the Vienna production of Lee Hall's *The Pitman Painters*.

This conference will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the H. G. Wells Society in 1960 together with the centenary of Wells's comic masterpiece *The History of Mr Polly*. We invite proposals for papers on all aspects of Wells's life and writings: his science fiction, his novels and short stories, his political, sociological and autobiographical works, and his contributions to education, journalism and the cinema. In keeping with the conference title, we hope to attract contributions which relate the local to the universal in his writings and/or look at Wells's achievements in relation to wider cultural, historical, temporal and spatial perspectives. 250 word abstracts for 20-minute papers should be sent by **1 March 2010** to Andrew M. Butler and Patrick Parrinder at <2010wellsconference@gmail.com>. Priority booking for the conference at bargain rates is available up to **30 June 2009**. Contact the Hon. Treasurer, Paul Allen, at <PaulMalcolmAllen@aol.com>

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