

Introduction: Reading to Know, Learning to Hear, and Engaging in Respect

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This “Introduction” is divided into three Sections: 1) “Opening Theoretical Remarks” i.e., a conceptual Preamble; 2) “A ‘Narrative’ of the Call for Papers” mapping the thematic ground and scope of an invitation to respond, and 3) “The ‘Happy Ending’ of the CFP: Respondents Write Back.” Indeed, the plurality of their contributions and points of view recognizes and answers the dialogical intent of our call.

1. “Opening Theoretical Remarks”

“Accommodating alterity” is the opposite of “othering.” How are these two alternatives perceived and regarded? Perceiving “alterity” is simply an awareness of the unfamiliar, of the unknown, of the foreign that frequently crosses our path. Othering, on the contrary, is not a simple perception but a devaluing attitude or practice that inscribes value in the opposition of “us and them.” Being open to difference or resisting it is the result of an attitude or a choice. When values (good/bad, better/worse) are inscribed in either opening or in isolating perceptions, the inevitable cultural pre-judice that constructs cultural knowledge can become nuanced, transformed, enriched or remain crystallized, conceptually simplistic, and even aggressive. Acknowledging difference, and welcoming or resisting it are not a definite given, but the result of many factors and of several processes, involving preliminary knowledge, choice and decision. Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued that prejudice is just an inevitable constituent of culture, not to be demonized, but to be recognized. He also showed that the elaboration of pre-judice is an enriching possibility.

Making room for alterity is the result of an affective choice motivated by constructive curiosity and leading to scientific documentation and to a critical evaluation of information. Ultimately, accommodating alterity is a search for reciprocal respect. Othering, on the contrary, does not necessarily require the pursuit of information: uncritical cultural prejudice suffices. Once difference(s) are perceived, the response can be indifference, refusal, or dialogical listening and critical acceptance; in short, accommodating alterity requires an ethics of reading, a resilience of listening and an engagement in reciprocal respect.

In gathering information from descriptive texts the myth of objectivity should be questioned;

caution in the interpretation of “exotic” information should be practiced, and honesty in the transmission of information should follow. Considerate attention demands elasticity in listening and resilience in the pursuit of knowledge of cultural differences.

Culture, whose traditional definition includes beliefs, law, morality, customs, art, literature, language, etc. is fluid, and its definition is slippery. At any rate, it is legitimate to ask: is the definition of culture fashioned from an external point of view or from within? In his *The New Science* (1725, 1774), Giambattista Vico saw culture as evolving in three stages: from “barbaric” beliefs in idols, oracles and auspices, to the establishment of “hero” rule (i.e., of aristocratic superiority), to the final acknowledgment of the equality of all men. Such an evolution, culminating in the universal equality of men indicated to him a clear cultural progress. The certainty of historical progress has been challenged since, and has become more and more problematic in time. Nowadays cultural critics could ask: What does “progress” mean in the light of “globalization,” when equality is not universal? Is the ideal of equality still a measure of progress?

Cultural hegemony establishes cultural value as an absolute normative parameter even when the notion of progress does not include the global meaning of equality. Theodor Adorno highlighted the limit of the term “culture” as determined from a point of view external to it, and by a need to classify for administrative and governing purposes. By now, many fields of knowledge have re-worked the global concept of “culture” to the point of suggesting that it makes sense only as an adjective qualifying a noun. Disciplines such as cultural anthropology, cultural semiotics, cultural psychology, cultural studies, cultural jurisprudence, cultural ethics etc., manifest such a conceptual shift. Basically, each discipline still points to a way of interpreting the world, and/or a way of living in it, and/or of desiring it; a discipline defines and is defined by a particular gaze; it still sets boundaries and has its rules (that is why it is called a “discipline”), but it also questions the limits of the parameters of its closed definition. Self-reflective questioning wonders what the constituting rules of a discipline leave out of its sight. Specifically, Tony Bennett has highlighted the erosion of closed definitions of culture, not only by referring to the multiplication of terms such as cultural hybridity, transculturation, cultural in-betweenness, etc., but also by emphasizing the cultural collapse of the dichotomy nature/culture. Ultimately, the paradox of humanistic globalization is its intrinsic pursuit of global evidence together with the call for the recognition of cultural plurality.

2. A Narrative of the Call for Papers (CFP)

The present issue of *Humanities Bulletin* 8.2 focuses on international Literary Culture in the broad sense of the term, considering several elements, that include: material aspects of texts (verbal and iconic), reading as material activity and as interpretation, translations and editorial disseminations.

Reception and interpretation of works of literature, including theory, is an unstoppable process; it has changed geographically and historically and is still constantly changing, highlighting varying social, economic and cultural appreciation. The intention of developing an international dialogue as inclusive as possible on a variety of topics, including Literary studies, is clearly stated by Victor Pricopi

as the reason for the very existence of *Humanities Bulletin*: “Our aim is to bring together different international scholars, in order to promote the dialogue between cultures, ideas and new academic researches.” As for the specific CFP for this issue, my basic underlying question can be summarized as follows: Can evidence of multiple productions and receptions demonstrate the limits of cultural pre-judice on which cultures are built, and can it possibly enrich different cultural horizons through literary and hermeneutic dialogue? There is no final answer to this multiple question, but each essay included here confirms its relevance.

Invited contributions were addressed to scholars working on the transmission of transnational literary knowledge, and promoting cultural dialogue by focusing on social, critical, cognitive and philosophical readings of literary texts, and on the cultural protocols of such readings. The task of advancing a sincere dialogue among scholars coming from different cultures and identity positioning and willing to engage in the exchange of different points of view was at the core of my explicit invitation. Inclusiveness was on my agenda as an ethical imperative and I know it is a risk, but one I was willing to take because knowledge grows as an evolving experiment, and true dialogue is always experimental and exploratory.

The list of suggested topics was formulated as a set of straight questions, linear but not simple, because reaching the greatest variety of international scholarly communities was an important goal to better understand different cultural textualizations and their reception.

Why do we read international works? Why and how do we choose what we read in the vast plethora of international texts? What desire (pleasure, fear, curiosity, etc.) drives our reading of international works? Also: what international texts are available, and where? Obviously, a variety of factors, including marketing rules, determines publications, media transmissions, translations and circulation.

Furthermore, if literature *per se* can resist the homogeneity determined by the dominance of global media, globalization still determines hierarchies of values in the production of information. So: how informed are readers and critics of different protocols of textual formation developed in subaltern and marginal cultures? How can the visibility of hegemonic and biased readings reduce cultural blindness?

A double challenge beckons the reader and the critic in the reception and interpretation of an ample variety of literary textual formations produced in the world. On one side, the need of information is evermore imperative in a global world; on another the processing of such information needs contextualization, in order to resist the stereotyped abstractions that are often used to access and describe different cultures. For example, the ideal of informative objectivity needs to be explored in its intrinsic ambivalence: what is a “realistic portraiture?” Who defines it as realistic? Can/does global technological control accommodate dissonant guidelines of taste? Attention to aesthetic imperatives, which are usually taken as an essential component of literary works are not culturally the same, nor explicit, in sharing Literary productions seen by a dominant *doxa* as marginal works. This consideration can go as far as questioning the literary ideal of aesthetic value.

Globalization does not challenge hegemonic normativity, but Literature can do it, because it fosters cognitive and critical interrogations on homogeneity and on cultural control. Furthermore, valorization of the role of the individual or local reader can shed light on the unseen areas of marginal works. Reading establishes a unique relation between the text and the reader who can approach it with different methodologies and values. Should the search for authorial intention be totally abandoned? Should it be kept as a form of testimony? It is sometimes very important to know biographical information to contextualize texts, but biographical interpretive projections should not become the one and only key of reading. So, the polyphonic structure of works of literature should also be heard because it always speaks to the reader. Increased perception of literary polyphony is a distinctive mark of the good reader. Starting from there, a dialogic hermeneutical practice can develop. Moreover, can multiple transnational interpretations open and enrich “the pleasure of the text”? They certainly confirm that there is no possibility of enriched understanding within closed or crystallized cultures.

As I pointed out, some of my questions were unswervingly formulated in accessible terms to avoid a geographically restricted use of technical jargon. The knowledge of non-Eurocentric traditions in Europe and North-America shows how the rest of the world knows much more about the “The West” and “The North” than Eurocentric and North-American scholars do about “The South” and “The East.” A hegemonic lexicon often infiltrates non-Eurocentric texts, because it is taken as a sign of scholarly excellence, at the expense of dialogical accessibility and transparency. The issue of terminology and technical jargon can turn into an issue of intellectual capacity, especially when there is no scientific curiosity about the outside world and languages.

The standardization of global hermeneutics is obviously rooted in the contemporary use of English as a “lingua franca.” Its use has been open to theoretical debate, one that on one side denounces linguistic colonization, and on the other valorizes the creative possibilities of trans-cultural exchanges. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, for example, represent these two discordant positions; the former resists the use of English in the production of African Literature; the latter sees the use of English as both an affirmative possibility and an inevitability. Gémino Abad, a Filipino poet and critic has stated that contemporary Filipino writers write from English but not in English, an interesting way of calling attention to the complexity of linguistic use and the many nuances of cultural dynamics. In this context we cannot fail to mention the alarm of indigenous linguists about the disappearance of local languages which is progressively evident in many countries because of the predominant use of English among young people.

We are obviously using English for our present exchange, but notwithstanding the ambivalence of this practice, I believe that it can be an important starting point of cultural dialogues, especially if it can convey conditions of affect which are inscribed within any text and in its reading. Volatile as they are, these conditions nurture transnational dialogue in ways that are not hegemonically decisive. How can affects be presented and highlighted in transcultural dialogues? From my inevitably European (but not Eurocentric) point of view I listed in the CFP some critics that were in fact used by the respondents

in their essays. I see this as a form of dialogue for which I thank them. For the record: among the many that I could have mentioned, I chose: Georges Poulet, Roland Barthes, Bell Hooks, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Pierre Bourdieu, Gloria Anzaldúa. They address both critical and affective ways of thinking and come from methodologically different traditions. Affective readings focus on the subject matter of a literary work; they are very important as an informational base for interpretation and a perceptive response to it. Critical readings evaluate the narrative structure of a literary work as a “making sense mechanism” and contextualize the information a text conveys. Hans Robert Jauss has argued that affective readings particularly important because they are often a pre-condition for the development of comparable “horizons of expectation”. In the CFP I asked then: how do affective readings orient, enrich or simplify hermeneutical performances?

Any reading establishes a relation between the text and the reader, but how can this relation be inflected to expand the horizon of reciprocal international exchange? Should the search for authorial intention be the dominant rule of affective reading? Or, on the contrary, should the polyphonic structure of work of literature speak directly to their reader with no reference to the author?

Furthermore, how can a dialogical hermeneutics really develop? Most probably not. Such readings and the ideal of a dialogical hermeneutics confirm that there is no possibility of reciprocal understanding among closed or crystallized cultures.

Comparison among literary productions has been a discipline in itself for a very long time, but recently it has become a theory challenging its own critical tenets. Comparative Literature as criticism juxtaposes both national and international works, often challenging the notion of canon or producing counter canonical readings of classical works. Comparative Literature as theory addresses the blind spots of criticism, the silences of literary works, and the critic’s own cultural amnesia, tilling the space of an encounter with otherness. A lot has been done in critical and theoretical works to implement cultural dialogues, but still more needs to be done in academic curricula, in publishing, in the media.

Financial and technological globalization promote a homogeneous way of life and of thinking; in this context, what does “cultural pluralism” mean today? As a matter of fact, cultural hegemony has been exposed within a “Western” critical tradition, and some theorists have gone as far as to express concern about the development of a technological determinism in public culture.

However, Literature resists the normalization of hegemonic imperatives by exposing systemic social contradictions, and by suggesting possible alternatives of identity, of taste, of thought, of institutional organizations. The role of the reader is assumed as particularly important not only for the acquisition of knowledge (“Reading to Know”), but also for the development of non-hegemonic skills of reception (“Learning to Hear”), and for developing dialogical hermeneutics. The stimuli of the Globalized world demand to respond quickly; to respond primarily to global expectations, not to local or marginalized ones. responding immediately means to respond to the pre-defined global feelings made understandable on the world stage. The result is the creation of a world without lasting sensations, with minds colonized by media through abstract human-machine stimuli that keep confirming pre-acknowledged feelings.

3. The “Happy-Ending” of the CFP: Respondents Write Back

After my elucidation of the conceptual presuppositions of this Issue of HB, and after the narration of how the CFP came about, some concluding remarks will focus on the “happy ending” of this story: the one brought about by the scholars who answered our call. In different ways and degrees they responded to the cognitive demands and ethical concerns set out in the CFP.

Grouping the received contributions previously selected for publication by the reviewers and by the General Editor has been both challenging and inevitable. Predictably, some themes overlap and stretch beyond the clusters I listed below, and different modes of writing may not have received adequate valorization. Therefore, this taxonomy is not meant to be interpreted rigidly but rather as an invitation to read each contribution attentively.

That said, I have formulated four basic conceptual themes: a) Ethics of Reading and Interpretation (Gerz, Li Haotian, Aronis, Jensen); b) Formal Traits of transcultural Textualities (Lau, Romano, Vasilescu); c) Protocols of “Nomadic” Identities (Allahyari and Farahbakhsh, Namgladze, Kao, Brown); d) The Body and Body Politics (Dwyer III, Vance, Krifa, Bunker).

a) Ethics of Reading and Interpretation

– Gerz valorizes attention as a basis for ethical responsiveness and, perfectly attuned with the CFP, reflects on definitions of ethics. She sees its root not on the basis of abstract concepts, but as “an art of seeing”.

– Li Haotian originally defines “an ethics of agonistic care” where conflict is not avoided but a practice of repair is not abandoned. A “reparative dialogue” is seen as a positive method in addressing cultural controversies.

– Aronis explores the literal meaning of reading and hearing transcripts of texts in non-standard English, and convincingly relates their understanding to processes of discrimination and racialization.

– Jensen’s interesting focus on the ethical and political dimension of story-telling allows her to discuss the blurring of trans-cultural German-Asian links, and human-animal boundaries.

b) Formal Traits of Intercultural Textualities

– Lau ingeniously highlights the fact that forms of intersemiotic translations are visible in publication of stories, not only because new readings of the same texts can change their overall meaning, but also because cover designs tell interesting stories of book reception.

– Romano resourcefully focuses on the reception of Hegel in Russia and relates the Hegelian “*absolutes Wissen*” to Dostoevsky’s “*sobornost*.” Her comparative approach underscores the dynamics of transcultural literary reception as creative conceptual transformation.

– Vasilescu conducts an ambitious comparative reading of French and English Emblem books from the 16th and 17th century, suggesting that the iconographic representation of animals can blur the boundary that traditionally opposed them to humans. He refers to Derrida’s zoocriticism and to zoopoetics to highlight the intersemiotic relation of written text and image and the social symbolic appeal of animal personification.

c) Protocols of “Nomadic” Identities

– Allahyari and Farahbakhsh’s original comparative practice works on both a textual level and a theoretical one. Allahyari’s *Qorab Jendun* and Churchill’s *Top Girls* are discussed through a Lacanian lens to compare their attitude towards patriarchy. Accepting, resisting, or rejecting it, in the light of women oppression, are approaches that underscore concrete or idealistic ideals of societal organization.

– Namgladze significantly highlights the political agenda behind the production of children’s literature in the context of identity politics of any society, and, specifically, in the Soviet Union from 1938 to 1964. Interestingly, she mentions the fact that there are “different types of identity,” and “cultural identity” is susceptible to political manipulation. Ideological drives permeate pedagogical agendas in the formation of children’s literature; this fact is confirmed by the production of different editions of “the same” work, as educational purposes change.

– In Kao’s perceptive and well-documented article the theme of exile works as a connecting device to illustrate how experiences of time and space inform the literary production of three Russian writers, Bunin, Nabokov and Gazdanov. Spatial dislocation to a foreign country and the irreversibility of re-location are shared themes of their works where nostalgia is paired with the persistent effort to close with the past. Progressively the authors’ writing changes, signaling the incorporation of literary techniques borrowed from foreign literatures.

– Brown performs a very creative analysis of a single work, Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, by relating it to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. An interesting net of details linking the characters of the two narratives (film and philosophical essay) develops the theme of how fractured identities are formed, and how they remain suspended but resilient. In this case emigration is the context in which the possibility of moving beyond inherited cultural norms to achieve a self-defined way of being implies both a critique of assimilation and of inherited burdens of duty.

d) The Body and Body Politics

– Dwyer III suggests that fiction and media reporting are connected insofar as they produce different versions of corporeal subjectivity. The bio-politics of Deleuze and reference to Anderson’s “imagined communities” are the references through which definitions of bodies are seen and related to their hegemonic interpretation.

– Vance’s starting point is the indication of the recurrence of the same tropes in Medieval romances. Many of them focus on the female body and condition and relate to the loss and reclamation of kingship and power. The strength of this well documented essay lies in the contextualization of *The Lay of Havelok the Dane* maintaining that French Arthurian sources are altered inasmuch as more space is given to the theme of violence against women, excluded from the line of kingship succession and forced into marriage.

– Krifa’s reading of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* addresses the issue of violence against women in the light of their reproductive rights; specifically, forced marriage and ritualized sex dehumanizes women. Many theoretical works from a French feminist tradition are aptly mentioned

to denounce patriarchal authority. Particularly interesting is the repeated reference to “Mayday,” a simple British code signal in 1923 meaning “distress,” translated into a nearly perfect homophonic French “m’aidez,” (“help me”) and eventually became “The mayday movement” i.e., the name of an international feminist movement.

– Bunker’s discussion of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* hinges on the definition of femininity as absence of masculinity and on the notion that femininity can be a masquerade, i.e., a learned and cultural gender role. Reference to Freud and Kline, as well as to a well-documented mention of many feminist critics confirm the elusive, if not deceptive, nature of “authentic womanliness.” The fact that Mrs. Ramsey is “a product of external desire” paradoxically perpetuates her absence from herself right when she is the perfect image of the archetypal woman-mother.

To conclude: this brief and necessarily not exhaustive description of the authors’ contributions is meant to fuel the readers’ curiosity and respond to it with the pleasure of reading, of learning, and loving it!

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