PROVOCATION AND NEGOTIATION: ESSAYS IN COMPARATIVE CRITICISM EDITED BY GESCHE IPSE, ET AL.

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In her volume of essays *In Other Worlds* (1987), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, giant in the spheres of comparative literature, postcolonial theory and critical theory, relates a question she was asked by a student following a lecture: 'It's all very well to try to live like a book' she is asked, 'but what if no one else is prepared to read?'. She replies that 'Everyone reads life and the world like a book. Even the so-called "illiterate"' (95). For the authors contributing to Provocation and Negotiation one senses that this response, insightful as it is, is but a start, but no satisfactory answer. Read as a whole, this volume suggests that in our encounters with the uncanny, with alienation, with society, with 'translational' culture (33), we are all not simply living as reading a book, but rather multiple books. We exist, in fact, in the comparative or indeed the intertextual, as a state of flux, which is expressed best in our relationships as academics, readers and authors, with the 'patrimony' of literature (9), and the comparative perspective above all. This overall conclusion, and the different methodological perspectives that drive it, help to provide an insistent answer to the question that the editors of the volume set out in the first place: 'Why compare?'.

With contributions from established academics and graduate students drawn from a range of North American and European institutions, this volume of essays comprises a concerted project with the explicit aim of representing the 'cutting edge' of comparative criticism (271), primarily grounded in an understanding of weltlitteratur. And in the breadth of its content, from Ksenia Robbe's interrogation into the comparative possibilities of South African literatures in multiple languages (21) to Denis Simon's investigation of the various representations of the historical event of the obscenity trials of Oscar Wilde, and the questions that can be read from it, it certainly displays moments of brilliance. We can see plainly an emphasis on the importance of adaptation, biography, memoir, travel writing and by extension, subjectivity as a mode of translation and comparison. The volume goes a long way in trying to make evident the immediacy of literature, and the value of the *comparative* mode as a larger theoretical tool operating intertextually and in the 'transmedia' sphere.

The perennial question with such projects however, remains: where exactly is the cutting edge? Moreover, what is the cutting edge cutting into in the first place, which is to say, what are the sites for confrontation where it shears the status quo? This is, at first, somewhat unclear. Certainly, Helena Carvalhão Buescu suggests comparativism itself as a type of 'cutting edge' cleaving both intertextually, and across our experience, and giving rise to what she calls 'the wounds of possibility' (5). She draws on Seamus Heaney, and Portuguese poet Cesario Verde to illustrate this comparison-as-site-of-provocation thesis, one of the two primary impulses, described by the title of this collection, to be found in the aporias that are exposed in the comparative process. These two approaches, 'provocation' and 'negotiation', represent two different ways of viewing the gap between comparative terms, in this case, gathered under the 'big tent' of literature, taken to include Brockmeier's five paths of cultural inseparability, 'considered characteristic of the current conception of cultural memory' (9) These we can take as symptoms of an intersubjective world, whether these are biography and literature, self and doppleganger, or translations of a given text. One

approach takes this gap to be, as Buescu makes explicit, a wound, or trauma, productive by its insistence, and unresolvable, unhealable nature. The other, described by Gesche Ipsen in the introduction to the second half of this collection, is to take comparative criticism precisely as 'a possible therapy, understood in its original etymological sense […] attending, ministering to the writings it examines' (121). The attempt to divide the book between these two approaches, while rather a blunt method, nevertheless draws our attention to the reciprocal mirroring of the need to balance between provocation and negotiation in comparative work in order to achieve the most productive results, with the place of comparative research as a discipline, and its aims within epistemological history. Within reflection on these two matters, which is to say: methodology and epistemology, lies the key to the second question that this volume seeks to resolve, 'where do we go from here?'.

With regard to the place of comparative study in the academy, this volume offers many examples that explicitly tackle this problem. In an environment of austerity, the shadow of Lydgate's 'odious comparative' still looms large, even if it is not recognised as such. There are two sources to this 'odious' reputation: one is effectively in line with Lydgate, that comparison always leads to hierarchy, whether as in Lydgate's parable this is among farm animals, or among works of literature. The privileging of one over another, the production of 'bests', and 'worsts', as highlighted in Valerie Macken's essay on Mathew Arnold, a figure whose oeuvre is often dismissed on account of such value judgement and the teleologies that underpin them (253–270). Nevertheless, the other – and no less odious – side to this coin is a relativism that gives rise to anaemic debate. As Macken goes on to highlight in her analysis of Matthew Arnold's early comparativism, what is often ignored in such teleological exercises is the comparative-as-process. This process, she suggests, is one which can be considered as a series of constant and unsettled attempts to balance methodologies that, if each methodology were followed exclusively, would yield less than effective results. Here, balance, just as a balance between an understanding of the comparative as provocation and negotiation, as process and juxtaposition, is desirable.

Furthermore, remembering the inquiry of Spivak's questioner, it arose in the specific context of her life in the Saudi Arabia, where Spivak herself admits, a theoretical answer not taking into account the lived limitations and experiences of the environment, would inevitably ring hollow. Such is the challenge of those engaging in criticism in the academic environment that has emerged since the 1990s: to bring to bear a balance of theory and practise in such a manner as to remain alive to both hegemonic impulses from without academia and the excesses of academic verbiage that can cloud inquiry within, especially in cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary pursuits. Two essays in this volume stand out as exemplary routes out of this problem. Firstly, Angela Becera Vidergar's poignant analysis of encounters with 'failed assimilation' as the uncanny in Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la Soledad* (1950) and the travel writings of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Vidergar sensitively draws out the patterns of similarity between the two men's experience but also reflects on the comparative process that they undergo themselves in the production of the uncanny they see as they run into those that should be their 'compatriots' abroad, only to find them alien. Secondly, the above-mentioned essay by Ksenia Robbe, which explores ways in which comparison of literary products from the same country, but in different languages can prove useful in elucidating cultural understandings and gaps in experience, as well as artistic goals. Robbe's reflexive approach, and clever rethinking of nation-based comparative paradigms is instructive. By contrast, it is at the times when the style of this volume becomes bogged down in theoretical approaches without context that the reader, and the discipline, feels most lost. So, even in Patrick French's expert hands, a purely theoretical handling of literature as a potential 'model for interdiciplinarity' based on the writings of Blanchot, is difficult to grasp, or at least, to enjoy.

The basic problem of creating new comparative paradigms that stimulate debate has only become more urgent during these times of economic uncertainty as they affect the role of the humanities in the academy. But, as this volume shows with at least partial success, the comparative is not empty or hierarchical, nor is it odious. It is productive in the fluid yet true manner in which our relationships produce ourselves. It is life.