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Heretical Deliberations on Poets’ Corner, the Great Tradition and New Literatures in English

The phenomenal growth of post-colonial literatures in volume and strength has triggered off a debate within the academic discipline of English studies about the scope of the discipline. Looking back on the historical development of the discipline of English studies, Hans Galinski and Heinz Kosok argue that a widening of the concept of English studies, perhaps even an expansion of the canon, that could cover the new regions of English language literature was inevitable:

The academic disciplines of English Studies take cognizance of the fact that new stars – new literatures in English – have appeared in the sky besides the sun, which of course still shines brightest.

Jürgen Schäfer commented critically on the concept of a “comparative study of English literatures,” since he saw in that concept only a continuation of the categories of national literatures. Horst Prießnitz coined the term “Terranglia” and demanded “a generative analysis of literature which can take into account the productive influences of the great works of English and American literary history on the new literatures in English.” Prießnitz elaborates the concept of “Terranglia” in his article “Koloniale Literatur?” and pleads for an intertextual approach to new literatures. Gerhard Stilz bases his argument on the existence of large English-speaking populations in the world outside Great Britain and the USA when he argues for a re structuring of English studies:

[we need] new organizational structures [...] that allow for an independent study of the international and multi-cultural dimensions of the new English literatures under the auspices of international English studies, but in close cooperation with English and American studies.\textsuperscript{8}

Obviously, scholars appear to agree that the face and the self-definition of English studies has changed and certainly has to change further. It is, however, a fact that the structure of English departments as expressed in the descriptions of new job openings has changed much less than the awareness of individual researchers. Another fact is that changes in departmental structure can be effected by “incentives” from outside. The establishment of American studies in Germany after World War II, for instance, was greatly enhanced by book donations, grants and fellowships and exchange programs sponsored by the American government. The Canadian government has implemented a similarly supportive cultural foreign policy that has led to the establishment of various centres for Canadian studies in German universities. Australia offers research grants and exchange programs. But countries like Nigeria, India or Jamaica cannot possibly afford to sponsor research activities outside their own universities. Thus, whoever wants to engage in research on regions that are not part of the industrial nations has to find his own financial resources or beg for money from the Federal Research Council. This lack of “incentives” is not really supportive of a readjustment of departmental structures and job descriptions.

\textit{Legitimation by international literary awards}

During the last fifteen years, about half a dozen authors writing in English have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, among them Patrick White from Australia (1973), Wole Soyinka from Nigeria (1986), Nadine Gordimer from South Africa (1991) and Derek Walcott from St Lucia (1992). Only William Golding (1983) represents British English literature proper; even Joseph Brodsky (1987), of whom Derek Walcott said that he had taught him English as a Russian emigrant, does not represent traditional American English literature. In 1992, when the decision of the Nobel Committee was broadcast over the news wires, a German commentator wrote “Once more a largely unknown author has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.” The way in which this critic confuses his own lack of knowledge with what he thinks is an objective absence of literary reputation appears symptomatic of the persistent eurocentrism in the perception of world literature, a eurocentrism that does not correspond at all to the internationalization of the literary scene on the threshold of the twenty-first century. That Derek Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992 might have been a surprise to many, but he was certainly not a newcomer to the arena of world literature. Since the production of \textit{Henri}

\textsuperscript{8} Stilz, “International English Studies,” 31–32.
Christophe as a BBC radio play in 1951, Derek Walcott has been continuously present on the international literary scene.

The de-nationalization of English literature becomes even more obvious if one looks at the practice of awarding the national British literature award, the Booker Prize, that was inaugurated in 1968 as the British counterpart to the French national literary award, the Prix Goncourt. In the cover-story of Time magazine on February 8, 1993 Pico Iyer comments:

In 1981 the Booker went to Salman Rushdie's tumultuous, many headed myth of modern India, Midnight's Children. In the 11 years since, it has been given to two Australians, a part Maori, a South African, a woman of Polish descent, a Nigerian and an exile from Japan. Runners-up have featured such redoubtably English names as Mo and Mistry and or Achebe; when a traditional English name takes the place – A. S. Byatt, say, or Kingsley Amis – it seems almost anomalous.

Last year the $30,000 award was shared by Barry Unsworth, an Englishman married to a Finn and living in Italy, and Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan of Indian, Dutch and English ancestry, educated in Britain, long resident in Canada, with siblings on four continents.9

With V.S. Naipaul (1971), Nadine Gordimer, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Keneally, J.M. Coetzee, Keri Hulme, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Okri (1991) and Michael Ondaatje (1992), the prestigious national literary award of Great Britain went practically every second year to a representative of the “New English Literatures.” And if one looks at the list of shortlisted authors – Chinua Achebe, Anita Desai, Mordecai Richler, Margaret Atwood, and the Afrikaans-writing André Brink – it becomes obvious, that since 1971, when V.S. Naipaul was first awarded the Booker Prize, there has not been a single year without one or more writers from outside British national culture being among the coveted candidates for the Booker.

The policies involved in awarding the Nobel Prize and the Booker, and the award of the Tucholsky Prize of the Swedish PEN to the South African author Don Mattera or the Premio Letterario Internazionale Chianti Ruffino Fattoria to the Nigerian Ben Okri in 1993, demonstrate that the juries of the international literary awards are fully aware of the fact that English has become an international language not only in the fields of economics, technology and science, but also in literature. With the literary awards, which very strongly influence renown and recognition on the scene of world literature, the internationality and multiculturality of English has obviously become a decisive factor in the selection of the laureates. The academic disciplines of English studies, on the other hand, appear to continue to adhere to a concept of national literatures and national languages. If this is really the case, academia is either lagging behind developments in contemporary literature in English or is deliberately ignoring

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contemporary literature as a central issue of the discipline – and is, instead, focusing its attention on the historical literary development of the past.

**National cultures as ideological constructs**

Historians, over the last few years, have started to question the validity of the “national history” approach and have cast doubt on the concept of the nation-state as the dominant category giving structure and meaning to historiography. In his essay “The Invention of the Past through the Present,” Rudolf Walther has convincingly put forward the view that ethnically, linguistically, and culturally homogeneous nation-states never existed except in the minds and political fantasies of nationalistic ideologues:

> Due to the lack of sufficient and convincing evidence, the ideologues of the so-called nation-state have always taken recourse to history. The absence of a coherent idea of the nation-state as manifested in the present time is supposed to be explained away by referring back to a common human destiny, a common genetic and cultural heritage, a common history, language, and literature. Even a casual look at these arguments reveals that the cherished concept of the nation is merely a historico-political construction based on deliberate, complex and longtime (*longue durée*) ideological planning.¹⁰

Literary study, with its primary category of language, obviously finds it more difficult to reconsider or reassess the concept of national culture and national literatures, although in the final decade of the twentieth century the ever-present multiculturalism of our global village belies these concepts. British literary and linguistic history testifies to polyphony, even inside England.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – still one of the centre-pieces of English literary studies – saw the establishment of southern English mores and dialects as the national matrix. Simultaneously and in a historico-causal connection with national consolidation under southern English domination, varieties of western and northern English reached out to foreign climes – to the Americas and later to Asia, Australia and Africa. Centripetal and centrifugal forces can be discerned as both antagonistic and complementary forces in cultural development.

The polyphony of varieties of English that seemed to have vanished under southern English centralization had in reality expanded into different cultural spaces. This polyphony is today pressing back into the “centre” from the various “peripheries” in another historically logical inversion of movement.

But even the nationally consolidated period of the eighteenth century shows that English literature was never as culturally homogeneous as it pretended to be. A case in point is Olauda Equiano’s autobiography, which appeared in 1789. Equiano was born in Igbo-land in what is today Nigeria, crossed the Atlantic on the much-dreaded Middle Passage, was sold into slavery in the Caribbean and the...

North American mainland, and finally reached England where, after several years of service in the Navy, he managed to buy his freedom. If it were not for the dark face on the frontispiece and the foreign name Olauda, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olauda Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself could well pass as one of the many autobiographical travelogues of sailors, merchants, and explorers that were so popular in eighteenth-century Britain. In modern criticism, Equiano has been variously claimed as the founding father of Nigerian literature, of Caribbean literature, of the slave narratives (i.e., the founding father of African–American literature), and of Black British literature. This apparently random classification under different national literatures, or, as in the case of African–Americans, with minority literatures (in opposition to mainstream literatures), reveals that the strictly national conception of literature cannot even be applied to the period of the late eighteenth century, when this concept first gained ground and was propagated for political ideological reasons. The example of Olauda Equiano shows, above all, that the English language had already developed into an international literary medium at a time before the ideologues of the Romantic period defined the alleged unity of the trinity of nation-state, national language and national literature as the essential constituents of a national cultural identity.

The internationalization of the English language has grown rapidly since the days of Equiano. Today about a billion people use English as their first, second or third language. More than a billion people use English as the language of commerce, science, transport and communication, but also as a language of literary expression. It is understood that only a small portion of the worldwide users of English also read or write literature in English; nevertheless, the question arises whether, with a given population of about 60 million people in the British Isles, 250 million in the United States, and more than 750 million other anglophones, the geopolitical situation is adequately reflected in the general practice of teaching English literatures in the universities with proportions of sixty percent British literature, thirty-five percent American literature and only five percent of other English language literatures. In purely statistical terms of population figures, British literature is definitely a minority literature, while the new or other English-language literatures represent the majority. English literature can of course look back onto more than a thousand years of literary tradition and can therefore, from the perspective of literary history, boast an immense corpus of literary texts. With all due respect for historical tradition, once more the question arises of whether an academic discipline in the humanities can today still afford to define its subject matter almost exclusively in terms of history and literary history and, by thus looking back into the historical past, lose contact with contemporary social reality. From the early days of Christoph Martin Wieland’s and the Schlegel brothers’ translations of Shakespeare, from the beginnings of English literary
studies as an academic discipline in Germany in the nineteenth century to the present day, the Elizabethan period has remained the uncontested heartland of the academy. Looking back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century does not necessarily help in sharpening one’s focus on the vision of the world in the last decade of the twentieth century.

National traditions: international reinterpretations

It was Terry Eagleton who pointed out, in his *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), the imperial importance of the adoption of English literature into the entry examination of the British Civil Service. With the assurance of the Great Tradition as the incarnation of national British culture in their hearts, with their English language, the legal and administrative tradition in their minds, British colonial officers went to the farthest corners of the world and established a metropolitan-oriented hierarchy of values that has survived the decolonization of the Empire. One can hardly imagine any author writing in English who has never acted in a Shakespeare production on parents’ day, or in a pantomime, or in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Joseph Brodsky, himself an exile from the Russian cultural and ideological empire and, as such, a representative of the North, analyses in his introductory essay to Derek Walcott’s limited-edition collection *Poems of the Caribbean* (1983) the centripetal forces within the gradually dissolving post-colonial cultural empire:

Because civilizations are finite, in the life of each of them comes a moment when centers cease to hold. What keeps them at such times from disintegration is not legions but languages. Such was the case with Rome, and before that, with Hellenic Greece. The job of holding at such times is done by the men from the provinces, from the outskirts. Contrary to popular belief, the outskirts are not where the world ends – they are precisely where it unravels. That affects a language no less than an eye.¹¹

Brodsky puts his finger on one of the most sensitive sores of metropolitan societies: after the Empire has decayed politically, ex-colonials are not only coming as immigrants into the metropole and drastically changing the face of the mother country, but those new arrivals from the provinces have also begun to re-shape and re-model the cultural heritage. In his essay “On Derek Walcott” in the *New York Review of Books*¹² Brodsky reproached the guardians of the cultural heritage, the literary critic, for “the unwillingness of the critical profession to admit that the great poet of the English Language is a black man.” In so saying, Brodsky is not so much concerned about Walcott’s blackness, but rather that he, like Brodsky, does not originate from the heartland of English language and literature.

If one wants not only to dedicate critical attention to a writer like Walcott, but also to incorporate him into the teaching program, one suddenly finds oneself confronted with all kinds of resistance. The canon of great works on which all the literature programs of the various philologies are based, seems to leave little room for new authors and new works, except one would be prepared to discard essentials. Resistance to this is high, because the canon for English – ie, F.R. Leavis’s Great Tradition – is looked upon as gospel truth: unchangeable, uncontestable and eternal. None of the sociopolitical conditions of the Forties, when Leavis wrote The Great Tradition, is still in existence today at the threshold of the twenty-first century, but Leavis’ literary canon persists. So it is no wonder that writers and critics who originate from outside the original territory of that Great Tradition question the indispensability of the canonized works. Indispensable for whom, and why? If the Great Tradition is the historical and aesthetic codification of the national cultural identity of the British Isles, as Terry Eagleton points out, the former subjects of the British Empire cannot but ask themselves what constitutes the greatness and the indispensability of these traditions for them here and now, ie worldwide and post-colonial. They cannot but raise the question of whether a specifically national cultural tradition can be exported indiscriminately and whether they, as ex-colonials, can conceive of themselves as being part of that tradition and whether they can accept it as a living tradition of their own, or whether they would rather feel that the Great Tradition is an albatross hanging about their neck. If the worldwide presence and de-nationalization of English is accepted as a fact, then it is urgently necessary to clarify the meaning of the literary tradition in that language outside the national context, the national territory and the national history of the British Isles, and what meaning the Great Tradition could assume in an international and contemporary context. This is not simply an overthrowing of the old gods, but rather a close examination of whether, how and to what extent a cultural tradition and changed historical and ethnographic conditions can be of value and can persist inside and outside their original cultural territory.13

Cultural practice and literary studies

The re-interpretation of classics is the daily bread of cultural practitioners, of directors and stage designers in theatre, opera and film. With those in charge of the application of literature and the transformation of literature into cultural events, it is often the boldness of the re-interpretation, the novelty and actuality of the vision of an old piece that gains acclaim. Patrice Chéreau’s production of Wagner’s Ring in 1976 or Harry Kupfer’s interpretation of the Götterdämmerung as

13 Basil Davidson has demonstrated the failure of the nation-state concept in the political realities of the post-colonial arena and era in The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State (New York: Times Books, 1992).
an allegory of the Chernobyl disaster are examples of how a classic piece – created a hundred years ago about an old myth that was put into written form a thousand years ago and originated two thousand years ago – can be made meaningful for a contemporary audience by attempting a relevant and actualized re-interpretation which the spectator can follow. Literary studies, on the other hand, appear to see their major task as that of a conservator or, at most, a restorer. Primacy of value is given to historically precise positioning or reconstruction of texts; texts are, so to speak, analysed in situ, ie the focus of attention is put on either the relationship of the text to its own time of origin, or, as the still-persisting New Criticism has it, on the universal and eternal aesthetic qualities of a text. In an article about a symposium of Goethe specialists at the University of California in Santa Barbara on the topic of “Faust Today,” the German critic Bernd Sucher commented polemically:

With very few exceptions none of the professors of German studies really concerned himself with Faust Today [...]. Only very few attempted to answer the question of what the meaning of Goethe’s works could be for the present-day reader (German studies professors do not concern themselves on principle with spectators and audiences). What those few scholars in literary studies half-heartedly put forward for consideration – if they bothered to think seriously about the contemporaneity of classic texts at all – was discovered long ago by theatre practitioners and has become their daily practice.14

There seems to be a fundamental difference in the way scholars and cultural practitioners approach the Great Tradition: there are, on the one hand, the pathologists, holding their postmortems over the texts of Dead White Males, andr the embalmers, preserving their literary findings for posterity as expertly treated mummies; on the other, there are the Frankensteins, who experiment with ever-new reincarnations and reanimations of old materials. There is, on the one side, the gaze back into the past at the author and his text in their own time; on the other, the attempt to open the spectator’s eyes to his own present or even his own future. It was Shakespeare, the darling of historical literary scholasticism, who demonstrated precisely this type of modernizing and topicalizing view of the past. In his popular theatre he brought onto the stage the heroes and villains of the certified as well as the mythical and legendary English history, and infused his characters with meanings and interpretations that concern topical political and social issues of the time. He presents the Richards and the Henrys, the Johns and the Lears in the business-suits of his day, thus harnessing history and topicality together before the chariot of Thespis. Shakespeare obviously did not segregate the past from the present through historicizing costumes and stage design. If Michael Bogdanov in 1983 can produce John Ford’s ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore in Cologne as an action thriller, as an expression of the entertainment mania of our

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time, he is following more or less the same principles as the old master himself in the early seventeenth century.

Most experimental theatre-work today is not restricted to a purely temporal transposition of classic texts into modern times; in many cases a cultural translation and transposition is added. Ariane Mnouchkine and her Théâtre du Soleil re-created from the text of Æschylus and Euripides her trilogy *Les Atrides.* In her theatre in the Cartoucherie, a former ammunition factory, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes and Iphigenia perform in an acting area that is designed like a bull-fighting ring, thus emphasising the killing instinct that pervades family relations in Mykene. On the other hand, the chorus of the women of Chalkis is introduced as a Indian temple dancing group.

For his famous production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest,* Peter Brook used his two favourite actors, Mamadou Dioume from Senegal and Bakary Sangaré from Mali, and thus imposed an utterly new dimension upon one of the key motifs of the post-colonial debate, the Prospero–Caliban theme. In London, the Temba Theatre under the direction of Alby James, who was born in Jamaica, has for ten years now been experimenting with a strictly intercultural theatre-style. Derek Walcott founded his Trinidad Theatre Workshop with the declared intention that he wanted a venue where he could, with the same seriousness, stage a Shakespeare play or sing a calypso. And even the central texts of the Great Tradition have today become intercultural joint ventures. The films made of the E.M. Forster novels *A Room with a View,* *Maurice,* and *Howards End,* which look at first sight excessively British, are an exclusively non-British enterprise. The director, James Ivory, is American; the producer, Ismail Merchant, is Indian; and the script-writer is the Booker Prize winner of 1975, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, with a Polish-Jewish and Pakistani background. Together they transform Forster’s perceptions of the English self and others into an international media event. James Ivory’s latest film, *Remains of the Day,* also presents us with an immaculate tableau of English life-style and social values. This time, the literary model is Kazuo Ishiguro’s prize-winning novel. Japanese-born and British-reared, Ishiguro won the 1991 Booker Prize for his view of the English ideal of “service.” Knowing that what appears in *Remains of the Day,* as a piece of British self-revelation, is in reality a piece of outside ascription by a bunch of Black Brits casts a completely different light on the “Englishness” presented in that movie.\(^{15}\) It is thus obvious that the cultural practice of the Eighties has disengaged the classics of the Great Tradition historically, ie they have been topialized and modernized, but they have also been disengaged culturally, ethnically and geographically, ie internationalized. The internationalization of the English language as a medium and the

Internationalization of the Great Tradition in modern cultural practice seems to go hand in hand.

Cultural practice fuses the original hallowed classic text with the ingredients of reanimation, thus creating a new scenic or performance text. Intertextuality has become the accepted practice for writing in postmodern literature and it has also been accepted as a major approach in critical analysis. In the oldest recorded written text of world literature, the epic Gilgamesh of 2000 BC, the narrator complains that all the important themes have already been treated and that he could only re-tell old stories. Intertextuality is thus one of the key features of written literature right from its beginnings. Post-colonial literatures, because of their multiple cultural heritage, have produced more openly intertextual works than the old "national literatures." Intertextuality has therefore become one of the key concerns of post-colonial critical discourse. There are re-interpretations of Greek classical drama by the Nigerians Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi as well as by the South African Athol Fugard. Femi Osofisan from Nigeria and Derek Walcott from St Lucia have experimented with texts by Chekhov, Strindberg, Beckett and Brecht. Chinua Achebe wrote his earlier novels in reaction to Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary and Graham Greene. In 1992, David Dabydeen produced another variant of Heart of Darkness in the Black-British scenario of The Intended. Jean Rhys rewrote Jane Eyre, Walcott transmuted O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones. Shakespeare’s Tempest, with the power-play between Prospero and Caliban, has become a key theme not only in English literature: not only has George Lamming treated the theme but also Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant.

Walcott’s Robinson: the white cannibal

Daniel Defoe’s has novel served as the matrix for writers from Africa such as J.M. Coetzee (Foe) and for Derek Walcott from the Caribbean. It was not, however, the story of the ruthless colonial conqueror, Captain Singleton, but the more subtle story of the colonial relations between Robinson and Friday. Derek Walcott treats the Robinsonian experience of being shipwrecked as one of the fundamental human experiences in his collection of poems with the telling name The Castaway (1965). The list of rewritings of the texts of the Great Tradition could be continued indefinitely. As an illustration of the post-colonial revaluation and reassessment of the Great Tradition, Walcott’s play Pantomime (1980) can serve as an example: on Robinson’s island of Tobago, the English ex-actor Harry Trewe tries his luck at running a hotel. For the opening of the tourist season and the amusement of his guests he has planned to perform a Robinson-and-Friday pantomime together with his factotum Jackson Phillip, an ex-calypsonian. The

black man Jackson agrees to this only on condition that he play Robinson – and that he can play Robinson the way he sees him. First of all he insists that, as the colonizer and discoverer, it is his right to name things and persons. Thus he insists on calling the “white cannibal” Thursday and not Friday. Harry Trewe, a great lover of the Great Tradition and a steadfast liberal, suddenly realizes with horror how the little pantomime about idyllic life on the Caribbean islands is threatening to take a completely different direction:

**Harry** All right, so it’s Thursday. He comes across this naked white cannibal called Thursday, you know. And then look at what would happen. He would have to start to ... well, he’d have to, sorry ... This cannibal, who is a Christian, would have to start unlearning his Christianity. He would have to be taught ... I mean ... He would have to be taught by this – African... that everything was wrong, that what he was doing ... I mean, for nearly two thousand years ... was wrong. That his civilization, his culture, his whatever was ... horrible. Was all ... wrong. Barbarous, I mean, you know. And Crusoe would then have to teach him things like, you know, about ... Africa, his gods, patamba, and so on ... and it would get very, very complicated, and I suppose ultimately it would be very boring, and what we would have on our hands would be ... a play and not a little pantomime. 18

Walcott’s sly humour and sense for ambiguities and contradictions reveals how, with an apparently minor change in the casting, with an apparently insignificant shift in character constellation in one of the key texts of the Great Tradition, the entire structure of the value system is brought to the brink of collapse and long-cherished views of the civilizing forces of English history are demasked as ideological lies. But Walcott shows also that the conventional use of this key text of the Great Tradition has cheapened it into a specimen of overused literary folklore – a light pantomime, nothing more. It is only the post-colonial rewriting of the text that reconstructs its essence as serious drama.

The alternative dramatic perspective and the multiplicity of spaces and localities are deployed here as new and alternative means in the construction of meanings. In his earlier plays, Walcott had already designated the Greek archipelago as the classic space of Greek and Western Literature. Like its modern counterpart, Walcott’s own Caribbean archipelago, the world of the Aegean islands represents both human isolation and openness, insularity and universality. This is how Walcott viewed the Greek islands in *Omeros* and *The Odyssey* (1992): as the meeting point of Hellenic and Trojan culture, where the Orient and the Occident merge into each other. The Caribbean islands are the post-colonial region where the cultures of the modern world meet and merge. From the early play *Sea at Dauphin* to *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *The Odyssey*, Walcott has cast his concept of multiculturality into a bifocal dimension: the sea and the shoreline, Monkey Mountain and the coastal town of Quatre Chemins.

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Salman Rushdie, by contrast, generates a polyphony of voices, the hybridity which he sees as the essence of literature at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, through the interaction of characters with culturally specific mentalities. In defence of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie writes:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the PURE. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world.\(^{19}\)

Rushdie’s concept of bringing newness through hybridity is not restricted to thematic aspects, or to a sprinkling of exotic scenery, or to using a broad brush to paint patches in local colour; the newness he is talking about concerns also the styles, the forms, the idioms of his writing, ie the presentation of re-presentation. His Indian film-star Gibreel, of course, brings his own style of acting, of representation, from the Hindi films onto the British screen. The code-switching from the idiom of Great-Tradition forms of writing to the idiom of orality or popular performance appears at first sight as a deliberate and positive statement of otherness, of the alterity of another literary and cultural and tradition. The newness – if we are prepared to accept Rushdie’s argument wholeheartedly – then results from the marriage of two different forms and concepts of tradition. The newness originates essentially from an egalitarian view of cultures that discards old eurocentric and other ethnocentric views of otherness in the sense that the inside-out ethnocentric view defines otherness almost automatically as inferior otherness. The growing literary strength of the “provinces” inevitably leads to a reassessment of the canon of English language literature. A new type of universality has evolved, in the sense that greatness is conceded to those works of the Great Tradition that have showed sustainable influence beyond the limits of national culture and literature, ie works that have generated and promoted intertextual dialogue between the “centre” and the “peripheries.” This de-nationalization and de-canonization of English-language literature appears to have run parallel to a de-codification of cultural production. The codified text of literary communication is being more and more replaced by less formalized and non-codified texts of oral, visual or performance communication. Intertextual dialogue has regained flexibility for canonized and codified texts, opening them up for new meanings and alternative interpretations. Similarly, re-oralization in cultural communication has resulted in more flexible forms of presentation. The rise of new media in the “provinces” – also due, of course, to the lack of ingrained structures in the formal media of book production and marketing, formal,

subsidized state theatres, or a national film industry – favours a less formalized and more immediate textual structure. This informality – or, rather, alternative formality – of the new media in turn enhances the incorporation of old and new oralia which are on the whole less élitist, closer to the grassroots, and perhaps even more democratic. And that not only on the national or regional level, but also on the intercultural and international level.

When Derek Walcott appropriates the memory of the dead in Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” for the West Indian peasantry in his play Remembrance, he gives us another example of that new universality of meanings achieved by intertextual dialogue. But he also reveals that literary appreciation and creative practice at the turn of the millennium are no longer achieved in silent adoration or veneration before the shrines of national cultural heritage in Westminster Abbey’s Poets’ Corner. Walcott transfers them to the schools, the streets and markets of Castries or anywhere else in the world where English-language literature is practised.

The arguments put forward here make it clear that an arrangement of the following essays on a regional basis would be counterproductive. We have deliberately decided on a thematic arrangement of the essays designed to reveal the sameness and differences in the literatures and the cultural production of the various regions in their dealings with oral traditions, gender issues, new media, and language.

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