

RECENSIONES

Russell West-Pavlov, *Transcultural Graffiti: Diasporic Writing and the Teaching of Literary Studies*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2004, 243 pp.

One of the things, at least, that sets West-Pavlov's book off from a veritable flood of publications featuring "transcultural" or "diasporic" in their titles is an unexpected drift sustained by the latter part of his title, "Teaching of Literary Studies". (Interestingly, even my computer marks the two terms given above as non-existent in its language-default, and so marks in red the uneasiness created by their extended promise of "contamination and permeability" [107].) More often than not, we as teachers or critics tend to overemphasize the theoretical concepts, even to take them for granted as the latest fad of the lit-crit industry. Not so for West-Pavlov as he is trying to show how what he terms "transcultural" art functions simultaneously between different cultural levels (mainstream and subculture; high and low), between different languages (living and dead; hegemonic and subordinate; imperial and colonized), straddling different national and political entities, transcending generic and institutional borders. Thus it is not surprising that he conjoins already in the title what we rarely consider together; namely, "graffiti" and "diasporic writing", and attempts to show how both cultural forms signify in our fraught cultural moment, post-September 11, post-national, post-postmodern, and what not.

Before proceeding, however, it is in order to understand the pregnant implications of one of West-Pavlov's central concepts, that of transculturation as it is conceived, for instance, in Mary Louise Pratt's important study *Imperial Eyes*.¹ Pratt herself acknowledges a debt to Cuban

¹ *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 1992. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

sociologist Fernando Ortiz, who first came up with the term, to designate “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 6). She further adds: “Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone” (6), and goes on to point out how this uneven exchange operates on the borders between cultures, systems and languages. This process thus seems inextricably tied to the politics of location, another admittedly broad concept operative in postcolonial studies. The author’s positioning, his (cultural) location, becomes entwined with his discursive stance, figuring as a predicament he partly shares with the authors/performers/artists presented in the book. This apparent fluidity of borders and the flexibility, but also ontological anxiety proceeding from a sense of temporary placedness, offers an indispensable vantage point to the author, which helpfully energizes his readings, and to some extent precludes a feeling of detachment that we usually get and largely expect from the books of this genre. West-Pavlov is casting himself in a position where he is constantly questioning his stance of a privileged observer and a repository of knowledge reflecting, rather successfully throughout the book, the structures that he claims to have informed postcolonial, transcultural and diasporic corpora. These strategies include principally triangulation, bricolage, various forms of translation, manifold forms of hybridity, deconstruction and performativity, always firmly embedded in a concrete pedagogical, lived situation. He does his questioning from the positions respectively of an expatriate academic, an offshoot of settler culture in his native Australia and in his manifold functions as a teacher, translator and critic. Varied locations that go into the making of his identity surely make it easier for him to proclaim that “national identity” can increasingly be seen as a result of “constantly reiterated illocutionary acts” (12). Especially in the light of some recent reconsiderations of the concept of nationalism as espoused by Benedict Anderson in his influential model of nations as “imagined communities”² or by the poststructuralist/postcolonial take on the issues of the constructedness of a nation through language, narration, cultural imagination and the strategies of remembering and commemoration,³ we can understand West-Pavlov’s refusal to insulate his

² *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

³ Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration*. 1990. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

discourse in the fixed mould of a national culture, operating in a unitary code. Granted, this perspective works wonders for taking on “grand” imperial cultures and dominant, hegemonic languages, such as inevitably English in this context, but it hardly portends the same sense of heady possibility of challenge and critique to the yet-to-be-imagined and still-to-be-encoded and represented emergent cultures, traditions and national literatures of the postcolonial and the post—Cold- War moment. Namely, as shown throughout the book, even when two writers use apparently the same or highly comparable generic models, the “transcultured” message they relay is not the same, given that their position, their situatedness is incomparable: for instance, that of the white writer being fascinated by the indigenous forms and an indigenous artist working with her “native” forms. Or to take another example, if a writer from a non-privileged cultural setting is using a canonical form, does that move signify the same degree of cultural authority as entailed in the position of cultural insiderism?

The other sets of questions articulated here concern the use of hybrid, mixed genre and collage forms on the part of the writers from various, formerly colonized and nowadays post- or neo-colonial contexts. Still, is this recourse to hybridity, this transculturation and translation taking place among texts, cultures and languages, undertaken with the same sense of urgency on both sides of the divide or is it the case that for some it is more critical and less a matter of choice than a result of historical and social necessity, while being less so for others? West-Pavlov is aware of the dangers involved in a potentially explosive mix of literary, historical and cultural backgrounds shaping the texts he addresses in the book, but occasionally history intrudes into the text and makes a deconstruction of the nation and community more difficult than suggested at the beginning of the book. (This reconstructive move obviously informs the aesthetic and inevitably political work by Australian indigenous artists, just as equally reconstructive fervour underlies Césaire’s bold rewriting of Shakespeare, which is not mere “talking/writing back”, but rather, I would venture, angry shouting.)

In Part 1 the author is concerned with “the micropolitics of pedagogy” (30), which is situated inevitably within the larger politics of postcolonial studies, aptly metonymized as the politics of language (English versus indigenous languages, for instance). West-Pavlov outlines in this section

an older paradigm in postcolonial studies, the one he is trying to displace in this book, namely, that of the “colonial interpellation” of the subject-to-be (32). One of the viable strategies of resistance is situated, as we find out from chapter 2, on location where transculture gets produced daily as it were, through a slum photographic project. Lévi-Strauss’s model of bricolage is extended by West-Pavlov to encompass an agenda that promises to transcend the limits of economic, political and epistemological fixing of the othered subject. Still this leaves us wondering whether the engagement between ethnography and classroom interaction can have wider repercussions beyond its rather narrow confines.

Central point of the book is contained in the ascending order of intertextual and intercultural relations among the texts and artefacts embedded in at least two different cultures, languages, literary traditions, even spaces, and it transpires in the following interrelations: firstly, (mis)translation, that simultaneously is shown to be a peculiarly skewed reading from one cultural space to another (in the case dealt with by the author, the German Nobel-prize winning author Heinrich Böll and his Australian counterpart Patrick White); secondly, the antropophagic appropriation, here shown to be enacted between the cultural master-text of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Césaire’s variation upon it. It is interesting to note West-Pavlov’s adherence to the concept of antropophagy, cannibalism, since this “anomaly” was seen from the beginning of the European contact with and the observation of non-European transatlantic worlds as a crucial marker of difference. It is perhaps enough in this respect to think of the grounding role that Michel de Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals” (1575) played in the construction of the colonial archive, even if de Montaigne’s original intention was laudable—to deflect criticism for the outlandish practices of the overseas barbarians. However, here the author shows what happens when the cannibalistic impulse, already identified as constitutive of otherness, turns to devour that what has created it in the first place—Prospero’s insatiable will to power, accompanied by the power of knowledge represented by Ariel. In other words, when Caliban (the author shows how Césaire casts himself in that role) decides to play along, an interesting realignment of roles happens in the textual and social universe, what Césaire calls “a process of transformation via usurpation” (94). Similar procedure is later located in the text by David Dabydeen, a black English writer, who “usurps” the Bildungsroman grid and

misappropriates the master-narrative of the emergence of post-colonial subject through his mimicked?, authentic?, willing?, coerced? engagement with colonial education metonymically rendered in the English literary canon (chapter 9).

The third transformative, intertextual, transcultural strategy covered in the book is “translation”, which enables communication among disciplines, cultures and art forms, even though its imperial baggage trails behind. In this process of negotiation we may be well served by the strategies entailed in what West-Pavlov terms inter-cultural practices enacted in the classroom or in situations where the subjectivity is performed rather than safely assumed.

The fourth process scrutinized by West-Pavlov as to its capacity to produce culturally innovative and technically demanding works representative of the present moment of constantly shifting paradigms in arts, literature and critical theory is “generic hybridity” as exemplified in autobiography, and especially so in a subgenre of diasporic autobiography. His texts in this part of the book include Janette Turner Hospital, an expatriate Australian author working in the USA; then “transcultural autobiographies” by Eva Hoffman and Luc Sante, respectively, and what is especially enlightening for the Croatian reader, a collection of short stories by the young German-Croatian author Marica Bodrožić under the title *Tito Ist Tot* (*Tito Is Dead*, 2002). It has also come out in Croatian as *Tito je mrtav* (2004). West-Pavlov reads it as a “bridge-text” which “can speak directly to the sensibilities of many German-speaking students whose relationship to the language is mediated by varying degrees of ‘foreignness’” thus casting it as “an exemplary text for the teaching of a literary ‘border pedagogy’” (149). It is in this section that two important aspects of the book come to the fore. One is, as already identified by West-Pavlov, to “transculturize” some aspects of postcolonial studies by locating them in a “non-English speaking European context” (54), while the other translation strategy tries “performatively” to pit Bodrožić’s text as in a sense representative of the Eastern European subject against postcolonial paradigms.

In part 4, West-Pavlov again engages, not surprisingly given his background and his position of an expatriate academic, Australian indigenous studies, here notably “indigenous oral literature” (chapter 8). It is in this section of the book that one of the central, I would say irresolvable, paradoxes emerges, not only for West-Pavlov’s model but

for a wider grid of postcolonial theory. It consists, to but it bluntly, in the gap arising between some of the theory's organizing concepts (nomadism, hybridity, diasporic identity, mobility), and, opposed to it, a trenchant sense of identity — here notably indigenous, thus native to a place, rooted in the soil, intransigent to (theoretical) displacements. What should transpire is that hybridity and transculturation mark different subjects, as regards their placement within the given socio-historical moment, in distinct ways and with varying consequences. Bodrožić's diasporic mediations, as rightfully pointed out by West-Pavlov, work on the foil of the forced economic displacement shared by the generations of Croatian and other *Gastarbeiter*. The fascinating syncretic, transcultural strategies employed by Australian indigenous artists are very often a transposed anxious attempt to forestall the destructive processes assailing the very survival of tribal cultures. Thus, even though on the face of it they display the similar mechanism, these particular strategies are inflected differently for their users. What the author foregrounds here is the already announced "ethical turn in cultural studies," which, as I have pointed out, carries certain risks. One wonders whether even the subject's willingness (and I have in mind the Western subject, constituted through procedures of knowledge acquisition as laid down among others by Foucault in his concepts of the archive, episteme and archaeology, and perpetuated in the Western cultural ethos) to listen and become responsive helps to reverse or for the moment shift the terms of discussion and to disturb the implied power axis, which, as pointed out in the beginning of this review, haunts the concepts of translation, transculturation, even hybridity, seeing how it has often been a result of historical structures of long duration (colonialism, imperialism). West-Pavlov shows that some hybrid forms of culture, bordering on literature, poetry, performance and translated forms, and enacted in the (multiethnic) classroom or before eclectic audiences may begin to question, if not totally undercut, the problematic ratio of power and disempowerment entailed in the contact zone (to recall another term used by Pratt) between two cultures.

The book therefore attempts to foreground the position from which the "knowing" subject speaks and thus to unsettle her position of authority; then proceeds to chart different but complementary procedures by which other subjects of/in discourse may be cast or cast themselves as the effects of their location and enunciative position rather than as fixed, given

entities; then sets such a deconstructed (Western) subject against the Other, already discursively domesticated but resistant to this clinching, to end up in the zone of total epistemological insecurity and ontological puzzlement. I have in mind the last chapter which takes up the problem of poetry dedicated to catastrophe, here specifically September 11 in the USA, whose reading exacts varied translational moves on the part of the reader in order to uncover its “hidden histories” (188). The very last chapter carries these demands further as it deals with the inadequacy of language and the dangers and “risks” entailed in the inevitable process of translation as the only access to an identity—again, significantly, indigenous, neo-colonial—which lacks an appropriate name and location within a potentially uncomprehending culture (“Conclusion: What Is Your Name?”).

Another point of interest for a non-English reader is the way she gets interpellated in the book, more often than not by embracing gestures, as evident from numerous instances of “triangulated knowledge” (130), which is defined as “a postmodern form of knowledge which comes to the fore in contemporary writing—novelistic and autobiographical—about the transcultural experience” (117); also in West-Pavlov’s welcome sensitivity for the present political moment presaged by the European enlargement and the incorporation of the Eastern European states (202). On the other hand, this is precisely what leaves me out, if I may be forgiven for privatizing the discourse. It is precisely a moment of triangulation, a gap, which gets instituted when Marica Bodrožić’s text is summoned to metonymically represent an identity (German-Croatian, South-East European) as yet unassimilable in the new European Union. However, from the position of West-Pavlov’s acute sense of positioning, this erasure, the non-existence of some subject positions in the symbolic is what poignantly describes the (non)position of some subjects nowadays in Europe, or by extension in the archives of knowledge that make up postcolonial studies. Further, if a subject is not even imperatively summoned, interpellated, this effectively excludes her even from the possibility to articulate an oppositional response to an adverse interpellation.

That is why addressing the texts such as Marica Bodrožić’s hybrid book weaving together “the connected phenomena of memory and diaspora” (138) or the parallel but distinct modes of subject inscription through the intercultural, transcultural practices used by the Australian indigenous



nations give off a sense of urgency. Such genres, alongside graffiti, collage, bricolage practices, contextualized translation, performance, may currently be the single forms in which the impasse between the asymmetrical positioning of the bricoleur and the engineer can be engaged. By turning to reading texts like these, this book courageously, informatively and responsibly sounds out the troubling interrogations arising at the intersections of various disciplines operative in literary and critical studies nowadays.

Jelena Šesnić

