

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (Columbia UP, 2012)

Originally delivered as The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine, in May 2010, the four essays collected in this volume ask us to read literature for its global interconnectedness, a method Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o terms 'globalectics'. Combining theories of globalisation and Hegelian dialectics with the author's personal experience as a novelist, student, and professor in Kenya, Uganda, England, and the United States, Ngũgĩ imagines a new global literary space and rethinks the politics of knowing as a way out of what he calls 'the straightjackets of nationalism' (8). Globalectic reading reaches for texts across time and space and asks that they respond to one's own time and space, staging a meeting of 'the local and the global, the here and there, the national and the world' (60).

Ngũgĩ announces his method in the book's introduction, an approach he calls 'poor theory': a practice that leverages the 'possibilities inherent in the minimum' to privilege a 'density of thought' over a 'density of words' (2). He prescribes poor theory – grounded in close reading, experimentation, and lived experience – as an antidote to theoretical thought that behaves like an unmoored 'kite ... floating in space with no possibility of returning to earth' (2). Ngũgĩ deploys his poor theory in a restrained prose that deftly avoids the tortured phraseology of many theoretical texts and delivers complex thought with an economy of words. The first chapter, 'The English Master and the Colonial Bondsman,' revisits the 1968 publication of 'On the Abolition of the English Department,' an essay he co-authored with Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong. Ngũgĩ reads that text as a critical moment in which the ideological, epistemological, and pedagogical questions that frame decolonisation come into focus. To situate 'On the Abolition ...', the author charts his own intellectual development through the estrangement and alienation of colonial schools in Kenya, his exposure to Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis at university, and his subsequent encounters with the writings of Marx, Fanon, Sartre, and the new African novelists. What emerges is an intellectual history of colonialism and the genesis of postcolonial thought in East Africa told in the form of memoir, critical theory, and close reading.

The second essay, 'The Education of the Colonial Bondsman,' presents the Hegelian dialectic – the master–bondsman relationship in particular – as a useful way to understand and think beyond colonial and postcolonial power relations. Ngũgĩ supplements Hegel with close readings of didacticism in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to show how ordered knowledge and power relationships in literary teaching moments anticipate and express colonial animations of the master–bondsman dynamic. As a way out of the vertical binary, Ngũgĩ endorses a postcolonial reading method that rejects the master's historical narrative and decolonises cognitive processes inherited from colonialism. The third chapter, 'Globalectical Imagination: The World in the Postcolonial,' calls for reforming schools and universities so as to reflect the network structures of the postcolonial, globalised age, which would produce departments 'devoted to world literature' (57). Left unaddressed is the question of how this redrawn disciplinary map would discourage a resurgence of canonicity. How will these new schools and departments of 'Literature' – untethered from their national and continental disciplinary homes – protect the hard-fought curricular gains that expanded English, French and Spanish departments to include postcolonial specialists and created departments of African, Asian, and Latin American literatures?

Book reviews: *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Corbin Treacy. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Ngũgĩ makes in this third essay his most full-throated appeal for a globalectic reading method that starts with what Erich Auerbach called a ‘point of departure’ or ‘handle’ from which the subject ‘can be seized and radiate outward’ to other texts from other places (58); it is a form of the local that, once grasped, necessitates conceptual flight beyond national boundaries. Defining globalectics as both transnational and grounded – features that Ngũgĩ calls the mutually contained ‘hereness and thereeness’ of a text (58) – applies welcome pressure to the ethereal fluidity and errant meandering described in some ‘transnational’ and ‘postnational’ literary scholarship, but the argument here would benefit from an expanded discussion of how to protect the dedicated study of this ‘local’ in the new academy Ngũgĩ imagines.

The final essay, ‘The Oral Native and the Writing Master: Orature, Orality, and Cyborality,’ rejects lingering academic hierarchies that pit the written against the oral, suggesting in their place ‘*orature* ... an alternative to the oxymoron [‘oral literature’] ... a counter to the assumed inferiority of the oral to the literary arts’ (72). Ngũgĩ analyses forms of orature that cut across cultures (hip-hop music, proverbs, riddles, dance, and song) and sees in recent technological advances (e-books, texting, Twitter) a blurring of the written and the oral. He describes the Internet as ‘neither pure speech nor pure writing ... it is orality mediated by writing ... cyborality’ (84) and argues that its rhizomatic network architecture provides a promising counter-model to the verticality of the written–oral hierarchy.

Ngũgĩ’s study will interest scholars from multiple fields. Those working in postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy, continental philosophy, comparative literature, globalisation, new media, and translation studies will find many points of entry in this highly readable volume. ‘Cyborature,’ in the fourth chapter, needs to be developed and remains something of a dangling thread. Typographical errors, though infrequent, are at times distracting, as when Alain Robbe-Grillet is renamed ‘Robert Grille’ (19). The capstone text to a prolific career in letters, *Globalectics* is a compact and timely theory of transnational literature that attends to both its disciplinary genealogy and new technologies that are expanding our understanding of the literary imaginary.

Corbin Treacy