

**Colloquiality, Collegiality, Dialogism:
Renewing the Case for Comparative Studies**

“Oedipus,” says my colleague Stephen Yarbrough in his book *Inventive Discourse*, “is how he,” Oedipus, “is related to others.” Now, Yarbrough is not a Lacanian, mind you. He is a pragmatist. He thinks, and I think too, that we all are, and *authentically* so, to the extent that we are in this cultural-linguistic intercourse, “in relation to certain interlocutors.” Indeed, Charles Taylor also reassures us in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, “a self exists” solely within “webs of interlocution,” in a Borgesian-Bakhtinian “world of others’ words”; it is in this vociferous other-world that the self comes about, in exchanges with others and their locutions, with their words and stories. Not only is the self carved out narratively, by narratives, as philosophers like Jerome Bruner and Alasdair MacIntyre underscore; this self is also fashioned by those behind the narratives because a narrative “relates” or is a “relation” twice: it both conveys information, relates or relays a meaning *to* me, and connects, relates me *to* the narrative’s source or author. As Michael Holquist comments on the Bakhtinian dynamic of author/hero, reader/author, and self/other, the writer, that other whom I am reading becomes who he or she is, an author, “only in the event of the artwork, only as he [or she] can be perceived or shown to be a function of the relation” between himself/herself and his/her own other, myself, the reader.

But this dialogism cuts both ways. On the one hand, it sets up a tie into future, with me, the work’s reader. On the other, this connection only restages the work’s intertextual link to its past. According to Bakhtin and the long line of critics drawing on his utterance theory, whenever

I read somebody's story, I respond to a response, to a text already articulated with another prior to it. Without that response, without that reading, there would have been no writing, no story for me to read to begin with. This "architectonics of answerability" carries into my reading of this story as well as into any stories I might tell or write myself. If not literally told or written by others, people's own stories, with all that these stories comprise and disclose, are in this sense made possible by those others. Our greatest revelations have come, in fact, from such others, in the "space of relation," as Derrida writes apropos of Édouard Glissant's *Poétique de la relation*.

This space, comparatists like Timothy Reiss have argued, is "post-autonomous." Not so certain, however, are the cultural and political ramifications of this juxtaposition, that is, whether proximity in space might or might not result in proximity or, worse, identity of structure or meaning. What I want to ask then here is this: At the same limit, in the same place where we "become ourselves under the gaze of the 'Other,'" can we repay our debt? That is, can we, in Clifford Geertz's words this time, "mak[e] the immense effort to *know* [him or her] in [his or her] own embeddedness, not as objec[t] of [our] own unique gaze"? As "the enormously distant" gets "enormously close" in the rapidly globalizing world, can we ensure the distant (space- and other-wise) does so "without becoming any less far away" culturally, any less different?

Yes, we can. The people have spoken. I mean, the CompLit people. Of course, in the process, our native homes—read, departments—have been demolished, most of them, in any case. So we have been put up, for more than two decades now, by colleagues from national literature departments, primarily English—I say primarily to the extent that English departments have by and large taken over the study of the utmost CompLit subjects of our time: colonialism and postcolonialism; *Weltliteratur*, now "world literature in translation," English, of course; globalization; cross-disciplinarity; the digital humanities, and, first and foremost, theory.

The issue, then, or the question rather, for me is: What is my role as a guest in the other's house? To clarify: How should I perform my own, disciplinary otherness? Given the conflict of disciplines, what does a true ethic of hospitality mean, to me, in my case? How can I be a good guest—and not only a well-mannered guest but also one who honors the host to the point of possibly attempting to make a difference in his or her own home?

I guess you may tell already where I am going with this: down the trail already blazed by people like Derrida and J. Hillis Miller as they recast the host/guest dyad in the new, and neocosmopolitan, mold of mutuality. This may well be one of deconstruction's greatest achievements and, to my mind, just another proof that its spirit—certainly not its specter, not yet—is alive and well. This mold, this ethical formation or *reformation* of guest-being, is, in my opinion, fast becoming absolutely key in the generalized context of world mutuality of post-1989 globalization and particularly relevant to us, to what we can be and do within and across our disciplinary setups. For, what we are and accomplish does depend on how we perform our institutional “positionality,” as they say, on how we bring to bear our epistemological otherness on the issues and people surrounding us in *their* historical homes. It all comes down, then, to what it means to be an other inside these interlocutional domains where a lot of decisive things are being adjudicated, from the meaning of works, concepts, and movements to curricular structures, hiring strategies, departmental missions, “the vision thing,” and so forth.

So, what does it mean to be an other—“in this day and age,” as some of our students like to specify? I will give you *my* answer—how else?—indirectly, that is, interlocutionally, by way of a brief detour through the work of globetrotting writer Pico Iyer. To be sure, Iyer is not a controversial author, but what he says on the subject makes a lot of sense to me. “I recognise in Nabokov,” Iyer declares no less “interlocutionally in his 1997 essay “The Nowhere Man,” “a

European's love for the US rooted in the US's very youthfulness and heedlessness; I recognise in him the sense that the newcomer's viewpoint may be the one most conducive to bright ardour.

Unfamiliarity in any form breeds content."

"Ardour": a bow to Nabokov's 1969 novel *Ada or Ardor*? Possibly. Let us note too, the outsider's inquisitive passion is "bright." It brightens. It bathes things in the raw light that in turn "enlightens" those who have been living in their shadow. Nabokov's relative unfamiliarity with the natives' world, a world ingrown, become too familiar perhaps, *defamiliarizes*. The Russian exile's passionate scrutiny catches on, fanning the insiders' self-reflexive ardor and adding a glowing intensity to how they feel about themselves. This is how *Lolita* "bred" new "content," giving new meaning to our 1950s. Unlike Naipaul's, contends Iyer, Nabokov's "way" lies in an epistemological exposure if not in an exposé altogether, in an *in vivo* cultural-political dissection. Naipaul's "congenital displacement" provides a unique insight into the modern state. Modernity, the Indian-Trinidadian-British Nobel Prize laureate intimates, spawns rootlessness and estrangement from or loss of the nation-state's culture. A "citizen of the world," he lives out world citizenship as exile and alienation in the *modern* sense that renders geopolitical separation anthropological inadequacy.

Less so Nabokov; much less so those who've taken Nabokov's lesson to heart, that is, among other things, postmodernism as we know it today. For, crossing, albeit inconsistently, into postmodernity, the Russian-American writer embodies a different cosmopolitan variety. I have called Nabokov an exile, and I agree with Michael Seidel's assessment that "Of all novelists who have lived in exile and written its traumas and its imaginative opportunities into the texture of their fictions, Vladimir Nabokov reigns, in his way, supreme." But *Ada*'s author also illustrates the displaced type that rises, in Seidel's Joycean formulation, to "postexilic eminence." A reality

of late modernity and postmodernity already, this becomes, with some exceptions, a post-Cold War “condition.”

What this means is that in the post-exile age of global access and media coverage, spaces out of or into which we may be forced, limiting spaces or spaces off-limit, unknown and strange, are shrinking. A post-Cold War era harbinger in this respect, Nabokov is one of the first 20th-century writers to feel, in Iyer’s words, “stranger nowhere in the world” and therefore “partially adjusted everywhere.” The point is not simply that exile, exteriority, and “alienation” now make up “our natural state,” but that the outlander and the “alienated” are no more—and no less—than an *alienus*, an “other” complete with an analytically “othering” gaze, a probing eye whose semiotic “plight,” Iyer glosses in *Sun After Dark*, is to see through the “games” of culture, *otherwise*. In Iyer’s nomadic epistemology, the wanderer retains the “non-parochial” capacity for “wonder” that gathers us all around culture as a site of “perplexity.” To him or her, culture, native or adopted, is neither lost cipher nor inscrutable enigma but object to fresh distinctions that may prove epistemologically and morally contagious. As the writer quotes Adorno in his book *The Global Soul*, “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,” and we do get more intellectually restless, more observant, hence more “moral,” in the clarifying proximity of the “connoisseur”-“outsider at the feast,” because, Iyer insists, “[he] does not have to sit in the corner alone, taking notes” any more; “he can [now] plunge into the pleasures of his new home with abandon.”

This “abandon” stuff is worth pondering. Either the guest’s or the host’s, “abandon” has less to do with giving up or relinquishing and more with their antinomies, with taking up and giving oneself over passionately, almost mystically, without the usual calculations and disclaimers, to a certain preoccupation, in this case to cultural experience, reading, and self-

reading. This is what abandon signifies here, as it does, more alluringly still, in the 2003 novel Iyer published under this title. *Abandon*, the book, is a romance of culture flaunting a similarly many-layered erotics of cross-cultural, textual, and human intimacy. In Iyer, as in so many others of his contemporaries, intimacy trades on heterology, is moored in *relatedness*. To be “intimate” is to be with an other, with an other here with you or with an other’s consummate proxy, with his or her book, to wit, with America and its stories in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, with Nabokov’s *Lolita* in the Middle East as in Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Americanist John Carlos Rowe’s Far West (he wrote an article titled “Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Idaho”) or, as in *Abandon*, with Iran’s Sufi tradition in Santa Barbara. *Jouissance* in action, “ardent” competency that picks up where scholarly rationality leaves off helpless, “intimate knowledge” is philology etymologically understood, empathic—from empathy—expertise that reaches across playfully and jubilantly once it has mastered the exacting art of self-abandon.

What is forsaken here is not the self altogether but, Levinas would say, a certain egological bent of selfhood. The consummate readers of an other’s work push themselves conscientiously to banish whatever presumptions warp an ethical relation with what they are reading and indirectly with themselves. “Banish,” *Webster’s* informs us, is an old meaning of “abandon,” and a “ban” on our cultural egotism must be imposed, or self-imposed, if abandonment is to complete its hermeneutical-ethical cycle and set up a connection, if not, indeed, a “bond” between self and other. After all, “ban” is morphologically part of “band,” which is related, and implicitly ties “abandon” itself, to “bond” (see Germ. *Band*, *binden*, and *Bund*), thus forming a relation that gestures to separation and difference and, *through them*, to the deeper semantics of relationality.

We have come full circle now. Provided, of course, we remember where we started, namely with that affirmation of all semantics as relation-grounded. Once more, meaning-making treads on a relational ground, is predicated on interlocution. To speak is to be in dialogue. Logos is dialogical: this is, of course, only one way, and one tradition of looking at it, and I assume this is the tradition we, as comparatists, are committed to. Not only that, but we are committed to it ethically, as our duty as guests in an other's house. This is a duty to "them" as much as to ourselves because "we are in this together," in our departments and world, for both universities and nation-states share, today more than ever, the condition of a generalizing self-other juxtaposition in the 21st-century's disciplinary and worldly syntax.

Let us stay with the former, though—with the English department or with the Spanish and Portuguese department, or, at a smaller school, with the humanities or communication department, and with our place and role in them as comparatists, as the kind of people who tend to make themselves at home in the homes of others by professional affiliation, by focus, and by method. How can we return the kindness of hospitality? Not in kind, and not in kin either, but outside and across the limiting turf of kinship and sameness, by acting as othering instruments of knowledge and, in so doing, by honoring both the host and the knowledge object itself, the heterology it fundamentally is made of. To explain what I mean, let me offer the following four, intertwined points:

First, no matter what you read, these days more than ever, it makes sense in a relation. If seriously—ethically—pursued, the trajectory of relatedness leads you to a vaster context indisputably larger than the traditional purview of modern taxonomies and rubrics such as national literature, period (or century), discipline, and beyond that things like race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and so forth understood as essential monads, monolithically and monologically.

Because of this, our role is quite crucial to the welfare of the humanities across the board in a world that is getting increasingly relational itself. To read, write about, study, research, and so on is to ready, write, study, and research for an other's foundational presence, all the more so in contexts where culture dramatizes itself as pure, unproblematic, of one piece. To understand involves listening for the murmur of otherness in whatever you are trying to "get."

Second, to "get" something is less an less a solitary undertaking; you do it with others, and the horizon of this otherness is also expanding fast. Reading-for and reading-with—the semiotics and logistics of research, consequently have both, or should have both, an ethical, *copulative* foundation in the with-world of the third millennium. Once we can impress this notion on our colleagues, the comparatists will no longer be perceived by administrations as institutional parasites but as key, "symbiotic" players in the necessarily comparatist pursuit of knowledge across and inside disciplines. Incidentally, I continue to be amazed by how quickly we lost this very argument in the early 1990s, when the world was so conspicuously becoming so hyperrelational.

Third, I say all this as a comparatist, that is to say, as an Americanist. I would also submit that is not a cheap paradox. The way I see it, in the 21st century, American Studies will be comparative American Studies or will not be at all. This is what I have been trying to convey to my colleagues inside and outside my home institution, and not because I want them to change "their ways," but because *I* wish to be a good colleague at a time when you cannot "get" American literature and culture anymore (if you ever could) without also talking about the global South, the literature of the Americas, the Caribbean and transatlantic exchanges, the Pacific Rim, now and across centuries. In brief, you cannot "get" this stuff if you do not pay attention to its

inherently dialogical nature, linguistically, culturally, historically, and so forth, and this is, of course, where our unique tools, skills, and competencies come in.

Fourth, and last, this is a dialogism of the researched object as much as of the researching subject. Discourse is dialogical. Does this sound too basic, too tired to you? It should, and yet we need to reaffirm the commonplace given the ongoing assault of people like Žižek on dialogue, dialogism, and their related problematics. Let us pause here for a second: To some, this is part of his broader attack on the liberal subject, and indeed, there is something to be said—positive, I suppose—about that. What worries me, though, is the unambiguously monological, awfully self-serving and arrogantly-dictatorial undertone of his anti-dialogue rant from, say, *Philosophy in the Present*, a book co-authored with Badiou. Philosophy, Žižek informs us there, is not dialogue. Plato’s dialogues, he claims, are not dialogues: just look at how much Socrates is talking, while others listen and learn.

Now, this comes from someone who wanted to be appointed as Interior Minister or to run the Secret Service of his native Slovenia back in the 1990s (he ran for President too), and who wants to be known for his appreciation for characters like Carl Schmitt, at one end of the political spectrum, and all kinds of Leninist, Stalinist, and Maoist mass-murderers and autocrats, at the other. There is also something to be said about a certain logorrheic approach to logos in Žižek’s own writings, interviews, and such. But more pertinent to this discussion is that dialogue, the word itself, has nothing to do with “two” (*duo*) in Ancient Greek, which is what he implies when he dismisses it—the implication is that you do not need more than one person, presumably the Slovene master himself, to “get it right.” Instead, “dialogue” has everything to do with *dia*, “across.” The logos—philosophy, discourse, your latest book review, your next course proposal—is dialogical and must be approached as such. Why? Because, whether you like it or

not, the dialogical, that in which willy-nilly we are and which we are, presupposes an illuminating crossing through a place of otherness, a hospitality, and thus a debt, a duty to be in dialogue and to honor its sites and participants. You may hear some frustration in this conclusion but, I assure you, not all hope is lost.