

Hatchling

A Personal Report from the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (GNEL/ASNEL): “Local Natures, Global Responsibilities”; Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, 17-20 May, 2007

Overwhelming.

Exhausting and exhaustive, very serious and very funny, intriguing, thought-provoking, instructive and informative, pleasant and even bitter-sweet to the point of being heart-breaking... I could continue to pile up these adjectives indefinitely, all of them correctly depicting the flux of experiences I went through during this year's GNEL/ASNEL Conference at the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena. Probably because this was my first full-length conference experience, I could not get rid of the feeling that I needed to break through something with difficulty, through something heavy and hard, to push with strength and determination - to hatch. Being a hatchling surely means having to confront an entirely new world with all its shocking strangeness and innumerable challenges. In my case it also meant to be *das kleine Küken*, the one who always asks the questions and often feels out-of-place (if not out-of-space). But these are all afterthoughts: let me start from the beginning.

The road to Jena was short and pleasant. I was in a group of nine students and Ph.D. candidates from Frankfurt who travelled together by car; we found our sunny *Ferienwohnung* easily and had a gulp of non-highway air. Afterwards, we went straight to the Conference Office to register, where we took the friendly organizers by surprise, probably because of our number and age. After a first encounter with Jena we headed for the Conference Warming. I had been told that that evening is a perfect opportunity to talk to old acquaintances and maybe gain some new ones. Having practically only a handful of academic acquaintances, I settled for a calm conversation with the people from Frankfurt. I remained with the impression that the conference would be a serene, even a bit boring event that would not require great exertion. I was in for a huge surprise.

In fact, the surprises were numerous and started early the very next morning, with the first keynote lecture by Ursula Heise (Stanford University) who delivered a fast-paced talk on the links between ecocriticism and environmentalist movements/ theories on the one hand and globalization and its models on the other. This time it was my turn to be taken by surprise (and I believe I was not the only one): Ursula Heise's paper introduced an enormous amount of ecocritical and ecocritically useful concepts, e.g. Beck's risk society, the concept of place (vs. space), eco-cosmopolitanism and so forth, while simultaneously discussing real-world examples such as science fiction novels and the Google Earth software. For me, this opening keynote lecture set the atmosphere and the pace of the conference.

The second day's programme included three keynote lectures, including a lengthy address by Vernon Gras (George Mason University) which focused ex-

clusively on developments in the USA and (consciously or unconsciously) ignored many other interesting areas. Immediately after him, the podium was given to Hubert Zapf (Augsburg University), who proceeded to give a detailed and deeply analytical talk on ethics and ecology in US-American literature based on examples from well-known authors such as the poet Emily Dickinson and the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko. Since I am a student of both English and American studies (majoring in the first one and... minoring?... in the second), I was pleased to have new horizons opened up in both fields. Certainly, this is also what the next keynote speaker, Greg Garrard (Bath University), did: his highly informative analysis of novels by Margaret Atwood and Ian McEwan pointed us to the challenges of a new reading and a possible re-appropriation of Darwinism. The final day of the conference began with an intriguing (albeit somewhat controversial) lecture on "Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism" by Serenella Iovino (University of Turin), which was followed by the deliciously titled "The Medium Is... the Monster? Global Aftermathematics in Canadian Articulations of Frankenstein" by Mark McCutcheon (University of Bonn). In a very entertaining talk, Mark McCutcheon concentrated, within the discourse of environmentalism/ecocriticism, upon Frankenstein adaptations, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and (environmentalist) human responsibility - a dense and thought-provoking experience.

All keynote lectures reflected the really intense nature of the conference programme. The organizers managed to follow their schedule very well and (regardless of the unavoidable tiny delays) delivered a very tight conference. Even the freshly-hatched like myself, who felt disoriented at times, could not lose much time on account of confusion because we were never left without anything to do. The organizers managed to present us with a very compressed three-day event and a smoothly executed programme. A good example for this was the short guided tour to the historical town of Weimar, which allowed me to talk to some of the scholars who presented papers at the symposium as well as gather interesting historical and contemporary information about Thuringia.

Another interesting feature of the Jena conference was the "Under Construction" section and the "Poster Session". While I did not participate in the former (I had decided in advance to focus as much as possible on questions of ecocriticism), I took part in the Poster Session as a member of the "Arrivals and Departures" Summer School team from Frankfurt. I must admit that I am always delighted to observe the variety of topics and their contexts in such gatherings of analytical work. In this case, the research presented was also in a state of construction, so that the mental movements and the various tracks for the researchers' train of thought were still to be discovered and/or chosen. Although we did not present analytical work, the Poster Session was nevertheless also productive for our Summer School team.

Unfortunately, poster-session participation meant that we had to miss a paper in one of the sections we attended immediately before that. This brings me back to the bitter-sweet feeling I was talking about in the beginning: the idea that although

I listened carefully, with my eyes wide open, with my mind turned blank side outwards to be written upon, although I learned so much, there was still more to be learned, more to be listened to, more to be done. A similar feeling haunted me during the excellent Conference Dinner. In a gathering of minds of such proportions, it is unthinkable to be introduced to everyone, let alone to *speak* to all of the people one would like to speak to. The end of the conference revealed yet another bitter-sweet nuance. The final section I attended included four presenters – Abioseh Porter, Silke Stroh, Derek Barker and Anke Uebel – and their very strong papers: for me, this was a conference ending on a very high note in the best sense of the phrase. But in spite of the mental fatigue and the extended effort, I was somehow unsatisfied, not full, as it were, and wished for a bit more.

I would like to end my report with a few impressions that for me had a revelatory or even an epiphany-like quality. Some of the most pleasant periods during this year's GNEL/ASNEL conference were the literary readings. Literary Readings have always left the footprint of a revelation in passing in my mind, and the readings by Anthony Joseph, Joan Clark, Sarah Quigley and Drew Hayden Taylor all resonated on their own specific wavelengths with this notion within me. They were both very amusing and rather engrossing. For instance, I remember trying to empty my mind of analyses and focus it on the pictures Joan Clark conjured up in her writing/reading, closing my eyes the way I do when I want to concentrate on some complex piece of music I am listening to. Later on, while we were sitting at a table in the warmly-wooden Café Einstein, Clark told me she had done her best to keep me awake, and I tried to convince her that sleep had not been on my agenda at that very moment.

The *crème de la crème* for me was a piece of information I acquired from Drew Hayden Taylor during our conversation at the Conference Dinner. He was talking to me about the copyright debate on Traditional Knowledge (TK), that is the body of stories, symbols, specific cultural items, etc., of First Nations people, which is often raided by various companies and individuals for various purposes, often commercial ones. Then he mentioned a wine producer who used the image of a human-like Inuit stone figure (whose Inuit name my overloaded mind conveniently forgot) on the labels of wine bottles – the original stone figures being actually built, as far as I can remember, as way-points, or indicators of well-prepared stashes, caches or other useful resources. The proverbial lightning out of the blue struck me when I realized that the same image is used several times in Hugh Syme's artwork for the album *Test for Echo* (Atlantic Records, 1996) by the Canadian trio Rush – in a completely different manner, however, and with a rather dissimilar aim in mind.

It is really one thing to discuss cultural theory and abstract ideas of interlinked cultures, and quite another to look at the actual examples of (hopefully successful) attempts at bridging cultural space. Moments like this summon up a song by King Crimson; Adrian Belew's multi-vocal harmonies soar through my brain: "Eyes wide open/Eyes wide open all the time/I've got my eyes wide open/Eyes wide open all the time/Because you never know what you might see..."

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