



THE DIFFERENCE THAT LANGUAGE MAKES

A Response to Paul Giles' "World Literature
and International American Studies:
Convergence, Divergence, and Contest"

I want to thank Giorgio Mariani for having organized this Symposium in Rome: after so many far-away and interesting countries and cities where IASA members have met in the past, it is now our turn. And, to make the event more memorable, we are in the presence of four out of the five presidents IASA has had so far: from IASA founder and first President, Dejal Kadir, to the second President, Paul Giles, to Giorgio himself, to the current President, Manuel Broncano!

As a member of the 2001 IASA Founding Committee in Bellagio, I am happy to see how, after fifteen years of existence, IASA has developed its dialectics and, in an enlarged and more variegated world context, how it is re-discussing its *raison-d'être*. Therefore, even if it is not one of IASA's biennial conferences, this symposium promises to be a very important event as regards the association's future.

Paul Giles's outline of today's debate on American Studies in the international panorama or, rather, on the formation of International American Studies vis-à-vis the World Literature project, is extremely useful. I am not familiar with some of the books he mentions, but, if I understand him correctly, the debate still seems to be a tentative one and one that will probably take a few more years before it settles on a satisfactory agenda. To conjugate the global with the local, to reach what has been horribly called "the glocal," does not seem to be an easy task. From the titles of some of the papers that will be read and discussed during

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this two-day symposium, the options revealingly seem to go from conciliatory to radical.

Certainly, a lot of ground has been covered over the past fifteen years, at least by those of us who live abroad and who are not US citizens. The situation of many (not all, of course) US Americanists is too often still characterized by a sort of nationalistic “fervour,” as Paul calls it, and by a deep-down, perhaps un-confessed— even to themselves—belief in their country’s exceptionalism, in spite of what has happened to it/them and to the rest of the world in the last half century. And, if we want to be historically correct (see Schueller and Watts’s book), in spite of the complex and “multidirectional” origins of their national identity—notwithstanding the many “voices” touting it otherwise. In his essay, Paul relates two exemplary personal anecdotes, so allow me too to mention an episode in which, more recently, some of us have been involved. A couple of years ago, of his own initiative, an excellent US historian, who had taught in Italy twice, but also in Vietnam and in Latin America, proposed a panel on “Teaching American Studies in Italy” at the ASA Conference of that year. He invited some of us (Donatella Izzo, Fernando Fasce, Giorgio Mariani, and myself) to take part in it. Each participant would have paid all his/her own expenses (travel, hotel, meals, etc.)—of course. Well, much to our friend’s embarrassment, his proposal was turned down, first, on the grounds that it was not interesting, and then, when he explained why it was indeed of great interest, on the grounds that... no room was available! As a matter of fact, it was only as late as 1986, at its Conference in San Diego, that, thanks to the late Emory Elliott’s efforts, the ASA accepted an entirely European workshop comprising only French and (two) Italian Americanists. Even if we know that there are US Americanists who think differently, we are far from seeing a spatially more extended imaginary emerging from our country of reference, in particular as far as international American studies are concerned.

Leaving aside, however, the attitude and opinions of several among our US colleagues, when, at the beginning of this new century, IASA started its activities, some of the most alert post-nationalist—in the sense of being less insular and less parochial—organizations and Departments in the USA were relating their mainstream culture

to the many cultural areas present in the country: from the native, to the black, to the Chicano, to the Italian, to the Asian, to the feminist, to the gay, to ethnicity, to post-colonialism, etc. Without intending to create a hierarchical ladder under the white Anglo-Saxon aegis, the multiculturalism of these institutions resulted from the conviction that the USA—being hybrid by nature—was the ideal laboratory where a multilingual and culturally interrelated field of studies might be pursued. Individual scholars—like Werner Sollors, for one—were working along similar, or even more extensive, lines. Overcoming the concept of the melting-pot, for these colleagues the time had come when the warp and weft of their country's interwoven tapestry—made of distinct threads/visions of life—could finally be objectively and intelligently examined.

Since the beginning of the new century, however, some Americanists—many from countries other than the USA—realized that this approach might be dated. It started to be seen, as Paul puts it, as globalization within a domesticated compass. Even when the risk and temptation of a patronizing/colonizing attitude were avoided, and multiculturalism was not what Žižek calls “the cultural logic of multinational capitalism” and a form of “racism with a distance,” due to the hegemonic political and economic power of the USA (and its gigantic army), some Americanists felt the need to set their researches within a larger context: larger in space, but, above all, in the sense of making room for reciprocity and (a welcome) alterity. From this perception both IASA and the more recently institutionalized World Literature Association have originated. In order to address the conceptual urge behind what especially IASA attempts to do, however, we would need, first of all, a new methodology, new paradigms of research, borrowed, possibly, from other, interconnected, fields.

Skipping, for the time being, this pivotal point, let me say right-away that I, for one, agree with Emily Apter's argument and do not share Franco Moretti's and David Damrosch's macro-cosmic visions according to which, when dealing with literatures, the knowledge of the languages relating to the ones we want to tackle is not necessary since translations will do—explicitly those into English (implicitly enforcing the “cultural” supremacy of this language/culture). In my opinion, this course is acceptable

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when we are engaged in a scientific field or in macro literary studies with the intention of arriving at “gargantuan” taxonomies, but not when we aim at something deeper and more analytical. And this is because a language, any language—as any good translator knows—entails a way of seeing and understanding, and it thus proclaims its *difference*: a difference that refuses to be reduced to a sort of universal essentialism—to what Paul rightly refers to as Goethe’s and Hegel’s ideological vision of a universal spirit: a vision seemingly shared by the World Literature Association. Turning our minds only towards countries that use English or only to texts translated into English makes the project more practical, but, in my opinion, one that cannot take into consideration—and is not respectful of—those differences that are crucial for any literary enterprise that intends to be scholarly. As I am convinced that the Comparative Literature scope is now obsolete—politically, since, in spite/because of globalization, nationalisms are more marked than ever, and culturally, since it is geared around fixed and limited perspectives—it seems to me that a specific knowledge of the language and of the culture of the country/ies of reference is *a must* (what one of my teachers called the need to know what the members of the civilizations in question ask and eat for breakfast). Shall we, then, limit our endeavors, as Mary-Louise Pratt suggested years ago, to those that for each of us are contact-zones, where no more than two-three languages and the history and customs of a limited number of populations are involved so that our goal is not... unreachable? Inevitably, according to the parameters of a planetary design, results would be partial, but wouldn’t this also be the case if we were to depend on the work of others (the translators) and on our limited knowledge of the civilizations referred to? In effect, if we were to embrace the World Literature approach, would we not run the risk of creating another, culturally diluted, melting-pot?

When, for instance, Paul hypothesizes a future Chinese scholar, who will rewrite an account of US literature, comparing, as may be the case, very specific topics relevant to the two countries he knows—his own and the USA—Paul seems to imagine someone who has one foot firmly in his/her own ground and another on US soil, unencumbered, however, by all the myths that US people have

created about themselves throughout their history. This is more or less what Mads Rosendahl Thomsen argues, when he reflects that any investigation necessarily starts from a “particular place.”

For those of us who are not US citizens and belong to a different culture, this road—though circumscribed in space, languages, and cultures—is the one we have taken so far and are still trying to tread. What, then, may be the new direction? That of being more knowledgeable about what other Americanists around the world are doing in interrelated areas?¹ Certainly. Until we have formulated an appropriate methodology, at least to criss-cross and compare notes, points of view, and judgments is always enlightening for everyone. This recommendation, should they be willing to pay attention to “others,” might be of help to some US Americanists as well. Because, indeed, as David Harvey posits, their country is not an abstraction to be idealized, but—like every other country—a very “material phenomenon.”

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1. Though not on a planetary scale, this is what all continental associations of American Studies have been encouraging their constituencies to do and the primary reason why they were founded (some, like the European Association of American Studies, over four decades ago).

