

**Nele Bemong, Mirjam Truwant, and Pieter Vermeulen, eds., *Re-Thinking Europe: Literature and (Trans) National Identity* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008)**

The days of smooth narratives are gone. (I can imagine how Vikram Seth would react: ‘Nonsense. It’s you, the so-called literary critics and cultural theorists, who think so.’)<sup>1</sup> With so many ‘post-s’ in circulation, we are nowadays more interested in ambivalences, contradictions, paradoxes, ruptures, and tensions. Of course, you can talk about essentialism, homogeneity, totalitarianism, and so on, but you must somehow manage to convey the impression that you mean to use these usual suspects in a *strategic* way. However, if you are more interested in the first set of plurals than in the second set of abstractions, you should read on.

The tendency (to go for the seams) is at once apparent in the title of the book I propose to review below: *Re-Thinking Europe: Literature and (Trans) National Identity*. Obviously, there can be no ‘re-thinking’ without deconstructing older relations. Can there be? (Who is *not* afraid of Michel Foucault?) The relation(s) in question here are those between comparative literature and the idea of Europe. At the time of its emergence in the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Europe), the discipline of comparative literature was conceptualised in highly laudable terms, as were a host of other disciplines/discourses. (Liberalism is possibly the most famous case in point. Indeed, Europe was at its persuasive best at the time.) ‘Comparative literature, then,’ write the editors in (the) ‘Introduction: Europe, in Comparison,’ ‘was always more than a value-neutral research project, as its vocation to overcome bias and opposition also carried the political and ethical promise of peace and cooperation beyond national and ethnic lines’. The presence of the word ‘promise’ in the quote is (painfully) suggestive of the nature of the real achievement of early comparative studies. It could not live up to its ‘lofty vocational claims’ because of its inherent Eurocentrism, so narrowly defined that it meant no more than a ‘small set of major nation-states’ (namely Germany, France, and Britain). In those golden days of growing ‘European’ hegemony, the entire critical energy of the discourse of comparative literature was focused on establishing ‘the superiority of the masterpieces’ of ‘these major players’ (7). ‘How could it be otherwise?’ one may wonder.

Then came the Second World War. Things (mostly European) fell apart.<sup>2</sup> The political and cultural supremacy of Europe became things of the glorious past. (Alas! Man proposes, God disposes.) With the arrival of America on the scene, the narrow confines of comparative studies seemed (at long last) to burst open. Characteristically, bold claims were made: ‘Away from the national rivalries of strife-torn Europe, [Americans] have no special axe to grind and can weigh the debits and credits of the

<sup>1</sup> Vikram Seth is the famous author of *A Suitable Boy* (1993), a prodigious (a total of thirteen hundred and forty nine pages) family saga set in the decades immediately following Indian independence when the question of national consolidation was still fresh in the Indian air.

<sup>2</sup> I have alluded to a number of critical/literary/scholarly works in this review. They are too familiar to warrant full citation.

various national literatures justly and with detachment' (8), declared Werner Friederich. In other words, '[t]he American melting pot' (8) was advertised as a more suitable place where the original European ideal of comparative studies (e.g. to forge a cosmopolitan space for different cultures to meet on equal terms) could realize itself successfully. Interestingly, it was also the moment of the first metamorphosis of the idea of Europe. Increasingly dissociated/distanced from Eurocentrism (Europe was after all on the other side of the Atlantic), it now 'served as the invisible border of the imaginary realm in which the dream of even-handed comparison could be acted out' (9). Nostalgia had set in.

For the idea of Europe to be deconstructed in any meaningful way, it had to cross seas other than the Atlantic. Why else should European fiction be so full of shipwrecks? 'In the colonies the truth stood naked' wrote Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>3</sup> But Europe began to take note of the naked truth only after most of its colonies had either achieved or were struggling to achieve political independence. Who wants to be disillusioned so cheaply? With the (former) colonies 'writing back' (after Salman Rushdie), the idea of Europe underwent another sea change. Enlightenment found (or, to be more true to history, was forced to find) itself in (the) heart of darkness. For a true understanding of itself, the European self needed both the lamp and the mirror of its non-European others. Since (the idea of) Europe has failed to universalize itself on its own terms, the way it may (once more) become universal is by letting itself be 'provincialised' (after Dipesh Chakrabarty) by its non-European others. (What an irony!) To be worth its name, the discourse of comparative literature has to undergo (is, in fact, undergoing) a similar process of self-transformation. It has to be a site for cultural dialogue, which it will be if it is ready to accommodate (without prejudice) both Europe and its non-European others, European constructions as well as non-European deconstructions, European insiders along with non-European outsiders. In short, it has to own up to its 'contradictions and contaminations' (12-13) to be of relevance to the hybrid cultural reality of the contemporary world. It is heartening that comparatists around the globe (and importantly in Europe) have already begun to move in that direction, especially at a time when the world itself is increasingly 'marked by an all-pervasive opposition between those who are 'with us' and those who are 'against us'' (12) in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent American military hegemony.

*Re-Thinking Europe* is a collection of articles originally presented at an international seminar (bearing the same title as the resulting book) held in Leuven in June 2006. The essays are organised in three parts, reflecting the changing idea of Europe in the field of comparative studies. Those in Part I deal with some of the first European projects of comparison. Despite claims to the contrary, none of these projects was able to resist the pull of national interests it had aimed at moving beyond. They were all products of the national contexts they attempted but failed to extricate themselves from. They desired to be transnational but ended up all the more national. Even the vision of Europe they would finally offer was at best partial. They were Eurocentric, but quite narrowly so, a phenomenon neatly captured in the title of the opening article of Part I: 'Europeanism in One Country.'

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface, *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 7.

The (sub)title of Part II – Performing Transnational Identity – is no less apt, focused as it is on some of the (actual, hence performing) negotiations of the idea of Europe by its non-Christian/non-European/postcolonial others. While it is common knowledge that the European self defines itself vis-à-vis its various others, the fact that those others in turn use Europe no less to define themselves is rarely recognised. The European image of Latin America as a land of magic, for example, is deconstructed not so much by constructing an oppositional image of (a) rational Latin America as by appropriating the European image itself (by inverting its semantic associations) as an emblem of Latin American reality. In any colonial context, who appropriates who is a fraught question. One of the possible explanations as to why peripheral selves seem to have a greater success in imagining themselves in transnational terms than the central self has to do with the latter's inflated sense of its self-integrity as a function of cultural/racial purity.

In Part III, Europe returns home to take stock of the potential opportunities it has squandered of becoming transnational. If not the whole of the world, at least a much broader Europe is in view now. What the (ideological) character of the literary canons/histories of the different (how does one define difference?) European nations could have been, one may speculate, if they had been constructed more in view of aesthetic pleasure than of moral (read national) uplift, if they had been geared more to satisfying curiosity than to mobilising consent, and if they had been meant to contribute more to individual dreaming than to social engineering. It must have been, at least, less national or, more accurately, less xenophobic. These 'ifs' could not possibly have saved humanity (essentialist?) of the traumas of the two world wars, but they could in all probability have offered a greater space for dialogue to take place among the European nations who were the major players in the theatre of those tragic wars. (The world could have had a few more years of peace and prosperity.) And what else is comparative literature, if not a dialogue between (*nationally!*) different cultures?

In what language(s) should comparative practices be carried out? They cannot possibly be performed in a linguistic vacuum. The editors of *Re-Thinking Europe* do not pause to ask this very crucial (in my opinion, of course) question. *Re-Thinking Europe* is entirely written in English. In that case, should it be assumed that ... and that ...? I leave it unstated. I know you know what I mean.

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