

An Prudon

*Across vast distances**An interview with Jahan Ramazani*

*For this special issue we were lucky enough to arrange an interview with literary scholar Jahan Ramazani. A professor of English and Department Chair at the University of Virginia (U.S.), Ramazani has an impressive list of credentials. His most recent work *Poetry and Its Others* (2013) defies disciplinary boundaries, as it highlights the dialogic relationship between poetry and other forms and genres, such as philosophy, the news, and prayer. His book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) is a key text when it comes to the transnational turn in literary studies, and even if your interests are less specific, you may know his name from the spine of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* for which he was one of the editors (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> editions). When Ramazani visited the Netherlands to participate in a number of events organized in his honor at VU University, editor An Prudon got to speak to him about an approach to literature that challenges the strict boundaries of nation states and national literatures.*

**What are the implications of your book *A Transnational Poetics* for the way we teach and study literature? Is it time to step away from our nationally grounded programmes of literature and culture?**

There will always be – and it might surprise you to hear me say this – a place for courses that are based around geography or nation. Those can be valuable frameworks within which to study literature. My difficulty is when this is the dominant and only framework, and so I would love to see more courses which cross national boundaries. At the University of Virginia for example, where I teach, we have deliberately turned away from nationally delimited surveys. We used to have required courses on British literature and others on American literature that were totally separate from one another. Now, the required survey is a history of literature in English – from the earliest moments up to postcolonial writing from the Caribbean, Africa, and India, as well as the United States and Britain and Canada and so forth.

A course could also be organized around a certain period. The advantage of courses designed in that way should be obvious from examples: American writers of the nineteenth century are very much in dialogue with British romanticism, to take one instance. In this example you would understand more of the distinctiveness – of what is happening in American Literature – by looking at it comparatively with the British literature of the same moment. Another way of organizing subject matter would be around genre, so you would look transnationally at the history of the novel, the history of poetry, and so forth. Seeing how these different genres are formed and embodied, transformed in different sites and different settings, can be very powerful.

**Isn't language still a very restrictive factor? Especially since, as you have said on previous occasions, you believe poetry is in some ways untranslatable.**

First of all, I think there should always be a place for classes in translation, and for some works in translation in our literature classes. However, my sense, particularly as someone who teaches poetry, is that if one wants to devote close attention to the language used in the literature, and to the textures and sounds, and to the literary history behind any literary text, then language is going to be an important part of what one studies. So if I wanted to teach, for example, German or French or Persian literature in the nineteenth century alongside Anglophone literature, that might be fine, except that I can't assume that all of my students would know French, German, and Persian. Maybe you could – here in Amsterdam. (Laughs)

We need to remember, however, that language and nation don't coincide, as one knows from Dutch and the various creoles in the Caribbean, and as we see with English and Britain's former colonies, or with French literature. What is French literature? The history of literature in French would have to encompass, nowadays, Africa, the Caribbean, Mauritius, and other places where you have innovative significant writing in the French language. So yes, language specificity, but not necessarily exclusively focused on the nation.

**Isn't it true that there is a bit of a paradox at the heart of *A Transnational Poetics*? You want academics to be guided less by the nation, yet we should have a clear sense of what a particular nation or national literature entails before we can speak productively about hybrids, exceptions, and instances of cross-cultural influence.**

I think that's exactly right, and while there are of course no perfect terms, the reason that I favour the term 'transnational' is that it embodies this paradox. The 'trans' suggests the 'acrossness' – the transit, the movement, the energy of that movement across national boundaries – but the 'national' is always part of it as well. Nations are powerful things. They are powerful organizing forces in history. So, absolutely: one has to understand the ways in which nations have functioned as central organizing forces for culture, historically speaking, yet not stay within that organizational box.

**Readings that are attentive to nationality and different cultural influences often seem to be guided by available biographical information about the author.**

Yes, in *A Transnational Poetics* I try to trace the flows – as Arjun Appadurai puts it – of peoples to different places and the transformations that they go through because of their own transnational human movement. But I wouldn't want to restrict transnational poetics just to that, because I'm also interested in how a poet like Christopher Okigbo, who was writing in Nigeria, read poets from various other places and was transformed by the influences of those works. It is also true that T.S. Eliot never visited India and that W. B. Yeats never made his way to East Asia, or Ezra Pound to China and Japan. Yet, there are powerful ways in which modernity, because it has accelerated the flows of information across national borders, has accelerated the intercultural contact across these vast and discrepant spaces.

**The examples you just named are rather outspokenly transnational. Should we be focusing specifically on this type of text, or look for traces of the transnational in other places as well?**

Ideally, I'd say we would want to look at both types of texts. Some poems are obviously, or more overtly, intercultural or transnational, and those certainly would be at the forefront of the kind of study that I have done. However, apart from those many examples where there is a clear straddling of different cultures within the text, I would want to look at the ostensibly highly local, highly regional poems as well. More often than we think, those poems complicate the idea that there can be a site which is hermetically sealed – in the twentieth or twenty-first century anyway – from any other cultural influences elsewhere. In an era of globalization, even the most localist text is going to be in some way informed by a kind of global framework of experience.

For example, you might write – as a poet by the name of James Wright did – a poem about sitting in a hammock, in a particular spot in the Midwest, on a particular day, and having an epiphany there. In such a case, we would say: 'this is an intensely local experience.'

rience about that particular place'. But what some cultural geographers have shown us is that any local space has traces within it of multiple cultural sites and multiple forms of contact with places elsewhere. In the case of the poem by Wright, if you would just read it as if it were only about that particular site, you would get a certain amount out of the poem but not all there is to get. If you then start looking at it a little more carefully, you see that it is holding on to this experience of a rural enclave partly through an implicit distinction between that localist site and the urban anonymous metropole. It is in part also doing so through the mediation of East-Asian haiku – it is a very compressed poem. You would have to look for that, because the poem doesn't wear it on its sleeve.

### **How about explicitly nationalistic poets or texts?**

I will grant that there are many poems – national anthems would perhaps be the most obvious example – which serve nationalist agendas. Sometimes poems have even been put in the service of a kind of militarist nationalism, a violent nationalism. So I'm not saying that all poems serve some universal cosmopolitanism. But at the same time, if you look carefully at the way in which form has travelled, or at the way language has travelled into those poems, the hybrid texture – the multiplicity that's embodied within the poem – often undermines the very nationalist ideology or national boundaries which the poem may be trying to draw.

This would even go for someone like the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who is often held up as the prototype of the poet of the local – of the ground and everything associated with that. If you look at his poetry carefully you will find that it is deeply influenced by the English poet Ted Hughes, and by romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, and Heaney also looks back to classical examples, and so forth. He sites many of his so-called 'Irish poems' in Jutland, in Germany and Denmark. So he is indeed writing about Ireland but *mediated* through another experience, often from another much earlier era. His work destabilizes the notions we tend to attach to him. So yes, I would argue that even these poems which are explicitly focused on the national often complicate, by virtue of their engagement with the global but also through their very long memory of form and their ability to move rapidly across space, notions of hermetically sealed localities.

### **Do we really need an extra transnationalist impulse to be able to reach this kind of conclusion? Weren't we always already going to get there, as long as we are faithful to the text?**

Well (smiling somewhat warily), ideally that would be the case. However, we also know from the study of hermeneutics that no matter how faithful we try to be to the text, our presuppositions will inevitably influence how we read it. We know that if we are reading poems with a kind of nationalist agenda – even though a poem's language and its tropes may be borrowed from other cultures and what have you – ultimately the poem could still become, say, a synecdoche for 'Americanness' or 'Indianness' or

'Britishness'. So I think that the transnational templet, so to speak, does make any transnational energies and influences more visible than they would be otherwise.

**Your interest lies in great part in those poets who are not canonized, who are from places the cultural output of which has been largely ignored or overlooked. Does *A Transnational Poetics* mean to carve out a space for the study of those types of poetry?**

Yes, I hope so. Before I wrote *A Transnational Poetics* I had written a book on postcolonial poetry in English from Africa, India, and the Caribbean, and some from Ireland as well. Since then I've been trying to help us see the conversation between those writers on the so-called peripheries with the writers in the metropolitan centres. It remains important to have a knowledge of the 'central', as they've historically been constructed, canonical writers – although of course the canon also changes over time, sometimes quite dramatically, so one always has to recognize that the canon is provisional rather than fixed in any way. But I think it is very important to understand both the canonical *and* the para-canonical, both those widely known writers and the writers who have not drawn as much attention.

*'we all come out of deep histories of cultural mixing, even if those histories have often artificially been made invisible'*

**On a previous occasion, you spoke briefly about how your work relates to that of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. Do you feel their efforts have remained too focused on the dominant literatures?**

I feel that there is a tendency in their work to focus on the way in which the dominant literatures diffuse across the rest of the globe, in a one-directional way. I am much more interested in seeing the two-way, or the two-three-four-way movements of literature. Yes, I am interested in the ways in which, for example, metropolitan modernism moves outward. But we should also look at how modernism is in turn transformed through contact with African art, with Oceanic art, with East-Asian literature and dance, and so forth. So I would love to see a kind of paradigm that would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the movements of culture as dialogic and multi-layered rather than always seeing them as one-directional.

**Shouldn't we be more afraid that this focus will ultimately invite a rhetoric in which the study of the peripheral literatures is legitimized only by way of their dialogue with traditionally studied canonical texts?**

I can see why there could be some anxiety about that, and I think one needs to be careful not to reduce those writers to their dialogue with the writers in the metropolitan spaces. It is important to be respectful of the ways in which those writers are in dialogue, not only with more 'canonical' literature, but also with their own indigenous tra-

ditions – to think about how they are drawing on those resources, and transforming them.

Of course, we also have to keep in mind that these are artificial boundaries in certain ways. Firstly: many of those writers from the so-called margins have often migrated to the metropole, and particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have often lived in both spaces. Secondly: their so-called peripheral spaces have of course always already in many ways been penetrated by metropolitan influences, and vice-versa. So, I wouldn't want there to be a kind of false dichotomy between centre and margin or modernity and tradition.

All in all, I think we will be okay as long as we are giving due attention to the local circumstances and traditions as well as that metropolitan vector. And besides, think of what the alternative would be... To not study them at all. If you go too far down that line of reasoning, you end up with a situation in which we're each only studying the literature of our own neighbourhood – for fear of colonizing.

**There seems to be a strong political or emancipatory component to your work. Is this project bigger than just understanding the poetry better?**

First and foremost, my allegiances are to the literature – to the poetry. So *that* is what I would want to foreground, and I would never want to be in a situation where I was just reducing the literature to a kind of instrumental project in which it serves some other agenda. We should read the literature for what it does with language, its power to make us see the world anew, to remake inherited genres, to transform our self-understanding, to affect our emotions, and all the rest.

But yes, it's also true that my work on transnationalism and the hybridization of culture does have a political component. It is a politics, though, that I am drawing out of the literature. Because what I am trying to suggest is that literature so often already is in dialogue across these artificial national boundaries: it traverses them. The problem is that politically informed nationalist ways of constructing the canon make those kinds of dialogue invisible. So I think that a study that is attentive to transnational energies and cross-influences – processes like creolization and indigenization and vernacularization – helps us to understand, as Edward Said puts it, that 'we are mixed in with one another'. It helps us understand that we all come out of deep histories of cultural mixing, even if those histories have often artificially been made invisible. And again: one can see this by paying close attention to language. If you take any language, you will see that it is always a mongrel formation, it is always a hybridization of other dialects and languages which have converged.

**You are crossing quite a few national borders yourself, as your work has lead you all over the world. Is travel important in thinking about issues of transnationalism?**

Yes, I think so. This can involve physical travel like, for example, my coming to the Netherlands this week. Being in dialogue with students and faculty from these diffe-

rent places can indeed be very valuable. That kind of intercultural contact through physical movement and travel is really important. Sometimes it can happen through digital media or print media as well – so it doesn't have to always involve physical movement – but I guess I would want to hold out a place for actual travel and the ways in which it can be transformative: the ways in which your own assumptions about a culture can be unsettled and undermined through an actual experience of the place and of the people.

Ultimately, what brings us together here is a love of literature – a *fascination* with literature – and the engagement with different cultures is a powerful dimension of literature as well. It is an important part, for example, of many travel narratives, and of so many poems that involve travel. Besides, one of the great powers of literature is its power to be understood, read, engaged, across vast distances. *Both* travel and literature, I want to say, involve a kind of defamiliarizing of our most cherished assumptions. As long as one 'travels' with an adequate openness to different cultures, they can, potentially, be transformative.