

Conference Report on “Arrivals and Departures – Stories of Motion”: 8th Summer School of the New Literatures in English, J.W. Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, September 3-7, 2007

When I arrived in Frankfurt in September 2007, I was not a novice to the idea of Summer Schools organised at various German universities, as I had already participated in one held at Humboldt University in Berlin in 2002. At the time, I signed up for the Summer School with no particular expectations, except for a rather vague idea of a mind-boosting and horizon-broadening experience. In fact, so naive and indeed academically inexperienced was I that I chose to participate in a ‘postmodern creative writing’ workshop, completely unaware of the obvious fact that the seminar would probably expect me to make use of my creative powers and ultimately make me present my writing to the public. Luckily, the seminar wonderfully run by Professors Dennis Cooley and David Arnason proved to be equally engaging and entertaining both for those determined to embark on a career as a professional writer and those not blessed with an artistic soul like myself. In the end, even the final performance was much more thrilling than it was stressful.

Having participated in the Berlin Summer School, I had every reason to assume that a week in Frankfurt would turn out to be not only fruitful and enlightening but also exceptionally enjoyable. Needless to say, Frankfurt did not let me down. My perception of the 8th Summer School was definitely different from that of the earlier edition, as having progressed from my second year as an undergraduate student to my first year as a PhD candidate, I became more advanced in my research and more focused on the post-colonial condition of (erstwhile Great) Britain as diagnosed by Black British writers. Therefore, it was not difficult for the lecturers to capture my attention by dropping names of postcolonial theory gurus and key-words like “Afro-Caribbean”, “hybridity”, “transculturality”, “quest for identity”, or “postcolonial heritage”.

During five days filled with academic revelations, we had the chance to listen to eleven inspiring lectures, take part in one of fourteen seminars or workshops on issues ranging from Bollywood, post-apartheid South African novels to Dalit literature or travel writing from the British Isles, and appreciate the readings by eight distinguished authors during evening or lunch-time events. Among my personal subjective highlights of the conference were the lectures dwelling on theoretical problems of studying postcolonial literature which brought in anthropological perspectives. In the opening lecture, Professor Frank Schulze-Engler directly addressed the motto of the conference by referring to James Clifford’s distinction between “roots” and “routes” and illustrating how the latter, i.e. spatial and social mobility, have shaped the development of contemporary New Literatures in English. Dr. Sabrina Brancato continued to investigate the concept of Afro-European or Afrosporic literature while Professor Jana Gohrisch discussed canon

formation in Britain in a historical perspective and also prepared and distributed a handout containing an impressive list of “must-reads” by and on black and Black British writers. Dr. Gordon Collier gave an inspiring lecture on the notion of belonging and identity construction in the Caribbean built around the opposition of the mangrove and roots analogies while Kirsten Sandrock systematically approached and presented main tenets of postcolonial theory. All lectures were followed by comments and questions, which in some cases triggered long and heated discussions. Indeed, they were so involving that sometimes they even cut into the coffee break.

The lectures finished just before lunch after which it was high time for us to participate in the afternoon seminars. I had the pleasure to attend a seminar on humour in postcolonial literature run by three distinguished experts in the field of postcolonial laughter: Dr Susanne Reichl, Professor Frank Schulze-Engler and Professor Mark Stein. I am definitely not going to give a cool-headed account of the seminar as I cannot possibly praise it enough. With only seven participants, the seminar had an impressive (though somewhat curious, I agree) teacher to student ratio of almost half a teacher per student. Contrary to our course leaders’ initial warning that analysing humour is “an entirely cheerless exercise”, we were bursting out laughing every now and then at impromptu jokes, witty remarks or surprising puns, which provided us with a healthy balance between academic insight and enjoyment. For five intensive days we explored instances of humour in the writings of authors from the Caribbean, Canada, South Africa (we even acted out a few scenes from Athol Fugard’s play), watched the hilarious British-Asian comedy series “Goodness Gracious Me,” and listened to recordings of Louise Bennett’s electrifying live performances. We also had an exclusive opportunity to host Drew Hayden Taylor before his reading the following day. All in all, the seminar was not only informative and highly entertaining, but also provided fertile ground for a truly independent thought-exchange. All of us could equally contribute to the seminar, be it by commenting, criticising or just listening. It is also worth mentioning how the open-minded attitude of our teachers and their complementary personalities led them to divert our debate in surprising directions and, as if by magic, open up new spaces for discussion.

However, sitting in class was only one aspect of the Summer School. The location of the conference was not limited to Campus Westend and the historic IG Farben Building, as the organisers made sure that we all move around a little bit – just enough to illustrate the conference’s leitmotif of arrivals and departures. In order to meet our readers and/or performers, we travelled to three venues as distinct as The Mousonturm (an independent theatre hosting George Elliott Clarke, Carolyn Gammon and Drew Hayden Taylor), the Art Education Exhibition Hall (an industrial bare-walled space in which we listened to Helon Habila and later got carried away by Bollywood tunes) and the Museum für Kommunikation (beautifully located right by the Main and hosting readings by Tabish Khair and Joan Barbara Simon).

The conference would probably not have been as successful as it was if it had not created space for a number of informal meetings. Sitting in one of Frankfurt’s

pubs we all agreed that late night discussions in an international company over a glass of Apfelwein or good German beer are just so much more fun. The Summer School crew did a wonderful job putting the conference together (e.g. finding a place to stay for participants from outside Frankfurt in the Katholische Hochschulgemeinde) and organising extra events such as a Midweek Party on Wednesday or the Frankfurt Rallye at the beginning of the week, which was an unusual way of getting to know the city and having loads of fun in our small groups. Special thanks to Gunvor Schimdt for that and many thanks to all the organisers for all their efforts, flexibility and lively spirits. Thank you Michelle, Raul, Corina, Heike, Karsten, Mahsa, Aylin, Claudia, Malte, Ivo, Geeske and Katharina.

I arrived in Frankfurt to seek inspiration, discussion, free exchange of thought, and, last but not least, sheer fun of interacting with like-minded literature-lovers both in seminar rooms and over a glass of “after-school” beer (I must admit that the latter motivation was rather strong – I still cannot forget the irresistible taste of Hefebier...). I departed with a head throbbing with ideas, associations, metaphors, theories, academic buzzwords and memories of a carefree one week-holiday. Interestingly, for me the central themes of the conference like migration, othering, identity-construction went on and on as my journey from Frankfurt did not take me back home to Warsaw, but to a lively ever-reverberating metropolis called London, where so many Poles had settled down before and where I too was to spend a year gaining new academic experience. On my plane from Frankfurt-Hahn, I read the marvellous novel by Joan Barbara Simon *Long Time Walk On Water*, which tells the story of the Jamaican girl Rose who in search of a better future for her children found herself on a plane to that very same place to which I was heading. The novel accompanied me on my first days of settling down in my new environment and I just could not help but wonder at the striking parallels between the emigrant experience of Jamaicans and Poles in the United Kingdom – poles apart, yet somehow brought together by similarities of life in “Hinglan”.

For me the week spent in Frankfurt was a refreshing and highly recommendable event. I am already looking forward to the next Summer School.

Magda Konopka (Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University)