

Reflection on 2013 Hughes/Robbins Transatlantic Seminar:

Transatlantic Reflections

Meta Henry

As an undergraduate English major, I treasured Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, but I was equally intrigued by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. For me, Yeats's claim that "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" was a cry of a generation more than a country or even a continent. So, when I heard that one of my favorite professors had taken a "transatlantic" approach to her dissertation, I was sold. I wasn't exactly sure what such an approach might entail, but I was fairly sure I wanted to take it. It made no sense to me to segregate great works of literature into such tiny compartments as nationalities, and it made even less sense during the literary era in which I was interested, when so many great American authors left America to live and write.

When I set out to write my Master's thesis from a transatlantic perspective, I didn't really know what I was doing. I was not aware that there was transatlantic scholarship that I might have used as a framework. The transatlantic scope of my thesis was that I used two authors, one writing in America and one in England, and connected their ideas. It wasn't until this semester and this class that I realized I did not have many of the more tangible connections with which some transatlantic scholars work—no evidence of influence, no travel, no letters, etc. I began to think, perhaps, one needed those things, and that my thesis wasn't transatlantic at all. But then, what was it? A project that paid equal homage to Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman could hardly be considered solely American or solely British. Now, at the end of the semester, I feel I have a more solid grasp on transatlanticism. Transatlantic scholarship, to me, can mean very specific and concrete connections, such as Dickens's tour in America or Stein's move across the Atlantic, but it can also mean more abstract connections, such as how women in two countries responded to social pressures in similar ways, even if they did not realize it, or the nuances in the ways in which their countries influenced them to respond differently. Transatlantic scholarship, by nature, is more fluid than other forms of scholarship. It forces one to view things in new ways, to allow national mythos to be destroyed, and to rebel against artificial labels and categories. And, as such, I believe it resists a narrow definition of what transatlantic scholarship *is*.

Since I see my work situated primarily in the twentieth century, this specific class has given me background and helped me to see the contexts on which my own studies will rest. I believed that Modernism lent itself to transatlantic studies due to its unique moment in history. However, I now see that the transatlantic aspect, at least, was not unique to this period, and that literary connections between American and Britain existed long before the expatriates of the early twentieth century. One aspect of transatlantic culture in which I am especially interested is the women's rights movement. I discussed this in my thesis, but I did not know all of the background and connections that we discussed in class. I have more material, and also a deeper understanding of research methods, in order to go back and revise portions of my thesis in potentially very productive ways.

For me, personally, literature has always been about allowing a glimpse into faraway times and lands, teaching empathy and a love of diversity, and, finally, demonstrating that we may not be so very different after all. Literature can help a wealthy, white man in New York understand the plight of an impoverished Haitian woman, if only just a little. Transatlantic

studies makes these connections clearer and more evident. It illuminates how print culture has allowed people to read tales from other lands, and it also allows scholars to study texts from seemingly disparate nations to find common bonds. Perhaps this is what I find so wonderful about transatlantic studies.

But dream teaching assignment aside, this course has also allowed me to envision ways in which I might incorporate transatlantic elements and frameworks into courses that are not strictly transatlantic themselves. For example, in the teaching materials I created, I made a lesson surrounding the Before I Die wall, a transatlantic, or more accurately a transnational, object. I wanted to do something with the Before I Die wall in my composition class, and the more I thought about it, the more obvious the transnational possibilities became—I think due to my training in this course. It was fun to see how I could incorporate elements of transatlanticism into a course that is not even centered on literature. Similarly, I can imagine using a transatlantic framework with theories such as cosmopolitanism and liminal space in teaching many literature courses, especially an American Modernism course, which would be incomplete without discussion of expatriate writers.

I, personally, see transatlantic studies playing a large role in my future as a scholar. I think this is because, more than any one set of techniques, rules, or texts, transatlanticism is a different lens through which to see literature and the world.