

Ella Elbaz, "A Train of Thoughts: Notes on IWL 2013"

A presentation given at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 15 May 2014

Being asked to give a talk on my experience at the Institute for World Literature, I started going through some of my notes and readings – it reminded me of the unique intellectual and social stirring that we had back then – and so I decided to share some of these notes and thoughts in order to give the feel of the institute. I'd like to begin with an excerpt from one of the texts we read in the first seminar I took, Professor Djelal Kadir's "When Literature meets the World." It's a text written by Borges in 1949 on *Quixote*, and I'll give it with the notes I made in the margin:

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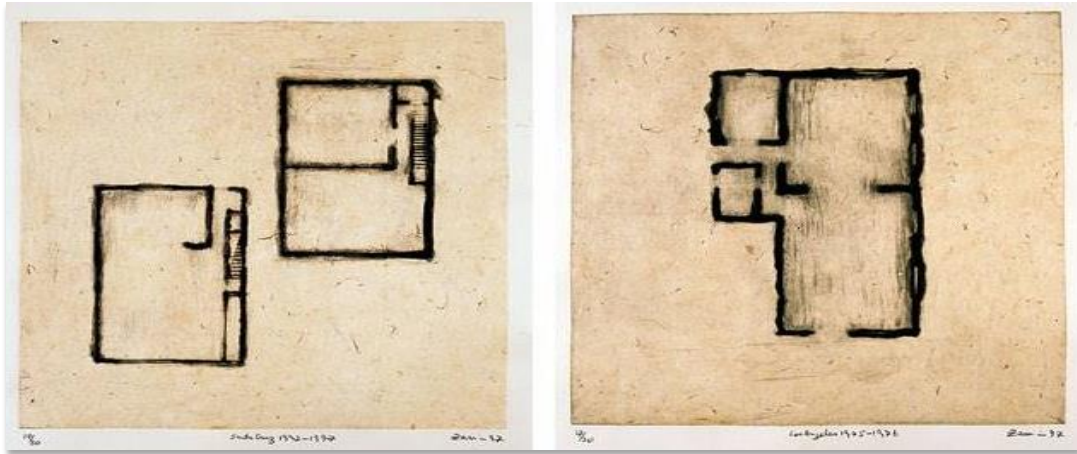
that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.

Translated by J. E. I

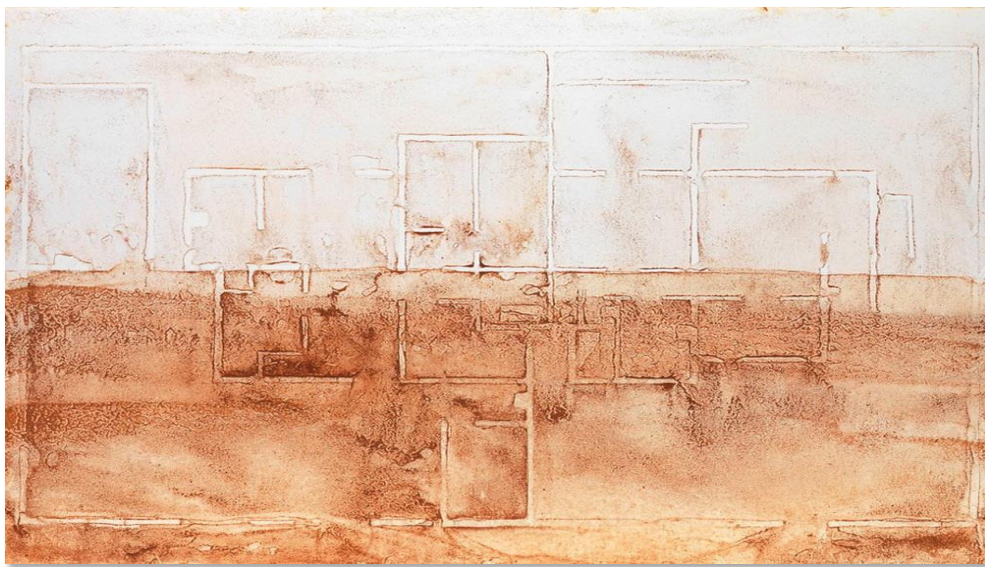
1833  
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I came to the summer school straight after writing the first draft of my MA thesis, and to my projecting mind it sounded very similar to one of my main claims – and so I wrote next to it: "it's *exactly* like the sentence I wrote about Marguerite Duras" – but then, as you can see if you read Hebrew – I erased the word "exactly" and changed to the word "similar". The difference was that I claimed that Duras is using the technique of creating confusion between the real and the fictitious as a reassuring act in order to enable fiction to overpower reality, while for Borges it was an act of destabilization. Why *would* we be disturbed by the thought of merging the two? We, people of literature. Because it unsettles our very ontology, the well-established borders between subject and object, it is uncanny, unhomey.

In a way, the kind of literature which exceeds its limits, which travels beyond the homely and the familiar, is what Prof. Damrosch defines as World Literature: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin [...] any work that has ever reached beyond its home base" (*What Is World Literature?*, 4). One of the major concerns during the IWL was how to define terms such as "home base" and "culture of origin." In his lecture for the program, Homi Bhabha showed us a 1997 art piece by Zarina Hashmi, an Indian artist, called "Homes I Made: A Life in Nine Lines":



Bhabha discussed this image, claiming that the original culture can coexist side-by-side with the foreign one. I could not but think of my own origins through the work of an Israeli artist, Micha Ulman, “Two-Family House” (2013):



One is an etching, the other in sand; both struggle with how to delimit a home, how to limit a place that essentially cannot be differentiated from its outside – notice the entrances and how the paper looks identical inside and outside the house – outside in the sense of the opposite to the “origin.” These houses are seen not from inside but from above, from the perspective of a know-it-all architect, only as a future plan. Ulman’s “two-family house” reflects on the possibility of two separate families – one Israeli and one Palestinian – co-existing side-by-side. He lets the foreign, the other, become a part of his home, and thus he redefines “home.” I’d like to draw a parallel: when our origins, in the sense of our home and culture, are no longer clear as to what is “ours” what is “theirs,” it leads to the unhomely feeling not unlike the realization that reality is not only an origin which fiction draws from but it is in fact inseparable from its fiction. While our home base changes, and the world within literature takes hold in the world outside of it, world literature wanders, it departs from its origin, and disturbs the definition of origin. World

literature becomes alive when it leaves its origins and establishes a new house for itself, a home which inhabits the unhomely.

In the second seminar I took, entitled “Recycling the Epic” and led by Prof. Wai Chee Dimock, we learned that the original text is only a suggestion to use, reuse, reconstruct and deconstruct into a new form, to recycle the unusable so it becomes available again. The original text is “scaled down and set adrift as a floating particle [...] sticking out as cyst or bump, irritant or stimulant” as Dimock writes on *Gilgamesh* (“Genres as Fields of Knowledge,” *PMLA* 122:5 (2007): 1385). The “recycled” texts we read expropriated the original to the extent of replacing it or even claiming to not have read it (as the Cohen Brothers and Derek Walcott said about Homer). The original does not remain in its solid state but becomes these floating particles that all are welcome to use and change. The course ended with a vibrant question: why do we recycle? Why look back? Perhaps, going back to Borges, because these texts have a hold in our reality, fictitious as they are, or because, if to use another definition of Prof. Damrosch, they are windows through which we see the world – the familiar or the foreign world. The origin – in the sense of reality, home or the original text – is intermingled with its “opposite” – in the sense of fiction, abroad or the adaptation of the original.

From a more personal angle, my studies at the IWL also helped me think about my future research. I hope to use that concept of “recycling,” as I intend to look at variations of the biblical stories of creation within contemporary posthumanist novels, which highlight the copy or the simulacrum versus – or above – the original. So I think the importance of the institute also lies in inspiring and advancing one’s personal work, or at least it was so in my case.

To finish with a more “worldly” matter – the IWL was not only a place to develop intellectually, but also an opportunity to join a larger community of scholars. Looking back, I realize that many of the connections I made during that summer were highly influential later on. In the past year I’ve been going through the tedious process of applying to PhD programs in US universities, and I was amazed and appreciative at how many of the people I befriended were willing to help, review, give advice. Prof. Kadir was one of my recommenders, for which I am grateful. The paper I presented in my affinity group changed considerably according to the response of the group and prompt me to reshape it as a publishable essay (I hope) alongside the information I received from the panel we had on publishing, which was very useful. It also allowed me to peep into a new and different academic framework, which is always enlightening to us comparativists. And finally, I think that to cross your own borders, leave home and meet yourself in a new context, surrounded by brilliant people who will change the way you read, think, and write, is a precious and thrilling opportunity that an Institute like the IWL can give.

*Editor’s note: Ella Elbaz will be attending Stanford University starting in fall 2014.*