Comparative Criticism Discussion Group, 10 February 2014

Participants: Rosie Lavan (St Anne’s/English); Kasia Szymanska (St Hugh’s/MML); Kaitlin Staudt (Brasenose/Oriental Studies); Lianjiang Yu (English); Anita Paz (St Hugh’s/History of Art); Céline Sabiron (Wolfson/English); Thea Bradbury (St Hugh’s/German); Yin Yin Lu (Lincoln/English); Ellen Jones (Lincoln/English); Xiaofan Amy Li (St Anne’s/MML/Oriental Institute/English); Helen Slaney (St Hilda’s/Classics); Junting Huang (St Anne’s/Film Aesthetics)

Texts: Ankhi Mukherjee, ““What is a Classic?”: International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question”, *PMLA* 125.4 (October 2010).

Orhan Koçak, ““Our Master, the Novice”: On the Catastrophic Births of Modern Turkish Poetry’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Spring/Summer 2003 102(2-3).

Introductory observations

On Ankhi Mukherjee’s article (Rosie Lavan):

- This article is in dialogue with two earlier pieces by T. S. Eliot (1944) and J. M. Coetzee (1991) which both addressed this question from different moments and perspectives
- Curious codependence of the classic and criticism is suggested, after Coetzee
- World literature not so much as a canon of texts but a mode of circulation (cf Franco Moretti): world literature implies and/or involves a relationship with the past and a monolingual literary tradition
- Notion of the classic inseparable from notions of empire
- AM questions the question here: what is JMC’s investment in the question which TSE himself already noted was old?
- What is a classic is a question of outliving and post-ness, of living in an age that seems to come after the end of history
- What is a classic is also a question provides literary critics with a viable, sustainable and ethical means of judging literary works and demarcating the field
- In the end question of the classic is perhaps always the question of the outsider

On Orhan Koçak’s article (Kaitlin Staudt):

- His focus is on the Second New movement
- Founding discourse in Turkish literature has been that the Ottoman tradition is separate from the Turkish sphere, so that these questions of nationalism, identity and influence from the past in literature have been spatialised in Turkey
- While these questions might be approached from geocultural/postcolonial perspectives have also to ask how founded in the English postcolonial tradition they might be and to what extent that might be problematic
- Turkish literature is outside the Western system and yet also might be seen as a laboratory of/for it
- Turkish literature famously has neither classics nor a canon because of the rejection of the Ottoman tradition post-1920s
- Thinking of e.g. T. S. Eliot on the literature as instrumental, we might ask how the question of the classic sits with traditions outside the “classics”
Discussion

On the example of modern Turkish poetry

- Distinction in the Turkish case to be made between written Ottoman and spoken Turkish—the latter being viewed as more accessible and yet not traditionally recorded
- Question of the outsider as raised by AM:
  o To what extent can we accept the presentation of TSE as “outsider”?
  o Does this coincide with remarks by e.g. Jakobson on literary theory having been created mostly by emigrants
- Postcolonial model from e.g. Spivak, Said, does not fit the Turkish model
- The concepts of the author, tradition etc in divan literature are so different to Western concepts of originality, the function of the author
- Important to note of the Second New writers their social/educational backgrounds: link might be made to post-war British cultural movements and the reaction against Eliotic high culture
- Why doesn’t Koçak include any original language quotations, which would be especially important at those moments where he is discussing musicality of verse etc?
- Suggestion that Second New poets threw influence backwards: might this be compared to Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and the permanent presence of tradition?

Definitions of the classic and the canon

- Is AM’s definition of the classic problematic? Should we infer that the difference between the classic and the canon is qualitative?
- Are these questions taught/raised on university courses? Does this matter? Does it feel old-fashioned to ask these questions—or are they necessary and current? Is this kind of self-referentiality important? Yes—when it presents itself, as it tends to, in postcolonial/gender studies discourses
- The idea that classics survive is tricky: imputes a strange agency to the text which might be problematic. Cf. to Coetzee
- Institutional questions need to be addressed—as AM does via e.g. ref to the Booker Prize
- Are all survivals from antiquity classics, by virtue of age and survival? How is status and value conferred?
- Interesting to cf to the Great Books courses as taught at Columbia—examples:
  o Literature Humanities (aka 'Masterpieces of Western Literature') syllabus
  o Contemporary Civilization (aka 'Masterpieces of Western Philosophy') syllabus
- Might also cf the ideological contrasts that emerge in comparing a list of top 100 books in the Guardian to a similar list in the New York Times

The role of criticism

- Is Coetzee’s argument that criticism and the classic are co-dependent problematic? While it can be a job of criticism to identify and test the classic it seems limiting to make this the job
- Might we see Eliot as testing the classics through his own poetry and criticism?
- There’s a link to be made from Eliot to education and access to/engagement with culture again
- Concern about the representative function that we make texts play—e.g. this is a South African novel, a Turkish poem etc—and what’s implied or denied by this