

THE VIEW FROM HERE – AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN CYPRUS

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ABSTRACT:

What does “English” mean now?” This is the question with which the new editorial team of this journal opened up their Editorial in 2016 in a volume (no. 65) that expressed the team’s dedication to considering the multiplicity of voices and viewpoints produced by English as a ‘global discipline’. The invitation to contribute to the series of pieces inaugurated in that issue under the title ‘The View from Here’ has been an opportunity for me to reflect on my own position as a teacher of English literature on the island of Cyprus. The questions this process has generated are too numerous and complex to answer fully in a short piece like this. For instance, what does it mean to teach English literature today on an island that is in many ways still caught up culturally and politically between its colonial past and its post-colonial (or, should I say, neo-colonial) present? More specifically in my case, what does it mean to teach Renaissance English literature to university students in Cyprus? How is that inflected by our place in history and current geopolitical position? What differences, if any, are there between teaching this literature to British students and teaching it to Cypriot ones? How does my own position as a Greek-Cypriot academic come into play, for instance, in the kinds of questions I ask and invite my students to ask about texts? The history of Cyprus has always been defined by its unique geo-political position. Situated at the Eastern point of the Mediterranean, at the crossroads, so to say, between East and West, it has been since antiquity the target of a long series of conquerors. Having gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960, the country continues to carry the traces of its long colonial past and a Department of English Studies on the island cannot but be attuned to the various questions that arise from the position of English in the postcolonial world. As we have now moved from an age of colonization to an age of globalization, it should also not fail to address such issues as the shift of English from a colonial language to a global language. These are questions my home department at the University of Cyprus has shown particular interest in addressing, with a range of courses covering Anglophone literature more broadly, in an attempt to invite students to reflect critically on the transcultural role of the English language and English literature in today’s globalized world.

But how does one teach literature that is both linguistically foreign in relation to the students’ native tongue and historically distant from their modern day experience? Educationally, one of the most tenacious elements in the legacy of British colonial rule in Cyprus has been the predominance of teaching English as a second language in the primary and secondary public-school education on the island. By implication, the majority of students who enter the Department of English Studies at the University of Cyprus (following competitive entrance exams) have a relatively high level of proficiency in English. Nonetheless, their exposure to

courses such as Shakespeare is always a bit of a shock initially. No doubt, British students are also removed from the spelling, morphology, and syntax of early modern texts. However, our students here (as I am sure students in various other non-Anglophone countries) are doubly removed from these texts linguistically. Their cultural distance from these texts adds an additional layer to this: unlike British students, they are hardly ever taught such material at school and live in a culture where such figures as Shakespeare are at best merely at the periphery. This contributes to the inhibition with which they often come to Shakespeare classes (not to mention early modern poetry classes that may start with Chaucer or Wyatt). But once these inhibitions are overcome – with a lot of close reading that enables students to acquire greater confidence in reading early modern texts – they start to open themselves up to the more substantial task of critical thinking and analysis.

As one would probably expect, students are often fascinated by such texts as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – partly because the elusive geography of Prospero's island (somewhere between the character's native Italy, Sycorax's Algiers, and Claribel's new home, Tunis) is somewhat reminiscent of their own island's in-betweenness. Likewise, discussion of the question of colonization in the text often prompts them to reflect on their own country's colonial history. This requires some very careful steering so that students learn how to avoid getting into an unthinking type of presentism. But once they realize the significance of historical contextualization and of firmly grounding the text within the culture of its own period, they also learn to appreciate the differences between past and present. At this point, cultural and historical distance from the text turns into an enabling factor that facilitates students' ability to find the value of historical specificity, to acknowledge their own historical situatedness and to reflect on how this shapes them as readers.

Other texts are even more sensitive with regard to students' (and my own) modern-day reality on this island. This is the case with such texts as Shakespeare's *Othello*. Reading *Othello* nowadays, one cannot help but contemplate that while the threat of a Turkish invasion of Cyprus is defeated early in the play with the report that the Turkish fleet has been segregated and 'our wars are done!' (2.1.20), a great part of 'this fair island' (2.3.138) is nowadays under Turkish occupation.¹ Sadly, the history of Cyprus in the last few decades reflects its more distant past in being equally tempestuous: though it gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960, the island was then beleaguered by inter-communal troubles (between Greek Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots) and an invasion of the island by Turkish troops in 1974. The continued mediations of the United Nations and the accession of the Republic of Cyprus into the European Union (EU) in 2004 seem to have done little towards solving the problem. This article is written right after the failure of yet another series of talks aimed at resolving the Cyprus problem, the July 2017 Conference on Cyprus in the Swiss town of Crans-Montana, which ended with Turkey (a country blighted now more than ever by an increasingly despotic regime) insisting on the maintenance of the rights of guarantee and military intervention, and refusing to accept the complete demilitarization of Cyprus as part of a prospective solution. For Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots alike, this development has once again shattered the dream of finding a lasting solution that will bring about the peaceful co-existence of the two communities within a federal state. On an island the history of which has already been tragically marked by political and religious conflict, one fears that

this development may once again re-ignite hostility and increase the distance between the two sides.

Within this context, critical reflection on issues of difference and diversity appears to be essential if Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots are to bridge the differences between them – away from and despite the machinations of high politics. But the population of the island does not only consist of these two groups. Besides the ethnic and religious minorities that traditionally lived on the island (mostly Armenians and Maronites), in the last couple of decades we have seen the influx of various other groups, from both the EU and beyond – including large numbers of economic migrants from Asian countries who find employment here as low-paid workers. Also, in the last few years we have seen the arrival of hundreds of refugees from neighbouring countries as the island has been called (even if to a lesser degree than other countries) to respond to the massive refugee crisis with which Europe and

the Middle East have been faced, especially after the eruption of the ravaging civil war in Syria.

The Mediterranean seems to be an even more heterogeneous space now than it was in the seventeenth century, with all the different groups that trafficked back and forth then and populated many of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Jews, Turks, and Moors besides Christians/ Europeans). For me, the teaching of plays such as Shakespeare's *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice* has been an opportunity to invite my students (the majority Greek-Cypriots but occasionally also Turkish-Cypriots) to think critically about the question of ethnic, racial, and religious difference, the ways in which stereotypes produce and are produced by ideology – both within the text and beyond it – and ultimately to negotiate their own biases. Shylock's reminder in *The Merchant of Venice* that what we all share is a common humanity – 'Hath / not a Jew eyes? ... / if you prick us do we not bleed?' (3.1.52–3, 58) 2 – cannot but resonate poignantly in a society where, sadly, the existence of different forms of diversity often brings us face to face with the many faces of racism. The challenge is for us to learn to appreciate and accept how – to quote from Langston Hughes's 'Theme for English B' (a text I always like to teach in my *Introduction to Poetry*) – 'You are ... / ... a part of me, as I am part of you' (lines 31–2).³ In this process, English (though it can probably never be entirely free from its past as the language of the colonizer) often provides the common medium we can all use to communicate with each other – from Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots to all those 'others' who are now part of our society. Likewise, literature in English (be it original or translated) provides apt ground on which to think together, negotiate, and bridge differences.