

Giorgio Mariani

Transatlanticism then and now?

Review of International American Studies 1/1, 7-9

2006

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Although, recently, there has been a lot of animus about the 'hemispheric' turn in American Studies, it is still an open question as to whether and how the field should be reconstructed to meet such an end and what kinds of implications this will bring along. We have asked four specialists from different quarters of the world (Giorgio Mariani, Manju Jaidka, Tatsushi Narita, and Paulo Knauss) to consider the main issues and challenges involved in reconfiguring American Studies along a hemispheric or transnational axis. The aim of these short statements is not to offer ready solutions to the problems involved, but to stimulate further debate about the future of American Studies in a globalized world.

TRANSATLANTICISM THEN AND NOW?

Giorgio Mariani

Università di Roma 1, 'La Sapienza'

In a recent review-essay entitled 'Transatlanticism Now', Laura Stevens notes that 'so many kinds of projects can be grouped under this rubric [i.e., transatlanticism] that it also threatens to lose specific meaning' (Stevens, 2004: 95). For example, the extent to which transatlantic studies may, or may not be seen as a new thing, depends largely on whether the great deal of comparative work done long before the 'international turn' in American Studies on the histories, cultures, and literatures of the Americas in relation to those of Europe should be seen as fitting into this category or not. Even though they may not have used the term 'transatlanticism', there is no question that Americanists operating outside the US have always been aware of the comparative dimension of their intellectual work. To stick to my field of specialization, European students of the literatures of the Americas have traditionally devoted considerable attention to both the ways in which American texts were received in various European countries and to the reception of European texts in the Americas. The question is, should we consider, say, studies of the Italian or German reception of Emerson's work, or of Emerson's use of Dante and Goethe, transatlantic or not? Regardless of how we answer that question—and I believe it is important that we find answers to it—do we all agree with Stevens that '[a] taxonomy of transatlantic studies would do much to forestall the possibility of overusing this term and thus draining it of meaning' (95)? I insist on this point because it seems to me that a lot of work done in the past by European scholars may be transatlantic to the extent that it deals with texts that crossed the ocean in one or the other direction, and yet such work may have been relatively uninterested in contesting explicitly a nation-based understanding of literary history. Should we reserve the term 'transatlantic' exclusively for work informed by certain kinds of theoretical premises? Or should the term designate any work that connects, in whatever ways, two different shores of the Atlantic world? When, and why, does a comparative study become 'transatlantic'? What are the advantages—if any—of defining it as such?



RIAS may provide a privileged forum for debating these issues as well as for the kind of taxonomical work called for by Stevens: the creation of an archive of 'transatlantic studies' would be of great help to all, especially in light of the fact that a sizable amount of transatlantic scholarship before the rise of contemporary transatlanticism was written in languages other than English. As a way of example, let me just remind you that it took nearly thirty years for the English-speaking public to discover a work as fundamental as Antonello Gerbi's *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo*, which appeared originally in 1945 but was translated into English only in 1973. A truly international mapping of the field can come about only through a great collaborative effort on the part of scholars of different nations.

What makes transatlantic studies so attractive today lies of course with the emphasis they place on the transnational, international, and/or post-national dynamics of cultural and social phenomena. Moving away from models based on rigid binaries and notions of isolated development, the best transatlantic work stresses connectedness, cross-fertilization, and reciprocity. Nations and nationalism (in literature and elsewhere) are no longer seen in terms of 'organicism' and teleological design. Routes are favored over roots, cross-cultural exchanges are highlighted at the expense of myths of uniqueness, the study of multidirectional flows and boundary-crossing replaces the attention traditionally paid to supposedly discrete national identities. Most importantly, perhaps, the renewed attention paid to colonialism, slavery, and the violence of nation-building has done a lot to restore a materialist basis to what remained for too long a dehistoricized area of inquiry. Yet, given these premises, it is certainly ironic that the most influential transatlantic studies have so far developed along a US–England axis (with occasional forays into France), thereby ignoring to a large extent the larger web formed by interrelations between Central and South America, Africa, and the rest of Europe. What do we think, for example, of Stephen Shapiro's charge in 49th Parallel that 'collapsing the Atlantic basin into a self-contained, mono-linguistic zone, transatlanticism risks reinstating a triumphalist Whig history, which disseminates an uncomplicated version of imperial events'? Personally, I find it both interesting and alarming, for example, that in the same issue of *American Literary History* in which the Laura Stevens article was published, the essay that immediately precedes it (by Kirsten Silva Gruesz) should lament 'the invisibility of translation as a critical term in American Studies discourse' (85). If Gruesz is right (some may think she is not), then we must certainly ask ourselves what kind of serious transatlantic work can be done without taking—at all levels—translation seriously. How can we convincingly deconstruct nation-based paradigms and epistemes unless we are aware of the role played by translation, both as a tool of empire and as a strategy of resistance?

Along these lines, a further problem may be worth keeping in mind. If broadly defined 'as the study of textual productions dating from the age of exploration to the present that originate in Europe, Africa, and the Americas' (the editorial statement of the new online journal *Atlantikos*), transatlantic studies comprises an immense field of inquiry. Regardless of how eager we may be to move

beyond one nation-paradigms, or simplistic single-nation versus single-nation comparisons, I wonder whether anyone can master the multilingual, multinational, multicultural expertise required to make sense of the transatlantic world as a whole. It seems to me that when a field becomes so large, we are inevitably faced with a conundrum quite similar to the one over which Franco Moretti, on the one side, and his critics, on the other, have been recently debating in relation to the question of how to study 'world literature', or literature as a global reality. Should we content ourselves with Moretti's 'distant readings' in order to draw very broad pictures of the transatlantic world, or should we instead be happy to 'remain rooted in the study of one region while reaching over to another' (Stevens, 95)? I suppose that ideally we would all like to move beyond 'a self-contained mono-linguistic zone' (as Shapiro would want us to), without making translation invisible (as Moretti's model stands accused of doing). How we can actually do so, however, is perhaps difficult to say. More generally, I wonder if we should see transatlanticism as a new epistemic key that would inevitably force us to redraw in major ways the boundaries of older disciplinary formations, or whether—given its still uncertain and contested contours—we should think of it as an attempt to extend and complicate American Studies that can coexist with extant institutional and curricular divisions.

WORKS CITED:

- [anon.], 'Statement of purpose', *Atlantikos: A Journal of Transatlantic Scholarship*; <http://www.msu.edu/~atlantik/statement.html> (last accessed July 12, 2006).
- Gerbi, A. (1945) *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo: storia di una polemica, 1750–1900*. Napoli: Ricciardi;
- [—] (1973) *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900*. Jeremy Moyle (trans.) Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Gruesz, K.S. (2004) 'Translation: A Key (Word) into the Language of America(nists)', *American Literary History* 16.1: 85–92.
- Shapiro, S. (2001) 'Reconfiguring American Studies? The Paradoxes of Postnationalism'. An interdisciplinary *Journal of North American Studies* 8, <http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue8/shapiro.htm> (last accessed July 12, 2006).
- Stevens, L.M. (2004) 'Transatlanticism Now', *American Literary History* 16.1: 93–102.