

FLORENTINA ANGHEL*
University of Craiova, Romania

UDC: 821.111.09:005.745; 821.111.09:141.136

■ INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO SPIRITUALITY IN THE LITERATURES OF THE ENGLISH SPEAKING WORLD

Vienna Conference, July 6-9, 2009

For four days the Department of English of the University of Vienna was an oasis of spirituality hosting the international conference "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Spirituality in the Literatures of the English Speaking World". The conference was organized in collaboration with University of Nancy 2, France, and University Paul Verlaine, Metz, France, – the latter having a research center on "Literature and Spirituality" – and aimed at convening scholars from all over the world to exchange the results of their research in the domain. The event was made possible due to Dr. Franz Woehrer, University of Vienna, who conceived and organized the entire activity with the assistance of Dr. John Bak, University of Nancy 2.

Faith, mysticism, creativity, eternity through spirituality, which brought together scholars from different domains (literature, philosophy, theology, linguistics), mingled within the labyrinthine university campus that inspiringly harmonized gardens with fountains, statues and buildings, echoing past and present, concrete and abstract in the spirit of the conference. The participants, who came from thirty-one countries, tackled the theme of spirituality from different perspectives and as reflected in various cultural contexts (British, American, Canadian, Australian, etc.). As a consequence, the concatenation of the presentations was arranged so as to naturally and coherently flow from general and theoretical papers on spiritual experience and the understanding of this concept to papers exploring spirituality in literary works. The scholars' contributions led to the harmonious interlacing of the sections according to diachronic and synchronic principles: from aboriginal spirituality to contemporary spirituality and from male fiction to women writers and to literature for children.

The first day opened with a section on "The Creative Mind and Spiritual Experience", whose papers mainly focused on the relation between painting and literature, between the visual and the audible in the spiritual experience shaped due to the artists' creative – re-creative minds. Transgressing temporal limits and the limits of the artistic manifestations of spirituality in literature and painting, Francis Bacon's *Utopia* (17th c)

* Kontakt podaci (Email): florianghel1@yahoo.com

was compared with Francis Bacon's abstract painting (20th c) and a parallel between the way in which William Blake illustrated John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress* and a religious allegory of the seventeenth century was built.

The participants of the second section delivered papers related to Sufi mysticism and Hindu mysticism as reflected in literatures in English. They demonstrated how Sufism influenced both West Asian and British and American literatures over centuries from Shakespeare to Byron, Emerson and Doris Lessing and how philosophy, religion and mysticism intermingled in Sri Chinmoy's poetry.

Spiritual and pseudo-spiritual contemporary literature challenged the participants to attempt an answer to various re-writings and distortions of the Biblical messages twisted through postmodern technical devices. The speakers emphasized the relation between author, postmodern devices and the horizon of expectation with reference to spirituality by focusing on works by Monty Python, Jeanette Winterson, Robert Harrison, etc. They also discussed the philosophical questions of good and evil and the relation between postmodern irony and spirituality.

The interdisciplinary approaches of the second day's opening section extended the research area to sociology and politics being centered on postmodern utopian texts, on gender and cultural spirituality in relation with Indian women and on incarnation and the spirit of the social revealed as a result of the use of theology and literary criticism as a reading grill for social scientific writings.

Whereas the above-mentioned ideas had established a net of spiritual experiences and their relations with different domains of research (theology, philosophy, sociology, painting, literature), the following papers would provide more insightful approaches to literary works. An entire section is dedicated to the role of aboriginal spirituality and its representations in Australian literature, while also initiating the audience in the Native-Canadians' cosmological view. Early representations of spirituality in the works of the Medieval English mystics were approached from a linguistic perspective and from a psychoanalytic one revealing "the castrating function of mystical vision" in Camille DeVilleneuve's opinion (*École Pratique des Hautes Études*).

The next section was dedicated to John Donne, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw showing the intertwining of physical pain and mystical experience and having as a source the late Medieval Catholicism. Starting from psychology and Christian theology, some features of the "Divine presence" as mystical experience were identified in George Herbert's poetry.

The last group of scholars scheduled for the second day delivered papers on spirituality in the 18th and 19th-century English poetry. The problem of artistic identity arising from spatial and ideological isolation and implying speculations on the audience was debated in relation with or against the spiritual poetic personas in works written by Christopher Smart, William Wordsworth and Chiang Yee, Coleridge and John Donne. Spirituality assuring the communion artist – space was extended to the correspondence between Blake's poems and his paintings and drawings reflecting his spiritual theory of vision.

The third day of the conference offered sessions on spirituality in 19th-century American literature and in Modern British, Irish and American literature. Hardy's work was interpreted as an example of the author's criticism of the church, which should not

be seen as an attitude against religion. James Joyce's works from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake* were explored on the speaker's quest for the edicts presented by Andrea Bennet and Nicholas Royle and for experiences to affirm or to negate spirituality.

Representatives of Modern writers and their works constitute the central topic of the next section. Stevie Smith's poetry and manifestations of spirituality were analyzed by contrasting female experience and male religious authority. In an interdisciplinary approach to Margaret Atwood's work it was demonstrated that religion and spirituality do not overlap. The African spiritual belief in temporal simultaneity which is translated into the coexistence of the dead, the living and the unborn was identified in Tony Morrison's fiction. The spiritual power of Morrison's novels was also seen as a response to the historical trauma of the African-American people.

On the last section of the third day the speakers illustrated spirituality in Emily Dickinson's poetry either as an identity problem perceived from a psychoanalytic perspective or as a spiritual alienation. Starting from Northrop Frye's *Words with Power* and the "authority" of literary language, the concepts of myths, metaphor and verbal mode were used to show the relation between the Biblical intertext and the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. S. Fitzgerald and Toni Morrison.

The last day of the conference brought the participants closer to their times by exploring the works of twentieth-century and contemporary writers. Ellen Glasgow's work, partly reflective of spiritual insights, was seen as a quest for heaven. Spiritual journeys were also explored in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and in Fanny Howe's fiction. The spiritual potential of the contemporary American male fiction was presented as an attempt to re-write the Book by considering the twentieth-century cultural context in John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and as an example of comprehensive spirituality, which explained the fact that a core common to Christian, Buddhist, Vedantic and Sufist traditions could be identified in Jerome D. Salinger's work. The *Left Behind* series of Apocalyptic novels covering the last seven years on Earth was presented as a mixture of fiction and Fundamentalist theology.

The closing section of the conference was a cross-cultural reception of spirituality ranging from contemporary Caribbean literature as a recipient of cultures and religions that revealed a hybrid identity, to a linguistic approach meant to demonstrate the risk that English runs in the translations of Buddhist works. Concluding the programme of the conference and also assuring its cyclicity by announcing a new beginning, literature for children was presented as a means to shape young readers' understanding of the spiritual, ideas supported with examples from *The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* by Michelle Paver.

The social programme of the conference made the participants continue to share their ideas on spirituality beyond the walls of the University of Vienna. The concert at Vienna State Opera on the first day and an inspiring excursion to Heiligenkreuz Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in 1133, organized on the third day enhanced the touch of spirituality the participants contributed to. Animated by vivid debates and discussions, the conference whose architecture rendered it unitary and comprehensive at the same time should be perceived as a great contribution to spirituality as expressed in literature. For further details concerning the participants and the programme of the conference the website http://anglistik.univie.ac.at/uploads/media/PROGRAMME-Printed_Version.pdf can be visited.