

1. Events

Event Details

Re-Membering Hospitality in the Mediterranean

Scientifique

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Conférence

Start date : 26 March 2020 10:00

Date de fin : 27 March 2020 18:00

Where : Toulouse

Hosted by : Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

Information sources :

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/4083973/re-membering-hospitality-mediterranean-international-conference>

Hospitality is a complex, paradoxical concept whose etymology foregrounds an aporia. Derived from *hostis*, the foreigner and potential enemy, the *hospes* or host welcomes the guest, implying an intricate relationship between receiver and received, insider and outsider, as well as a compensatory relation since both *hospes* and *hostis* derive from the Latin verb *hostire*: “to treat as equal,” “to compensate,” “to pay back” (Grassi 35). The foreigner shifts from the position of an endangered, alienated subject to one who is included within the protective folds of the polis and the home. In welcoming the other, the host not only shares his home and power, but also entitles the guest (if only temporarily) to his own power as despot—etymologically, “the master of the house who lays down the laws of hospitality” (Derrida 149)—while reasserting his own domination. As a result, the commutative essence of the relationship between host and guest—whereby, as René Schérer argues, the host “acknowledges, through and thanks to the figure of the guest, his own exilic self” (40)—is perpetually jeopardized. In Claude Raffestin’s formulation, “hospitality is a right that warrants the transgression of limits without entailing violence” (166; qtd. Grassi 23).

Indeed, hospitality in the Middle Ages was compulsory as anyone who was sedentary was likely to turn into a pilgrim: vagrants and beggars who transgressed the social order always found a protective threshold and a right of passage in medieval society. Hospitality was the ultimate gift, a gift that transcended the laws and materialized in the food or horses often bestowed upon the guest when he departed. This is what leads Schérer to posit that “hospitality has and is an economy, in the full sense of the word, because it

constantly reestablishes the production and circulation of a flux that would otherwise petrify and impoverish itself” (126).

In contemporary society, however, this ultimate gift of the self—whereby hospitality stands out as “more than human, always engaging the divine [since] it is a god who is welcomed, a god bought by gifts, a mysterious Other” (Schérer 129)—is ruthlessly shattered. Developing Derrida’s concept of “hospitality, hostility, hostpality” (45), Ana Manzanás Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez demonstrate that “hospitality [...] can cannibalize the Other in a radical act of incorporation that apparently dissolves limits and demarcations” (84). Such is the case in the garden of evil in George Saunders’s “The Semplica-Girl Diaries” (2012), in which inanimate immigrants hanging on a line exemplify the cruel devitalization and “commodification of the Other” (Manzanás Calvo and Benito Sánchez 178). Hospitality violently, albeit surreptitiously, transforms the guest into a ghost, not unlike Oedipus who, Derrida shows, “presents himself as a spectre” (654) in the last abode where he is to be secretly buried.

This process of disincarnation takes the form of fierce linguistic, economic, and political processes of dehumanization, on both personal and state-orchestrated levels. The exiled Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès imagines a dialogue between *hostis* and *hospes* in which the latter asks: “What do you come to do in my country?” He insists that “your attachment to my homeland does not justify your permanent presence amongst us [...] Stranger, you will always be a foreigner to me. Your place is your home and not here.” Seeking refuge in the hospitality of language, the guest ripostes: “Your country is that of my language” (Jabès 51). Linguistic (in)hospitability harkens to another etymological derivation of the verb *hostire* in the Latin *hostia*—the victim meant to alleviate the gods’ wrath. This root gave birth to the French word *hostie*, whose English translation, *wafer*, derives from a different origin, but still conveys the same idea: the ultimate selfless gift as a compensation for death and absence through a displaced form of presence.

Such is the ultimate meaning of Oedipus’s cryptic burial in a place where he does not belong and where he is not to be physically located, a place that he nevertheless keeps haunting. Though spectral and intangible, his presence is most acutely real in the very tears of Antigone. Her grief imparts visibility and reality to what is denied any visible existence: “Antigone asks something clear: that he see her at last, [...] and see her weep. More specifically: she commands him to see her tears. The invisibility, the placelessness, the illocality” (Derrida 115).

These preoccupations are particularly resonant in the context of the Mediterranean space, where Anglophone writers have often seen a Promised Land that was soon to be denied or corrupted “by the specter of inhospitality” (Manzanás Calvo and Benito Sánchez 55). Whether we think of what Hakim Abderrezak reads as a story of the “Mediterranean seametery and cementery” (149), or of Cypriot artist Christoforos Savva renegotiating “his seemingly marginal positionality” as a modernist and avant-garde artist who disputes Western paradigms of modernity and tradition (Danos 78), we realize that artists and writers embedding their work in the Mediterranean always confront the dialectics of hospitality, and that the stereotyped vision of a fundamentally hospitable Mediterranean is at odds both with ancient laws and modern practices. Lawrence Durrell’s experience of hospitality in the Greek islands, for example, shows a world of “fragmentation, instability, and connectivity [...] that opens up new connections” (Keller-Privat 47-48) by shattering and redefining common understandings and practices of hospitality. As “The Middle Sea” or the “Mare Nostrum” which has repeatedly been the stage of strong economic and colonial strife, the Mediterranean powerfully brings to the fore the ontological difficulty that lies at the heart of the praxis and ethics of hospitality. For, as Derrida reminds us,

“what is difficult are the things that don’t let themselves be done [faire], and that, when the limit of difficulty has been reached, exceed even the order of the possible” (127). How does the Mediterranean invite us to rebuild new forms of artistic and literary forms of hospitality that challenge these boundaries? Antigone’s tears remind us that “there is no hospitality without memory. A memory that did not recall the dead person and mortality would be no memory. What kind of hospitality would not be ready to offer itself to the dead one, to the revenant?” (144).

Hospitality, therefore, is not a given fact of social praxis, or an innate ethical urge. Rather, it is a way of being in the world that is constantly reconstructed through past narratives, voices, and art works. These reconstructions “recall the dead and the mortal” in order to foster a boundary-crossing impetus that defies the laws. The process of reconstruction takes various forms and crosses linguistic boundaries through the appropriation of the Other’s language, words, and images, forging a committed type of heteroglossy (Paddington). It is always a reconstruction that challenges political and national forms of belonging. How then can the Mediterranean be considered as the ideal locus for re-membering hospitality? How does it operate as a creative node of hospitality that links the sea and the hinterland? How does it implement a radical connectivity between lands and people? How would it corroborate Jabès’s assumption: “Abiding by the unformulated imperatives of hospitality somehow implies learning our dependence upon others” (70)? May we read Anglophone Mediterranean explorations in the poetry, fiction, and travel books it has nurtured as the place where “the boundless hospitality of the book” (67) is redefined and reasserted—remembering and transcending the memory of all those who, in the wake of Odysseus, brought nothing with them but the fluidity of time and space, and the intimate knowledge that we are all transient guests on earth?

Papers may focus on the displacement and resemanticization of Mediterranean and Biblical narratives of hospitality in Anglophone literature and the arts. The Mediterranean may also be envisaged as a locus of displaced, unexpected hospitality for early modernist female writers. Anglophone writers taking shelter in the Mediterranean also experience the “limits of difficulty” in the hospitality they are granted: an indomitable sense of estrangement lies at the heart of a new belonging, notably in works that contribute to the re-membering of a hospitality that is constantly endangered. The specific locations of hospitality—pilgrims’ hospitals, hospices, convents, and, later on, hostels and hotels—also play an important role in the narratives redefining the contours of the Mediterranean, where early travelers navigated between hostility and hospitality, and where modern ones often stand out as precarious guests. The hospitality that writers and artists have sought, received, and rebuilt on Mediterranean shores, particularly in the tightly woven artist colonies that spanned the Near and Middle East in the twentieth century, may also be envisaged as a hermeneutic tool for the critique of our present-day “sick hospitality” (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 107). From that perspective, the Mediterranean may be considered as the locus of a newly founded commonality whereby, as Andrew Benjamin argues, “centrality would be attributed to relationality. Being-in-common [...] marks the primordially of relationality, and thus what counts as human being needs to be incorporated within a relational ontology” (29).

Historical, mythological, ethnographic, visual, literary, cinematic, and intermedial approaches are all welcome provided that they define and articulate a concept of hospitality, its relation with memory, and the confrontations and reunions that substantiate the emergence and deployment of new forms of commonality within the Mediterranean space.

Practical informations :

Abstracts (300 words) are due by September 15, 2019 to Yasser Elhariry (yasser.elhariry@dartmouth.edu), Isabelle Keller-Privat (isa.kellerprivat@gmail.com), and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (etamalet@tulane.edu).

Contributors will be notified of acceptance by September 30, 2019.

A selection of papers will be published in an edited volume in the wake of the conference.