



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S43. The Writer, the Collection and the Museum

Thursday 31 August: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm

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In a time span stretching from Renaissance Wunderkammer to post-modern museums, we wish to explore the various modes in which the culture of collecting – art or artefacts – and exhibiting have been and still are inscribed in the text as either theme, metaphor, formal model, location, or mirror of its author. Topics addressed will therefore include: Lieux de mémoire/oblivion; visual/verbal archives; the writer in the museum; the museum in the text; exhibiting and narrating; the politics and rhetoric of taxonomy, inclusion/omission; women as collectors, collectibles and viewers; writing/exhibiting “otherness”; authentication, identity and validation; textual collections and authorial construction.

Session 1

Text, Sex and Sculpture at the British Museum in the Early Nineteenth Century

Dominic Janes (Birkbeck College, University of London)

The British Museum was, and still is, one of the greatest repositories of ancient sculpture and artefacts. However, in the nineteenth century tensions surrounding the purity of Christianity were exacerbated by the development of studies in comparative religion. These suggested that pagan antiquity bequeathed a tainted legacy of immorality to Roman Catholicism. This paper will, therefore, investigate Protestant writers who read the collections of the British Museum as a source of moral pollution in the context of contemporary Catholic revivalism.

The Curiosity Cabinet Exhibition(ism) in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*

Béatrice Laurent (University of Antilles and Guyana)

In his fascination for the hidden, the mysterious and the grotesque, De Quincey proves to have the cabinet keepers' frame of mind. Typical curiosity cabinets housed plant and mineral specimens from distant lands, unusual artefacts from “primitive” cultures, weird weapons, skeletons of animal or human “monsters”, anatomical wax figures... Thomas De Quincey's imaginary curiosity cabinet, such as evoked through his reveries,

nightmares and hallucinations, contains most of that and much more : the body of the artist himself carefully dissected, his brain unfurled and displayed, the weird body of the text tumescent with the spontaneous outgrowth of digressions, and the body politic of early 19th century England laid bare.

John Clare and the Poetics of Taxonomy: Sane Collector/Mad Collectable.

Francesca Cuojati (University of Milan)

Moving along in the rural scenery of pre-enclosure Northamptonshire, John Clare's original poetic practice was 'holistic' in the sense of being one and the same thing with the activity of the natural historian given to botanizing as well as to ornithology and mineral gathering, and with that of the collector of folk music and ballads. Both the enclosure of the common land around native Helpston, and the subsequent confinement of the poet in lunatic asylums had Clare's poetic ecology clash with a spatial and cultural environment deeply invested by a dramatic epistemological rupture. My paper discusses first how Clare's writing registers such nineteenth century changes in the knowledge and perception of the natural world and the self, and then goes on to investigate how it questions the grid of the new policies and rhetoric of knowledge

Reconsidering George Eliot's Museum. An Enquiry into the Artificiality of *Romola*

Francesca Muscau (University of Buffalo)

Since its publication in 1861, and in spite of its positive reception among a selected and educated Victorian public, *Romola*, has suffered from accusations of artificiality, excessive erudition and lack of "organic" unity. In numerous readings the novel is seen as a collection of foreign imports at odds with George Eliot's "true" British character. Bardo's library, the morbid environment that shapes Romola's intellectual formation, becomes, in this way, a metaphor for the novel and the act of writing itself. By reading *Romola* as a metaphor for George Eliot's private museum, I intend to investigate the connection between a museum-like writing and the concept of artificiality.

Lost Correspondence: from *The Aspern Papers* to *Persuasion*

Roberta Gefer Wondrich (University of Trieste)

The paper is concerned with the metonymic relevance of the motif of the artist's secret papers as objects of a literary "quest" pursued by a scholar or amateur figure, which appears to be a common thread in some narrative fictions, from the short story to the postmodern romance, all of which prove indebted to the archetypal model of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888). In Saul Bellow's "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" (1954), David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1966), Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1991), and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), the culture of collecting is a prominent issue through a host of connected themes and motifs that include - among others - the idea of the private museum, the sphere of desire, both erotic and epistemological, where the papers are a symbolic figuration of its citationality, the (female-gendered) "spoil" along with the phenomenon of cultural fetishisation and the Jamesian "visitation of the past", its attempted textualization and transformation into an archive of memory by means of a cultural and personal quest.

“Again in the Museum Mood”: Remembering the Museum in Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*

Joshua Kotzin (Marist College, Poughkeepsie)

In *The Ambassadors*, Strether’s conflicted sense of mission, as a pilgrim at the Louvre, a consumer of European culture, finds its expression in the uneasy tension within the two terms of “the museum mood”—permanent against fleeting, past against present. Even museums, it turns out, are limited by human perspective and brought to meaning by a desire mediated through memory. Strether’s predisposition to read Paris while “under the charm of the museum” becomes of interest not just for this novel but also for a broader understanding of the way museality underwrites the framed narration in much of James’s late work.

Conversation Pieces: Mario Praz’s *House of Life*

Laura Scuriatti (ECLA, Berlin)

In 1958 Mario Praz published *La casa della vita*, an autobiographic book in which he described in detail the collection of eighteenth century furniture, art works and objects that he assembled over decades and housed in his Rome apartment of Via Giulia. Although the collection is now housed in a different apartment, where Praz spent the last years of his life, I am going to investigate how both the book and the collection articulate autobiographical narratives, for example through the exploration and appropriation of eighteenth century taste, and how these narratives relate to one another.

Session 2

Poets in a War Museum: Kenneth Lohf and his Collection

Elizabeth Denlinger (The Pierpont Morgan Library)

Kenneth Lohf (1925-2002) was fascinated by British war poetry, amassing a collection of near 5,000 items covering both world wars. Lohf was himself a pilot in World War Two, a poet and, as rare book librarian at Columbia, a professional collector. This paper explores two sets of circumstances: first, and more importantly, how Lohf’s collection, when in his hands, functioned as a site of both memory and self-fashioning fantasy, and second, how his collection has changed since, on his death, it became part of an institution, the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Nabokov Visits the Museum: a Case of Modernist Historical Anxiety

Will Norman (New College Oxford)

My paper responds to the idea of the museum as a locus of late modernist historical anxiety in the works of Vladimir Nabokov, in particular his short story “Poseshchenie muzeya” (“The Visit to the Museum,” 1939). Nabokov construes the museum as issuing an interpretative challenge: to forge connective links between diverse historical fragments in such a way as to transform them into a pattern to be assimilated into the experience of the autonomous subject. Nabokov’s anxiety rests in the resistance of the collection to

interpretation, the inability of the visitor to tame history by reading it subjectively, and therefore the persistence of historical time as contingent and hostile to the subject, a threat to autonomy.

The Museum Behind Beckett's Last Plays

Mariacristina Cavecchi (University of Milan)

Beckett's concern with the making of his stage images has grown steadily and is everywhere apparent in the sources frequently cited as those which gave him the idea for his plays. As a matter of fact, Beckett's interest in painting was highly serious and long-lasting and he was a visitor to the major museums and art galleries in Dublin, London, Paris, Berlin, Erfurt, Dresden, Hamburg and New York. My paper aims at analysing the paintings and visual works of art which would appear to have inspired Beckett's images. This should allow me to sketch what might be defined as the virtual Museum behind Beckett's visual imagination.

"Shelf after Shelf after Shelf": Museums, Collections and Cabinets in A.S. Byatt's Writings

Carmen Lara-Rallo (University of Málaga)

In her short story "Body Art" (2003), A.S. Byatt offers a detailed description of a collection of sinister objects that stands as her latest portrayal of the art of collecting, sorting, and displaying. Indeed, in the course of her writing career, Byatt has developed an enriching relationship with museums and collections that is not reflected solely in her contribution to catalogues of exhibitions and other museum publications, but that emerges above all in the recurrent depiction of such elements in her novels and short stories. In the light of this, the aim of the present paper is to explore the representation and function of museums, collections, and cabinets in Byatt's fiction, focusing mainly on the figure of the collector, and on the image of the cabinet of curiosities in *Possession*.

The Writer-Collector as Fetish-Breaker: Parodying Stereotypes in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*

Corina Crisu (University of Bucharest)

It is the aim of the present paper to focus on Ishmael Reed's reconfiguration of the African American identity in *Flight to Canada* by rewriting Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Brown's *Clotel*, and Dumas' *Georges*. Using the fertile soil of this textual collection, Reed indulges in a subversive exercise of uprooting conventional meanings through a demythologizing endeavour of *rethinking* his black and white precursors. More specifically, the paper discusses Reed's parody and re-evaluation of two significant stereotypical images to be found in the literary and historical archives of the epoch: the black pacifist and the rebellious mulatto. The paper demonstrates how Reed's postmodern text reconfigures the nineteenth-century models of self-made manhood and proposes fiction-made characters, parasitically feeding on earlier texts, liberated from essentialist views, the heroes refuse to be labelled as 'real' or 'imaginary', to wear monochromatic costumes, and to be pinned down to a certain temporal or spatial dimension.

Exploding Taxonomies, Exhibiting Textuality: J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973)

Mariadele Boccardi (University of the West of England)

The Siege of Krishnapur intertextually echoes contemporary accounts of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, exploiting the colonial archive to construct a post-imperial revisionary narrative that examines the conditions for the Empire's representation of itself and the means by which that representation is enforced. It further reflects on the power of taxonomic arrangements in its second historical referent, the 1851 Exhibition, whose representational power is at the forefront of the novel's post-imperial critique. My contribution to the seminar investigates, firstly, how taxonomy and archive inform Farrell's narrative; and secondly, how the novel undermines the very basis of its structure and plot in a gesture of defiance towards what it has throughout admitted is a hegemonic representational strategy.

Art Galleries in Paul Durcan's Poetry

Chiara Sciarrino (IULM Milan)

From August 1990 to March 1991, the Irish poet Paul Durcan observes and writes his way of interpreting some paintings of the National Gallery in Dublin. The collection of poems which came out of this experience, *Crazy About Women* (1991), inevitably links to his poems written after the paintings hung at the National Gallery of London (1994). It is my intention to look at some of his poems in order to assess the role played by painting and by its location as an ideal backdrop for the poetic voice to be hinted at, fully described, turned upside down or be derided.

Postcolonial Writing and the Archives of Empire: Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*

Wendy Walters (Emerson College, Boston)

Author Patricia Powell's 1998 novel, *The Pagoda*, represents a multicultural Jamaican history, at the same time that it depicts the crumpling, endlessly re-writing nature of such discursive projects. Powell's novel foregrounds the collected materials of the archive (letters, maps, ships' logs, paintings, etc.), as a way of deconstructing the supposed hegemony of British imperial identity in Jamaica. My paper focuses on three fictional collections of documents (letters, articles, and diaries) that structure the ways in which we read this novel and this portrait of a nineteenth-century multicultural society. Each of these three archival collections represents a strand of the transnational history Powell narrates.