

THE END OF UNIVERSALITY: NEW COLLECTIVITIES IN CURRENT LITERARY STUDIES

O FIM DA UNIVERSALIDADE: NOVAS COLETIVIDADES NOS ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS DE HOJE

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ABSTRACT: The author investigates how the literary studies reacted to the conceptual crises of universalism, especially after WWII. In order to replace a concept that refers to the ability of a literary work to transcend time and space, literary studies should focus on different and specific collectivities that, situated in time and space, read and interpret literary works. The author makes use of the concept of the obverse, in which two poems, from different historical moments and intellectual traditions are compared based on a common social-historical problem they are trying to solve.

KEYWORDS: Comparative literature. Universalism. Obverse.

RESUMO: O autor investiga sobre como os estudos literários reagiram à crise do conceito de universalismo, sobretudo depois da II Guerra Mundial. Para substituir um conceito que se refere à capacidade de uma obra literária transcender tempo e espaço, os estudos literários deveriam indagar sobre as diferentes coletividades específicas, no tempo e no espaço, que leem e dão significado à obra literária. Para isso, o autor se utiliza do conceito de “obverso”, em que dois poemas, de épocas e tradições intelectuais diferentes, são comparados a partir de um problema sócio-histórico que tentam resolver.

PALAVRA-CHAVE: Literatura comparada. Universalismo. Obverso.

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INTRODUÇÃO

It is a pleasure to join you for the thirtieth Encontro Nacional da ANPOLL. I will speak today about two enduring problems in our common field of literary studies, collectivity and perspectivism, and gesture toward some contemporary approaches to these problems. I hope to provoke reflection on how we arrived at the present moment in literary studies, and how we might think about both the past and the future in our common discipline.

Perhaps the best way to begin is at the beginning of a book of criticism that figures prominently in the library of our field.

"Os leitores da *Odisséia* lembrar-se-ão..." These five words that begin the Portuguese translation of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* introduce several things at once: a chapter about the narrative orientation and verbal style of the Homeric poems; a book about the establishment of the realist tradition in the West; and the founding document of post-World War II comparative literature, probably the most admired, challenged, and read book in the field of that era. Those five words, however, carry another agenda. As Gayatri Spivak observed about ten years ago in her book *Death of a Discipline*, comparative literature depends on a working doctrine of collectivity, which is really a way of invoking the readers to whom a given work speaks along the axis of history, transhistorically, and along the axis of the present, across international borders. When we pay attention to the collectivity at work in a book like *Mimesis*, we are attending to this population of readers: who are they imagined to be? How are they invoked? How does their assumed interest shape the concerns of the critical project? And how does the project create the readership it wants for itself? Perhaps the most fundamental question is something like this: if the assumed collectivity were stated directly ("this primary work spoke to this audience in the past and that one in the present"), would it make sense as an assumption in line with the practices of the critical project? Questions like these remind us how much of the role of comparative literature has been to put in the foreground issues that are germane to all of literary studies. In some sense, I will suggest, the recent history of the discipline — of comparative literature, but also of literary studies generally — recapitulates the changes in how these readerships have been conceived.

The first thing to say is that literary studies was for many years haunted by the problem of universalism. Universalism in comparative literature shares a name with major issues in philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence but is a distinct problem that offers its own challenges. Unlike these other disciplines, where universalism is typically an article of active belief — for instance, the jurist Francisco de Vitoria's position in *De Indis* (his relectio of 1537) that the colonized peoples of the Americas belonged to a world population subject to natural law and the rights that attend it, or in the past century, the promulgation in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — comparative literature as a field enables (and at some moments even encourages) an unspoken universalism. This universalism understands collectivity as a given: literature, and comparative literature, is by and for everyone, and everyone is left undefined and unelaborated on. The national literatures have their own particular working doctrines of universalism, to which we can perhaps return later.

In its earliest phases, from the nineteenth century to World War II, comparative literature as a discipline relied on a set of universalist assumptions to carry out much of its business: its ventures in biography, generic classification and definition, and thematic analysis were typically undertaken in the name of a common reader who was everyone and no one. Comparatists wrote for one another in an Adamic language of methodology, even (or especially) across national and linguistic borders.

It is commonly held that World War II was the threshold between a founding model of the discipline and what it is today, for several reasons but mostly because the war drove a number of European scholars into American universities, where they articulated a fresh sense of disciplinary possibilities and a new cosmopolitanism. I think this account is true as far as it goes, but what should be remembered — and several recent historians of the field have reminded us — is that the war itself dealt a blow to universalist assumptions about literature more decisive than any theory. The scholars who relocated to the United States during and after the war found themselves working within a redrawn disciplinary horizon. The world as they had regarded it — which is to say the Europe that had formed the ground of comparative literary studies — had been slashed into opposed, sometimes unintelligible cultural zones, the existence of a common cultural heritage had been thrown into question, and little could be assumed in the theory or practice of a comparative literature across these problems and divisions.

It has become a cliché to treat Auerbach's *Mimesis*, written in 1946, as the exemplar of this historical moment, but where twenty or more years ago that book used to be seen as the expression of a comparative literature closed to non-European perspectives (which to a limited view, it is), it ought to be seen instead as an attempt to rethink the nature of collectivity for comparative literature in a broken world. Auerbach's project does not assume a universalist stance for the discipline but returns to first principles in attempt to figure out what constitutes the realist tradition in the west. And its historical importance, I think, is not that it demonstrates a coherent method but that it struggles to uphold a discipline that can no longer rely on an unspoken universalism but must speak to its version of collectivity at every turn. From Auerbach on, the most intriguing, and the most moving, examples of comparative literature have been those in which the absence of a universalist credo is noted and addressed. For this field, and really for all fields in literature, some variety of universalism is always at hand; no one is immune from the blandishments of a position that arises out of not so much a theoretical doctrine as a self-absorption or a blindness. I want to suggest that the history of the larger discipline of literary studies in the twentieth century can be divided into the universalist and post-universalist periods, before and after World War II, before and after *Mimesis*, and that much that is interesting about the latter era comes from the struggle against an unspoken universalism — a resistance that must be enacted afresh with every turn of methodology, and articulated again in nearly every piece of scholarship. Universalism haunts the field, as the

founding article whose repudiation once would have been unthinkable — so much early scholarship in the field depended on it as a methodological convenience but also received it among the apparatus of a world-view — but came to be seen as necessary for comparative literature to become true to its own principles.

Consider the work of a European scholar who came to the United States not during World War II but a generation earlier, in 1926: this is the Czech comparatist René Wellek, whose book *Theory of Literature* (1949), written with Austin Warren, corresponds to Auerbach's *Mimesis* as one of the primers of postwar comparative literature. From the first pages of the first edition of *Theory of Literature*, it is clear that the dilemma of imagining a collectivity troubles Wellek's project in ways that we should recognize now even if it was still indistinct to him and his contemporaries. Wellek's purpose in this book is to advance a theoretical framework for identifying "the concrete object of the work of art." In that connection, the first chapter offers some not terribly illuminating reflections on the problem of universalism, with the predictable conclusion that formalist description and interpretation obviate the need for a reliable alternative to the unspoken universal:

É preciso reconhecer, porém, que toda a qualquer obra literária é simultaneamente geral e particular, ou — talvez com maior exactidão — simultaneamente individual e geral. Pode distinguir-se entre a individualidade, por um lado, e a particularidade completa e unicidade, por outro. Como todo o ser humano, cada obra de literatura tem as suas características individuais; mas compartilha também de propriedades comuns a outras obras de arte, tal como cada homem tem traços comuns a toda a humanidade, a todos aqueles que pertencem ao seu sexo, à sua nação, à sua classe, à sua profissão, etc. Podemos assim generalizar, a respeito de obras de arte, teatro isabelino, todo o teatro, toda a literatura, toda a arte. Tanto o criticismo literário como a história literária visam caracterizar a individualidade de uma obra, de um autor, de um período, de uma literatura nacional. Mas esta caracterização só em termos gerais e com base numa teoria literária pode ser realizada. A teoria da literatura, como um *organon* de métodos, é a grande necessidade da formação literária de hoje.¹

Not only has the question of the collectivity of literary studies — the 'who are we?' of both literature and literary criticism — been subsumed into a received debate about the ontology of works of art, but the prospect of incommensurability between populations of writers and readers — and more threateningly, between particular writers and readers — shows itself fleetingly, and is dismissed: "como todo o ser humano, cada obra de literatura tem as suas características individuais; mas compartilha também de propriedades comuns" and so on. The prospect that Wellek will not entertain in detail, here or elsewhere in *Theory of Literature*, is that even as history has fractured literatures and intellectual traditions and rendered certain concepts (the universal, the great, the natural) suspect or even useless, it has likewise rendered the undifferentiated readership of literature into a multiplicity of readerships divided by language, historical experience, sex, and other factors. With that premise, the mission of comparative literature shifts unmistakably: from settling the common basis of a universal literary tradition with a small number of outposts in metropolises around the world, to negotiating the terms of comparison among many more such outposts, metropolitan and peripheral alike, without a reliance on universalism, tradition, or even a common notion of literary value.

This is the specter of incommensurability that Wellek, Auerbach, and their generation confront, as the first comparatists to do business without a universalist ideology in the background; in *Mimesis*, *Theory of Literature*, and elsewhere in the work of this cohort,

¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Teoria da Literatura*, trans. José Palla e Carmo, 5th ed. (N.p.: Publicações Europa-América, n.d.), 18.

one can see these scholars consider the fuller implications of a post-universalist order, and back away from it. In Wellek's case, the backing-away takes the form of reducing the looming incommensurability to the matter of differences between individuals rather than the ruptures brought about by conquest, slavery, colonialism, diaspora, subjugation, and so forth—conditions that could scarcely be far from the mind of the Czech Wellek, who began *Theory of Literature* only one year after the Munich Agreement began the process of turning his native country over to Nazi Germany partly under the pressure of internal ethnic tensions. The imaginable zones of difference among readers and comparatists, we might say, make an almost unbearable subtext in these scholarly books, glanced at but not explored, while Wellek, Auerbach, and the rest struggle with the problem of reframing the discipline after the unquestioned demise of universalism. This is a challenge I confront in my own work, and I suspect you do too: how to imagine and corroborate an audience contemporaneous with the works of the past, and how to assemble a collectivity for our own interpretation in the present.

Something else is visible in the same passage from Wellek: the task of literary criticism is to offset universalist claims about literature with the particularities of works, authors, and other entities. This is the formalist world-view: that the outmoded premise of a universalist readership and discipline will be suspended in favor not of a comparative literature that reinvents itself outright in the face of incommensurability, but of a recovered universalism that operates through formal description and interpretation. "Tanto o criticismo literário como a história literária visam caracterizar a individualidade de uma obra, de um autor, de um período, de uma literatura nacional. Mas esta caracterização só em termos gerais e com base numa teoria literária pode ser realizada." The theory of literature becomes the basis of a new universalism, not metaphysical or ethical, as in so much foundational writing in the field of comparative literature, but formal and thematic. The universalist claims that embarrassed this generation of scholars will be set aside and replaced by an alternate set of claims that pertain to forms and structures instead of to works or authors. The response to the end of universalism is to bring back a limited version of the same, coincident with literary theory.

At the same time, Wellek and his contemporaries realize that such an attenuated universalism still demands some concession to history, to the incommensurabilities that remain within the collective dimension of literary study. This fact conditions the appearance of what I take to be the main theoretical venture of the book, the definition of perspectivism. As Wellek explains,

É-nos pura e simplesmente impossível deixar de sermos homens do século XX ao empreendermos a apreciação do passado: não podemos esquecermos das associações das palavras que usamos, das atitudes recentemente adquiridas, do impacto e da herança dos últimos séculos. Não podemos transformar-nos em leitores contemporâneos de Homero ou de Chaucer ou em espectadores no teatro de Dionysus em Atenas ou no Globe de Londres. . . . [Ao mesmo tempo], o investigador histórico não se contentará com julgar uma obra de arte apenas do ponto de vista da nossa época: isso é um privilégio do crítico prático, que revalorará o passado em função das necessidades de um estilo ou movimento contemporâneo. Para o investigador histórico será até instrutivo observar uma obra de arte do ponto de vista de uma terceira época que não seja contemporânea nem dele nem do autor, ou examinar toda a história das sucessivas interpretações e críticas de determinada obra, pois isso lhe servirá de guia para a detecção do significado total. . . . A resposta ao relativismo histórico não é um absolutismo doutrinário que apele para a 'imutável natureza humana' ou para a 'universalidade da arte.' Devemos, antes, adotar uma concepção para a qual parece adequada a denominação de 'perspectivismo.' Devemos ser capazes de referir uma obra de arte aos valores do seu tempo e aos valores de todos os períodos subsequentes. Uma obra de arte é 'eterna' (isto é, preserva uma certa identidade) e 'histórica' (quer dizer, passa por um

processo de desenvolvimento que logramos descortinar). . . O 'perspectivismo' quer dizer que nós reconhecemos haver uma poesia, uma literatura, comparável em todas as épocas, que se desenvolve e evolui, cheia de possibilidades. A literatura não é uma série de obras singulares sem nada em comum, nem uma série de obras encerradas em ciclos temporais como Romantismo ou o Classicismo.²

What is Wellek doing here? One is tempted to see this gesture as the rehabilitation of a humanist notion of literature, that is a universalist notion, under the protective coloration of a high modernist concession to multiple perspectives. Even the "perspectives" here are strangely uniform, according to which "we" move together from the present to the past, but there is always a collectivity that overgoes the accidents and injuries of history. On its face, the definition of perspectivism probably means to go no further than this. And yet: in his attempt to offer a safety-valve to let off the pressures of a gathering sense of incommensurability, and at the same time to qualify the limited reinvestment in universalism that *Theory of Literature* offers earlier, Wellek (with whatever degree of awareness) opens a door that will in turn lead to a comparative literature more thoroughly disengaged from universalism — a largely decentered discipline of multiple locales and few absolutes, many perspectives but few doctrines. If the postwar history of the discipline sees a stark shift away from an unquestioned universalism, Wellek's perspectivism is one of the first attempts at a terminology for what we would have to develop in its place: a cultivation of difference among readers, writers, and critics as to what literature is, how and what works mean, and to whom criticism and theory speak. Even the elevation of literary theory to the status of a "universal" discourse would presumably be subject to these multiple perspectives: how? **[Perhaps by a kind of historical reconstruction: recovering the theoretical instruments of the past and of the world outside Europe, and putting all of these into conversation with each other. Haun Saussy's scholarship of the early 1990s does this with Europe and China, and there are many more examples in recent years.]** What I am observing, then: Wellek announces in effect two approaches to the problem of universalism: one theory, and perspectivism. They have staggered effects. They aren't harmonized in his account; but perspectivism probably trumps the other.

In this postwar era, then, the action in literary studies, and especially in comparative literature, has been moved: to the zone between the universal and the contingent, between general legibility and incommensurability. It is a striking change of intellectual landscape for the field, obviously owing much to the historical conditions of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and promising much that was to be redeemed much later with the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978: a book that (its earliest readers were surprised to learn) owed a great deal to Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Both books reset the dials of the discipline, as they found it, to account for a world, and a world of literature, quite different from the one in which their disciplinary assumptions were formed.³ My own view is that Said's project also owes something to Wellek and particularly to this moment in *Theory of Literature*, in which the epistemological and ethical conditions of the field are under revision.

While Wellek and Warren were developing *Theory of Literature* in Iowa City, Auerbach was composing *Mimesis* in Istanbul. Of course his emphasis is historical rather than theoretical: tracing the development of realism rather than only the workings of forms and styles at a given moment (although he gives us a great deal of the latter along the way). Starting from those first six words, however, Auerbach also posits — discriminately, explicitly, by stages — both a historical and a present-day collectivity, and fashions his

² Wellek and Warren, *Teoria da Literatura*, trans. Palla e Carmo, 49.

³ Herbert Lindenberger, "Appropriating Auerbach: From Said to Postcolonialism," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 11, n. 2 (2004), p. 45-55.

method to bring them together. That method demonstrates Wellek's perspectivism in action: each chapter treats one major work on its own historical terms but in view of the present, naming the optic of the past (as I have recently said elsewhere) in a critical language of the present. If there is a formula that animates the extraordinary sympathy for discrete periods and standpoints that runs throughout *Mimesis*, it is this perspectivism between past and present.

Auerbach's book belongs both to his moment and to ours, of course, and it's worth asking how this set of terms matters to us in the present. If Wellek's perspectivism represents one prophylactic posed against universalism on the one hand and incommensurability on the other — an expedient addressed to the two problems of the moment — then we might ask what is missing here. I'd like to point to a lacuna that both tell us something about that mid-century moment and set an agenda for future work right up to the present. This is a working model of how perspectivism operates in lived reality — that is, in historical times and geographical places. Let me give a concrete example. I am principally an early modernist, but I also work on the literatures of the Americas over time, and especially the development of responses to early modern values and aesthetics in the modern period. If there is an area of literary study in which we need a response to an unconsidered universalism and a demonstration of how to theorize and recover perspectives in operation, this is it; or to put it another way, the literature of the Americas is all about collectivities, but we don't always have the best means with which to identify them for the purposes of interpretation.

In a recent essay I have argued that a poetry of the Americas, if such a thing exists, is made out of distant connections, parallel projects, and cross-cultural doublings.⁴ To capture something of this network of coincidence that is not, in the colloquial sense, coincidental but highly determined through history, culture, and poetics, I have proposed the concept of the obversal. An obversal is a relation between two or more poems that occur in different places, different cultural situations, perhaps different languages and traditions, around a common sociohistorical problem or challenge: when such an occasion is refracted in poetry, it can produce poems that are obverses of each other — faces or surfaces, like the sides of a coin — that are not opposites or reversals of each other but alternative versions of a single problem or question. We might think of the obversal as rhyming not through form but through history.

A poem caught in an obversal is in some way consubstantial with another poem with which it shares a particular historical situation; obversals represent two or more faces of the same coin, neither one of which is primary; in this they differ in import from poems that answer one another, are related intertextually, or simply share a genre or mode. What often makes such poems relevant to one another, makes them obversals, is that they are the outcomes of historical situations seen from different sides, with a core element held in common: for instance, key words of more than poetic meaning, an event, or a locale (in the strict geographical sense of a setting in which social relations are constituted).

For instance, consider first Thomas Wyatt's "Tagus, Farewell," a poem presumably written on the occasion of Wyatt's departure from Spain and the court of Charles V, where he was the English ambassador from 1537 to 1539. It first appeared in a collection called *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557, the eighty-fifth of ninety-one poems attributed to Wyatt in that collection.

Tagus, farewell, that westward with thy streames
Turns up the grains of gold already tried,
With spur and sail for I go seek the Thames,
Gainward the sun that shew'th her wealthy pride
And, to the town which Brutus sought by dreams,

⁴ "Interamerican Obversals: Haroldo de Campos and Allen Ginsberg Circa 1960," in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 618-32.

Like bended moon doth lend her lusty side.
My king, my country, alone for whom I live,
Of mighty love the wings for this me give.⁵

There are a number of observations that should be part of any interpretation: that the poem is based on the contrast between the English Thames and the Iberian Tagus, rivers that to a sixteenth-century Englishman suggest home and expatriation respectively; that a corresponding contrast between sun and moon implies something like a two-sided English subjectivity, the sun representing the public, commercial aspect and the moon the dreamy, lusty side; that the ringing affirmation of the couplet is modulated slightly when love of nation shades perceptibly into Wyatt's typically pragmatic stance toward the reality of living under absolutism — "alone for whom I live" also means "alone by whom I live"; and that the eight-line poem is to a sonnet something like what the sonnet is to a canzone, a compressed and pressurized redaction that forces out certain perspectives that might have rendered the speaker's attitude more complex; and yet those perspectives — such as an offset to the couplet's affirmation, perhaps an acknowledgment that he lives for something besides king and country — call themselves to our attention in implicit fashion, inviting us to see this poem as the octave to a ghostly sestet and to wonder what such a sestet might have said. All of this belongs to a fairly standard close reading, and these kinds of insights are conditioned by the assumptions of such a reading: that the poem is an integer, that form is a vehicle for delivery of meaning, that the places mentioned here are important semantically but not otherwise.

But let's entertain the possibility that this is to impose a modernist protocol on such a poem. What are the questions that such a protocol discourages us from pursuing? What if the convention here — call it fluvial lyric of exile — is more important than the actual poem we are looking at? What if places in early modern poems are not merely semantic elements but passageways into alternative worlds and collateral poems — that is, Wyatt's Tagus is rooted in this poem differently than the places that occur in Fernando Pessoa's or Elizabeth Bishop's poems? What if this poem is not an integer but a fraction?

The early modern experiences of diplomacy, commerce, imperialism, and slavery, among other things, establish the circuits or networks that make such poems possible — or perhaps necessary, if we allow that poetry is a medium by which such circuits communicate. Wyatt's "Tagus, farewell" belongs to such a circuit, and one of its obverses is the sonnet "Brandas águas do Tejo" by Luís de Camões.

Brandas águas do Tejo que, passando
por estes verdes campos que regais,
plantas, ervas, e flores e animais,
pastores, ninfas ides alegrando;
não sei (ah, doces águas!), não sei quando
vos tornarei a ver; que mágoas tais,
vendo como vos deixo, me causais
que de tornar já vou desconfiando.
Ordenou o Destino, desejoso
de converter meus gostos em pesares,
partida que me vai custando tanto.
Saúdoso de vós, dele queixoso,
encherei de suspiros outros ares,
turbarei outras águas com meu pranto.

(Gentle waters of the Tagus, you flow
across the fields, nourishing the herds,

⁵ Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 98.

the blooming plants, the flowers, and the birds,
delighting the nymphs and shepherds as you go.
Sweet waters of the Tagus, I don't know when
I'll ever be able to come back home to you,
and, anxiously, before I say adieu,
I begin to doubt if I'll ever return again.
Destiny, intent on finding a way
to turn my joys to sorrows, now commands
this difficult parting, full of regrets and fears.
Still longing for you, and complaining, I sail away,
to breathe my sighs in the airs of foreign lands,
disturbing distant waters with my tears.)⁶

A generation younger than Wyatt, Camões moves outward from the Tagus on his own imperial errands, to Morocco and Goa as soldier and colonial administrator. Camões' Tagus is a pastoral river that feeds green fields but his poem somehow occludes Lisbon, the seat of the crown that sends him overseas; next to Wyatt's encomium to king and country, in a collateral reading, Camões' resentment of what he calls "destino, desejoso de converter meus gostos em pesares" reveals the mind of the colonial factotum perhaps more vividly than this sonnet would alone. By contrast, Wyatt does not so much hide his two cities, Toledo and London, as he renders them mutually dependent complements: Toledo and the Tagus look westward, to gold and probably to America, while London is eastward, wealthy, proud, and lusty. One, Spain, is fluvial and outward while the other, England, seems riparian and circumscribed, and through Wyatt's imagining of the two nations' relation to their chief rivers we can understand the sense of Camões' complaint that "de tornar já vou desconfiando": these two poems evoke two national conditions between about 1540 and 1550, namely country and empire or kingdom and empire. Wyatt's position, even down to the formal level of the octave without a sestet, registers the limits of his king's imperial ambitions and professes acceptance of them, while Camões knows that his king's demands ensure that once on the Tagus he will likely never return. So far, then, these two poems show more together than they do apart, and they are linked not by allusion or circumstance only, but by a locale, the Tagus, that enables each poet and his readers to imagine his relation to the national purpose. The integer here is not two fairly minor poems, an epigram and a sonnet, with their partial horizons, but the poetic locale of the river that connects two men, perhaps ten years and one hundred and seventy miles apart, one looking east and the other west. Whether the obversal is conditioned by an event, a vocabulary, or as in this case a locale, such poems encourage us to find their obverses and step through them into an alternate account of the same reality.

The concept of the obversal gives us a purchase on the problem of collectivities in the Renaissance and American societies; it is in a sense a completion of Wellek's perspectivism, in that it reinserts that mode of reading back into history and place. (We need, I think, another, complementary concept — which we might call the divagation—to describe poems whose artistic and intellectual coincidences are represented by a common spatio-temporal situation: these start from the same time and place and go outward into the world.) Obversals show us the relations among poetic events widely scattered in space and culture, and not contemporaneous in time so much as in relation to a common event; one is tempted to say that the poems gathered into obversals are the same poem conceived and produced from very different standpoints.

In the essay of several years ago I broached, as modern examples of the obversal, two sets of twentieth-century poems that are roughly contemporaneous but seem to offer little

⁶ Luís de Camões, *Selected Sonnets*, ed. and trans. William Baer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33.

foundation for a cross-reading: these are Allen Ginsberg's poems of 1959 through 1961, first collected in *Kaddish* (1961) and later augmented in the *Collected Poems 1947-1980* — especially the run from "Lysergic Acid" through "To an Old Poet in Peru" — and Haroldo de Campos' *Galáxias* of 1963 and after, especially the incantatory poem known as "circuladô de fulô." Ginsberg and Campos share a precursor in Pound, but otherwise diverge in their models. Campos treats Pound essentially as a European poet reaching back first to symbolism and to the troubadours, while Ginsberg augments this tradition with the prophetic and hortatory poetics of Walt Whitman and William Blake. Oblivious to one another, Ginsberg and Campos represent alternative poetics of the Americas at a single moment. I chose the moments of *Kaddish* and *Galáxias* because they find both poets at a second stage or transition: expanding the cultural and intellectual resources available to them, getting past the protocols and styles that served for their early work, and traveling, both literally and figuratively.⁷ This phase of Ginsberg's work was provoked by his travel to Europe and Latin America, where he began to develop what one biographer has called "a global consciousness";⁸ Campos' turn toward *Galáxias* was catalyzed by his first trip to Europe, including a return through the Brazilian northeast during which he "rediscover[ed] Brazil via the world. The hybrid and the ecumenical."⁹ In each case, the second stage is activated by a new awareness of a particular American vantage or location installed in the world; in each case the transition involves a poetry differently oriented — speaking within a broader circumscription, addressing the world as a concept in metaphysical as well as geopolitical terms — and a struggle to produce poems that acknowledge, include, capture the world. On these terms two poets who built alternative versions of a postmodern poetics move closer to each other, and the poems of these moments sometimes dissolve into voices that make Ginsberg sound like Campos and vice versa. And in their transitions, Ginsberg and Campos produce poems that might be treated as obverses, or alternative engagements with problems of history and knowledge.

On the other hand, the poems involved in a divagation are — probably in most cases — very different from each other, but their relation is constituted through their proximity in time and space. If Ginsberg's poetry of the late 1950s and 1960s can be read as an obverse to some of the experiments taking place in Brazilian avant-garde poetry of the same period — each poet trying to solve what amounts to a corresponding problem in his development at that moment — then Ginsberg is found, not in an obversal but in a divagation, with the poets who joined him at the Six Gallery on Fillmore Street in San Francisco on October 7, 1955, for the reading that made famous his poem "Howl"; and the poems drawn into that relation include Gary Snyder's "A Berry Feast" and Michael McClure's "Point Lobos Animism," and Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*, all of which were read or conceived that evening.

It might be hard to say which relation discloses more identity between its elements, the divagation or the obversal. One tells of relations in presentia, the other in absentia; one is about a crossing of paths in time and space, the other about a complex historical correspondence. But to understand, for instance, early modern poetry or inter-american poetry in all their complexity, we need both kinds of terms. This is a circumstantiation of Wellek's position on perspectivism — and a concrete step toward imagining collectivities in action.

My interest in both describing and making collectivities shows up in two other ventures. As president of our national organization, the Modern Language Association of

⁷ The state of Ginsberg's poetics in 1956 is summarized by Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 101-04.

⁸ Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 279.

⁹ This remark from a biographical sketch of the 1980s is quoted in A. S. Bessa's introduction to *Galáxias*: <http://www.ubu.com/ethno/poems/decampos_galaxias.html>

America, I have the privilege of announcing a theme for our annual convention, and for the 2016 convention in Austin, Texas, that theme will be 'Literature and Its Publics: Past, Present, and Future.' The subtitle is important because it encourages us not only to reconstruct collectivities of the past but to imagine, and convene, those of the present and future.

The second initiative is the digital salon for literature and the humanities, Arcade (<http://arcade.stanford.edu>), that a group of colleagues and I have been developing for the past five years. Arcade exists to assemble new collectivities through its existing features such as peer-reviewed digital journals, blogs, and multimedia; and a new feature we've been building over the past year, called Colloquies, is explicitly an attempt to fashion new communities of interests among readers and writers. Each Colloquy gathers recent and forthcoming articles, book chapters, videos of recent lectures or conferences, blog posts, and other items around a central topic, which might be "Poetry after Language" or "Imagining the Oceans"; each one is open to submissions from readers, and may be remixed by readers into Colloquies of their own. To me this kind of project exemplifies how we attend to the matter of collectivity in the digital age, and I invite you to participate. In the same spirit, I hope that my participation in ANPOLL continues an era of collective thinking and exchange between our communities of literary scholars.

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