

**A COMMON STRANGENESS: CONTEMPORARY POETRY:  
CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS, COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

Jacob Edmond

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Globalization, multinational capitalism and global free market, together with technological innovations have broadened the horizons of cultural exchanges in the past few decades. A change in thinking and consciousness started to develop after the Second World War and even more so, after the end of the Cold War in 1991. What seemed like an endless battle between the capitalist West and the communist East has ended with the outward triumph of capitalism worldwide. Whether it is the appropriate term or not to define our present, we are now living in a multicultural, globalized era. Cultural, social and literary studies have also taken a trans-national turn, and the discussions in the area of comparative studies have for some time dealt with the binary of social, political, historical, linguistic and cultural, sameness and strangeness.

Jacob Edmond, of the University of Otago, starts his book, *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounters, Comparative Literature*, by briefly accounting for the socio-political global changes caused by the end of the Cultural Revolution in China (1976); the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989); the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (1991). He then sets out his main concerns, already palpable in the book's subtitle: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounters, Comparative Literature. Edmond raises the questions which are at the bases of the vital and ongoing debate in cultural and literary studies today:

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How have these economic and geopolitical events transformed the way we think about literature and culture on a global scale? How have avant-garde poets like Perelman and their readers like Jameson participated in and responded to these historic changes? What might their responses tell us about how we have come to understand our own era as both more global and more diverse? What might they reveal about the historical and rhetorical structures that produce these poles of sameness and difference? What is the history—and what is the poetry—of this common strangeness? (2)

Extending the kaleidoscope of possibilities in the diverse comparative approaches to literature—more precisely poetry, in this case study—Edmond analyses and acknowledges different “multilateral cross-cultural referents and personal encounters” (3) between six avant-garde poets from post-Soviet Russia, China and the United States, giving the reader examples of poets who have actively responded to the historical changes “by intertwining linguistic strangeness and multiple cross-cultural engagements in ways that offer new possibilities for reconceiving literary and cultural studies” (3). The book extends the approaches of formulating a comparative study to literature and culture, going beyond the binaries of them/us, sameness/difference, local/global and East/West, presenting alternatives for the recognition of a commonplace in the difference and strangeness.

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In order to portray the trans-national and multicultural awareness which is shaping the literary canon of our present time, *A Common Strangeness* makes cross-cultural readings of the poets taking as examples and case studies six specific avant-garde poets, from countries which played key roles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century historical changes: the Chinese Bei Dao (1949-) and Yang Lian (1955-); the Russians Arkadii Dragomoshchenko (1946-) and Dmitri Prigov (1940-2007); and the Americans Charles Bernstein (1950-) and Lyn Hejinian (1941-). Although the theoretical track followed in the book can seem complex and the reader’s attention might easily be caught at first by the specific peculiarities of each poet and his poetics reflected individually, Edmond’s overall thesis, which brings together these six concrete examples, becomes clearer once the conclusions are reached. These poets’ individual peculiarities come together by means of a poetic production which addresses responses to the same historical changes: “These poets’ attentiveness to poetics, to how we construct an image of the world in language, not only leads to an acute awareness of the rhetorical structure of sameness but also offers ways of writing—and so thinking—our world differently” (6).

In chapter one, it is interesting to learn how the Chinese prose and poetry writer, Yang Lian, is accurately compared to Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, through the nineteenth century figure of the *flâneur*. While in exile in Auckland, New Zealand, Yang illustrates in his collection *Unreal City* the condition of the exile, superimposing Beijing onto Auckland. These cities are seen through the

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eyes of a walker in the city. By using the figure of the “flâneur in exile” as a figure of comparability in this encounter, Edmond suggests an interesting point of comparison: “[...] the flâneur in exile emphasizes collision, encounter, and touch, rather than models of comparison that either claim mimetic commensurability or pit global homogeneity against local particularity” (16).

In chapters two and three, Edmond examines the different encounters (correspondence, translation, collaboration) between the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and the American poet Lyn Hejinian. These encounters help to shape Dragomoshchenko’s book *Sky of Correspondence*, in which the different kinds of correspondences have diverse meanings: “Their collaboration takes the form of a bilingual correspondence that intermingles private letters with poetic texts and that addresses correspondences and noncorrespondences between Russian and English, between the Soviet Union and the United States, and between language and the world” (45). Particularly interesting in the sense of a comparative approach is Dragomoshchenko’s Poetics of Co-response, which “[...] offers an alternative model based on encounters among particulars or fragments that respond to one another but never unify” (49). The Language Poet Lyn Hejinian, influenced by Shklovsky’s theory of poetic estrangement, and her personal immersion in Russian culture, links in her work “[...] three kinds of estrangements: poetic estrangement, the estranging effect of her Russian experience, and the estrangements as the bases for a community that would unite Russian and US writers” (73).

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When considering the Chinese poet Bei Dao in chapter four, Edmond examines the poet’s responses to his experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution, in a moment in which globalization reached China, by turning his interest towards exploring the world and world literature. Bei Dao does not set his work within the binaries local/global or individual/collective, but by using allegory, as Edmond explains, he “emphasizes the historical flux and contested readings that gave birth to our current era” (96). Although Bei Dao’s work can be addressed in a national and local context, it also holds a strong appeal to universal literature and can be considered globally. This is also the case of the works of the Russian artist and poet Dmitri Prigov, who is treated in chapter five as a cross-cultural conceptualist. Dmitri Prigov, who mostly uses iteration in his artistic production, as Edmond comments, establishes a “global project”, putting together the national and the transnational. “Prigov’s work offers a model for reading the contemporary world that depends on neither absolute sameness nor total strangeness, on neither local difference nor global culture [...]” (163).

The last chapter of *A Common Strangeness* observes the work of the American, Charles Bernstein. Edmond points out that “Bernstein’s writing emphasizes the

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place of rhetoric in thinking comparatively and cross-culturally and in addressing the relation of literature and culture to globalization” (165). Edmond’s notes on Bernstein’s reconsideration of Ezra Pound’s poetics and thought are stimulating and worth reading as they exemplify Bernstein’s aesthetics.

*A Common Strangeness* is a highly recommended book for all scholars interested in comparative approaches to literature. It is notable that Edmond is fluent in Chinese and Russian, a necessary tool for conducting comparative literature studies, a tool which he has used to provide the reader with English translations of the Chinese and Russian texts. Also noteworthy are the rich end-notes, which together with the wide-ranging bibliography will be of great service to specialists in these studies. *A Common Strangeness* opens the kaleidoscope of possibilities in the academic fields and critical studies of contemporary poetics and comparative literature, demonstrating that there are diverse ways to consider poetry: universally, individually, collectively, globally, locally, transnationally, etc... “A Common Strangeness describes not just the various poetries that emerged from such encounters at a moment in historical flux, but also the comparative methods they might inspire” (198).

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## Works Cited

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