



Introduction

Ludmilla Kostova

“St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo

Over recent years, the highly productive concept of mediation has been attracting a lot of specialized attention in a wide variety of areas of study and research. This is borne out by the newly published *Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Mediation* which explores perceptions of mediation and mediation practices in many fields, with some of them as remote and seemingly unrelated as international politics and foreign language teaching. Mediation has been studied by sociologists, political scientists, historians, anthropologists, theorists and practitioners of translation and interpreting (see the section on translation research and intercultural mediation in *The Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Mediation*), pedagogues, littérateurs favouring diverse approaches to literature, and travel writing specialists. The present issue of *VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences* explores instances of mediation in the areas of history, travel writing, literature, and film, thus contributing to what is still an emergent but undoubtedly vital inter- and cross-disciplinary field. Earlier versions of several of the issue’s articles were initially presented at the online interdisciplinary conference “Narratives of Intercultural Mediation” (11–12 March 2022), which was organized by the University of Veliko Tarnovo.

Definitions of the concept of mediation are a legion; for our present purposes, we will start with the one provided by François Debrix and Cynthia Weber in the Preface and Introduction to the volume *Rituals of Mediation. International Politics and Social Meaning* (2003) of which they are also the editors. According to Debrix, “[t]o mediate is basically to provide a point of contact, an intersection, a place of communication or dialogue between two different positions” (Introduction). He identifies three possible social uses of mediation, which he terms “rituals of mediation” (Introduction). The three “ritualistic modalities” in question are representation, transformation, and pluralization (Introduction). While all three produce social meanings, each is based on a different ideological position. For instance, mediation as representation is a method of “peaceful, neutral interposition” (Debrix, Introduction). On the other hand, the rituals of mediation as transformation “do not simply connect and differentiate” but can also “initiate novel forms of thought,” “usher in new creative possibilities,” and “make visible radical political choices” (Debrix, Introduction). The third modality is primarily associated with postmodern times and favours openness and plurality of signification.

Each ritual of mediation operates through a particular image and/or stance of the mediator. Within the context of representation, the mediator emerges as a neutral agent who transfers meaning by “relating two domains of experience, which, at the same time, must be kept separate” (Debrix and Weber, Preface). In rituals of transformation, the mediator is an active figure intent upon change, who strives to “[re-]make the world in his or her own image” (Preface). The pluralizing mediator rejects closure and favours multiple cultural practices (Debrix and Weber, Preface).

One of the advantages of Debrix and Weber's interpretative model is the emphasis that they place on agency: as we saw, they define the mediator's distinctive stance in each of the three "ritualistic modalities." On the other hand, one may quibble about Debrix's approach to mediation as transformation: for him its "advent" coincided with "the emergence of a modernist cultural avant-garde (from romantics to surrealists), which ... revolutionized the meaning of aesthetics" (Introduction). He thus consigns this "ritualistic modality" to the past and singles out pluralization as the one that best corresponds to the postmodern present. Interestingly, Weber successfully demonstrates, in her own contribution to the volume under discussion, that romantic mediation may be part of latter-day symbolic practices as well. She explores the ways in which the narrative of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during the Second World War became one of "the most powerful sites of romantic mediation of the events of September 11[2001]" (Epilogue). According to Weber, Pearl Harbor "functions as the political, social, and aesthetic medium through which [the US] affirms its wound in order to once again rise up and gloriously restore its sense of self" (Epilogue). Weber's analysis does not merely provide an insight into the workings of what she calls "the collective American psyche" (Epilogue) at a difficult time in American history but, in a more general sense, reveals the role that stories from the past, re-produced by literary, cinematic, digital, or other means, play in mediating events in the present.

As a site devoted to the creation and re-creation of stories literature provides many instances of mediation. Literature can be said to have a troubled referential relationship with what Birgit Neumann calls "the non-literary world" (138). While it does not reflect the world in a mechanistic way, it nevertheless "only exists in relation to [it]" and "unavoidably carries traces of [it]" (Neumann 138–139). Because of this literature can provide insights into different cultures and stimulate reflection on the diverse ways in which they interact. Therein also lies its ability to "creat[e] and negotiat[e] concepts of self and otherness" (Neumann 136) and to function as a major tool of mediation.

It is hoped that this brief overview will provide a background to the six papers on the issue's special topic. The first two articles are focused on history. Sverrir Jakobsson's essay analyses discourses about the people known as Rus and Varangians that were prevalent among the erudite elite of the Eastern Roman Empire in the Middle Ages. Predictably, the image of the Rus was initially mediated through earlier discourses of barbarism: they were likened to a hailstorm and a roaring sea, perceived as wild animals ("wild boars"), and viewed as an instrument of divine punishment. Perceptions of the Rus gradually changed as their conversion to Christianity became a distinct possibility and the Eastern Roman Empire forged diplomatic links with them. They were still seen as different from the *Rhomaioi* but were recognized as people with their own type of government, social structure, and specific interests. Unlike the Rus, the identity of the Varangians was tied to their service to the Eastern Roman Empire. They were praised for their loyalty in battle. Reflecting on the evolution of the image of the barbarian in the Eastern Roman Empire, Jakobsson concludes that the acceptance of the Varangians as friends and allies, "aspiring to be included into the world of *Romanitas*," marked the final stage of that evolution. Once the process of what we now call *integration* was completed, "the identity of the barbarian vanished into thin air," and that was the eventual fate of the Varangians.

Achraf G-Idrissi's article explores mediation within the context of Moroccan diplomacy and travel writing. His focus is on a nineteenth-century travelogue produced by Ahmad al-Kerdoudi about his embassy to Spain. As is well-known, travel writers negotiate between cultures and bring to their target audiences their impressions of the place(s) they have visited. According to Susan Bassnett, "this role is akin to that of the translator, who is, above all, a *mediator between cultures* [my emphasis]" (550). G-Idrissi's text presents a traveller who is fascinated by life in Spain but is constrained from expressing his admiration unreservedly by religious and political considerations. G-Idrissi's reading of al-Kerdoudi's travelogue shows sensitivity to nuance and stylistic subtlety as he strives to do justice to the "ethics of relationality and cultural mediation" through which the Moroccan traveller's text is organized.

The next section is entitled "Literary Mediations" and comprises four articles. Two of these explore aspects of Joseph Conrad's work. Pei-Wen Clio Kao's paper is an object lesson in intercultural mediation insofar as it deals with the author's own experience of teaching Conrad's novella "The Secret

Sharer” to Taiwanese students. In this undertaking she is aided by Peter Fudakowski’s 2014 film adaptation of the text. The film adaptation makes Conrad’s story more accessible to present-day Taiwanese students by showing them how its original plot can be re-interpreted in the light of present-day ideas of eco-justice and feminism.

Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska approaches Conrad as a precursor of today’s transnational writers and explores his portrayal of intercultural relations in the Malay trilogy. She argues that he adopted an open-minded view of other cultures at a time when imperialist values were dominant in the Anglophone world.

Yarmila Daskalova’s contribution deals with William Butler Yeats’s construction of a Celtic(ized) image of early twentieth-century Ireland and with the subsequent “transformation of [this image] into a ‘universal’, yet historicist, mythopoeic narrative about the shift of civilizations.” To produce the former, Yeats made use of a re-discovered and re-interpreted Celtic mythology which also functioned as an important medium in the engendering of Irish nationalism. The poet’s later mythopoeic narrative marks a movement away from his earlier myth-mediated nativism, towards a universalism, which, however, does not negate or belittle Irishness.

Ingrida Žindžiuvienė presents a reading of Marina Lewycka’s award-winning novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005) which stresses the author’s British-Ukrainian identity and her family’s history of migration out of Ukraine. Using the novel as a lens, Žindžiuvienė reflects on the history of Ukrainian emigration to the United Kingdom, focuses on different periods and types of migrants, and investigates some of the cross-cultural issues of migration.

The six essays on the issue’s special topic shed much-needed light on significant aspects of mediation, which they represent as a transforming and culturally significant activity. While they do not exhaust the subject, they undoubtedly point to new directions in which the study of mediation could develop.

The current issue also returns to the theme of letters and epistolarity, which was the focus of a previous edition of the journal (see vol. 4, issue 1, 2020). Nick Norwood’s contribution, provocatively entitled “Other People Do, in Fact, Exist: Richard Howard’s Epistolary Strategies” provides unique insights into the poetic work of the eminent American poet, translator, and academic Richard Howard (1929 – 2022). Norwood delves into some of Howard’s persona poems, which are reminiscent of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues but also feature epistolary aspects. In his opinion, Howard’s impersonation of numerous individuals from the near and distant past helped him in developing his own particular poetic voice, distinguishing him from the confessional poets of the post-Second World War American literary scene. Norwood’s text “bends” the genre of the literary-critical essay insofar as it includes critical analysis as well as recollections of his own meetings with Howard. The poem “Maple Leaf” by Norwood himself, a fitting tribute to one of the most significant figures in American literature who passed away last year, follows the essay.

Adriana Chakarova’s paper looks at the employment of letters in a totally different context: the legal system of the United States in the 1920s. Chakarova concentrates on the infamous Rhinelander Versus Rhinelander judicial case, in which a lower-class woman of colour was accused of luring an upper-class white man into marriage. The letters the spouses had exchanged were submitted as evidence in the trial, with race and class stereotypes playing a key role in the proceedings.

In closing, I would like to thank this issue’s guest editor Prof. Joanna Skolik, who is Secretary of the Joseph Conrad Society (Poland), for her help in editing all articles and promoting the conference “Narratives of Intercultural Mediation” among Conrad scholars in Poland and across the world.

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