

An Argument for Academic and Educational Attention to Popular Fiction Novels with Multilingual Content, Cultural Diversity, Sociopolitical Depth, and Inspirational Value

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Abstract:

This article argues for increased academic and educational attention to popular fiction novels whose plots encompass, and whose protagonists embody considerable multilingual content, cultural diversity, sociopolitical depth, and inspirational value. Cultural, linguistic and literary theories and concepts are applied to scholarly life via an analysis and autobiographical application of educational ideals and protagonist traits in popular fiction. Methodologically, tools and tenets of comparative literature let us link conceptual foundations of literature, education and communication in an interdisciplinary manner. Empirically, we reveal how the author performed in worldwide conference keynote presentations, and was evaluated by the organizers in official achievement certificates before, during, and after the global pandemic. The analyzed fiction novels, and their protagonists' embodiment of cultural values and skills, are recommended for education and professionalism, from language learning over cultural awareness up to professional practice and performance. The conceptual contribution is a reframing of popular literature via heightened cultural, linguistic, social and political awareness. The methodological contribution is the use of comparative literature as a framework for analyzing literary productions side by side with professional life and cultural practice. The empirical contribution is an insight into rhetoric and professional performance as evaluated in official event evaluations. The overall contribution is the correlation of fiction, education and professionalism across academic and artistic activities and categories. The implications range from language learning and intercultural understanding over global travel and international education up to professional

engagement and public performance, across language, media and communication forms, and across literary, cultural and political borders.

Keywords: Crossing Literary Borders, Crossing Linguistic Borders, Popular Fiction, Multilingual Authors, Polyglot Protagonists

1. Introduction: World Congress and World Literature

This article makes a contribution in the spirit of Comparative Literature, namely by bridging of “disciplines in the humanities and social sciences”, and with a “methodology in interdisciplinary study” that can relate literature to “other areas of artistic expression” (see Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998: 4, 8), while methodologically, it constitutes a “transdisciplinary” research [...] of shared frameworks and approaches (see Martin, 2017, p. 130).

As the ICLA Congress took place towards the end of a global pandemic, reference and reverence to Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and to Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*, seem appropriate. *A Tale of Two Cities* must have been cited countless times since the novel was first published as a weekly series in 1879; we do so again below (1999: 1) for its reverberation with the global situation at the time of the Congress:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.

The last phase of the pandemic and lockdowns also brought Congress contributors together to share their work in presence or virtual mode. An excerpt from the first pages of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2003: 19) symbolizes the professional, physical and literary situation of many of us, working and interacting from the confines of our homes

or libraries, differing mainly in today's access to modern communications technology:

No other room displayed the meticulous solemnity of the library, the sanctuary [where] around [...] walnut desks and the tufted easy chairs [were] lined the walls and even the windows with shelves behind glass doors [with] three thousand volumes [...] Unlike the other rooms [...] the library always enjoyed [...] tranquility and fragrance.

While the epochs described in those two works of world literature, and the pandemic whose impact was still felt at the time of the Congress, were less romantic and contemplative than the above literary passages might sound, this article shares some of the author's work during such best and worst of times, from more or less meticulous home libraries, and in presence or online modes, as was being done by Congress colleagues.

Let us focus on the artistic and academic settings of popular novels and of professional conference engagements before, during and after the pandemic, and on the author's work with international institutions and event organizers. Within an interdisciplinary framework, we will learn about the delivery of official and invited conference keynote speeches, and about having the respective performances evaluated and certified for academic quality, delegate reactions, audience benefit, and participant inspiration, among others.

We put those activities in the context of popular fiction novels with discernible multilingual content, cultural diversity, sociopolitical depth, and inspirational value, before making an argument for their increased academic and educational consideration. Referring to these novels as world literature, and tracing their authors' scholarly accomplishments (some of them are professors of English or of literature), we acknowledge them to reflect historical and educational ideas, philosophies and ideals still relevant and discussed today.

2. Worldwide Keynote Contributions in Times of Crises

Like many Congress contributors, I had spent the two years of the pandemic teaching online classes at my home institution, while maintaining international conference presentations (in online mode during the lockdown), and especially keynote speeches, together with any related chairing and emceeing responsibilities, by continuing close collaborations with universities and event organizers. Among those universities were Harvard, MIT, Oxford, Cambridge, London, Rome, Athens, Prague, Istanbul, Malta, Palma, Teramo in Italy and Mardan in Pakistan, while some of the event organizers were the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (LCIR), the Review of Socio-Economic Perspectives (RSEP), the International Journal of Arts and Sciences (IJAS), the Association of International Education (AIE), the International Association of Social Science Research (IASSR), Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), Sripatum University (SPU), or the Ardabil Industrial Management Institute (AIMI), among others.

As a numerical and geographical orientation, at the time of this writing, and in a time period of two years before and then two years during the pandemic, the author has delivered a certified total of 236 international conference presentations, 112 of those in the form of official and invited keynote speeches, while 74 of them were delivered as regular (non-keynote) presentations, and 50 as foreign-language (non-English) presentations (as analyzed below). In addition, at 106 events, conference organizers officially requested me to assume further functions and responsibilities, namely as a session chair, workshop conductor, or master of ceremonies, while at many events, I assumed several of those functions or responsibilities, such as for chairing multiple sessions, or emceeing the entire event.

Those 112 official and invited conference keynotes presentations have been presented in 18 countries and 24 cities across the world (online during the pandemic): London, United Kingdom: 58 (38 online); Boston, United States: 6 (4 scheduled but canceled due to corona); Oxford, United Kingdom: 5 (3 online); Cambridge, United Kingdom: 5 (3 online); Barcelona, Spain: 4 (1 online); Vienna, Austria: 4 (1 online); Rome, Italy: 4 (1 online); Madrid, Spain: 4 (2 online); Istanbul, Turkey: 3 (2 online); Warsaw, Poland: 2; Dubai, United Arab Emirates: 2; Prague, Czech Republic: 2 (1 online); Palma, Spain: 2 (both online); Paris, France: 1; Amsterdam, Netherlands: 1; Lisbon, Portugal: 1; Montreux, Switzerland: 1; Cairo, Egypt: 1; Spitsbergen, Norway: 1; Moscow, Russia: 1; Athens, Greece: 1 (online); Valetta, Malta: 1 (online); Teramo, Italy: 1 (online); and Warden, Pakistan: 1 (online).

3. Keynotes Evaluations Reflecting Interdisciplinary Ideals

The inviting university's or organization's criteria for their performance evaluations, beyond the relevance of the topic and the speaker's rhetorical skills, included for instance interactive audience involvement, plenary engagement, participant atmosphere, delegates' reactions, fostered team spirit, group dynamics, community cohesion, or any participant feedback to the organizers, or re-invitations as a result of positive organizer and participant impressions. More detailed evaluation aspects included participants' displayed interactions on Google, Teams or Zoom screens, their comments in the conference chat spaces, their opinions expressed to the organizers about my activities and performances during and after an event, or their nonverbal reactions and attitudes, ranging from their body language to their facial expressions.

While I had originally accepted and collected those organizers' achievement certificates for documentation reasons mainly, I now consider them also as sources for professional and personal improvement, for academic and collegial sharing of experiences, and for individual, institutional, interdisciplinary and international integration and inspiration. They are also appreciated as substantiating personal action and professional growth within wider global processes, some of which beyond anyone's control, such as pandemics.

Before analyzing popular literature reflecting literary and educational ideals, it might help to trace the interdisciplinary nature of my conference presentations in general, being one motivation for organizers and presenters to keep requesting and scheduling them. Bearing in mind that interdisciplinary presentations always feature a strong overlap of content areas, and referencing all my 236 international conferences for better representativeness, then 99 presentations addressed topics in the fields of comparative literature, media and film studies, gender and music studies, art economics, cultural diplomacy, art history, autobiography, poetry and narrative studies; 68 presentations focused on cosmopolitanism, internationalism or international education; 65 presentations focused on multilingualism or language learning, 38 presentations linked travel and tourism with film and media studies, environmental, social and economic sustainability, the triple bottom line, or slowness, 24 presentations were in the field of macroeconomics, specifically art and cultural economics, environmental and ecological economics, abundance and post-scarcity economics, labor and leisure economics,

as well as developmental and resource economics; while 17 presentations addressed artificial intelligence in relation to human healthcare, while a last category included presentations on European Union integration, comparative politics and sociology, and sports studies.

4. Popular Literature Reflecting Educational Ideals

That interdisciplinary orientation of the delivered conferences keynotes reflects several of my professionally pursued and personally cherished educational ideas and ideals. One of them is Alexander von Humboldt's "universal education", another is the figure of the 'polymath' (in the Greek meaning of 'much-learned', or 'multi-learner'), or of an educational 'Renaissance person' (lofty European examples include Leonardo da Vinci, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, or Sir Richard Francis Burton). These intellectual concepts (and personal representatives) are mentioned here mainly for illustration, without neat definitions or differentiations, much less claims to fulfil (or emulate) any of them, while confessing to the idealism and inspiration that might have left traces in the author's professional and personal development.

Let us now apply comparative literature methodology to the below analyzed examples of popular literature that exemplify those educational ideals: Morris Langlo West's novels *Harlequin* (1974), *Proteus* (1979) and *The Ringmaster* (1991), Trevanian's (Rodney William Whitaker) *Shibumi* (1979), Don Winslow's *Satori* (2011) or Ken Follett's *The Key to Rebecca* (1998) all depict protagonists who are highly educated and sophisticated, professionally and personally accomplished, besides being adventurously worldly and widely traveled, and in addition, competent in at least half a dozen major world languages.

In *The Key to Rebecca*, Ken Follett (1998: 36-37) describes the room of a German spy in Egypt on the eve of World War II as follows (the short quote highlights the language-related interior of a room entered and investigated by a local detective):

On a shelf behind the desk were books in several languages: nineteenth-century French novels, the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, a volume of [...] Arabic poetry [...] and the Bible in German [...]. It was [...] the home of a cosmopolitan intellectual".

Trevisan's *Shibumi*, a highly sophisticatedly phrased, culturally critical, and ironically allusive novel, depicts its main character, Alexander Nikolaevich Hel, mostly through actions and achievements, with one of his most compact characterizations on the book's back cover:

Nicholai Hel is the world's most wanted man. Born in Shanghai during the chaos of World War I, he is the son of an aristocratic Russian mother and a mysterious German father and is the protégé of a Japanese Gō master. [...] Hel is a genius, a mystic, and a master of language and culture, and his secret is his determination to attain a rare kind of personal excellence, a state of effortless perfection known only as *shibumi*.

In *Satori* (a prequel written after the worldwide acclaim of *Shibumi*, see Winslow 2011: 534-537), Hel's and another main protagonist's cultural and linguistic backgrounds are concisely carved out as follows (Winslow 2011: 10-12):

Ellis Haverford [...] had spurned Yale and Harvard for Columbia [...] was majoring in Oriental history and languages [...] fluent in French, Japanese, and Vietnamese, and could make himself understood in some parts of China [...] one of those rare individuals who seemed comfortable in any setting, including an exclusive Japanese teahouse. [...] Aware of Kamiko's passive attention, Nicholai asked, "Shall we switch languages?" Haverford already knew that Hel spoke English, French, Russian, German, Chinese, Japanese, and, randomly, Basque – so there was quite a menu from which to choose. He suggested French, and Nicholai accepted.

Finally, in *The Ringmaster*, Morris West (1991: 8, 12-12, 15) lets his protagonist reminisce about his life in culturally and linguistically, professionally and personally insightful detail:

I'm Gilbert Anselm Langton, fifty-odd years old and feeling much older. I'm a publisher, a major shareholder of an international group called Polyglot Press which was founded in Sydney, Australia and now has branches or affiliates all over the world. My father [...] had held for a quarter of a century the Chair of Comparative

Languages at the university and [...] had given me the gift of tongues [...] You can trust me in twenty-three major languages and be confident I won't let you too far astray in fifteen or twenty others.

My father devoted every moment of his leisure life to making me, as he put it, 'apt for a gypsy life on a shrinking planet'. [...] He allowed me to see [...] the joy of things, the challenge of new places, new people, old history relived, new history in the making. [...] He taught me more than language. He taught me a mannerly silence and the deference appropriate to a stranger who is invited to share the tribal fire.

A polyglot himself, he gave me the key to the Tower of Babel where the world's languages echo in hopeless confusion. He taught me how to decipher them, remember them, turn them into currency of daily commerce [...] He insisted I read law and economics and learn business administration [...] So as my publishing services extended, I found myself gradually co-opted into a new role, that that of consultant or mediator in international commerce. [...] More than half the cost of international business is used up in dialogues of the deaf, between people who are actually ignorant of each other's laws, customs and business dialect.

5. Keynotes Reflecting Literary and Educational Ideals

Educational ideas and ideals as the ones mentioned (cultural sophistication, multilingualism, multidisciplinary, mobility) keep being held up in institutional and international guidelines, from secondary education curricula to General Education syllabi. In the context of my keynotes, a similar integration of models of universal education was maybe most poignantly certified for an English as well as an Italian keynote at Harvard and MIT (the English title being "Classical artistic ideals for current academic challenges, or integrating innovative sciences with inspiring humanities: the timeless ideal of the polymath Renaissance Man or Woman as expressed in art and literature for our transnational and transdisciplinary world of the twenty-first century", at the *International Journal of Arts and Sciences In-*

ternational Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities, Harvard University and MIT, 2019):

The keynote reflected the differentiated landscape in higher education philosophies and politics which are steering a course between the sciences and the humanities, such as for subject choices and career orientations. Overcoming potentially divisive streaks of arguments, it made a conclusive case for constructive departmental and disciplinary collaboration, inspired institution-wide integration and implementation of programs of knowledge, and curricular concretization of educational wholesomeness across degrees, departments, disciplines and didactics in teaching and learning, studies and professions.

The Italian keynote revived and embodied the ancient yet also timeless essence of the well-rounded scholar and educator, by honoring the universities' classical and comprehensive instructional ideal and cultural appeal. The keynote session chair and expert on the influence of Classical Roman times on current tendencies, Professor Pellegrino Manfra, held that the presenter himself, in his multiple roles of researcher, presenter, linguist and educator, embodies references to both real and fictional instances of Renaissance personalities who, in turn, combined sciences and humanities in theory and practice.

Even several non-keynote presentations were noted for similar efforts, such as on global educational philosophy and practice at the International School of Geneva, or in comparative literature at the Institute of Georgian Literature in Tbilisi:

“English and French presentations [...] embodied the educational enthusiasm and challenge of evoking polymath potential in today's internationally connected and interactively communicating students, especially in their early and middle years before an increasing subject specialization. As the participants claimed the presentations to be accessible and entertaining, they felt that the research claims were expressed and supported by a model representative of the modern international [...] educator”, *AIE (Alliance for Interna-*

tional Education) 11th World Conference, 'Rethinking International Education: Values and Relevance', International School of Geneva/ École Internationale de Genève (Switzerland, 2019).

“Presentation let the participants enjoy the topic’s complexity in ways and styles that evoke some of the classical oratory traditions, and are as such steeped in the Great Books tradition, while however, in a Romantically influenced and timeless style, wear their learnedness gracefully lightly. In pleasant tradition during our annual symposia, integration of scholarly knowledge with simple language, well-meaning education with easy-going entertainment, analytical diligence with personal passion, and intellectual industry with individual inspiration, continues to be cherished”, *The XIII. International Symposium, Contemporary Issues of Literary Studies: 'Political Events and Literary Discourses of the 1980s and 1990s', Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2019.*

6. Keynotes Linking Local Cultures and Languages

In my presentations, I often use specific cultural and linguistic markers in topic and audience engagement. Below examples from certificates for a keynote and for an Italian speech (topic: “The total artwork between history and modernity, art and economics, advertisement and branding, and event exhibitions: a transdisciplinary ideal applied to film productions and Olympic Games”, *15th RSEP International Social Sciences Conference, University of Washington Rome Center, Italy, 2019*):

The keynote allowed the delegates to take full advantage of the setting of a social sciences conference [...] and the location’s artistic and historical surroundings [...] by means of the keynote presenter’s, characteristic eloquence in speech, affability in manner, and evocative body language. It excited in conveying the presentation’s content with arresting overhead images and carefully selected film clips. Some delegates even took the speaker up on the often-entreated impromptu ability to relate nearby architectonic, artistic or cultural references, in this case the conference room’s ceiling and

wall paintings, to the message of the keynote, but even more importantly, gracefully and impressively, to their own presentations and personal contributions.

The combination of the English and the Italian speeches provided a fitting linguistic and cultural bond between the transdisciplinary presentation topic, the conference country of Italy and city of Rome, and the University of Washington Rome Center. It visibly excited those participants who, during the question-and-answer part and afterwards, revealed themselves as linguistically and artistically inclined, but it also animated those who evinced more economic research preferences. The entire Italian and bilingual presentation part was, in the words of the title of an eminent BBC documentary series and popular book by Columbia University's Professor Simon Schama, a vivid display of the 'Power of Art'.

The previous year, the organizers had expressed similar thoughts regarding interdisciplinary orientation and the use of the local language, including session chairing (translated to English, the Italian speech topic was: "Art economics and administrative evolution: government support for creative industries from macroeconomic and sociopolitical perspectives, for cultural policy formulation and artistic peer motivation", *9th RSEP International Social Sciences Conference*, University of Washington Rome Center, Italy, 2018):

Italian speech perfectly fitted to the topic of arts, the framework of economics, and the conference location of Rome. Participants remarked after the speech, and reported during the day, that it had in several ways heightened their historical awareness, artistic sensitivity, mercantile admiration or linguistic appreciation for the delicate links between eternal art and effective administration.

The exhilarating way of chairing sessions and especially of encouraging attendants foments a climate of collegiality that regularly brings all of them closer to each other and to the organization. It is each time appreciated that, before and after each session, the chair converses with many of them in their native tongues, to alleviate nervousness of novice speakers, and to intensify the exchange among the experienced presenters.

7. Beyond English: Foreign Language Integration

Within the analyzed time period, 50 conference presentations were given in fifteen languages *other than English*. The organizers that have encouraged those foreign-language presentations were, in order of frequency, RSEP (Review of Socio-Economic Perspectives, IJAS (International Journal of Arts and Sciences, Sripatum University, IASSR (International Association of Social Science Research), Tbilisi State University and Georgian Comparative Literature Association, AIE (Alliance for International Education), Hellenic American University in Athens/Greece, John Cabot University in Rome/Italy, Södertörn University in Stockholm/Sweden, University of the Free State in Bloemfontein/South Africa, Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos in São Leopoldo/Brazil, the Latin American University of Science and Technology in Panama City/Panama, ACLAA/CAAL (the American and the Canadian Associations of Applied Linguistics), University of the Balearic Islands in Palma/Spain, Webster University in Athens/Greece, and Kadir Has University in Istanbul/Turkey.

In a first example, a 2016 Latin conference presentation in Venice was recorded by a group of Mexican tourists, and their online posting later shared with my high school Latin teacher, to inspire his pupils and classes:

“Internationally inspiring and educationally enthusiastic presentation in fluent Latin, to the delight of the international and local audience, who expressed their feeling of personal involvement and their fascination at having been able to follow it”, *IJAS (International Journal of Arts and Sciences) International Conference for Education*, Università Ca’ Foscari, Venice, Italy, 2016).

In a second example, my integration of foreign languages with interdisciplinary content was pointed out for the mentioned English and Italian keynotes at Harvard and MIT (the Italian speech titled “*Ideali artistici classici per sfide accademiche attuali, o integrando le scienze innovative con quelle umanistiche ed ispiratrice: l’ideale senza tempo del Uomo o della Donna Universale del Rinascimento come espresso in arte e letteratura per il mondo transnazionale e transdisciplinare del ventunesimo secolo*”), and for the mentioned English and French presentations at the International School of Geneva:

“English and French presentations affirmed and articulated international education’s multifaceted characteristic and multilingual component. [...] The participants [...] felt that the research claims were expressed and supported by a model representative of the modern international and multilingual educator”, *AIE (Alliance for International Education) 11th World Conference, ‘Rethinking International Education: Values and Relevance’*, International School of Geneva/ École Internationale de Genève, Switzerland, 2019).

“Just one such example that, while in fictional literary form, however encapsulates and epitomizes Dr. Konrad Gunesch’s encompassing humanistic endeavors and accomplishments, could be seen in the novel *The Name of the Rose* and a statement by its main protagonist: ‘[Roger] Bacon was right in saying that the conquest of learning is achieved through the knowledge of languages’”, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences International Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities*, Harvard University and MIT, 2019).

These testimonies suggest much potential for language students, for almost all skill levels, learning approaches, or background profiles, and many implications for foreign language learning (FLL) teaching and research, on sociolinguistic, cultural and educational levels. It also seems highly relevant for ‘global English’; while widely recognized as the world’s ‘lingua franca’, issues of linguistic and cultural diversity and ecology are ever more discussed in our globalizing world.

8. From Scholarly Insights to Student Involvement

Many colleagues share my worry about a gradual loss of students’ abilities to present their knowledge appropriately in speaking and in writing, despite their familiarity with online and social media communication devices. From classical to our times, and from Cicero’s first-century BCE *Ars Oratoria* to Lucas’s twenty-first century *The Art of Public Speaking*, a comprehensive globalized education needs corresponding models and practices of efficiently communicating insights to our peers, and of inspiring our students. Relatedly (and meant to be inspiring if noted here), the organizers

of the mentioned presentations in Geneva and Tbilisi praised local students being attracted to the conference theaters, too:

“It has correspondingly been a repeated plea over the years by the participants to request the presenter’s linguistic indulgence – and remarkably, also by the students who have been attending his sessions in each of the countries and in each of the organizing international schools where he has so far presented in the conference series”, *AIE (Alliance for International Education) 11th World Conference, ‘Rethinking International Education: Values and Relevance’*, International School of Geneva / École Internationale de Genève, Switzerland, 2019.

“Integration of scholarly knowledge with simple language, well-meaning education with easy-going entertainment, analytical diligence with personal passion, and intellectual industry with individual inspiration, continues to be cherished by our fellow delegates and happily joining students, inside and beyond our Institute’s classrooms and discussions”, *The XIII. International Symposium, Contemporary Issues of Literary Studies: ‘Political Events and Literary Discourses of the 1980s and 1990s’*, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2019.

As an example of trying to apply such conference and presentation results in classrooms and student engagements, one of my students’ undergraduate coursework in ‘Media Law and Ethics’ was presented at London University’s *2020 International Conference on Digital Humanities*, and was very warmly received not just on the organizers’ certificate (as quoted below), but also by the international scholarly community (as manifested by many comments to her contribution on the conference website):

“The chair had even achieved to bring one of his own university students, from the course ‘Media Law and Ethics’ [...] to be a participant [...] We congratulate the student [...] thank the speaker and chair [...] and look forward to inviting and to welcoming students at his university and from his courses and classes, projects and presentations to our future conferences, events, and shared sessi-

ons”, *International Conference on Digital Humanities, ‘Digital Dialogues’*, originally to be held at Birkbeck University of London, United Kingdom, 2020.

9. Conclusion: International Itineraries and Inspirations

We have argued for academic and educational attention to popular fiction novels whose plots and protagonists encompass and embody considerable multilingual content, cultural diversity, sociopolitical depth, and inspirational value. We have personified literary and educational ideas and ideals with professional actions, achievements, and certifications. Having made conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions, we recommend the analyzed fiction novels, and their protagonists’ embodiment of literary and cultural skills and values, for an application from study over work to all of life, in education and profession, and from language learning over cultural competence to professional practice and public performance.

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