Elske v. P. Smith Lecturer Award Address: Short Introduction

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In reflecting on the significance of the Elske v. P. Smith Lecturer Award, it occurs to me that what it recognizes is not an individual achievement but a successful teaching, research and service partnership in the English department, College and University. To the extent my work in these areas has been at all successful, it has benefited directly from the inspiration offered by my colleagues and by generations of students who have encouraged me to develop a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach in my teaching and research. My two most recent publication ventures have tested the very definition of boundaries, geographic and thematic. The four volume History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe (2004-2010) focused broadly on the geocultural area between former empires (Habsburg, Ottoman, Czarist), foregrounding the innovative intercultural trends that have emerged at the intersection of different language and cultural traditions.

Another, more recent project on New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression (2014) has focused on important multimedia synergies between image, sound and text. As I argued in my Introduction, the final decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of new media forms—notably the internet, television, video, and digitized sound—as well as a worldwide shift towards the visual, the mass-produced, and the virtual text. This shift has opened up new domains of human achievement in art and culture, unimaginable a generation or two ago. Literature has remained an important focus in this project, but one that has undergone a major transformation. As Gabriele Schwab (The Mirror and the Killer-Queen, p. 39) has recently explained:

Under these altered cultural conditions, most of us working in the field of literary and cultural studies have become increasingly mindful of the need to provide new ways to relate cultures—comparing, translating, and interfacing traditionally separate entities. Focusing on “cultural contacts” is even more important today than it was in the past … [L]iterature itself provides a mode of cultural contact and has done so for centuries…. In addition to offering direct figurations of otherness and cultural contact, literary texts deploy complex discursive strategies and aesthetic devices in order to mediate these fictional cultural encounters for their readers. Thus they form part of the cultural politics toward otherness, including the cultural imaginary which they help continually to reshape.