

# ADVOCATING AN OPEN AGENDA FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:

## THE LEGACY OF DOUWE FOKKEMA

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As I hope to underscore in my recollection of Douwe Fokkema, one of the longer-term aims he pursued with dedication was the promotion of an open agenda for Comparative Literature (CL) on the international, regional, and local planes. He understood that striving toward such a lofty goal could only occur cumulatively and it required an untiring willingness to experiment, to rethink positions and habits, and to reach beyond the home grounds of the first pioneers and the restart of Comparative Literature at the end of World War II in order to incorporate the contributions of newer waves of colleagues, especially of colleagues grounded in cultures outside the Eurocentric core of the start and restart of our discipline. In a very real sense, the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) found itself collectively—as of the first decade of the present millennium—in the “awkward” position both of looking back from an advanced viewpoint such as Douwe fought for, and of having to negotiate ways forward for collaboration through a bewildering unevenness in the stages of development amidst the rich variety of particular scholarly activities and kinds of local awareness.

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Douwe relished this historical complexity, although he understood it posed serious challenges. One consequence of promoting a generous cluster of natural interests in literary studies around the globe was that the actual elaboration of diverse aspects of an open agenda could devolve over time into an unfortunate splintering. CL might easily give birth to separate particularist movements, unless a collective will toward reintegration eventually balanced every limited (even if in itself worthwhile) agenda. The fuller potential of CL was foreseen in Henry Remak’s famous definition (1961) of our discipline’s interconnections with all manifestations of culture, crossing all boundaries and considering all the arts, sciences, modes of discourse, and media in relation to literature. Douwe’s consciousness of the strains spawned by ICLA’s own

achievements in realizing many elements of this promise is part of what made him so central a figure in international comparative literature for almost half a century.

A felicitous combination of personal factors suited Douwe for his important role in advancing a constructive open agenda. He was trained both as an expert in Dutch literature and as an international comparatist. He was by temperament an attentive listener and careful, thoughtful speaker. He began his career as a Dutch diplomat and carried his mastery of international dialogue over to the service of literary and cultural studies. His *Report from Peking: Observations of a Western Diplomat on the Cultural Revolution* (1972) drew on his own experiences in China as an attaché during the tumultuous late Mao period and demonstrated his prowess as a social historian. It was “prefaced” by his doctoral dissertation on *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956-1960* (published 1965) which already showed an adventurous disposition to go beyond the European and Eurocentric world as well as a general predilection for modern and contemporary subjects. In *Literary Doctrine*,

**228** Douwe accomplished a remarkable act of triangulation. The book rested on his thorough knowledge both of the development of Soviet-era Russian and Chinese thought in their respective cultural spheres and of their interactions, plus Western Marxist views, and it framed these for a wider world audience through the medium of English as lingua franca. We probably shall never see a more meticulous and nuanced account which rigorously assembles the evidentiary material from Russian and Chinese sources and illuminates the semantic and social values in play. The scholarly apparatus includes a hefty register of Chinese terms, presented both in transliteration and spelled in ideograms, with helpful translations into English, and an index of names from diverse countries in both Chinese ideograms and Western spellings so that Chinese scholars, too, can use it. Douwe’s encyclopedic knowledge of people, places, events, and ideas in *Report from Peking* and his clear-eyed focus, often as a witness on the scene, makes this book a still invaluable treasure trove for cultural historians. Since he comments from time to time on the activities and reactions mainly of diplomats in China during the disorders, it is highly instructive to measure his own personal insights and sense of the views of other foreigners against the sorry record of certain Western public intellectuals such as the prominent members of the *Tel Quel* group who came worshipfully to witness the Maoist transformation, a story later analyzed by Eric Hayot in *Chinese Dreams* (2004).

Douwe was a natural intellectual, who readily moved between practical criticism and theory. He found in Elrud Ibsch, his wife, the perfect companion who shared many of his interests and became an invaluable collaborator in many specific undertakings. Thus any tribute to Douwe is also implicitly a tribute to her, although a true assessment of her independent career would necessitate a separate far-ranging appreciation of her individual writings and special traits. I was aware of her early work on Nietzsche (1972) before learning of her connection to Douwe. Their command of the larger context of their (continental) “home” culture is seen in their broad-gauged book *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature*, which

appeared first in Dutch (1984). In addition to their fascination for modernism, one of the persistent common grounds at the center of Douwe's and Elrud's pursuits was their constantly renewed, increasingly refined search for an "empirical" approach to literature—as reflected, for example, in their sophisticated joint treatise *Knowledge and Commitment* (2000). Douwe and Elrud followed the difficult pathway of championing Western Enlightenment ideals of rational inquiry, which meant also paying serious attention to the contests of values past and present and in specific contexts, not just in Eurocentric territories but everywhere. In a very rough kind of shorthand, I would describe Elrud during the last two decades of the twentieth century and down to the present as increasingly devoting herself to the following large areas. One has been the applicability of cognitive psychology in reception studies; another, the relation of identity formation to cultural systems; and, thirdly, appreciation of powerful literary responses to historical crisis and trauma such as the Holocaust. While supportive of her initiatives, Douwe was inclined to invest a great deal of his energies in fundamental diachronic and synchronic mappings of cultural systems; he was especially interested in literary history, the historical flow of cultural theories, and semiotics and general systems theory. He developed a special flair for the story of postmodernism as is reflected in a number of books he co-wrote and edited. The volume *International Postmodernism* (1997), edited jointly with Hans Bertens, is clearly the culminating effort and it counts today as the major resource on the subject. Besides its global range of attention, I find especially impressive the set of editorial introductions to sections of the volume. The editors never push any thesis beyond the evidence; in fact, one of their outstanding strengths is the capacity to see not just where and in what guises postmodern impulses appear, but where they have been resisted or indeed are absent. We encounter a strict standard for critical discourse that can be summed up in the folk saying, "honesty is the best policy."

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As will already be apparent, my limited remarks here are not intended as an historical outline of Douwe's career, but rather as my own selective personal reflections on the experience of fostering and sharing open dialogue which Douwe promoted. My first strong recollection of him comes from the Innsbruck Congress of ICLA in 1979, when he and Frederick Garber were bowing out upon completion of two terms since 1973 as co-secretaries general and I and Yves Chevrel were stepping in as the two newly elected for that job. No year afterwards went by without communications and/or conversations that deepened my respect for Douwe's persistence as a "long-distance" champion of an open agenda. What he did behind the scenes for the cause of CL on the international plane was far more than the wider public ever knew. For example, when the finances of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences slumped and this endangered the then fledgling ICLA project of a Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, he along with Mihály Szegedy-Maszák helped negotiate a friendly transfer from Akadémiai Kiadó to the John Benjamins Publishing Company in the Netherlands. He developed the successful Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature with the same academic house. The postwar pioneers had

managed to stage the fifth congress of ICLA in Belgrade in 1967 and attract a wide participation of scholars from Eastern Europe. Like Jean Weisgerber, his Belgian predecessor as ICLA secretary general, Douwe had been a clear-sighted supporter of the idea of holding a world congress in Budapest in 1976 in order to reinforce ICLA's role as a mediator among cultural blocs during the Cold War. This sort of backing was crucial for our colleagues like György Vajda and Tibor Klaniczay in Hungary's Institute for Literary Studies in undertaking to organize such a major venture. Douwe understood the vital importance of promoting interchanges and collaboration on projects among colleagues who lived under a variety of political regimes. With his gift for quietly espousing the benefits of a common meeting ground, he was among the most resolute defenders of the ICLA principle that all comparatists, whether they joined directly or through a regional association, held their membership as individuals and that the ICLA would never disenfranchise any person or group for political reasons. He has an honorable place in this complex, but as yet still unwritten history.

**230** Many younger enthusiasts for theory will be interested to learn that Douwe designed the ICLA's standing research Committee on Literary Theory, and that on occasion Elrud (who over time has served exemplarily on a number of key ICLA committees) pitched in actively to reenergize its program. During Douwe's presidency of ICLA (1985-88), he recruited Earl Miner, who was among other things an expert in Japanese literature, as the next president in order to strengthen the chances for the success of ICLA's triennial congress in Tokyo in 1991. This was the first congress held outside Europe or North America. Douwe did everything he could to bolster the fledgling Chinese Comparative Literature Association which our colleagues at Peking University, Yang Zhouhan and Yue Daiyun, persevered to launch in the cultural thaw after the Mao period. Having been part of that start-up effort myself in 1985, I appreciated the way Douwe applied his long experience of Chinese culture during a tenth-anniversary celebration in 1995 in Beijing in order to reinforce with Chinese officialdom the sense of how important the CCLA was internationally as well as domestically. In fact, Douwe lobbied discretely for holding an ICLA congress in Beijing in 2000, a very difficult choice (as he confessed privately) because South Africa was an eager rival bidder. Both countries were desirable hosts, ready to provide attractive venues through which the global aspirations of our field would logically benefit. As a newly installed ICLA president, Douwe had worked hard to mitigate British disappointment in a similar situation of rival offers by holding a large joint conference with the BCLA in England as an immediate extension of the Paris congress in 1985. There were logistical impediments—above all, the far greater geographical separation—to repeating such a combination. As it turned out, ICLA went first to Pretoria (2000) for its next triennial world congress and then to Hong Kong (2004); and afterwards to Rio de Janeiro (2007) and to Seoul (2010).

It is important to note that, apart from the triennial congresses, the Executive Council of ICLA (an elected body of some two dozen persons from about as many countries), along with ICLA's past presidents and the chairs of its administrative and

its numerous research committees, meets at a minimum annually in conjunction with an international conference sponsored by a national academy, regional association of CL, or a prominent university. Thus Douwe, who as emeritus president unflinchingly appeared as a wise counselor on these numerous occasions in venues around the globe, had the satisfaction of witnessing how ICLA gradually was succeeding in fulfilling its own proclaimed goals, despite sometimes worrisome setbacks. The joint conference held at Venice in 2005, organized by Paula Mildonian at the Università degli Studi di Venezia (Ca' Foscari), was indeed a very special week. It celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of ICLA's inaugural world congress. While a broad cross-section of members of a now much larger, expanded ICLA were understandably more mindful of their own immediate concerns, in his address at a special session Douwe gave us a splendid upbeat review of how far we had progressed. He described the remarkable achievements by ICLA that stretched over the half century and further prospects that beckoned on the horizon as we prepared for our congress in Rio de Janeiro. He reminded the audience of the fact that ICLA had broken out of its initial rhythm of alternating congresses between North America and Europe and had established the pattern of moving around all the continents. That, moreover, ICLA had fostered international research consortia in the areas of theory, translation studies, literary history, interdisciplinary studies, gender studies, relatively neglected geocultural territories, and more—and that the Association clearly demonstrated a will and a way to accommodate new initiatives yet to be generated. In his view, by designing both standing committees and time-limited committees for special topics, the Association was managing to maintain flexibility and readiness to experiment.

Douwe and Elrud had good reason to think positively of work accomplished and an inviting future. What is striking in the early book *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century*, published jointly by them in 1977, is its plural mode of perception and open outlook. It starts by reviewing Russian formalism, Czech structuralism, and claims of scientific reliability; goes on to French structuralism, narratology, and the linguistic turn; extends beyond primary Marxist theories (Marx, Engels, Lenin) and practice after the October Revolution to Chinese reception thereof, and Lukács and neo-Marxist criticism; devotes an entire chapter to the theory and practice of Western reception aesthetics; and concludes with “Prospects for Further Research,” highlighting semiotics, epistemological assumptions in the historical sciences, the sociology of knowledge, and semiotic analysis of structures of communication. The way Douwe and Elrud acted as honest brokers, not partisans, was a harbinger of their steadily maturing sense of the multiple strands and energies of the real world—and concomitantly their recognition of the need for an inclusive CL that does not ignore but rather accepts the local and regional, the ideological and social codes, yet refuses to be limited by them. Twenty years later, in the collective volume *Théorie littéraire* which he co-edited, Douwe's own contribution (325-51) is a chapter focused on epistemological questions posed by CL and arising through its activities. This chapter underscores his return, again and again, to the social dimension, the relevance and

nature of literary experience in our own times.

I will permit myself an excursion to say a brief word about Douwe's own very social nature that might under some circumstances not be apparent to persons who saw only the public persona in a snapshot moment at some conference or other. Douwe was unfailingly correct toward colleagues and a very kind host at his own institution, the University of Utrecht. As I was privileged to take note of over the years, he was keenly interested in any new active personalities who appeared in our ranks and wanted to learn what they were all about. Yet, in parallel, I occasionally heard expectable complaints—invariably caused by differences in cultural expectations—such as that he had marshaled persons to return from their coffee break conversations to the table during Executive Council meetings or had brusquely pushed the agenda forward when someone was in a mood to be loquacious (or totally off subject!). Douwe was a no-nonsense person determined to get things done during working hours and he got them done. But free nights were another matter. He truly enjoyed venturing  
**232** into new cultural spaces and he sometimes revealed a whimsical sense of humor. I remember visiting a Gypsy nightclub with him in Budapest late into the night when he got caught up in the music and exuberantly tried to replicate the strange rhythms on our table—the band was showing off for a wealthy Gypsy prince who was in attendance with his court at a table near us. I remember him somehow simultaneously trying to recruit our own table companion, the semiotician Itamar Even-Zohar, for greater involvement in ICLA. One night in Beijing, in a bigger locale, I suddenly heard a second high-pitched chanteuse besides the young woman in a sequined dress singing a traditional song on the podium. It was Douwe, imitating her for fun, and managing to look serious despite a surreptitious smile. Douwe was ready to enjoy the meat orgy at a gaucho banquet establishment in the Brazilian outback or a quiet conversation over drinks at a taverna in Athens. One of my fondest memories of his rare spontaneous interventions comes from the meeting of the ICLA Executive Council in Brussels in 2009. The almost perennial question was raised by a sincere newer member, why did certain famous contemporary philosophers not come to ICLA congresses. (Actually, some did from time to time.) Douwe's answer was terse sarcasm of the highest order. I will try to get close to his wording here: "That's because some of our colleagues are geniuses. Geniuses don't need to talk to others when they already know everything. Only people like us who are not geniuses think we may yet learn something." The subject vanished in sudden silence, and the next agenda point was raised. To me, Douwe's outburst sprang only in part from pique over certain pretentious travelers on our road, and more from his deep abiding trust in good social relations and cooperation.

From my vantage point, Douwe was a convinced latitudinarian liberal who cherished the Western tradition, but he would never put himself forward as a star who vaunted its humanistic values, although he was in fact a steadfast pillar in calmly explaining them. I was aware of the enormous scope of Douwe's publications, both as primary researcher and as editor of collaborative volumes, but he rarely mentioned

any of these, except when there was some pragmatic working reason to do so; and, probably because his sense of good manners inhibited talking about himself. I never learned from him that he was the author of a volume of poetry and two novels in Dutch. I will not attempt here to delve into the many aspects of his prolific writing which doubtlessly others more qualified will appreciate more usefully in other retrospectives on his career. And in citing his last work which he saw in print, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West* (2011), I will not pretend to judge the Chinese side of its contents; rather, my thought concerns the felicitous way in which this book gathers and reaffirms so many of the interests and creative traits characteristic of his lifetime contribution. One feature immediately accessible to those of us limited to European and New World literatures is Douwe's treatment of the range of utopian and dystopian imagination in modern to contemporary writers (Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, Bradbury, Atwood). He joins this complex to a range accessible to Sinologists (Lao She, Wang Shuo, et al.) and thereby allows those who are grounded in either cultural world to cross over, contrast, and compare. *Perfect Worlds* is not simply a catalogue of raw materials, because Douwe takes the literary phenomena to another level and dares to qualify and interpret what is happening in this instance where "East" and "West" are sharing ideas and story forms that have emerged as a kind of global common property in the twentieth century. As in his commentaries on postmodernism, he detects fascinating cross-cultural divergences and appropriations, and avoids any flattening imposition of supposed universal norms. One of the important thematic polarities is the respective Chinese and Euro-American authors' probing of the question of what is "alien" or what exhibits or threatens cultural self-alienation. This is an abiding key issue of our age, and Douwe has magnified it in a challenging way as a comparatist who pays careful attention to the evidence in the dynamic flow of cultural history.

In his last major monograph, Douwe seems to me to fulfill what he advocated in his very early, most sociological work, *Report from Peking*: "In this contact with one another we do not need to abandon our own familiar concepts, but we must learn their relationships to those of another country by means of an unbiased study of its views, culture and history" (171). We hear this same credo at the conclusion of Douwe's and Elrud's summa, *Knowledge and Commitment*: "The question is how to become an 'honest broker' in the negotiations over canon formation and other issues in the cultural debate. Without expert knowledge it is impossible to be persuasive; without research there can be no convincing criticism" (191). As a theoretician Douwe constantly strove to define both the relationship between processes of investigation (analysis) and interpretation (synthesis) within cultural repertoires, and with an understanding of more than one repertoire, to examine the interaction of cultural systems. It behooves us to cultivate practices we can derive from such valuable lessons. With Douwe's passing, we have lost the immediate presence of a significant positive guide and will sorely miss him, but we are grateful for and can take comfort in the example he has established.

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