

VARIA

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Comparative Poetics, Postmodernism, and the Canon: An Introduction

In every age there is an avant garde that proclaims its break with the past and often enlists the past to make such a break.¹ Sometimes, as in Marxism, writings are enlisted to demonstrate the movement of dialectical materialism. In a psychoanalytical schemata, the canon is often a family album full of pastoral nostalgia, the burden of the past or the anxiety of influence, an enlistment of grandparents or adopted parents against the neglect or oppression of literary parents. From one feminist perspective, the male canon is a burden of dominance in history and childhood. Deconstruction unveils the mystery of structures, of which the canon is one. New historicism construes history as an analogy of analogy, a kind of anecdotal web in which there is no teleology or perspective of perspectives, so that Shakespeare and a Renaissance pamphlet are related in their narratives through the comparisons and telling tales of contemporary theory, and systems theory affects our understanding of literature in general and the Renaissance in particular (see, for instance, Richmond-Garza in this issue). Within all postmodernisms, which are very selective about the modernism they are reacting against, there is an increasing multiplicity of conflicting theoretical and methodological views.

Changes to literary study make theory more exciting. To neglect changes in the humanities and the arts is as much malpractice as in the sciences, although this lapse is less apparent and more tolerated because the use of outmoded techniques is not as obvious as a dentist who pulls teeth with pliers. Rather than resist these changes to the literary paradigm or to reduce them to mistakes of the past persisting in the present, the "Review of Scholarship" has attempted to face the new trends and to present their differences and complexity. The debate becomes what matters. Behind the disagreements, there is a concern over the

1. In North America, a landmark volume in the study of canon formation was von Hallberg's *Canons* (1984). Works on the canon are now numerous. For instance, UMI has at least six volumes in its series, "Challenging the Literary Canon" (Hitchcock; Bowers and Brothers; etc.); for Comparative Literature and the canon see Culler; Grimm; Hernadi; Lawall; and Pratt; for Canadian literature and the Canon see Hart; Lecker; Tötösy; for a recent discussion of the canon see Guillory; and for gender and the canon see Winder.

nature of literature and theory, how texts are constructed and dismantled in a historical and cultural context. The articles and reviews in this issue contribute to a general attempt to widen the scope of literary study in such a manner as to increase the range of our understanding and the ways we read, write, and teach. The canon has always changed, and some of those changes have been sea-changes. The periodization of literature in the West marks some of the most important of these transformations.

The issue moves from a discussion of the problems of comparative poetics between East and West (Tatlow), through an examination of the myths about the Chinese language in Romanticism, modernism, and deconstruction (Tong), to a consideration of the Chinese experience of postmodernism (Wang); this is followed by a discussion of poststructuralisms and feminisms in Renaissance studies (Emck; Richmond-Garza), through an analysis of the paradox of the "Chinese box" strategy in postmodern fiction (Zhang), to an assessment of the relation between postmodernity and comparative New World criticism (Lang), a look at the problem of social semiotics (Wall), a commentary on Frye's interviews, sermons, and less-known essays as well as on recent criticism on Frye (Hart), a speculation on some roles of American studies (Wolf), and finally an article cluster on canonization (Dimić; Kernan; Reynolds; Balakian). The articles are followed by a wide-ranging group of reviews that George Lang has invited and brought together and an In Memoriam for Tibor Klaniczay, the well-known Hungarian Comparatist and Renaissance scholar (Kushner).

As the articles and reviews speak for themselves, I wish only to highlight the way in which they relate to one another and contribute to this issue as a whole.

The question of East/West poetics informs the articles by Anthony Tatlow, Q.S. Tong, and Wang Ning. These articles continue a debate that has occurred over the past year in this journal (see Xie and John Chen, Zha, Xiaomei Chen, Eoyang, Chang). In responding to Earl Miner's recent discussion of comparative poetics, Tatlow sees two major problems with this approach to the topic (see Eoyang's review of Miner which argues for a different perspective). First, Tatlow questions Miner's assumption in which he connects Western drama to basic mimetic expectations and his premise "that literature can be best explained by formal, normative, conscious, clarified poetics based on an apparently universal principle of philosophical realism." Among other strategies, Tatlow uses a Japanese *kyogen* play to disrupt Miner's assumptions about comparisons between East and West. Tatlow argues against a formalist poetics, which assumes the primacy of mimesis, and for more consideration of historical evidence and the resistance of antimimetic writing, which frees the reader's imagination from the internalization of power structures and representation in the act of interpretation.

Q.S. Tong explores Western myths about the Chinese language by focusing on Zhang Longxi's *The Tao and the Logos* (see Zha's review of the book in this

issue). In attempting to examine language "as a closed organic structure evolving from a definite origin" and to create the concept of a family of Indo-European languages based on grammatical inflection, German scholars paid close attention to the Chinese language, which they took to be opposite to these languages. This attention, Tong argues, was a means of creating a contrast in which Germany and Europe were the centre and China a marginal opposite. Tong says that Zhang wants to compare *tao* and *logos*, so that he can deconstruct *tao* (cf. Zha 1992). But Tong notes that the differences of the two terms are too important to overlook because Lao Zi's concept of *tao* is absolute in its "absence from our written experiences, oral and written," and because while *tao* is hierarchical, it has a different sense from that of *logos*. Like Zhang, Tong looks at some Western misconceptions about the Chinese language, beginning with the Romantics, and includes comments on Plato, Hegel, Foucault and Derrida. He says that from the start, "Chinese characters did not copy but signified things." Finally, he says that to have a fruitful comparison between European languages and Chinese, there needs to be a "removal of geo-ideological barriers existing between traditions."

After discussing the basic features of postmodernism and comparing postmodernism and modernism (he notes that Nietzsche is a model for both), Wang Ning sets out four "metamorphosed versions of postmodernism in China": avant garde experimentation in language and narrative discourse, the new realism, commercialization of literary creation, and the deconstructive movement. Wang then asks whether postmodernism is a Western phenomenon. He concludes that postmodernism has different forms in East Asia than in the West and that it is a temporary phenomenon in the East that may be assimilated to mainstream culture in "a new pluralistic context."

Elizabeth Richmond-Garza muses on the twilight theory of the Renaissance in the 1990s (echoing Nietzsche's gay science of a century ago) after the explosion of new historicism and cultural materialism that Stephen Greenblatt and Jonathan Dollimore helped to set off (see Hart 1991a, 1991b). Richmond-Garza effectively characterizes the relation between new historicism and the assumptions that underlie her own article:

This radical, and one might even say surprising, combination of a poststructuralist continental mistrust of the authenticity of all modes of representation with a careful and applied indigenous materialist inquiry into social history and ideology generated the very possibility of a title such as my own which explicitly allies poststructuralist theory with the Renaissance critical project.

In addition to discussing poststructural manifestations of methodologies such as new historicism, rhetorical theory, narratology, and new psychology (e.g. schizoanalysis), Richmond-Garza hopes that in the 1990s "a new positive post-structuralism" will emerge. Picking up on Greenblatt's central metaphor of

negotiation, Katy Emck also talks about the contextualization that new historicism and cultural materialism bring to Renaissance or early modern studies. She focuses on subversion, containment and cultural authority — all new historical terms — in recent feminist studies of the Renaissance by Ann Rosalind Jones and Pamela Joseph Benson. Emck argues that Benson demonstrates "that the epics of Ariosto and Spenser are written within the tradition of profeminism" and that Jones shows that in the early modern period women are agents, and not just objects, of exchange.

Benzi Zhang's article examines the various types of the "Chinese box" strategy and suggests that a new typology is necessary to supplement the traditional one — stories within a story, single-storied frame narratives, and the main outer story and the fragmentary inner story. In his classification Zhang suggests that looking at "Chinese box" narratives in terms of a new classification, that is the paradoxical and the non-paradoxical, will help our reading of postmodern novels, especially as it "evokes a form of narrative democratization or absence of hierarchy." Such narratives change our ideas of plot and action. They permit a spatial system for "plotless 'reverie' structures" and challenge the reader "to recognize textual heterarchy."

In George Lang's article a shift occurs in the comparison of literatures: he is interested in postmodernism from the point of view of the "New" World. Lang considers whether culture in the Americas has gone downhill since the arrival of Columbus. More specifically, he looks at Québec's connection to Latin America, the bilingual Chicano culture and the polyglot Caribbean culture that draws on the Americas, Africa, and Europe. In keeping with the postmodern imperative, Lang questions centrality itself, and not simply Eurocentrism. He focuses on texts by Larry Shouldice and Earl E. Fitz as well as a collection edited by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, which he supplements with other texts. In echoing Octavio Paz — *No hay centro* — Lang makes the point that "well before postmodernism was conceived, Paz understood that each and every point of cultural creativity constructs its own centre and projects its own truths," a conclusion that has implications for marginal, minority, regional, and post-colonial literatures. For Lang, there is a celebration in this many-centredness and no apocalyptic Yeatsian pronouncement that the centre will not hold.

Social Semiotics as Praxis by Paul Thibault, which is based on the framework set up by Michael Halliday, represents, according to Anthony Wall, "a performing example of what is called Social Semiotics." Wall argues "that there is an important distinction to be made between ... what is here called the social semiotic and ... what we could call social semiotic theory." He uses the idea of performativity to see the positive aspects of Thibault's theory, to find a thread that allows him to admire the "circular labyrinth" and find a way out at the same time. All the same, Wall thinks that Thibault's book skirts the issue of "potential practitioners' choices." The sociologist, the semiotician, and the linguist

have to figure out how to recruit people into social semiotics, and the very difficult performance of Thibault's book makes that hard, despite its vital statements on the theory of language. My review essay on Northrop Frye discusses material from obscure texts as well as from more oral sources, such as sermons and interviews. I also review a book based on the MLA panel on Northrop Frye, organised to honour him on his seventy-fifth birthday. Frye and the other critics discuss modernism, postmodernism, and the canon. As this material is difficult to find (only Robert Denham's diligence has brought some of it to light) and as Frye is in my opinion the most international literary theorist Canada has produced, I have given more space discussing the matter than I would otherwise have.

The article cluster on canonization grows out of an MLA panel in December of 1991.² The concern with the current state of literary studies and the attempt to understand the changes happening to them form the basis of the preceding articles and those that appear in this cluster. Importantly, the changes in North American society and its changing relations with the world are themes that run throughout this issue. Dimić introduces the topic by asking why we should study canonization. He classifies the canon in terms of inside and outside, and centre and periphery (an opposition on the inside). Although Dimić says that no canon will ever justly represent all groups in a society, he says that scholars and teachers can do better than in the past. He exhorts us: "we can understand better both the processes under scrutiny and our own study of them, and we can also open our teaching canon to a greater diversity of representative human experiences, aspirations, and achievements." In discussing historical canons, Alvin Kernan asserts: "it is also impossible to ignore the fact that intellectual life in the more advanced cultures, including our own, has historically been organized around canons, and that most of human thought has not been free intellectual play but the interpretation of canonical works often treated as sacred truth." Kernan makes his case by looking at the older canons, including especially that of Confucianism in China. He says that attacks on canons are part of canonization and that the most recent protests may have no more effect than those against the nineteenth-century commentators on Confucius. David S. Reynolds looks at the role of the aesthetic in canon revision in American literature. He says that "A major challenge of multiculturalism is to identify and present those texts of other cultures that are truly representative, including those which have had a demonstrable, lasting influence." The aesthetic factor is, in Reynolds's view, the only workable way to choose new texts for the canon, and he suggests that "multivalence ... encourages us to contemplate the complexity of life." In the continuing work of excavating or mining the archive, only time

2 Similarly, a previous panel, "The Specificity of the Literary Text: A Discussion," appeared in our journal in 1986 (cf. Balakian; Dimić; Greene; Reynolds).

will tell who will be in the canon. Scholars, Reynolds says, should be rebels, like the authors they study, and not sheep who flock to new theoretical shepherds and their hegemony. In her opening paragraph, Anna Balakian sums up the arguments of the other papers in this cluster. She says she was a canon-breaker in her youth, so that she is not going to argue for a canon. She does, however, think that "canon harassment," which is the work of pressure groups, will have no lasting benefit. Mastery of a trade, Balakian argues, occurs in every walk of life, including literature. She questions the notion of "Western" literature as a monolith and suggests that this literature is *a priori* multicultural. Nonetheless, she thinks that multiculturalism has been hijacked and moved away from the internationalism she experienced in Comparative Literature. Balakian argues for a principle of organization and for an aesthetic principle in the study of literature. After setting out "minimum requirements" to include texts in literature, Balakian concludes that works that do not meet these standards "belong in the realm of 'cultural studies' but certainly not in courses in literature taught under the umbrella of the Humanities."

In "Notes and Documents," Howard Wolf's reflections on American Studies overseas shows the changing place of the United States in the modern and postmodern world. He discusses the role of Vietnam as well as the impact of demographic and economic changes on American Studies. He suggests that if the United States reinvents itself in every generation, its future, like Canada's, will be multicultural, or whatever term of "cultural revaluation" will be used. Wolf concludes that in the United States "cultural pluralism" has replaced *e pluribus unum* as a slogan for the 1990s. In Wolf's assessment politics and literary studies cannot be separated: American Studies is a tale of discovery — Wolf documents how he became globalized.

The canon, modernism, and postmodernism are hotly disputed terms. This issue should help to contribute to the debate. As long as the discussion is open, culture benefits. Theoretical debates, including the controversy over canons, help literary scholars, in East or West, North or South, to open up their minds. The business of literature and theory is exploration and discovery of individuals, groups, nations and the world, some of whom are not yet born and some of whom will insist on being heard as much with their eloquence as with their hopes.

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Problems with Comparative Poetics

Earl Miner has written a *Comparative Poetics*, perhaps the first sustained attempt at a truly intercultural account.¹ His subtitle, *An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*, focuses more closely on the matter and manner of this innovative book, since it announces a preliminary discussion of existing theories of literature. These theories are themselves understood in terms of explicit but also of implicit poetics, and viewed across a range of cultures.

This is therefore not an attempt to propose a new intercultural or universal poetics nor to consider a comparative poetics in the light of recent developments in literary theory. It is, instead, an historical and comparative account of long existing poetic systems, though these are in part teased out of their literary practices or, as I will argue, imposed upon them, rather than based on or abstracted out of systematic analysis.

Such a comparative poetics can perhaps be regarded in two ways: as a historical account of how writing has been shaped, or how theorists believe it ought to have been and, secondly, as a guide to reading that writing. In this intercultural account, the poetic systems themselves derive from what Miner calls "foundational" genres. These genres therefore shape the nature of all expression and hence the fundamental expectations of what is culturally possible. Miner's perspective therefore implies a universal history of the culturally imaginable. Reading is dependent on the generic assumptions that have shaped the writing. But in Miner's account, this reading is then given no space to contest those assumptions. Reading therefore becomes a function of the assumptions and hence we have to ask what they presuppose and what consequences they produce. The major contrasting examples are taken from Western (mostly English) and East Asian (mostly Japanese) writing.

The book is full of specific insights gained through a lifetime of comparative literary study, but it also raises at least two particular and rather troubling sets of questions. One of these sets is internal and the other external to the arguments in the text. The internal problems derive from the structure of Miner's

1 Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. 259. Paper US\$37.50.