

Reprenant, pour conclure, l'examen critique de l'état actuel de la littérature comparée, j'affirmerai que si la réflexion que je viens d'esquisser sur la pertinence de l'objet littéraire (qui, malgré bien des morts annoncées, se porte bien) est valable pour tout le champ des études littéraires, elle l'est à fortiori pour la littérature comparée. Pourquoi? D'abord à cause de l'étendue de son champ objectal qui dépasse celui d'une seule langue ou du national, ce qui ne permet pas seulement aux comparatistes d'éviter toute focalisation centralisante, mais qui l'oblige aussi à s'élever à un niveau de généralité favorisant le travail critique et théorique. Ensuite, parce que le nomadisme institutionnel du comparatisme comporte à la fois une nécessité et une capacité pour construire de nouveaux objets relationnels, ce qui pourrait faire avancer la réflexion sur un lieu culturel important dans le contexte technique actuel: l'interface entre texte et image. Il n'est pas exclus que dans cette comparaison de l'écrit et du pictural, la littérature comparée trouve un nouvel horizon à explorer, et exerce de ce fait, comme par le passé, un certain *leadership* à l'intérieur du champ des études littéraires.

Université de Montréal

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DOUWE FOKKEMA

Comparative Literature and the Problem of Canon Formation

Apart from doing scientific research, scholars may be engaged in meta-science: discussing the validity of scientific results, the organization of research, the definition of a discipline, the social significance and ethical standards of that discipline, teaching goals, etc.

A recent product of this meta-scientific debate is the collection of essays published under the title *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, edited by Charles Bernheimer (1995). It includes three reports on professional standards by committees of the American Comparative Literature Association, submitted in 1965, 1975, and 1993, and named after the chair of these committees, respectively the Levin report, the Greene report, and the Bernheimer report. The latter stirred much controversy and Anthony Appiah, Mary Louise Pratt, and Michael Riffaterre were asked to respond to it at the Convention of the Modern Language Association of 1993. At a later stage more reactions came forth by Peter Brooks, Jonathan Culler, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Marjorie Perloff, and others. All these papers were put together in a handsomely printed volume, preceded by an introduction by Charles Bernheimer, who under the pressure of fundamental criticism withdrew or qualified some of the more provocative statements expressed in the report that bears his name.

COMPARISON: RESEARCH OR CRITICISM?

The Bernheimer report is indeed of a meta-scientific nature but does not deal with standards or methods of research, unless one wishes to consider in that context the suggestion that, where possible, texts should be read in the original language. Nothing is being said on the validity of the results of research, nothing on the distinction between research and criticism. The Bernheimer report mainly focusses on redefining the discipline of Comparative Literature, not by showing that nowadays we are confronted by a different cluster of problems to be solved, but by arguing that we should adopt different standards in interpretation and criticism. By totally ignoring the polarity of research and criticism and neglecting research activities, the Bernheimer committee has done its job only halfway. And the aspects that were highlighted were almost necessarily discussed in ethical or political terms.

What does the Bernheimer report, in a description of the graduate program of Comparative Literature studies, propose? Let me try to summarize its main theses as accurately as possible:

- 1) "Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline. Rather, literary texts are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production." It further suggests "that comparative literature departments should moderate their focus on high-literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed. The production of 'literature' as an object of study could thus be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems."
- 2) "The knowledge of foreign languages remains fundamental to our *raison d'être*." Comparatists "should be encouraged to broaden their linguistic horizons to encompass at least one non-European language."
- 3) "The old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated."
- 4) "Comparative literature should be actively engaged in the comparative study of canon formation and in reconceiving the canon."
- 5) "Comparative literature departments should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives."
- 6) "Comparative literature should include comparisons between media, from early manuscripts to television, hypertext, and virtual realities" (Bernheimer 42-45).

There are two more theses dealing with the pedagogical implications and the role of theory, but the gist of these observations is clear: the object of study should first be expanded beyond "literature" and include all types of discourse, thus virtually coinciding with cultural studies; and, secondly, it should go beyond the European tradition and include texts from Asia, Africa, and Latin-America.

Having myself studied a non-European language and having worked in the field of both European and modern Chinese literature, I have no particular difficulty with any of these tenets except the very first one. I must admit, however, that part of my tolerance derives from the assumption that these theses predominantly express ethical, political, didactic, or pedagogical opinions and do not claim any scientific basis. The many times the word "should" is mentioned betrays that the rhetorical structure of the theses is that of the moral exhortation. Peter Brooks raises this point and asks whether the recommendation to "moderate" the focus on "high-literary discourse" is indeed made from a sufficiently convincing basis (Bernheimer 100). I will return to the "high-low" dichotomy, but wish to say first something on the distinction between the literary and the nonliterary. Both dichotomies are, of course, relevant for the discussion of canon formation.

As mentioned, I cannot subscribe to the first thesis, which is ill-phrased and betrays a serious misunderstanding of what a discipline is or can be. Disciplines are not distinguished by the object they study but by the questions they ask. Or,

as Karl Popper once said, "a so-called discipline is no more than a limited and constructed conglomeration of problems and tentative solutions" (108; translation is mine). As is well-known, literary texts are studied not only by literary scholars, but more or less occasionally also by theologians, jurists, social scientists, psychologists, anthropologists; in addition, their materiality — from medieval manuscripts to computer programs — can be investigated by chemists and physicists. Objects cannot define a discipline. That is why Marjorie Perloff prefers to speak of "the *literary* in its various forms — the *literary* of different centuries, different cultures, different nations" (Bernheimer 184), and Brooks of "literariness," a concept first advanced by the Russian Formalists but which he understands as "part of the stance of literature in the world, part of its project, part of its institutional claim" (102). Both terms, the literary and literariness, refer to qualities attributed to texts. They characterize ways of reading rather than the texts themselves, although, as we will see, textual features usually are a significant factor.

The cluster of questions and problems that together make up literary studies all pertain to literary-aesthetic intentions, the semiotic means by which they are expressed, and their effects. (Intentions do not necessarily have effects, and effects may occur without being intended.) At this point the Bernheimer report is plainly escapist. Finding it difficult to further examine what it is that makes people consider certain texts as literature and deny that qualification to other texts, it suggests to expand "the object of study" to make it coincide with the whole field of "cultural production." The suggestion might be taken serious if it had been clarified what, in this context, "cultural" means, but the term remains as much unexplained as the notion of literature. Of course, the proposed expansion of the object of study does not solve the problem of definition.

INVARIANT CONCEPTS, VARIABLE PHENOMENA

Will I be brazen enough to solve the problem of definition? I am aware of several more or less successful tentative solutions — solutions that are precise enough to allow for pertinent observations and explicit objections. Some of the proposals to define the literary have a merely operational value: they may serve the rather modest goal of describing a particular way of reading or delimiting a particular corpus of texts. Other attempts to characterize the literary or poetical are less ephemeral. The practice of writing literature is at least over two thousand years old and all major cultures have a literary as well as a poetological tradition. Aristotle (4th c. BC) and Liu Xie (AD 5th-6th c.) were early theoreticians whose findings have been discussed by later generations, yielding finally an impressive boom of theoretical writings in the twentieth century. Personally, I find the idea of the aesthetic convention as phrased by Siegfried J. Schmidt helpful if one sees it as a kind of contract between readers or between writers and readers to read a particular text in a way that does not primarily ask for factual correctness and

yet attributes significance to that text (Schmidt 92). Similarly, but using a different wording, Thomas Pavel wrote: "Symbolic distance must be complemented by a principle of relevance" (145). That many people act in accordance with the aesthetic convention with respect to particular texts is a social fact which further deserves to be investigated. The questions of how many people read in a literary-aesthetic way, under what circumstances, and with regard to which texts are partly sociological (Bourdieu; Knulst), partly psychological ones (Berlyne 1971, 1974; Groeben; Zwaan). It is here that interdisciplinary research becomes a necessity. I do not see, however, why such questions would completely rule out involvement of literary scholars. It is my experience that literary scholars are playing a crucial role in this kind of research as they are able to suggest interesting cases from literary history and can provide sophisticated working hypotheses.

The Western poetological tradition has yielded another approach with Riffaterre's concept of decontextualization, which in fact is rather complementary to the notion of the aesthetic convention as advanced by Schmidt. Riffaterre argues that "a text can be said to be literary when it survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which that text responded" (Bernheimer 70). He calls attention to the fact that texts originally written without literary intention, for instance historiographical or religious texts, may become incorporated in the body of texts that an interpretive community considers literary. The original referential meaning of a text may get lost and/or give way to a symbolic or metaphorical significance which it may also have or which can be read into it.

This approach can be further elaborated. At the basis of literary communication there is more than just this process of decontextualization. Reading may consist of three stages: 1) the historicist attempt at contextualization, 2) the discovery or attribution of symbolic significance which implies decontextualization, and 3) the presentist attempt at recontextualization, i.e., the construction of meaning with reference to the reader's own lifeworld. A literary way of reading will include stages two and three; emphasis on stage one will produce a nonliterary reading directed at the discovery of scientific, historical, or practical information. (The focus on the intention of an author is not under all circumstances a fallacy.)

To what extent the text plays a role in the respective stages of historicist contextualization, decontextualization and the discovery of literariness, and presentist recontextualization is a point of debate. Riffaterre argues for a fairly large role of the text: "Literature is the text, and once established, and once the author is gone and can no longer make alterations, the text is ahistorical and its significance lies above all contexts" (Bernheimer 71). Stanley Fish has denied any decisive role for textual features (for criticism of this position, see Shen; Fokkema and Ibsch xv-xvii). The outcome of the debate can be settled only by empirical research. By now there is some empirical evidence (Hoffstaedter;

Zwaan; Steen) for assuming that particular readers with some knowledge of literary conventions interpret particular texts as being literary more often than other texts. This does not mean that certain textual features as such trigger the reaction of a literary reading; it means, however, that particular textual features motivate readers to apply their knowledge of literary, generic, and stylistic conventions. The features of the text make a difference, although the size of that difference may vary depending on the cultural and other conditions of particular instances of reading.

Similarly, we assume that educated readers are able to distinguish high literature from popular literature. In both cases — the distinction between literary and nonliterary, high and low — the notion of convention is crucial. Maybe our conventions are wrong and perhaps knowledge based on conventions must be suspected, but it remains a fact that many readers can distinguish the literary from the nonliterary and the high from the popular.

It is at such points in our meta-scientific endeavor that the difference between scientific and non-scientific (or pseudo-scientific) observations becomes visible. We can establish by scientific means which texts are read in a literary way by which people, or, more elliptically, which texts are considered to be literary; and I would not immediately give away that kind of research to the social sciences as we need the results of that research in order to get closer to solving the problem of how the literary-aesthetic is produced, what its effect on readers is, and how its vitality can be explained. Neither sociology, nor psychology has shown much interest in the full complexity of these problems. It is impossible, however, to decide by way of scientific research that the literary is more valuable than the nonliterary, or expert literary discourse more important than the popular one. By definition, the correctness of such value judgments cannot be proven by scientific means. But also the moral or common-sense argument in defence of these judgments can hardly be successful in the abstract. It is quite obvious that in many cases, for instance in reports about political developments, nonliterary discourse is to be preferred. Fortunately, both political scientists and political commentators express themselves in a discourse that most educated readers will recognize as being different from fiction or poetry. Similarly, the argument can be made that under certain conditions, for instance among populations with little knowledge of literary conventions, popular literature will have more effect than high literature.

It is important to maintain the distinction between research and criticism here. As mentioned, the Bernheimer report does not do that. Where it advocates to compare the production of literature to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems, the term "compare" obfuscates the difference between research and criticism; it can mean both. Evidently a kind of cultural studies program is aimed at here which Peter Brooks considers dangerously close to a mixture of "amateur social history, amateur sociology, and personal ideology" (Bernheimer 100). The objection calls for another term, such

as "cultural sciences," which would distinguish itself from the more ideological tendencies in "cultural studies" — from what in fact is "cultural criticism" — by applying scientific methods, just like the natural and the social sciences. Although in English the word "science" is not currently used in conjunction with culture or literature, we may reconsider that usage, if only in the context of the *lingua franca* that English also is. In many languages one does not hesitate to use the word "science" with respect to the humanities. The Russian Formalists, for instance, explicitly aimed to establish a "science of literature" ("nauka literaturny") and "Literaturwissenschaft" is widely used in German, as well as "Kulturwissenschaft." We should perhaps recall here that the scientific ambitions of sociology are no older than two hundred years, those of psychology date from about a hundred years ago. The drive toward "Wissenschaftlichkeit" or scientificity in literary studies is again younger, but one can hardly imagine that it will abate and disappear again. Many literary scholars, not all of them living in Europe, agree that their discipline comprises more than interpretation and criticism. Both Culler and Brooks (Bernheimer 101) have argued that one should pay attention to institutional factors, to regularities in the production and acceptance of literary texts. Culler writes that "the idea of literary study as a discipline is precisely the attempt to develop a systematic understanding of the semiotic mechanisms of literature, the various strategies of its forms" (117). The search for regular patterns in the production and reception of literature makes our discipline a scientific endeavor. As part of that endeavor a number of concepts and terms have been constructed, such as the notion of convention, notably the aesthetic convention, and the concept of decontextualization, but also older terms such as fiction, metaphor, rhyme, style, free indirect discourse and a host of narratological concepts.

One wonders how far we have come. Lotman has convincingly argued that different cultures may favour either the aesthetics of opposition or the aesthetics of identity, but both forms of aesthetic impact include some kind of formal modelling as well as some degree of cognitive and/or emotive relevance. Jakobson, Ingarden, Barthes, Lotman, and many others have offered descriptions of how the literary is produced. The effect of focussing on formal features as well as on thematic content seems to imply a slackening of the reader's attention to the precise referential meaning of a text (decontextualization), allowing for symbolic and metaphorical transpositions and giving rise to a situation where, in an off-guarded way, readers may accept a story or a view which they never would take the trouble to absorb if the text were a straightly informative one. It may be this hybrid nature of texts considered literary — high literature rather than popular literature — that makes them more likely to dismantle ideological fixities than expository texts can do. If this indeed is an important effect of high (in the sense of complex) literature, then this may partly explain why this kind of discourse is essential in the system of verbal communication in modern society. It may provide a key to explaining why creative literature remains a vital

form of communication in spite of the rise of new media, ubiquitous commercialization, the dominance of managerial attitudes, identity politics, and religious and ideological fundamentalism.

These general concepts and assumptions concerning literary communication are useful since they enable us to discover culture-specific and situation-specific variables. However, it can hardly be expected that these concepts and assumptions — even if they would become more refined in the hands of future researchers — will be capable of fully explaining the literary-aesthetic effect wherever and whenever it may occur. For much of that effect is contingent and restricted to specific cultural, historical, social, and individual circumstances. This does not detract from the usefulness of general or, possibly, universal concepts: the fact that the specific ballistic curve of a stone thrown by somebody cannot be fully explained by the law of gravity does not invalidate the latter as a universally applicable law.

RESEARCH INTO THE COMPOSITION OF CANONS

What does this mean for the problem of canon formation? First, we must emphasize that it will be helpful to know the composition of canons upheld in different parts of the world by different groups of readers. That would be part of our scientific endeavor. Second, as educators or critics we may wish to intervene in the existing canons and, following the advice of the Bernheimer report, to reconceive some of the prevailing canons. Let me first comment on the first issue and conclude with some personal observations on a restructuring of canons in university education, in particular from an international point of view.

A canon can be defined as a selection of well-known texts, which are considered valuable, are used in education, and serve as a framework of reference for literary critics. There is one flaw in this definition and that is its passive construction. No mention is made of the agency which makes the selection and expresses the value judgments, or prescribes the texts as reading matter in school. The definition leaves the question "whose canon?" unanswered. Probably this open ending cannot be avoided, because the question of *who maintains which canon* is something which in concrete cases must be investigated.

How do we recognize a canon when we believe to see one? Jan Gorak has pointed out that it is not easy to determine which texts belong to a particular canon and which not. Critics have often been more explicit about an assumed canon they wished to reject than about a canon they preferred. Gorak notes the "tendency to narrow the cultural and historical diversity of *canons* into one reactionary *canon*" (248). His own historical research has shown to what extent canons can be different in size, scope (national/international), and rigidity. Indeed, a distinction must be made, as Nemoianu has done, between the canon of the critics (or various groups of critics) and the school canon (the curriculum). The latter can be differentiated again with respect to language and level. The

canon of English literature at high school is different from that at the university, and at different universities there may be different school canons or reading lists (Kaat). Gaiser found striking discrepancies between the "real" canon of high school students and the "official" canon of their teachers. Kochan has collected interesting material about the school canon of literature in German. Perhaps we should also distinguish a canon of the literary historians, which generally is more hospitable than that of the critics.

Glen Johnson has found a way to study the canon of English literature at universities in North America by comparing various editions of anthologies designed for teaching. However, the anthologies offer a rather wide net, which from the publisher's point of view seems the profitable thing to do. Yet, counting names of authors and the number of pages devoted to their work provides a clue which may turn out to be an interesting one, in particular if one, on the basis of subsequent editions, will find that the attention of the editor has shifted in one way or another. In recent editions of American anthologies, for instance, more women writers can be found. The editorial arguments explaining such shifts can be rather revealing.

Karl Erik Rosengren, whose work is not widely known among literary scholars, developed a method for studying the canons of critics. He suggested counting the number of times particular authors (or texts) have been mentioned in criticism focusing on another author. This method derives from the idea that familiarity with a certain set of writers and texts belongs to the general knowledge of educated people and therefore provides a frame of reference to a critic. Only writers who are well known can be referred to for reasons of comparison or explanation. In this research Rosengren uses the following operational definition of canon: a canon consists of those writers and texts which are frequently mentioned in literary criticism dealing with another author. Although his method of research can be improved by distinguishing between long and short, negative and positive "mentions," it can be applied quite successfully, including in research on the canons of literary-historical publications.

Instead of taking for granted that Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and Shakespeare belong to the canon, as Charles Altieri did (Nemoianu and Royal 2), it is possible now to examine more precisely which authors belong to the canon of a particular critic or group of critics, or to the canon of a particular literary historian or group of literary historians. Moreover, we are able to study fluctuations in the composition of these various canons in the course of time, and we may detect the hurdles which an author (or text) has to take before he or she (or it) is admitted to the rather stable canon of the literary historians, who, like the editors of anthologies, prefer to add rather than to delete, expressing their personal emphasis mainly by allotting more or less space.

The results of empirical research, such as carried out by Johnson and Rosengren, must be interpreted. The question why in recent editions of American

anthologies there are more women writers than in earlier ones is easy to answer. The publication of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* by Gilbert and Gubar is not difficult to explain either. But the question why certain authors reappear in every new anthology and remain also frequently referred to by literary critics, is more complicated. Clearly, Christopher Clausen is correct in criticizing the view that "literary works have value and meaning only for the period, culture, class, sex, or ethnic group that produces them" (Nemoianu and Royal 200). This position was not maintained even by Marx or Engels, only by some short-lived radical groups in the history of Marxism. However, what is it that makes people (including Marx) believe that some literary works have lasting value? Perhaps the question should be phrased more correctly as: What is it that makes certain texts having a better chance of surviving longer than others?

Some scholars will answer that it is a matter of well-organized distribution by publishers or other kinds of institutional support. But if that were the answer, the question is merely deferred, because why should a publisher or academic institution have given its full support precisely to this one author, Shakespeare for instance, or Li Bai, or Rabindranath Tagore, or Borges, and not to authors who by now are less popular? If institutional support is given as the main reason for an author's success, the implication is that the work to be supported was selected at random. It is more likely, however, that the distributional and institutional networks have spent their energy on texts by authors who appeared to offer something of value. Publishers and other institutions will have acted on the expectation that with this particular author they would have more success than with another. Therefore, institutional support alone provides no explanation.

Our not so very revolutionary conclusion is that the thematic contents and formal features of a text are a factor determining the chances of survival as well. Christopher Clausen has focused on the thematic elements. His findings are rather tentative and the question why particular texts time and again have been read and commented upon, thus conforming to Kermode's criterion of a canon whereas others have not shared this fate, remains one of the most intriguing problems of literary history. Simple answers cannot be expected, since values are contingent, as Herrstein Smith has shown. However, that does not mean that within the various cultural traditions they also are arbitrary.

The question of the persistence of certain thematic contents (related to the more private spheres of life: indeed love and death, family relations, the dilemmas of individuals in their confrontation with the outer world) and of certain formal features (a certain complexity of form, resulting from repeated encoding as Lotman has suggested, including of course the possibility of the zero device or *minus prijom* which is related to the contingent expectations of the readers) remains an important research topic. In order to generate promising hypotheses, however, it will be necessary to have more data.

Relatively much is known about the canons of literature in Europe and the Americas, but we have little knowledge about the composition of canons in other parts of the world, in spite of the great number of publications about postcolonialism and writing in the former third world. In 1993, I submitted a questionnaire on canon formation to two groups of students of Peking University. In fact, the questionnaire was designed to collect information about the personal literary preferences of these students. The main results may be summarized here.

Thirty-eight students, twenty females and eighteen males, all born in China, completed the questionnaire in two different classroom sessions, twenty-one of them studying English, thirteen Chinese, whereas four did not answer the question about their main field of study. Although there were some first- and second-year students among the group, the majority had studied between three and five years at the university. As to reading, narrative prose (including fiction) was strongly preferred: 26 against 7, who said to prefer poetry, and 5 who liked to read essays. The (open) question which novel of *traditional* Chinese literature was appreciated most yielded the answer *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong lou meng*) 30 times. Only eight respondents preferred another choice: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yan yi*), or *Water Margin* (*Shui hu zhuan*), or other well-known traditional fiction. The strong preference for *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the eighteenth-century family history and tragic love story, is not difficult to explain. I would not be surprised at all if the majority of Western students of Chinese literature would have the same preference. I may recall here that China has a tradition of canon formation that shows at least as much awareness of the process of canonization as the European tradition. For instance Zhi Yu (d. AD 311), a compiler of an anthology, emphasized the moral, cognitive, and emotive functions of literature in a way that coincides with our emphasis on the significance of literature for the private domains of life, its significance for the relation between the subject and its social and natural environment: "Literary writings are the means by which one manifests images of superior and inferior, illuminates the order of human relationships, investigates inner principles and exhaustively [expresses] one's nature, in order to examine what is proper to the myriad phenomena" (qtd. in Yu 175).

Other questions were designed to find out to what extent *foreign* literature was preferred in comparison with traditional *and* modern Chinese literature. Here my findings should be treated with caution as there were many students of English among the group and because some respondents did not complete this (last) question due to lack of time. Nevertheless, the question "If you now compare your preferred novels and authors, please mention three novels (either Chinese or foreign) in the order of your preference" was answered, even by students of Chinese, by mentioning *War and Peace*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Sons and Lovers*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Remembrance of Things Past* (indeed, French fiction is remembered by English titles and often read in English or

Chinese translation), *Jean Christophe* and so on, although again most often *Dream of the Red Chamber* appeared in the first position. There was a notable absence of Japanese novels.

A similar question about poetry brought Li Bai to the first place with 11 mentions in the first position, but the question about the most favoured playwright (either Chinese or foreign) was answered 11 times with Shakespeare in the first position and O'Neill as a second best among the foreign names. Much preferred Chinese playwrights were Guan Hanqing and Tang Xianzu, and from this century, Cao Yu and Lao She.

As far as the preferences for foreign authors are concerned, it should be emphasized that the availability of texts in Peking, preferably in Chinese translation, is a precondition for their being widely mentioned. Therefore, the preferences for foreign writers are bound to be rather conventional. Also the recent showing of films on the campus of Peking University, such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *Gone with the Wind* was reflected in the answers concerning preferred foreign fiction.

Availability is less of a constraint if we consider the preferences for *modern and contemporary* Chinese literature. As to fiction, Shen Congwen (*The Border Town*, 1934), Ba Jin (*Family, Spring, Autumn*, 1933-1940), Lu Xun, Lao She, and Qian Zhongshu (*The Besieged City*, 1945) were at the top. A film after the latter novel was shown as a television series, which may have influenced its position. The most favoured modern poets were Xu Zhimo, Dai Wangshu, Ai Qing, Hai Zi, Shu Ting, Feng Zhi, Bei Dao, and Wen Yiduo, some of whom had been published already in the 1930s, whereas others were contemporaries. The list of preferred modern playwrights is least surprising: Cao Yu being by far the most popular, Lao She occupying the second position, and Tian Han and Xia Yan being mentioned also more than once.

With the expressed popularity of Shen Congwen and Qian Zhongshu as well as Xu Zhimo and Wen Yiduo a link is made with the prerevolutionary past. Strictly speaking, this observation applies also to Ba Jin, Lu Xun, and Lao She whose pre-1949 writings were mentioned, but these writers continued to be widely published and read after the founding of the People's Republic. However, the connection with the prerevolutionary period is probably not the most important factor determining these preferences. It is the thematic contents and expressed emotions, which were not dealt with in the official literature of the socialist realist kind during the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution that makes these works attractive. My hypothesis is that, however much a text may be interesting from a formal point of view, it will never achieve a high position in the canon unless it is thematically relevant at the same time. As we observed above, this relevance has often to do with the private spheres of life, which are not discussed in other media. The personal canons which can be constructed on the basis of this questionnaire have much to do with the concerns

of adolescence: emotional attachments, family relations, individuals in their confrontation with the outer world, and the unknown history of the period before 1949 which was responsible for the later developments. I wish we had longitudinal data about students' preferences so that we might see crucial shifts and perhaps constancies in their personal canons. Our long-term aim, of course, must be to develop a theory that would explain both these constancies and shifts.

INTERVENTIONS IN THE CANON DEBATE

A concept of literary communication which implies decontextualization and presentist recontextualization has consequences for the canon debate. It appears that the readers' understanding of a text will always deviate from the original context in which it was written. Reading literature seems interesting precisely because it allows for metaphorical or symbolic interpretation. It is different from reading expository texts. Even at a time of great political turmoil in China, Lu Xun subscribed to that view: "In addition to catchwords, slogans, notices, telegrams and notebooks, the revolution needs literature — just because it is literature" (Lu Xun 22).

Riffaterre has argued that the problem of canon formation "should be the exclusive domain of cultural studies" (Bernheimer 71). Two comments must be made about this position. First we should know whether we have research into the composition of canons in mind (a kind of research that would belong to the cultural sciences) or intervention in the canon debate (i.e., cultural criticism). Secondly, as argued above, I do not believe that the formal and thematic qualities — pre-eminently examined by literary scholars — can be neglected in studies of the canon problem.

However, Riffaterre is right in considering that the social context, political concepts, and educational goals cannot be excluded from explaining the composition of a particular canon, or from arguments in favour of changing that canon. If I wish to discuss changes in, let us say, the canon of literature taught in the Faculty of Arts, or, more narrowly, the set of texts to be read in Comparative Literature departments, I must remind myself of the context in which this reading is done and of my educational and, possibly, political goals. Thus, my observations have a personal and not a scientific character and whether they will be shared by others depends on whether one can accept my diagnosis of the social context, my preference for certain goals, and other elements in my argument.

In a world that is threatened by fundamentalism in various appearances, ranging from ethnic cleansing and identity politics to religious persecution and economic and technological ideologies, we need a literature that helps its readers to break through ideological barriers and to unmask fundamentalist beliefs. I assume that complex or "high" literature is more effective in unsettling ideological dogmas than popular literature, which usually conforms to widely

maintained conventions. This depends, of course, partly on the way the various texts of "high" literature are read, whether, for instance, voices of doubt and contrast are allowed to become part of the readers' interpretation. Here another aspect of our social context should be mentioned: in a world that favours the commonplace as promulgated by the tabloid press and television, the private spheres of life and individual critical thinking are under considerable pressure. Again it is complex texts, texts with a capacity for eliciting an individual and possibly intellectual response, that should be part of our canon. In modern society the public sphere, which first has undermined family life and communal structures, now also threatens the private. We probably need a kind of literature that discusses problems which are ignored by the other media: moral dilemmas, models of emotional attachment and the experience of death, individual views on the confrontation with the outer world. If we value independent thinking and individual concepts of emotional response, we again must have a preference for complex or "high" literature, rather than its popular counterpart.

My political convictions include a concept of cosmopolitanism that can compete with identity politics of whatever provenance. The discussion has been carried on now for many years — not only by Scarpetta and Todorov, but also by Marxist authors — whether human beings have something in common with each other that distinguishes them from animals. Perhaps that common element is precisely the wish to be different from animals and the reflection on that desire, which, in effect, is a desire not to be completely dependent on natural, biological and other conditions. This desire has resulted in the invention of ethics and human rights. The possibility of a new cosmopolitanism can save us from a proliferation of the culture wars, a term which to our embarrassment is currently used in the United States, for instance in the title of a book by Henry Louis Gates, chair of the department of African-American studies at Harvard University.

Gates, however, prefers a peaceful accommodation over a withdrawal into the trenches of cultural identities. He argues that there is no limit to our capacity for learning the conventions of another culture: "Any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be" (xv). This coincides with my educational convictions. There are many examples of people who have acquired knowledge of the conventions of another culture and are able to apply them in practice. Think of the many immigrants who have come to North America, or of politicians, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, who was equally at home in Oxford and Cambridge as in his own country. It is a valuable goal for Comparative Literature departments to foster the idea that conventions of different cultures can be taught and learned, however much some scholars emphasize the fundamental differences between, say, the Chinese and the European tradition, to mention an example of sharp contrast that may serve as a paradigm for other cultural differences. James Liu, one of the most successful mediators between the two cultural traditions, in a

posthumous publication, expressed the belief "that only by means of juxtapositions of texts from [the] two different traditions can we bring into relief what is truly distinctive in each tradition.... Such juxtaposition will also enable us to become aware of the unspoken presuppositions about the nature of language, poetry, poetics, and interpretation that underlie each tradition, thus paving the way for a genuinely comparative poetics, free from both Eurocentrism or Sinocentrism" (qtd. in Idema 279).

Accepting the fundamental differences between cultural traditions as wide apart as that of China and of Europe does not mean that switching from one cultural code to another is impossible. The life and work of James Liu himself have shown that it is not. Such code-switching is not only possible but also highly interesting to those who attempt it. This code-switching does not imply that the codes switched are considered homogeneous or "pure." In fact, as Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid" (xxix). Though, as hybrids, they are different from each other.

The situation sketched above and the political and educational goals mentioned provide some indications of the axes along which my preferred canon will be composed. That canon will be dynamic; its goal is not to emphasize an — always constructed — identity but to explore possibilities for identification. The search for such a canon is a pre-eminently cultural performance, and the search itself is at least as important as that which will be found. In this context I would subscribe to Walter Mignolo's definition of culture as that which "guides actions or patterns of behavior, not the accumulated achievements or accomplishments by which 'cultures' are often measured and ranked" (179).

My preferred canon, then, will be guided by the possibility of code-switching — the very opposite of identity politics — and focus on contrastive values, on the differences between traditions, on criticism of prevailing ideologies, and on a variety of models of moral behavior and private life. It will include texts of complex literature from all major cultures of the world, not only contemporary texts but also older ones, on the assumption that it is more rewarding to try to understand difficult texts than to assume to understand simple ones. However, my ways of decontextualization and certainly my attribution of presentist significance (recontextualization) will be different from those of my colleagues, and, therefore, my preferred canon will be different from theirs. As a result, it is useless to provide a list of texts preferred by me, as any final list adopted by a department of Comparative Literature will always be a product of compromise, dictated by diverse convictions, the specific culture we are living in, and the convenience of the moment (such as the availability of the books).

If I argue for an ideal of cosmopolitanism, it does not mean, of course, that all canons of world literature designed by Comparative Literature departments should be the same all over the world, but only that each Comparative Literature

department, from its own point of view, establish a reading list (preferably more than one) that should be guided, among other things, by the notion that human nature is one, despite differences of language, nationality, race, religion, gender, or culture. It would be most interesting to compare the various, Western and Eastern — of course still partly culture-bound — conceptions of such cosmopolitan canons, and to enjoy their differences as well as the aspects they will have in common.

Utrecht University

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ARMANDO GNISCI

La Littérature comparée comme discipline de décolonisation

La littérature comparée, on le sait bien, est une discipline académique qui naît en Europe et en Amérique du nord. Dès son origine, qui remonte au début du siècle dernier, elle s'est toujours définie comme une discipline "en crise." Au fur et à mesure qu'elle étendait l'ampleur de ses connaissances, cette forme d'étude de la littérature au point de vue international s'interrogeait sur son identité, sur sa légitimité, sur ses limites, sur ses objectifs.

Cette autocritique incessante, mais en fin de compte physiologique et constitutive, est aujourd'hui sur le point de toucher à son terme. Beaucoup prétendent, avec une insistance de plus en plus croissante, que la littérature comparée est une discipline en phase d'extinction, si non déjà disparue.

Avec quoi se propose-t-on de remplacer la littérature comparée? D'une part on soutient la nécessité de son assimilation à la soi-disante théorie de la littérature. Conçue comme la discipline centrale et la plus puissante des études littéraires, elle soumettrait et réglerait, tout en se portant leur garant, l'ensemble des autres disciplines: philologie, herméneutique et littérature comparée même.

D'autre part on propose au contraire comme désormais inévitable le dépassement de la littérature comparée face à de nouveaux intérêts d'étude, expression directe des problèmes fondamentaux de la culture mondiale de notre époque. Il s'agit de: a) les études sur la traduction (*Translation Studies*); b) les études sur la décolonisation culturelle (*Postcolonial Theory*) et c) les études inter-culturelles (*Intercultural Studies*). Quelqu'un ajoute à cette liste: d) les études féministes (*Gender* ou *Women's Studies*).

Le premier choix — qui impose l'assimilation de la littérature comparée à la théorie de la littérature, au nom de sa prétendue supériorité — exprime l'attitude typiquement égocentrique des pays européens et nord-américains, tout en proposant encore une fois la vieille conception impérialiste et hiérarchisée de la science occidentale: celle qui impose un savoir fort et central à fondement de toutes formes de connaissance. Le deuxième choix, articulé et multiple, est issu, au contraire, des développements concrets des études littéraires dans une perspective véritablement mondiale, et non plus exclusivement euro-américaine. De plus, *Translation Studies*, *Postcolonial Theory*, *Intercultural Studies* et *Women's Studies* ne se présentent pas comme indifférents ou alternatifs les uns aux autres, mais ils semblent marcher ensemble dans la même direction, liés par