

EUROCENTRISM AND THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

by M. Schipper

The conflict between historical relativism and perspectivism in the study of literature has been the subject of discussion for many years. Historical relativism stems from historicism – ‘an approach that sees everything in purely historical terms, unrelated to the political context, or to ethics or religion’ (Jan Romein 1963: 147). The past was important *as past*, in the belief that it was possible to reconstruct this past exactly as it had been. The point of perspectivism, in the words of Wellek, is ‘that we recognize that there is one poetry, one literature comparable in all ages’ (1973: 43). Wellek was sharply opposed to relativism, which he equates with an ‘anarchy of values’ (ibid.). It is interesting to note that this discussion took place at a relatively late stage – starting in the 1950s and gaining momentum in the 1960s and the years that followed (cf. Haskell Block and Etiemble).

The term cultural relativism was first used in connection with literature studies in 1969, by Roy Harvey Pearce in a footnote to an article in his series *Historicism Once More*. D. W. Fokkema expanded on this in his inaugural lecture in 1971 on cultural relativism and comparative literature. He defines cultural relativism in the study of literature as ‘the approach that interprets the literary-historical phenomena of a given period within the context of a particular cultural area. This approach makes its assessment on the basis of the norms and against the background of both the period and the cultural area, and then compares with each other the various value systems that characterise the different periods and cultural areas. I think that to ‘period’ and ‘cultural area’ one must add the social group from which the particular literature has originated and by whom it is read. But we will return to that later.

Science has been enriched in a number of research areas as a result of Western imperialism and colonialism. Anthropology, as one of the first human sciences, profited enormously. Perhaps this is the reason that developments took place at such an early stage in anthropology, which only much later manifested themselves in the area of literature studies. The problems of cultural relativism can be clearly distinguished in these developments, and for this reason I now propose that we make a brief detour to anthropology. The fact that oral literature for such a long time was seen as a province of anthropology and was studied primarily by this discipline has not always been beneficial to its analysis as literature. Scholars and students are partly to be blamed for this themselves.

The anthropologists went through phases of evolutionism and cultural relativism. E. B. Tylor preached evolutionism in his *Primitive Culture* (1871). His views were clearly Eurocentric: modern western civilisation was his norm – all non-western peoples were ‘less advanced’. According to Tylor they had stayed in an earlier stage. For him and his followers, there was a single process of evolution that encompassed all of nature and culture.

Franz Boas later opposed this (in, among others, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Race, Language and Culture* (1940)).

He criticised evolutionism because it claimed to be able to reconstruct a history of culture that applied to the whole human race. Just after the turn of the century Boas was already warning his students against projecting their own western values and categories on the cultures they wanted to study. This brought enormous changes. The word 'culture', for example, was given a plural form for the first time. People reached the conclusion that there was a nearly infinite number and variety of cultural elements.

For Tylor, the evolutionists, and all who preceded them, culture had always meant 'enlightenment' and 'progress', resulting from rationality and creativity. After Boas, however, it began more and more to take on the opposite meaning – culture as that which binds people to tradition, to the irrational. Man is no longer seen as the creator of culture, but rather as the creation of his own culture. Familiar names from the Boas school are Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits: they stressed the equal value of all cultures. According to Herskovits, there is actually no one who is qualified to make judgements about aspects of another culture or about other cultures as wholes. Why?

Herskovits says that these judgements depend on one's own cultural experience and are no more than reflections of one's own culture and its prejudices, since one assumes one's own categories to be generally valid. One is thus forced to conclude that no general judgements are possible. A culture can only be assessed by someone who is a carrier of that same culture.

But here one is losing one's vision of the whole. In fact, what Herskovits wants is for western scientists to overcome their ethnocentrism and take a tolerant view of all other cultures: a 'peaceful coexistence' on the basis of cultural relativism, rather than ethnocentrism. Whereas ethical imperialism had led to missionarism and colonialism, ethical relativism led to anti-missionarism, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. Similar developments also took place in such fields as non-western sociology and history. New definitions had to be formulated and new words coined, because the point of departure had changed.

Pizarro, Stanley and Cook, for example, could no longer be termed 'explorers'.

On the surface, cultural relativism might seem very appealing, but the difficulty is the absence of values: on the one hand Herskovits denies that it is possible for human beings to make value-free, non-culture-bound judgements; on the other hand he wants to practice an anthropology that is objective, value-free and not bound by culture. Like Lemaire, we can see a definite contradiction here (1976: chapters I and II). In fact, cultural relativism actually confirms ethnocentrism. The democratic idea of cultural relativism is that everyone is ethnocentric. One is preaching for the status quo, assuming an immutability of real differences between cultures, and adamantly opposed to contaminating one culture with elements from another. Emphasis comes to lie on isolation, a sort of apartheid that is, unfortunately, familiar to us: people are trapped in the straight-jacket of cultural determinism.

Actually, cultural relativism is nothing more than a theoretical protest against the processes of centuries that have been westernising the human race. Historically, it is interesting to note how much the field of anthropology actually served colonialism.

Tylor's theory, the anthropology of evolutionism, justified colonialism – 'bringing civilisation to the natives'. During the next stage, when the West thought that not too much civilisation should be brought to the 'natives' because it might make them troublesome, the theory of cultural relativism was very handy: it justified conservatism – existing cultures had to be respected (and inequalities perpetuated).

Nonetheless, the insight into the inevitability of ethnocentrism can be useful, not only for anthropologists, but also for scientists in other fields: value systems from various cultures should be the subject of comparative research. Lemaire goes into this in depth in his book.

Especially after the world wars, and as a result of the start of decolonisation, historians also began to realise that a new way of describing history was needed. Toynbee was one of the best known proponents of this in Europe. In his essay 'Widening our historical horizon', he noted that historians can have a great deal of political influence: 'History tells us that historians, like scientists, do have an impact on society, and if the historian is a teacher, his impact is direct and immediate. Nineteenth-century historians (...) stoked up the fires of nationalism, and the consequence is that these fires are still raging today, when we have been carried by the scientists into the Atomic Age (...) The historian has a practical responsibility (...) The student and writer and teacher of history ought to strive now, with all his might, to widen his public's historical horizons and, to do this, he must begin by widening his own' (p. 60).

Developments that have taken place in anthropology and in history indicate that a growing number of scientists have begun to take a critical look at the forms of ethnocentrism – or more properly, Eurocentrism – and at the associated value systems in their own disciplines.

But what does all of this have to do with literature? Have we put evolutionist thinking behind us as the anthropologists have? Are we, like the historians, interested in new definitions in literature studies? What about the question of the social relevance of our research – do we too have the practical responsibility Toynbee spoke of? In anthropology and non-western sociology (a Eurocentric term, by the way), the shift came because of intensive field research outside Europe at a fairly early stage, and later, through the inevitable confrontation between western researchers and their Asian, Latin American and African colleagues. As I mentioned before, the literature of other cultures has long been considered a logical component of anthropological and sociological studies.

Why then has oral literature so seldom been seen as a research topic for students of literature (fortunately with a few exceptions, such as Finnegan 1970, 1974, 1977)? Have the echoes of decolonisation not reverberated through to literary discussions? If so, what of this has been passed on to literature research and education? I think that the combination of analysis and qualitative evaluation that characterises our work has played a part. But we need not be pessimistic.

In a recent article on comparative literature study, D. W. Fokkema (1981) points to several developments within the discipline, the theoretical component of which has only recently been set down in statutory terms in the *International Association of*

Comparative Literature. Comparative literature study is defined in this 1979 document as 'the study of literary history, the theory of literature and the interpretation of texts, undertaken from a comparative international point of view' (p. 188).

Without taking the time to go more deeply into the historical developments, suffice it to say that the approach to literature study presented by Fokkema in this article leaves ample room for the comparative study of literature from various cultures, whether this involves relationships of contact, or of typological similarities. The new study of literature has liberated itself from the old approach with its inflexible norms that characterised so many researchers. Many now direct their attention to the literary communication situation and to the conventions or the production and reception of texts that are accepted as literary under certain circumstances. According to Fokkema, a strict distinction is now made between the reader and the researcher, between the historical reception of certain texts and one's own evaluation. Unlike New Criticism or its British variation, practical criticism, the scientific study of literature aims neither at the transfer of literary values, nor at the formation of defence of a literary tradition. Within the new study of literature, the transfer of literary values and the formation of literary traditions are, on the other hand, the object of research (p. 192).

The developments that have led to a new vision of the scientific relevance of the field are extremely encouraging. The theory, however, often bears little resemblance to the practice of research, education, and particularly of literary criticism, which are clearly dominated by institutionalised literature and its associated value system.

One sees clearly that literature is an institution if one looks at the textbooks and anthologies used in schools. Pupils are exposed to these books, and in this way an identification is created in their minds between what the book contains and what literature is or should be. Writers' names, and texts or fragments of texts, are included in the book because they are 'literary', and they are 'literary' because they are in the book. The literature textbook involves a selection, and thus presents a picture of what its editors think literature is in terms of the value system they hold. What is passed on as literature – national or international – seems to be heritage for the new generation, but in fact it is a heritage of which a part has been held back and is never referred to. An interesting study by Bernard Mouralis (1975) refers to this part as the field of counter-literature, which tries in many ways to attract the attention of that small elite group who decides what may and what may not be counted as Literature. This counter literature includes both oral and written works from the present and the past. Nowadays one must also include popular magazines, comic books, science fiction, detective stories and romances. In our vision of what is Literature, the vast majority of the works from other cultures also belong to this large field of counter literature. Nevertheless, from a historical point of view, shifts are taking place in the evaluation and assembly of our literary heritage. Mouralis offers a brief summary: after classicism the supremacy of the classic heritage was disputed – in France with the appearance of *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. The cultural horizon was expanded through acquaintance with other ancient civilisations (Egypt and the Middle East) or modern ones (Persia, China, America). After this, more attention was also given in the west to the literature from other European countries and to one's own 'folk literature'. In the nineteenth century,

discovery was made of new literatures in European languages such as English, Spanish and Portuguese. These became further and further removed from the exclusive European influence. Thanks to the science of anthropology, twentieth-century westerners came into contact with the oral literature of Africa, America and Oceania. Since recently, there is also a large supply of literature that stems from colonial, semi-colonial and post-colonial societies and sharply opposes western cultural domination. One must add to this that the immigration of large groups of people with other cultures, and their permanent settlement in our western world, certainly is influencing or will influence our literature and culture (see Mouralis 1975: p. 58).

In a number of ways the counter-literature mechanism, as Mouralis calls it, can be compared with the polysystem theory of Even-Zohar (1979). Even-Zohar argues from a semiotic point of view against inflexible elitism and the equation of literary criticism with literary research, and against writing the history of literature using only the so-called masterpieces: '...as scholars committed to the discovery of the mechanisms of literary history, we cannot use arbitrary and temporary value judgements as criteria in selecting the objects of study in a historical context. The prevalent value judgements of any period are themselves an integral part of the objects to be observed. No field of study can select its objects according to norms of taste without losing its status as an intersubjective discipline' (p. 292).

Only scant traces of the developments that have been summarised here can be recognised in the literary heritage that is passed on in literature education. What criteria are being used? Criteria of an esthetic and/or ethical nature? How is literature defined? With respect to the concept literature, perhaps only one thing can be said with certainty – that no one ever agrees on how it should be defined. The formal criteria for what is to be considered as literature have shifted and been revised so many times in the course of western history alone, that it is impossible to see them as anything but arbitrary. The study of literature from other cultures makes the recognition of this arbitrariness all the more necessary.

It is for this reason that every encouragement should be given to the general view that study and criticism should be separated from each other as much as possible in comparative literature. The continued use of inflexible standards of 'quality', as Wellek did, is inconsistent with this approach. Such an inflexible basis for study, in which western literary values are seen as universal, has been sharply criticised in recent years outside Europe – criticism that in my opinion is largely justified. Until the 1970s, western encyclopedia articles and textbooks on world literature were limited primarily to the discussion of western literary works. Until the most recent editions of the Dutch encyclopedias Oosthoek, Winkler Prins and Spectrum, African literature received almost no mention. I think that such criticism from outside one's cultural context can be very enlightening; after all, the science of anthropology benefited from western anthropologists being confronted by the critical questions of scholars with other backgrounds. Likewise, historians from Latin America, Asia and Africa have pointed to the one-sided, expansionist perspective from which westerners tend to write history. Theological research has been given new impulses by the liberation theologians from Latin America and by the black theology from North America and Africa. To what extent can the same

be said of the study of literature? I think that in our field the confrontations have been fairly recent. The transfer of western literary values to other cultural contexts has been a fact of life for a very long time. In the eyes of researchers from these cultures, this has had some advantages, but has also been damaging to their own cultures. Many discussions on this subject have been taking place since the sixties and seventies, particularly in countries that have known western colonialism. But these discussions have seldom penetrated the walls of our own European universities. Do we know, for example, that more than once the question has been asked outside Europe whether a westerner is at all capable of studying other literatures? Perhaps we just shrug our shoulders at what seems to us such an impertinent question. But maybe it is pertinent after all if we ask ourselves what is behind that question.

One example – in an article entitled 'Comparatism and separatism in African literature', Isidore Okpewho (1981) from Nigeria explains how there came to be two camps among African scholars of comparative literature. Besides those who urge using the same broad definition mentioned here, there are others who see no merit in this sort of comparatism, since western students of literature in the past have made it plain that they saw no merit in African literature when doing their comparative research. The same narrow vision that has plagued western research is thus adopted as a reaction by those who feel they have been sold short by this attitude. And then there is the fact that in cases where westerners did give attention to other literatures, they approached them from a very Eurocentric point of view.

Okpewho is absolutely right when he notes that: 'the political undercurrents of comparatism do indeed deserve some emphasis, especially in the light of the painful political history of Africa. The colonial and other foreign presences among us did so much savagery to our cultural values that it is no surprise to find some of our scholars looking inward for a rediscovery of our violated essences. But we can also take what seems to me a deeper view of domination and argue that it is essentially an effort toward dehumanization' (1981: 26). Nonetheless, Okpewho makes a plea for intercultural literature research, even though he readily admits that this research is still always hampered by the historical relations based on inequality that have stood in the way of subjectivity, and still stand in the way through Eurocentrism and the reaction to it. I have taken part in many such discussions myself, and as a result organised a seminar on exactly this subject for the Africa Study Centre in Leiden in 1976. The seminar examined the question of whether the same methods can be used for studying other literature as for studying western literature. Scholars from Africa, America and Europe came together for this discussion. Some of them quite correctly dismissed summarily any western publications that tried, using western criteria of quality, to see how far African literature has now advanced along the evolutionary line between prehistory and western modernity.

The unanimous conclusion was reached in Leiden that methods themselves need not be culture-bound, providing the respective scholars are aware of the limitations that are imposed by their own historical and cultural situations (see Schipper 1977).

Historical research on how texts from other cultures have been received by western readers and critics would certainly produce enlightening results. There is an interesting study by Gerard Leclerc on colonisation and decolonisation in anthropological research, entitled *Anthropologie et colonialisme* (1972). In the field of history, I cannot

neglect mentioning a work by Preiswerk and Perrot: *Ethnocentrisme et Histoire* (1975), Mouralis' book *Les Contre-littératures* places our western Literature in a broader, relative perspective. There are indications of a changing approach for research in the human sciences. At the end of their book, Perrot and Preiswerk bring up a number of critical points. I will mention several and apply them to the study of literature.

1. How do we define for ourselves the term 'world literature'? Does our definition contain any traces of cultural evolutionism? Research on national literatures requires fitting them into a larger whole to illustrate the relationship between the literature in question and other literatures within the same or other cultures. Such exploration also enables us to have a better insight into our own literature and culture.
2. The choice of what is to be seen as literature, and the question of who does the choosing is very significant. Historical textbooks and encyclopedias reveal the world view of the group from which they originate. It would be interesting to confront such a literary choice with a selection from what has been explicitly left out – for example, with works from counter-literature. This would sharpen our insight into the problem of assigning value.
3. With respect to the writing of literary history, the question is where one has it begin. In the west it has not been at all unusual to have history start at the point at which the west began to play a role, or first came into contact with the area under consideration. For the history of literature this has often meant leaving out oral literature altogether. The criteria for assessing quality are also often heavily influenced by evolutionism.

There are abundant examples. I will give two. Robert Cornevin (1970) has theatre in Africa 'come into existence' after the coming of the Europeans to Africa. His book on the subject, *Le Théâtre en Afrique Noire et à Madagascar*, is dedicated to a colonial Frenchman, 'the father of the African stage', as he calls him. Like The Chadwicks in the forties and C. M. Bowra (1961), Ruth Finnegan (1970) also bases her definition of an epic on the written version of the Iliad and the Odyssey that have reached us through the pen of Homer. The Nigerian Okpewho, himself a classicist, raised some questions about this after having carefully studied a number of the oral epics of Africa. He reproaches Finnegan 'for setting Homer up as the yardstick of definition of the epic and for dismissing as inadequate all 'primitive' heroic narratives which do not mimic the classic devices of Homer (or at least such of them as the written culture has passed on to us). I have indeed made the Homeric corpus the major counterpoint of my examination of various African texts and have consequently reached conclusions which raise questions about the validity of the fashionable premises concerning the art of Homer' (p. 27). The interesting thing about African epics is that they are still passed on orally and can thus yield important data about the oral transmission of the epic. No western researcher had ever considered this possibility on the subject of Homer. The African epics are 'forgotten' or neglected.

4. Widely varying views are held on what 'literary' means. Naturally, the notion that 'literary' always means the same everywhere and can thus be pinned down in a universal definition has (or has had) the most followers, especially in Eurocentric

circles. Note that the term universal in this context often turns out to be a synonym for 'western'. It is a question whether Jakobson's general definition of the 'focus on the message for its own sake' (1960) is valid. The dominant esthetic function of literature that Mukarovsky speaks of is ascribed by the scholar to the literary text. One wonders whether the esthetic function of such a text has always and everywhere been equally dominant for both the sender and the receiver of the 'message'.

The appeal of the new approach to the comparative study of literature is that it leaves ample room for studying the highly various communication situations that can occur in the literature as it functions in different groups, eras and cultures. Reading and analyzing other literatures can also teach us to see our own literature in a new light, with another dimension.

The same is of course true for the writer. In a brilliant essay, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1978) speaks of the necessarily Baroque style of Latin American literature, in which too many things have remained unnamed and thus unknown. Everyone has heard of the chestnut tree or the nut tree, but how many people know about the ceiba or the papaya? The Latin American knows about a pine tree in the snow even though he has never seen it. He has read descriptions in literature. But the mother of the trees, the ceiba, has yet to be described, and the same is true for the papaya. These are American trees and because they exist they must be introduced into fiction writing, which is not easy, because they do not have the good fortune of being called 'pine tree', 'chestnut tree' or 'birch'. Moreover the French King Saint Louis never languished in their shadows, nor did Pushkin ever dedicate a poem to them. That is why the ceiba and the papaya have to be talked about. (...) We Latin American novelists have to name everything – everything that affects, surrounds and determines us – everything that builds an atmosphere – in order to place it within the universal (...)

The time is past for footnotes on every page to explain that this particular tree has red flowers in May or August. Our ceiba, our trees, with or without flowers, must become commonplace through precise words that belong to the universal vocabulary. Carpentier notes that this means abandoning the techniques in vogue in the west, like those of the French Nouveau Roman, for example. In Latin American one must opt for Baroque 'out of the necessity to give things a name' (pp. 146-149).

This is happening not only in Latin America, but also in other parts of the world outside Europe, and it springs from the same awareness. Things are being described and named or renamed that have never before been put into written words, or, if they have, it has been done with deliberate inaccuracy. There are also more and more things being put in writing that for centuries had only been recorded in oral form. On the basis of so much new data, it is inevitable that also at the level of research, a number of concepts must be redefined or altered.

The question is how western is the study of literature, how western is literary research. This question is of course improper, because science, as we teach our students, must in principle meet requirements of soundness, systematics and accessibility. If this is so, the combination of 'western' and 'science' is thus theoretically a contradiction in terms. In practice – partly because we know too little of other literatures, and partly because we unconsciously let ourselves be influenced too much by

our own value system – we make judgements that are indeed demonstrably western and not as sound, systematic or objective as our discipline demands of us.

Perhaps it is useful to conclude this talk with a variation on Toynbee: 'The scholar and student and teacher of literature ought to strive now with all his or her might to widen the public's literary horizon; and to do this he or she must begin by widening his or her own.'

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REPORT OF THE LITERATURE SECTION

By E. Korthals Altes

The first part of the discussion in the literature section evolved around the four statements proposed by Mineke Schipper (see I); in the second part suggestions concerning research that would prevent or counter Eurocentrism in the field of literary theory and analysis were formulated and discussed (II).

I. Statements for discussion in the literature section

1. Concepts based upon various gradations of evolutionism have played and still play a part in the study of literature.
2. In Comparative Literature 'exclusive thinking' should be substituted by 'inclusive thinking'. For that purpose a critical exchange of ideas between scholars from different cultures is indispensable.
3. A dose of cultural relativism might contribute to the awareness of Eurocentrism, in the study of literature, although, in the end, it does not mean a solution. Awareness of one's own ethnocentrism is a necessary condition for the advancement of proper research.
4. One does not, in principle, require different theoretical concepts and research methods in order to study literature from different cultures.

Comment on the second statement: it was suggested that 'exclusive' thinking can be interpreted as the building of hypotheses, which may be done on the basis of a restricted field of investigation, whereas 'inclusive' thinking would mean the testing of these hypotheses on material from different cultures. For instance, most of the existing genre theories in the field of literature are axiomatic and based on western literary values instead of being descriptive or directed at developing and testing hypotheses. The concept of genre is always historically and culturally determined.

Suggestion: when applying methods and concepts, one should define the field in which they have proved to be applicable.

There was some discussion about the existence or not of the Epic in Africa. Could this be considered as Eurocentric?

The epic is defined by many scholars in Europe as a developed stage of literature. Since they did not find it in Africa, they concluded that African literature was underdeveloped. Some participants of the discussion stated that the observation of the absence of the epic in Africa simply reflects an interesting empirical fact and does not constitute a value judgement. Others replied to this that as Okpewho had demonstrated in his lecture, Africa could very well live without the epic, which it in fact possesses, but in this case, as in many others when it came to African literature, value judgements preceded actual analysis of the facts. It was concluded that evaluative judgements should be separated from the analysis of empirical facts.

II. After general agreement on the idea that Eurocentrism is not a methodology or a theory, but a moral attitude that is wrong as far as it is a prejudice, Musschenga's first question was not discussed further.