

*RELATIVISM IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:
A SHORT RECONSIDERATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO EDWARD SAID'S 'CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM'**

1. The assumption that there are national characteristics in fiction and poetry is a heritage of romanticism. Applied to comparative literary research it inevitably entails relativity at least in a formal sense. To put it simply, a comparatist relates his own national literature to another because it cannot be judged in itself. And if he did not have a firm stand on that cultural soil he calls his own, there would not be any comparison at all. The all embracing concept, however, for the romantic literary critic, August Wilhelm Schlegel for example, was "Weltliteratur" and not "Nationalliteratur"¹. It therefore seems as if relativism and universalism were pushed ahead by the same movement.

Things have changed in the meantime. Today's relativism has another, a more radical meaning. Comparative literature now acknowledges cultural diversity even within one and the same society, and more or less specializes in pinpointing discrepancy and interdependence between one's own and the other. And this certainly is a more functional way of analyzing texts, instead of confronting them with the application of psychological character-features on national collectives, a procedure that could only be justified metaphorically. In the following remarks I shall try to point out in the briefest of terms the change in some of the basic concepts of comparative literature as far as an underpinned relativism is concerned; a change which is due to what is nowadays a widely accepted insight into the precarious and transitory structure of cultural identity.

Comparativism presupposes a certain mode of looking at two or more different things by joining them under at least one common feature. Relativism as well as universalism have no real correlates in the objects we study. They are ways of *seeing as*; seeing texts, for instance, as related to particular values: aesthetic, political, moral or social; or seeing texts as related to anthropologically or crossculturally valid generalizations. To quote a famous example illustrating the latter mode: Immanuel Kant in his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* pleaded for a study of poetry as an "auxiliary for anthropology" (*Hilfsmittel der Anthropologie*) because poetry always refers to the reality of "human nature", even if this reference is hidden behind the excessive use of poetical or rhetorical images². Kant's view serves well to document the interest of a philosophical reader of drama, novels etc.

in an essential truth which everybody, using his own reason, may be able to grasp.

The opposite to this attitude is found in modernist or postmodernist relativism. The new approach deems it impossible to believe in the one and objective truth. Relativism denies categorically that there can be any knowledge beyond society, or beyond culture³. But behind this relativism not infrequently lurks another relativism; culture, in this case, becoming the *nom de guerre* for a widespread and growing conflict about the question of whose culture may be regarded as superior to that of the others. Academically speaking, the term "culture" in first place refers to all kinds of meaningful practice, constituted through linguistic, symbolic or iconic signs. But in situations of political or social conflict it may become a weapon, useful to draw militant lines and even to denigrate the other as a barbarian⁴.

The point of relativism now is that the above-mentioned cultural practices are not only dependent on specific contexts (mentality, social and political structures etc.) but moreover are functional tools expressing the interests of those groups, peoples, societies, nations, who make use of them. Culture from this perspective has the egalitarian meaning of mass culture, giving the use of iconic signs preference to that of the written text. Consequently, the images of the world, better, of the plurality of worlds, the images of "Us" and "Them" cannot, as Kant would have done, be any longer defended as productions of reason nor of the reflected consonant interplay between imagination and intellect. On the contrary, the elaboration of these images, from a strictly relativistic viewpoint, must be judged as nothing other than an ideological issue bound to a collectively shared *imaginaire*. Research in the humanities including comparative literature (imagology) is becoming specialized more and more, and this is a significant change, in that what Walter Lippmann once called "pictures in our head": stereotypes, clichés, images.

2. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) points out that comparative literature and the underlying concept of "world literature" at their historical outset were deeply involved in the power-play of European imperialism⁵. Nothing new, of course: all historical-philological disciplines in their hour of birth, during the 19th century, the century of nationalism, were eager to discover, to purify, to mummify and eventually enshrine their own national traditions; a task which automatically led to the exclusion of the neighbouring or other more distant cultures and literatures, thus strengthening one's own

identity via negation. Solidarity with one's own is exclusive. The question, however, is to what degree the strategies of in- and exclusion became militant and were thought to establish a nationalistic self-image by fighting the images of the other on the ground of a powerful cultural resentment. I call to mind the often quoted words of Grillparzer: "Der Weg der neueren Bildung geht - Von der Humanität - Durch die Nationalität - zur Bestialität"⁶. Must this be seen as a fatally determining historical law describing the rise of what can only be regarded as a degenerate nationalism? I do not think so because the early nationalisms were not meant as something rooted in the unquestionable and irrational depths of the "Volkscharakter". Nation, rather, was a synonym for middle-class, the emergence of which in 19th century Europe was necessarily linked to a "general growth in literacy, commerce, industry, communications and state machineries" creating "powerful new impulses for vernacular linguistic unification"⁷. One of the preconditions for the spread of the idea of a nation state was the development of competitive secular attitudes, as Paul Kennedy and other historians have shown, in central Europe as early as the Renaissance. The initial step to identify the concept of nation with the sovereignty of the people, a step first made in 17th century England, can be understood as an important move aimed at breaking down the authoritarian political structures representing the Ancien régime⁸.

These historical interpretations notwithstanding, Edward Said insists on the importance colonialism has had, materially as well as ideologically, in the formation of nations since euphemistically called the discovery of the Americas.

Before I continue outlining Said's position, which I consider representative of a powerful, but ambivalent rhetoric of relativism, a few words about its author. The reason is that he himself frequently stresses the link between his autobiography and his expertise. Said teaches English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and has gained some fame through his book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, not to mention *Beginnings. Intention and Method*, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* and many other publications. *Orientalism*, being a rather provocative assault on a one-eyed occidental view in which Said fosters the idea that what Westerners call the "Orient" is nothing else but an imaginative construction and at the same time a powerful instrument to legitimize one's own interests of dominating and exploiting cultures outside one's own national dominion.

The main objects of analysis in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* are the great English narratives written in the age of imperialism, 19th and

early-20th century: famous novels by Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling and others. Thus, he re-interprets canonized works belonging to the European cultural archive, which reflect certain attitudes and references directly or indirectly corresponding to Western colonialism. These works have to be reread – Said argues – within a framework of “interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories”⁹. Although he pretends to adopt a global view, his vision is restricted to the confrontation between Western, in his own words, “metropolitan” and non-Western societies, leaving aside the imperialism of the former communist powers. The perspective Said’s rereadings or new readings comprise, is that – to quote him once more – of an “intellectual with a background in the Arab world”, living and working in the United States, writing “about the past and the present, about ‘us’ and ‘them’”¹⁰. He calls his study “an exile’s book”¹¹, and exile he positively considers “a norm” and “experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures”¹². To circumscribe it with the help of a term coined by Todorov: “exotopie”, i.e. “extériorité temporelle, spatiale, culturelle”¹³. Said defies any value-free literary criticism. Exile as a norm entails the *parti pris* for the culturally and historically depossessed. To quote from his essay *Secular Criticism*, published in 1983: “To stand between culture and system is therefore to stand close to [...] a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgements have to be made and, if not only made, then exposed and demystified”¹⁴.

His use of the term “culture” is well in accordance with this view. “All cultures” – he contends – “are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic”¹⁵. To this extent, cultures are to be analyzed as open systems and dynamically changing entities, even as “battlegrounds” on which there is combat not only between social elites but combat as well for purity, i.e. national identity. This struggle for identity is, of course, neatly connected with the very often aggressive enclosure of other cultural achievements and texts. The canon of national classics, for instance, stresses the values of our own culture and is used to fight against others. Culture in this sense is deeply tainted by power, a concept which strongly resembles the features of culture – and Said is fully aware of that – expounded in the writings of Michel Foucault.

Literature as an important momentum of a national culture takes

part in the struggle for identity. When one is first taught to read, the canonical set of national classics is no innocent goal. Indeed, literary education is used as a medium to achieve some kind of contagious and homogeneous feeling for one's own traditions and cultural values and to strengthen, often uncritically, one's loyalty to national identity. At the same time these aims unwillingly perhaps involve the denigration of extraneous cultures and values.

But there is not only the shaping power of national literary education. Fiction itself plays a part in the general power-play characterizing the struggles to maintain cultural or national identity. The English social anthropologist Benedict Anderson, a specialist on Southeast Asia in *Imagined Communities* (1983), and Homi Bhaba, a lecturer in English at the University of Sussex, in his reader *Nation and Narration* (1990), have both underlined the importance of "narrative culture", including history and fiction, for the emergence of the modern nation state. What they and their fellow-scholars wish to demonstrate is the fact that the narrative culture which produces the symbolic patterns of national identity is by no means a unified one but has to be studied with the concept of cultural difference in mind, or, as Bhaba puts it, "within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples"¹⁶.

Said who is repeating Bhaba's: "nations themselves are narrations"¹⁷, underscores the importance of this doubleperspective for his own analyses and pleads for a reading of fiction he calls "contrapuntal". The "power to narrate" in his view includes the power "to block other narratives from forming and emerging" and establishes the very connections between culture and imperialism he wants to expose. Imperialism is supported by a method of interpreting which Said calls "the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States", discourses that "assume the silence [...] of the non-European world"¹⁸. Contrapuntal reading instead focusses on both sides and their interdependence. This reading, Said remarks, is undertaken "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. [...] We can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement with the West Indies or India, say, is shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. At this point alternative or new narratives emerge, and they become institutionalized or discursively stable entities"¹⁹.

Said's view is in accord with a number of contemporary authors

representing the so called New English Literatures, to mention only Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie. And he agrees with Toni Morrison's conviction that "even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation"²⁰. His contrapuntal readings, therefore, of Austen, Dickens and others try to show that even behind those narratives which are, as it seems, strictly confined to the images of an inner English life and culture, that behind, let me emphasize, these images representing the inside of the national culture there are the dominating images of the empire outside contested by the alternative images of the dominated.

Of course, classical imperialism came to an end after World War Two. But the consequences survive, particularly in that search for new cultural identities which in the Western world can no more rely on the domination and exploitation of the colonized Other. While these, the former colonies, not at all free from the cultural impact exerted on them, frequently violently, by the colonial powers, are searching for their own independent identities. A painful and risky business, because there is a lot of trouble behind those geopolitical and cultural faultlines that were forced upon whole continents by the former imperial powers. In the course of this global resurgence which can be seen – in Said's terms – not only as a contest "over land and the land's people" but at the same time as a struggle "about images and imaginings"²¹, both sides have to reshape their collective memories. A task which affects all narrative genres: general history as well as fiction and literary history in the sense of a contrapuntally and comparatively rereading of canonized traditions.

3. In my short overview of Said's rich and stimulating book I have had to concentrate on those features appropriate to the main question of my paper: What about relativism in comparative literature today? I think Said's openly confessed *parti pris* for relativism is of particular interest, because it works on the basis of a set of universally valid concepts. At first sight it doesn't seem so. He quotes from Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*: "For the native objectivity is always directed against him"²². But he quotes this sentence in order to demonstrate the discrepant perspectives of both sides: the self-image of the imperial European comprises objectivity as a highly esteemed virtue of the researcher studying the alien culture, for instance, that of the colonized people. Whereas the object of investigation, the colonized people, see in that virtue and in the scientific observation connected

with it, nothing else but a sophisticated instrument of repression.

Surprisingly, Said does not seem to be interested in the question as to whether this antagonism, which today is seen as a mutual antagonism between images of "Us" and "Them", could be overcome or at least elucidated in the house of erudition itself. On the contrary, he dismisses, as we have seen, not only all kinds of universalizing and unifying discourse, but he is also sceptical about solutions on a methodological level. "Were the disputed value of knowledge about imperialism", he remarks, "merely a controversy about methodology or academic perspectives in cultural history, we would be justified in regarding it as not really serious". But, he continues, "we are talking about a compellingly important and interesting configuration in the world of power and nations"²³. Culture in this "configuration", in my opinion, is almost indistinguishable from ideology; ideology being one of the most effective components of that "cultural violence", which Johan Galtung has made responsible for the *justification* of directly violent acts stimulated by the appeal for a chosen gender, a chosen race or nation²⁴.

But if culture (which definitely includes the critic's discourse) and ideology are so intensely connected or even identified, we are confronted with a severe epistemological problem. How will it be possible, we then have to ask, for the critic to criticize the ideological implications of literary discourses, if there is, as Said exaggeratingly puts it, "no Archimedean perspective that is subject neither to history nor to a social setting"²⁵? Criticism like comparative literature, is, one has to recall, a type of cultural practice that has its offsprings in the European movement of Enlightenment. So the critic who wants to deconstruct the cage of tradition with the help of the very tools this tradition has forged, does he not plunge into a desperate dilemma?

There is relief, I think, if we acknowledge the fact, that relativism as an exclusive attitude does not make sense. In other words: all relativistic views tacitly presuppose some universally valid assumptions and vice versa. Calling *Culture and Imperialism* "an exile's book", Said is alluding to a rational way of knowledge that can avoid the pitfalls of cultural blindness, i.e. ideology. "Belonging", he comments, "to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily"²⁶. The exile is in-between, his knowledge consciously estranged. To quote a passage from Todorov's essay "Comprendre une culture" supporting this view: "La connaissance objective des choses 'telles qu'elles sont' est peut-être accessible à l'étranger idéal et désintéressé"²⁷.

The social anthropologist Ernest Gellner, a furious polemicist

against postmodern relativism, is quite in terms with Todorov when telling us that truth can only be gained "through voluntary cultural exile"²⁸. Gellner's "exile" is a symbol for that type of rational knowledge which Descartes set out in his *Discours de la Méthode*. It is the formal premiss the critical scholar needs if he seeks to discern between a right and a wrong path in the acquisition of knowledge. And there are good reasons to assume that whenever and wherever critical analysis lays claim to objectivity, in the sense of sound and generally acceptable statements, it has to approximate to this pattern of rational discourse. Otherwise all criticism would completely fall prey to ideology.

The principle of voluntarily choosing the viewpoint of a cultural exile, therefore, cannot be subject to relativism. In our context it must be considered as a minimal definition of a universally valid norm. To put it in other words: a universal based not on substance or metaphysics but based on conventions, valid in any field of methodical research, be it that of comparative literature or that of contrapuntally rereading the canon. Though the search for knowledge on the basis of a set of rational norms may be considered universally valid, knowledge itself can never be deemed an unquestionable ultimate truth or possession. To put it in an old-fashioned way: there is a sound *certitudo modi procedendi* but only a suspensive *certitudo cognitionis*²⁹. The literary critic, therefore, who struggles to supersede the powerful images of "Us" and "Them" imposed on him by his own culture has to accept a constant migrant condition. "The universal truth of exile", Edward Said concludes, "is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss"³⁰.

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¹ Cf. H. Byun, *Hermeneutische und ästhetische Erfahrung*, 1994.

² I. Kant, *Anthropologie*, p. 31.

³ Cf. E. Gellner, *Postmodernism*, p. 54.

⁴ Cf. S.P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 1993.

⁵ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 48.

⁶ Franz Grillparzer, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. M. Decker, vol. II, Leipzig (n.d.), p. 186.

⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 75.

⁸ L. Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, pp. 14 seqq.

⁹ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XX.

¹⁰ loc. cit., p. XXIII.

¹¹ loc. cit., p. XXVI.

¹² loc. cit., p. 317.

¹³ T. Todorov, *Comprendre une culture*, p. 14.

¹⁴ E. Said, *The World*, p. 26.

¹⁵ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XXV.

¹⁶ H. Bhaba, *Nation and Narration*, p. 4.

¹⁷ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XIII.

¹⁸ loc. cit., p. 50.

¹⁹ loc. cit., p. 51.

²⁰ T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 46.

²¹ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 7.

²² loc. cit., p. 162.

²³ loc. cit., pp. 35 seq.

²⁴ J. Galtung, *Cultural Violence*, p. 298.

²⁵ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 32.

²⁶ loc. cit., p. XXVII.

²⁷ T. Todorov, *Comprendre une culture*, p. 11.

²⁸ E. Gellner, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.

²⁹ "Suspensive knowledge", in the words of Stephen Slemon, building the "swaying bridge" which connects those cultures/literatures that are supposed to be read within a frame of cross-cultural encounter. Slemon, *Post-Colonial Writing*, pp. 52 et pass.

³⁰ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 336.

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