A DEBATE:  
Studying 'New Literatures in English'

Joost Daalder

I

NEW LITERATURE REVIEW has commendably been concerning itself with, amongst other things, questions of critical theory and of methodology in relation to its subject area, which appears to be identical to that of the newly founded CRNLE; and can probably be accurately described as 'all literary writing in English which does not emanate from Great Britain, Ireland or the United States of America'. It seems safer to use this definition (if it is such) than the one which, in New Literature Review No.3, speaks of 'New Literature in English' as including, e.g., 'Commonwealth Literature' (as though this would not include Britain), and which tries to enumerate comprehensively without probably being able to do so (at least in anticipation of what we may later usefully wish to include), or naming what is in fact the common denominator.

One may well sense certain theoretical difficulties even if one considers merely this matter of definition, but for the moment I should like to believe that at least we all know in practice what we mean by the 'New Literatures in English' of the CRNLE or even the seemingly more unified 'New Literature in English' of this journal. When I was asked to join the CRNLE and accepted, I certainly thought of our title as just one of convenience and meaning what I assert it to be above. However, the use of the singular 'Literature' in the definition of New Literature Review, as well as the theoretical discussions which have appeared in these pages, have made plain to me that there is more ground for disagreement, and for exploration, than I had thought.

II

First of all, even if we agree on which New Literatures there are, it seems to me that we have not yet thought very carefully about what distinguishes them, and whether indeed they have anything in common to such an extent that we are really justified in thinking of a separate subject area. In New Literature Review No.2, a special issue on 'Post-Colonial Literature', an effort was made to describe the subject area as a unified one in the light of political history. I believe that however else we approach the problem, this line, at any rate, is mistaken. I suppose no one would deny that there is some point in John Docker's associating American, Irish, and some of the New Literatures. But even where one may see, for example, Irish literature as in some sense related to (or expressing) a struggle against an imperialist Britain, it should be obvious that the best-known Anglo-Irish writers ought not to be seen primarily (or even at all) in political terms. If a case is to be made from this angle, we of course need a considerable amount of evidence, and this has not so far been presented, nor, I predict, will be. The simple fact that there are perhaps, or sometimes certainly, historical resemblances between the countries involved does not in any way prove or necessarily mean that there will be literary ones also.

To take this matter into the realm of the so-called 'New Literatures', I will briefly consider New Zealand as an example. Does that country's literature express the attitude of an 'ex-European post-colonial' society? We must surely be careful not to reason from history into a theoretical expectation of what the
literature might be, nor too readily speak in one breath of, e.g., New Zealand and the United States. Such a lumping together obscures what are major differences even from a non-literary viewpoint. The United States is an extraordinarily powerful nation which in almost all respects has become very independent (and can therefore in this sense be described as 'ex-European', suggesting emergence from an influence nevertheless known to exist, and, I would say, still present); New Zealand, however, remains still very much part of what used to be the British Empire. Not only is it much smaller than the US, and more insignificant politically, but it also has a predominantly British-derived white population. Isolating that part of the population, for the moment, from the remainder, one can quite safely say that cultural links with Britain still remain remarkably firm. This is also obvious in English departments of universities, a matter of considerable and justified concern to Docker. Prior to coming to Flinders, I worked at the University of Otago from 1966 to 1976. When I came, I thought that New Zealand academics would take a strong interest in their own literature, but it soon became evident that they thought that an 'English' department should concern itself with English (not even, for example, Scottish) literature, with only the occasional New Zealand text added to the programme.

Surely the New Zealand attitude I refer to is not usefully described as 'post-colonial'. If one has to use this sort of terminology at all, one should concede that the attitude of the natives is that of colonials having an unhealthy respect for a supposedly superior mother-culture that hardly now exists in the form in which it is believed to exist. Clearly, if political considerations are brought to bear, it will not do to generalise about the situation in all the countries producing 'New Literatures'. And apart from that, we need to distinguish between such things as the political situation, a country's educated readers, its authors, etc., etc. Our task will be truly considerable, though none the less worthwhile for that.

Docker does not only proceed on the basis of labels such as 'post-colonial'; there are also considerations about the 'modernity' of European literature since the beginnings of romanticism and the supposed resemblance of such literature to that of the emerging post-colonial English-speaking nations. Here again, with reference to New Zealand anyhow, I find the train of thought misleading. Broadly speaking—though I am generalising before I should—I regard New Zealand literature as indeed romantic, but its romanticism seems to me largely the logical continuation of the English romantic tradition in a backward, provincial country which simply has never caught up with the anti-romantic reaction characteristic of much literature in twentieth century Britain. There is not, in New Zealand, the sort of fresh, forceful 'series of protests against the rise of industrialism' that in British literature I locate as having found its voice particularly in writings such as Blake's or Wordsworth's—for the reason that industrialism in New Zealand just does not count for much, as well as the fact that British romanticism was simply inherited by New Zealanders and thus kept alive as part of 'culture' in an almost automatic, unchallenged way. Or if that is giving too one-sided a picture, I should add that the New Zealand romanticism that I do find peculiarly vigorous, that of writers like Janet Frame and R. A. K. Mason, is a reaction, not so much against 'industrial society'; but against a stiflingly conformist, complacent, largely uncultural community such as one has some difficulty envisaging if one has not spent several years in New Zealand, and which appears to have nothing in common with such particularly urban countries as Britain or Holland. The main point to emerge is again that we should not generalise and theorise about the New Literatures, either in historical-political or in literary terms, without making sure that we can do so. So far, it appears that there are no very good grounds for assuming that the New Literatures are anything more unified or spectacular than I suggested at the beginning of this essay.
However, Docker is not on his own in thinking that the New Literatures have been unduly slighted by conventional academics in Australasian departments of English. Recent developments show manifestly that others, too, feel that there is a need for some teaming together of those who have an interest in the New Literatures, and I must confess that it always used to worry me that my New Zealand colleagues cared little about the academic study of their own literature. Still, just as I think that we should not jump to any hasty conclusions about some supposed unity of the New Literatures as, e.g., 'post-colonial', I am rather more reserved than Docker about the ultimate reasons for studying them.

Can we really believe that there is bound to be something very parochial, in an inevitable way, about what Docker calls the 'anglocentric' approach while supposedly the study 'of Australian and Commonwealth literature ... immediately involves international contexts'? I think not. I will not suggest that I have invariably found, say, New Zealand students of literature more provincial than their British counterparts. But neither do I think it at all true to claim that the study of New Zealand literature does, theoretically or in practice, immediately involve international contexts, although it is true that, for example, the derivativeness of so much of it can only be observed through a study of such contexts—or at least of British and sometimes (but less often) American literature. However, I would not wish to defend the teaching of, or research into, New Zealand literature within our universities on the basis of any optimism about its enlarging, for example, myopic Australian mind; and indeed I believe that some very tolerable analyses of New Zealand literature have been conducted by 'practical' or 'New' critics reading works as though they are hardly the product of any particular historical or geographical setting. Of course, some works in any case enlarge the mind more than others, or need more understanding of 'background', or are accidentally studied by those with an interest in international contexts—but I do not think it in any way possible that New Zealand literature qualifies for any special place in this regard.

Naturally, since Britain has for so much longer had a grand literary tradition of its own, anglocentric critics are sometimes inclined to forget that there are other literatures perhaps just as important, some of which have had a marked influence on British letters, and without a knowledge of which it is not really possible adequately to understand them. In a superficial way, the anglocentric critics may therefore well think that they need not concern themselves with any other literatures (old and, particularly, new), while it is absolutely necessary for students of 'New Literatures' to familiarise themselves with any the British literary tradition. However, the fact that this attitude is irritating in its arrogance is unfortunately no proof that it is wholly wrong. If we ask ourselves once again why there may be point in studying British literature before or simultaneously with a 'New' literature, the answer is that given above: the fact that the derivativeness of the 'New' literatures is not seen without such a study, and, in a more profound sense, that the cultural history of the country is likely to have its roots largely in Britain (or some other great cultural nation). It is not at all probable that such a fact is going to be understood by those who come to, say, New Zealand poets without a grounding in British literature; speaking from considerable experience with New Zealand readers, I simply have to assert that in that country, at least, there can be no doubt about the matter. Therefore, quite apart from the question of value, the study of British literature is academically a necessity if the New Literatures are to be studied in a professional way. Time may well come that one will actually be able to speak of a developed, independent New Zealand tradition: at the moment that time does not appear to have arrived, and it would be a miracle if it had. Civilisations are not built within a century or so, and I think it must ultimately be considered more presumptuous to think that they are than that they are not.
I am, then, firmly in favour of a 'core' of English studies of the kind which pluralists like Docker detest. I really do not think that the case for the study of New Literatures will be helped at all by rejection of such a core.

And let us then with even more risk briefly tackle the question of 'value'. There is, of course, nothing magical about England and its literature to the exclusion of other countries and literatures. Again, as a non-native speaker with considerable experience of the sort of anglocentric attitude that Docker refers to, I must concede that my blood boils whenever native Anglo-Saxons seem to think that only they, because they have never learned any other language, can ultimately speak and understand English correctly, and that there is some special superiority in this. This is the kind of arrogance that I guess Docker has encountered. But even in this emotional area we must be careful not to see things in too personal a way. Surely, if one thinks truly in international terms, it must be granted that a country like New Zealand, and, I would suppose, Australia, has not yet produced as many literary masterpieces as England? If I were to construct a syllabus for a three-year BA with a major in English which should be the product of evaluation only, and if I included, for example, thirty English 'works' (single novels, plays, or equivalent groups of poems), I do not think I could add more than two New Zealand works without feeling that I was overstating the case for a valuable New Zealand literary tradition. And I do not consider that this in any way is an insult to what New Zealanders have in fact already achieved.

IV

Let us keep a sense of proportion. British literature is important, but not to the extent that other literatures must be neglected for its sake, even in so-called 'English' departments. Even the 'English' syllabus almost always includes some Anglo-Irish literature, and some works produced by Americans (Henry James, T. S. Eliot) who are judged to be 'English' (or important?) enough to absorb. For some reason, which must be nationalistic rather than academic, Scottish authors are often largely ignored. So have the Americans been—possibly because of the belief that the English tradition can only be studied properly without including all sorts of 'foreign' work, but more likely because of insular distrust of (or contempt for) a new, supposedly barbarous yet unfortunately in part 'English', nation. As Docker indicates, the anglocentric mind is usually not very explicit about its assumptions in such matters. At any rate, the English attitude has not paid off: America does have its own literary culture, and attempts to ignore that fact have come to look increasingly absurd. It is to be hoped that the present 'New Literatures' will show up impressively also, and at any rate one does not give them a fair chance and will not know unless one is willing to study them from the outset. This, I think, is pointing in the direction of an answer for our problems and differences. Only by actually acquainting ourselves with cultures, whether old or new, will we be able to judge for sure what the relations are between history and culture, between literary movements in one country and another, and between the merit of one tradition or another. There is, as yet, every reason for discussing methodology, etc., but what should be already patent is that no kind of theory which rests on such things as national prejudice (whether in favour of Britain or Australia), or on political assumptions or preferences, is likely to do justice to the true humaneness and rich diversity of living literature in all countries and in all times. And if the 'New Literatures' are to make their case, as they assuredly will and already to some extent have done, they will do so through just such universal and timeless qualities as still make us read Homer or Chaucer.

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NOTES

1. The CRNLE is the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English,
Nos Ancêtres les Anglais:  
A Reply to Daalder

Julian Croft

ON READING 'Studying "New Literatures in English"' ¹ it is hard to resist a long- ing to believe in Joost Daalder's reasonable and calm conclusion (as occasionally I find myself after the Epilogue imagining immortality and Paradise), but it is not a picture of the world which has been recorded for over four thousand years, nor one that is likely to exist in the next four thousand. To believe that we can have theories of literature which are free from 'national prejudice' and 'political assumptions', and that we can do justice to literature without them, is as inconceivable as that they should have been written without those prejudices and assumptions.

Dr Daalder believes that there is no common political factor in the literatures mentioned by John Docker in his argument; ² he believes that we should not see some non-English English literatures in political terms, and, with the disarmingness of Gulliver singing the praises of the English in the last chapter of his travels, and the singlemindedness of the one-eyed citizen of book twelve of Ulysses, he cites as examples the Anglo-Irish. Further, he believes that even if there are common historical and political traditions and experiences in these countries, there is no reason to expect that their literary expressions will be similar. I disagree.

A cursory look at the history of English cultural domination from the six- teenth century to the twentieth shows an often successful attempt to impose uniform religious and cultural beliefs on groups of disparate people. The church,