AIMS AND METHODS

NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL, AND COMPARATIVE LITERARY APPROACHES: WHAT ARE WE ABOUT?

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The Quarterly World Report of the Council on National Literatures has only recently come to my attention, and I observe that its aims are so admirable that the loss has been mine. I wish to express support, too, for what has been achieved, and no doubt will be, in the Review of National Literatures.

Nevertheless, I feel some disquiet at what are set forth as general principles concerning RNL in the CNL/QWR, and it seems to me that there may be some contradiction between this statement and the one which describes the CNL/QWR as a forum for scholars concerned with "comparative" study. How can the CNL/QWR serve this function if we are to reject at the same time "deliberate cultivation of an internationalist point of view" which RNL appears to be opposed to? There appears to be some lack of theoretical clarity here, and I wish to make what appear to me to be some very necessary—and perhaps practically useful—distinctions. The issues involved are obviously important ones to all those who are interested in more than one literature, and particularly at present, when there are so many technical ways, at least, for international communication; when there appears to be a growing interest in what the CNL/QWR describes as "emergent, and neglected national literatures"; and when so many scholars have even in a geographical sense been moving from one culture to another. (Personally I speak as a Dutchman who studied English literature in Britain and Holland; who has subsequently studied it from New Zealand and Australia; who is retrospectively trying to come to grips with New Zealand literature from Australia; is only beginning to learn about such a thing as "Australian literature"; and realizes he has some thin roots in his mother country, about the literature of which he knows little but which somehow does turn out to have unexpected "relevance," and which he is expected to promote the study of within Australia. Under these circumstances, one cannot help but constantly ask large theoretical questions and try to provide answers; and I am sure my situation is not as bizarre as it might sound. It probably merely exemplifies in a rather extreme case what is happening to more and more of us.)

At all events, these are the issues as I see them:
1. We must distinguish very clearly between national, international, and comparative approaches. A national approach is one that confines itself to the literature of one country, obviously in the belief that for whatever reason this is worth doing. The reason cannot be that the literature is necessarily important to anyone outside the country considered; for, if such were held by the student, he is (however minimally) viewing the literature from an international (not necessarily comparative) perspective. It may be that the student knows nothing about the literature of other countries, but he is—at least implicitly—assuming that he knows enough about human nature everywhere to be justified in the supposition that the national country studied must inevitably be seen as important outside its own immediate visible confines.

An international approach may be of the rudimentary kind just mentioned, but also become considerably more explicit and perhaps sophisticated. It may be of the "sentimental" kind which Wellek appears to have in mind, merely making explicit what I have just mentioned before, but this need not be so: there is a totally different kind of internationalism, which I shall define as "the belief that the importance of a national literature lies not only in what the nation in question considers it to be for itself, but even more so in its ability to make a significant impact on an open-minded outsider." This internationalism is unlike what Wellek refers to, yet not to be confused with a comparative approach.

A comparative approach in its usual and (b) similarly, to have timeless significance. I am not suggesting that such an approach is one that confines itself to the literature of two or more literatures, or that it is wrong to value a literature per se to value a literature for these reasons, but we must surely agree that it is ultimately inimical to some of the most basic aspects of any significant culture wherever or whenever, viz. (a) the ability to transcend national boundaries because it is concerned with essential human matters and (b) similarly, to have timeless significance.

If that is accepted, it follows that the international approach, at its best (see above) should be the one most beneficial both to seeing a literature for what it is, and in what lies its value. I am not suggesting that such internationalism should be contemptuous of the local context within
which a literature occurs. Such contempt not only shows inverted parachialism ('the outside world is automatically superior to everything in this place') but is also likely to lead to undue neglect of such local factors as must be grasped if the literature studied is seen both for what it is as a part-product of its nation (or in part referring to it) and as something that can only be properly valued for its universality and timelessness if it is at the same time viewed from the outside.

A truly comparative study is probably the hardest to undertake successfully. The comparatist needs to see each work exactly for what it is, which means that he must be an excellent critic and must be quite sure that he is not in danger of misunderstanding work "A" because he knows a good deal less about its context than that of work "B." Indeed, if the context of "B" is well understood, there may be a temptation to confuse it with that of "A." The critic, in fact, needs to understand each work from a national view first of all and then to be detached enough to see with international eyes as well—a formidable task. And all the time the proper questions should be asked. For example, does a resemblance exist because of cultural conditioning, because of accidental similarities between the personal views of the authors or because of the occurrence of so-called archetypal patterns? It is difficult to extricate such aspects with confidence and although the theoretical value of the exercise may be very real, one is likely from a dispassionate viewpoint to question the results.

Suppose that these aspects can be extricated, what does the result show? Probably very worthwhile things: for example, in the case of archetypes or personalities (if these two can be kept apart) that human nature, in a sense, is the same anywhere—always assuming that in its turn the matter of conditioning can be isolated. And of course worthwhile things can be shown about that too. Furthermore, if all these aspects can be distinguished from each other, it may be possible to argue that one work is better than another, in which case one is of course talking about differences as well as resemblances. That is, naturally, the general situation. Complete similarity (disregarding the linguistic differences) must be either a complete freak or a case of imitation (something worth knowing, although of limited value).

Peculiarly, the comparative approach would according to this theory be both extraordinarily hard and of somewhat limited—though still considerable—value. In practice too, I think this is commonly so, and I add that I have not seen much comparative work that seemed to me altogether to avoid the pitfalls mentioned, or the limitations. I am deliberately not mentioning examples because I think we must see the general issues for what they are, and in a report of this kind one is not likely to help that process by mentioning instances almost certainly not known to everyone.

My own greatest hope is for international as distinct from comparative literature: an approach which sees the literary work within its own context, but in such a way as to draw out what are likely to be matters of permanent and universal importance. In this process some element of comparative literary study will no doubt play a part now and then, but such study is nevertheless different, and probably the last and most idealistic goal.

**"WHAT WE ARE ABOUT...."**

Dr. Daalder's generous discussion of his "diquisite at what are set forth as general principles concerning RNL in the QWR" is certainly an eloquent plea for the "kind of internationalism" in literary study that Dutch literary scholars have seemed especially competent to pursue, almost as a distinctive national trait, since at least the time of Erasmus and the subsequent founding of the great Dutch universities where Latin remained for so long the international medium of instruction. Early in his discussion Dr. Daalder defines his preferred form of internationalism as "the belief that the importance of a national literature lies not only in what the nation in question considers it to be for itself, but even more so in its ability to make a significant impact on an open-minded outsider." In his concluding paragraph, he passes beyond mere belief to characterize his methodological preference in literary study as "my own greatest hope," and also as "probably the last and most idealistic goal."

In what way such an approach to appreciative and critical study of the established, emergent, and neglected literatures of the contemporary world is consistent with the purposes of our Council was the theme of our discussion of the literary views of Johan Huijinga in the 1977 issue of RNL devoted to Holland and will be the subject of the Council panel at the December meeting of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco ("National Literatures in an International Spectrum").

Like most of us educated in the Western tradition, Dr. Daalder is a comparatist to the core. Ever since the Romans abandoned their literary hearts to the study of Greek, the Western peoples have had a thoroughly comparative literary legacy: Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Medieval-Germanic, Italian, French, English, Spanish—to the point where, in the case of some important neglected European literatures, it has become necessary to search self-consciously for what is distinctively national, rather than a derivative of transnational appreciation of foreign literary cultures.

But in other parts of the world there have been cultures and literary traditions of a far more autochthonic character. The West has learned to deal with them—imperially, to be sure, at first; but now the effort is under way to enter upon relations of a higher literary diplomacy, based on a developing recognition—de facto and de jure—as belligerent, in the ex-imperialist sense—of their and our right to "separate and equal" status among the literary powers of the earth.

The point is that, to build toward Dr. Daalder's "last and most idealistic goal," we have to start from where we are internationally. We must be prepared to "recognize" new declarations of national independence as the beginnings of comparative literary study, for such declarations show, at the very least, a more or less "decent regard for the opinions of mankind." That is what we, at any rate, are about, with our Council's RNL and CNL/QWR (as well as in its exploratory seminars and special meetings).

But is it possible to deal "internationally" on a "separate and equal" station with the variety of established, emergent, and neglected literatures that now make up the world's rich variety simply by playing the role of "open-minded outsider"—a role that comes all too easily for some of us in...
the West? What is more “international” than translation from one national literature into another national literature? Translation, imitation, explication, particularly when there is reciprocity regardless of levels of development or excellence, is part of the literary diplomacy of which we speak. And central to it is recognition of national difference—recognition that can become appreciation and respect.

Historically, the diffusion of Greco-Roman culture into the literatures and life of the modern European countries which constitute the traditional “comparative” core as we have known it has shown us how “international” comes about in realistic terms. The situation today is not far different from that of an emergent Rome that found in a tired Greece something which the arrogance of power (whether large or small) would not willingly let die. The tapestry is much larger today, but the weaving power (whether large or small) would not willingly let die. The tapestry is literature into another national literature. The situation today is not far different from that of an emergent national ism, to be a part of the Third World, the area of emergent nationalism, to be a part of the Third World, the area of multiculturalism. The situation today is not far different from that of an emergent Rome that found in a tired Greece something which the arrogance of power (whether large or small) would not willingly let die. The tapestry is much larger today, but the weaving power (whether large or small) would not willingly let die. The tapestry is literature into another national literature.

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