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Imagology and the Problem of Ethnic Identity

Every endeavour to characterize the actual state of affairs of the aims and possibilities of comparative imagology as a contribution to solving identity problems (of a national, ethnic or other kind) has to consider right from the beginning two different sorts of facts.

First of all, it is necessary to recall that comparative imagology was originally a branch of comparative literary studies, established as "Comparative Literature" (littérature comparée, Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft etc.) at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century; an academic discipline (although not immediately taught at the universities) with distinct and well refined objectives: the comparative study of parts of different literatures (called particular or national literatures), understood as an independent domain of research and teaching; and this, of course, also with special methods of its own, based on the principles of a specific supranational cultural neutrality.

Secondly, we have to consider that this Comparative Literature, which somewhat later was occasionally referred to as "General and Comparative Literature," was the result of a real scholarly urge to solve problems of our European multinationality. It was indeed not invented, for instance, in order to be of help to professors of philologies in need of subjects for doctoral theses and dissertations, or to provide them with the possibility to use their own "national literature" as a basis for comparison with other literatures and in doing so, to enlarge their horizon and the prestige of this national literature. (For that kind of studies, no new discipline was needed and they could be realized within the frame of the existing national philologies.)

Genuine comparatism was thus a special discipline institutionalized at the end of the 19th century, at first in Klausenburg [Cluj] by Meltzl de Lomnitz, later in Zürich by Louis-Paul Betz, as well as in Lyon by Joseph Texte in 1893.

In contrast to the existing national philologies, it strove to compare several - usually, at least three - particular, so-called "national" literatures with each other, as well as investigate their relations respectively reciprocal relations. And here, the basic model in Europe consisted in a combination of French, German, and English literature.

As a matter of fact, comparatism originated from the idea that as a consequence of the diversity and plurality of the European national literatures and cultures, problems of literary (but also of other) kinds sprang up which showed, on the one side, conflicts and antagonisms and on the other the possibilities to surmount them; these were problems that should be tackled in the interest of the coexistence of the European national respectively tribal entities (called nations, peoples, linguistic communities, or otherwise).

Here we were, so to speak, confronting the very crux of all those complicated questions of the present “identity problems;“ in front of the task to start scrutinizing all this from a downright neutral, that is to say, supranational point of view.

However, this also meant that comparative literature - similar to comparative (history of) law, comparative pedagogics, comparative history of religion and so on (they all came into being at the turn of the century) - aimed at “higher objectives“ than the older national disciplines. And this implied that literary comparatism was to be connected with aims which in the end went far beyond not only national philological goals but also beyond so-called literariness itself.

The history of this new special discipline, so different from national philologies so clearly marked by national thinking everywhere in Europe, is well known. Among the national philologists it earned - especially in connection with its supranational and neutral position - as much sympathy as comparative religion with the theologians, that is to say, none at all.

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Even today, only very little is known about the details which made it possible that imagology, as the last consequence of the research of interrelations between the literatures, succeeded finally to be accepted by about 1950/51 on the part of the French school of comparatism.

You have to realize that under the label “Littérature Comparée,“ up to that time, two different sorts of research work were done:

First of all, the synchronic analysis of movements and currents common to different literatures, a study which in France was called later on “littérature générale“ and which, by means of cross-sections, stated common characteristics and differences as ascertained in specific periods of literary history. (Best examples: Paul Van Tieghem’s study of European pre-romanticism and Paul Hazard’s “Crise de la conscience européenne“ from 1935.)

Second, the investigation of reciprocal relations; that is, in principle, the research of the influence of one literature on another; respectively, the influence on authors of another literature as well as the investigation of the “reception“ of one representative of a literature X in one or more foreign literatures (let us say, Y, Z).

Those investigations into mutual relations got more and more popular in the long run, in France as well as in other countries. And finally it was precisely this kind of research which, shortly after World War II, brought about the change to imagology. No matter how influential the success of the study of influences may have been (here we have prime examples, as well: Baldensperger’s “Goethe en France“ and “Les orientations étrangères d’Honoré de Balzac“, Carré’s „Goethe en Angleterre“), researchers by and by became aware of the fact that the search for influences conducted until then, as well as the analysis of the international orientation of the authors, were not at all methodologically correct and, [it was simultaneously understood], that by a strict limitation to a precise and well-defined research matter, it would be possible to realize the essential, fundamental objectives of the discipline. (Therefore the concentration on the problem of “L’étranger tel qu’on le voit.“)

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Today you can be of the opinion that Jean-Marie Carré, who by about 1950 paved the way for the basis of his new orientation, made no doubt also some mistakes (for instance, with his poorly explained rejection of the “Littérature Générale”). Equally you may think that he did not succeed with his new programme to help establish Comparative Literature for good, giving it the hoped-for a status of an independent non-problematic discipline side by side with the national philologies in the European universities. But he had, without any doubt, success with his concentration on this special kind of reception studies; the study of “the otherness,” “alterity,” “l’autre,” “l’étranger.”

Indeed, this could be considered a life achievement with a great future! For in this way, a new subdiscipline was born, a subdiscipline within comparative literature still fighting for international acceptance; a subdiscipline which got its special profile in the long run just because of its possibilities situated in the field of the so-called extrinsic study of literature, and which was well on its way to become a “key” in the research on the psychological background of the inner-European nationality conflicts. - And remember, we did not need to concern ourselves - to put it blandly - with the question in how far the other parts of the initial comparatist teaching and research programs (“Littérature générale” as well as “Comparative literary theory and methodology”) could still be developed or could be conformed to the national philologies.

In other words: imagology working with literature (i.e. literary research matter) did not only become, in the long run, the research province par excellence of all comparative literature, but moreover it became a special field promising to form a bridge to other human sciences, in order to solve problems the importance of which indeed “dépasse la seule littérature” (to cite here Carré’s disciple and collaborator Marius -François Guyard).

As you know, the study of “images” and “mirages” has at the time been violently attacked by René Wellek and some of his followers respectively epigones, in the context of the French-American fight between comparatists, concerning our methods of research. Exactly the interdisciplinary possibilities and ambitions of imagology, he did not like at all. For him this was “rather a study of public opinion useful, for instance, to a program director in the Voice of America.” Or more in earnest: It was “national psychology, sociology...” and so on. As a matter of fact, he did not want to recognize the legitimacy of such research as part of a larger concept of the study of literature. The basis of these negative statements was lying, of course, in Russian Formalism and in the principles of New Criticism and the so-called “intrinsic study of literature.”

This subject is well known and has often been extensively treated.

That Wellek’s view on comparatism and its future potentiality - as well as his judgement concerning the French school - were outright erroneous is meanwhile considered proven. Just at a moment when after World War II the discipline faced a time of worldwide revival, he, without any doubt, damaged (nolens volens) its reputation. Thus in spite of (or just because of) the great prestige he enjoyed (first of all as a co-author with Austen Warren of “Theory of Literature” and later as author of the monumental “History of Literary Criticism”), the fact stands out that he indeed no longer contributed to a stabilization or even a further expansion or consolidation of Comparative Literature in the United States or the World. And the other fact stands out as well that his efforts for the discipline had become a fatal counteracting

force. By the way, he failed also to give a substantial answer to the problem he obviously had in mind all the time and which concerned the question of the “essence“ of literature and poetry, i.e. the problem of “literariness“ which in his opinion our discipline could elucidate.

His influence on the development of comparatism was rather destructive. And it is typical that a discipline which on the international level was still called “Comparative Literature“ (and which was impregnated by an American dominance stimulated by him), ended in a complete desorientation, which de facto led to the inner destruction of the discipline: from “Literature and the other arts“ up to “Gender studies,“ “Postcolonial studies,“ “Culture studies,“ even “Gay studies“ - and consequently to one “change of paradigms“ after the other.

Besides: after Welck’s attacks and especially after the death of Carré, a sort of stagnation took place in France as well. the heyday of “Littérature comparée“, as witnessed at the time of Paul Van Tieghem, Paul Hazard and Fernand Baldensperger, has never been repeated.

A study like Claude Diegeon’s “La crise allemande de la pensée française“ (1959) which Jean-Claude Carré supervised till shortly before his death, was one of the stunning exceptions and even this did not find the reception of a specific comparatist work. Typical of this spiritual climate was also Robert Escarpit’s solo attempt, aimed in the direction of empirical reception studies while referring explicitly to “littérature comparée“ and the investigation of “images“ and “mirages,“ which he labelled, correctly or not, “sociologie de la littérature.“ In this way, Escarpit in the wake of the much earlier attempts of Fernand Baldensperger, became the precursor of the Rezeptionsaesthetik such as it was later on formulated in the German context by Hans Robert Jauss.

Ulrich Weinsten who had played a leading role especially in the development of North American comparative literature, invented for this lamentable evolution the striking slogan, “From Ecstasy to Agony.“ And the state of affairs of comparatism in general has, since then, indeed become accordingly bad, in the European-American domain as well as in other parts of the world. A scupulously detailed description of the situation of the discipline at the respective universities, even where it once functioned properly, would fully confirm this.

Once the possibility existed to establish definitely an independent discipline of cultural neutrality, free of national philological ties, and formed out of a combination of international comparison of literatures and research of international literary and intellectual relations; a discipline which could be made part of the (list of) specialisms in language and literature; a full-sized authority. But this distinctly profiled program has not been generally put into practice; and where this happened, it was either slowed down, prevented from functioning, or simply abolished; not to the least degree at the instigation of the national philologists. When, some day, the history of the Humanities in the 20th century will be written, the failure of Comparative literature will undoubtedly be one of its saddest chapters.

In this respect the development of comparative imagology as taught by me and my collaborators at Aachen University has been an outright solo achievement, with modest successes but with the provable and legitimate conviction that here a program could get a special profile that was of great extraliterary promise and in the end far from all sorts of quarreling about the possibility of an academic establishment of “comparative“ or “general and comparative literature“. And this imagological program was at the same time able to extricate the very best from the rich cornucopia of the original “littérature comparée“ on a - true enough - restricted but, for that matter, highly specialized basis.

Thus at first it turned out to be undisputed that imagology such as presented by Carré and his disciples (above all, Marius-François Guyard) had given the opportunity to show the existence of “images“ and so-called “mirages,“ as Carré said in certain cases, in a multitude of fields that were all part of the literary domain and could only be comprehended by way of literary research. It was in the first place in the field of belletristic writing that numerous works could be named in which images and “imagotypical structures“ played such an “intrinsic“ role (to use a term dear to Wellek) that an interpretation of those texts without regard to the images* in question was not possible. [* Editorial Note: It is necessary to remind the reader that the author, professor Dyserinck, understands by ‘images’ the objectivation of specific ways of perceiving cultural, ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ collectives, e.g. ‘the French,’ and its derivatives, e.g. ‘French culture’, or what appears to be the ‘French quality’ in ‘French’ culture. He suggests that we critically scrutinize such, more or less stereotyped perceptions (heteroimages as well as autoimages), as they crop up in the literatures studied. As ‘imagist’ tendencies (Ezra Pound; Wallace Stevens; William Carlos Williams; all indebted to Ernest Fenellosa’s famous essay, and in league with the film theory and practice of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov) played a role in modernist Anglo-American literature, especially in poetry, departing from a completely different concept of the ‘image’ and giving it a completely different relevance, it is important to point out the specific, though well-defined use of the term ‘image,’ in the context of Dyserinck’s imagological approach.]

Additionally there was the role that “images“ and “mirages“ played in the dissemination of literature outside its field of origin (for instance by translation). And last not least the influence they have on literary criticism and even literary historiography itself.

This lead also to scientific findings which might at first sight seem of secondary importance but which - looked at more closely - revealed themselves as linked to an issue with essential prospects.

Thus, for instance, the notion that the images and imagotypical structures were not a reflection or so, of real collective qualities of the communities in question (“nations,“ “people“ and so on) but fictions, i.e. ideas that at some time in the course of history emerged in the countries or communities concerned. These ideas were partly handed down from generation to generation and they were in the long run even able to produce effects completely different from the original opinions and intentions of those who started them. This ontologically exceptional position, in connection with a sometimes striking vitality and longevity, would enable us later to point out its relationship with the so-called “Objects of World 3“ in the philosophy of Karl Popper. Here the best-known example was the French image of Germany during the 19th and 20th century that could be traced far back to Mme de Stael’s precursor, Charles de Villers. This distinct and clear structure (with the well-known contrasts romanticism/classicism, protestantism/catholicism, love of freedom/cult of authority, and so on) till far into our century served some people as an illustration of the Germanophilia - and others as a reason of their Germanophobia.

At this point, also, the highly important fact (important for every kind of imagology and equally for every discussion of identity) became clear that every “image of the other land“ has ultimately an underlying basis in the image of one’s own country, be it openly declared or latently existent.

In other words, hetero-image and auto-image belong together. And it became also clear that the play and interplay of hetero-images and auto-images could only be investigated from a

radically neutral point of view, which is to say, at least from that standpoint we have come to know already, in the context of the basic principles of every authentic comparatism, as supranational; a standpoint which, combined with a politically highly relevant imagology, was absolutely necessary.

It hence follows that none of these much talked about (and promising) “images“ - or “mirages,“ as Carré called the images of Germany - could be seen as the result[s] of whatsoever a de facto existing “national“ or “ethnic“ character or “genius“ (“Wesen“; or essence) on this or that side of the Rhine and that therefore, without any doubt, you could not use them as integral parts of a supposed “ethnopsychology.“

And finally, this made distinctly clear that the so-called “Voelkerpsychologie“ (this pseudo-scientific product of ideologically based fantasy), let alone, “Wesenskunde“ (cultivated at an earlier time in German universities) cannot be promoted by imagology but rather had to be abolished. Therefore we could speak of the de-ideologizing or even de-mythologizing function of imagology.

However, this did not prevent us from keeping in mind that, as we said before, images and imagotypical structures managed to stay alive for generations by their very consistency and resistance. And above all, we could not forget the fact that those images, by their sheer existence, nurtured up to the present day, either directly or indirectly, even such irrational and wrong ideas as the notion of “national character,“ of the “soul of the peoples,“ and of the “genius“ (“Wesen“) of nations. The belief in so-called “ethnopsychology“ was sheer ideology (in the sense of “false consciousness“, “falsches Bewusstsein“, as challenged by Karl Marx), but the concepts that nations and peoples nurtured with respect to one another were hard realities; of course: realities of a special kind. So that they had to be examined in a specific way and with particular objectives. And the importance, for politics which these ‘hard realities’ permeated, entering this field as they did, via literary criticism and literary historiography, came here to light with double force. They became indeed one of the strongest powers in international communication and life.

In connection with the identity problem already referred to, two concepts follow from the numerous results of the comparatist’s imagological theory that are of equal relevance:

(1) The statement that thinking in national categories is relative, that even concepts like “nation“, “people“ [people, pueblo, Volk] and so on, are only conceptual models which in the course of history have obtained a transitory concretization. - This is a result of the insight into the relativity of all image formation.

(2) The realization that there is, at the same time, something like an inherent need of collectivity formation and of a sense of belonging and being “sheltered.“ The human being of modern times has answered this need (as everybody knows) with his national feelings; an attitude which should now, once and for all, be replaced in a new way, on a higher level, i.e. by going beyond national thinking. - This is a result of the investigation into the impact, and even “obstinacy“ with which images and imagotypical structures appeared again and again in the course of history.

Therefore we should conclude that one of the tasks of comparative imagology consists not only in investigating identity problems, to go all the way from former “ethnopsychology“ to a new scientifically well-founded “ethno-imagology“ in the vein of critical rationalism. But imagology should also investigate the possibility of developing - in literature and in

surrounding field - post-national identity models; a task that leads us very close to similar phenomena in the European literature of the 19th century. (Let us take, as an example, the attacks against national thinking, of the French romanticists Lamartine, Musset, Hugo and so on, and moreover, Victor Hugo's conviction that the postnational human being could satisfy its "sense of shelter" not only in European culture but even in the conviction to belong to the whole universe.) And again, we are confirmed that literature and its surrounding field - including literary criticism and literary historiography - is a rich source of materials for research of this kind, without any doubt.

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As a practical example of the possible application of the principles of imagology to the problem of national and cultural identity - and as an illustration of the consequences of the concept of relativity of national thinking, we may take (out of numerous European research subjects) the identity problems in the Benelux area. This at least as a suggestion concerning the possibilities for an analysis of a given situation in certain territories, where points of contact and interaction of ethnic or lingual groups exist.

If we have in Europe a territory where the relativity of ethnic identity is expressed in a most consequential way, then it is indeed this area. Not only because here diverse "national," "ethnic" and lingual entities (which are even difficult to define) come into close contact. But because, moreover, they overlap in language and space.

In Wallonia, where the female prime minister is a child of immigrated Flemish parents, where leading politicians of the big Francophone political parties have names like Spitaels, Cools, Van der Biest and where also well-known authors, publicists and journalists have Flemish names, not even the biggest racist could have the idea to define "nationality" by the concepts of biological descent. And if the linguistic boundary, a factor endlessly discussed, leads to 'violent' conflicts at regular intervals and if, for instance, the "Charter for the protection of regional and minority languages" has still not been ratified by the Belgian government, this is above all due to the fact that this situation, since generations in movement, is in the final analysis caused by problems of linguistic usage, a phenomenon which in the end is not limited by frontiers.

And all this in a political structure in which separate parts of the - if you like - "federal union" are not even clearly defined by a proper name: the three parts of Belgium (French, Dutch and German speaking) have official names that in comparison to each other are not logical at all: "Communauté Française," "Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft," and "Vlaamse Gemeenschap." The term "Communauté Française" uses the adjective "française" as an indication for everything French, that means not only language and culture but also the state of France. On the other hand, the term "Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft" (which is the only one of the three that is clear and exact) indicates only the fact that the people of this community are speaking German. And the term "Vlaamse Gemeenschap" (and Flanders anyway) is based on a merely historically conditioned, and not even legitimate, predominance of one part, the provinces of West and East Flanders. And this even though the other Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium, Brabant and Limburg, do not belong, strictly speaking, to Flanders.

As for the so-called "Kingdom of the Netherlands" (I say so-called because in English, and in Dutch too, the official name contains a plural which is not correct, the southern part - i.e.

Dutch or “Flemish“-speaking Belgium - being also a part of the “Nederlanden“ or “Netherlands“, the Low Countries), we have an analogous situation, at least in colloquial language, when the whole is simply called “Holland.“ Here we also encounter a pars pro toto method, without consideration of the names of the other regions except Holland, such as [Northern] Brabant, [Northern] Limburg, Zeeland, Gelderland, Groningen and so on.

So we might go on in a way which could lead us to the impression of complete absurdity, if there was not the fact that all this leads also to continual psychological conflicts and that each of these unlogically labelled territories finds temporal approval in remarkable parts of the population, linked together by feelings of “belonging,“ of being “sheltered,“ and even by burst of patriotism; feelings with which big parts of the population live and for which certain individuals suffered or even died in wars. Something that applies also, it goes without saying, to the „twin model“ Belgium, consisting only of “Flanders“ and “Wallony“.

Also the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg is an excellent example where the impossibility of a thorough gallicization (or Frenchization) of the population is confronted with the simultaneous refusal to be regarded as an integral part of the German speaking territories of Europe, like any other German dialect area. Result: Even at the end of the 20th century, a serious attempt is made to develop from the German dialect Moselfraenkisch* [* editorial note: the mosan-franconian dialect, a variety of the Franconian dialect as spoken in certain areas traversed by the river Mosel and adjacent territories] Luxemburg’s “national language.“ By the way: something similar took place in Western Flanders during the second half of the nineteenth century, as an attempt at lingual disengagement from the all-Dutch (respectively Netherlandic) speaking area, made by certain “particularists“ - and it failed.

Faced with these facts, comparative imagology, as a study of identity following the principles of critical rationalism, has to call to mind one of its most important findings: “nations“ and even “peoples“ are not constant or God-given factors, but only conceptual models; models which in the course of history have obtained a transitory concretization. But imagology has also to state that in these “transitory“ structures, at the same time, desires of “belonging“ can be satisfied - just as in other forms of longing for human bonds.

In this perspective, we see in the end what can be expected from imagology as one of the last consequences: the possibility to investigate also the human need of concepts of collective identity, and therefore we should ask the question how long and in what dimension this - or anything similar - will be the case in postnational thought. Literature, too, bears witness to it, by the immense role it played in the processes of the conceptualization of identity: a role it will possibly continue to play in the future.

In this way, comparatist imagology will be all the more a part of that field to which it definitely belongs: a general philosophical anthropology as the science of man, with special regard to his existence in a world still essentially marked by collective differences - be they called “national, “ethnic,“ or otherwise.