

BOOK REVIEWS

LA LITERATURA DESDE EL PUNTO DE VISTA DEL RECEPTOR.
By Franco Meregalli. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi. 1989. 178pp.

Literary theory has taken over like wildfire in academic circles in Taiwan. At least that is the impression that I have gathered from a year's sojourn as visiting professor at National Chengchi University. Yet the theories in vogue here, like myself, have been imported from other parts of the world, chiefly from France and the United States. Since theoretical writings from Spain and Italy have been largely ignored, I hope readers of this journal may have some interest in an exposition of a major area of modern theory written in Spanish by one of the most eminent scholars of comparative literature in Italy, Franco Meregalli, Professor of Spanish and comparative literature of the University of Venice. The international character and reputation of his work is rounded out by its being printed in the Netherlands by a publisher with offices in Amsterdam and in Atlanta, Georgia.

Professor Meregalli's observations call to mind the international vagaries of literary theory in the contemporary academic world. History reveals a natural tendency toward establishing the seeking of knowledge upon particular doctrines, toward crystallizing master-disciple relationships, and toward associating masters and doctrines with the country of their origin. In the West many intellectuals are identified by the founders or putative founders of the systems they espouse (Platonists, Augustinians, Baconians, Marxists, Derrideans) as well as by the major principle of a system or systems (idealists, deists, positivists). The encapsulated segments of thought by which these doctrinal programs survive in successive academic generations are also associated with the national literatures from which they stem. It is widely known that the Russian formalists prior to World War I began the first wholesale trend in modern criticism by reacting against the emphasis of literary historians on extrinsic considerations (chiefly milieu and biography) and advocating instead close analysis of literary texts. The American New Criticism fell in line with this trend, carrying objections to extrinsic matters to even greater extremes, restoring esthetics to the foreground, and exalting particular groups of writers as worthy of attention, groups such as the English

metaphysical poets and the French symbolists. In the early days of comparative literature immediately after World War II, literary theories — or methods of reporting research — were classified according to two national schools. Those who adhered to positivism and its emphasis on *rappports de fait* presumably belonged to the French School, primarily because of the prestige of a nineteenth-century French positivist Gustave Lanson. Those who proposed instead the method of revealing resemblances between works the authors of which have no demonstrable contact were denominated members of the American School.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a form of literary study closely attached to historical investigation developed in Germany and independently in the United States. In Germany it was known as *Geistesgeschichte* (history of the spirit of the age) with less conspicuous branches *Problemgeschichte* and *Ideengeschichte* (history of problems, history of ideas). In the United States this method of inquiry was known simply as the history of ideas. The methods in the two countries are closely related but not identical. German *Geistesgeschichte* takes into consideration various elements in a certain period viewed as a whole; whereas American history of ideas examines thought units or separate ideas as they appear in various periods throughout history. This union of philosophy, history and literature flourished chiefly in Germany and the United States, although it stirred some interest in France, which still publishes a series of books under the rubric "Bibliothèque des Idées." So far as I know, this type of literary investigation has not been promoted or practiced by any East Asian theoretical coterie.

Two German personalities have had considerable influence upon literary production and criticism during the twentieth century, Freud and Marx. Exponents of Freud, however, deal for the most part in psychiatric and psychological theory, and exponents of Marx, in political and economic theory. These theories may be applied to individual literary works, but in themselves do not constitute a literary methodology. Marxism gained ground among literary critics in the United States during the depression of the 1930s, but was totally submerged during World War II and its aftermath. It was resurrected during the period of radical student movements of the 1960s, and at present its influence is relatively strong in nearly all parts of Europe and America. Marxism is a rare illustration of a literary theory flourishing, temporarily dying out, and then returning to vogue with equal or even increased vigor.

The two latest literary systems to enter the scene, structuralism and

deconstructionism, deriving respectively from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida, and jointly referred to as French New Criticism, have had greatest success in the land of their birth, France, and in the United States. Their influence has been so widespread and so closely associated with France, moreover, that a German scholar has coined the expression "Frankolatry in der Kulturwissenschaften" (France idolatry in cultural scholarship). Structuralism has close ties with anthropology and linguistics, and deconstructionism could not exist without linguistics. Predictions are now being made, however, that the present turn toward linguistics will eventually be supplanted by a turn toward esthetics. More and more scholars are affirming that language is not an autonomous system, but is a product of human experience and history. And for this and many other reasons, literature, unlike mathematics, cannot be studied in depth without consideration of its relations to life. Two nationalities that have remained relatively untouched by contemporary theoretical ferment are the English and the Japanese. Their scholars carry on traditional research, blending historical, biographical, and textual approaches as each appears relevant to a task in hand. Many English readers seem to agree with a character in one of Walter de la Mare's novels who cherishes the "inveterate preference to be allowed to study and enjoy his authors with as little external intervention as possible."

Germany and Spain have shown an affinity for two specialized methods of literary inquiry, Krausism and magic realism, that have intrigued critics in these countries, but have aroused little interest elsewhere. Both systems originated in Germany, and both have had their greatest vogue in Hispanic scholarship. Spanish *Krausismo* is a blend of philosophy and literary criticism based on the writings of Karl C. F. Krause, a German philosopher of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, who developed a system of idealism teaching that mankind and the universe belong to the divine essence but are only part of it. In Spanish literary criticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Krausismo* occupied a position comparable to Marxism in Western Europe today, but its emphasis was individual, not social. It entered the Spanish university system as an ideal of secular personal development, cultivating not only the intellect, but moral and esthetic awareness as well. Magic realism originally developed in Germany as a theory of painting and other plastic arts, but it is currently used in the Hispanic world in connection with surrealist literary works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Terranostro* by Carlos Fuentes. Neither *Krausismo* nor *realismo magico* has aroused much interest in Europe

except in Germanic and Spanish areas. One of my former students now teaching in Taiwan has participated in an international conference on *realismo magico* at the University of Illinois, but I am not aware of any other Chinese scholar specializing in this sector.

German criticism has entered the Hispanic world in another modern approach, that of *Rezeptionaesthetik* (reception esthetics), the focus of Meregalli's book. This theory concentrates on the reader or receiver of a literary work rather than on the author or the text. Similar theories had been expounded in the United States early in the twentieth century by the philosopher John Dewey, but they did not attract much attention among literary critics until they were developed under the rubric of transactional theory by Louise M. Rosenblatt, in an exposition entitled *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 1978. In a sense reception theory is an old hat, having monopolized the congress of the International Comparative Literature Association as far back as 1979. I am hoping, nevertheless, that since the theory has not received wide publicity in Taiwan and that since Meregalli's book is dated as recent as 1989, the following remarks may not be considered as entirely outmoded.

Before entering upon his explication of literary reception, Meregalli offers an overview of the history of criticism. He points out that in Europe from classical times until the end of the eighteenth century, criticism was devoted almost exclusively to the text. Critics of the Romantic Movement were the first to pay attention to the author, individual or collective, in connection with their notions of genius. Reaction against Romantic exuberance and vacuousness led to the positivism of the nineteenth century, the effort to bring to light every fact concerning the composing of a literary work and the life and milieu of the author. Meregalli is one of the few critics in our day willing to say a good word about positivism. He appropriately observes the injustice of dwelling upon its defects without admitting its merits. Positivism confronted the mellifluous platitudes of the Romantics by demanding objectivity and factual evidence. Scholars in Taiwan, where even today public lectures are offered on topics such as "The Beauties of Literature," should not lightly reject this objective criticism based upon *rappports de fait*. An excess of factualism and neglect of esthetics, however, doomed positivism nearly everywhere. Among the various national substitutes that took its place, Meregalli lists Italian neoidealism, Russian formalism, North American New Criticism, German *Textimmanenz*, and French structuralism. Extreme partisans of these critical systems, all active in the years 1940-1980, even went so far as to deny the relevance of literary history to the under-

standing of the works themselves. Paradoxically Marxist criticism and other forms of investigating social phenomena failed to stem the flood of abstract theory. The paradox exists today in Taiwan as elsewhere that some individuals, seasoned professors as well as naive students, maintain the efficacy of both Marxist theories and those denying the connection of the text with the real world without recognizing the inherent incompatibility of the two perspectives.

According to Merregalli, reception theories grew out of the limitations of previous approaches that took into consideration only the producing of literature, both those that investigated the author and his times and those that emphasized the text. Literature, according to the receptionists, implies a dialectic character, requiring a receiver (the reader) as well as a sender (the author), and a text cannot exist without a context even when only its linguistic components are considered. A distinction has been made between a text as the single and invariable physical combination of words and a work as the private realization of the text in the mind of each individual who reads it. Words themselves change with the passage of time. While attributing to German scholars Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss much of the credit for promoting theories of literary reception, Merregalli indicates that the approach is not entirely new and that its advocates, unlike the advocates of some other contemporary schools of criticism, do not regard their method as opposed to traditional literary history, but as supplementary or complementary to it. They still consider the perspective of the emitter as the major one. The common term *receptionesthetics*, Merregalli explains, is really a misnomer since esthetics comprises in addition to literature other disciplines such as music and art. Receptionists, moreover, are not exclusively concerned with esthetics, but investigate in addition extraesthetic elements in literature such as linguistics, the arousing of emotion, intellectual displays, and awakenings of conscience. Merregalli takes a stand contrary to other critics such as Mukarovsky and Wellek who maintain that the esthetic content is predominant in literature. He stoutly affirms that "the grandeur of literature resides precisely in its capacity of expressing all of humanity, not only the esthetic element." For this reason he prefers to speak of the theory of literary reception rather than reception esthetics.

The flaw in the positivists' classic notion of influence, according to Merregalli, consisted in regarding the receiver as passive in his relationship with the emitter. But he warns against going to the contrary extreme by studying only the reaction of the receiver. He repeatedly advocates integrating both

points of view, not substituting one for the other. In introducing the perspective of the receiver, he explains that a work of literature may enter the mind as an auidial experience, for example, the songs of the troupadors in the Middle Ages or in our times dramatic performance on the stage or on television. But the major concern of literary critics is, of course, the reader. *Final readers*, those who do not communicate the results of their reading to others, are not all of a kind but may be categorized in various ways, such as naive, informed, ideal, open-minded or biased. *Institutional readers*, those who act as mediators between writer and reader, are usually informed or ideal. They include translators, interpreters, and critics. If the translator is able to resist the temptation of expressing his own personality, and even the best-intentioned ones are not completely free from doing so, he must be a "transparent" mediator, completely faithful to the original. And in adopting this self-abnegating role, he must exercise some of the duties of the critic. Throughout his book, Merregalli offers many valuable comments on translation, an enterprise that partisans of all forms of theory support and which is particularly crucial in communication between East and West. Turning to the interpreter of a text, Merregalli defines the practitioner of this relatively rare, literary activity as one who deliberately follows a specific text in a subsequent creative work, thus producing a partial imitation that wanders freely beyond the original. As example, Merregalli gives Unamuno's *La vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*. More recently one could cite Michel Tournier's *Robinson Crusoe. Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. The critic, according to Merregalli, is one who clarifies the significance and value of a work, carrying out the double function of hermeneutics and axiology. The latter concept of defining value has vanished from the vocabulary of nearly every other brand of theory, but Merregalli dares to use it. He then affirms that the critic must be faithful to the text, "to accept from it the confirmation or the negation of his interpretation." This affirmation seems to reject the individual reader as the final arbiter of a work, and indeed it does. Only extreme partisans of reception or related theories argue that each reader's opinion is as good as any others. Merregalli admits, on the other hand, that no absolutely objective or definitive interpretation is possible. "As the work is always an open work, except when the author himself has given an interpretation of it that pretends to be definitive, so the criticism is also open." But each critic is not required to start from zero. Unless he is the first to address a given work, he can utilize the concrete evidence provided by previous criticism. His function is to build, not tear down. "Posterity may understand in a different,

but nevertheless legitimate and more profound way, an event conceived in another manner by its contemporaries and even by those directly involved in it since the long-range significance of an event becomes evident only through the historical perspective upon it that by definition its contemporaries cannot possess; in the same way criticism may give a modern but nevertheless legitimate and objective interpretation of a text from another era, revealing meanings that remained hidden to its contemporaries and even to its author and that, nevertheless, were immanent in it." With great common sense, Merregalli adds that the reception method may work with particular texts, but not all, a modest attitude that advocates of some other theoretical systems do not share.

In his practical examples of reception theory, Merregalli stresses, as would be expected, Spanish and Italian literatures, particularly the works of Cervantes, Unamuno and Ortega. He also has some fresh material on the reception of Cervantes in England and of Voltaire in Germany.

The late president of the mainland Chinese Comparative Literature Association, Zhang Zhouhan has compared the conflict between advocates of literary theory and advocates of literary history, which he thought was a purely Western phenomenon, to the eighteenth-century quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. The comparison is ingenious since the contemporary debate does in a sense represent a clash between those who respect the past and those who prefer the present. The debate in the United States is not primarily a generational one, however, since most of the gurus of theory are in their sixties. To a certain degree younger faculty are attracted toward novelty, but on the whole both students and faculty tend, as always, to reflect what they have been taught in graduate school. On the East coast, the major bastions of theory are Yale, Johns Hopkins and Cornell, although some advocates may be found in all the major graduate schools. The theorists are so dominant at Yale that they have been humorously described as the Yale football team. On the West coast, a single center for theory stands out, the University of California at La Jolla, the academic home of Wai Lim Yip and other eminent Chinese scholars. The latter work with theory, but are not fanatics about it, saving the department of literature from being dubbed the California ping pong team.

Ordinarily a considerable time lag exists between the passage of a literary theory from one nationality to another. The works of Lévi-Strauss on which structuralism is based, for example, appeared in France during the 1940s, but his influence was not felt in the United States until the 1970s. A few years

after this the French vanguard announced that structuralism was *passé*. In the United States, outmoded theories are said to be dead. I have heard this said about the history of ideas. Sometimes a theory that seems to be the last word in modernity is condemned as a throwback to one from a previous era. Literary structuralism, for example, is accused of being a pedantic form of nineteenth-century art for art's sake, and its anthropological aspect is considered to be linked to conventional folk-lore. Deconstruction has been described, more or less objectively, as a resurgence of Nietzschean scepticism and, pejoratively, as philosophical nihilism that relegates literature "to a musty corner of the intellectual universe." The American "new historicism" of the last ten years has been associated with the ideals of the history of ideas as set forth by A. O. Lovejoy fifty years ago. Some of the liveliest discourse in the United States at the present time, moreover, concerns the nature and workings of rhetoric, a topic that might previously have been said to be completely antiquated during the eighteenth century. Reception theory because of its eclecticism has not come under extensive attack. The major objection raised is that it cannot be applied to the study of documents in a historical context, that is, to their effect on minds other than that of the reader of the moment. As practised by Franco Merigalli, reception theory has much in common with *Krausismo* and many resemblances to the most acceptable elements of nineteenth-century positivism. For this reason it is likely to survive.

A. OWEN ALDRIDGE

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FROM CHINESE PERSPECTIVES. By John J. Deeney. Shenyang: Liaoning University Press, 1990.

Dr. John J. Deeney 李達三, a Reader at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is the author of *Pi-chiao wen-hsüeh yen-chiu chih hsin fang-hsiang* 比較文學研究之新方向 (*New Orientations for Comparative Literature* [Taipei: Linking, rev. ed., 1982]), and a recent essay-collection entitled, *Chung-hsi pi-chiao wen-hsüeh yen-chiu* 中西比較文學研究 (*Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Studies* [Shenyang: Liaoning Peoples Press, 1990]). The author has also compiled over the years a series of comparative literature bibliographies related to Chinese and Anglo-American materials in English, most recently, "Chinese-English Comparative Literature Bibliography: A

Pedagogical Arrangement of Sources, in English—1982-1987” *Tamkang Review* 17.4, (Summer 1987).

Even though a Western scholar, the author has taken a keen interest in Chinese culture and literature. He is also one of the few Western scholars who have enthusiastically promoted Chinese-Western comparative literature studies for a quarter of a century. As he states in the General Preface, his ideal in assisting in the publication of this series of Interflow books from the LUP, is to “encourage a two-way traffic between Eastern and Western cultures which will serve as both inlet as well as outlet to both” (iv).

Like other books in the same series, *Comparative Literature from Chinese Perspectives* is written in English. It is tailor-made for “readers who do not know Chinese but are interested in learning about comparative literature in China” (Author’s Preface v). As the title indicates, the book acts as an introduction to the study of comparative literature from Chinese perspectives and traces the development and problems faced in this relatively new academic discipline. The author of this book, with his many years of experience in working with Chinese colleagues in promoting Eastern cultures and literatures, was the first to introduce the concept of a “Chinese School” complement to the American and French Schools. The theme of the book, as stated by the author himself, is to “consider comparative literature from the point of view of modern scholarship as well as in the context of China’s long, literary tradition” (Preface viii).

Instead of going into the history of Chinese-Western comparative literature right from the start, the first part of the book (including General Preface, Author’s Preface and the Prologue) is devoted to explain the author’s purpose of writing this book: his inspiration, intention, and the ideal he wants to achieve. In his prologue, for example, he talks about the controlling ideas that inspire him to write as well as the reason why he introduces another school (the Chinese School) in studying comparative literature. The author also summarizes the ideas which will be developed in later chapters. These are suggestions on how we should study comparative literature: the attitude and motivation; the principles and methods, etc. All these serve as a foundation for the concepts to follow which enable readers to have a general overview of what they are going to encounter. This is very helpful, indeed, especially when the target readers are those who are not familiar with comparative literature from Chinese perspectives.

The main body of the book is divided into five chapters, namely, History, Ideology, Comparativization, Translation and Poetics. Chapter One

looks back at the history of how the Chinese School in comparative literature is understood as an academic discipline in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC. In Part I of this chapter, "Early Beginnings", the writer introduces some prominent figures in Chinese literary history who contributed to the development of Chinese-Western comparative literature studies in its earliest stage. In Part II, "Recent Developments", the book focuses on the evolution of comparative literature in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC. The common areas under investigation are teaching and research institutes; meetings and associations; and journals and books.

Chapter Two, on the other hand, points out differences as well as similarities:

I will recapitulate some of the distinguishing characteristics of comparative literature in the Taiwan, Hong Kong and PRC areas as they have developed *historically*. Then in the second section, "Future Prospects," I will examine some of the ways the Chinese School has been described *ideologically* by comparativists from the first time the term appeared over a decade ago (1)

In this chapter, the author discusses, in separate sections, the "distinctive characteristics of each of these three geographical areas" (3-4), and also the unique problems found in each of these three places. He finally draws a conclusion about Hong Kong's uniquely strategic location between China and Taiwan, being the place he thinks best to promote Chinese-Western comparative literature.

In order to study Chinese-Western comparative literature in the most fruitful way, Chapter Three points out the importance of training ourselves to read literature from a multi-dimensional point of view, and developing a habit of thinking comparatively (1). This is what the author means by "comparativization."

At the end of the chapter, he makes a brief yet very clear summary about the qualities a comparativist should possess in his or her approach to literature. These include:

A great openness and active acceptance of other varieties of literature and alternative literary expression; a persevering inquisitiveness and sensitivity to multiple literary relationships; the constant integration of knowledge around a core of solid principle; an effort to truly internationalize narrow Western

concepts of what constitutes comparative literature; finally, and most important of all, the continuing development of an open habit of mind which has been trained to think comparatively (22).

This openness and acceptance means that we have to deal with many more than one literature, language of culture, and this implies that translation must become an indispensable part in studying comparative literature. Therefore, Chapter Four suggests that translation enables "nations of the world to appreciate each other's literatures despite formidable language barriers" (1). The author then explains how translation can considerably help in studying comparative literature. He develops this idea under the rubric of "Pedagogical Role of Translation" (4). The author also relates biculturalism, pluralism and interdisciplinarity, etc., to translation, since they should be, in his view, inseparable from each other.

Chapter Five on "Poetics" attempts to give a brief sketch of important figures in the history of traditional Chinese literary theory. The author intends to introduce Westerners to "a sampling of representative critical ideas that are related to the origins and development of China's two millennia of literary writing" (1). He emphasizes the need for seriously considering Chinese literati's more intuitivist approaches to literature.

The book *Comparative Literature from Chinese Perspectives* is impressive for its clarity of purpose and execution. The author makes clear to the readers his purpose in writing the book, his approaches, the honest admission of certain shortcomings and the ideal he wishes to foster. In each chapter and section he states clearly his theme(s) so as to avoid ambiguity. Also, right from the start, he has explained to the readers the way he arranges his bibliographical notes and their usefulness for readers. He also gives a sensible explanation for the transcription policy he has followed so as to avoid confusion.

The chapter titles look unrelated by name and each has its own area of focus, but they are also very closely interwoven together, with one idea leading to another. The book begins with the history of Chinese-Western comparative literature, looking at the three related but distinct Chinese societies (PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). Then, in the next chapter, he leads us to look at the differences in these three areas when studying comparative literature. The idea of differences further takes us to the concept of multi-dimensional perspectives and the open attitude towards literature in

Chapter Three. The multi-dimensional perspective and interdisciplinarity also have a great deal to do with translation and poetics as the author points out in last two chapters. The ideas and concepts in the book form a network that hangs together.

I would like to call attention to the very useful "Chinese-Western Literary Chronology" chart at the beginning of the book which helps readers to realize which periods in China's literary history correspond to those in the West. This is extremely helpful, especially for those who have no idea whatsoever about Chinese literature and the leading literary figures in each period.

Throughout the book, the author's attitude is consistently a "middle-of-the-road" one (*Chung-yung chih-tao* 中庸之道). To reach his happy medium, he often presents extreme views, or quotes drastically opposite opinions from various scholars. He usually draws conclusions based on the positive strength of these divergent views.

The book is valuable because it is clear, systematic and comprehensive, yet there are still some shortcomings. First of all, as suggested by the author himself, there is a lack of all but the most commonplace examples from Chinese Literature, which affects the book's persuasiveness. Moreover, there are ideas or facts that repeat themselves in different chapters, even though the author claims them to be unavoidable.

The author is very meticulous in explaining all the methodologies and tools he uses, and in pointing out problems big and small one may encounter when studying Chinese-Western comparative literature; for instance, the different transcription systems used in converting Chinese characters to an alphabetical code; and the confusion caused by personal preferences in spelling and word-order contained in quotations, etc. A warning beforehand from the author helps to reduce uncertainty and frustration when facing such problems.

To conclude, this book is a very good beginning. Western comparativists who are interested can begin their study of Chinese-Western comparative literature with this text. Scholars who might want to make a similar contribution to this area of academic study can well follow this example. We look forward to more specialized Chinese-Western critical works by comparativists who can produce similar works that are so helpful in this area of study.

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