Toward a Cultural Approach to Literature

Louise M. Rosenblatt


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-0994%28194605%297%3A8%3C459%3ATACATL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5

*College English* is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/ncte.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Toward a Cultural Approach to Literature

LOUISE M. ROSENBLATT

President Roosevelt's warning that if civilization is to survive we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together in the same world, at peace—has gained even more drastic urgency since it was written on the day before his death. International understanding and the moral and intellectual solidarity of all peoples must be achieved—under penalty of extinction if we fail. Educators have been especially alert to this need, and there has been a renewed concern to clarify the ways in which each field of study can better serve those ends. In the field of literature the need to acquaint American youth with the literary achievements of foreign peoples has been urged as an important means of eliminating provincialism and fostering sound international understanding. And, since international sympathies must be reinforced by moral solidarity at home, the study of foreign literatures has been urged, too, as a means of eliminating prejudice against people of various foreign ancestries within our own country.

An enveloping philosophy for the study of foreign literatures and a clear sense of the basic attitudes and insights that we seek to foster are essential. The crux of the problem lies in the development of attitudes toward cultural differences. It is not necessary to document here the existence, even among American college graduates, of attitudes of rejection or superiority toward those, abroad or at home, who diverge from accepted American norms. To be fruitful, the study of foreign literature should be permeated by consistent ways of thinking about cultural differences. In particular circumstances, with particular instructors and students, one or another type of course or series of texts may be desirable; but their effectiveness for fostering humane attitudes will depend on the concepts about people and cultures which make up the climate of thought within which the reading and study are carried on. The following remarks are an attempt to initiate discussion by sketching some of the ideas which should be implicit in any treatment of foreign literatures which seeks to serve our ultimate humanistic goals.

I

The anthropologists, through their study of primitive and modern societies, or, to use the anthropological term, cultures, have provided us with the ideological framework for our problem. They have reinforced our awareness of the amazing diversity of social patterns that men have created—strikingly different modes of behavior, types of personal relationships, ideas of good and evil, religious beliefs, social organizations, economic and political mechanisms, and forms of art. But the anthropologists find these differences evidence only of the extreme plasticity of the human creature. They have made us understand...
that men have fashioned these divergent patterns of living out of the raw materials of their common humanity, out of the common drives which all human beings share.

The scientific evidence is that race or any inherited physical traits cannot be recognized as causal factors in the diverse patterning of cultures. Each culture utilizes, at any time, only a limited number out of the vast range of potentialities possessed by the human creature. Everything from physical traits to the ability to dream dreams and see visions may receive different valuations in different societies, and a people may at different times in its history pour its personal and group life into widely contrasting molds. There will be many differences from individual to individual within a society, of course; but all will be shaped by reaction to the dominant pressures, the accepted habits, and the system of values, of that culture. There would be a great difference in the resulting personality, for example, according to whether the same human organism were born into a society which rewards gentleness, moderation, and co-operativeness or one that prizes aggressiveness, violence, and individualism. For each society develops some of the individual's latent possibilities and represses or rejects others.

Thus we come to see our American society as playing out one among the many modes of living that mankind has developed and as one among the many diverse cultural patterns man has evolved from his common drives and capacities. If we tend to feel that our ways have an inherent rightness and divine sanction, that, too, is an illusion that we share with individuals shaped by other cultures, which seem equally self-justified to them.

When the individual sees himself and all that he takes for granted in our American society as a product of the same process of cultural conditioning that has produced other personalities in very different types of society, he can acquire the objectivity necessary for meeting the impact of those differences. They will be recognized as variations on the common human theme and need not be met with blind and self-justified suspicion or fear or repugnance. The emotional rejection of differences can give way to intelligent reflection on them.²

Infused with this cultural approach, the study of foreign literature should indeed have a liberating effect. (I am assuming, of course, that any study of foreign literature will, above all, help the student to have direct, personal enjoyment of literary works as works of art.) Literature gives us concrete evidence of how differently men have phrased their lives in different societies. But literature, by its very nature, helps also to bridge those differences. For literature, which permits us to enter emotionally into other lives, can be viewed always as the expression of human beings who, in no matter how different the ways, are, like us, seeking the basic human satisfactions, experiencing the beauties and rigors of the natural world, meeting or resisting the demands of the society about them, and striving to live by their vision of what is important and desirable in life. Imaginative sharing of human experience through literature can thus be an emotionally cogent means of insight into human differences as part of a basic human unity.

²This statement of key ideas is necessarily sketchy. See Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (Houghton Mifflin, 1934), and Race: Science and Politics (Viking Press, 1943), and the general works by Franz Boas, Ralph Linton, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Robert H. Lowie, et al.
The ultimate human meaning of a work of literature, and especially a foreign work, is not that of a photographic document but emerges as we penetrate beneath the exotic social forms and themes to discover the structure of emotional relationships and moral emphases it embodies. Our delight in the picturesque or dramatic externals of foreign life, our interest in strange folkways, need not obscure our sense of the literary work as a crystallization of human emotions and aspirations, as a patterning of attitudes toward the world of man and nature. Sometimes these are explicit in the work, sometimes implicit, clothed in story and symbol. But always it is possible to reach through the literary work to the broader human patterns it reflects. Through the study of foreign literature, then, we are seeking to help our students to broaden their vision of the varied images of life, of the different patterns of values, of the contrasting habits of emotional response, that other peoples have created out of our common human potentialities. And these differences are to be seen as alternatives, beside which our way of life and our own system of values are to be placed.

Nor will the images of human behavior and personality encountered in literature fall into a neat hierarchy, with American society perched at the summit. It will not always be easy to decide in what direction the balance should fall, if these patterns are weighed in terms of their meaning for the fulfilment of human capacities. In some societies, as in the Greek or the feudal, men will be seen, for example, to have elaborated ideals of a different range of personal loyalties, a more exacting code of honor, than in our own, or to have envisaged stronger claims of friendship (cf. Pater's *Two Early French Stories*). Again, some societies tend to give greater prestige than we do to the artist and the intellectual. Or it may be necessary to make clear at what social cost certain types of elegance in art and manners, as in seventeenth-century France, were achieved. Moreover, in the same society—and in the same great work of art—high sensitivity on some points may coexist with great callousness on others. An acceptance of cruelty or violence, a view of the child as a little savage to be tamed, a suppression of women, and a glorification of brute power may be associated with much that we admire ethically and aesthetically. Perhaps such insights may lead to the question whether America, too, may not have cultural blind spots, juxtaposed to humane sensitivity at other points.

A concern with attitudes toward cultural differences gives special point to the literary scholar's interest in clarifying the relationship between the literary work and the society which produced it—and especially the relationship between the author and his audience. Of course, we know that literature is not a mere mirror of life. Literature is itself an integral part of a culture and has its own complex relationship to the rest of the cultural setting. A literary work often reflects only some one segment of the society, to which it may be addressed. If sometimes it offers a realistic description, at other times it may represent an escape from, or compensation for, actual conditions. And always it implies the temperament of the author—more or less at one with the dominant modes of thought and feeling in the society about him. It would be self-defeating, if in our zeal to find "characteristic" or "representative" foreign works we minimized these considerations and unwittingly reinforced the tendency to make hasty gen-
eralizations about foreign peoples. Moreover, we are less insulated from the full human impact of the great masterpieces if we see how they often reflect only one part of the arc of a society.

Perhaps all of this sums up merely to insistence that we approach the literature of other peoples with the same concern for its intrinsic human meaning with which we approach our own literature today. The value of such intercourse with, and such an open mind toward, the cultural alternatives encountered through foreign literature of the past and present lies in the objectivity which it can foster. Such a comparative approach opens the path to escape from unquestioning acceptance of the familiar and from consequent crude prejudice against all other ways. If we are indeed seeking to foster international understanding, it must be based on such objectivity toward our own and other ways of life.

The same approach to differences can help to dissolve attitudes of rejection toward the minorities within our American society, who possess differentiating traits due to their national ancestry, their religious training, their segregation because of color, their belonging to one or another economic group. And the view of differences as alternatives due to environmental variations may lead even to the recognition that minority groups may possess some qualities, may follow some standards of behavior, such as habits of group aid, or may value some kinds of temperaments that, instead of being spurned as divergent from American norms, should be incorporated as an accepted part of the American pattern.

II

Awareness of the cross-fertilization of cultures is another insight militating against provincialism that can be fostered through the study of literature. Interchange from society to society has been one of the important factors in cultural growth and enrichment. Even among primitive cultures, the anthropologists point to those marginal peoples who have remained culturally impoverished and static because they were cut off from contact with other societies. The history of our Western civilization embodies a long series of such fructifying contacts. Within our own field of literature our problem is an embarrassment of riches in seeking to do justice to the intermingled cultural streams that have fed us. We must include at least the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman among the ancient literatures; the Middle Ages and the Renaissance must be presented as European developments with various influences from the East; and, in more recent times of national literatures, what a vast network of crosscurrents, of give-and-take across national frontiers!

Students of comparative literature remind us that, when such borrowings, such "influences," occur, it is because native conditions have created a favorable soil on which the foreign seed can be implanted. Each literature possesses, and continues to maintain, its own special characteristics, and the foreign influence may undergo a sea-change as it is incorporated into the new literary setting. Yet beneath the surface similar emotional needs and intellectual tendencies have made possible the transfusion of ideas, themes, or artistic forms.

---

3 How disillusioning it was for many Frenchmen in 1870 to discover that the image of the romantic, sentimental, dreamy, contemplative Germans—based largely on the reading of German romantic literature—did not at all correspond to the full reality! See Fernand Baldensperger, La Littérature: création, succès, durée (Paris: Flammarion, 1927), p. 201.
This view of the intricate interpenetration of cultures both prevents a smug cultural egotism and permits a hopeful sense of possibilities for the future. No society is justified in the belief that it has produced the supermen toward which all history has been tending. We are not the supremely superior heirs who incorporate all that was good in the past. We see that peoples, at one time looked upon as barbarians and inherently inferior by the more advanced societies about them, have later, in the course of cultural interchange and growth, developed new and undreamed-of outlets for human capacities and have produced writers speaking across the barriers of language and time to their fellow-humans.

A reason frequently stated for studying the foreign works which have contributed to our own cultural heritage is that we shall thus inculcate a respect and sympathy for the peoples who produced these great writings: the Bible will demonstrate oneness in ethical and religious ideals with the Jews; Dante will lead to a sense of fraternity with the Italians; Homer, the Greeks; and so on. Such an increased appreciation and sympathy for specific peoples should surely be fostered.

But should there not be an equal emphasis on the fact of our common indebtedness to a multi-national, or multi-cultural, ancestry? The Bible, Homer, Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe, Ibsen, and the others are not only bonds between us and the people whose national pride they are. Such works are bonds also between us and all the other peoples they have enriched. The intermarriages of minds in the course of history have given us and other modern peoples many of the same cultural ancestors. Are not the Greek and Latin classics cultural links between us and the French, for example? And are not Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, or the Bible, mediators among many cultures?

Indeed, when we look at the histories of literature as they now exist, we may well wonder if the nationalist obsession of recent centuries has not too strongly dominated our thinking and obscured the realities. Such revolutions have come about in the course of any national literature that an Englishman of the eighteenth century, for instance, might feel more at home with a French contemporary than with his own English descendant of the romantic period. Our national cultures are so complex, and include such a wide range of temperaments and philosophies, that an American poet today may find himself more akin to, say, a contemporary French poet than to another American poet. Fortunately, we do not always put nationalist categories first in treating literature. Courses in medieval literature and the Renaissance perforce cut across national and linguistic boundaries. Even in dealing with more recent times of intense nationalism, we are breaking away from distorting national compartmentalizations, to concentrate on great common movements of ideas and feeling, as in courses on the romantic movement, realism in fiction, the symbolist and post-symbolist trends. The study of different genres, drama, the short story, the novel, poetry, also leads us to move back and forth across national frontiers. More of this emphasis on parallel developments should permeate courses focused on American or English literature if we wish to present modern civilization as a co-operative enterprise transcending national frontiers. The evidence of the rich harvest of cultural interchanges in the past can be made the source of a receptive attitude
toward such interchange with an ever-widening circle of peoples in the future.

The approach to cultural differences that has been sketched thus far is equally pertinent to the problem of affecting attitudes toward differences within our own society. Not only do we Americans share the general multiple indebtedness of our Western civilization, but we are living embodiments of a very special illustration of cultural intermingling. American history is coming to be understood more and more in terms of the interplay of peoples and patterns drawn from many lands. The period of zealous "Americanization," with its image of differences merged in the American melting pot, has given way to a growing realization of the fact that unity need not mean uniformity. The newer and more constructive image is that of an orchestration of individual and group differences into a harmonious national unity. Differences can be welcomed as a national asset, a condition making for cultural fertility.

Teachers of English, both in the colleges and in the schools, may have to admit more than a small share of the responsibility for having perpetuated too narrow a conception of what is American. The tendency to overstress the so-called "Anglo-Saxon" elements in our culture is understandable. But without scanting this major aspect of our American literary tradition, we can do greater justice to the values in our life and literature that have resulted from the incorporation into our American society of people with varied traditions of behavior, feeling, and expression. The emphasis should not be on differences in themselves but rather on the fact that, out of this wealth of diverse temperaments and ways, we have laid the foundations for, and are together continuing to create, an integrated American culture. The special mark of this culture can be its flexibility, its fostering of a broad and fertile range of individual differences—some of which may be due to diversity of ancestry—within the framework of a creatively democratic society.

Given the complexity of the cultural picture, let us be especially careful that the study of foreign literature not lead to the mistaken notion that the label—English or French or Chinese or Polish—can be equated with any individual. The very laudable effort in the schools, at present, to stress the contributions of the various groups to our cultural heritage seems sometimes to fall into this error. Such labels denote broad cultural patterns, within which there can be great individual variations. The boy of Italian ancestry, for instance, may weary of having it assumed that he will take special pride in Dante and Leonardo da Vinci or that his schoolmates will value him more because of these great Italians. The boy may himself respond more to Homer or Walt Whitman—and they are as much his heritage as is Dante. Above all, we must remember that his Italian ancestry is only one of the factors in the complex process of cultural conditioning to which his life in America has exposed him. The concept of the interplay of cultural elements may thus help us to liberate ourselves from too rigid national or cultural categorizations and may permit us to look at individuals within our own and other cultures as individuals.

III

The comparative approach to cultures, the placing of our own beside the
others, represents only the first step in the process of developing international and human understanding. Students, it may be objected, becoming acquainted with cultures extremely different from, yet in their own terms as valid as, our own, may lose their provincialism but retain only a sterile relativism, arguing that what is "good" in one culture may be "evil" in another. A similar confusion may result from the turning with equal enthusiasm from one great work to another in, let us say, a course in world literature. Nor do we wish to exchange the feeling of superiority of the smugly complacent American for the feeling of inferiority endured by another kind of American. A recurrent phenomenon in our country has been the intellectual or the artist who has reached out for the aesthetic riches of foreign lands and has become alienated from the American life about him.

The answer to these objections has been implicit throughout this discussion: the comparative approach, the awareness of cultural differences as cultural alternatives, to serve as a basis for a sound educative process, must be buttressed by an active sense of values. Only by turning a critically appreciative eye upon our own and other cultures, our own and other literatures, shall we avoid either excessive smugness or excessive humility. The fundamental criteria for such a critical attitude are provided by our democratic ideals. The belief in the value and dignity of the human being that has been the leaven throughout our history can be the foundation for such a system of values. Though we have in many ways fallen short of our democratic ideals, the common awareness of those ideals has been our conscience and our goad. The fact that within our own society there are tendencies that sometimes frustrate and obstruct our democratic aspirations can be a reminder that in all cultures there are varied and often conflicting elements. There must be developed the kind of international understanding that respects the validity of other cultures and does not seek stupidly to impose our own but yet, at the same time, discriminates between those patterns that threaten and those that serve the democratic ideal and the mutually helpful relations among peoples. The problem becomes one of discriminating, in our own and other literatures, between those elements that nourish the sense of man's dignity and worth and those that, no matter how satisfying aesthetically, reinforce attitudes inimical to this view or reflect an authoritarian spirit. Thus the student is liberated imaginatively to look objectively upon his own and other societies and to envisage the possibility of even greater approximation toward our democratic goals.

If we claim that the study of literature has value for life today, if we believe that through such study we can contribute toward creation of the ways of thinking and feeling so sorely needed in our domestic and international life, we must make much more important than ever before this critical process based on a vital awareness of democratic values. These should not, of course, be made the subject of constant preachments. Nor need courses in literature include lectures on cultural anthropology. Such insights can usually be fostered in terms of specific literary works, for in their personal and human import lies a potent means for affecting attitudes. This will be accomplished through constantly recurring emphases, through the approach to literary works in terms of their underlying structure of emotional relation-
ships and social values, and through a consistent attitude toward cultural differences. The ends we are so eager to serve can, I believe, be achieved when the study of foreign literature embodies such a critically comparative approach, based on the democratic system of values.

A Postwar Program for the Remedial-English Student

GILBERT L. BOND

Since the remedial-English student will be with us for some time to come, we may just as well accept him. Already more and more universities and colleges, the state-supported ones in particular, have been forced to re-evaluate their English-composition programs and to institute extensive remedial-English courses for the inadequately prepared freshman. Moreover, the influx of veterans into the universities certainly will underscore several times the need for remedial English. Many of the students taking advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights will not make a satisfactory mark on an English placement test, even though they could have done so immediately after graduation from high school. The writer's recent study of opportunities for college training for veterans who have not completed high school revealed that thirteen of the twenty New England colleges and universities contacted have admitted worthy veterans who lack high-school diplomas. Although these veterans have done acceptable work in most cases, a frequent comment was that their greatest weakness is in the field of English.

The government has provided the guidance programs, and the G.I. Bill of Rights the opportunities, but legislation cannot carry out the intended objectives. The answer lies in the institutions themselves. The more mature veteran enrolled in college will show a manifest impatience and lack of sympathy with the inelasticity in academic machinery relating to required courses, prerequisites, and the like. This student will never accept remedial English on a non-credit basis. According to the best estimates, 7 per cent of the men and women who have been in the service will enter college on a full-time basis. Certainly we are going to show these veterans every consideration consistent with educational purposes.

Many educators will agree with the objectives; but they will immediately question the success of such an English program on the college level. Many colleges had to grasp the nettles of remedial English long before the return of veterans. Let us examine remedial English in a few of our institutions of

1 Special instructor in English, Simmons College, Boston, Mass.

2 The Educational Services programs of the Army and the Navy have encouraged many servicemen to complete interrupted high-school training and to get started on university correspondence courses through the U.S. Armed Forces Institute at Madison, Wisconsin. Through this program, men qualified in educational and vocational guidance have done much to help the returning veteran prepare himself as adequately as possible for college training. The writer, while stationed at the U.S. Naval Hospital at New Orleans, conducted a course in review English grammar for Navy personnel who expected to enter college upon discharge.