

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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## The Teaching of World Literature

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE

at the University of Wisconsin

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## FOREWORD

In the spring of 1958, the Department of Comparative Literature of the University of Wisconsin began to explore the possibility of a conference in Madison on the teaching of world literature, particularly in introductory courses in large universities. Colleagues in neighboring institutions gave warm encouragement, and administrative officials of the University of Wisconsin lent their generous support. The conference, which took place at the end of April, 1959, was attended by close to 40 staff members of major midwestern universities, including several directors of courses and programs in literature in translation. The papers here collected constitute the program of the two-day sessions.

The editor and his colleagues are deeply appreciative of the contributions of all who participated in our program, not only through the presentation of papers, but in the lively discussion periods which followed. We are especially grateful to the Director and staff of the Wisconsin Center, where our meetings took place, and to the Humanistic Foundation of the University of Wisconsin (H. L. Smith Bequest).

H. M. B.

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not to be made over in our image but to be understood and to be accommodated. It always seems to me that there should have been a Fifth Freedom—Freedom from Contempt which comes with ignorance. There are many movements to remedy this myopia, this ignorance, especially in academic circles; courses in non-western civilizations and in area studies of India, Japan, China, Arabia, South-east Asia, are being offered; the languages of these countries are being studied (we at Wisconsin, have had the Chinese language for several years, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, and this next year a modern Indian language is being added, Hindi); many new translations of materials have been made and many more are needed; library acquisitions in these areas are increasing but never rapidly enough to satisfy the demands; efforts are being exerted toward establishing a requirement that every secondary school teacher must have contact with a non-western culture; or, beyond that, that this contact become a requirement for an undergraduate major, as it is now at the University of Chicago. Organizations, conferences, institutes, workshops and summer courses have increased rapidly in the last ten years. In 1957 there were some 10 summer course programs offered, while last year the Asia Society published a list of 21. The many journals, some entirely devoted to Asian studies, and others that have welcomed contributions, are a part of this expanding picture. If you are an "outsider" to this, just glance through the issues of *Literature—East and West* which came into existence in 1954 and note the conferences, digests of papers read, books reviewed, library lists of basic books in the area, information about films available and many other services, and you will be astonished at the activity. Yes, today is different, for a beginning has been made, but the numbers reached are still very small and a large majority of college students graduate without having made any contact with a very large half of the world.

The area programs seem to have as their aim the preparation of the specialist who will make this field a life-time work, either as a teacher or a research worker, or as an international relations expert useful to the government. If, as a non-specialist, you have ever attended any of the conferences on Asian studies and heard each specialist within his area—archaeology, anthropology, geography, linguistics, history, government, philosophy, art, literature—speak feelingly for the necessity of his subject

in any balanced view, if you have noted the demand for a knowledge of the language or languages (and if possible residence in the foreign country) as a *sine qua non*, you have no doubt come away with a feeling that entrance into this vast and complex unknown is a complete impossibility and that there is no place for the "enthusiastic amateur" who, though he does have a thorough discipline such as literature, has not become an "orientalist". Yet how many of you hesitate to teach a Russian novel, or a Greek drama or the Book of Job because you are not an expert in the original language? How many of those with a knowledge of the language are also skilled in literary interpretation? True, many of the specialists in Asian Studies turn to literature for their evidence, for their source material, but they fragment it for their own purposes, and do not interpret it as a whole. The great value of these programs is obvious, but the necessity for reaching the large majority of students seems to demand many other courses by way of introduction. These introductory courses may stimulate the student to study the language, to continue in one of these areas and become a specialist; or they may be the only contact the student will ever have. Most major universities are offering some such courses. We at Wisconsin offer five courses in History, several courses in Chinese and Japanese art, courses in geography, in political science, sociology and anthropology, a course in religions, east and west, Chinese literature in translation—in fact a large enough group to have established an Asian Studies major for undergraduates and a minor for graduate studies, operating under a committee.

Obviously our question here today is, what contribution can Comparative Literature make to this problem? Perhaps we can suggest that the special forte of courses in Comparative Literature is the enlargement of the reader's perspective by what I like to call the cumulative method. What is this? It is the drawing together of books of similar genres, or similar subject matter, or those illustrating some theme or some literary movement, or any of the other problems related to literature. It involves cutting across national lines, language barriers, time boundaries or epochs. As each new book is added and comparisons and contrasts are explored there emerges in fuller perspective an understanding of that genre of epic, or that subject matter of heroism, or that theme of self-revelation or that view

of romanticism. Non-western books increase this total cumulative discovery and often add new facets. These books must be carefully studied, not to erase or minimize differences, but to understand their cultural slant and their distinctive qualities. The reader is thus encouraged to broaden the base of his judgments and criticism, and though he may not, by taste or temperament, immediately enjoy a work, he may come to understand why it did appeal to its audience and to the generation that followed.

Again, because we assume this role of a broad approach we can choose the important books, the "living books", those that have survived the ravages of time and been cherished by later generations. These are even more sharply defined in the East than in the West and their continuous power has been more obvious. We do not need to defend them, we explore them to discover what the source of their power is, to enjoy them and even to be inspired.

Perhaps we can say on a basic level that literature contributes more directly to the understanding of people than the other disciplines, such as history, which is the objective recording of external details and events; or such as philosophy, which concentrates on abstract formulas of what man's relation is to the universe and to his fellow man. Literature presents life in an immediate and intimate way, as it reveals the hopes and disillusionments, the joys and sorrows. It presents human experience, intensified, clarified, interpreted, in fragments or in some total vision of life, which preserve it in such a way that those who hear or read are forever satisfied. It is the revelation of this inner spirit which unites humanity, even while it reveals its infinite variety, that gives a higher dimension to existence.

Today we are suspicious about characterizing a people, whether we define them as an ethnic group or a national group or a cultural group, and we resent the generalities that are often pointed at us. Because of the great complexity of our own country, we might also question whether our present day literature is any clue to our character. But in dealing with early stages of cultures, cultures still living, we see our own as coming from Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem, and the great books which preserved it we present in our courses in the Western tradition. In the same way, the great books of the East preserve those

early cultures and give some clues to an understanding of them today. Jawaharlal Nehru comments on the importance of the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, to the people of India:

I do not know of any book anywhere which has exercised such a continuous and pervasive influence on the mass mind as these two. Dating back to remote antiquity, they are still a living force in the life of the Indian people . . . They make us understand somewhat the secret of the old Indians in holding together a variegated society divided up in many ways and graded in castes, in harmonizing their discords, and giving them a common background of heroic tradition and ethical living. (Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 90)

Thus, in exploring these books, although we may not be "orientalists" we feel that with our general knowledge of literatures and our comparative approach we can introduce the East within the perspective of the West, arouse a respect for the traditions of the East, erase some of the contempt that stems from ignorance, and promote a larger tolerance. In this way these books may become a "spiritual bridge over dividing mountains."

Most world literature courses are designed to offer a well-balanced diet, both in relation to their materials and their staff. Any suggestion of adding oriental literature may seem to be adding the unnecessary dessert. I will admit that at times the literature of the Orient can seem like its foods—highly spiced, exotic, with strange flavors—but they are usually concocted on the basis of staples with which we are quite familiar, just as is their literature. It is quite possible, however, to come out with literary indigestion if an indiscriminate number of fragments from many literatures, such as Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, are incorporated without some educating of tastes. One or two books from one culture that can be adapted into the general organization of a course and given their proper focus are much to be preferred to the "cafeteria" approach.

It seems to me that our experience here at Wisconsin has been atypical. From the time of the establishment of the Department of Comparative Literature in 1926, when courses were organized leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees, oriental literature has been a part of those courses. Dr. Philo M. Buck, who established the department, was a representative of the East and the West. The first sixteen years of his life were spent in India, where he acquired a dual education in the classics and mathematics of the English curriculum and the history and lit-

eratures of India. His deep sympathies and understanding for this early home bred in him a world point of view. In almost every course Indian literature was introduced, then Chinese and later some Japanese. Our *Anthology of World Literature* in its first edition in the '30's included a large section on Indian literature with a few selections from the Persian and Egyptian. For all of us who inherited or acquired this background there was the pleasure in the new subject matter, the illuminating insights of the master teacher, the impetus to explore more fully, and the delight in comparison and contrast. Shakuntala and Sita took their places beside Helen and Dido, Deirdre and Nicolette as superb feminine characters, understandable, universally human, while at the same time they revealed the differing role of women in their specific cultures. Epic, novel, drama, autobiography, contemporary literature, all these areas of study were eventually to draw upon their representatives from the East. Thus we have not had the problem of unfamiliarity nor the feeling of necessity to justify the place of these materials in the curriculum.

In our experience it has been the students who have provided the best test of this material, who have brought the greatest sense of reward. The graduates usually find fault with the translations, but they enjoy trying out their analytical powers on the philosophical works. With their tools for literary study, their sensitivity to expression, and their breadth of background, they can approach these works from many points of view and with many insights. Their future teaching will never be free from their contact with these materials and many of them report back to us about the courses they have established. For the undergraduate there is a variety of response; from puzzlement to great delight, from disagreement with the philosophy to awakened interest to a realization of its universal qualities, from the realistic questioning to the sentimental approval. You can be sure it will arouse their minds and promote a certain sense of freedom in discussion. They can be thoroughly objective about these books and find it less difficult to discuss the *Bhagavat-Gita*, the *Analects* or the *Tao-to-ching* than the literature of the Old Testament or of ancient Greece. You will discover that they are more interested in looking for wisdom and humanity in what they read than in the beauty of expression or the structure of the work or its sources, even though we do not neglect these

matters in our presentation. The sensitive and intelligent student of literature may continue to pursue these more detailed studies, but for the average undergraduate, what he reads becomes a sounding-board for his own ideas and, if his prejudices are not too deep, for an expansion and even clarification of his own thinking. Thus he might be fulfilling in some way Goethe's comment: "If we go back in history, we find at every point personalities with whom we agree and others with whom we could certainly be at variance. But the most important element is after all co-existence, because it is reflected most clearly in us and we in it." (Strich, p. 12). Or to bring these remarks back into the focus of non-Western literature, the words of Tagore, seem appropriate. "Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger."

\* \* \* \* \*

What do we teach in world literature, when do we teach it and how do we teach it? We teach a graduate seminar titled The World's Classics, which has been set up for those who are taking their minors in Comparative Literature, and with those participating coming from many departments: English, French, Spanish, German, Speech, Library Science. In addition, we offer a course open to undergraduates of at least sophomore standing, entitled "Books that have made Civilization" (with its emphasis on cultures, not civilizations!) which is just another term for great books or the masterpieces of world literature. In the first semester we teach books representing five parallel cultures that were evolving in the centuries before Christ: Greece, Rome, India, China, and the Near-East. In the graduate seminar complete texts were read, while in the undergraduate course our *Anthology of World Literature* is used, supplemented by several paperbacks. The chief emphasis in India is the *Bhagavad-gita*, the *Shakuntala* and selections from the epics. From China we read the texts of Confucius' *Analects*, Laotse's *Tao-te-ching* and a drama, *The Sorrows of Han*. The graduate class also reads the full text of the *Compassionate Buddha*. In the second semester of the graduate seminar, a two hour session is devoted to Tagore's works. We use many study aids, including one based on the *Anthology*, and further supplementary materials to guide the students in reading the drama and studying the *Gita*. We also have the NAEB

tape-recordings of Alan Watts' lectures on "The Great Books of Asia"; we have a tape-recording of Tagore's drama, *Chitra*, prepared by our WHA players; we also have access to a large number of slides of Indian art and movies of Chinese art but seldom have time to use them. Perhaps the most valuable aids that we offer are the discussion groups—the two lectures a week are followed by a discussion period where the students meet in small groups and have the opportunity for active participation. Our special course devoted to the "Legendary Literatures of Asia" offers the opportunity to concentrate on the literatures of India, China, and Japan. The total plan may look appalling to you (and may give you that literary indigestion just from looking at it) but it has proved very satisfying, if we may judge from the work that has been done by the classes and the projects which they have pursued. The calendars are full of suggestions for extensive reading, not for the course alone, but for *future* reading!!

Introductory courses in Oriental literature are bound to grow, and more and more fine texts are being made available in paperback form. Without neglecting the traditional role of the study of our European cultural heritage, we must make increased efforts to present the richness and variety of non-western literatures to our students.

## ON DEFINING THE HUMANITIES

H. V. S. OGDEN

*University of Michigan*

To begin with, we ought to ask, I think, why bother with defining the humanities? Aren't we like the small boy who planted some seeds and dug them up a few days later to see how they were doing? Or like Rasselas, the Prince of Abyssinia, who according to the sage Imlac, while making the choice of life, neglected to live? At any rate, before we plunge into what may turn out to be a Serbonian bog where armies whole have sunk, let us ask what gain there is likely to be from an exploration of the complex concept which we name "the humanities". I can think of four ready motives for undertaking this exploration. The first arises from the sense that the humanities are under attack, that modern culture, especially American culture is profoundly antithetic to the humanities, that the social sciences are pushing us out of our cultural heritage, and that since the Russians launched the first Sputnik, the humanities are being overwhelmed by the pressures of natural science and national defense. This point of view has recently been developed in a brilliant address by Mark Schorer entitled "The Harrassed Humanities" published last March in *College and Research Libraries*, XX (March, 1959), pages 101 - 110 and 134. It is stated more fully in Howard Mumford Jones' new book, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States* (Harcourt, Brace, & Co.: New York, 1959). Both Schorer and Jones make much of the plain fact that the humanities are not supported adequately, either by universities or foundations or government agencies. For example, Mr. Jones points out that for the year 1958 the ACLS was able to budget for research in the humanities only 1/280 of the amount that the National Science Foundation budgeted for science. There can be no doubt but that Mr. Jones is right about this, that the humanities are in fact inadequately nourished in our society. A commercial jet pilot is paid three times what a humanities professor at a good university is paid, five times what a professor at a small private college is likely to get. It follows that we would do well to explore the meaning of the term *humanities*, and describe the nature and goals of humane study precisely in order to convince the