

“East and West” and the Concept of Literature¹

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Summary:

By carefully comparing observations made by specialists in Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western literature concerning problems of literary values, canon-formation, and the concept of literature itself, the author tries to answer some of the most pertinent questions in comparative aesthetics and ethno-poetics, specifically:

Are literatures of radically different cultures comparable regarding **literary values**?- Do “universal” literary values exist?- Do literary values remain the same within the development of *one* culture?- Does the fact that certain works of literature have been valued over centuries indicate that “eternal values” exist?-

Is the **concept of literature** the same in radically different cultures?- Does it remain the same within the development of *one* culture?- Are the basic genres (the lyric, epic, and dramatic) comparable?- Are certain analogous phenomena in Indian and Western literature indicative of basic similarities between these literatures?-

Is at least the **theory** deduced from these literatures similar?- Is a unified theory of literature desirable?- Are literary **canons** established mainly according to perceived aesthetic values in the selected works?-

If the answer to all of the questions above is NO, wherein lie the basic differences between Eastern and Western literatures?-

I

In a review of literature on the topic², Anthony C. Yu alerted us to recent attempts at applying Western critical vocabulary to Chinese literature. He defended this method. This makes us aware of **two possible perspectives for evaluating literature**, i.e., our present (mostly Western) one and a historical reconstruction of ways of viewing works that do not seem to fit our criteria.

We cannot take it for granted that such a “historically adequate” approach is at all possible for “comparative aesthetics” (Eliot Deutsch) or “ethnopoetics” (Tim Ingold). But even if it were, it would not enable us to explain *why* certain works of literature have been selected and passed on as exemplary, and others not. In some isolated cases, this central problem of canon-formation might be answered *historically*, if we know enough about the genesis and social surroundings of such works. But we will never be able to explain such choices and traditions with *aesthetic* criteria³, simply because in most cases the process of selection and tradition was not made according to such criteria⁴.

Most critics silently assume that all so called “masterworks” of literature in various cultures and periods have been selected based on more or less the same set of esthetical standards which are merely obscured by all kinds of circumstantial (“cultural”) ballast. Once freed of the latter, their “eternal and universal values” will shine in beautiful self-evidence. - The comparatist experience should teach us precisely the opposite: Firstly, that “masterworks” have not been selected mainly according to esthetic standards, and secondly, that such standards are in any case not the same for sufficiently remote cultures. They even vary *within* such cultures.

What do we mean by “sufficiently remote” cultures? We mean precisely those cultures that had *not yet* reached the stage of mutual interaction, exchange, and influence that was meant by Goethe when he coined in 1827 his concept of “World Literature”⁵. As Horst Steinmetz has correctly established, Goethe “meant predominantly European literature” with his concept, not a list of “great books,” comprising Arab, Chinese, Indian, Japanese or Persian ones, as would be taught nowadays at an American college. “World literature is, as a product of economical, historical, and intellectual development, primarily to be defined as a literature which transgresses and wants to transgress national and linguistic barriers from the outset. However, it does not do that because it excels in special literary or other qualities but rather primarily because it reacts to situations in life which increasingly resemble each other, in spite of differing national environments, especially in the so-called capitalist countries.”⁶

We might just as well say: "sufficiently remote" cultures are those before (or outside) the Western domination in the colonial period. Certainly, there were also other kinds of "cultural colonialism" besides the Western one, e.g., that of the Arab culture in Mogul India and of the Chinese in all of its "satellite states." - But we are accustomed to distinguishing these "cultural spheres" as a whole, while we are not always aware of the far reach of our own cultural influence. Therefore, we tend to "universalize" our own cultural values.

To complicate matters, we also have to be careful about which *stages of development* of various cultures we compare. It seems to make sense to only compare literatures of a comparable period. But who is to decide which periods are roughly comparable? When Germany, after the confessional wars, made a first attempt at developing a kind of "national literature," the Indian "classicism" was long over. When in China the four great lyric poets of the T'ang period wrote their masterworks, the tribes of the Germanic migrations were merely dreaming of unifying into a united "Reich." Already in the 7th century, the library of the Chinese emperor contained 370 000 scrolls, while two centuries later, in the 9th century, one of the largest collections of the Occident, belonging to the monastery of St Gallen, could only boast of four hundred volumes.

II

It is not only the quality of esthetical standards that varies widely in different cultures, and within these cultures in various stages of development of these cultures, it is the concept of literature itself, which has to be examined comparatively. We have to ask: What makes (or since when is) literature "literature" in our sense of the concept? The same critics that assume a universal validity of aesthetic standards in all cultures usually also assume that the concept of "literature" means more or less the same wherever we look.

However, Wollhart Heinrichs points to the "surprising fact that in classical Arabic there is no comparable concept to 'literature'" and that "while the concept 'literature' in a Western context immediately evokes the popular

trinity of epic, lyrical, dramatic, its application to the Arabic high literature yields two deficits (epic and drama), which leaves the third category not particularly effective."

Not only do variants in its sub-groups cause the concept "literature" to fluctuate, so also do the different meanings it receives from its social embedding. There are various stages of the latter to be observed which Rudolf Arnheim describes well: "In early societies, performers and art makers are so closely integrated in the community that their motivational objectives coincide with those of the group. At first, there may be no distinction between those who supply the arts and those who consume them. Performances of dances and other ceremonies are shared by all for a common purpose, and craft work is contributed by everyone. Even when the arts become specialities reserved for certain individuals, there is in early societies no noticeable distinction between the objectives of the artists and those of the community. Only in ages of individualism such as that of the Renaissance in the Western world do artists cease to be employed artisans like bricklayers or shoemakers and develop their own aesthetic values, which must try to cope with those of monarchal and ecclesiastical princes using their services. In the nineteenth century, the artist, detached from the give-and-take of well-functioning social relations, is typified by isolated loners pursuing their own standard and taste, which more often than not are not shared by the public."- The situation first described might have been part of the fascination that, for example, the island of Bali exerted on anthropologists and especially artists.

While Arnheim writes about art in general, Terry Eagleton⁸ concentrates on literature only, and at the same time tackles the question of whether aesthetic values are "universal" or "culturally relative." He recommends dropping once and for all the idea of "literature" as an eternal and immutable category. Anything can be literature and everything that is now seen as indisputably literature might one day not be so any longer. The reason lies in the changeability of value judgements, meaning that the so-called 'literary canon' has to be recognized as a construct, which has been built by certain people in a certain time for certain reasons. According to him, a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself independently of

what anyone has said or will say about it does not exist. 'Value' is a transitive concept: it always means what certain people in specific situations according to certain criteria and in light of certain intentions value highly. The fact that we interpret certain works always to a degree in the light of our own interests - we can, in fact, do nothing else - could be one of the reasons why certain works kept their value over the centuries. It may be that our appreciation does not relate to the 'same' work, even though we may think so. 'Our' Homer is neither identical with the Homer of the middle ages, nor is 'our' Shakespeare the one of his contemporaries; various historical periods have constructed a different Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes and found in their texts elements of various value, even though these texts were not necessarily the same.-

This last view is not entirely new. It expresses what Goethe called the "incommensurable" of great poetry. It enables different readers of different times to read different things "out of" (or "into") great works. According to Ingarden, each individual reader has to (re)create the "aesthetic object" by "filling in" the "points of indeterminacy" in the "artistic object." Homer's *Iliad* (the art object) is not the same as our experience of it (the aesthetic object). Our value judgements can only be focused on *aesthetic* objects (our experience of works) and not on artistic objects. The former change, together with our tastes and with our cultural sensibilities and expectations.

Arnheim and Eagleton are not the only ones who have shown us that different periods within the European cultural sphere completely differed in their artistic ideas and ideals. Karl Aschenbrenner maintains the same opinion, mainly in respect to music, but it can easily be transferred to literature. He regrets that in "our ecumenical age" everyone tries to appreciate everything, and asks whether this "esthetical use" of many things does not inevitably lead to their misuse. He suggests that we should rethink whether our devotion to pure art celebrated since the Renaissance is the only way we can satisfy our "aesthetic instincts." According to him, we do not have to wait for Marxists to ask ourselves whether the only flag under which art should sail is *L'art pour l'art*.

Similarly Ulrich Weisstein: "Whether literature is art in the narrow sense of the word may remain unanswered. In late antiquity, as well as in the Middle Ages, it was certainly not an independent, free art, but rather remained tied to the 'artes' of the trivium (the basic academic disciplines) of grammar, dialectics and rhetorics."

Rosario Assunto begins his book on *The Theory of Beauty in the Middle Ages* with the question of whether one can speak of a medieval aesthetics at all: "Talking about medieval *aesthetics* we commit an error in using this concept in the strict sense of the word. Medieval thinking does not know yet the combination of the concepts of perception, art, and beauty on which we base the terminus *aesthetics* since Baumgarten. And even less the idea of art as a subjective human creation. What we now call a work of art was for the Middle Ages a thing created for a useful purpose. It did not represent a category of its own merit, qualitatively differing from dresses, tools or weapons (15ff). The *moral meaning* of a work of art roughly corresponds to what we would call now its *promotional* appeal. Its *allegorical* character by which it becomes a metaphor we would call its *didactical* nature. The difference to our present concept lies in the fact that we consider it to be a deficiency if a work of art is promotional or didactical. At least we pass these qualities in silence when we evaluate a work of art. In the Middle Ages, it was just the opposite."⁽²¹⁾

Assunto also indicates that the medieval thinkers principally differentiated between the concepts of the *Beautiful* and *Art*, quite in contrast to the Renaissance. - By recommending again a strict differentiation between these two concepts (see my articles, 1990, 1998, and 2000), we only return to the old and proven.

Finally, we should ask ourselves, in accord with the comparatist Jean Weisgerber, "not only whether a unified theory of literature is possible but also whether it is to be wished for. Are universal categories relevant and accurate enough to describe particulars? Theories may be so abstract as to lose all contact with empirical reality, 'over-abstraction' is sometimes of no avail."

III

Still, and this is the amazing and seemingly contradictory observation we cannot deny, we *do* find in the older Eastern cultures many **analogous tendencies** to some of ours - that is, if we look long enough⁹. - We read, for example, with surprise about a Chinese scholar-writer in the 16th century¹⁰ who (like Herder and young Goethe in Western settings) collected folk songs and even valued them more highly than the artful poems of his colleagues because of their simplicity of language and sincerity of emotions. This, however, was the exception to the rule, as we shall see later -

In **Indian aesthetics**, W. Chaudhury has gone farthest in equating Indian with Western criteria of "poeticity." He compared (1956) the theory of *rasa* (to be translated as "moods") which was first laid out by the mythic Brahman sage Bharata before the 3rd century with Aristotle's concept of *catharsis* in regards to their psychological effect on the viewer. Later, he tried to demonstrate that Kant's category of *disinterested pleasure*¹¹ as well as his definition of *taste* were not new. It is especially interesting for us that Bharata advocated the opinion that all psychological formation has to be subordinated to one main emotional impact, a view that was held by Aristotle for the tragedy.

Even the "autonomous" mode of existence of poetry is hinted at when in *rasa*-theory two kinds of emotions are differentiated, private ones (related to the poet's life) and general or fictitious ones, which are supposed to be the true material of poetry.-

Also the theory of *empathy*, as worked out by Theodor Lipps and Volkelt, had its precursors and in India was partially explained with the *deja-vu phenomenon* stemming from prior incarnations. Even for Lukacs's understanding of the *typical* and the *exemplary* there are analogies in early Indian theory.

The function of Ingarden's *spots of indeterminacy* (*Unbestimmtheitsstellen*) were anticipated when the evocative character of good poetry was stressed again and again. The soul of good poetry is supposed to be the unspoken. An interesting anticipation of our "thoroughly modern" *poetics of deviation* (*Abweichungspoetik*) can be found already around 600 AD in the thoughts of Bhamaha.- The concept of beauty as defined by the

last great theoretician of poetics, Jagannatha (17th century), is again strangely similar to that of Kant.

We have to keep in mind, however, that most of the above mentioned criteria are not evaluative ones. They apply to "kitsch" just as well as to "high literature." They do not help us much for establishing generally valid criteria for evaluating literature. It is the weighting or relative dominance of such criteria within their own traditions which matters.

IV

For a balanced picture we need to emphasize characteristic **differences between East and West**. To stay with Indian poetics, again and again Western naturalism is rejected. The Indian authority on aesthetics, Coowarasmany: "We may say indeed, that whenever, if ever, Oriental art reproduces evanescent appearances, textures, or anatomical construction with literal accuracy, this is merely incidental, and represents the least significant part of the work. Because theology was the dominant intellectual passion of the race, oriental art is largely dominated by theology. Oriental art is not concerned with Nature, but with the nature of Nature; in this respect it is nearer to science than to our modern ideas about art. Where modern science uses names and algebraic formulas in establishing its hierarchy of forces, the East has attempted to express its understanding of life by means of precise visual symbols. In this constant reference to types of activity, Oriental art differs essentially from Greek art and its prolongations in Europe."

Helmut von Glasenapp¹² stresses, that "the classical poetry of the Indians is a learned one, which presupposes as a condition of its appreciation knowledge of certain rules." In a survey of the main teachings of Indian critics he makes it evident that they concentrate on stylistic differentiations, which far surpass those of European rhetorics (we shall later see that this does not apply to Japanese criticism). Herrmann Jacobi's¹³ still unsurpassed description, dating from 1910, equally stresses the "scholastic and dialectical character" of all of Indian scholarly literature (and with it of literary criticism) and the tendency of Indian scholars towards abstract conceptualization. We hear the same from a modern specialist, Helmut Hoffmann: "For Indian literature it has to be considered as typical that the borderlines between

poetic and scholarly literature remain indistinct. We are not allowed to project Western criteria on either if we do not want to miss the typical character of Indian creativity. The genres of the novel, poetry, and the art epic have in common that they all have to be counted to scholarly literature. The lyrical 'cry from the heart' [Urlaut], as we expect it in the West from true poetry since Goethe, is unknown in India. Fixed clichéd descriptions are indispensable." And in regards to the theater, he says: "It must not be overlooked how little 'dramatic' in the Western sense Indian theater is. Tragedy is unknown and in our terminology we should rather call Indian plays libretti (which, by the way, also applies to Chinese plays)... V Chinese drama, which rather should be called "operetta" (or "Singspiel" in German) developed in the 12th century; the novel in the 14th. Both were discussed in early theoretical treatises as fictitious narratives. The first theoretical treatment of plays is especially interested in the sung interludes and their presentation (Dolezelova-Velingerova). Chinese Ming-dynasty novels were roughly contemporary with German Baroque novels. Both types were written in highly developed cultures, if ever so different ones. Willy R. Berger expresses his scepticism of fruitful comparisons in the following manner: "As much as we wish to agree with Etiemble's exhortations that Comparative Literature should push beyond mere registration of historical connections towards an esthetical analysis of comparable works, we still have to doubt that a comparison between a Chinese novel of the Ming-dynasty and a European novel of the Baroque period can yield anything besides those abstract 'conditions sine qua non du poeme' which equal the Platonic detachment and ubiquity of Staiger's basic concepts." Günther Debon repeatedly stresses the "high value, which was always put on lyrical poetry in China, quite in contrast to Europe where the epic poem and drama occupied the first place." - Again it is the *historical* dimension of literary appreciation which is being brought to our attention. - Debon characterizes Chinese lyrical poetry in the following manner: "What we consider to be typically Chinese, a predominantly this-worldly orientation, a rational and moderate attitude, inspired by subserviency to father, mother, and the ancestors, obliged to the emperor, nevertheless peace-loving; and, as far as form is concerned, measured and leaning towards symmetry. Next to Confucianism (until 1911)

Indian Buddhism shaped Chinese literature decisively (from the 3rd to the 9th century) and especially - so to say as mystical antidote to rational Confucianism - Taoism: While the scholar-official was officially Confucian, his secret affection often was Taoism." One reason why poetry was valued more highly than the novel or play is the appreciation of the former as a direct personal expression of the poet, a member of the elite, based on real experience. Debon stresses that "literary activity until recently remained a privilege of a small elite, since the system of writing required the mastery of about nine thousand different signs . Popular poetry was only from time to time written down. For that reason, our knowledge of this kind of literature is based on a very small amount of tradition, and what we know has been imprinted by the spirit of the elite." - It is in the light of these observations of a true connoisseur that we should view the previously mentioned isolated incidence of a 16th century scholar interested in folklore.- Especially in regards to the style of scholarly treatises of literature before the influence of Western criticism, Van Zoeren writes: "The language of criticism was allusive and metaphorical, and critics combined a passion for key terms with an almost total disinterest in the problem of their definition. Instead, writers on literature assumed a complex web of continuities and analogies between and within the natural and social/cultural worlds that worked to subvert and evade analytic distinctions." However, in regards to the practical effect of literature, he adds: "The belief that poetry and literature generally had powerful pragmatic powers - and thus an important moral and political dimension - continued as a mainstay of traditional criticism over the next 20 centuries and survives today." A similar description would apply to Japanese criticism, as will be illustrated below.

IV

What can we say about **Japanese aesthetic theory** before the Meiji-reformation? A relatively new analysis of the Japanese concept of beauty, written by two Japanese (Isutzu, Toshihiko and Toyo), starts with the characteristic statement that the Japanese sense of beauty so radically differs from what is normally associated with aesthetic experience in the West that it affects us as mysterious, enigmatic or esoteric. According to Makoto Ueda and Yuriko Saito, the mood-qualities *sabi* (*sabishi*, lonely), *wabi* (the beauty

in/of poverty), *shiori* (compassion etc.), *hosomi* (sensitivity etc.), and others (like “inspired”) which Basho suggests for the *haiku* are supposed to have sprung from the tea ceremony for which there is no parallel in Europe. For that reason alone it is difficult for Westerners to emphasize with them. They are, moreover, so vaguely defined that even Japanese have problems in describing them satisfactorily and in delineating them from each other. They are certainly not suitable as *universal* values . The same applies to four more concepts which are supposed to relate more to *technical* aspects of Haiku-composition: *fragrance* (meant possibly as unity of mood), *resonance* (of emotion?), *reflection* (pensiveness?), and *lightness* (detachment from worldly concerns?). These are supposed to determine the relationship between parts of a poem. We might call them “emotional correspondences” (French “correspondances”), again qualities of mood, which cannot be defined and differentiated without difficulty. The attitude of “lightness,” which can include humor, is doubtlessly inspired by Zen-Buddhism as well as by Taoism and also for that reason not easily transferable to the West. Even more difficult to define are the value-concepts of Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443). This is especially true of his main ideal of *yugen* (Ueda, 1963: elegant, detached and subtle beauty with mystical overtones) which is supposed to be indefinable by language. That is why, since Zeami, the Japanese have been trying to illustrate its meaning with poetic imagery (falling cherry blossoms, etc.). It can be argued, of course, that stylized melancholy also can be found in other cultures. However, the Japanese concepts are especially hazy and completely dependent on their illustration (Ingarden might have said: “concretization”) and therefore not transferable to other cultures. The Japanese would be the first to reconfirm this (and to congratulate themselves of being so “unique”, comp. Nomura). Our understanding of Japanese aesthetic concepts is especially hampered by the fact that they are often applied differently from our way of using them. One of the most respected contemporary critics, Makoto Ueda, for example, tries to enlighten us about Zeami’s theory of *No*, which is supposed to be concentrated on three basic principles: “imitation, by which he meant representation of essences rather than surface mimicry” [therefore, we should not call it “imitation” but rather “symbolic representation” or something of that kind], “yugen, elegant beauty

with underlying implications of mystery and depth" [whatever that is supposed to mean. It is difficult for Westerners to associate "elegant beauty" with "mystery and depth"], "and 'the sublime', the highest type of theatrical effect, which he [Zeami] suggested by means of the image of the sun shining brightly at midnight." What is a Western scholar to do with such descriptions? This is only one example of many such doubly-obscured attempts at defining aesthetic phenomena, the first time by the original author, and the second time by its interpreter. We can only name a few additional concepts which are all equally unclear and unsatisfactorily defined: *aware* ("pathos"¹⁴), *sui* ("pure essence" in Ueda's translation), *iki* ("high spirit," both latter terms relating to metropolitan elegance in the Edo-period), *makoto* ("honesty") and *masuraoburi* ("masculinity"), *mono no aware* ("pathos of things" according to Ueda: "emotional identification with nature" according to Motori Norinaga, 1730-1801), the latter two ideals again developed in the Edo-period. It should not be overlooked that all of these concepts refer to the *content* of literature and not to its *form*. There are, of course, translations of European, especially German, concepts like *yubi* for beauty, *suko* for the sublime and *kaigyaku* for humor. But, according to F.Y. Nomura, "they are almost never used in traditional aesthetic writing."¹⁵ If we ignore separate key concepts and look for permanent tendencies in traditional Japanese aesthetics, the differences with the West become even more clear. Yuriko Saito described the typically Japanese predilection for the imperfect, the decaying, the impoverished and aging and half-hidden, which comes from the tea-cult and has no correspondence in the West: "The obscured moon, fallen cherry blossoms, and the end of a love affair are much more interesting to the imagination than if they were at the height of their condition." A preference for asymmetrical buildings and flower arrangements can be observed. The ceramist, Suzuki Aisaku, claims asymmetry (together with economical use of space) as the most important characteristic of Japanese art and explains it with the spirit of the tea-ceremony, which in turn is influenced by Zen: "Symmetry has a static character, while asymmetry confers the experience of dynamic movement. Zen-Buddhism brought the dynamic character into Japanese aesthetics. The central idea of Buddhism is 'emptiness'. According to this philosophy, things have no essence.

Everything is flowing. Things are only temporary composites of elements, which after a while form new composites. Zen-Buddhism essentially influenced the tea ceremony." These ideals contrast with those of the Chinese and with somewhat contemporary European buildings in the Renaissance and Baroque period. Only during the Bauhaus movement did the Germans develop an understanding for Japanese taste. One of the first to do so was the German architect Bruno Taut. Yanagi Soetsu, the propagator of the Japanese folk art movement (*mingei*) at the beginning of the last century, summarized his penchant for the "irregular," e.g., in tea-bowls, by saying "There is a little something left unaccounted for." We might call it the lovable touch of human imperfection as contrasted to the cold and impersonal perfection of the machine. Saito stresses that the propagators of this kind of aesthetics of the incomplete and imperfect themselves came from the socially privileged and highly cultured strata of society and that they could have well afforded to surround themselves with perfection had they wanted to do so. Perfection, however, bored them; and we cannot help but think of the insights of the "strata aesthetics" of a Nicolai Hartmann or Roman Ingarden who taught us, amongst other things, that we derive aesthetic stimulation precisely from "filling out spots of indeterminacy," which is almost as much as saying "completing in our mind the incomplete and imperfect." This is what we are doing when we read Japanese poems, especially *haikus*, which are still popular, or if we contemplate *sumie*, Japanese ink paintings. The word *yojo* "expresses the quality of a poem in which the words do not fully express the feeling which the poet wishes to express" (Debon 1984, 6). What these forms of "artistic minimalism," as Saito calls them, have in common, what their attraction consists of, and where their limitations lie, has been previously shown (Ruttkowski, 1977, 1989). Saito points out that "the possibility and effectiveness of indirect expression require some degree of culturally shared associations and allusions, such as cherry blossoms symbolizing transience and elegance or an autumn dusk evoking desolation and loneliness. Otherwise, the experience will simply result in frustration and disappointment." (548) Similar observations could be made in regards to emblems in Western Baroque poems.-

he relationship of the Japanese to nature as it is reflected in poems also differs from its Western counterpart. Nomura (716) even goes as far as saying that: "In Oriental arts nature seems more important than the human being." This certainly applies to Chinese literati paintings, in which minuscule human figures appear in the landscape. For Japan, Yuriko Saito points out correctly "The aspects of nature frequently praised for their aesthetic appeal are relatively small, intimate, tame, and friendly. Little appreciation is given to the gigantic, overpowering, frightening, or aloof. Secondly, nature is considered fundamentally identical to humans, and the sensuous expression of this identity becomes the object of aesthetic appreciation. One characteristic of the Japanese aesthetic appreciation is the fact that it lacks the experience of the sublime, which according to the Western theories of the eighteenth century, is typically invoked by overpowering, gigantic, or dangerous aspects of nature. Japanese aesthetic tradition aestheticizes the evanescence of natural phenomena. The impermanence of natural phenomena is appreciated as providing an analogy to human transience, and this affinity gives solace to the otherwise pessimistic outlook on life." This is also why in *haiku* the seasons play such an important role and the *haiku* has to hint at it, within its very limited amount of syllables, by means of the *kigo* (season word).

VII

One could assert that lyrical poetry is *known* to be untranslatable and, therefore, incomparable as far as its value is concerned because it is simply too strongly determined by and dependent on language. Japanese poetry, for example, has no rhyme (in contrast to Chinese¹⁶). But it has so many homophones that almost everything can be said with a "double-entendre" and often it can only be clarified with the help of the Chinese signs. How about the larger epic genres in which content is usually clarified by context?

In Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari* the Japanese have created a novelistic masterwork many centuries before the West. Edward Seidensticker, however, prefers to call it a "romance" and not a "novel," since he defines the former as "a story remote from the ordinary and centered upon remarkable events," and the latter as "a story of the familiar, even

commonplace, centered upon character." Elsewhere (53) he refers to "the lyricism of the *Genji*." - To my knowledge, works of the complexity and at the same time almost musical composition of the novels of a Thomas Mann have not been written in Japan up to now. Good Japanese novels impress us by atmospheric detail. Their plots, however, are comparatively loosely structured. They have, like old Japanese music, no real ending, at least for our sensibility. Inner development of their heroes is hardly ever shown, only vacillations in their momentary moods. If Prince Genji would have been immortal, his adventures could have been told over many more books.- How differently ends Wolfram's (roughly contemporary) *Parzival* with the achievement of attaining the holy grail and with it a cultural ideal. Edward Seidensticker (1982, 51) appropriately remarks: "Had Proust stopped writing somewhere along the way, we would have known it ... Whether or not the *Genji* is finished is among the problems that will be debated forever."

We can see in this loose structure of Japanese novels an anticipation of modern tendencies. Earl Miner writes: "A couple of decades ago, even 'modern Japanese novels' were thought strange in characterization, plot, and conclusion. Now, after readers have absorbed a good deal of recent Western fiction of the anti-novelistic kind, Japanese literature has become far easier to teach. The recent shift to antimimetic presumptions (Becket and Borges, for example) has seemed to fit in with the non-mimetic presumptions of Japanese literature. Before, the burden of proof was to show that Japanese literature was, indeed, literature; now, the need is to show that it is a literature different from the literature of the West.

Tanizaki Junichiro's *Makioka Sisters* also dismisses us with an open ending.- Kawabata's novels impress us mainly by descriptions of moods; in other words, by their lyrical components, not their composition. - Even Mishima Yukio's novels, which more than others emulate those of the West (viz. Mishima's admiration for Thomas Mann), often have unconvincing plots and strangely pale and sterile figures' / .- These admittedly superficial observations show that even in contemporary, equally developed and "Westernized" civilizations with different historical backgrounds literary values do not have to be the same. Just to mention a few more characteristic differences: there was no *tragedy* and no tragic experience, in the sense of

German Classicism, in Japanese literature until the Meiji-reform. Equally, no *comedy of character* in the sense of Moliere, no analogy to the *detective novel* or to the *novella*, just as there was no equivalent to *no*, *kabuki* or *haiku* in the West. To a certain degree we can explain historically or sociologically¹⁸ the absence of some kinds of emotional experience and their corresponding literary genres. But these differences have no relevance for the *evaluation* of national literatures.

VIII

What we said about epic genres in the East and West makes it clear that **unity** is an important value in Western literature. Unity can be primarily understood as "organic" (Aristotle¹⁹, Goethe) or as "structural" (esp. by *Prague Structuralism*, *New Criticism* and, in Germany after the last world war, by the school of *Immanente Interpretation*). For us, there is no contradiction between the "organic" and the "structural" view of unity.

First, we have to clarify that the expression "unified" only has aesthetic relevancy when it is being applied evaluatively. Otherwise, it could simply mean "uniform" or even "monotonous." According to Wolfgang Kayser, "(Ein)stimmigkeit" does not have to be without inner tension. Also Ingarden speaks of a "polyphony of values" as a precondition for a "great" work.

Consideration must also be given to *intended* disharmony (Wolfgang Kayser: "Stimmungsbruch")²⁰ which we can find, for example, in ironic poems by Heinrich Heine or occasionally already in Baroque poems²¹.

It is apparent that the criterion of unity is given much less, if any, consideration in non-Western literatures. We have just observed this in Japanese novels. Let us look now at Japanese theater, e.g., the plots of unabbreviated Kabuki-(melo-)drama. Here we can hardly speak of "drama" in the Western sense of the word. Kabuki is eminently "theatrical" (stage-effective), not, however, dramatic in the sense of Aristotle. Earl Miner reaffirms this with somewhat different words: "Japanese theatrical genres are experiences rather than dramatic texts."

The criterion of a dramatically concentrated plot with climactic structure - be it in a play or in some narrative genres, like the *novella* or the *detective story* -, can, of course, be justified psychologically: The subordination of all parts under one main theme serves concentration on the main impact of the work, which will be more powerful the less attention is taken away from it. Aristotle's famous "three unities" for tragedy were intended that way. And even though modern theatrical and cinematographic techniques could dispense with two of these, the unity of persons and of place, the most important one, of plot, was never abandoned in the West.

Does, however, the criterion of unity present a *universal* value? Isn't it rather a fact that viewers belonging to *our* cultural sphere experience it as value since it meets their specific psychological needs? And what are these needs? - Mainly for a surveillable order (disorder causes us discomfort, Freud would have an explanation) and for suspense (as modern creatures of an urban civilization we get easily-bored). These needs might also correspond to the rational character of our culture, which not only determines our science and technology but also our music and philosophy. - Should we see this as a *peculiarity* of our culture or as *value* which can be generalized? - In reality, it is *us*, after all, who project sense onto the world surrounding us. And not always do we succeed.²² - Paradoxically, it is *Western* literature that combined in the genre of classical drama an extremely *realistic way of representation* (stage design, technique of acting) with a *highly constructed plot*²³. We do not notice any longer the "artificial" and "unnatural" character of our conventional dramatic plots because we are used to them, just as the Edo-period Japanese were used to the stylized presentation of *kabuki*, the pre-revolution Chinese to the peculiar conventions of the *Peking-opera*, the southern Indians to those of the *katakali*, and the Turks before Ata Türk to those of the *karagöz*.

While traditional Western theater could claim *concentration on one main impact* as a reason for its high valuation of "unity," other traditional forms of theater could probably name *adherence to reality* as their artistic motivation. Life's incidences are rarely structured according to Gustav Freytag's pyramid-model. Unresolved relationships with "open endings" are the rule, and not the exception.

Especially in regards to the different forms of theater, we might generalize that stylization (even artificiality) is not a characteristic uniquely "Eastern." It rather is practiced in different domains. While in Eastern theater it is mainly the form of representation which is highly stylized, in Western drama it is the structuring of the plot. However, since our stage design as well as the makeup and acting technique of Western actors look "natural," we succumb to the illusion that it is the whole of Western theater which is supposed to be more realistic than Eastern theater.

IX

We observed some profound differences in Eastern and Western literature concerning the importance of "unity" and the use of realism, stylization, and plot structure. - Again: are there **pervading differences**, at least in the *traditional* literatures before "Westernization," which make evaluative comparisons *eo ipso* impossible?

Even those who wish to "consider the high cultures as principally of equal value" as Spengler or Toynbee did, can still, as Horst Rüdiger (139) or Alexander Rüstow do, maintain "that the history of Greek literature, on which Western literature is based to a large degree, stands as a unique testimony of the liberation from barbarity, superstition, feudalism and foreign domination." This commonly taken stance confirms our belief that the great literatures of this world can be compared "ethno-poetically," but not evaluatively²⁴.

This is in accord with Earl Miner and Jozsef Szili who saw the main difference between Western and Eastern literary theory in the fact that the former derived its concepts (since Plato and Aristotle) mainly from drama and therefore saw imitation as the main characteristic of literature. That is why initially Western literary theory could not differentiate lyrical poetry from narrative genres, and not even the kind of lyrical poetry which Greek tragedy at that time mainly consisted of. - Since literary theory of each culture can only derive its standards from its own literary genres, Greek poetics was philosophical and abstract, while the Chinese and Japanese poetics, which were derived from lyrical poetry, were "imagistic, lyrical, affective-expressive." According to Miner, "most critical systems of the world

developed by means of defining literature from lyrical poetry. The Greek system is unusual, probably unique, in that it derived from drama.”

György Lukacs describes the development of art as emancipation from religion and ‘allegory’ and reaches the conclusion that aesthetic *mimesis* never succeeded in the East as a lasting influence on the development of the arts. For Western poetics, imitation is the central concept, just as affectivism is the heart of Eastern literary theory. In the same way, the Indian scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy²⁵ repeatedly assures us that realism and naturalism never took roots in the East.

What about Indian poetics? Szili writes that what it has in common with Chinese poetics is that dramatic composition is absent in both. The problem of the dramatic form is not even mentioned. Besides, both accord the narrative catalogue, the chronicle, and the primitive essay an equal status with the lyrical genres and the old-Indian poetics treats poetic and didactical texts in the same way. Also, the earliest Chinese texts on poetics do not separate the realm of treatise, letter, speech, and chronicle from that of narrative and lyrical poetry.

All of this indicates again that our strict division of the three genres *lyric-epic-dramatic* (with the possible addition of a *didactic* or “audience-related” genre²⁶) was not made by non-Western literatures.

X

In regards to Western and Eastern **canon-formation**, Mihaly Szegedy-Maszak (132) states that “Canons may have been more static in non-Western cultures because in the Western world artistic developments were often a history of changing generations - at least since the Renaissance - whereas the Asiatic developments extended over greater stretches of time. A much more rigid patriarchal and despotic socio-political system may explain why canonicity played a more important role in Asian than in Western culture. *The classical anthology defined by Confucius*, a collection of 305 poems, which existed more or less in the present form even before Confucius, has been a canonized anthology for the past twenty centuries. With the possible exception of the Bible, there was no book in the Western world

which could exert such a profound influence on virtually all cultural products."²⁷ At another place (132), he states: "The conclusion is inescapable that a canon is a pragmatic concept and never an embodiment of immanent values."⁽¹⁵¹⁾

Günther Debon (1984,6) similarly remarks on the "continuity, founded in the respect for the old and traditional" as a characteristic of the East-Asian literatures. After all, Confucianism practically remained state religion up to the 20th century.²⁸ "The fight for renewal, be it in regards to form or to contents, always met much stronger resistance in the Far East than in the West." This means that traditions were preserved and kept alive because they were old and for that reason alone venerable. It is inconceivable that later centuries evaluated those venerable texts according to *esthetic* criteria.

XI

Aleida Assmann, in an important article, points to George Steiner's differentiation of "literary" and "cultural" texts, "which does not concern different groups of texts, but rather different ways of accessing possibly identical texts." In other words, we can see the same texts in two completely different ways, as "works of art" or as cultural documents. However, "the perspective on literature as autonomous or cultural texts is mutually exclusive."

Beginning with the invention of the printing press and with the post-medieval nationalization of cultures (in Germany with the establishment of Germanistik as an academic discipline between 1820 and 1840), "the differentiation of belletristic literature from the ensemble of cultural activities solidifies." Assmann speaks of an "emancipation of the domain of literature by means of aestheticizing and historicizing literary texts." We could also (with Max Weber) talk of an increasing specialization and "compartmentalization in societal disciplines with their own institutions, autonomous organization and dynamics of development."

According to Assmann "the idea of the autonomy of art begins with the Enlightenment. It develops out of the separation of the moral and aesthetic

