Imagology: History and method

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The tendency to attribute specific characteristics or even characters to different societies, races or ‘nations’ is very old and very widespread. The default value of humans’ contacts with different cultures seems to have been ethnocentric, in that anything that deviated from accustomed domestic patterns is ‘Othered’ as an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity. Such ethnocentric registrations of cultural difference have tended to stratify into a notion that, like persons, different nations each have their specific peculiarities and ‘character’ – although that term is itself historically more complex than one might think at first.

The informal, anecdotal belief in different national characters formed the unquestioned cognitive ambience of cultural criticism and reflection until the late eighteenth century. In the course of the nineteenth century it became embedded in the comparative-historical paradigm that dominated the human sciences. The twentieth century showed, first, an a-critical comparatist preoccupation with registering and describing the textual evidence of such national characterizations, and later an increasingly stringent disavowal of national essentialism and national determinism. This in turn was to lead to a deconstructive and critical analysis of the rhetoric of national characterization – the beginning of ‘imagology’ proper as pursued in the present volume. In what follows here, these historical developments will be outlined, and then followed by some reflections on the theoretical and methodological toolkit that is available to the present-day imagologist.

History

Imagology has its ‘archeology’ and its ‘pre-history’. The archeology leads us to the cultural criticism of early-modern Europe which began, in the tradition of Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558), to sort European cultural and societal patterns into national categories, thereby formalizing an older, informal tradition of attributing essential characteristics to certain national or ethnic groups. This classificatory urge of aligning cultural differences with ethnic stereotypes was to lead to the systematics of early-modern ethnography and anthropology as illustrated, for instance, by the Austrian Völkeraltabellen or ‘Tableau of Nationalities’ (Stanzel et al. 1999). This national-characterological systematization of ethnic stereotypes and anecdotal knowledge concerning ‘manners and customs’ was to remain intellectually
dominant into the Enlightenment – witness the national-psychological investment of Montesquieu’s *Esprit des lois*, of Hume’s essay “Of National Characters”, of Voltaire’s *Essai sur les moeurs* and even of Vico’s *Scienza nuova* (Hayman 1971). However, with the thought of Vico and even more with that of Johann Gottfried Herder, culture and cultural difference increasingly came to be seen, not as ethnographical phenomena, but as anthropological categories: as the patterns of behaviour in which ‘nations’ articulated their own, mutually different, responses to their diverse living conditions and collective experiences, and which in turn defined each nation’s individual identity.

Anti-Enlightenment cultural relativism, Herder-style, thus created an ethnic taxonomy which saw ‘nation’ and ‘culture’ as the natural and fundamental, mutually interdependent units of humanity. This led to the rise of the comparative method in the human sciences. We see its impact in anthropology, e.g. Humboldt’s *vergleichende Anthropologie* (in lieu of the older pattern which had held, in undifferentiated, universalist terms, that “the proper study of Mankind is Man”) and in language, where linguistic difference was thematized by the Humboldts, Schlegels and Grimms, who felt that each language was held to be the very breath of the nation’s soul, characteristic identity and individuality. The philology of Jacob Grimm extrapolated this ethnolinguistic identitarianism to literary history, which was held to contain a record of the nation’s collective imagination through the medium of its proper language. Jacob Grimm’s philology already used arguments of national character and national identity to address the problems of the *Stoffgeschichte* of widespread themes (e.g., animal fables like that of *Reynard the fox*) among different nations and language areas.

This brings us from the archeology into the pre-history of imagology. The philological departments in the new, nineteenth-century universities prototyped by Humboldt’s University of Berlin involved the twinning of linguistics and literary studies (*Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*, ‘Lang-and-Lit’); similarly, the rise of Comparative Linguistics triggered the idea of a Comparative Literature. In this scheme, philology was still, much as Giambattista Vico had originally defined it in his *Scienza nuova* of 1725, a study of the creative and poetic responses of nations to their historical circumstances, each expressive of that nation’s character; moreover, it was informed by the philosophy of Fichte and Hegel, which held that the individuality of a nation, more than a mere ‘character’ (i.e. a salient singularity in manners and customs), was in fact informed by a transcendent, spiritual principle, an ontologically autonomous *Volkgeist*. The new idea of national character thus stood in the same relation to society as that between soul and body; it was an unquestioned fundamental in the very taxonomy and differentiation between the various literatures which were studied separately by the ‘national philologies’, and in their mutual inter-
action by a ‘comparative’ extension to these national philologies. Culture was, unquestioningly, national culture, held a priori to be different from other cultures and singled out by the nation’s underlying characteristic individuality.

In this paradigm, the various stereotypes and assumptions concerning national peculiarities never form the topic of investigation, but always part of the interpretative tool-kit; they are explanations rather than explicanda. The literary criticism of mid-century scholars, inspired by the achievements of Comparative Linguistics, explain literary traditions from ethnic temperaments, which in turn are presented, in un-argued, a priori form as ‘received knowledge’ and common consensus, that is to say: on the basis of current stereotypes and images. The rise of literary history-writing (Wellek 1941; Spiering 1999) in these decades provides ample illustration: literature is seen first and foremost as the expression, through its proper language, of a specific nationality; the natural and proper taxonomy of literature is therefore by nationality and language (the two criteria were used interchangeably), and the historical meaning of literature lies in its way of manifesting and documenting the nation’s identity and its moral and aesthetic world-view. Literary history is thus a form of studying the nation’s true character as expressed in its cultural history. Needless to say, notion concerning the nation’s essence or character are wholly determined by ingrained and widely-current stereotypes and ethnic images.

This model culminated in the positivistic determinism formulated by Hippolyte Taine in the theoretical introduction to his Histoire de la littérature anglaise of 1863. Famously, Taine presented a cultural geometry in which a given cultural artefact (in concreto, a literary text) could be situated, characterized and understood with reference to three defining parameters: race, milieu and moment. All three of these had their own, un-argued presuppositions. Moment is not merely a date or a chronology but rather the ambience of a Hegelian-style Zeitgeist: texts breathe a ‘spirit of the age’, a climate or mentality which is held (on unspecified grounds) to be characteristic of the period, and which thus anchors the text in, and also instills it with, a particular, historically situated world-view. Milieu is explained by Taine in a similarly deterministic way: as the physical, geographical environment of which any given text must bear its traces. The prime manifestation of milieu is climatological (‘cold’, ‘temperate’ and ‘warm’ literatures), and thus invoked the entire array of stereotypes current in the long-standing climatological theory of cultural-temperamental difference (Zacharasiewicz 1977). Race, finally, speaks for itself: Taine unhesitatingly sees texts as co-determined in their literary characteristics by their authors’ physical ethnicity; the nature of the determination obviously invoking the presupposition that physical ethnicity entails specific moral and cultural particularities.
The extreme ethnic determinism as formulated by Taine provoked its own correctives. Ernest Renan, himself in his early years an adept of the positivistic-determinist school, was to abandon this mode of viewing culture and cultural difference, mainly because it had been used to justify the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine after 1871; he famously expressed, in his lecture *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation* of 1882, that nationality was not a fixed category within which human affairs took their course, but rather a set of human choices. The implication of this voluntaristic view was that nationality became a topic for historical rather than anthropological analysis. Accordingly we see that in literary criticism and in literary scholarship, the generation after Taine began to address cultural and national diversity in the literatures of Europe in a less ethnically-deterministic way—at least: outside Germany, where ethnic determinism remained in the ascendant in the triumphalist climate of the Wilhelminian Empire. Elsewhere, the turn away from ethnic chauvinism and ethnic determinism marks the beginning of Comparative Literature properly speaking, with early harbingers like Emile Hennquin, Joseph Texte (the first incumbent of a comparatist university chair), the Swiss Louis-Paul Betz and the Alsatian Fernand Baldensperger. Baldensperger, in 1913, expressed the new view as follows: “Une littérature exprime une nation, non parce-que celle-ci l’a produite, mais parce-que celle-ci l’a adoptée et admirée” (quoted Fischer 1981: 53).

While the notion of nationality and national character was historicized (originating from historically variable choices and circumstances rather than emanating from a transcendent, transhistorical category or determining principle), it was nevertheless still credited with an ontologically autonomous existence, as a ‘real’ thing pre-existing its articulation and persisting independently from it. This was reflected in the first generation of studies, which we may call ‘proto-imagological’, charting the representation of a given nation in literature. Such studies became popular in the first half of the twentieth century, not only in France, but also in Germany, in the United States, and elsewhere. They address topics such as ‘Frenchmen in Shakespeare’ or ‘Germans in Russian literature’. Frequently their approach is that of *Stoffgeschichte*, listing and tracing a given type of literary preoccupation from text to text across succeeding generations. *Stoffgeschichte* can address many such preoccupations or themes (lovers’ parting at dawn, incest, the Noble Savage, revenge, the dandy, Reynard the Fox), and a given national type can be chosen as just another such theme. At its worst, *Stoffgeschichte* is merely a thematic bibliographical track-record; at its best, it can trace changing fashions, poetics, literary attitudes and cultural values through the *fil conducteur* of a longitudinal theme across the centuries, with all its constants and variables (Beller 1986; Naupert 2004). But the thematicization of a given nationality as a literary theme in these decades implies, usually, two things: the nationality ‘really’ exists, to be represented
fairly or unfairly by authors according to those authors’ needs and capabilities; and such representations are a byproduct or reflection, rather than an underlying condition, of literature’s international traffic and contacts.

The value of such older studies for present-day readers varies. In many cases, their implied or overt ethnic essentialism can be disturbing to the point of unacceptability. Certainly, many German studies from the 1930s fall in this category. At the same time, they are often based on diligent and exhaustive source research and may still have bibliographic use, as a shortcut to the primary literary sources, quite apart from their own interpretations and ideological assumptions. More importantly, such studies often served to demonstrate the extreme variability of national stereotypes. Julián Juderías’s classic La leyenda negra of 1913 is a case in point. It was actuated by patriotic indignation at what the author considered the malicious misrepresentation of his nation at the hands of foreign authors; and as such it sins against contemporary standards in scholarship in a variety of ways: the nationally partizan motivation; the underlying, essentialist assumption that there are ‘false’ and by implication ‘proper’ ways of representing nations; the unquestioning acceptance of a division between Spain and the Others, and its anachronistic tendency to see this division in its 1913 state as a historical invariant. Nevertheless, Juderías’s study, appearing as it did when Spain enjoyed a romantic reputation (Mérimée’s and Bizet’s Carmen) strikingly advertised the fact that this country had enjoyed a totally different reputation in earlier centuries; which alerted readers and scholars to the extreme vacillations to which ‘national characters’ can be subject in their outside perception and representation. That the purportedly ‘phlegmatic’ and restrained English nation had in the eighteenth century been known for their choleric temper and suicidal tendencies was a similar surprise; and most famously, there was the case of the German image, which vacillated between the romantic one (a nation of poets and philosophers) and that of a technocratic, brutal nation of tyrants and ruthlessness.

The actual emergence of imagology as a critical study of national characterization could only take place after people had abandoned a belief in the ‘realness’ of national characters as explanatory models. Literary scholars finally reached this stage in the years following the Second World War. The confrontation with that perceived ‘Germany’ and its historical mood-swings, especially after the nadir of the Third Reich and the Second World War, provoked an anti-essentialist, constructivist approach to national representation and national identity. While Jean-Marie Carré’s Les écrivains français et le miroir allemand (1800-1940) of 1947 was still (understandably, perhaps) fed by anti-German national bias, such studies opened perspectives towards an imagology that in its method, if not in its subject-matter, would be post-national, trans-national. Carré’s pupil Guyard, in his
essay *L'étranger tel qu'on le voit* (1951), proposed this topic almost as the keystone for Comparative Literature: the study, not of nationality *per se*, but of nationality ‘as seen’, as a literary trope. In Guyard’s programme, the analysis of the representation was divorced from the (politically contentious and methodologically contaminating) reliance on a *representandum*. Nationality could be studied as a convention, a misunderstanding, a construct; something that resulted from its articulation as a *representamen*, which was brought into being by being formulated; something which could therefore be analysed in its subjectivity, variability and contradictions.

The 1950s, when Guyard’s programme was presented as a *domaine d’avenir* for Comparative Literature, were a propitious period for this type of approach, at least in Western Europe. German scholarship had gone through the very abyss of ethnically prejudiced pseudo-scholarship, and German scholars in particular (including those who had gone into exile) felt the urgent need to address the twin problem of racist thought and of their country’s tarnished reputation. In philosophy, both the Frankfurt School and Karl Popper’s *The open society and its enemies* thematized the need for scholars to debunk ethnic myth. In the French social sciences, the first stirring of a Lévi-Strauss-style structuralism made themselves felt, which meant that culture was now seen as a pattern of *bricolage*, communication density and praxis differentiation rather than as a nation-by-nation package deal; accordingly, social psychologists began to study the old topic of ‘national psychology’ in constructivist rather than essentialist terms; they began to see ‘national identities’ as internalized collective self-images taking shape in the structural context of a Self-Other opposition (Brossaud 1968; Hollander 1948; Duijker & Frijda 1960). And in politics, all of Western Europe was embarking on the trans-national project of European integration.

Yet, this initiative towards a post-national imagology, promising though things looked, was to run aground. The main reason for this was a methodological rift with American scholarship. Not only were Anglo-American literary studies at the time far more oriented towards criticism, the aesthetic analysis of individual texts, than towards their historical and ideological contextualization, the American social sciences were still much more dedicated to the study of ethnicity *per se*. This tradition can be registered in the filiation of anthropologists from Franz Boas to Ruth Benedict and Geoffrey Gorer. International relations during the Second World War and the Cold War were often analysed, with the active, commissioned assistance of such anthropologists, in terms of the national characters of the various parties concerned (Hertz 1944; Klineberg 1951; Buchanan & Cantril 1953). Race conflicts dominated US domestic politics (Sollors 1996), and the worldwide process of de-colonization, in which the United States were concerned both as a global power and as a former colony,
tended to confuse the very concepts of ‘states’ and ‘nations’. This was the background against which the leading literary scholar René Wellek (1953) could make his famous remark that imagology was a form of ‘literary sociology’, closer to the concerns of ethnic anthropologists than of literary scholars (whose core business lay, according to Wellek, in the elaboration of a ‘theory of literature’, a typology of what made literary texts special: Wellek & Warren 1949).

The Wellek-imposed dilemma between ‘intrinsic’ textual analysis and ‘extrinsic’ contextualization did much to paralyse Comparative Literature worldwide. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, comparatists tended to abandon image studies. The main exception was Hugo Dyserinck, who argued that national images and stereotypes need by no means be extrinsic to the text’s inner fabric, but instead permeate its very substance (Dyserinck 1966, 1982). With his Aachen programme, Dyserinck went further and advanced a concept of Comparative Literature which thematized literature’s multinationality in terms, not of an objective national taxonomy, but in terms of the transient national subjectivities (ideas, images, stereotypes) which crisscross Europe’s (and the world’s) cultural landscape and which generate much of the moral tensions that literary texts address (Dyserinck 1991). The ultimate implication here was that images concerning character and identity are not mental representations which are conceived by nations about nations but which, as articulated discursive constructs circulating through societies, are constitutive of national identification patterns. Meanwhile, at the Nouvelle Sorbonne, Daniel-Henri Pageaux continued a French preoccupation with imagologie, much indebted to a Lévi-Straussian anthropology, as an imaginaire of perceived characterological (and national-characterological) diversity (Pageaux 1981, 1983, 1988, 1989).

From the mid-1970s onwards, in the wider field of literary studies, some scholars working in the individual philologies (especially German and Austrian Anglicists: Stanzel 1974; Boerner 1975; Diller et al. 1986; Blaicher 1987) picked up on these themes and theories as they were being marginalized within the crisis-ridden discipline of Comparative Literature itself. Meanwhile, outside the field of literature and in the wider context of the humanities, the idea began to gain ground among historians that national identities are constructs and that it is the historian’s task to analyse the process of their construction and the nature of the constructedness (Giesen 1991; Berding 1996). The trend to see historical awareness as a construct rather than an objective condition was triggered by volumes like Hobsbawm and Ranger’s The invention of tradition (1983) and Pierre Nora’s Les lieux de mémoire (1984-92). The arrival of poststructuralist thought (especially that of Michel Foucault) was of especial influence (Kristeva 1988). In →anthropology, the generation following Stocking (1987) and
Wolf (1982) began an enormous, still-ongoing enterprise of critically analysing the ethnocentrist assumptions on which their own discipline had rested for so long. Postcolonial theorists in the wake of Frantz Fanon (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952) and Edward Said (*Orientalism, 1978*) began to address the imposition of reputations and stereotypes as part of a colonial power imbalance between hegemon and subaltern. Feminists and scholars in Women’s Studies thematized the relation between sex and gender and began analysing the latter as a cultural construct. Finally, Ernest Gellner’s hugely influential study *Nations and nationalisms* (1983) advanced its provocative central contention that nations had been made by nationalism, not vice versa – that a sense of a primordial national identity had been retroactively constructed by nineteenth-century ideologists as a sort of collective false memory syndrome. The debates and influence around Gellner’s book made it widely obvious that all these various approaches to the constructed nature of identity were of immediate importance to the study of national identity and nationalism.

Thus, the late twentieth century saw a situation where, ironically, the long tradition of imagology had been all but abandoned within Comparative Literature (which as a whole was a discipline in crisis, outflanked on all sides by new and old sister-disciplines), while its insights and preoccupations were being re-invented in disciplines all around it. The topic of national stereotyping and identity construction was being addressed everywhere, but often in monodisciplinary isolationism, and on the basis of ad-hoc theorizing and contradictory nomenclature.

In the last twenty years, a fundamental realignment in literary studies has taken place. By and large the old philologies have seen a divorce between linguistics and literary studies; and the older idea that historical-comparative literary research was to underpin generalizing theories about literature has also undergone a fission. ‘Theory’ is now a more self-sufficient pursuit, relying less on extrapolations from the comparative use of literary-historical data and more on the applicability of contemporary cultural philosophy to textual interpretation. The historical study of literature has grown closer to the social or historical sciences, which themselves have undergone a ‘cultural turn’ and show increasing interest in literary (and otherwise cultural, e.g. pictorial) source-material. In many fields, an interest in national diversity and images or stereotypes of national identity is noticeable; feminist and postcolonial approaches have been in the ascendant.

Meanwhile, social and political developments have triggered a return of ‘identity’ as an autonomous force in social, political and cultural relations. The fall of communism and the ongoing integration of Europe have each in their own way led to a revival of nationalist attitudes. Mobility, globalization and the increasingly multicultural nature of modern
societies in the West has similarly revived the importance attached to
ethnicity and even religion. Consciousness-raising among many (hereto-
fore marginalized) groups such as women and ethnic minorities has
occasioned the rise of ‘identity politics’. The retrieval, protection or culti-
vation of one’s culture, tradition or ‘identity’ in an increasingly plural and
mediatized cultural landscape means that such categories are once again
being reified into categories for the understanding of human affairs. The
notion of identity has in the last thirty years come to be understood in an
implicitly constructivist sense, rather than in the old transcendent-essen-
tialist one – but, like the notion of culture, it is once again being seen in
deterministic terms. Concepts like culture, nationality and identity are
being used once more as explanations rather than as descriptions or expli-
canda (Leerssen 2006).

This trend manifests itself, not only in politics and journalism, but also
in the new discipline of intercultural management studies, which by and
large (Hofstede 1980; Peabody 1985) employs the ethnic-anthropological
categories of the vintage of Ruth Benedict and Geoffrey Gorer, and so
helps them to a new lease of life.

This historical survey is of course overly schematic. For one thing, the
periods presented here overlap in time and space. One does not give way
to the other immediately and completely; the transition is a much more
gradual one. Indeed, the periods here are cumulative rather than suc-
cessive; they form overlays of new approaches covering, but not dis-
placing, the older ones. Ethnic essentialism in the style of Grimm and
Taine remained noticeable when other scholars begin to treat nationalism
as a historical phenomenon; it remained particularly strong in the
velopisch oriented studies of the period 1900-1945. Nor has the belief in real,
objective national characters ever been wholly obliterated by constructivist
analyses. The revival of national attitudes in the 1990s (both in politics and
in the field of scholarship) is not so much a re-appearance of something
that had disappeared, as rather a new upsurge of something which in the
previous decades had been unfashionable.

Similarly, the tradition of comparatist imagology may have been margin-
alized but it was never wholly abandoned. The present volume is a sign of
that: Dyserinck’s Aachen programme (Dyserinck 2002) found a continua-
tion in European Studies as practised at the University of Amsterdam,
from where a series of Studia imagologica is edited; at Bergamo, a number of
conferences proclaimed the ongoing importance of the specialism (Beller
1997); in France, the postcolonial approach to littérature comparée continues
the imagological tradition (Moura 1997); in Germany and Austria, there is
the work of Anglicists like Stanzel (1974, 1997, 1999) and Zacharasiewicz
(1977, 1999), to name no others. Rising nationalism in the Balkans has also
spurred young scholars in Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia into
critically studying the discourse of nationality and national stereotype. Literary scholars working in imagology now have at least the interdisciplinary context of a general widespread interest in their topic. What can they contribute in the present scholarly climate?

Method

To begin with, Imagology, working as it does primarily on literary representations, furnishes continuous proof that it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated. Europe’s literary record is a long-standing and voluminous one, and can be fruitfully searched (and placed alongside the historical record of social action and political decision-making) for longue-durée topics like the provenance and spread of attitudes and mentalities.

What is more, that textual record is one long, continuous and voluminous proof that images work, obtain their effectiveness in the cultural and communicative field, primarily because of their intertextual tropicality. They are tropes, commonplaces, obtain familiarity by dint of repetition and mutual resemblance; and in each case this means that whenever we encounter an individual instance of a national characterization, the primary reference is not to empirical reality but to an intertext, a sounding-board, of other related textual instances. In other words: the literary record demonstrates unambiguously that national characters are a matter of commonplace and hearsay rather than empirical observation or statements of objective fact.

Third, literary sources, depending on their canonicity, have a long currency and topicality. Notions concerning a German character may have been expressed in schoolbooks, journalism, cultural criticism and government reports, but novels like Heinrich Mann’s Der Untertan (1918) or even Jerome K. Jerome’s Three men on the bummel (1900) have outlasted all such more ephemeral sources. For a similar reason, a canonical text like Shakespeare’s The merchant of Venice, with its Shylock-figure, may not only testify to attitudes towards Jews at the time of its origin, but also, in its long-standing reception history, provides an interesting track record of shifting attitudes in subsequent centuries.

Fourth, there is reason to assume, at least as a working hypothesis, that literature (as well as more recent poetically-ruled and fictional-narrative media, such as cinema or the comic strip) is a privileged genre for the dissemination of stereotypes, because it often works on the presupposition of a ‘suspension of disbelief’ and some (at least aesthetic) appreciative credit among the audience.
Such factors continue to give an imagologist specialism within literary studies its raison d’être. At the same time, it can continue to work on methodological assumptions which have been elaborated over the last decades. Some of these may be listed as follows:

1. The ultimate perspective of image studies is a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, not a theory of cultural or national identity. Imagology is concerned with the representamen, representations as textual strategies and as discourse. That discourse implicitly raises a claim of referentiality vis-à-vis empirical reality, telling us that nation X has a set of characteristics Y, yet the actual validity of that referentiality claim is not the imagologist’s to verify or falsify. The imagologist’s frame of reference is a textual and intertextual one.

2. Imagology is, pace Wellek, not a form of sociology; its aim is to understand a discourse of representation rather than a society. While it is obvious that current attributes concerning a given nation are textual tropes rather than sociological or anthropological data, the less obvious implication is equally true: the cultural context in which these images are articulated and from which they originate is that of a discursive praxis, not an underlying collective, let alone a ‘national’ public opinion. How representative a given text is of more widespread patterns is an intertextual rather than a sociological issue. To see a literary tradition (which in any case is never monolithic) as if it were generated by a constituent ‘nation’ would be to let essentialism in through the back door.

3. Our sources are subjective; their subjectivity must not be ignored, explained away or filtered out, but be taken into account in the analysis. The nationality represented (the espected) is silhouetted in the perspectival context of the representing text or discourse (the spectant). For that reason, imagologists will have particular interest in the dynamics between those images which characterize the Other (hetero-images) and those which characterize one’s own, domestic identity (self-images or auto-images). Both espected and spectant are usually categorized in national terms, but in both cases the scholar will be wary of seeing in this appellation a straightforward reflection of empirical real-world collectives. In studying the image of Spain in French literature, the aggregate ‘French’ is no less complex and problematic than the category ‘Spain’. In studying the German self-image in the work of Thomas Mann, the question must always be if Mann writes, from case to case, as a German, or else possibly (and possibly at the same time) as a patrician bourgeois, a European intellectual, or a Lübecker. Images do not reflect identities, but constitute possible identifications.

4. Imagology addresses a specific set of characterizations and attributes: those outside the area of testable report sentences or statements of fact. These are here called imaginated. The statement “France is a republic” is by and of itself not imaginated; the statement “The French are freedom-
loving individualists” is. The demarcation between imagined discourse and testable report statements is not always obvious, and sometimes calls for interpretative acumen on the part of the scholar. Generally, imagined discourse [a] singles out a nation from the rest of humanity as being somehow different or ‘typical’, and [b] articulates or suggests a moral, collective-psychological motivation for given social or national features. Imaginated discourse is specifically concerned with the characterological explanation of cultural difference. (Leerssen 1992, 1997a, 2000)

5. The first task is to establish the intertext of a given national representation as trope. What is the tradition of the trope? What traditions of appreciation or depreciation, and how do these two relate historically? To which extent is that background tradition passively or actively echoed or reinforced, varied upon, negated, mocked or ignored by the individual instance in question?

6. The trope must also be contextualized within the text of its occurrence. What sort of text is it? Which genre conventions are at work, narrative, descriptive, humorous, propagandistic? Fictional, narrative, poetic? What is the status, prominence and function of the national trope within those parameters? What allowances must be made for the poetical (narrative, ironical) deployment of a given national characterization? It is in this respect that imagology is still most firmly anchored in the field of literary studies. An awareness of poetical conventions, narrative techniques and literature’s shifting conventions is needed to assess the textual deployment of a given image in a balanced manner, and not just bibliometrically. Textual interpretation, one of the oldest crafts of the literary scholar, will be necessary here as much as a reasonable knowledge of the theory and methodology of literary studies. Certainly in the twentieth century, national attitudes have come to be formulated in a much more complex and problematic (often “ironic) sense than before (e.g. the Englishness of Philip Larkin, the Germanness of Thomas Mann).

7. Historical contextualization is also necessary. Literary texts cannot be interpreted in a timeless, aesthetic never-never-land. Historical factors must be taken into account when assessing, respectively, the Italian settings in Ann Radcliffe’s and George Eliot’s novels. Class politics and regional differences play into the English self-image of Evelyn Waugh and John Osborne, respectively, or the Italian self-image of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

8. Recently, a pragmatic-functionalist perspective has also been urged. What is the text’s target audience? How is its rhetoric and deployment of national tropes geared to this target-audience? Is there any evidence concerning the text’s reception and impact?

9. On the basis of all these methodological provisos, there are further perspectives. In the long-term history of national clichés, certain constants
and variables may be encountered, sometimes even vacillations between extreme appreciation or depreciation. It may be that these can be seen as two sides of the same coin: the Germany of poet-philosophers and the Germany of tyrannical technocrats is in each case characterized by its penchant for systematic abstraction (as opposed to humanist pragmatism); the Ireland of mindless violence and the Ireland of poetic sentiment are both opposed to a notion of reasonable realism. (Leerssen 2000 identifies such deep structures, generating a polarity of contrasting attributes, as ‘imagemes’.) It may also be useful to situate certain images of a given country amongst different neighbours (the image of Germany in Holland, Denmark and Poland, respectively: cf. Süssmuth 1993, 1996). Further study is required to understand the nature of the dynamics where, within the bandwidth of an imageme, images can shift between contrasting modalities (poet to technocrat) and opposing valorizations.

10. The area of self-images presents one additional perspective of particular relevance. Patterns, not only of Othering, but also of the maintenance of selfhood through historical remembrance and cultural memory, have been put on the agenda (Assman & Hölscher 1988; Ricoeur 1990). The extent to which national self-images have a specifically diachronic dimension, not in the self-other dynamics of setting domestic culture off against others, but in the identitarian process of maintaining a sense of selfhood across time, deserves further investigation. In this respect, the persistence (Baldensperger’s durée) of the literary canon as a historical memory reservoir, and the literary thematization of the filiations between past and present, deserve equal attention (cf. Assmann 1999).

11. The study of national images is in and of itself a comparative enterprise: it addresses cross-national relations rather than national identities. Likewise, patterns of national characterization will stand out most clearly when studied supranationally as a multinational phenomenon. Certain imagined moral-characterological oppositions are nationally unspecific and can be encountered in many different cases: northern-cerebral vis-à-vis southern-sensuous, peripheral-timeless vis-à-vis central-modern, or western-individualistic-active vis-à-vis oriental-collective-passive. This indicates that national characterizations are often specific instances and combinations of generic moral polarities, and that our way of thinking in terms of ‘national characters’ boils down to an ethnic-political distribution of role patterns in an imagined anthropological landscape. It is in this comparatist aspect that imagology holds out a challenge and a promise for future research.

Between them, these methods and perspectives still define the specificity of literary imagology and will help it to enrich, with its findings, the wider field of the human sciences and their interest in identity constructs. By the
same token, it may also help us towards a typology of commonplace and formulaic convention in literary texts – aspects which have usually been neglected as the mere *repoussoir* of its creative and innovative individualism, but central to our understanding of the text’s poetical, rhetorical and pragmatic foundations (Amossy & Rosen, 1982; Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot 1997).

In the final analysis, imagology may also help to get a clearer focus on the multinational diversity of literature itself. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century philology had worked on the unquestioned assumption that language-cum-nationality was the organic taxonomic unit for literary study; nowadays, that naive outlook has been drastically complicated by the realization that ‘nationality’ is to a large extent a subjective viewpoint rather than an objective condition. What is more, linguistic borders and state frontiers rarely coincide as neatly as our nomenclature (‘French’, ‘English’, ‘German’) would seem to indicate; the literary map of Europe and of the world is dominated by cultural minorities and by *littératures secondes* (Dyserinck 1991: 94-99); identities and categories here are produced by literature rather than vice versa. The objective fact of linguistic difference exists; but the borders crossed by international literary traffic are to a large extent in people’s heads, imagined, in that the demarcation between domestic and foreign cultural space, and the classification and filtering of ‘foreign’ texts in their dissemination and reception abroad, has to a significant extent to negotiate attitudes as well as linguistic or spatial distance. More fine-tuned systemic or polysystemic models of cultural organization, communication and dissemination will not supersede or abolish the objective primacy of language and linguistic difference, but must certainly allow an imagological dimension into the fundamental discussion as to what constitutes the ‘nationality’ of a given literary text in the first place.


—— Wolf, Eric R. (1982), Europe and the people without history (Berkeley, CA).