



Literary heritage and European identity

Património literário e identidade europeia

*Peter Hanenberg**

Abstract: Thomas Morus' Utopia, Luís de Camões' The Lusíads or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Nathan the Wise belong to the European cultural heritage – but are mostly read within their national linguistic limits. It is necessary to recognize how much they have built a common European identity referring to concepts like critical thinking, the relation with extra-European cultures or tolerance. The article offers transnational readings of these texts in their function as agents of promoting European identity.

Keywords: Imagined community. Literary heritage. European identity. Translation.

Resumo: A Utopia de Thomas Morus, Os Lusíadas de Luís de Camões ou Nathan o Sábio de Gotthold Ephraim Lessing fazem parte do património europeu, mas são preferencialmente lidos nos seus limites linguísticos nacionais. Torna-se necessário reconhecer como estes textos contribuíram para a construção de uma identidade europeia partilhada, incluindo conceitos como o pensamento crítico, a relação com culturas não-europeias ou a tolerância. O artigo sugere uma leitura transnacional destes textos como agentes de promoção de uma identidade europeia.

Palavras-chave: Comunidades imaginadas. Património literário. Identidade europeia. Tradução.

Historically, literary heritage has been on the service of the nation. We speak about “English Literature” or German or Brazilian Literature not only in the sense of the language used in these literatures but as the national culture which these literatures represent and express. In some cases, the language is bigger than the culture – and in other cases, the culture is broader than the language. English, American and a significant part of Indian Literature use the same language; Swiss Literature expresses itself in German, Italian, French or Romansh language. The process which Benedict Anderson has described under the title “Imagined communities” counts in many moments on the work of literature and the importance of literary heritage. On the case of the Finish Nation, e.g., Anderson writes:

The leaders of the burgeoning Finnish nationalist movement were persons whose profession largely consisted of the handling of language: writers, teachers, pastors, and lawyers. The study of folklore and the rediscovery and piecing together of popular epic poetry went together with the publication of grammars and dictionaries, and led to the appearance of periodicals which served to standardize Finnish literary [i.e. print-] language, on behalf of which stronger political demands could be advanced (Anderson, 1991, pp. 74-75).

* Associate Professor at the Faculty for Human Sciences, Universidade Católica Portuguesa; director of the Research Center for Communication and Culture CECC. Contact: hanenberg@ucp.pt

A common (literary) heritage (in some cases even more than a common language) seems to be one of the most important building blocks from which education and media can develop the foundation of an imagined community. Epic or literary narratives are especially strong in this process because they do not simply offer a means of reference and communication but the meaning of the community as such. Literary heritage represents the community in its acts and deeds, its options and features, constructing the “reality”, which the imagination refers to.

Jerome Bruner famously stated that narratives accrue and that “the accruals eventually create something variously called a ‘culture’ or a ‘history’ or, more loosely, a ‘tradition’.” (Bruner, 1991, p. 18). “Once shared culturally”, Bruner continues, “narrative accruals achieve, like Emile Durkheim’s collective representation, ‘exteriority’ and the power of constraint”. From there, it is just a short step not only to an imagined, but rather to an effective community:

What creates a culture, surely, must be a “local” capacity for accruing stories of happenings of the past into some sort of diachronic structure that permits a continuity into the present – in short, to construct a history, a tradition, a legal system, instruments assuring historical continuity if not legitimacy (Bruner, 1991, pp. 19-20).

Bruner’s “narrative construction of reality” is based on ten principles: narrative diachronicity, particularity, intentional state entailment, hermeneutic composability, canonicity (and breach), referentiality (as verisimilitude rather than as verifiability), genre, normativeness, context sensitivity (including negotiability) and the fore mentioned narrative accrual.

These ten principles also apply to the work of literary heritage on the service of an imagined community. Narratives are strong because they respond, represent and perform individual and social forms of reality construction that seems to be vital. They give a temporal perspective to the imagined community (narrative diachronicity), they state its particularity, entail its intentional states, compose its hermeneutic grounds of meaning, build a canon (and allow for its breach), assume referentiality to the community’s “reality” as verisimilitude, establish genres and norms and attend to the community’s context.

Narrative, concludes Bruner, “organizes the structure of human experience” and therefore it is worth understanding “how ‘life’ comes to imitate ‘art’ and vice versa” (Bruner, 1991, p. 21).

Knowing how much narrative and literary heritage have shaped the conception and perception of nations as imagined communities, the following examples would like to invite the study of literature to a different perspective by asking how Europe as an imagined community might be discovered in and through the European literary heritage. The question would be how much and, first of all, what can be learned from literature if the interest is not its value for and in a national context, asking instead what it would mean for the understanding of a broader European community. This is not to claim that Europe is or works as a nation. On the contrary, the argument would be that a nation is first and overall an imagined community and that this characterization gives room to the narrative construction of other communities.

Europe's Utopia

“Narrating Europe” is therefore intended as an attempt to restore such narratives which would address a common European interest (Hanenberg, 2004). The publication of one of the first founding texts of a common European interest has recently celebrated its five hundred anniversary, Thomas Morus' *Utopia*. In Morus' book, the messenger of the ideal utopian state is not the British intellectual himself, but a Portuguese sailor called Raphael. The real story behind the utopian idea is that you must have discovered foreign countries before you can imagine an alternative view of what has long been established. Right from the beginning, the common European interest has been defined by the experience abroad, by the experience with new worlds outside of Europe. Therefore, Portuguese and Spanish sailors have duly been called the pioneers of globalization.

At the end of the text, one reads:

In the meantime I cannot agree with everything that he said, for all his undoubted learning and experience. But I freely admit that there are many features of the Utopia Republic which I should like – though I hardly expect – to see adopted in Europe. (More, 1965, p. 132).

Morus' Utopia shows how much Europe has been able to think itself beyond a given reality and a closed community. As one of the founding texts of a European Narrative, a reading of Utopia would offer three important insights:

1. Europe is presented as a project of cooperation: between sailors from Portugal and Spain, intellectuals from the North, writers and readers, old and new ideas.
2. The European Project needs going beyond itself, knowing other realities, exploring realms out of its borders, leaving its limits behind.
3. Therefore, Europe is always and from the beginning also a critique of Europe, not bound to self-affirmation, but open to alternative models.

Europe and the global age

To a certain extent, such an understanding of Europe is also present in another work from the time, Luís de Camões' *Lusiads*. The founding text of Portuguese identity is simultaneously a founding text of European projection. While the term Europe appears just once in Thomas More's text, the word Europe is frequently used by Luís de Camões. Interestingly, Camões uses the term in two situations. First it is used to make a contrast with those peoples who are distant and different, and who represent the status of otherness:

Here is Christian Europe, advanced and envied
For its might and for its governance;
Here is Africa, desperate to share
The world's goods, and racked by violence (X, 92)¹

1 All quotes from Camões, 2001, as usual given by the n° of the canto and the stanza.

However, Camões uses the term Europe also to address the differences between the several European nations as in “Canto Seven” where he refers to special features of “You, Portuguese, as few as you are valiant, /Make light of your slender forces”, or of the Germans, “haughty stock/ [...] Look at the hideous wars the wage”, or of “that rough Englishman”, or of Italy “enslaved by vice, your own worst enemy” or “Greeks, Thracians, Armenians” or Georgians. In the *Lusiads*, Europe is already designed in its double meaning as being a unit contrasting with the world “out there” and as being diverse concerning its inner constitution.

Camões *The Lusiads* have been mostly read as a grounding document of Portuguese identity, but some scholars have drawn attention to its relevance for a concept of Europe (Moura, 1994). And indeed, right from the first Canto, Camões introduces three important perspectives which could be understood as an significant contribute to the European Narrative. The first topic is the notion of a new age, a modern experience of change:

Arms are my theme, and those matchless heroes
 Who from Portugal's far western shores
 By oceans where none had ventured
 Voyaged to Taprobana and beyond,
 Enduring hazards and assaults
 Such as drew on more than human prowess
 Among far distant peoples, to proclaim
 A new Age and win undying fame (I, 1)

This notion of a new age simultaneously includes the recognition of a long tradition in shaping experience.

Boast no more about the subtle Greek
 Or the long odyssey of Trojan Aeneas;
 Enough of the oriental conquests
 Of great Alexander and of Trajan;
 [...]
 Abandon of the ancient Muse revered,
 A loftier code of honour has appeared. (I, 3)

The new age asks for new narratives, new experiences and new actors. This is the modern view which Camões introduces into European tradition, aware of both continuity and change. A third perspective has to do with the relation to the cultures found beyond the limits of the well-known world which is already present in the first quote given above: the conviction of Europe's superiority crosses both the overseas' endeavor itself and the epic dedicated to it:

Kings likewise of glorious memory
 Who magnified Christ and Empire,
 Bringing ruin on the degenerate
 Lands of Africa and Asia (I, 2).

Camões' work represents the beginning of an imperial and colonial age which has brought violence, destruction and ruin to many non-European regions and peoples. Therefore, reading Camões today – as has well done his English translator Landeg

White – means recognizing Europe’s responsibility in this process without perpetuating the false presumption of its superiority.

Europe: trust and tolerance

An important step further in dealing with the responses and responsibilities of colonialism can be found in the literature of the enlightenment – from Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persennes* to Voltaire’s *Candide*. The German author Gotthold Ephraim Lessing has contributed to this debate with an outstanding play under the title *Nathan the Wise* from 1778. Taking place during the Christian crusades in Jerusalem, the eponymous hero finds himself challenged by the mighty sultan with the request to tell him which religion would be the right one. Nathan, knowing that the request is only a pretext to ask the rich merchant he is for money, answers with the famous parable of the three rings: Possessing a ring which gave him superhuman powers, a father decided to let copy it three times, offering at his death one to each of his three equally beloved sons. As every heir is convinced to hold the right and powerful ring, they soon get into dispute. A judge is therefore asked to decide on the right ring:

If you will take advice in lieu of sentence,
This is my counsel to you, to take up
The matter where it stands. If each of you
Has had a ring presented by his father,
Let each believe his own the real ring.
'Tis possible the father chose no longer
To tolerate the one ring’s tyranny;
And certainly, as he much loved you all,
And loved you all alike, it could not please him
By favouring one to be of two the oppressor.
Let each feel honoured by this free affection.
Unwarped of prejudice; let each endeavour
To vie with both his brothers in displaying
The virtue of his ring; assist its might
With gentleness, benevolence, forbearance,
With inward resignation to the godhead,
And if the virtues of the ring continue
To show themselves among your children’s children...²

Nathan tells the Sultan that as the rings, also the religions cannot be distinguished. But the Sultan does not accept this idea:

The rings – don’t trifle with me; I must think
That the religions which I named can be
Distinguished, e’en to raiment, drink and food,

Therefore, Nathan continues his argument:

And only not as to their grounds of proof.
Are not all built alike on history,

2 All quotes from Lessing 1893.

Traditional, or written. History
 Must be received on trust – is it not so?
 In whom now are we likeliest to put trust?
 In our own people surely, in those men
 Whose blood we are, in them, who from our childhood
 Have given us proofs of love, who ne'er deceived us,
 Unless 'twere wholesomer to be deceived.
 How can I less believe in my forefathers
 Than thou in thine. How can I ask of thee
 To own that thy forefathers falsified
 In order to yield mine the praise of truth.
 The like of Christians.

In the end, the Sultan asks Nathan not for money, but for friendship – so strong and effective is his lesson in tolerance.

Religious tolerance is certainly something which Europe had to acquire over centuries – going through the cruelest proofs of its denial as well as through an enlightening way of learning. Lessing's contribution to this process does not just build on an exemplary story. Rather it draws attention to a concept of tolerance which cannot be mistaken for indifference or arbitrariness. In Lessing's concept of enlightenment and tolerance, people do not give up their religions but recognize their coexistence – and continue to build their convictions on the trust in their history and the values received by the example of their forefathers. In this sense, Lessing's drama offers a double lesson what Europe stands for: a concept of tolerance and the trust in its own history. A true responsibility derives from both. A Europe without tolerance would be as poor and dangerous as a Europe neglecting its history.

Learning from history

Learning from history: this is certainly a central topic in the concept of Europe. It has frequently been said that the European Union has been built in consequence of a long history of war and violence – with its highest (or better: its deepest) moments in 20th century's world wars. Literature has accompanied this process in manifold ways – and also in this case its worth discovering the European dimension of literary heritage. Two short examples may illustrate this: Günter Grass is certainly one of the authors who influenced profoundly Germans history, politics and identities during the second half of the 20th century. In this sense and for many reasons, Grass might be hold as *the* German author *par excellence* after 1945. However, this a limited perspective. Already his first and most famous novel *The Tin Drum* spans a geographical bow which reaches from what today is Poland in the East and Germany in the West. Grass' work would not be interesting at all if it were not considering Germany's relation to its neighbours – a relation shaped as much by violence as by shared suffering. Grass can be rightly understood only as a European author.

This is also true for the Dutch author Geert Mak whose book *In Europa* brings together a cultural history of outstanding moments in Europe's recent history and a map of places bound together by the means of travel. Time and space – history and geography – people and actions: this makes up the experience of Europe. Much more

could be said about this author and the many others who express in their literary work the many faces and phases of what could be part of a European identity. Travel – for what reason ever, is certainly a key moment of European experience.

The number of authors who actually traveled through Europe and beyond bears witness to the experience of a social, political and cultural reality which has always been broader than the borders of a given country. For the purpose of illustration, I limit the examples just to those German writing authors which I have worked on recently: Wolfgang Hildesheimer, exiled in England, Palestine and Switzerland, Peter Weiss, exiled in Czechoslovakia and Sweden, Uwe Johnson, leaving the German Democratic Republic and dying in England (Hanenberg, 2014a), Paul Celan, whose journey is beyond words and space (Hanenberg, 2014b), Joachim Schädlich, telling us about Kokoschkins travelling from Odessa to New York (Hanenberg, 2013), Ulrike Draesner, whose seven turns from the borders of the world arrived among contemporary migration or Marica Bodroicz, Kroatian born German writer searching her white peace in post-Yugoslavia (Hanenberg, 2016)– none of them can be reduced to a nationally limited experience.

Literary heritage has always had a European dimension. It is not true that there have been no alternative European narratives. However, the truth is that they have been widely ignored as such. Therefore, a new reading as suggested here might try to draw attention to those phenomena which could support a European dimension rather than the conventional national perspective. And there are as many reasons to lead such an interest to success as there are for its failure. Of course, the long history of national philology will easily tend to favor national approaches over European perspectives. Nevertheless, this long history cannot make us forget that the authors of all times have found inspiration to their work in a common heritage reaching from Vergil and Homer to Shakespeare and Goethe, and from this Western male tradition to Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing and Toni Morrison. There is no such thing as a national literature. Authors and readers do not respect national borders. And many of them have actually built their work on a transnational experience.

Europe's resources

Transnational and transcultural experiences make up the concept of Europe in many ways. They can be found in a Utopian critique of Europe as well as in its glorification. They can be found at the basis of tolerance as much as in the shared experience of conflict and violence. But they can also be a starting point from which a new concept of identity and belonging might develop. Unfolding the potential of such a shared heritage (in literature and history) could open new possibilities of enriching identity instead of sealing it. Amin Maalouf has formulated such a new concept of identity in an exemplary way:

Each of us should be encouraged to accept his own diversity, to see his identity as the sum of all his various affiliations, instead of as just one of them raised to the status of the most important, made into an instrument of exclusion and sometimes into a weapon of war. Europe too, taken as a whole and insofar as it tends towards unity, certainly ought see its own identity as the sum of all its linguistic, religious and other

affiliations. If it does not accept every element in its history, if it fails to impress on its future citizens that they must learn to feel fully European without ceasing to be German or French or Italian or Greek, it will simply not be able to exist. Creating a new Europe means creating a new concept of identity, for Europe itself, for all the countries in it, and to a certain extent for the rest of the world too (Maalouf, 2000, p. 1622).

Thomas Morus' Utopia, Luís de Camões global perspective, Lessing's claim for tolerance and the respect for history and the overwhelming experience of war and violence in the 20th century find a worthy answer in Maalouf's new concept of identity. In the same line, the French philosopher François Jullien (2016) has more recently claimed that there is no cultural identity at all. Cultural differences, he argues, exist as cultural resources – and must be defended as such, not as excluding, exclusive and enclosed identities. Resources are alternatives – they are not exclusive.

Translating Europe

How to deal with the manifold cultural resources then? How to allow them to coexist and to stimulate each other, to build this “sum of all [t]his various affiliations” and this “new concept of identity”? Literary heritage can be a good means to know about the diversity of resources and to understand its potential in a common narrative. However, some would argue, language differences will always impede such a project. But will they really? Isn't translation one of the oldest human capacities, maybe as old as language itself? Haven't we always been able to know about others by the effort of translation? Haven't we permanently been engaged in understanding the others – what languages ever we use and how difficult sometimes it is. If we really want to keep cultural resources alive in their differences and in their shared uses – then we will certainly need translation as a permanent effort.

Translation is Europe's proper language, famously stated Umberto Eco (Wolf, 2014, p. 224). Europeans, said Peter Sloterdijk (2002, p. 35), have always already been translators. How much work in translation is behind Utopia, behind Europe's global expansion? And hasn't the father in Lessing's parable “translated” the power of the one ring into the power of the three? For the sake of mutual respect and tolerance, for the sake of living together in peace and sharing manifold resources, we have to engage in translation. Or, once again, in Amin Maalouf's words: “So to avoid trouble we prefer to translate and translate ad infinitum, however much it costs” (Maalouf, 2000, p. 1424).

An unfinished adventure

Speaking of literature as a national phenomenon has always been a mistake – a mistake in service of the imagined communities which shaped political culture since the 19th century. We could have well learnt other lessons from literary history, drawing our attention to diversity and unity on a wide range of fields – and exploring and translating the utopian potential residing in such cultural resources. Narrating Europe

instead of imagining national communities could have been a peaceful attempt – both to overcome hostility and to offer a specific experience of cultural richness.

The need for such a project of Narrating Europe turns out to be even more appealing when considering Europe's role in the process of globalization. Globalization is first and during 500 years a process of Europeanization, and Europe cannot deny its role and responsibility in this process – though we know now how important and promising it might be to provincialize Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000) at any instance. As Zygmunt Bauman (2004) put it, Europe is an “unfinished adventure” in which it is a responsibility driven by a 500 years history which claims for less national and more European awareness: also through literary heritage and certainly and always through a continuous effort in translation.

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