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MIGRANTS, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION



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Qanat



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Images of otherness in literature: from imagology to cultural stereotypes.

by Anna Re

“Prejudices are the pillars of civilization”¹: Andre Gide’s statement shows emphatically as cultural images, including prejudices, stereotypes, clichés towards otherness and/or what is outside imaginary cultural affiliation are different, numerous and persistent.

Information read or heard is everywhere, moreover today we continuously have chances of meetings with immigrants, tourists, foreign people thanks to easy travel, mass media, internet. Almost every day we find ourselves, therefore, to express opinions, make comparisons, imagine other places and other situations that differ from us and our fellow citizens and their foreign countries.

As sources of information are now more accurate and faster, literature plays an important role in the formation of this imagination. Through literature we can know a lot about the issue of otherness that has been expressed in all times and in all cultures. Those judg-

¹ Gide, André, *Les faux-monnayeurs*, Paris, 1925, trad. it., *I falsari*, Milano, Bompiani, 1990, p. 11.

ments, those images, those thoughts since ancient times respond to needs common to all human societies and put a border between the known and the unknown to tell the difference between the ego and the other.

The opinions expressed on other communities rarely had an empirical foundation but, even in the Eighteenth century when traveling to Europe became a widespread practice among noble and writers, the judgments expressed were not to be free from prejudices and stereotypes.

These images that come to us in a reworked, or mediated form are products of the sensitivity operating in different social and historical contexts and have a suggestive power far from the true reality, the same power which still influences our thoughts in the formation of an “imaginary” of foreign countries and the stranger himself.

From the analysis of literary texts and the socio-historical context in which they are were produced, we can then infer the ideologies and cultural biases they express. In the representation of the other (meaning other nation or culture), imagology has a fundamental role in studying the images, the prejudices, the stereotypes, the clichés, or the opinions that people, nations, countries have created one another in the course of history and also in literature. These images do not reflect the actual characteristics of the “other” because contaminated by knowledge and views of the author and are influenced mainly by historical and cultural context in which the literary work was created. Each image is formed through a continuous comparison that moves from identity to otherness, so that talking about the “other” is always also a way to reveal something about himself.

The vastness of the aspects and methods of science with reference to the many factors that converge in the formation of the image of the other, of a social group, of a population, of a race are reflected in the languages and literatures that influence the evolution of the intercultural society.

The relationship among individuals, between the ego and the other is studied by different disciplines such as anthropology, cultural history, ethnology, psychology, social and ethnopsychology and, with equal rights, comparative literature, in particular imagology which uses the same terminology observing the aesthetic, rhetorical and subjective dimension. In this sense, it tends to investigate the cultural images at least from two points of view:

1) as representation of otherness, manifestations of man towards the other and thus expressions of all transactions by which each culture invests the other;

2) investigating the role that pictures play in a text, the functions performed, the influences that exert on the literary text, their relationships with language codes. As Yves Chevrel² effectively summarizes, the term “imagology” refers to an area of comparative studies focused on the analysis of cultural images of the other, through which it is possible to detect mental and psychological structures, individual and collective, even through the intermediary of clichés and stereotypes, that represent what is foreign.

In texts most of the ideas that the author shares with the social and cultural environment in which he lives are condensed. At the same time, the description of a

² Chevrel, Yves, *La letteratura comparata*, trad. di A. Cammarota, Roma, Carucci, 1991.

foreign country and its inhabitants brings into play the view that an author has of his own culture and the way in which he is placed there, that is his cultural identity.

1. Evolution of imagology

Imagology studies images in the comparative literature field, and defining its specific theory from the second half of the Twentieth century, has developed its own specific methodology under this term. However, this approach receives a first systematic legitimacy as early as the studies of Jean-Marie Carré with *Les écrivains et le mirage Français Allemand (1800-1940)*³ and in particular with the publication in 1951 by Marius-François Guyard, his pupil, of *La Littérature Comparée*.⁴ Guyard focused on literary images of otherness as a productive and useful branch of the future of comparative literature. In addition, the Preface signed by Carré shows that comparative literature is to be defined as the study of international spiritual relationships, relationships of literary works, inspirations and even the lives of writers belonging to different literatures.⁵

From these studies, there will emerge deep theoretical differences and Rene Wellek, an European moved to New York, will criticize Guyard's position and the French school in the essay "The Crisis of Comparative

³ Carré, Jean-Marie, *Les écrivains Français et le mirage Allemand, 1800-1940*, Paris, Boivin, 1947.

⁴ Guyard, Marius-François, *La Littérature Comparée*, 1951, Paris, PUF, 1978, chapitre VIII, "L'étranger tel qu'on le voit", p. 117 .

⁵ Carré, Jean-Marie, "Preface" to M. F. Guyard, *La Littérature comparée*, Paris, PUF, 1951.

Literature”,⁶ included in the volume *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature (ICLA)*, held in North Carolina in 1958, titled *Proceedings II*. Wellek considers illusory conceptions of nations “what Guyard called spiritual relationships”. He criticizes comparative literature studies when they invade “extrinsic” fields such as sociology, psychology or ethnopsychology. His main concern is of an intratextual analysis study in what is “intrinsic” to the literary text.

Consequently, on the one hand there will be the development of a comparative French-inspired methodology; on the other hand, since Wellek, an American school of comparative literature will emerge, which will originally join the “intrinsic literary model” of Wellek, but that will evolve with new approaches and expectations incorporating sociology, psychology and ethnopsychology.

There will, thereafter, be a sort of “evolution” of the American school with the birth of cultural studies. In 1961 Henry H. H. Remak in his essay “Comparative Literature. Its definition and Function” speaks for the first time of the “American School” in this way: “[...] there has most certainly been a very influential French tradition in comparative literature studies, and also a marked departure from this tradition in the United States...”⁷

⁶ Gnisci, Armando, Sinopoli, Franca (eds), *Manuale storico di letteratura comparata*, Roma, Meltemi, 1997.

⁷ Remak, Henry H. H., “Comparative Literature. Its definition and function”, in N. P. Stallknecht, H. Frenz (eds.), *Comparative Literature. Method and perspective*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP, 1961, p. 19.

Very important are also the studies conducted over decades by Earl Miner on the comparative analysis of the Western cultural system with those of the Middle and Far East, the so-called East-West Studies, that he theorized in the early Nineties. Moreover, Etienne Rene in the Sixties takes the distances from the orthodoxy of the French school, giving a substantial change to the field of comparative literature. In “*Comparaison n’est pas raison*” the qualities and skills of the “ideal comparatist” are described and it is also illustrated the way to a renewal of comparative literary studies:

“ [...] À la limite, et pour l’avenir prochain, le meilleur comparatiste serait celui qui, doué d’une vocation encyclopédique, et connaissant plusieurs langues parmi les plus importantes de celles qui s’écriront dans le monde vers l’an 2000, aurait de la beauté littéraire l’expérience intime. [...] En combinant les deux méthodes qui se croient endémie et qui, en réalité, doivent se compléter – l’enquête historique et la réflexion critique aboutirait comme fatalement à une poétique comparée”.⁸

An important impetus to the study of literary imagology will be given by the two main European imagology currents: the one developed between the Sixties-Seventies with the University of Aachen, on the analysis of images and mirages by Hugo Dyserinck; and the one born in the Seventies under the inspiration of Daniel-Henri Pageaux, who introduces a perspective on the *imagerie culturelle*. For both schools it is of paramount importance to distance the theoretical assumptions of the traditional positivist imagology.

⁸ Etienne, René, *Comparaison n’est pas raison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1963.

2. Cultural stereotypes

The term “stereotype” in the sense of image appears in the Twentieth century, in a study on the processes of formation of public opinion conducted by Walter Lippmann in 1922. He borrowed the term from the world of printing, where it was originally used to define both the printing process, as the mold used. Lippmann believed that this double sense of the word “stereotype” would metaphorically design the preconceived opinions, not captured on the basis of direct experience and poorly susceptible to change. They are, in fact, easy to use cognitive tools, which change or adjustment, however, is so complicated as to be virtually never implemented. According to Lippmann, in fact, the cognitive relationship with external reality is not direct, but mediated by mental images of the reality, each of us forms:

“[...] In the big, booming, buzzing confusion of the outside world we choose what that our culture has already defined for us and we tend to perceive what we have chosen in the form that our culture has stereotyped for us”.⁹

The stereotype is usually associated to bias and often used as its synonym, but this interpretation has to be criticized. In the context of the images of the other, bias indicates, in fact, a sociological and psychological phenomenon, the stereotype is, instead, a specific linguistic and literary expression.

Stereotypes are, therefore, images that filter the

⁹ Lippman, Walter, *Public opinion*, New York, Macmillan, 1922, p. 31.

information and that affect the perception of the individual causing him to simplify the reality that surrounds him. In this regard, it can be mentioned the literary production in the epistemological or fictionalized form developed in the aftermath of colonial European shipments to the Americas, meant to describe the natives of the often brutally conquered and occupied lands as “savages” to civilize and christianize.

That production is strongly imbued with stereotypes and prejudices against a reality and a cultural imagery hitherto totally unknown and, as such, deemed not to belong to Western socio-cultural identity. For example, the *Carta de Colón* sent by Columbus to Luis Santangel (treasurer of the Spanish court) in 1493 describes indigenous people this way:

“[...] The inhabitants of this island and all the others that I have come to know, run completely naked, men and women, such as their mother gave birth to them, even if some woman covers a portion of the body with a tree leaf or a piece of cotton to make this purpose. They have no iron or steel, nor weapons and are not anything suitable for this kind of thing, not that they are not performing, a beautiful complexion, but are extremely fearful. [...]”¹⁰

We must remember, however, that many of these reports were written with the expressed purpose of persuading the authorities to duly reward the services or, more simply, it was a purely celebrative production by the conquistadors. However, there was also a rich flowering of short stories aimed at somehow “unmask” the

¹⁰ Beonio-Brocchieri, Victor H., *Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, a new heaven and new earth: The letters the discovery*, Milan, Rosellina Archinto publisher, 1991, p. 19.

prejudices and stereotypes on these people: think for example of *Naufraios y de la relación Hizo que la jornada Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Florida Vaca* (1490? - 1559), sent to Charles V as a report of a shipwreck off the coast of Texas in which we clearly perceive the will of the survivor to report what he had experienced without the psychological subjection derived from the fact that its recipient was king. Cabeza de Vaca had lived in Texas for seven years with the nomadic tribes, sharing in all and for their life style. Particularly interesting is the story of the encounter of some Indios, who traveled with Cabeza de Vaca and a group of Spanish: the narrator, having reassured the Indios about the non-hostile intentions of its compatriots, will however be deceived by them and will come to assert: "They, in fact, had decided to attack the Indios, that we, instead, left with words of peace. The Christians did not serve any scruple to implement their plan [...]".¹¹

Any representation of cultural identity requires a comparison of the differences between the observer and the observed (and *vice versa*). This comparison gives rise to three different classes of stereotypes: The autostereotypes, which refer to the typical image of a member in a group; the eterostereotypes, which designate the typical images of members of one group over other groups; and finally the exostereotypes, which define the typical image that members of a group believe to be attributed to them by members of another group.

Hermann Bausinger recalled three functional qualities of stereotypes:

¹¹ Alvar, Nunez, *Cabeza de Vaca, y relación de la jornada Naufraios Hizo que a la Florida 1545*, trans. en., I Shipwrecks, Turin, Einaudi, 1989.

1. the ability to express a partial truth as generalizations of the actual characteristics;
2. the function of orientation that reduces the complexity of confused materials, thus facilitating communication;
3. the quality to create actual effects offering opportunities of identification.¹² In this case, instead of stereotype we talk about clichés. The sociologist C. Anton Zijderveld operates a distinction between stereotype and cliché, giving the first term a dimension of moral and metaphysical qualification and, as the cliché would be limited to being only an abstract reduction, an expressive formula, and applied to literature, a strict figure of speech.

3. Stereotypes and national identities

Common stereotypes include a variety of views of social groups based on ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion, politics, but also profession, social status, gender and wealth.

In the context of this initiative, the stereotypes that may be of interest are those related to ethnic and national identity.

Stereotypes offer good information and materials to form the image of a nation: national identity is composed of stereotypes. We must, however, not incur in generalizations: not only the public, but also scholars often confound stereotypes and clichés with the reality.

Moreover, the researcher Joep Leerssen observes with all reason that: “[...] Cultural identity is not an

¹² Bausinger, Hermann, “Name und Stereotype”, in H. Gerndt (ed.), *Stereotypvorstellungen Alltagsleben*, Munich, Münchner Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1988, pp. 13-19.

Hegelian idea that flies over and determines the mundane practices, but more a construct, a internalized collective image of themselves".¹³ The so-called identities, like stereotypes, are fictions, as Leerssen continues: "The model and the character that nations attribute to themselves and each other, follow literary imagination".¹⁴

With regard to national identities and national stereotypes, Leerssen points out that in imagology studies it is more important the recognition value of a given image than its content of truth. Texts discussing national characters often do not depend on an objective observation of reality, but on a pre-existing reputation. This means that the historical strength of certain stereotypes is based more on recognition value than on their claim of reality.¹⁵ Leerssen also identifies common structural similarities in the representation of different countries, listing the most common clichés:

"The north of any country is always more practical, efficient and individualistic than the south of that country (which is more idyllic, accommodating, etc..), but the same thing also happens among countries (the south of Germany becomes the north of the northern Italy, etc..) [...], the suburbs of any given area are more traditional, retrograde, natural, the center of that area is more

¹³ Leerssen, Joep, "As Others see, Among Others, Us. The Anglo-German Relationship in Context", in H. Husemann, (ed.), *As Others See Us. Anglo-German Perceptions*, Frankfurt a. M., Lang, 1994, p. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 79.

¹⁵ Leerssen, Joep, "National stereotypes in Literature. Canonicity, Characterization, Irony", in supplemento al numero 24 de *Il Confronto letterario*, Fasano, Schena, 1996, pp. 49-60.

cosmopolitan, modern, “cultural”. [...] The area in question may either be an entire country or a region of that country”.¹⁶

It is clear, therefore, as the interest of imagology studies for literary stereotypes results from the need of understanding through poetic and rhetorical strategies the text conveys, the imagery of a group against another group and, consequently, also its own imagery.

In this regard, I would like to mention the questions that were addressed to the speakers at the Seventh Conference of Leiden, held in October 1993 on *Ethnic Stereotypes and National Purity in Life and Letters*:

“[...] What role do such stereotypes have on literature? How are they created? From what materials constructed are they? What purpose ethnic and national stereotypes do need? Can it ever be useful to one? They are avoidable? Can we live without them? What can be done about the deleterious effects they may be thought to produce? [...] How are reflected in these stereotypes and reinforced by literature? Should literature and can do anything about them?”¹⁷

The conference proceedings were collected in the volume *Beyond Pug's Tour* and divided in sections. After an initial article and two introductions on the sociological and psychological currents that are the fundamentals of ethnic and national stereotypes, there

¹⁶ Leerssen, Joep, “National Identity and National Stereotype”, Images on the website, <<http://cf.hum.uva.nl/images/>>, 2001, p. 2.

¹⁷ Barfoot, C.C., *Beyond Pug's Tour National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*, Amsterdam-Atlanta, Editions Rodopi BV, 1997, p.1.

are a number of articles that explore the way in which national stereotypes are portrayed in the first modern period, particularly in travel literature. It is, then, considered the influence of colonial expansion on stereotypes and how British, Italians and Germans have fought and still continue to fight the problem of their stereotypes.

Very interesting is the article “Beyond Pug’s Tour: Stereotyping our ‘Fellow Creatures’” by C.C. Barfoot, editor of the volume. He reports a funny and instructive conversation among Maggie Tulliver, a nine year old girl, and Luke, the forty years old head miller, all characters in the novel *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot. Maggie shows an innocent and curious interest about “our fellowcreatures” (the inhabitants of Europe) and wonders of Luke’s indifference to know more than he needs to know. She invites him to read *Pug’s Tour Through Europe*, a children’s book, published in 1824, that shows, thanks to the help of numerous illustrations, national, cultural and social stereotypes of the peoples of Europe.

“[...] There’s’ Pug’s Tour of Europe - That would tell you all about the different sorts of people in the world, and if you did not understand the reading, the pictures would you help - they show the looks and ways of the people and what they do. There are the Dutchmen, very fat, and smoking, you know - and one sitting on a barrel”.¹⁸

It is clear, therefore, that only if we are conscious of the inevitability of stereotypes and their dangers, we

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 5.

may refuse to live with them or be influenced by them. We need to know their strength and their potentiality to interpret the way we perceive our lives and the lives of others, but at the same time, we must refuse to succumb to their spell! Literature has been and continues to be rich in ethnic and national stereotypes, but we must take into account that very often these images are used by authors as rhetorical and poetic strategies.¹⁹

Stereotypes, despite the most often take on negative connotations, become useful tools to practice a confrontation and encounter between far distant cultural imaginaries, seemingly incompatible with each other. As French comparatist Daniel-Henri Pageaux asserts literature should be a tool to “meet with the foreign culture,” to open a “dialogue of cultures”.²⁰

¹⁹ From a purely stylistic and poetic point of view stereotypes may have the following functions:

stylistic function: stereotypes are accurate stylistic features that draw basically two types of approaches: -Regulatory approach: they use ready-made phrases, clichés, to avoid the “neutral” style. Think of Edgar Allan Poe, very close to the Gothic genre from which it inherits certain themes and ideas (the taste for the mystery, the ravine, the distressing), developing and investigating the psychological aspects among personal obsessions and nightmares: of course, books of this type could not use a “neutral” style; -Structuralist approach: interest in clichés and stereotypes for their operational functions, their literary effect, from the aesthetic choice of the author. In this sense, the cliché is used to broaden the discourse with intertextual references.

poetic function: interest in clichés and stereotypes because of their semantic and intertextual significance, through which we trigger specific mechanisms of production of meaning.

²⁰ Pageaux, Daniel-Henri, *La lyre d'Amphion. De Thèbes à La Havane. Pour une poésie sans frontières*, Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001, p. 9.

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