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Focus: European Literature

European Literature:[1] Simply a Higher Degree of Universality?[2]

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One of the most difficult and uncertain areas of research offered the historian of literature today is the attempt to define 'European literature' as a corpus and an object of literary and/or historical analysis. The various efforts of the past few years – in the form of anthologies as well as histories of literature – usually remain torn between a unitary presupposition that seems to be the only acceptable political-historical way of justifying the body of European literature and an irreducibly composite – not to say heterogeneous – reality that is not amenable to the representations of Europe as reduced to this superficial unity. If we are to reflect on the modalities and specificities of such a historical undertaking – which has so few equivalents in the world that it is all the harder to model – and shake off political models and representations, it seems to me that we need to work from another hypothesis. One of the few trans-historical features that constitutes Europe, in effect, one of the only forms of both political and cultural unity – one that is paradoxical but genuine – that makes of Europe a coherent whole, is none other than the conflicts[3] and competitions that pitted Europe's national literary spaces against one another in relentless and ongoing rivalry. Starting from this hypothesis, we would then have to postulate that, contrary to commonly accepted political representations, the only possible literary history of Europe would be the story of the rivalries, struggles and power relations between these national literatures. As a consequence, rather than a unity that remains if not problematic at least far from being achieved, it would no doubt be better to speak of an ongoing literary unification of Europe, in other words a process that occurs, occurred and is still occurring – paradoxically – through these struggles. This upside-down history would trace the models and counter-models, the powers and dependences, the impositions and the resistances, the linguistic rivalries, the literary devices and genres regarded as weapons in these specific, perpetual and merciless struggles. It would be the history of literary antagonisms, battles and revolts.

History, literature and politics

First of all, I would like to propose taking a brief look at the raison d'être of the 2007 ESF-Conference in Vadstena, Sweden, that gave rise to the present article. I was struck to see that the reasons offered for the invitation to come together and discuss the question of literary Europe were of a clearly political nature: the symposium proposal[4] cited, among other things, the recent enlargement of Europe, Turkey's controversial entry into the EU and the French and Dutch 'No' votes on the European Constitution referendum. These events are all of an institutional and political order. However, they were presented as obvious reasons for collectively asking ourselves whether such a thing as a European literature exists. The request for an expert opinion – whose legitimacy in its own order I do not contest – was conceived and formulated in explicitly and exclusively political terms. This fact alone seems to me a significant symptom – or a patent indication – of the true state of the discussion concerning the object 'European literature'.

The terms in which this short text was couched imply, in effect, that we were being asked to think about what European literature could contribute to the construction of Europe, whether the very idea of literature could be of any help in constructing this political and economic entity: in sum, could European political institutions use our conclusions or draw any authority from our discussions to evoke the cultural unity, the great works of literature and the 'unique heritage' constituted by European literature? In other words, we, as literary scholars and historians, were being asked to participate in our own way in a properly political process of construction, far from the necessities or the logic of the professional, methodological and theoretical discussions proper to our field.

I stress this fact, not to condemn it but in order to make it the starting point of my reflection. It merely shows precisely where the discussion stands.

It so happens that in my earlier work[5] I showed that all of the national zones, all of the literary spaces that have arisen throughout the world – since the first European spaces in the 16th century – made their appearance following an injunction, a claim or an affirmation of political-national identity. If we want to describe something like laws applying to the formation of new spaces or new literatures, we always find that a new claim to the right of a literature to exist originates from a connection between a demand for recognition or the construction of a nation in progress and a demand for recognition of a literature. In other words, when a national space emerges and demands the right to political existence and independence, it proclaims at the same time that it possesses – that is 'nationalizes' – a cultural, linguistic, historical and literary heritage.[6] Thus, in 1882, Ernest Renan declared that one of the two constitutive principles of a nation was the 'shared possession of a rich legacy of memories'.[7] It is as though

the two foundations were mutually dependent: there can be no nation without a collective heritage and no heritage without appropriation by the nation.

Kafka, as we know, was one of the first to formulate, in his famous diary entry of 25 December 1911, the inevitable and constitutive link between emerging literatures and demands for a national identity. In the Prague of 1900–1910, he was thinking of the Czech and Yiddish literatures, which he terms '*Literaturen der Kleinen Nationen*', translated by Joseph Kresh in Max Brod's edition as 'literatures of small peoples', as opposed to the 'great', that is German, literature that dominated the region. He describes this phenomenon as: 'the connection [of literatures] with politics'.[8] And he adds in the same entry, that the relationship of small nations to their literature is characterized by 'the pride which a nation gains from a literature of its own and the support it is afforded in the face of the hostile surrounding world […] the acknowledgment of literary events as objects of political solicitude […].' All of this results, he writes, in the 'dissemination of literature within a country on the basis of political slogans.'[9] With an eye to analyzing a literary space, the interest of such a text is that Kafka, far from merely describing familiar literary worlds,[10] uses his practical and intuitive knowledge of two dominated literatures as a starting point for what could be called a 'step-up in generality'. At the end of this descriptive text, he sets out '[a] character sketch of the literature of small peoples', which is not indebted to specific cases but is an attempt, as is the rest of his text, to generalize these features; in other words, to formulate a theory of what he sees to be the mutual and constituent dependence between 'literatures of small peoples' and national struggles.[11] I therefore think Kafka can be regarded as one of the first who came close to theorizing this dependence between these two agencies.

It seems to me that several consequences can be drawn from this historical and structural law:

(1) The initial dependence between the appearance of this new object held up for our consideration – 'European literature' – and the political institutions thus tends to show that, paradoxically, the European literary world can be regarded as a space in the making, in other words that it does not actually exist as such on the world literary stage, that it cannot yet be recognized as an autonomous totality in terms of literature. This is indicated by the fact, among others, that there are still few specific literary authorities, very few publishers,[12] writers, literary awards juries (save those that result from political and institutional instigation or funding[13]) that claim as their sole identity the fact of belonging to Europe, as well as by the fact that anthologies of European literature – although growing in number – are not yet widespread or required reading in the various school systems of the European Union.[14]

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(2) Of course, I know full well that the European literary space is one of the oldest zones of cultural and literary production, one of the best endowed with literary capital, one of the most prestigious and most influential, and one of the world's most powerful and effective centres of literary consecration. I am also aware that it may seem at first paradoxical – not to say contradictory – to treat the whole of Europe as a space-in-the-making that is grappling with the inventory and accumulation of its resources. As we know, the European literary capitals are national resources, dependent on national languages and school systems, which rely exclusively on national institutions for their inventory, maintenance and reproduction. And that is why they have been the object of many rivalries during international or inter-European struggles. Measuring and evaluating the volume of a capital that has been so well maintained by each of the national spaces in Europe should not, in terms of national logic, be a big problem. But this is true only if we are content with a 'multinational' definition, in which the national spaces are simply set side by side. But when we speak of 'European literature' we are in fact talking about the potential appearance of a new political-literary entity that cannot be reduced to the simple sum of all the national literary heritages, but which would instead assemble all of the European literary resources into a whole, thus 'denationalizing' them, as it were. In which case, we would have to speak of a 'denational' space, to use a neologism coined by Ezra Pound in the early 1920s.[15]

(3) Of course, since the 18th century there have been a number of well-known attempts to describe and define a history of European literature: Schlegel, Babits,[16] Curtius,[17] Van Tieghem,[18] Paul Hazard[19] among others; and then in 1967 the important initiative of the International Comparative Literature Association.[20] But as these 'Europeanized' goods had not at the time really been collectively inventoried as a European production, had not been celebrated, or adopted and appropriated outside their national borders, or legitimized (in particular by the different school systems), this capital could not actually be assembled and accumulated. In other words, these attempts were in a sense premature: since they did not accompany a process of political unification, they were unable to constitute a collective heritage that was accepted or even claimed as such. And that is why we are forced to acknowledge that today, despite all appearances, we are seeing only the first signs of the emergence of a new 'European' literary space. But this state is changing in accordance with the law stated above. Indeed, in tandem

with the political construction of Europe, a literary construction is slowly forging ahead. In the last ten or so years, we have seen the appearance of a phenomenon with an altogether new finality: the inventory of a new kind of literary capital defined by its European and trans-national character. Today, in many zones of the European literary space, semi-conscious attempts can be observed to amass the literary heritage without regard for national and linguistic divisions. In the case of the French language alone for example, in the last few years we have seen new kinds of works – notably anthologies of European literatures – appear. The most important of these, for the French language, seems to me to be the monumental 14-volume 'Patrimoine littéraire européen', initiated and published in Brussels.[21] Beginning with the Jewish and Christian Biblical traditions and ending with the globalization of Europe, it styles itself an 'inventory' of 'Europe's literary treasures'.[22] This phenomenon should obviously be compared with what the historians of 19th-century European cultural nationalism – amongst others Hobsbawm,[23] Anderson[24] and Thiesse[25] – have described: namely the key role played by scholars in the first stages of the accumulation of literary resources in all of the emerging national spaces.[26] I think that the Vadstena Conference should be analyzed with an analogous logic in mind: as a group of historians, specialists on various cultural and linguistic areas who have come together to confront propositions, objections and argumentations concerning European literature. It can be seen as one of the most traditional ways of collecting and inventorying this patrimony, which, in the case of Europe, includes not only novels, poetry and plays but also the full range of literary criticism and theory.

(4) And yet the fact that the European space is made up of old, rich, national literary worlds changes our problematic. Among other things, it means that, unlike many currently emerging literary spaces, each national space within the overall European space enjoys a great deal of autonomy, and that each small world of literature in Europe, confined within its national borders, is free – at least relatively – from political dependencies and imperatives. In other words, in each separate country in Europe, politics and literature operate relatively independently of each other (although differently and differentially in each case). It is only at the higher, supra-national level of the European Union that political and literary issues tend to be conflated, thus bringing us back to the heteronomy characteristic of emerging spaces described above. Or rather, these questions tend to be conflated simply by virtue of the political unification of Europe. The relative

independence of the two spheres inside each national space no doubt explains, at least partially, why there has not (or not yet) been any genuine collective demand stipulating the urgent need to recognize a literature that is specifically European. But it seems to me that this particularity might help us to distance ourselves, as historians or literary theorists, from a political demand that could easily instrumentalize us if we are not careful. At the outset of this gigantic undertaking, which will of necessity be long, hard and controversial, should we not therefore make independence our first rule of conduct? And should we not do this in the very name of our concern for European literature and the need to provide it with the means for an autonomous existence? Among many other things, we could, for example, refuse to let the question of the borders of European literature, in other words the legitimacy of linguistic-cultural boundaries, be formulated in political terms and for political ends. We could ask ourselves whether the guiding force behind the interest manifested by political authorities for European 'cultural identity' might be not to draw up a list of the candidates to be included as legitimate members of Europe but to stigmatize and thus to designate those to be excluded.[27]

(5) If we ever manage to set in place the conditions and reflexivity necessary for developing such a project, the near-historic opportunity offered us will be tremendously exciting: it will mean working as a group to bring a new sort of literary history into existence, in other words developing paths for accumulating a wholly new kind of literary capital; it will mean thinking 'in vivo' about how to define a new body of literature that aspires to union but lays no claim to national unity or linguistic unification, in view of concrete, practical ends; in short, it will mean inventing 'denational' ways of thinking in order to analyze and to understand the Europe of literature.

Suggestions for a future history of European literature

From this perspective, I would like to set out a few trail markers for thinking about the conditions in which a history of European literature would be possible; in so doing, I am clearly in no way claiming to resolve the huge difficulties entailed in such an undertaking, and as amply laid out by all the participants in the Vadstena Conference.

It seems to me that two main solutions are proposed today (which are not far removed from the space of discussion that is presently growing up also around 'world literature'). One describes European literature as the collection or juxtaposition of already constituted national literatures. In this case the problem is to

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find a means of gathering them together or bringing them to coincide so as to construct the object 'history of European literature'. This hypothesis emphasizes the difficulty of coordinating the chronologies and aesthetic trends, which are perpetually out of step.[28] The other describes European literature as the set of texts (and authors) which surpass definition in terms of nations and can be defined – by virtue of their zone of circulation, their reception beyond the original national borders, their influence, the number of times they have been translated – as trans-national and therefore as 'European', as opposed to 'national' texts.

It seems to me that it is possible to reflect on the limits and the specificities of European literature and on the ways it functions only if we first attend to the literary space that enables these texts to appear, a space that takes in the entire world. According to the definition I suggested in other studies, this world literary space is a configuration of relations formed by the positions that writers, on the one hand, and national spaces, on the other, occupy within it and by the relations of these different positions (individual and national) with each other. Aside from the national units, which are relatively autonomous entities, we also find intermediate, supra-national structures, which manage to accumulate resources on a linguistic or cultural basis. These are linguistic areas, linguistic-cultural areas and supra-national areas such as, for example, the Hispano-American space. Each is organized according to a hierarchy, and it reproduces the same structure of domination as the world space, only on a smaller scale, and thus perpetuates the opposition between one or several dominant centres, and dominated regions less endowed with specific capital.

According to this thesis, if the European literary space exists, it cannot be conceived as an autarchic whole, describable by and for itself. It is dependent on the world literary structure and on its position in it; and therefore requires a double description:

(1) of its relative position in the world space, and
(2) of its internal workings insofar as it too is organized according to a hierarchical structure governed and ordered by internal power relations.

(1) As far as its most autonomous regions are concerned, the European space has the particularity of being one of the major legislative centres of the literary planet: its capitals – in particular London and Paris, but Frankfurt as well – concentrate the greatest number of consecrating authorities awarding the most sought-after – that is to say the most effective – certificates of literary recognition. It is therefore in Europe that what I have called the 'fabric of the universal' operates, that is to say the machinery for recognizing a literary work as 'autonomous'. By virtue of history alone, the European capitals of literature concentrate

the greatest power in the world of letters. Europe thus enjoys the particularity of being a factory for producing a non-national literature, thereby enabling the entire world space to function. That is why I believe it is impossible to envisage a history of European literature without at the same time taking into account the entire structure of world literature.

(2) From the standpoint of the internal configuration of literary Europe, and whatever geographical – that is to say political – boundaries are assigned to it, the point that seems crucial to me is that we are talking about a strongly hierarchized whole, about a formation in which powerful effects of a specific domination are at work. In other terms, in this whole, the same kind of power relations are at work as in other parts of the literary world.

It is obviously this second point that is going to allow me to outline the question of literary history. In effect, unlike the usual golden legend of literature – belief in the neutrality of translations, in the inoffensive character of 'literary relations', in all texts and authors having equal access to consecration, in prestige and universal recognition, in the necessary meeting of great minds and great works in a flawless sky of pure ideas and texts – the idea I propose to place at the origin of the very notion of History of European literature is not only that of the differences that have been stressed – and rightly so – during the Vadstena Conference, but that of struggle, power relations and inequality.

The hypothesis of a European literary space implies in effect that this is an unequal world, formed and shaped by and through constant violence (in a soft form, to be sure, but relentless nevertheless), characterized by brutal impositions, denied but nonetheless powerful ascendancies, constitutive relations of domination, which imply battles, resistances, uprisings and revolutions. Confronted with these strange forms of domination, writers – at any rate the most lucid ones, that is to say often the most dominated and, often because of this, the most innovative – have developed a set of (aesthetic, theoretical, linguistic) strategies, all of which are ways of waging a literary struggle against these forms of literary dependence. In this perspective, literary history would be, not the history of writers (conceived as biography) nor the history of texts, whether they bear the label 'national' or 'European'; instead it could be, at least in part, the history of the concrete and visible effects of the domination exerted on writers and the various national spaces – among which the history of strategies of resistance could be central. In a way, we can regard these specific struggles to transform a position or to reverse a power relation as paradoxical vectors of the ongoing unification of the European literary space. At the same time, we come to understand that, in this type of history, we do not need to choose between the

national and the European levels: dependency constantly affects all kinds of literary production (but especially the most dominated), whatever their zone of consecration or recognition.

I cannot go into specifics here, as I then would have to simplify too much to be convincing. Let me just say that the kind of European research I evoke here could be the simple inclusion, in both the interpretation of singular works and in the overview of national literary histories, of inter- or trans-national relations of power operating in the European space. Commenting and analysing a portion of the literary texts regarded as 'European' in terms of this structure of dominance would have nothing to do with a simple 'contextualization'. The effects of power relations are not a matter of exchange or of simple influence. Not only do they affect contents, they also stamp their mark on stylistic choices, text forms, privileged literary genres, and so forth. That is why a study of the effect of literary domination on the writing of texts itself must reconstruct the relationship – admiration, rivalry or rejection – that the texts under study have with each other at the national, European and international levels. It is in this sense that focusing on this specific structure of domination, considered as one of the forces driving literary history, could be one way to a true history of European literature, one that would regard the discordances, disagreements and discrepancies between national literatures or between literary movements as being potentially at least as fertile as the concordances and similarities.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the ordinary and tacit idea that often lies behind the object 'European literature' is that of some unity which historians are supposed to find behind and beneath the differences and the centuries of antagonisms and divisions that have made Europe. On the contrary, I think that taking into account the literary power relations that have informed the history of European literature is one of the surest means of rendering the paradoxical literary unification of Europe that has come about through these specific battles. In view of the blind spots and the limits of strictly national histories of literature, this kind of European literary history may perhaps also be one of the ways of attaining simply a paradoxical but higher degree of universality.

Notes and References

1. The present essay, as do the other essays making up the 'Focus' on 'Literature for Europe,' all result from a European Science Foundation-Linnköping University Conference held in Vadstena, Sweden, in May 2007, and sponsored also by the Academia Europaea.
2. I am merely sketching a few trails of reflection for developing a transnational literary history. 'Life-size' studies on these subjects would obviously require much more detailed, collective and transnational research. As I worked alone I have often taken a Franco-centric view in this article; I am fully aware of this.

3. See among others C. Tilly (1995) *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers). E. Terray (1993) 'Le Conflit': L'Expérience européenne de la guerre, *L'Esprit de l'Europe*, vol. 2 (Paris: Flammarion), pp. 244–267.
4. I hope the organizers will forgive me for these few preliminary considerations, which describe a state of the discussion about European literature and by no means question the terms of the invitation to the symposium.
5. M. Debevoise (trans.) (2005) *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard University Press), esp. pp. 34–44 and 181–200.
6. See in particular O. Löfgren (1989) The nationalization of culture, *National Culture as Process*, *Ethnologica Europea*, **XIX**(1), pp. 5–25, quoted by A.-M. Thiesse (1999) *La Création des Identités Nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil), p. 14.
7. E. Renan (1882) 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation'? Lecture given at the Sorbonne, 11 March, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1947), t.I, section 'Discours et Conférences'. On the same subject, see also H. Schulze (1996) *Staat und Nation in der Europäischen Geschichte* (München: C.H. Beck) (English translation, *States, Nations and Nationalism: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)), esp. chapter 4. A.-M. Thiesse (1999) *La Création des Identités Nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil), esp. part 2, pp. 23–155.
8. F. Kafka (1948) *Diaries 1910–1913*, edited by Max Brod, translated by Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken), pp. 194.
9. F. Kafka (1948) *Diaries 1910–1913*, edited by Max Brod, translated by Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken), pp. 191, 194.
10. We know that, even if he did not read Yiddish, he had garnered a great deal of information about the emerging Yiddish literature, especially from his friend Itzhak Löwy. See among others E. T. Beck (1971) *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on His Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).
11. F. Kafka (1948) *Diaries 1910–1913*, edited by Max Brod, translated by Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken), pp. 194–195.
12. See A. Prassdoff (1998) 'L'Edition européenne, solidarités et rivalités', *Précis de littérature européenne*, edited by Béatrice Didier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 63–67.
13. Among the many initiatives, we note: in France, the highly official 'Prix Littéraire Européen', created in 1981, and awarded, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the Association des Ecrivains de Langue Française (ADELF) – which gives some idea of its true European nature; the 'Prix Littéraire Européen Madeleine Zepter', created in 2004, annually rewards a novel by an author from a member country of the European Union that has been translated and published in France, or by a European Union author writing in French – which gives some idea of the French interest in European languages. It is worth noting that 2008 saw the appearance of an official 'European Union prize for literature', organized and funded by the European Commission. The 'Austrian State Prize for

European Literature' [*Österreichischem Staatpreis für Europäische literatur*], established in Vienna in 1965, also known as the 'European Literary Award' [Europäischer Literaturpreis] rewards European writers and is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Art. It could be considered to be one of the most genuinely European literary awards. But it, too, is a paradoxically national award, in other words attributed and financed by one of the states of the European Union.

14. See in particular J. Dugast (1998) Peut-on enseigner les littératures européennes? *Précis de littérature européenne*, pp. 89–93.
15. In his literary criticism articles, Pound suggested in 1921 that the distinction could be made in literature between 'denationalism' – that is, the critique of the very idea of nation – and 'internationalism – the ties between countries. E. Pound (1921) 'Paris Letter', December. *Dial*, in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), vol. IV, pp. 210–211.
16. M. Babits (1934) *Az europai irodalom története* (Budapest: Nyugat).
17. E. R. Curtius (1948) *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Berne) (English translation: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953)).
18. P. Van Tieghem (1969) *Le Romantisme dans la littérature européenne* (Paris: Albin Michel). (1935) *Répertoire chronologique des Littératures modernes* (Paris, Droz).
19. P. Hazard (1961 [1935]) *La Crise de la conscience européenne* (Paris: Fayard) (English translation: *The European Mind, the Critical Years, 1680–1715* (London, Hollis and Carter, 1952)).
20. ICLA/AILC, *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages,* 1973. Thirty volumes have appeared to date, the last devoted to European romantic prose: G. Gillespie, M. Engel and B. Dieterle (eds) (2008) *Romantic Prose Fiction* (Amsterdam: Benjamins). See also A. Marino (1998) Histoire de l'idée de 'littérature européenne. *Précis de littérature européenne*, edited by Béatrice Didier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 13–17.
21. J.-C. Polet (ed.) (2000) *Patrimoine littéraire européen. Anthologie en langue française* (Bruxelles: De Boeck et Larcier), 14 vols. See also B. Didier (ed.) (1998) *Précis de littérature européenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France). A. Benoit-Dusausoy and G. Fontaine (eds) (1992) *Lettres européennes: Histoire de la littérature européenne* (Paris: Hachette) (reprinted by De Boeck, Bruxelles, 2007). C. Biet and J.-P. Brighelli (eds) (1993) *Mémoires d'Europe. Anthologie des Littératures européennes* (Paris: Gallimard), collection Folio, 3 vols. Also the series 'Les Classiques du Monde', Editions Zoé, Genève.
22. In this symbolic domain *par excellence*, the use of economic vocabulary – heritage, wealth or treasures – is inevitable and emphasizes the fact that we are indeed talking about the accumulation of a capital.
23. E. Hobsbawm (1990) *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
24. B. Anderson (1983) *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso), esp. chapter 9.

25. A.-M. Thiesse (1999) *La Création des Identités Nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil).
26. A.-M. Thiesse (1999) *La Création des Identités Nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil), pp. 64–66.
27. See for instance J. Weisgerber (1992) L'Héritage extra-européen. A. Benoit-Dusausoy and G. Fontaine (eds) (1992) *Lettres européennes: Histoire de la littérature européenne* (Paris: Hachette), pp. 15–19 (reprinted by De Boeck, Bruxelles, 2007).
28. On this subject, see in particular Y. Chevrel (1998) Peut-on écrire une histoire de la littérature européenne? *Précis de littérature européenne*, edited by Béatrice Didier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 19–36.

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