Imagology: History and method

JOEP LEERSSEN

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 acritical 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 Völkertafel 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 *Volksgeist*. 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-