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Medieval Literatures as a Challenge to Comparative Literature: A Reflection on Non-National Cultural Formations

Le plus grand tort des philologues, c'est de croire que la littérature a été faite pour des philologues.

Robert Guette

The first part of the title of my paper evokes the famous inaugural address Hans Robert Jauss (1976) delivered at the University of Constance, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*, inasmuch as, in the history of the problematic relationships between Comparative Literature and medieval literature as a field of study, the role played by the disciplines of his argument is in no way a minor one, as can be seen in the reorientation from a historicist to a theoretical pole experienced by Comparative Literature.¹ This problematic status which medieval literature involves for Comparative Literature is symbolically illustrated by the lack, for the moment, of a comparative medieval literary history under the auspices of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). In fact, when in 1989 Jean Weisgerber described the principles of this historiographical project, he pointed out that "it aims to trace the far-reaching changes undergone by literatures in European languages *from the end of the Middle Ages*

¹ The original title of Jauss' inaugural address "Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Literaturgeschichte?" changed into *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* in its subsequent publication in 1970. Actually, my title evokes the English translation of this last version (*Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*) by Timothy Bahti, although I do not agree with the translation of *Literaturwissenschaft* as *Literary Theory*.

until the 20th century” (1993, 408; emphasis added, my translation), which is a symptomatic statement of the unequal interest aroused by the endophone and exophone processes in medieval Europe in contrast to those in modern and contemporary Europe.

Medieval literatures as a challenge to Comparative Literature

The causes of these problematic relationships between Comparative Literature and medieval literature as a field of study belong to various closely-linked spheres, such as the epistemological weakness attributed to Comparative Literature, its abstruse academic integration both inside and outside the field of Literary Studies, which caused it to be methodologically cloistered in the contactological formula of *rappports de fait* during several decades, or the very existence of a translinguistical discipline, which by definition has a supposed comparative intention, devoted to medieval literature (Medievalism, *Romanistik*). I have dealt with these topics elsewhere (Domínguez 2001) in terms of academic historiography, so I will not return to them here, although recalling the climactic moments of approach and separation between Comparativism and medieval literature may not prove inopportune.

In the period of academic foundation of this discipline in France towards the end of the first third of 19th century, medieval literatures made up its first field of application, as is testified by Abel-François Villedieu's *Tableau de la littérature au Moyen Âge en France, en Italie, en Espagne et en Angleterre* (1875) or Jean-Jacques Ampère's "De la littérature française dans ses rapports avec les littératures étrangères au Moyen Âge" (1867), a lecture that resulted in his unfinished *Histoire de la littérature française au Moyen Âge comparée aux littératures étrangères* (1841). However, since the end of the 19th century a gradual renunciation of comparative research of medieval literatures has begun, Joseph Texte's being one of its first programmatic statements. In this regard the title of his inaugural address at the University of Lyon ("L'Influence des littératures germaniques sur la littérature française depuis la Renaissance") is most telling, as it has a chronological restriction argued according to the following terms: "The great revolution of the 15th century is the indubitable origin of the comparative method. It had as a consequence the differentiation of literatures, their nationalization, ... the

constitution of their aesthetic personalities" (1998: 23; my translation).² Such a restriction was refuted by Jean Frappier with a lecture entitled "Littérature médiévale et littérature comparée: Problèmes de recherche et de méthode," reproduced without any change fourteen years later in the first volume of the *Grundriß der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, which stands as good proof of the limited impact of his *compréhension élargie du comparatisme littéraire* (Frappier 1972, 139), as confirmed by the organization of the *Grundriß* along national lines in contrast to the original comparative and genological approach planned by Jaus and Erich Köhler (see Gumbrecht 1996).³

With regard to various factors that share in this problematic history, my intention is just to initiate a very preliminary discussion on the ontological problem that medieval literature poses to Comparative Literature. According to Benedict Anderson, the first nationalist wave in Europe in the 19th century is closely linked to what the author calls the *philological-lexicographic revolution* for the reason that it "created, and gradually spread, the conviction that languages (in Europe at least) were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups ... and moreover that these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place in a fraternity of equals" (1996, 84). Comparative Grammar would have contributed to this because the discipline was "central to the shaping of nineteenth-century European nationalisms in complete contrast to the situation in the Americas between 1770 and 1830" (Anderson 1996, 71). Even though the importance of these studies to the building of national consciousness is indisputable, I must point out, all the same, that Anderson neglects the part played by another comparative discipline (Comparative

2 The materials for the inaugural address in Lyon were picked up in "Les Études de littérature comparée à l'étranger et en France," *Revue sur l'enseignement* 13 (1893): 253-69. I quote this work through the Spanish translation (Texte 1998). This methodological and, to a large extent, axiological principle was taken on by Paul Van Tieghem in several works, such as the first programmatic handbook of the discipline, in which he states that he "comprendrait, à ne considérer que le monde occidental, les relations des littératures grecque et latine entre elles, puis la dette des littératures modernes, depuis le moyen âge" (1946, 57), or his own contribution to a *histoire littéraire internationale*, symptomatically entitled *Précis d'histoire littéraire de l'Europe depuis la Renaissance* (1965).

3 Frappier delivered his lecture in the II Congress of the ICLA (Chapel Hill, 1958), where René Wellek complained about the epistemological weakness of the positivist and factualist paradigm.

Literature) with regard to nationalist movements in this era — in fact, the era of its academic foundation.⁴ While Comparative Grammar paid attention to the relationships between languages in order to classify them into families and reconstruct lost stages (proto-languages), Comparative Literature devoted itself to the research of the relationships between literatures, provided that their frontiers were those set by nation-states, not in an upward perspective (*proto-literatures*, including medieval, were regarded as the object of study of Folklore and Mythology), but in a downward one, that is, with special attention to national idiosyncracies and to the establishment of national directions of literary influence within the European context.⁵

If we consider this research programme in the light of the chronological restriction upheld by Texte (*depuis la Renaissance*), it will be obvious that the ontological problem medieval literature poses to Comparative Literature is the result of its being not a national cultural formation, but a non-national one. An objection to this assertion could come from the aforementioned initial alliance between Comparativism and medieval literature, represented by Villemain's and Ampère's comparative histories. Nevertheless, such an objection seems to be disproved by the fact that the first comparative interest in medieval literature is linguistic and not fundamentally literary, a consequence of the above-mentioned ontological problem that resides in the heterogeneity/homogeneity paradox. Medieval literatures are considered national according to linguistic criteria (on account of their rupture with the Latin matrix), but not according to cultural criteria (precisely on account of their dependence upon that matrix, a perspective whose leading exponent is Ernst Robert Curtius with his *Europäische*

4 This implies that Anderson's thesis on the difference between American and European stages should be restricted. Consider, for example, the international mission contemplated by Chilean Daniel Barros Grez for literatures in Latin American Republics.

5 Regarding the inclusion of medieval literatures among *proto-literatures*, this passage by Texte is eloquent: "Le folklore attend encore le maître qui lui fixera une méthode et lui donnera de sûres règles critiques. Mais, dès à présent, on peut affirmer que l'étude comparative des monuments de la littérature populaire est entrée dans la science. Je n'en citerai pour preuve, — et simplement à titre d'exemple, — que le livre de M. J. Bédier sur les *Véhicules* du moyen âge français" (1968, xxvi).

Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter).⁶ The non-existence of any *national* variant of medieval literatures should not, however, be concluded from this refutation, since our more usual idea of these literatures is altogether a national idea, an *invention* (in the sense used by Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) projected from the historiographical canon in the area of systemic auto-descriptions.

A quick revision of transnational historiographical models — which, however, are not necessarily always comparative — applied to medieval literatures (national retro-definition, linguistic, genological, and topical models, this last one in the sense of *historischen Topik*) allows us to highlight the following two factors. Firstly, all of them introduce into the medieval literary phenomenon an unacknowledged element of reification.⁷ Thus, the linguistic model assumes that for literary representation the linguistic cartography is much more accurate than the political one of the nation-states. Even though this is undeniable, we cannot conclude from it a complete contiguity between linguistic and literary maps.⁸ The genological model operates from a retrospective organization as well, in view of the fact that its structuring of medieval literatures is imposed from the generic triad of modern literatures, supplemented with an atomist inventory of medieval genres willingly accepted as *literary* (chronicles, charters, geographical, medical, or theological works, etc.). And the topical model, on the assumption of the homogeneity of Latin culture, postulates a relationship of subsidiarity of vernacular literatures to that of Latin, which relegates them to the traductological status of *belles infidèles*. Secondly, the fact that the national criterion is not exclusively limited to the first model deserves

6 Thus one may explain that the first and only volume published of Ampère's *Histoire de la littérature française au Moyen Âge comparée aux littératures étrangères* consists of a history of the formation of French language. In the preface he states: "Comme de la décomposition de la langue latine est sortie la langue française, de même la littérature française au moyen-âge est sortie de la littérature latine antérieure, et s'en est détachée et départie graduellement; ce départ graduel s'est opéré diversement dans les divers genres littéraires" (1841, ix).

7 I omit momentarily anything related to the national model as this model will be discussed in depth later on.

8 Consider Latin as a second chirographically controlled language since the 6th-8th centuries or vernacular koines with a genological specialization. For an overview of the implications of chirographically controlled languages see Ong 1984.

attention, as it extends to the linguistic and the genological ones by acting as subparameter on several occasions. There are even epigones of Curtius who pay attention to the national modifications of rhetorical and poetical topics.

This same omnipresence of national retro-definition of medieval literatures has not been entirely alien to the theory of comparatistics, as can be perceived in Dionýz Ďurišin's theory of interliterary process. That author, as a result of considering national literature as the smallest unit of world literature, puts medieval literatures on an equal footing with modern ethnic literatures (1993, 16) and situates them in the eschatology of literary nationalization. Therefore, the status attributed to them is not non-national, but, more accurately, sub-national, which puts us in the theoretical field of *literary regionalism*.⁹ Over the last few years, Comparative Literature has abandoned the naive security and naturalness, based on an alleged theoretical asepsis, of national literature as an area of study, a process that has intensified recently in a post-national sense due to globalization, with its territorial reinvention (*glocal*), and multicultural movements. In view of the fact that nation-states are recent historical products, it is clear that non-national cultural formations (among them, medieval literatures) constitute a new comparatistic challenge. Its theoretical consequences will not be insignificant when it comes to understanding other cultural formations that go beyond either or both of the coordinates of the medieval European chronotope. I now proceed to the second part of this paper, where I will reflect on non-national cultural formations from a systemic perspective.

Medieval literatures as non-national literary systems

With the systemic approach which I can only outline at this moment, I intend to find a solution for the dichotomic, but not wholly contradictory, conceptions of medieval literatures as either national-based discursive agglomerates or discursive agglomerates united around a linguistic code and organized according to an open and chaotic inventory of genres and topics,

in which the national referent has various levels of latency.¹⁰ The natural way in which the premises of these conceptions are accepted is remarkable, and is likely an outcome of the role played by medieval literatures in the national school canon, inasmuch as their texts are only ever decoded within the framework of a highly mediated academic circuit of communication.¹¹ There are two fundamental hypotheses of a systemic theory of literature as it relates to some observed facts:¹²

1. In contrast to a textocentric orientation, it devises literature as a communicative and dynamic system of social interaction;

2. Only the heuristic status of the notion of system is acknowledged, not the ontological status. The system exists within the framework of systemic theory — thus its constructivist nature — as a tool that allows us to infer certain observable consequences.¹³

Up until now, a systemic approach to medieval literatures has never been carried out.¹⁴ For this reason, one can conclude that, due to its epistemological bases, systemic theory is unable to provide an explanation

10 I would like to thank Darío Villanueva for calling my attention to the fact that medieval literatures, in contrast to contemporary ones, do not incorporate new *medieval* works to the repertoire. A different matter is transductive rewriting, or the discovery of texts so far unknown. This is a problem largely neglected, but which has theoretical consequences not wholly irrelevant.

11 Actually, the constitutive heterogeneity of these oral and/or manuscript works is cut off through their transformation into a print-text (the critical edition), normally in the format of *morceaux choisis* (chrestomathies, anthologies, school books), with a detailed hermeneutical apparatus.

12 The systemic approach includes several trends, with an almost simultaneous development in different countries. Here I will make use of the Empirical Study of Literature of the NIKOL-group, under the direction of Siegfried J. Schmidt (with especial attention to its constructivist bases in relation to Niklas Luhmann's proposals), Polysystem Theory of the School of Tel Aviv, most authoritatively expressed in Itamar Even-Zohar's works, and Systemic Transductology, with different approaches represented by José Lambert, André Lefevere, and Theo Hermans.

13 However, one should recognize that some practical uses of systemic theories have not managed to avoid an inclination to reify the object of study.

14 The only exception, although in a very partial sense, is Tymoczko (1993), because her study accepts the existence of medieval literary systems a priori in order to concentrate exclusively on the systemic functioning of translation in 12th-century French literature.

9 Literary regionalism as a field has been historiographically explored both in a strong sense, especially by Marxist Comparativism (a vague outline in Nicouline 1980), and in a weak sense by *Romanistik* (for example, the series *Lo spazio letterario del medioevo*).

of medieval literatures, a possibility recognized even by systemic studies themselves, studies such as *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Schmidt 1989), which situates the origins of the German literary system in the second half of the 19th century, with conclusions parallel to those arrived at by the discipline of Sociology with respect to the French *champ littéraire* (Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Viala), or by categorical statements on the restricted applicability of Niklas Luhmann's theories to modern industrial societies (Hermans 1999, 138). Nonetheless, occasionally a systemic study of medieval literatures does not seem completely impossible, when one observes — albeit only in the framework of the polysystemic approach — that Itamar Even-Zohar illustrates the principles of the law of interference by the Akkadian polysystem towards the year 2000 B. C. (Even-Zohar 1990, 60-61) or that Orly Goldwasser analyses Egyptian *literature* during the Amarna period (second half of the 14th century B. C.) as a polysystem (1992).¹⁵ In this regard the frequent reification of the notion of polysystem from a national perspective should not be overlooked.¹⁶

One can derive consequences not wholly irrelevant from this ambiguity: (1) a system is a historical category, and (2) in that historicity an idea of literature as an autonomous system has been enthusiastically

15 “The term ‘literary system’ may sound anachronistic when one thinks of the actual conditions of textual production in the cultures of the Fertile Crescent and compares them superficially with our own circumstances. But if we accept the term ‘literary’ as referring to any kind of textually manifested (or manifestable) semiotic repertoire fully and visible institutionalized in society, the parallels of the systemic relations with later periods become immediately striking” (Even-Zohar 1990, 61). However, the problems of a systemic analysis of literatures alien to the paradigm of European modernity are far from finding a resolution just by acknowledging terminological difficulties.

16 “Literatures belonging to the same cultural ensemble also constitute coherent literary systems. The smallest units of such cultural ensembles are the national literatures.... These national literatures are open systems; Even-Zohar would call them literary polysystems” (Vajda 1986, 155-56). On this matter Hermans points out: “‘system’ does not have to mean, say, ‘Italian literature’ or ‘postwar French cinema’, but can refer to the poetry scene in *fin de siècle* Berlin, the multilingual culture of colonial North Africa, intellectual life in Beijing’s Forbidden City during the Ming dynasty, or public oratory in Ancient Rome. The unit of investigation can be large or small This is worth pointing out because very often, even in Even-Zohar’s own work, the idea of a (poly)system is simply equated with a national literature or culture. It is more flexible than that” (1999, 108).

endorsed (an autonomy generally understood in national terms), behind the ideological agenda of the notion of literature, whose worldwide diffusion follows the route mapped out by nation-states.¹⁷ In this regard, the systemic study of medieval literatures meets the same requirements as those set down by Antonio Cornejo Polar for Latin American literatures, which may be summarized as a demand for historicity, with a critical nucleus plainly imposed in this framework by the dichotomy heteronymy/autonomy.¹⁸

Before analysing this dichotomy with respect to the systemic constitution of medieval literatures, I would like to point out the fact that an ahistorical use of the notion of system (for example, the polysystem, as a result of its universalist purpose manifested by the laws reported in Even-Zohar 1978, 45-53 and taken up again in Even-Zohar 1990, 58-72) leads to conclusions very similar to those built for these very same literatures by national and comparative (on a national basis) positivist literary history. A polysystemic understanding based on the constant achievement of innovation, originality, and autarky implies a privileged *locus*, but one not made explicit (that of modernist-formalist aesthetics). From this point of view any variation is regarded as an anomaly, a deformity, and is classified among the categories of (1) young literature, (2) weak and/or peripheral literature, and (3) literature in crisis. The fact is that, from this idea of system, medieval literatures, like contemporary ones described as emerging, could be included in any of those categories, which converts them into an evolutionary aporia: during centuries they would have corrected their *systemic faults* in an inevitable and mechanistic way in response to an unknowable fatalist orientation, that of a relatively established and independent system (Even-Zohar 1990, 55), identified, once more, with a national literature.¹⁹

17 In this respect, the resemantization in the course of the 19th century of Arabic *'adab*, Japanese *bungaku*, Russian *literatura*, or Greek *logotehnia* in order to translate the European concept of literature is eloquent.

18 “... simultaneity is more historical than consecutivity. Each system has its own history, but also shares in another, more encompassing history, which distinguishes one system from another and at the same time, directly or indirectly, correlates them. Therefore, if we want to keep talking of systems, there is no option but to put them into a historical context” (Cornejo Polar 1989, 20; my translation).

19 In this respect, polysystemic studies that describe *non-established* and *dependent* systems as *proto-systems* (calque of *proto-languages*) are revealing. The implications concerning their underlying principles of literary change are obvious.

Finally, I proceed to analyse different levels of a systemic approach to medieval literatures, acknowledging the highly hypothetical nature of the proposals put forward. If the system can be defined as a complex of interacting elements, whose systemic value is not immanent, but determined positionally and functionally (Bertalanffy 1993, 56), the specific conditions that favour the functioning of the system as an autonomous field imply the existence of an environment with contrasting states. A good example of the difference system/environment is provided by Iuri M. Lotman's Semiotics of Culture with the distribution culture, non-culture, and the notion of frontier. In the case of the literary system, its external differentiation (literary/non-literary) from other social systems has been delimited by Siegfried J. Schmidt through two hypothetical conventions, the convention of aesthetics and the convention of polyvalence (Schmidt 1990). The origin of both conventions is located in the transition from a feudal social order to a functionally differentiated society in 18th-century Europe, which resulted in the construction of the domain of literature as an autonomous and auto-organized system. The exact scope of both conventions has been somewhat amended by those studies that sought to obtain their empirical justification, especially from a diachronic point of view.²⁰

This diachronic research, with regard to the Middle Ages, could operate through intracultural and intercultural comparative explorations. Provisionally, a certain operating capacity can be speculated for the polyvalence convention, considered in Groeben's weak sense as a result of the degree of hermeneutical competence. In this respect consider, for example, the four exegetical levels that in *accessus* are applied as much to biblical texts as to philosophical, legal or *literary* ones, which result in the commonplace exordium that ascribes to the recipient the responsibility of the moral direction of his reading. Despite that, material factors that radically affect the creation of plural readings cannot be overlooked. A clear instance of this is the autonomy of modern literary systems, which largely

20 Thus, for instance, Norbert Groeben has argued against the strong definition of the polyvalence convention with a weak alternative as a result of the consequences of different degrees of literary competence in the level of pluralism and creativity in the hermeneutical process. At the same time, he has pointed out, with Margrit Schreier, a direction for its empirical verification that has a direct effect on my argument, diachronic research: "future research on the PC [polyvalence convention] will also have to include the diachronic perspective and thus the question whether the convention(s) might not be putting forth a concept of aesthetics limited historically as well as spatially" (23).

depends on an overproduction and, hence, an "extensive reading" anxious for novelties, but very little attentive to hermeneutical depths. In the medieval period, on the contrary, manuscript culture would favour an "intensive reading," decisive for an orientation to the past and for the durability of works in their centuries-old accumulation of *auctoritas*.²¹ The situation is different, obviously, with oral traditions, with a pronounced inclination for the modern extensive reading, stimulated not as much by the abundance of supplies as by the ostensive and temporary character of the performance.²² Greater difficulties are created by that which concerns the aesthetics convention, especially because Schmidt's definition puts this convention on an equal footing with fiction, in accordance with the capacity of functionally differentiated societies to create alternative models of reality. A partial explanation for these difficulties stems from the medieval coexistence of *poesis* and *litteratura*.²³

The heteronymy of medieval literature is the result of its limited functional differentiation, with the *poesis* as the privileged nucleus within the diffuse field of *litteratura*, as can be inferred from the restricted operating capacity of the polyvalence and aesthetics conventions during the Middle Ages. Some proof of that limited functional differentiation is (1) its theoretical dissemination among the arts of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, (2) its own gnoseological status (for instance, the *poesis* as *appendix artium* in the ensemble of logical arts, in the model by Hugh of St. Victor, or as an independent art in the model by Rodolphe de Longchamps), (3) the

21 I take from Moretti (2003) the distinction between *extensive* and *intensive* readings, which the author uses in his analysis of the boom of the novel in England between 1770 and 1820.

22 "C'est d'une culture de masse que relève globalement la poésie médiévale, non d'une "littérature." Les clercs, écrivains, gens d'écriture dans l'exercice de leur fonction, précurseurs certes du monde moderne, forment, dans la société européenne des siècles médiévaux, une infime minorité... Les jongleurs, récitants, ménestrels, gens du verbe, forment l'immense majorité de ceux par qui la poésie s'insère dans l'existence sociale" (Zumthor 1986, 139).

23 Adrian Marino argues that coexistence in the following terms: "On the one hand, *litterature*, which continues on its course, with all that it means for preserving, transmitting, organizing and developing culture, with all its literary implications — repetitions, stereotypy, clichés; on the other, *poetry*, which brings spontaneity, individual character, novelty, and lyricism. The two directions will permanently compete or overlap until the present day" (24).

widespread applicability of *accessus* methodology, or (4) the criteria of compilation of grammatical manuscripts (Irvine 1994), with four basic sections (elementary texts, Christian Latin epic in the Vergilian style, collection of *enigmata*, and classical *auctores*). The only convention that may embrace all this discursive plurality and project, for its systemic constitution, an external differentiation, in the sense of Luhmann's *Ausdifferenzierung*, is the one I suggest naming *acceptability convention*.

The acceptability convention orientates itself by the binary scheme valid/non-valid; that being so, *literary* communication (I use this hypercultism in order to stress its differences from modern literary communication) operates within the framework of a normative discursive transmission. Various characteristic specializations of modern social systems come from this highly abstract code, for example the codes legal/illegal (in the law system), true/false (in the science system) or observable/non-observable (in the religion system), next to which it is difficult to locate the genealogy of the code of the modern art system, of which literature is a sub-system: beautiful/ugly.²⁴ Of the connections between (1) the medieval acceptability convention, as the external differentiation of *litteratura* and *poesis* as one of its nuclei, and (2) these modern specializations, two are very suggestive. The first one concerns the law system, which brings us to the matrix of *litteratura* located in Rhetoric with its three *genera causarum* and their binary codes which conjugate the discursive finality of *docere et delectare*. The second one concerns translation as a social sub-system following the

24 Obviously, beauty is not a matter alien to medieval poctology (it affects Patristics and Scholasticism), but its subsidiary character in relation to the norm of validity seems indisputable, in opposition to the transgressions accepted for contemporary literary systems in accordance with their highest degree of specialization, synthesized in the well-known declaration of autonomy of *l'art pour l'art*. Thus one understands that one of the greatest paradoxes of medieval theoretical thought is the change of *humilitas* (discursive ugliness or *verbum sordidum*, that is assessed as *vitium elocutionis*) into the maximum exponent of *sublimitas* (see Haug 7-24). This change has important consequences for the total inversion of the rhetorical hierarchy of *ornatus*, argued, for example, by Augustine of Hippo in *De doctrina christiana* in order to justify the biblical treatment of the highest matter one can imagine, a point as much attended by Erich Auerbach as disregarded by Curtius. The flip side of this coin can be found in the *litterarization* of *scriptura mundana* or *saecularis*, with its programme of moralization that places the validity in an allegorical reading, as *exordia* and/or *epiloga* constantly remind us: "Et qui la fable ensi creroit / Estre voire, il meserreroit / Et seroit bogrerie aperte. / Mes sous la fable gist couverte / La sentence plus profitable" (*Ovide moralisé* XV, 2532-36; qtd. in Copeland 112).

arguments of Theo Hermans, who places its differentiation in the same binary scheme I propose here for the acceptability convention.²⁵ Actually, there may be no referential model more accurate for understanding medieval literatures from a systemic point of view than the traductological one. In this regard, the medieval acceptability convention may be paraphrased as discrimination between translations (intra-linguistical, inter-linguistical, or inter-semiotic), valid or not valid, of the original text, the *divinae litterae*. As a matter of fact, rewriting is the method that defines the potentially infinite project of *translatio studii*, in which the senses of transmission of political legitimacy (*translatio imperii*) and of knowledge in its amalgam of *elocutio*, *interpretatio* and *translatio* coexist inextricably. It is possible to understand from this perspective that the fidelity of medieval translation has its referent in the deep truth of the original, and not in its literality, or to understand how of works so incomparable for a modern reading as those compiled in grammatical manuscripts were classified as *ethicae subponitur*.²⁶

The heteronymy of medieval literatures, or, in terms of Luhmann's systemic theory, its limited functional differentiation, has as a corollary a high degree of redundancy, this meaning that the knowledge of one of the constitutive elements of the system allows us to gain information on the remaining ones (consider the medieval proclivity for the encyclopedic genre of *Summa* or *Bibliotheca universalis*). Both factors are characteristic of a society with a centripetal and hierarchical organization, like that of medieval Europe, with its dogmatic understanding of the world. That stratification manifests itself in an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities of communication, concentrated in the religious community and the dynastic

25 "My suggestion as regards translation would be for the distinction between "valid" or "not valid" as representation" (Hermans 143).

26 Konrad, for instance, in the *invocatio* of *Rolandslied* (c. 1170), does not attribute to the selected version of *Chanson de Roland* but to God the possibility of telling the truth: "lère mich selbe dinu wort; / du sende mir ze munde / din heilige urkunde, / daz ich die luge virnide, / die wårheit scribe / von eineme türlichem man" ("teach me your words, place in my mouth your holy message, that I may not lie and may write the truth about an admirable man") (*Rolandslied* 4-9; qtd. in Haug 76-77).

realm, the two cultural systems that, according to Anderson (1996, 9-36), precede the nation-state.²⁷

I will use this relationship between Luhmann's systemic theory and the genealogy of nationalism argued by Anderson in order to expose another systemic feature of medieval literatures as non-national cultural formations. According to Luhmann (1977), in a stratified society, structures characteristic of previous stages (for example, those of a society with a segmented differentiation) survive. So, on the basis of territoriality, a differentiation between core and periphery may be constituted, through which communication spreads spatially and, hence, unevenly. That being so, cores transform themselves into a sort of islands within society. If the modern geopolitical map is characterized by a perfectly contiguous division of homogeneous and legally sovereign nation-states, with internationally-recognized borders, but with no "no man's lands" (a political Pangaea, in short), the medieval geopolitical map represents a complex system of partial, discontinuous, heterogeneous, and overlapping sovereignties. These sovereignties are held by those territorial cores signalled by Luhmann, cores of a religious or of a dynastic kind, which are precisely the main parties responsible for the production, patronage, and consumption of literary culture. Thus, the geographical image that best describes the arrangement of medieval literary systems is that of an archipelago, with literate islands surrounded by an illiterate, but not *illiterate*, sea. This illiterate sea is that of oral culture, where the interaction of performance unites the performer with his audience in an *actio* as collective as it is ephemeral and epiphanic. From this one can understand that these literate nuclei of medieval literary systems reproduce within themselves the limited functional differentiation that characterizes them on their discursive level, an homology that here affects the concentration in a single institutional space of the three components (ideological, economic, and status components) that André Lefevre has identified for patronage (Lefevre 1992, 14-26). It can also be inferred that the selection of cultural codes by these nuclei depends on

relational factors and not on an essentialist programme of large-scale homogenization, as practised later by nation-states.²⁸

Constrained by the imprint of its national matrix, the history of Comparative Literature represents a prolonged reflection on its problematic location as a discipline and that of literature as its field of study; a reflection that, in this respect, manifests the difficulties in imagining a world organized without nation-states (see Taylor 1994, 143). Therefore, one understands why medieval literatures have posed and still pose a challenge to comparative research. Its resolution should redound to the benefit of a divergent view, perhaps more enriching, of non-national cultural formations, both European and non-European. In this regard I have drawn a first outline of a theoretical platform from a systemic perspective in an attempt to get past long-established national reification. Its applicability to a comparative history of medieval literatures will require, without a doubt, subsequent methodological developments. The degree of its theoretico-empirical effectiveness will depend on them.

As regards these developments, which, as I have suggested above, will have to be practised through intracultural and intercultural comparative explorations, I would like to add three more directions now. Their connections with the theoretical platform outlined so far are self-evident as far as concerns the paradoxical part played by medieval literatures with respect to national cultural formations. Firstly, the location of the transition from a stratified society to a functionally differentiated one towards the 18th century has significant concomitances with the periodology put forward for the Middle Ages by Lucien Febvre, *extended* to that century in opposition to the usual humanist closure in the 15th century. In this respect, one could speculate on a co-existence between systemic forms characteristic of functional differentiation and systemic forms characteristic of the previous hierarchical differentiation, with all that implies for the penetration and survival of medieval literary cultures within modern literary systems. This would provide further proof of the thesis advanced by Joep Leerssen, who argues that, in the case, for example, of the chronology of English

27 Regarding this unequal distribution, Roland Barthes reminds us that rhetoric bases itself on a strategy of control of the access to the word, not in agreement with its so-called democratic values (Barthes 1982).

28 Thus, for example, and contrary to the expectations of nationally-oriented reading, Hispanic Jews who emigrated to the northern Christian kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula as a result of Almoravid persecutions found to a significant degree in Arabic poetics a specific manifestation of their Jewish identity (see Drory 1993).

literature, *Beowulf* should be placed between Wordsworth and Carlyle (Leerssen 1999). Secondly, a largely unnoticed consequence of national retro-definition of literatures affects their, more or less explicit, geopolitical retro-location due to European nuclearity in the modern world-system. Good evidence of this is the spatial organization of world literature histories. However, and in the light of world-system literature, we should ask ourselves whether our understanding of medieval literatures should not be completely changed when we establish that, during the Middle Ages, Europe did not occupy a core position at all, but rather made up the distant periphery of cores located in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean (see Abu-Lughod 1991). For Auerbach, European unawareness of these cores explains the lack of historical perspective during the Middle Ages (1988, 300-301). And thirdly, in opposition to Ernest Gellner's likening the invention of nations to negative values such as fabrication and falsity, Anderson (1996, 6) highlights the creative and imaginative aspects of national processes (hence his definition of nation as an "imagined political community"), a dichotomy that seems inherent in the idea of nation, as was stated by Ernest Renan in his classic "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" when he pointed out that "forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (Renan 1994, 11). Leaving aside Anderson's optimism, and in the light of what has been argued here, it does not seem inconsistent to conclude that in our understanding of medieval literatures we owe as much to the aspect of creative imagination as to the aspect of historical error implicated by national literatures.

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418 / César Domínguez

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