



## The Role of Literature in the Making of the Nations of Europe: a Socio-Semiotic Study

Itamar Even-Zohar  
University of Tel-Aviv

*[...] in the spring of 1971 the two first and most celebrated manuscripts arrived [in Iceland, from Denmark]. These were the Book of Flatey and the Codex Regius of the Eddic poems, and they came to Reykjavik in a Danish warship accompanied by a delegation of Danish ministers and members of parliament. On the morning of the 21st April the ship drew in to the quay in Reykjavik [...] Thousands of people had gathered to the quayside, and along the roads by which the visitors were to drive through the town children stood with Danish and Icelandic flags [...]*

This is how Jónas Kristjánsson (1980, 89-90), the director of the Arnarnaganean Institute in Reykjavik, describes the triumph of the Icelanders in the manuscript war with Denmark; he would later observe (1982, 25) that since then, “more manuscripts have been steadily arriving, and now some 900 have come home, together with numerous other documents.” This manuscript dispute between Iceland and Denmark was preceded by similar wars between Denmark and Sweden some 300 years before. In the seventeenth century, however, unscrupulous competition on the matter of acquiring these manuscripts was not unheard of, and even such belligerent acts as sinking a ship loaded with manuscripts sometimes occurred. In Iceland itself, however, people did not care much for such cultural items at this time: As Kristjánsson (1982, 24) notes, the pages were “cut out of the vellums and used for various purposes,” and were even used to decorate clothing.

It is certainly clear that neither the seventeenth- nor the twentieth-century manuscript quarrels had much to do with the vellums as artifacts. It was not the physical objects as such that were really sought. In the seventeenth century, it was generally their textual content which was so uniquely desirable; for in them each of the Scandinavian kingdoms expected to find precious historical information that could reinforce its claim to greatness and power. Similarly, in our century, reclaiming the manuscripts meant, for the Icelanders, the ultimate stage in legitimizing and confirming their national independence. It seems evident that in both periods, the heated quarrels touched deep feelings of self-identity, or more precisely, of “collective identity.”

This story, although singular in its details, is not unique as a manifestation of socio-semiotic structures. On the contrary, it is a magnificent illustration, as this paper attempts to show, of the function of literature in the making of many nations, and other culturally-organized groups, in Europe. In this sense it may, however, be a phenomenon that is peculiar to European history.

Is “literature” in this sense in fact unique to Europe? This is not an easy question. There are perhaps no known organized societies which do not have some sort of “literature,” or in other words, an activity during which texts are recited or read, to or by their members, either publicly or privately. It is true, however, that certain societies have had a reputation which would seem to make them more qualified than others to create and transmit such texts. For instance, in the Medieval Middle East, Arabs were considered to be “gifted” in respect to this occupation, as it were “by birth,” while in Northern Europe, it was the Icelanders who were taken to be “born” writers and story-tellers.

Khalifs and Kings, Emperors and Czars, as well as “simple people,” were all known to attend performances of verse and prose literature in numerous times and places. Moreover, in such states as China, writing poetry according to accepted models was a mandatory qualification required for an administrative position.

Yet none of these examples amounts to the creation of “literature” in the sense of our study. For they do not contribute to making literary activities function in the way they eventually did in European history. So while activities of a literary nature as such are not unique to Europe, it is our argument that the roles played by such activities in organizing European life may indeed be unique. Wherever they are observed in non-Eu-

ropean countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they are not so much a continuation of the previous literary activities of those countries as a new activity borrowed through contact with European nations.

It would be appropriate to clarify here what “Europe” refers to in this study, in particular what its spatial and temporal borders are taken to mean. It would be tempting to confine this discussion to the eighteenth and later centuries, as this chapter in European history seems to be conspicuously clearer with regard to our subject. Nevertheless this easier path will not be taken, and although I will examine that period in some detail, this discussion will begin with the birth of Western civilization. It is my belief that we are discussing here a very salient feature of World history, and this history could in fact have taken a completely different route than its actual outcome.

It would serve no purpose to attempt to suggest a definitive answer to the question regarding whether or not textual activities are universal in the sense that they would have emerged under any circumstances, or whether they are the consequence of some accidental development which took place in the making of the World’s first civilizations. In modern socio-semiotic theory, including the economic and historical fields, one is inclined nowadays to eschew deterministic generalizations. However, once a feature can be detected, analyzing it from the first link in a long chain of events is now accepted practice. Along these lines, whether the emergence of “literature” was inevitable, or occurred by chance at the dawn of civilization, is a question that may be impossible to resolve. What can be observed, however, is what has happened since it emerged. Thanks to developments in historical and archaeological research, we can now reconstruct at least some of the major links in Western literary history.

The first literate and literary civilization we know of is the Sumerian aggregate of city states in Mesopotamia. Features invented in, or introduced by, Sumerian civilization can be detected for millennia in cultures which gradually, in what seems to be a chainlike process, seem to have “inherited” them. The preoccupation with texts, both written and recited, figured prominently in Sumerian culture. While elite groups had the exclusive privilege of accessing these texts directly as both new producers (writers) or perpetuators (performers), at least some segments of the masses were exposed to these texts on various festive occasions. While even the rise of multiple stelae (with Hammurabi’s Code of Law, and the

detailed self-laudatory descriptions of achievements recorded by almost all rulers) cannot serve as evidence to accessibility and operability of texts, it can at least bear witness to the intention of these rulers to perpetuate and to propagate texts about themselves.

Most importantly, by establishing and consolidating schools (*é-dubba*) as an institution of power, Sumerian culture also introduced the socio-semiotic institution of the canon. Both school and canon served to organize social life basically by creating a repertoire of semiotic models through which “the World” was explained by way of a cluster of narratives, *inter alia*, which were naturally tailored to the liking of the ruling groups. These narratives turned out to be very powerful in imparting feelings of solidarity, belonging and ultimately submission to law and decrees which consequently did not need to be enforced by physical means alone. Thus, Sumerian culture was the first society to introduce both textual activities as an indispensable institution, and the utilization of this institution for creating socio-cultural cohesion.

Lest the term “socio-cultural cohesion” seem vague or empty, let me explain here that it refers to a state in which a widely-spread sense of solidarity, or togetherness, exists among a group of people, which consequently allows a non-physical means of imparting behavioral norms. It seems that the basic key concept to such socio-cultural cohesion is readiness, or proneness. This phenomenon is a mental disposition which propels people to act in many ways that otherwise might be contrary to their “natural inclinations.” For example, going to war, being prone to die in combat, would be the ultimate case, and is amply repeated throughout human history. To create a large network of readiness (or proneness) on a significant number of issues is something that, although vital for any society, cannot be taken for granted. For example, no government can take for granted that people will obey “laws,” whether written or not, unless they are successfully persuaded to do so. Achieving obedience by physical force, such as military and police efforts, can be effective in the short run, but sooner or later such measures will become ineffective, partly because few societies can afford to keep a large enough body of law enforcement individuals.

It is thus my contention that it was “literature” which served as an ever-present factor of socio-cultural cohesion in our society. This does not mean that it always was the major or sole factor, but perhaps it was the most durable one, and probably one which was most often combined with others (for instance, accompanying certain rituals or other physical

performances, like constructing edifices or performing dance and music). Its ubiquity and longevity may be attributed to its institutionalization and conspicuousness, since we find it over and over again in those cultures which gradually superseded Sumer, namely the Akkadian and the Hittite, as well as in Egyptian society, which certainly developed somewhat separately. The term “Akkadian” is here a general term for many different societies where variants of the Akkadian language and “literature” were used, obviously including early Akkadian society as well as the Babylonian and Assyrian states, but also the cultures of a large variety of organized states between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean, such as Ebla and Mari, Yamhad, Ugarit and Canaan. None of these, with the exception of Canaan or Phoenician culture, abandoned the Sumerian-Akkadian system of writing, although it was gradually, and in various degrees, simplified by all of them.

The hidden link between all these societies and “Europe,” which has been covert for many centuries, is becoming more and more evident with our improving knowledge of these cultures. The Phoenician origin of the Greek alphabet, also reported by the Greeks, is not contested. Even the very name Europe, which, according to Greek mythology has to do with the city of Tyre, may have derived from the Phoenician-Hebrew word ‘ereb’, meaning both “evening” and “west.” In the context of the institution of “literature,” however, with all of its components, this link cannot be presented as indisputable. Nevertheless, it can be claimed today, with all due reservations, that it seems more plausible than not, in view of the evidence gathered by the deciphered documents of these cultures, that “literature” found its way from Mesopotamian through Hittite (and perhaps Luvian) intermediators to Greek culture, whence it spread, in a chainlike process, from one European society to another through the ages.

This hypothesis will not be examined in detail here; nor shall we attempt to ponder literature in the court of such rulers as Ashurbanipal, with his library of 25,000 clay tablets. Suffice it to iterate that textual activities, the totality of which I call “literature” for the sake of convenience, persist throughout the history of all of the above-mentioned cultures. A few words of reservation are however required here. Despite the compelling power of the Sumerian-Akkadian model, evidenced by the obvious success of a repetitive repertoire of beliefs and customs, we must not fall into the trap of anachronism. It is not easy to assess the level of socio-cultural cohesion in these societies, and the contribution of textual

activities to its success, in more than general terms. There is, on the other hand, evidence of more than one failure. For example, the seemingly rapid collapse of Assyrian culture may perhaps be attributed to a rather low cohesion, which in this case clearly suggests a failure of the socio-semiotic textual culture.

Nevertheless, even where its power in imparting cohesion may have been less than crucial, literature never relinquished its hold as a signifier of power and distinction, which possibly has been its primary function as an organized activity. By adhering to the habit of perpetuating textual activities, rulers propagated the idea of their superiority, distinguishing themselves from the rest of society, or from “lesser” rulers, as it were. As Gentili (1984, 153) puts it, discussing Greece in the sixth and fourth centuries B.C., “*attraverso l’opera dell’artista, il ricco signore o l’aristocratico della città e soprattutto il tirano miravano a nobilitarsi e a consolidare il proprio potere politico.*”

In short, possessing a “literature” belonged to the indispensabilia of power. But what does “possessing a literature” mean, and what in fact are the indispensabilia of power?

This is perhaps the right moment to state explicitly that the concept of “literature” used here does not necessarily coincide with the popular notion of “a collection of accepted texts, produced by and for individuals to read,” which is more or less a modern image. Here “literature” signifies a whole aggregate of activities, only part of which are “texts to be read,” or “to be listened to,” or even “to be understood.”<sup>1</sup> In short, these activities include production and consumption, a market and negotiational relations between norms. When a ruler maintains these activities this means that he has to spend resources on the upkeep of agents of production of both written and oral texts, often sung or recited with musical accompaniment rather than merely read aloud, as well as agents charged with accumulating and storing such products. The Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal invested considerable resources in copying the Babylonian inventory of canonized texts.<sup>2</sup> Having “literati” in court (Tadmor, 1986) was, without doubt, a token of power and prosperity. It is not insignifi-

---

1. For a more complete discussion of the concept of “literature” please see *Polysystem Studies*, Even-Zohar, 1990.

2. In this process the Babylonian gods were also converted – notably in *Enuma Eliš*, The Epic of Creation – to their Assyrian counterparts, thus appropriating the texts, rendering them as it were Assyrian rather than Babylonian. (The author is grateful to Itamar Singer for this observation.)

cant that such commodities should figure among the obligatory repertoire of tributes from minor to major rulers. The Assyrian king Sennacherib, for example, boasts of the reciters, both male and female, he forced Hezekiah, king of Judah, to pay him as part of a bountiful tribute.<sup>3</sup>

“Possessing a literature” is thus undoubtedly equivalent to “possessing riches appropriate for a powerful ruler.” It is therefore an important item of what I have called “the indispensabilia of power.” Semio-culturally speaking, “to be” some distinct “person-in-the-culture” (Voegelin 1960), at whatever level, always involves employing and having a distinct repertoire of commodities and procedures. For example, to be “a Frenchman” is likely to entail a preference for drinking wine rather than water at mealtimes. To be a great king or emperor has similarly, since time immemorial, necessitated possessing edifices of some magnitude, with sculptures and wall-paintings or reliefs, and much more. If these commodities do not yet exist, it then follows that their creation must be undertaken. It also necessitates various other ingredients, actually too many to be described here in detail, among which engaging the services of reciters or “poets,” or dancers and singers, or an ensemble of performers called “a theatre,” is included. The Andalusian Khalif `Abd ar-Rahman III kept ministers who also could entertain by reciting Mozarabic poetry (alternating Arabic with Romanic; Ramón Menéndez Pidal, (1926, 552) while Al-Mansur was fortunate enough to have Ibn Darraj al-Qastali compose a laudatory poem in honor of his conquest of Santiago de Compostela in 997.<sup>4</sup> Harald the Hard-Ruler (eleventh century) kept nearly 500 poets, some of whom accompanied him, like the Khalif’s most valued poets, on many daily tasks (Turville-Petre 1968), as well as to war. In short, clearly a “checklist” of indispensabilia with more or less the same items is perpetuated throughout the history of Western civilization. “Literature” almost always figures, in one form or another, among the most prominent items of these indispensabilia.

While the ancient cultures of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt only hint as to how large a portion of the population textual activities could impart socio-cultural cohesion, it seems that for the first time in World history we witness some clear evidence of such a function in Greece. We may,

---

3. For more about political ideology in Assyrian inscriptions see Tadmor, 1981.

4. Ibn Darraj al-Qastali. *Diwan*. Mahmud Ali Maki, ed., Damascus: Al-Maktab Al-Islami 2\_1968: 314-320.

naturally with due caution, perhaps call it a shift, or perhaps even “the Greek contribution,” which could not have emerged, however, without the invention of the alphabet in Canaan. Without delving here into a discussion of the difference between Athenian and other Greek communities, clearly what we have at the dawn of Hellenistic times is a shift from a repertoire possessed by rulers and their entourage to one possessed by “the people,” although “the people” would include only a select segment of the population at large. The textual activities now taking place outdoors are not confined to public hymns, or stelae with inaccessible inscriptions, but are more and more reaching large audiences. They even allow social criticism and a less than reverent treatment of rulers (in particular within tragedy and comedy).

Moreover, stories of yore, gradually forming a widely accepted canon, become basics of schooling, and self-distinction, for ever larger groups. It could even be said that for a member of the Greek community, and certainly for a member of a Hellenistic community, there is already a clear-cut cultural repertoire, intimately linked with textual activities, and internalized to such a degree that it constitutes part of the individual’s self-image, and sense of identity, distinguishing him from the rest of the world, the *barbaroi*.

In addition, through such texts as these, the Greek *Koine* had become far more successful than any preceding language. (The Assyrian case, in comparison, was rather a failure; when the Empire collapsed, hardly anybody continued to speak Assyrian: most of the population had already gone over to speaking Aramaic). Perhaps it was in Greece that a model was established through which, in addition to imparting socio-cultural cohesion via texts, a literary language succeeded in gradually superseding local variants. Contrary to the popular image which sees a causality chain from “inborn identity” as it were to “language,” and only finally to “texts” (literature), the Greek case already displays a different course, from texts to identity and language.

Another crucial “shift” ought perhaps to be attributed to Greece, namely the clear proliferation of cultural and “literary,” systems. While texts in Sumer, even those recited at public occasions, were composed by members of the elite, and texts in Babylonia, Assyria, or the Hittite and Egyptian Kingdoms were composed by the literati, Greece provides us with both elite and “popular” textual cultures. It is in Greece, moreover, that we can witness the emergence of multiple channels of propagation. On the one hand, there is the written product, aimed at the few, but even-

tually also marketable to the many; on the other hand, the oral product, such as the Platonic dialogues, aimed at the many, but often based on products made for the few. The source of the modern notion of “literature” as something connected with written texts clearly derives from Greece. The institutionalization of the book (though “book” in Greek, *byblos*, derives from the name of the Phoenician city of Gebal [\*Gubl]), as Gentili remarks, generating this cultural cleft. While he points out (1984, 222) that “*la scrittura fu sentita per la prima volta come vero e proprio atto letterario, letteratura tout court,*” he also writes (1984, 228):

Accanto a questa cultura più propriamente letteraria ed erudita, che fiori nell’ambito ristretto delle corti e dei cenacoli, patrimonio esclusivo di una élite di intellettuali, ebbe vita autonoma un’altra forma di cultura, che con termine moderno potremmo definire popolare o di massa, nel senso che era destinata a larghe fasce di fruitori e trasmessa oralmente in pubbliche audizioni, da parte di recitatori, cantori (*rhapsoidoi, kitharoidoi, auloidoi*) e attori itineranti (*tragoidoi, komoidoi*, ecc.), che esercitavano la loro professione ottenendo compensi ed onori e nelle feste istituite dalle diverse città del mondo ellenizzato.

The matter of what the repercussions of such a situation could have been for deviating from accepted norms, that is in matters of accepted themes and forms as well as accepted ideas, is a different question. Obviously, both literati and performers could hardly express dissent, or engage in forms contradicting an accepted orthodoxy. In Greece, independent literati did emerge who had the courage to speak out differently, although, as is shown by the case of Socrates, they had to pay dearly for it. No such occurrences are known to us in more ancient cultures, with the exception of the Judean prophets, who, like Jeremiah, were punished nearly to death by their ruler (Jeremiah, 38: 6-13).

Throughout world history, models created in one culture could find their way to other cultures, if there was a reason for the other culture to wish to match itself with the culture from which the model was adopted. We are given ample evidence of contacts leading to “borrowings.” Any group of people who match themselves seeking to measure up to any other group may always ask themselves: “Why don’t we have all of these commodities and traditions?” For example, if in some institution recognized as reputable we find that everybody is equipped with advanced computers and related accessories, we naturally would consider ourselves to be deprived of something we should possibly possess ourselves if we

wish to live up to the standards of that institution. This basic pattern of the relation between “possessing” versus “not-possessing” functions on any socio-cultural level, and for any number of people. It is my strong conviction that the repertoires just discussed were not invented in each culture individually or domestically. When a new institution was “needed” in a society, the idea of having it, as well as the repertoire involved with it, usually came from an outside source. One defined “being a king” for example, by looking at some accessible source, such as contemporary neighbors. One did the same when kingship was already established, but it then naturally had to be matched with some permanent standard. The story in Samuel I:8, about the establishment of kingship among the Israelites, is highly instructive in this context.

The elders of Israel come to the prophet Samuel and say: “[...] now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” Samuel, giving a speech in the people’s Gathering, attempts in vain to deter them from such an idea, describing the undesirable behavior a king was likely to display:

And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your olive yards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that day. (Samuel I, 8:11-18).

But the Elders are not convinced; they, too, know something about the obligations of a king: “Nay, but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.” (Samuel I, 8:19-20).

One could argue that the Kingdom of Judah was a small and insignificant province; therefore it always looked to measure itself up to some external standard. But comparisons of these kind readily occur between equal groups. It is even plausible that the more powerful the group, or the

higher its aspirations, the more likely it is to place itself in competition with other groups which happen to possess items that are not yet available to it. The efforts invested by several Egyptian Pharaohs to obtain an adequate quantity of the precious lapis lazuli certainly are connected to the fact that the Mesopotamian kings had this stone in abundance (see the Tell El-Amarna correspondence). Since lapis lazuli is no longer held to be a very prestigious commodity in our modern world (though still sought in Central Asia), these efforts may seem ridiculous today. But so too may the elephant skins that a certain king of Judah (Hezekiah) is forced to send as tribute to the Assyrian Emperor according to the Annals of Sennacherib I mentioned above, or anything that seems to lack concrete value. Along the same lines, even the xenophobic Egyptians could not afford to be unaware of the culture of Mesopotamia. They thus taught the Akkadian language and a formal canon of Akkadian texts in their elite schools.

There are numerous channels by which knowledge about the indispensabilia of another culture is acquired. They unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this study. This knowledge, however, may often be quite intimate, and therefore not of a second-hand nature. In such cases, it may play a decisive role in the making of a culture, i.e. of the indispensabilia through which it works and can be acquired and internalized.

While the respective roles of Mesopotamian, Phoenician, and Egyptian cultures in the making of the Greek, if any, are often the subject of heated debates, no one contests the role of Greek for either Etruscan or Roman, and subsequently for all European cultures, both Eastern and Western. It seems that the kind of relationship we could observe between Sumerian and Akkadian has been repeated in the relationship between Greek, or rather Hellenistic, and Roman cultures.

While Hellenistic culture was appropriated as part of dominant Roman culture, it produced a domestic Roman repertoire – both commodities and patterns of behavior. Thus, although Greek texts were adopted, domestic works were produced along the same lines. It is evident that it might never have occurred to Virgil to produce his *Aeneid* had the Homeric text not been established as a distinctive feature of “a great society.”

The compelling presence of both Greek and Roman models goes on to have a decisive impact on the acts of organizers of society throughout

the Middle Ages and the Modern Age. Although the ethnic variety of Europe was almost as large during the Middle Ages as it is nowadays, the inheritance of the Roman Empire, and the unificatory interests of both rulers and the Church, did not encourage the emergence of local entities. As Várvaro so succinctly puts it, referring to the fifteenth century, “[...] *non può certo parlarsi di una precisa diffusa coscienza di distinte identità nazionali?*” (Várvaro 1985: 10). In what would eventually become Germany and the Scandinavian countries, with the conspicuous exception of isolated territories like Iceland (and to some degree Norway), the acceptance of Christianity delayed the development of local separate cultural entities for centuries. When the success of a local insurrection could not be secured, however, without attracting the consenting spirit of larger segments of the population, Europe begins to create its new nations. And to do that, old sets-of-operations are utilized with skill, as if they had been acquired through formal schooling.

There is no need to expand here on the reasons why Alfonso X “the Wise” should have decided to impose Castilian by decree (although he himself preferred using Galician, i.e. Galego-Portuguese, for his own poetical writings). This was immediately linked with the making of indispensable texts, such as a translation of the Scriptures (which had been carried out before, by Jews, but without any major implications for the larger community), and others. Without Castilian, the socio-cultural cohesion imparted through texts which carried beliefs to be shared by all, a unified Spanish nation would not have emerged. This is, of course, not a clear-cut case, since the rulers of Spain, in order to accelerate this process of cohesion, expelled all those segments of the population which could not be assimilated into the new national identity.

Spain is among the first cases of success in imparting socio-cultural cohesion to a large population which had long been divided. This success is fully evidenced through the ventures of the Spaniards in the New World. The relative unity of Spanish in Latin America is a testimony to this. Other cases have not been so successful: When emigration takes place from France to the New World, a unified French culture is not really successfully implemented. Although they kept their separate ethnicity after the British occupation, the Quebec inhabitants of French origin were “brought back,” as it were, to become part of the new French nation only through the endeavours of French missions in the nineteenth century. Even today, this acculturation enterprise has not integrated the French Quebec people with continental France. In the Italian case, emi-

gration to the Americas, even during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, turns out to have taken place before socio-cultural cohesion was successfully imparted to the population of the Italian peninsula. Most so-called “Italians” did not yet consider themselves as “Italians,” and more often than not had no access to the newly invented identity of the national “Italian,” which was expressed in attempts to speak a “dead” Italian language (De Mauro, 1984).

In short, French, German and Italian identities, or “nations,” from the point of view of socio-cultural cohesion, are late inventions. In making them, the time-honored set-of-operations was mobilized and utilized, naturally augmented and adapted to local circumstances. Texts, produced together with a new or a re-standardized language, functioned in all of these cases as a major vehicle of unification for people who would not necessarily consider themselves as “belonging to” a certain entity.

In the French case, the turning point was the French Revolution. Everything that had previously belonged to the court and the aristocracy was now appropriated by the bourgeoisie. The “common people” had to wait quite a long time before they enjoyed full access to the commodities and socio-cultural items of the defunct aristocracy, except during the several chaotic years of revolution, when attempts were made to draw this segment, too, into sharing the general identity. However, the bourgeoisie, who nevertheless constituted a relatively large percentage of the population, especially since it merged with the old aristocracy (Mayer, 1983) by perpetuating and expanding the repertoire of its predecessors, and by enlarging the school system, giving literature, both as an institution and a major generator of socio-cultural cohesion, its prominent position in the French socio-cultural organization. Let us remember that, just as in pre-*reconquista* Spain, the large majority of the people living within the confines of France did not even speak “French” until around the end of the eighteenth century. They had to be persuaded gradually to acquire this knowledge, which could not have become possible without the many texts that have been instrumental in this enterprise, and in which many of the ideas necessary for persuading people were explicitly introduced. This process of integration went on throughout the nineteenth century, and was set in motion each time a new piece of territory was gained by France. It was even implemented in the distant colonies in Africa, where children in school read about “*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*,” like their continental French counterparts.

One can easily claim that under different circumstances, such a region as Savoy, annexed by France only towards the end of the nineteenth century, could have become Italian. On the other hand, Northern Italy could have become French, had there been no *Risorgimento* in Italy.

In the German, Italian, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, Czech and perhaps even the modern Greek cases, “literature” has been even more indispensable for the creation of the “nations” under these names. In each of these cases, a small group of people, whom I would like to call “socio-semiotic entrepreneurs,” popularly known under various titles, such as “writers,” “poets,” “thinkers,” “critics,” “philosophers” and the like, produced an enormous body of texts in order to justify, sanction, and substantiate the existence, or the desirability and pertinence of such entities – the German, Bulgarian, Italian and other nations. At the same time, they also had to bring some order into the collection of texts and names which in principle could be rendered instrumental in justifying what their cause.

In order to understand just how literary German identity is, we need only reflect on such a case as the Duchy of Luxembourg. Such duchies existed all over the current German territory; and their inhabitants each spoke their own local language. There was nothing “natural” in their consent to be united with Prussia in order to create the German union, nor was there anything “natural” in their acceptance of the language called “High German” (*Hochdeutsch*), unilaterally standardized, with a dose of fabrication, by Gottsched and his followers (see Blackall 1978; Guxman 1977). But it was the reputation of the texts produced in this language by the generation of Goethe, Schiller and others which eventually created the new German nation. The idea of the nation, aspiring at integrating the inhabitants of a certain politically fragmented territory, struck roots with great success.

It is by now widely accepted that there would have been no German nation without the German literature, which could not, in its turn, have become unified without a well-defined and standardized language. This package deal, consisting of a nation, a language, and a literature, was not, strictly speaking, new. As Goldstein (1912, 20) states, “*Bismark hätte die politische Einheit nie schaffen können, wenn nicht vorher von unsern Klassikern die geistige Einheit begründet worden wäre*” [‘Bismark would never have been able to create the political unity, had our Classical writers not founded prior to it a spiritual unity.’] However, in the German case, it had to be deliberately planned and implemented, rather than achieved through unguided development. This implicated, as in the French precedent, ignoring and

even banning anything that did not conform with the unified institutions. Thus, all linguistic alternatives which did not conform to the new standard were reduced to the dubious status of “dialects” (in Germany), or “patois” (in France, where such geolects are not even considered to stem from the “authentic” French language).

For the new socio-cultural cohesion aspired at by the entrepreneurs of such an undertaking, the act of establishing a national language, and a national literature, is equivalent to the act of acquiring self-identifying, and self-edifying commodities, typical in other periods of ruling groups only. The sentiment of the ruler had now moved, or perhaps more accurately, had been moved, from the individual ruler, or aristocrat, to the whole anonymous body called “the nation.” Each member of this body, by virtue of participation in “the nation,” had now earned the right to claim a share in the acquired goods. Thus, demonstrating the suitability of the German language for any spiritual and intellectual task clearly meant, from the point of view of the Germans, “we no longer need to feel inferior to the French, or any other nation” (Blackall, 1978). To have a literature capable of competing with other literatures, because it has acquired such admirable exponents of the stature of Goethe and Schiller, is clearly with “a great nation.” The stature of such figures as Goethe is a complex outcome of the combination of his activities as an intellocrat, to borrow Hamon’s & Rotman’s (1981) term, and the effect of his writings.

For any individual in a community, the greatness of the nation is also capable of conferring individual greatness: “I am great, because I belong to a nation which has generated Goethe.” This is not at all different from the kind of sentiments involved in any competition: “I am great because I belong to a nation whose basketball team has won the European championship.” It simply “pays” to be member of such a nation, and this bonus becomes a very powerful factor in strengthening and nourishing the sentiment of “belonging.”

The Italian enterprise, although it culminated at almost the same time as the unification of Germany (1870-71) with the creation of the Italian state (1861-1870), already had both the French and the German precedents as possible semio-cultural models. Indeed, there was nothing inherent that would have convinced the population of Italy to become “Italians,” members of a nation called “Italian,” had there not been entrepreneurs, who like their German counterparts, used the reputation of texts written in a language hardly anybody actually spoke, to popularize the same kind of package deal which had crystallized in Germany, i.e. the

packaging of a language with a “nation,” whose existence was substantiated, justified, motivated, and defended by coupling the wealth of narratives about its alleged common “past,” generally a somewhat distant one, with the glory of the linguistic tool developed at some time by some of its members.

The language we now call “Italian” was perhaps in even a poorer state than French or German from the point of view of its actual distribution. It was *una lingua morta*, as Tullio de Mauro (1984) states in his classic *Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita*. Out of the approximately 22 million inhabitants of the peninsula, about 600,000 persons could understand Italian. Even the major writers in this language, like Manzoni, used French more fluently at the time the Italian state was founded. However, it was due to the literary and intellectual efforts made by Manzoni and a group of intellectuals, gradually supported and mobilized by the clever prime minister of Piedmont-Sardinia, Cavour, that the idea of an Italian “nation,” based on the language used by the great founders of its literary tradition, Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, successfully gained ground among ever-growing parts of the population. However, the unification of Italy was only the first step towards the creation of the nation. Not only were there discussions about which inhabitants would join the new nation, but it indeed took many years, until the 1980s, or more than a hundred years after the political unification, that Italian actually became the spoken language of the majority of Italians. As De Mauro states in the Introduction to the second edition of his book, (1984, xvii): “*L’italiano era ancora vent’anni la lingua abituale d’una minoranza. Oggi è la lingua abituale della maggioranza degli italiani, anche tra le mure domestiche, dove più hanno resistito i dialetti.*” There were of course those who were not happy with the inclusion of all inhabitants of Italy into the new nation. Some would have preferred to have it based, for example, only on the middle classes. Others, like Cavour himself, were not at all happy with the exploits of Garibaldi, who brought the South and Sicily on a golden plate to the monarch. Cavour would have preferred a state without the South, but could not reject what popular ideology, devised by “literature,” already presented as a national cause.

As was the case in Germany, no actual vernacular could be made into the common tongue. Italian, although historically based on the Florentine language as tamed and standardized by Dante and followers, was no longer identical with the kind of language actually spoken in Toscana, and more specifically Florence, at the time of the unification. Manzoni, whose official task was to make recommendations about the language to be

adopted by the state, while briefly entertaining the idea of adopting the contemporary Florentine variant as a basis for the modern tongue, withdrew from this idea, to support a hybrid fabrication, based on selecting and combining several local norms.

In both Germany and Italy, both prior to the political unification and after it had been achieved, thousands of agents had to be recruited to popularize the texts of the few initiators, and to spread the language they used in these texts. The main burden fell on school teachers, and the Italian intellectuals produced texts to provide these teachers with all the necessary arsenal for their task. Texts prepared for children, like D'amici's *The Heart* (Il Cuore), or Collodi's *Pinocchio*, were deliberately tailored for, and served as perfect imparters of, socio-cultural cohesion. Clearly, Italy simply did not exist as a coherent entity without its new language and re-established literature. No wonder that doubts and discontent with this entity, especially after the strong policy of the fascist government against the dialects, have led to various symbolic upheavals against the unified language, which, in the eyes of dissidents, has led to the destruction of local cultures. Literature in the vernacular was created as an act of protest, as is evidenced in the case of Pasolini, who accuses the official Italy of having committed cultural genocide. On the 8th of October 1975, a short time before he was murdered, he published a piercing article in *Corriere della sera*, where, about the presentation of his film *Accatone* on television, he says:

Tra il 1961 e il 1975 qualcosa di essenziale ha cambiato: si ha avuto un genocidio. Si ha distrutta culturalmente una popolazione. E si tratta precisamente di uno di quei genocidi culturali che avevano preceduto i genocidi fisici [...] (reprinted in *Lettere Luterane*, Torino 1976: 154).<sup>5</sup>

It will be necessary to omit detailed consideration of the other cases specified above, such as the Czech and Bulgarian ones, although each of these cases brings more nuances to our understanding of the function of literature in creating the nations of Europe. This would require a much longer presentation than can be offered here. Instead, to conclude this somewhat serpentine excursion, I would like briefly to discuss the function of “the European model” for non-European cultures, and what seems to be its conspicuous absence in some cultures.

---

5. I am grateful to Alon Altaras for this quotation.

The highly-established nature of the “European model” is evidenced by its repeated and successful use in one culture after another in Europe itself. But it is also corroborated by cultures which did not establish themselves on European soil.

The first such example is the case of the Hebrew nation, now established in the State of Israël. The creation of this modern nation, which began to plant itself in Palestine towards the end of the 1800s, was initiated in Germany around the beginning of that century, almost at the same time as the German nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, in a laborious process, the new identity, which also generated a new socio-cultural and ultimately political entity, was generated through a newly developed literature and a reorganized language – Hebrew adapted to new objectives.<sup>6</sup>

The second example is the making of the modern Arab nations. This case also displays many of the ingredients recognizable from the European model. The so-called “revival” of Arabic language and literature, first in Egypt and Lebanon during the nineteenth century, although it clearly made use of materials available of old, was a different entity. The nature of the new literature, the position held by its agents, its impact on the acts of the people, first the intelligentsia, and later gradually among larger groups, is of European origin. It is of course not a simple case of export, as it were, but it certainly is an adaptation of the European, primarily French, model to local conditions. It also combines a whole set of operations carried out deliberately by both rulers and intellectuals to attain the status of “a modern state.” These are not disparate ideas about this or that literary genre, but rather touch on the very structure of the activity of texts. Needless to say, this also entailed the gradual adaptation of the old literary language to the new objectives. Although it has never become a uniformly spoken language like German and Italian, Arabic has liberated itself from ossified traditions to become a flexible tool in the implementation of the intellectual project of forming the modern Egyptian and other Arab nations.<sup>7</sup>

The third and final example of export of the European model may seem out of order, but I believe that it is a rather perfect demonstration

---

6. For the Hebrew case see Shavit (1987), Even-Zohar (1990).

7. For more details about the making of modern Egyptian nationhood see Gershoni 1986, Mitchell (1989).

of the established nature of the model. When Lazaro Ludoviko Zamenhof created the Esperanto language in 1887, among his first and major concerns was to set up literary activities. Literature has become a major preoccupation for this international community, which rapidly produced translations of the masterpieces of Western literature and original works. Zamenhof, whose acts as a creator of literature were mocked by the competitors, i.e. movements for the promotion of other international languages, seems to have fully internalized the European model for the creation of nations in order to create an international community united through a similar, if not identical, sentiment of cultural cohesion. Words used in Esperanto like “esperantistaro” for “the community of Esperanto speakers,” “Esperantujo” for “the home of the speakers of Esperanto” are perfect equivalents to names of a nation and a country in the “national” languages. Nothing like this was initiated by other synthetic international languages. Perhaps this might be a partial explanation for the relative success of Esperanto and the failure of all the others.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, it is likely useful to note that this model of the making of nations was not utilized in the United States of America. This North American nation was born out of rebellion against Great Britain, but it did not attempt to detach itself from the English literary or linguistic traditions. It is true that textual activities, mostly of popular and less institutionalized nature, have been instrumental in distributing stories, myths and images that made “the American spirit,” creating a growing sentiment of distinction. However, this did not affect elite literary production which sought to be accepted in the British center almost as far as the beginning of the twentieth century. And although it had to distinguish itself from its motherland and previous oppressor, this new society had no trouble using the same literary language. Change on the linguistic level did not occur as it did in Norway, where a Norwegian language basically identical with the Danish was distinguished from the Danish through a series of planned reforms. Americans, though they developed their own styles and preferences, never really attempted any heavy reforms, nor have they ever sought to replace English by some other language. Change occurred in the American variant of the English language as the realities of language use in the United States gradually found their way into stylized literary language, through a lengthy negotiation between norms and tastes. The American nation is thus not a creation of or through its literature, nor of

---

8. See also Lieberman 1979.

or through its language, but was rather unaffected by them. The “European model” is thus not universal, but I hope to have demonstrated that the image of literature in contemporary Europe is based on longstanding and concrete realities.

## References

- Blackall, Eric A. (1978) [1959]. *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language 1700-1775*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Bollati, Giulio. (1984) [1983]. *L'Italiano: il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione*. Nuovo politecnico. 136. Torino: Einaudi.
- Bottero, Jean. (1987). *Mésopotamie : l'écriture, la raison et les dieux*. Paris: Gallimard.
- De Mauro, Tullio. (1984). *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*. 1963. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. (1990a). “The Emergence of a Native Hebrew Culture in Palestine, 1882-1948.” *Poetics Today* 11.1: 175-191.
- . (1990b). Polysystem Studies. *Poetics Today* 11:1. Durham: Duke University Press. A Special issue of *Poetics Today*.
- Gentili, Bruno. (1984). *Poesia e pubblico nella Grecia antica, da Omero al V secolo*. Storica. Roma: Laterza.
- . (1988). *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece: from Homer to the Fifth Century*. Translated, with an introduction, by A. Thomas Cole. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press.
- Gershoni, Israel, & James P. Jankowski. (1986). *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930*. New York & Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Goldstein, Moritz. (1912). *Begriff und Programm einer Jüdischen Nationalliteratur*. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag.
- Guxman, M. M. (1977). “Formation of the Literary Norm of the German National Language.” In *Soviet Contributions to the Sociology of Language*, Ed. and Trans.
- Philip A. Luelsdorff, 7-30. *Contributions to the Sociology of Language Series*, 16. The Hague: Mouton.
- Hamon, Hervé, & Patrick Rotman. (1981). *Les intellocrates : expédition en haute intelligentsia*. Paris: Ramsay.

- Kristjánsson, Jónas. (1980). *Icelandic Sagas and Manuscripts*, Reykjavik: Icelandic Review.
- . (1982). “The Literary Heritage.” In *Icelandic Sagas, Eddas, and Art*, 9-15. New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library.
- Lieberman, James E. (1979). “Esperanto and Trans-National Identity: The Case of Dr. Zamenhof.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language: Language Planning and Identity Planning*. Ed. Paul Lamy. 20: 89-107.
- Mayer, Arno. (1983). *La persistance de l’Ancien Régime: l’Europe de 1848 à la Grande Guerre*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Mitchell, Timothy. (1989) [1988]. *Colonising Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Shavit, Yaacov. (1987). *The New Hebrew Nation: A Study in Israeli Heresy and Fantasy*. London: Frank Cass.
- Tadmor, Hayim. (1981). “History and Ideology in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions.” In *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons (in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis)*. Ed. F. M. Fales, 13-33. *Oriens Antiqui Collectio - XVII*. Rome: Istituto Per L’Oriente.
- . (1986). “Monarchy and the Elite in Assyria and Babylonia: The Question of Royal Accountability.” In *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. Ed. S. N. Eisenstadt, 203-227 (Chapter 8). Albany: State U. of New York Press.
- Turville-Petre, G. (1968). “Haraldr the Hard-Ruler and His Poets.” *The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, 1966*. London: Lewis.
- Várvaro, Alberto. (1985). *Letteratura romanza del medioevo*. Saggi, 282. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Voegelin, C. F. (1960). “Casual and Non-Casual Utterances Within Unified Structure.” In *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, 57-59. Cambridge: MIT Press.