Apples and Oranges?
An Idiosyncratic Comparison
of Literature and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: This essay takes the standpoint of a specialist of Chinese literature to consider the question of what kind of knowledge literary studies produces. I believe that confronting this question head-on is critical to our discipline's renewal. Moving between the personal and the theoretical, I suggest that anthropology can provide useful tools in making sense of politically and culturally distant texts in the age of world literature. To illustrate my point, I revisit the question of flat characters in traditional Chinese fiction in light of new research in the anthropology of mind. In the end, I propose that literary studies move toward the "new humanities" in order to make itself relevant to broader constituencies.

O N THE SECOND PAGE OF HIS MAGNUM OPUS, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age,* David Damrosch declares that "comparison begins at home."[1] In this essay, I shall run with this declaration and provide an extended commentary on it by drawing on my own experience as an aspiring comparatist based primarily in a national literature department.

First a little background. I received my undergraduate education at Peking University, where I was assigned to major in philosophy and religious studies (my test scores weren't high enough

[1] David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 2.

to be placed in a more coveted major such as English or international finance). In graduate school in the United States, I switched to literature and eventually received my PhD in East Asian literature from Cornell University. As is probably the case with many people, I had fallen in love with literature on my own at a young age. And when I finally got the chance to study it in school, I was eager to be shown the proper ways of appreciating literature. But that never really happened. The humanities in the 1990s were still caught up in the theory fever and in retrospect it seems that I was studying everything but literature.

Both during and after graduate school, my institutional home has been a national literature-cum-area-studies department. Yet all those theory texts I have imbibed have made me feel like an inveterate boundary-crosser. But am I a comparatist? "Comparatists," Damrosch observes, "have classically crossed linguistic as well as geographical borders."[2] As a specialist in modern Chinese literature, I do occasionally cross these borders, but not programmatically. So instead of a roving, committed comparatist, I am a home-bound opportunistic comparatist. That is to say, I do not usually set out to compare two or more literatures, and yet I often end up using comparison as a method and practice in order to arrive at a keener understanding of my materials. This is not surprising. No one, really, is exempt from the imperative of comparison. The question is what and how and at what scale. And this is the question that Damrosch's book interrogates thoroughly and relentlessly. I'm particularly drawn to the chapter on theory, since it is my education in theory that has brought me to the vicinity of the discipline of comparative literature and muffled the interloper's inner doubt. In the space that follows I will reflect on a particular mode of boundary-crossing, one that involves shuttling back and forth between literature and anthropology. In the end, I hope to make a case for pushing comparative literature toward the "new humanities."

APPLES AND ORANGES

Damrosch quotes from Terry Eagleton and Jonathan Culler to the effect that literary theory as it is commonly conceived of by contemporary practitioners is a misnomer, since the usual suspects surveyed in a literary theory class have their origins in other areas of the humanities.[3] These writings on language, mind, history, and culture have eclipsed philology and poetics to constitute the core methods and approaches of literary studies. The theory turn has served me well given that I came to the discipline sideways and had no deep attachment to older methods. My mode of practicing comparison therefore entails moving between my primary texts and the ever-expanding firmament of abstractions.

There is no need to belabor the point that literary theory—as practiced at the center of what Chen Bar-Itzhak[4] calls the "world republic of literary theory"—is by and large a product of Western history and civilization. Anyone who tries to bridge the gap between theory and non-Western literatures invariably ends up comparing Euro-American literatures with whatever literature one is studying, both to provincialize theory and to render it "globally applicable."[5] Early in my graduate studies, I encountered the problem of flat characters in Chinese literature. It piqued my interest, but I shied away from it since it was almost always dismissed in the same

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2 Ibid., 1.

3 Ibid., 123.

4 Chen Bar-Itzhak, "Intellectual Captivity: Literary Theory, World Literature, and the Ethics of Interpretation," *Journal of World Literature* 5, no. 1 (2020): 85.

5 Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures,* 145.

breath as a Eurocentric discourse of lack. Comparison should not be reduced, I learned, to iden-tifying and compiling a litany of lacunae and inadequacies on the part of the non-West. But is it possible that vigilance against Orientalism has preemptively closed off certain avenues of com-parative inquiry? I will return to the problem of flat characters in the next section. I mention it here to explain why I became attracted to anthropology in my search for a viable theory of dif-ference that is alert to the pitfalls of Orientalism. With the rise of interpretative anthropology spearheaded by Clifford Geertz, social and cultural anthropologists took to parsing concepts like "signification" and reading culture as text. In turn, every other literary scholar was learning about Balinese cockfights and reading text as part of culture. Brad Evans terms this two-way traffic "the conceptual refiguration of each field's disciplinary object in the other's image."[6] I was quickly sold on the idea that literary texts are cultural artifacts, and I found in anthropology an effective toolkit to make sense of the cultural differences that lie just below the textual surface. And anthropology's ongoing soul-searching seemed to have salvaged comparison as a method and charted a path between universalism and particularism.

It is not my object to conduct a systematic comparison of the two disciplines in question or to revisit their history of convergence and divergence. Instead, I offer a sketch of how I have navigated the two disciplines pragmatically, with reference to a few meta-comparisons that have resonated particularly well with me. Stanley Corngold argues that both literature and anthro-pology are quintessentially structured around a moment of consternation, which he calls "the anthropological moment" and defines as "a sudden, alarming amazement or dread."[7] In field-work, the moment of consternation arises when one human being perceives another as strange while struggling to make sense of the strangeness as part of a culture. Classical anthropology "describes cultures remotest from the observer's own while struggling to produce an idea of this other humanity. As the distance closes between the culture of the observer and that of his object, anthropology verges on abnormal psychology."[8] Corngold was writing in the 1980s. Since then, anthropology has "come home" without, however, merging with abnormal psychology. In liter-ature, the anthropological moment is engendered by the ubiquitous literary device of defami-liarization. Novels "stage moments of interpersonal consternation and recovery or covering up," and moments of consternation suffuse the reading experience as well.[9]

In literary studies, the danger is that we may not be sufficiently alert to moments of conster-nation if we are not sufficiently equipped to recognize the strangeness of others. Since so much of the reading experience is driven by identification[10] and analogy-making,[11] we can be inattentive to cultural assumptions and logics that underpin motivations, relationships, and events in a sto-ry-world. We all honor the imperative to historicize and contextualize, but what counts as proper context is largely left to the discretion of individual scholars. The interpretative anarchy may lead

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[6] Brad Evans, "Introduction: Rethinking the Disciplinary Confluence of Anthropology and Literary Studies," *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (2007): 430.

[7] Stanley Corngold, "Consternation: The Anthropological Moment in Literature," in *Literature and Anthropology*, ed. Jonathan Hall and Ackbar Abbas (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1986), 156.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 160.

[10] Amanda Anderson, Toril Moi, and Rita Felski, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[11] Douglas R. Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

to creative insight, but it also vitiates our discipline's claim to be a knowledge-producing enterprise. So before we explore how anthropology can help determine the context and prepare us for the anthropological moment in literature, we need to establish what kind of *knowledge*—beyond aesthetic pleasure—is possible when reading literature.

Mitchell Green[12] sums up the evolving body of theories loosely known as "literary cognitivism" that identifies three kinds of knowledge: 1) propositional (such and such is the case), 2) phenomenal (what an experience is like, how an emotion feels like), and 3) practical (how to do things at an imaginative level). The last kind of knowledge is the least well understood, and pioneering inquiries have benefited from extensive borrowings from cognitive psychology.[13] Until the cognitive turn, most theorizing has focused on propositional and phenomenal knowledge using mostly social realist and modernist fiction as examples. Ideology critique informed by Marxism and gender and race theory, for example, is primarily concerned with whatever propositions, even theses, may be teased out of a text that communicate certain beliefs or attitudes about the social world. However, it is difficult for literary critics to claim interpretative authority when interpretations are neither true nor false, but plausible or implausible, apt or inapt. Plausible and apt interpretations can only be arrived at through contextualization, but establishing a proper context must necessarily take the critic to extra-literary domains where historians and social science disciplines claim expertise and epistemological authority.

So how have I benefited from crossing over into anthropology? When reading modern Chinese fiction, the social world depicted therein may be deceptively recognizable to me as someone who grew up in China. Without insights from anthropology, I'm liable to pick up only elements that are legible to my quasi-nativist eye while missing those that operate by older, remote, or occluded cultural logics. This is not to say that a non-Chinese scholar necessarily occupies a vastly superior position when it comes to experiencing moments of consternation. Modern Chinese literature, as has been abundantly demonstrated, is the product of a translated modernity.[14] It is often more discernibly "modern" than "Chinese" and resonates more readily (than classical literature) with the modern sensibility of a reader of whatever ethnic extraction and cultural upbringing. Given our innate preference for the known and familiar, defamiliarization does not automatically kick in. We need anthropology to render a story-world truly strange for us, otherwise we merely "find in non-Western material a confirmation of what [we] already know."[15] This is the case, in Damrosch's view, with Revathi Krishnaswamy's reading of *bhakti* poetry, which, for all her postcolonial sensitivity, "emphasizes elements that closely track the interests of modern secular feminism."[16]

Another reason I have been drawn to anthropology has to do with the growth of cultural studies, an amorphous, highly fungible mode of critical inquiry that has swept through the

12 Mitchell Green, "How and What We Can Learn from Fiction," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010): 352.

13 Gregory Currie, "Literature and 'Theory of Mind,'" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (New York: Routledge. 2016); Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Lisa Zunshine, *The Secret Life of Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

14 Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

15 Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures,* 155.

16 Ibid.

humanities in the last decades of the twentieth century. As an intellectual response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, cultural studies was at once the love child of literature and anthropology (and to a lesser extent sociology) and a prodigal son that provokes mixed feelings in both disciplines. An obvious if superficial indication of the dominance of cultural studies is the renaming of many national literature departments as departments of languages and cultures, such as the name of my home department at Stanford: East Asian Languages and Cultures. In Evans's words, cultural studies has "refigured the very idea of what literature was, such that literature was able not merely to represent cultures, but also to be representative of them—as if an object of ethnography."[17] As we literary scholars venture into the brave new world of cultural studies and leave the time-honored tools of the trade further behind, we are eager for whatever ropes or toeholds were installed by forerunners. Most prominent and influential among these new paradigms is postcolonial theory, but it has its shortfalls. For Nicholas Thomas, postcolonialism has fallen prey to the tendency to reify identity categories derived from contemporary liberal politics. Much of postcolonial criticism is thus conducted:

> … in terms that seem doggedly attached to categorical constructions of identity (as race, sexuality, ethnicity and so on) that are problematized only insofar as they are shown to cross-cut one another. Identities are therefore exhibited as pluralized and fractured rather than singular and integrated, yet a notion of identity as given by categorical location (straight/gay and so on), and as fixed possession rather than historical and biographic contingency, thus seems to haunt current discussion … This is one of the areas in which theorizing within cultural studies has failed to engage with more radical critiques of personhood.[18]

Moreover, cultural studies inspired by postcolonialism tends to fixate on what Thomas calls "the imperial net," comprised of the "texts of imperialism themselves, and those that are enunciated in direct opposition to it."[19] As a result, cultural expressions that lie beyond such texts and counter-texts become invisible to the critical vision. This blind spot is especially pronounced with regard to texts with rural or indigenous settings that are not directly swept up in the imperial net—in other words, texts that do not feature *de rigueur* postcolonial themes of migration, diaspora, and hybridity. Modern Chinese literature, on account of its peculiar birth in the semi-colonial condition of the early twentieth century, has a preponderance of such texts that look backward and inward to reckon with the often painful ramifications of modernization and Westernization and yet cannot be easily aligned with the texts and counter-texts of imperialism. Elsewhere, I have similarly argued that the literary academe's preoccupation with identity politics has made it indifferent to the otherwise glaring fault line that cleaves Chinese society and animates its cultural expressions: state-society relations.[20]

A critical vision without an anthropological lens is especially handicapped when it comes to fiction set in rural regions where many traditional, folk elements still shape people's choices and behaviors. One may derive a superficial understanding while remaining blind to the cultural underpinnings pertaining to traditional cosmology, religiosity, kinship principles, ritualized

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17 Evans, *Rethinking*, 430.

18 Nicholas Thomas, "Becoming Undisciplined: Anthropology and Cultural Studies," in *Anthropological Theory Today*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 271.

19 Ibid., 272.

20 Haiyan Lee, "Latour, Tiananmen, and Glass Slippers; Or, What We Talk about When We Talk about Chinese Studies," *Prism* 17, no. 2 (2020).

social relations, authority structures, and sociolinguistic patterns. One can then fail to identify tensions, fissures, and discrepancies that result from the overlay of modern values and assumptions over older ones. Theories that are universal in pretension are less helpful than anthropological theory, perhaps the only genre of abstract generalization that is avowedly composite, encompassing both the universal and the culturally specific, and concerned with both ontological and epistemological questions. Indeed, anthropological theory, like literary theory, is also an amalgamation of generalizations appropriated from other disciplines that are then tested against local configurations in the anthropological encounter. It is thus a product of self-conscious grappling with the dilemma of using terms derived "elsewhere" to understand a culture, of placing etic discourse into a fruitful, albeit never frictionless, dialogue with emic discourse. It remains true to the mission of the interpretive social sciences, which, according to Charles Taylor, seeks to explain human action in terms of both the agent's self-definition and the scientist's universalist vocabulary.[21] Neither alone is sufficient for understanding; neither alone constitutes knowledge as such. Bar-Itzhak[22] echoes this point in her call for emulating cultural anthropology's relentless reflexivity in order to overcome the "intellectual captivity" that traps first-world academics.

Damrosch is for all intents and purposes also calling for the anthropological approach when he speaks of "culturally specific theories":

> Whether embedded in literary texts or elaborated in aesthetic treatises, culturally specific theories provide an essential check against vague universalism and imperialist exoticism. They can keep us from declarations that, say, a Lacanian perspective on *The Story of the Stone* has revealed its long-hidden meaning, invisible to readers in the Qing Dynasty. Yet anyone using a broad theoretical perspective will be assessing a work to some degree in terms derived elsewhere than within the work itself, and even scholars deeply immersed in their home culture are rarely stewards of unmediated local traditions.[23]

The key question is how to chart a middle course between adopting the self-descriptions of authors/characters as agents and bypassing them altogether. All too often we veer to one extreme or the other. The few psychoanalytical readings of *The Story of the Stone* I have encountered, for example, are mechanical and unsatisfactory because there is very little attempt to reckon with the propositional discourse within the text. Coincidentally, my first publication as a graduate student was an anthropological reading of the same eighteenth-century Chinese classic.[24] All I did was inject a selection of anthropological writings on kinship, death, and fertility into the field of critical operations dominated by gender and sexuality—universal categories derived from contemporary politics of identity but anachronistic at best to eighteenth-century Chinese society structured by particularistic lineage organizations and patriarchal kinship ideology. Interpretations uninformed by anthropology are wont to go down the critical path of recognizing only elements that closely track the interests of modern scholarship with its liberal, secular, and progressive commitments.

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21 Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers,* vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116.

22 Bar-Itzhak, "Intellectual Captivity."

23 Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures,* 155–56.

24 Haiyan Lee, "Love or Lust? The Sentimental Self in *Honglou meng* [Dream of the red chamber]," *CLEAR (Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews)* 19 (1997).

ROUND AND FLAT

The dialectic of universalism and particularism brings me back to the problem of round and flat characters. As noted above, scholars of Chinese literature have largely dodged the problem that was initially formulated by E. M. Forster in relation to European novels. Confronting it head-on would require more than the "vague universalism" of narratology or the exoticism of Sinology. Anthropology can help on this particular front, especially the subfields of anthropology of cognition/mind and anthropology of self/personhood. Here I seek to update an early attempt at explaining the appeal of flat characters in traditional Chinese narratives by Darko Suvin, best known for his work on science fiction. Suvin's article appears in an anthology on literature and anthropology and makes reference to both structuralist anthropology and structuralist poetics. Most important, he adopts an anthropological gaze to cope with the moment of consternation when reading Chinese novels with numerous characters, or character types, that drop in and out of meandering, episodic plotlines. And equally important, he ultimately turns that gaze back on European novels.

Suvin's article may be read as an indirect response to Fredric Jameson's complaint about "third-world texts" that do not "offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce"[25] ("indirect" because both articles were published in the same year). Jameson is not mistaken in attributing the odd aloofness of these texts to their double existence as national allegories, whereby the fate of the individual always mirrors the fate of the nation under colonial or imperialist domination. Caught in the collective anti-colonial struggle, third-world literature privileges "men in the aggregate"[26] fighting for socioeconomic and political freedom over the inner agonies of the private psyche. The inward gaze is what gives us the celebrated psychological novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as practiced by such European realist and modernist masters as Eliot, Hardy, Hugo, Woolf, and Proust. Out of these novels emerged Forster's "round" characters who stand in sharp relief from the character types that had populated premodern, early modern, and postmodernist literature: "The victory of the Individualist character has never been complete. It was always confined not only to the Individualist epoch but also to its typical or dominant genres—e.g. to the psychological novel and the well-made play as against the fairy tale, the paraliterature, the farce, the melodrama, and the great bulk of modern avantgarde literature and drama of the last 100 years."[27] Uninformed by such anthropological insight, modern criticism has taken the psychological novel as the gold standard and habitually put literary characters through the round/flat test. Accordingly, premodern Chinese literature, like premodern literatures the world over, is found to be peculiarly lacking round characters. This dearth seems to have carried over into the modern century as well, as Jameson has wistfully observed.

For Suvin, however, it is the round individualist character that is an anomaly in the history of world literature. Thus, instead of dismissing flat characters as a kind of artistic arrested development or the literary equivalent of magic vis-à-vis modern technology, he sets out to explain how flat characters work at the emotional and aesthetic level. Suvin surveys two vernacular novels, *The Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan*, fourteenth century) and *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi*, eighteenth

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[25] Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65.

[26] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 77, quoting John Updike.

[27] Darko Suvin, "On Fiction as Anthropology: Agential Analysis, Types, and the Classical Chinese Novel," in Hall and Abbas, *Literature and Anthropology*, 125.

century), both featuring a large ensemble cast. Following Andrew Plaks, who pioneered the narratological study of traditional Chinese fiction, Suvin argues that characterological complexity is achieved not by giving a central character conflicting traits and hence inner depth but rather through "a redundancy of characterization."[28] Hence the continual addition of characters whose attributes partially overlap with existing characters who serially rotate off to make room for newer configurations of moral conflict. The character ensemble "as a whole in a Chinese text will equal (or surpass) the contradictory complexity and richness of traits found in a central character in an Individualist (Euro-American post-Cervantes) text of a comparable quality."[29]

Why is it possible for one or two central round characters to supplant an ensemble cast? The anthropology of mind may have some answers. Literary cognitivism maintains that psychological fiction exploits the pleasure attendant on exercising our cognitive capacity for mindreading (aka theory of mind, or mentalizing), evolved for the purpose of explaining and predicting behavior. Characters relate to one another not just socially but also psychically through a recursive mode of mental embedding. Plot development can hinge to a large extent on whether A knows that B knows that A knows, or if A misconstrues B's intentions about C and misinforms C, and if C knows that A is mistaken about B but acts on the information anyway to mislead A, and so on and so forth. The mental interlocking beyond the elementary state, or thinking about thinking, can implicate the characters, narrator, implied author, and implied reader, who keep track of the whirligig of impulses, feelings, and thoughts through inner monologues, dialogues, and free indirect discourse. As I have argued elsewhere, such high-stakes exercise of theory of mind is peculiar to the psychological novel that arose in modern commercial society predicated on stranger sociality.[30] In what Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity,"[31] social relationships are conjured up from scratch each time two or more individuals come together to embark on a project—business transaction, political partnership, courtship, marriage, and so on. The thoughts and intentions of others have become a mystery that requires decipherment. Anxiety about trust is what underlies both the perils and thrills of stranger sociality, which in turn drives the appeal of the psychological novel.

In premodern society grounded in family, kinship, and face-to-face community, one has far less need for theory of mind to navigate a relatively stable social world. Instead, one relies on the folk psychological heuristics of stereotyping, projection, and manipulation. In situations where epistemological accuracy is secondary to the goals of social cohesion and order, the most important cognitive skill is not charting the dark continent of another mind, but having a firm grasp of role expectations and ritual protocols that knit a community together. That's why the myths, epics, and folklore of traditional cultures lionize straight-up heroes and heap scorn on those whose stock-in-trade leans on Machiavellian intelligence.[32] Susan Blum speaks of the selective or restrained exercise of theory of mind in her ethnographical study of truth and lying in China:

> Peasants have substantial common knowledge of each other's lives and contexts, which they
> draw on to explain what others are doing for what purpose, on most occasions. It is unnecessary

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28 Ibid., 126.

29 Ibid., 128.

30 Haiyan Lee, "'Measuring the Stomach of a Gentleman with the Heart-Mind of a Pipsqueak: On the Ubiquity and Utility of Theory of Mind in Literature, Mostly," *Poetics Today* 41, no. 2 (2020).

31 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

32 Lisa Zunshine, *The Secret Life of Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 92; see also Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity* (New York: Crown, 2014), chap. 7.

and undesirable to infer others' intentions, but their goals may be guessed—not as idiosyncratic but as would apply to anyone with such a personality in such circumstances. Focus on individual self is irrelevant.[33]

There are also cultures that are so strongly disinclined to mindreading that they are said to operate on an "opacity doctrine."[34] In some Pacific Island societies, for example, peering into the mind of another is considered impertinent at best.

In premodern China, mindreading is believed to be practiced by crafty individuals looking to take advantage of the guileless and broad-minded. Traditional narratives tend to reflect societal priorities of control, regulation, and cooperation by privileging trait attribution, stereotyping, and behavior schemata—techniques of "mindshaping."[35] It seems that mindshaping works as well as mindreading in building dramatic tension and propelling the plot. In such narratives, readers keep track of the merry-go-round of character types through dialogues and actions that do not deviate erratically from what is typical for a character with "such a personality in such circumstances."[36] The complexity of social dynamics is achieved through the proliferation of partially overlapping and permutating character attributes. One reads not autonomous, sovereign minds, but "character" as a composite entity jointly sculpted by social norms and individual dispositions. Each character in isolation may be "flat," i.e., lacking unpredictability and idiosyncrasy. But an assemblage of characters is as complex and quirky as any individual can possibly be psychologically.

This way of reading flat characters is profoundly anthropologically inspired: theory of mind may be universal in social life, but it is not universally prized or maximally exploited for literary effect. Long after the psychological novel has been introduced to China and long after modern Chinese writers have invented memorable round characters, novels with avowedly flat central characters still abound—to the extent to which Chinese society still eschews individualism and emphasizes role performance. During the high socialist period, in fact, only flat types were permitted by the tenets of socialist realism: a character must be either exaggeratedly positive or exaggeratedly negative. In other words, he or she must be an ideal typical hero or ideal typical villain. The so-called "middle character" who mixes positive and negative qualities and who exhibits a degree of psychological depth is frowned upon and effectively banned.

In attending to the anthropological moment, one may arrive at an understanding of another culture as well as a revised understanding of one's own. Such should be the goal of all comparisons freed from debilitating relativism (the idea that other cultures can only be understood in their own terms) and arrogant ethnocentrism. In his account of how the interpretative social sciences differ from the natural sciences, Taylor argues that cross-cultural comparison speaks a language not reducible to the explananda of the observer or the explanandum of the observed:

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33 Susan D. Blum, *Lies That Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 194.

34 Alessandro Duranti, *The Anthropology of Intentions: Language in a World of Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); T. M. Luhrmann, "Mind and Spirit: A Comparative Theory about Representation of Mind and the Experience of Spirit," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. S1 (2020); Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey, "Introduction: Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology and the Opacity of Other Minds," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2008).

35 Shannon Spaulding, *How We Understand Others: Philosophy and Social Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

36 Blum, *Lies That Bind*.

In fact, it will almost always be the case that the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one could call a language of perspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both.[37]

Cross-cultural literary criticism, such as practiced by Suvin, speaks precisely such a language of perspicuous contrast.

LITERATURE EVERYWHERE

My engagement with anthropology falls largely within the parameters of the anthropological approach to literature as defined by the MLA (Modern Language Association). But my interests are not confined to tracing familiar anthropological themes such as kinship, ritual, magic, and mythology. I turn to anthropological knowledge about Chinese and other non-Western societies that brings to light underlying cultural and political logics that could explain certain aesthetic choices or preferences, such as the enduring prominence of character types, including their political canonization during the Mao era. Again, my goal here is not to attempt a systematic comparison of literature and anthropology. Comparison of this sort has been attempted, interestingly, more by anthropologists than by literary scholars, especially during the high tide of poststructuralism when both disciplines were wracked by the "crisis of representation." For Henrietta Moore, anthropology has the most at stake in withstanding the shockwaves:

This "crisis of representation" was experienced by all the disciplines of the human sciences, but its particular inflection within anthropology was specially tied to the geopolitics of West/Other relations and to anthropology's own fraught, but essential engagement with those relations. Anthropology occupies a discursive and practical space defined by West/Other relations, and no amount of critiques of "othering" will ever alter that fact. Anthropology must on no account vacate that space because to do so would be to give up on the possibility of a critical politics and a critical ethics linked to an understanding of the way the world currently is and to the multifarious ways in which people are living out their lives.[38]

In Evans's account of the "long-standing special relationship"[39] between literature and anthropology, the shockwaves have washed away the bounded notion of culture and replaced it with "circulation"—of people, ideas, and things on a global scale—as "a kind of antidote to culture's conceptual stasis in place and time."[40]

Another reason why the crisis has impacted anthropology especially hard is because its practitioners combine two roles that are often split in literature: the author and the critic. Whereas the anthropologist is both an objective scientist and an empathic interpreter, the literary critic performs only the secondary task of interpretation. Who has authority to represent whom is a question that may trouble creative writers, but the critic can sit on the sideline and in judgment of the former. In anthropology, on the other hand, the need to distance itself from its colonial

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37 Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 125.

38 Henrietta L. Moore, "Anthropological Theory at the Turn of the Century," in *Anthropological Theory Today*, 5–6.

39 Evans, "Rethinking," 437.

40 Ibid., 435.

pedigree is dogged by a different kind of role bifurcation: the role of the author is split between the ethnographer and the informant, and their relationship is characterized by both collaboration and power imbalance. Whereas the anthropologist and the informant jointly "make up" ethnographical facts, it is the former who executes the secondary act of "making real," to use Elaine Scarry's vocabulary,[41] and produces ethnographical knowledge by virtue of his or her institutional location. This problematic division of labor has spurred experimental ethnography as well as auto-anthropology in parts of the world where anthropologists traditionally conduct their fieldwork. By contrast, literary scholars' informants—authors—are often larger-than-life cultural heroes or icons. They are a kind of native anthropologists whose deep immersion in, or participatory observation of, the social world they depict enables them to speak authoritatively with little reference to academic criticism. Readers are often eager to connect directly with authors while bypassing criticism, especially jargony academic criticism.

This comparison leaves us with a troubling question: What exactly is the role of the literary scholar? What is the nature of criticism as a form of knowledge? Anthropologists can aspire to scientific objectivity and claim to produce truthful knowledge about a society/culture based on empirical research and the dialectic of the anthropological encounter. They operate in a discursive and epistemological community that mostly excludes literature understood as high culture as well as literary criticism as practiced in academia. Literary scholars cannot make the same claim to objectivity, but in my view they can produce cultural knowledge that extends beyond specific literary works if they are willing to scale steeper disciplinary barriers. As I have noted earlier, plausible and apt interpretations depend on proper contextualization. What counts as proper context must be informed by an understanding of the broader social/cultural milieu—the domain of area studies and social sciences. In a way, the literary scholar's authority is always disciplinarily deferred but not negated. That's because he or she can turn to other disciplines to make explicit the different kinds of knowledge communicated or operationalized by works of literature, above and beyond their aesthetic value. To invoke Scarry's vocabulary again, a literary scholar can mobilize borrowed tools to make real the knowledge hiding in plain sight, overshadowed by literature's glorious or inglorious fictionality.

For example, I teach a recurring course on gender and sexuality in modern China. Half of the course materials are works of fiction (novels, short stories, films) supplemented by the occasional polemical essay. For secondary texts, I rely heavily on anthropological scholarship. With their emphasis on cultural difference and cultural transformation, these texts are enormously helpful to the students by historicizing and relativizing what we take as universal identity categories such as sex and gender. Students come away from the course with a much more nuanced grasp of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural comparison as a method and practice. But could they have acquired such knowledge in an anthropology course directly? Perhaps. But not necessarily in the same way. Literature is not simply a proposition-delivering package from which one can get the goods more straightforwardly by stripping away the padding. Literature takes "lifeless propositions"[42] and makes them matter to us by engaging our emotions. It tells us why facts matter. To the extent to which anthropology resorts to narrative ethnography, it is also trying to approximate the potency of vicarious experiential learning. Literature can also become disarticulated from its milieu and hitch rides with global currents of ideas and feelings. Students

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41 Elaine Scarry, "The Made-Up and the Made-Real," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5, no. 2 (1992).

42 James Harold, "Literary Cognitivism," in Carroll and Gibson, *Routledge Companion,* 385.

don't just learn something about China by reading Chinese fiction. They also acquire a new way of seeing their own world and reflecting on the human condition.

In her forthcoming book *Post-Discipline: Literature, Professionalism, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, Merve Emre[43] argues that while literature departments are in decline, the study of literature has flourished in settings such as business schools, medical schools, and law schools, as well as in book clubs and online forums. Literature has for all intents and purposes escaped from the classroom presided over by forlorn professors and their armloads of credentialed expertise. In some ways, this is an extension of the way literature has always been used by social scientists. Rose De Angelis notes that "historians, classicists, folklorists, mythologists, archaeologists, and ethnographers" have long made use of literature to interpret the past and identify cultural patterns.[44] Janet Tallman singles out for attention what she calls "ethnographic novels" or culturally rich texts that yield valuable anthropological data otherwise difficult to access from fieldwork alone.[45] Somehow these social scientists have intuited that they cannot afford to ignore the imaginative genres insofar as social theory seeks to understand its subjects as agents of self-definition whose practice is shaped by their self-understanding. Fiction furnishes a ready-made lingua franca of cultural self-fashioning. "When we imaginatively engage with works of fiction, what we imagine affects what we believe."[46] And we habitually view the social world through the lens of our favorite works, so much so that modifiers like Orwellian, Dickensian, and Kafkaesque require no definition.

In all these nonliterary uses of literature, it is the social realist novel that is privileged because it requires the least amount of critical intervention. Should we as literary critics cede the realist repertoire to the lay public and retreat to difficult texts on which we can better prove our disciplinary chops? That would be irresponsible. I believe we can retool our discipline so that we can capitalize on our most popular assets. One way is to ally with cognate humanities disciplines such as philosophy and history and interpretative social sciences such as anthropology as well as area studies to strengthen our claim as a producer of cultural knowledge—propositional and phenomenal knowledge about cultures, societies, eras, and peoples. This harkens back to Gayatri Spivak's suggestion twenty years ago that "the politics of the production of knowledge in area studies (and also anthropology and other 'human sciences') can be touched by a new Comparative Literature"[47] and vice versa. Another way is to ally with far-flung disciplines such as medicine, law, computer science, neuroscience, cognitive and evolutionary psychology, and behavioral economics to build "new humanities" on the basis of the kind of practical knowledge that can be honed in literary engagement.

Let me conclude this essay with a plea: Instead of seeking to recruit more literature majors, we might try to lure more computer science and engineering majors into our classrooms and make EVERYONE read more literature. We can make literature an essential part of the common core by demonstrating that literature shapes understanding and understanding shapes practice. If Frankenstein can misread *Paradise Lost* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as "true history" and

43 Merve Emre, "Post-Discipline: Literature, Professionalism, and the Crisis of the Humanities," University of Oxford, n.d., https://postdiscipline.english.ox.ac.uk/about.

44 Rose De Angelis, *Between Anthropology and Literature: Interdisciplinary Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

45 Janet Tallman, "The Ethnographic Novel: Finding the Insider's Voice," in De Angelis, *Between Anthropology and Literature,* 13.

46 Harold, "Literary Cognitivism," 388.

47 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 4–5.

learn to love virtue and spurn vice,[48] we should be catholic about readerly approaches to fiction. Instead of fretting about the lack of evidentiary warrant for whatever kind of knowledge we are claiming for literature, we can sensitize our students to the culturally and ideologically motivated aspects of works of fiction by pointing to the discrepancies between literary and nonliterary discourses. We should not make ourselves irrelevant to a broad constituency who read literature with an eye to what it can teach them. If they value propositional and phenomenal knowledge as much as the implicit and elusive benefits of cognitive, affective, and moral improvement, we should help them on all fronts.

I make the above plea with considerable practical justifications. After two years of teaching a survey course in modern Chinese literature right out of graduate school, I gave up on the survey model and switched to a topics model whereby I assemble an interdisciplinary body of texts with literature at the core on a topic that is likely to appeal to undergraduate students, such as the body, gender, and sexuality; Tiananmen protests; human-animal relations; love; happiness; and so on. These courses have indeed proven more appealing to students who often say in class questionnaires that the reason they take my elective courses is because they hope to "learn something about China." I'm thus left with the challenge of justifying why they can "learn something about China" in a literature course where most of the texts are fictional, and why they should take my course instead of yet another course in history or sociology or political science focused on China. The students' area orientation also has pedagogical implications: I'm generally reluctant to devote too much class time to specifically literary topics or questions of form. I might try to explain quickly what an allegory or third-person limited point of view or free indirect discourse is, but if the students show little interest or comprehension, I simply move on and try to meet them halfway by focusing on thematic issues. Student papers, too, are overwhelmingly devoted to thematic explorations. When they do independent research to supplement course materials, they almost exclusively consult social science and media sources. In other words, they approach literature as a valuable source of cultural knowledge.

To be sure, what I have described may be a case of what Rey Chow has called "coerced mimeticism,"[49] a bias of low expectations that reduces non-Western literatures to testimonies hewing closely to the lived experience of oppression, tyranny, and backwardness. This is, as Evans also recognizes, an inherent limitation of the anthropological approach, whereby literature, as just another part of a culture, can lose its ability to say novel things about anything but the culture itself.[50] But insofar as non-Western literatures do not make it easy to bracket cultural difference and continue to, say, serve up flat characters that are difficult to relate to, we have to find ways to accommodate a knowledge-focused orientation if we are serious about the survival of our discipline. As a discipline that has grappled the longest and hardest with the question of cultural difference, anthropology has much to offer us. $\boxed{\text{A}}$

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48 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dover thrift editions, 1994 [(1831)]), 92.

49 Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *Boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 18.

50 Evans, "Rethinking," 436.