

Forum

Romania and the Widening Gyre

To the Editor:

Peter Brooks's essay, "Romania and the Widening Gyre" (87, Jan. 1972, 7-11), left me uneasy. Romania as a concept, he argues, is easily misleading, obsolete, defunct. No one will argue that Romance Philology, whatever its charms, is not dead—the tracing of origins and the description of Ur-myths is not a primary concern of students of literature today. Even the very concept of Romania in literature may, as Brooks seems to argue, be no more than a Romance Language Department Imperialism. But has he argued for anything more than a multilingual English Department Commonwealth?

I am disturbed by what I take to be his assumption that all of literature is one, apparently abstract, domain of image-making wherein there are no distinctions worthy of serious consideration. The Aristotelian description of artistic activity as "image-making" (which I share with Brooks) involves, however, more elements than a mere attention and response to human needs as an abstract concept. In point of fact, if "human needs" exist at all in an unarticulated and abstract realm, that realm itself is unapproachable to all but the metaphysicians. Aristotle suggested a way out of that cul-de-sac with his division of artistic expressions according to the medium in which they are produced. Thus I agree that "fiction-making should be seen within the range of man's other image-making activities"—and I would add the plastic arts, music, film, and social patterns to Brooks's essentially conservative list—but I would insist on closer attention to the medium of a particular work of art than Brooks seems to require.

Literature does not exist as a disembodied expression of human needs but as a specific image of those needs as they are expressed in language. And there is an *esprit de langue* (however vague) in each language, conditioned by its geography, its literary experience, its history. The medium of literature may well be language but language itself is not one medium but many—each different from the others and capable of preoccupations and emphases distinct from those of every other language.

This does not mean that literature-in-translation courses are impossible and to be avoided. On the contrary, they are profoundly important and contribute significantly to helping the undergraduate

student see beyond the limits of American literature and experience. It does, however, mean that in moving from one literature to another the professor should take great care to avoid presenting works from different literary traditions as though they were simple and direct images of an abstract human need with no cultural and historical reservations. They are not. They are responses to an abstract need expressed in a specific language which, inevitably, implies its unique tradition and concerns. Languages do make a difference in what the author chooses to detail, the metaphors he employs, the prejudices and judgments he implies. The professor, then, must make it clear that the work of literature under consideration in the classroom has built an image in the terms of the medium the author has used.

Brooks has called for "thematic and structural homology" where none may exist. Homology implies direct genetic connections, demonstrable *rapports de faits*—notoriously difficult to isolate within a single literary tradition, let alone between several. Homology may be useful within the single literary tradition, such as Romania, but it is seriously limited in attempts to discover similarities of concern with historical connections (although a few exist, especially in modern literature) between works originating in different traditions. What, for example, can homology do with a confrontation between the miracle plays of Romania, Noh drama of Japan, and the Sanskrit theater of Ancient India? The barriers of language, tradition, concerns of the cultures involved, all are too great for a leap to an abstract realm where human needs are imaged without a direct and detailed preliminary statement of the differences involved. Homology, which requires a demonstrated genetic relationship, would retreat to Ur-literature where human needs are imaged on a level of abstraction that would dismay us all.

A sounder approach to the problem may involve the refurbishing of Romania as a literary concept rather than its dismissal. I envision a course similar to Brooks's, but one where Romania has its place beside Anglo-Saxondom and Germania, Orientalia and Sla-vonica. Each of these cultural circles has its own integrity and a historical tradition which has exercised significant influence on the literature produced within its confines. That is the concern of homology. But between these separate cultural circles there are a number of relationships based not on historical connections

but parallels and similarities which are the concern of analogy. The use of analogy can respect the many differences between literary traditions—differences Brooks discounts—and concern itself with the same images of human problems on a more sharply defined level than Brooks offers, a level where differences of language and literary tradition are acknowledged and their contribution to an author's statement of human problems confronted directly.

I do not differ greatly from Brooks in my hope for courses that respond to the problems literature describes. But I do feel that some attention must be directed to the particular author's medium (his linguistic and literary tradition) in order to understand what has influenced his position. Without respect for Romania and the other cultural circles that influence human expression, little contribution can be made to the teaching of literature as an understanding of "the confrontation of the mind and the surrounding world that is not mind" Brooks seeks. To return to the semipolitical metaphor of my first paragraph, I see neither a Romance Language Empire nor an English Department Commonwealth but a United Nations of all the Language Departments with the divergent traditions and assumptions they represent.

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To the Editor:

I wish to comment on "Romania and the Widening Gyre" by Peter Brooks (87, Jan. 1972, 7-11). Mr. Brooks is insufficiently aware of his own assumptions. E. R. Curtius, on the other hand, was alert to his cultural loyalties and the limitations of the method those loyalties had left him as an inheritance. Although the arrangement of his work acknowledges chronology and geography, he cultivated no mystique about origins. He sought no ultimate solution to the mystery of human creativity. Since the dominant tradition of Western literature was rhetorical, he laid out a rhetorical panorama of the literature and the theory which had largely determined its styles and forms.

But there is also a value in the kind of book Curtius wrote for those writers and teachers who imagine that they have broken with the traditions of Latin Europe. We are still faced with the problem of teaching literature, of talking about it with one another. Although it is impossible to teach literature directly, we continue to exchange rhetoric about it because occasionally something important does seem to happen. Illumination occurs within a continued dialectic of rhetoric. That is just what Curtius illustrated over and over again. There is no other method available.

If Brooks wishes to teach literature as an institution

of fiction-making, of "mime, model-building, play, dreaming" (p. 8), he will soon find himself dealing comparatively with models going back to Thomas More's *Romania* and the story of Eden. In other words, he will have to be something of a Curtius. One hopes he will be as clearheaded as Curtius was about where his values are taking the discussion. There is room for doubt on that score. Brooks is naive about the open-endedness of teaching literature as play, of looking at literary works as dream-worlds. He must have noticed sometime that one man's dream is another's nightmare. If that is in fact the point of his institution it is a point my students have already learned.

The thematic arrangement of a course or of an anthology does not deliver the teacher from his own dogmatism. Rather, it leaves him more vulnerable to it. The best a teacher can do is to allow his own first principles to be challenged by human precedent, by comparison and analogy, by the arts of persuasion. At that point he is back in the tradition of Curtius.

The dissolution of a European literary tradition does not redefine the problems of reading, writing, and argument, whatever changes in pedagogy may be worth a try. Every private myth must yield to communal comparisons as soon as it is put into words. What modern romanticism needs is a Curtius who will describe the linguistic patterns that cut across autobiographical minutiae. Even half a Curtius would be welcome.

RICHARD HARRIER
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Mr. Brooks replies:

I am in some doubt as to the reality of any profound disagreement between Professor Moriarty and myself. I of course agree that literature is fabricated of language, and that any approach which neglects the specificity of a language, its conventions and possibilities, is utopian and falsifying. I argued that attention to "genius loci" and genius of the language is an irreducible necessity of any literary study. I believe, for instance, that the valid and necessary enterprise of teaching literature in translation is most effectively carried out by a teacher who knows the works in the original, and can convey a sense of the unavoidable displacements brought about by translation. As much as Professor Moriarty, I deplore the course which makes of Western literature a timeless and placeless spiritual cocktail party.

Since I was quite explicit on this subject in my article, I do not see why I am charged with making literature an "abstract" domain of image-making. There is nothing abstract about image-making. Nor do I think