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*The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*

EDITED BY DAVID DAMROSCH, NATALIE MELAS, AND MBONGISENI BUTHELEZI

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## The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature

From the European Enlightenment  
to the Global Present

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Notes

1. From M.-F. Guyard, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951). Translated by David Damrosch.
2. The Allies had liberated Paris from German occupation in 1945, six years before Carré wrote his preface, a fact that may be echoed in the military language of his concluding sentences.
3. The first general exposition was provided by our teacher Fernand Baldensperger in 1921 (first issue of the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*). See also P. Van Tieghem, *La Littérature comparée* (1931; reprint, 1946). [Au.]
4. A subject taught in the United States. [Au.]

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## The Crisis of Comparative Literature<sup>1</sup> (1959)

René Wellek

One of the eminent European scholars who spearheaded the study of comparative literature in the United States after the Second World War, René Wellek was born in Vienna in 1903 of Czech parents. He was educated in Vienna and then in Prague, where he pursued a doctorate in philology at Charles University. While later holding a teaching post there, he joined Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetskoy, and others as a member of the Prague linguistic circle. This group was instrumental in extending the insights of structural linguistics to literature. The war's outbreak sent him into exile in the United States, where he eventually became a professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Yale University. With Austin Warren, he co-authored *Theory of Literature* (1949), a pioneering and highly influential approach to the study of comparative literature in which history, theory and criticism are intimately linked. Sympathetic to New Criticism's critique of historical and biographical approaches to literature, Wellek nonetheless advocates a more synoptic view of literature, and he himself attempted a sweeping overview in his massive, unfinished eight-volume *History of Modern Criticism*, on which he worked from the mid-1950s until his death in 1995 at the age of ninety-two.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Wellek made a great impact on comparative studies through a series of searching, polemical essays on problems of defining literary terms and the discipline of literary studies. In "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" (1959), Wellek defends a broad and multivalent definition of the discipline against the strict emphasis on

the study of direct and verifiable influences, represented by such scholars as Marius-François Guyard and Jean-Marie Carré. The essay became a manifesto of sorts for what came to be known as the "American School" of comparative literature, which emphasized the importance of literary theory and championed cosmopolitan humanism over cultural nationalism.

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The world (or rather our world) has been in a state of permanent crisis since, at least, the year 1914. Literary scholarship, in its less violent, muted ways, has been torn by conflicts of methods since about the same time. The old certainties of nineteenth-century scholarship, its ingenuous belief in the accumulations of facts, any facts, in the hope that these bricks will be used in the building of the great pyramid of learning, its trust in causal explanation on the model of the natural sciences, had been challenged sharply even before: by Croce in Italy, by Dilthey and others in Germany. Thus no claim can be made that recent years have been exceptional or even that the crisis of literary scholarship has reached anywhere a point of solution or even temporary accommodation. Still, a re-examination of our aims and methods is needed. There is something symbolic to the passing, in the last decade, of several of the masters: Van Tieghem, Farinelli, Vossler, Curtius, Auerbach, Carré, Baldensperger, and Spitzer.

The most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology. I believe that the programmatic pronouncements of Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Carré, and Guyard have failed in this essential task. They have saddled comparative literature with an obsolete methodology and have laid on it the dead hand of nineteenth-century factualism, scientism, and historical relativism.

Comparative literature has the immense merit of combating the false isolation of national literary histories: it is obviously right (and has brought a mass of evidence to support this) in its conception of a coherent Western tradition of literature woven together in a network of innumerable interrelations. But I doubt that the attempt to distinguish between "comparative" and "general" literature, made by Van Tieghem,<sup>2</sup> can succeed. According to Van Tieghem "comparative" literature is confined to the study of interrelations between *two* literatures while "general" literature is concerned with the movements and fashions which sweep through *several* literatures. Surely this distinction is quite untenable and impracticable. Why

should, say, the influence of Walter Scott in France be considered "comparative" literature while a study of the historical novel during the Romantic age be "general" literature? Why should we distinguish between a study of the influence of Byron on Heine and the study of Byronism in Germany? The attempt to narrow "comparative literature" to a study of the "foreign trade" of literatures is surely unfortunate. Comparative literature would be, in subject matter, an incoherent group of unrelated fragments: a network of relations which are constantly interrupted and broken off from meaningful wholes. The *comparatiste* qua *comparatiste* in this narrow sense could study only sources and influences, causes and effects, and would be even prevented from investigating a single work of art in its totality as no work can be reduced entirely to foreign influences or considered as a radiating point of influence only toward foreign countries. Imagine that similar restrictions would be imposed on the study of the history of music, the fine arts, or philosophy! Could there be a congress or even a periodical exclusively devoted to such a mosaic of questions as, say, the influence of Beethoven in France, of Raphael in Germany, or even Kant in England? These related disciplines have been much wiser: there are musicologists, art historians, historians of philosophy, and they do not pretend that there are special disciplines such as comparative painting, music, or philosophy. The attempt to set up artificial fences between comparative and general literature must fail because literary history and literary scholarship have one subject: literature. The desire to confine "comparative literature" to the study of the foreign trade of two literatures limits it to a concern with externals, with second-rate writers, with translations, travel books, "intermediaries"; in short, it makes "comparative literature" a mere subdiscipline investigating data about the foreign sources and reputations of writers.

The attempt to set apart not only the subject matter but also the methods of comparative literature has failed even more signally. Van Tieghem sets up two criteria which supposedly distinguish comparative literature from the study of national literatures. Comparative literature is concerned, he tells us, with the myths and legends which surround the poets and it is preoccupied with minor and minimal authors. But it is impossible to see why a student of a single national literature should not do the same: the image of Byron or Rimbaud in England or France has been successfully described without much regard to other countries and, say, Daniel Mornet in France or Josef Nadler in Germany have shown us that one can write national literary history with full attention to ephemeral and forgotten writers.

Nor can one be convinced by recent attempts by Carré and Guyard to widen suddenly the scope of comparative literature in order to include a

study of national illusions, of fixed ideas which nations have of each other. It may be all very well to hear what conceptions Frenchmen had about Germany or about England—but is such a study still literary scholarship? Is it not rather a study of public opinion useful, for instance, to a program director in the Voice of America and its analogues in other countries? It is national psychology, sociology, and, as literary study, nothing else but a revival of the old *Stoffgeschichte*.<sup>3</sup> “England and the English in the French novel” is hardly better than “the Irishman on the English stage” or “the Italian in Elizabethan drama.” This extension of comparative literature implies a recognition of the sterility of the usual subject matter—at the price, however, of dissolving literary scholarship into social psychology and cultural history.

All these flounderings are only possible because Van Tieghem, his precursors and followers conceive of literary study in terms of nineteenth-century positivistic factualism, as a study of sources and influences. They believe in causal explanation, in the illumination which is brought about by tracing motifs, themes, characters, situations, plots, etc., to some other chronologically preceding work. They have accumulated an enormous mass of parallels, similarities, and sometimes identities, but they have rarely asked what these relationships are supposed to show except possibly the fact of one writer's knowledge and reading of another writer. Works of art, however, are not simply sums of sources and influences: they are wholes in which raw materials derived from elsewhere cease to be inert matter and are assimilated into a new structure. Causal explanation leads only to a *regressus ad infinitum* and besides, in literature, seems hardly ever unequivocally successful in establishing what one would consider the first requirement of any causal relationship: “when X occurs, Y must occur.” I am not aware that any literary historian has given us proof of such a necessary relationship or that he even could do so, as the isolation of such a cause has been impossible with works of art which are wholes, conceived in the free imagination, whose integrity and meaning are violated if we break them up into sources and influences.

The concept of source and influence has of course worried the more sophisticated practitioners of comparative literature. For instance, Louis Cazamian, commenting on Carré's book *Goethe en Angleterre*, sees that there is “no assurance that this particular action made this particular difference.” He argues that M. Carré is wrong in speaking of Goethe's “having, indirectly, provoked the English romantic movement” merely because Scott translated *Goetz von Berlichingen*.<sup>4</sup> But Cazamian can only make a gesture toward the idea, familiar since Bergson, of flux and becoming. He

recommends the study of individual or collective psychology which, with Cazamian, means an elaborate, totally unverifiable theory of the oscillations of the rhythm of the English national soul.

Similarly also, Baldensperger,<sup>5</sup> in his programmatic introduction to the first number of *Revue de littérature comparée* (1921) saw the dead end of literary scholarship preoccupied with tracing the history of literary themes. They can never establish, he admits, clear and complete sequences. He rejects also the rigid evolutionism propounded by Brunetière.<sup>6</sup> But he can substitute for it only the suggestion that literary study should be widened to include minor writers and should pay attention to contemporaneous evaluations. Brunetière is too much concerned with masterpieces. “How can we know that Gessner played a role in general literature, that Destouches charmed the Germans more than Molière, that Delille was considered as a perfect and supreme poet in his time as Victor Hugo was later and that Heliodorus counted perhaps as much as Aeschylus in the heritage of antiquity?” (p. 24). Baldensperger's remedy is thus again attention to minor authors and to the bygone fashions of literary taste. A historical relativism is implied: we should study the standards of the past in order to write “objective” literary history. Comparative literature should plant itself “behind the scenes and not in front of the stage” as if in literature the play were not the thing. Like Cazamian, Baldensperger makes a gesture toward Bergson's becoming, the incessant movement, the “realm of universal variation” for which he quotes a biologist as a parallel. In the conclusion of his manifesto Baldensperger abruptly proclaims comparative literature a preparation for a New Humanism. He asks us to ascertain the spread of Voltaire's skepticism, of Nietzsche's faith in the superman, of the mysticism of Tolstoy: to know why a book considered a classic in one nation is rejected as academic in another, why a work despised in one country is admired elsewhere. He hopes that such researches will furnish our dislocated humanity with a “less uncertain core of common values” (p. 29). But why should such erudite researches into the geographical spread of certain ideas lead to anything like a definition of the patrimony of humanity? And even if such a definition of the common core were successful and would be generally accepted, would it mean an effective New Humanism?

There is a paradox in the psychological and social motivation of “comparative literature” as practiced in the last fifty years. Comparative literature arose as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of much nineteenth-century scholarship, as a protest against the isolationism of many historians of French, German, Italian, English, etc., literature. It was cultivated often by men who stood themselves at the crossroads of nations or,

at least, on the borders of one nation. Louis Betz was born in New York of German parents and went to Zürich to learn and teach. Baldensperger was of Lothringian origin and spent a decisive year in Zürich. Ernst Robert Curtius was an Alsatian convinced of the need of better German-French understanding. Arturo Farinelli was an Italian from Trento, then still "irredenta,"<sup>7</sup> who taught at Innsbruck. But this genuine desire to serve as a mediator and conciliator between nations was often overlaid and distorted by the fervent nationalism of the time and situation. Reading Baldensperger's autobiography, *Une Vie parmi d'autres* (1940, actually written in 1935), we feel the basic patriotic impulse behind his every activity: his pride in foiling German propaganda at Harvard in 1914, in refusing to meet Brandes in 1915 in Copenhagen, in going to liberated Strasbourg in 1920. Carré's book on *Goethe in England* contains an introduction arguing that Goethe belongs to all the world and to France in particular as a son of the Rhineland. After the second World War Carré wrote *Les Écrivains français et le mirage allemand* (1947) where he tried to show how the French nourished illusions about the two Germanies and were always taken in at the end. Ernst Robert Curtius thought of his first book, *Die literarischen Wegbereiter des neuen Frankreichs* (1918), as a political action, as instruction for Germany. In a postscript to a new edition written in 1952, Curtius declared his early concept of France an illusion. Romain Rolland was not the voice of the new France as he had thought. Like Carré, Curtius discovered a "mirage" but this time it was a French *mirage*. Even in that early book Curtius had defined his conception of a good European: "Ich weiss nur eine Art ein guter Europäer zu sein: mit Macht die Seele seiner Nation haben, und sie mit Macht nähren von allem, was es Einzigartiges gibt in der Seele der anderen Nationen, der befreundeten oder der feindlichen."<sup>8</sup> A cultural power politics is recommended: everything serves only the strength of one's nation.

I am not suggesting that the patriotism of these scholars was not good or right or even high-minded. I recognize civic duties, the necessity of making decisions, of taking sides in the struggles of our time. I am acquainted with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, his *Ideology and Utopia*, and understand that proof of motivation does not invalidate the work of a man. I clearly want to distinguish these men from the base corruptors of scholarship in Nazi Germany or from the political doctrinaires in Russia who, for a time, declared "comparative literature" taboo and called anybody who would say in print that Pushkin drew the story of "The Golden Cockerel" from Washington Irving a "rootless cosmopolitan kowtowing to the West."

Still, this basically patriotic motivation of many comparative literature studies in France, Germany, Italy, and so on, has led to a strange system of cultural bookkeeping, a desire to accumulate credits for one's nation by proving as many influences as possible on other nations or, more subtly, by proving that one's own nation has assimilated and "understood" a foreign master more fully than any other. This is almost naïvely displayed in the table of M. Guyard's little handbook for students: it has neat empty boxes for the unwritten *thèses* on Ronsard in Spain, Corneille in Italy, Pascal in Holland, etc.<sup>9</sup> This type of cultural expansionism can be found even in the United States which, on the whole, has been immune to it partly because it had less to boast of and partly because it was less concerned with cultural politics. Still, for instance, the excellent cooperative *Literary History of the United States* (ed. R. Spiller, W. Thorp, et al., 1948) blithely claims Dostoevsky as a follower of Poe and even of Hawthorne. Arturo Farinelli, a comparatist of the purest water, described this situation in an article contributed to the *Mélanges Baldensperger* (1930) entitled "Gl'influssi letterari e l'insuperbire delle nazioni."<sup>10</sup> Farinelli very appropriately comments on the absurdity of such computations of cultural riches, of the whole creditor and debtor calculus in matters of poetry. We forget that "the destinies of poetry and art are fulfilled only in the intimate life and the secret accords of the soul."<sup>11</sup> In an interesting article Professor Chinard has most opportunely pronounced the principle of "no debts" in the comparison of literatures and quoted a fine passage from Rabelais on an ideal world without debtors and creditors.<sup>12</sup>

An artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences, a motivation by cultural nationalism, however generous—these seem to me the symptoms of the long-drawn-out crisis of comparative literature.

A thorough reorientation is needed in all these three directions. The artificial demarcation between "comparative" and "general" literature should be abandoned. "Comparative" literature has become an established term for any study of literature transcending the limits of one national literature. There is little use in deploring the grammar of the term and to insist that it should be called "the comparative study of literature," since everybody understands the elliptic usage. "General" literature has not caught on, at least in English, possibly because it has still its old connotation of referring to poetics and theory. Personally I wish we could simply speak of the study of literature or of literary scholarship and that there were, as Albert Thibaudet proposed, professors of literature just as there are professors of philosophy and of history and not professors of the history of English

philosophy even though the individual may very well specialize in this or that particular period or country or even in a particular author. Fortunately, we still have no professors of English eighteenth-century literature or of Goethe philology. But the naming of our subject is an institutional matter of academic interest in the most literal sense. What matters is the concept of literary scholarship as a unified discipline unhampered by linguistic restrictions. I cannot thus agree with Friederich's view that comparatists "cannot and dare not encroach upon other territories," i.e. those of the students of English, French, German, and other national literatures. Nor can I see how it is even possible to follow his advice not to "poach in each other's territory."<sup>13</sup> There are no proprietary rights and no recognized "vested interests" in literary scholarship. Everybody has the right to study any question even if it is confined to a single work in a single language and everybody has the right to study even history or philosophy or any other topic. He runs of course the risk of criticism by the specialists, but it is a risk he has to take. We comparatists surely would not want to prevent English professors from studying the French sources of Chaucer, or French professors from studying the Spanish sources of Corneille, etc., since we comparatists would not want to be forbidden to publish on topics confined to specific national literatures. Far too much has been made of the "authority" of the specialist who often may have only the bibliographical knowledge or the external information without necessarily having the taste, the sensibility, and the range of the non-specialist whose wider perspective and keener insight may well make up for years of intense application. There is nothing presumptuous or arrogant in advocating a greater mobility and ideal universality in our studies. The whole conception of fenced-off reservations with signs of "no trespassing" must be distasteful to a free mind. It can arise only within the limits of the obsolete methodology preached and practiced by the standard theorists of comparative literature who assume that "facts" are to be discovered like nuggets of gold for which we can stake out prospectors' claims.

But true literary scholarship is not concerned with inert facts, but with values and qualities. That is why there is no distinction between literary history and criticism. Even the simplest problem of literary history requires an act of judgment. Even such a statement that Racine influenced Voltaire or Herder influenced Goethe requires, to be meaningful, a knowledge of the characteristics of Racine and Voltaire, Herder and Goethe, and hence a knowledge of the context of their traditions, an unremitting activity of weighing, comparing, analyzing, and discriminating which is essentially critical. No literary history has ever been written without some

principle of selection and some attempt at characterization and evaluation. Literary historians who deny the importance of criticism are themselves unconscious critics, usually derivative critics who have merely taken over traditional standards and accepted conventional reputations. A work of art cannot be analyzed, characterized, and evaluated without recourse to critical principles, however unconsciously held and obscurely formulated. Norman Foerster in a still pertinent booklet, *The American Scholar*, said very cogently that the literary historian "must be a critic *in order* to be a historian."<sup>14</sup> In literary scholarship theory, criticism, and history collaborate to achieve its central task: the description, interpretation, and evaluation of a work of art or any group of works of art. Comparative literature which, at least with its official theorists has shunned this collaboration and has clung to "factual relations," sources and influences, intermediaries and reputations as its only topics, will have to find its way back into the great stream of contemporary literary scholarship and criticism. In its methods and methodological reflections comparative literature has become, to put it bluntly, a stagnant backwater. We can think of many scholarly and critical movements and groupings during this century quite diverse in their aims and methods—Croce and his followers in Italy, Russian formalism and its offshoots and developments in Poland and Czechoslovakia, German *Geistesgeschichte*<sup>15</sup> and stylistics which have found such an echo in the Spanish-speaking countries, French and German existentialist criticism, the American "New Criticism," the myth criticism inspired by Jung's archetypal patterns, and even Freudian psychoanalysis or Marxism: all these are, whatever their limitations and demerits, united in a common reaction against the external factualism and atomism which is still fettering the study of comparative literature.

Literary scholarship today needs primarily a realization of the need to define its subject matter and focus. It must be distinguished from the study of the history of ideas, or religious and political concepts and sentiments which are often suggested as alternatives to literary studies. Many eminent men in literary scholarship and particularly in comparative literature are not really interested in literature at all but in the history of public opinion, the reports of travelers, the ideas about national character—in short, in general cultural history. The concept of literary study is broadened by them so radically that it becomes identical with the whole history of humanity. But literary scholarship will not make any progress, methodologically, unless it determines to study literature as a subject distinct from other activities and products of man. Hence we must face the problem of "literariness," the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature.

In such a conception of literary scholarship the literary work of art itself will be the necessary focus and we will recognize that we study different problems when we examine the relations of a work of art to the psychology of the author or to the sociology of his society. The work of art, I have argued, can be conceived as a stratified structure of signs and meanings which is totally distinct from the mental processes of the author at the time of composition and hence of the influences which may have formed his mind. There is what has been rightly called an "ontological gap" between the psychology of the author and a work of art, between life and society on the one hand and the aesthetic object. I have called the study of the work of art "intrinsic" and that of its relations to the mind of the author, to society, etc., "extrinsic." Still, this distinction cannot mean that genetic relations should be ignored or even despised or that intrinsic study is mere formalism or irrelevant aestheticism. Precisely the carefully worked out concept of a stratified structure of signs and meanings attempts to overcome the old dichotomy of content and form. What is usually called "content" or "idea" in a work of art is incorporated into the structure of the work of art as part of its "world" of projected meanings. Nothing would be further from my mind than to deny the human relevance of art or to erect a barrier between history and formal study. While I have learned from the Russian formalists and German *Stilforscher*,<sup>16</sup> I would not want to confine the study of literature either to the study of sound, verse, and compositional devices or to elements of diction and syntax; nor would I want to equate literature with language. In my conception these linguistic elements form, so to say, the two bottom strata: the sound stratum and that of the units of meaning. But from them there emerges a "world" of situations, characters, and events which cannot be identified with any single linguistic element or, least of all, with any element of external ornamental form. The only right conception seems to me a resolutely "holistic" one which sees the work of art as a diversified totality, as a structure of signs which, however, imply and require meanings and values. Both a relativistic antiquarianism and an external formalism are mistaken attempts to dehumanize literary study. Criticism cannot and must not be expelled from literary scholarship.

If such a change and liberation, such a reorientation toward theory and criticism, toward critical history should take place, the problem of motivation will take care of itself. We still can remain good patriots and even nationalists, but the debit and credit system will have ceased to matter. Illusions about cultural expansion may disappear as may also illusions about world reconciliation by literary scholarship. Here, in America, looking from the other shore at Europe as a whole we may easily achieve a certain

detachment, though we may have to pay the price of uprootedness and spiritual exile. But once we conceive of literature not as an argument in the warfare of cultural *prestige*, or as a commodity of foreign trade or even as an indicator of national psychology we shall obtain the only true objectivity obtainable to man. It will not be a neutral scientism, an indifferent relativism and historicism but a confrontation with the objects in their essence: a dispassionate but intense contemplation which will lead to analysis and finally to judgments of value. Once we grasp the nature of art and poetry, its victory over human mortality and destiny, its creation of a new world of the imagination, national vanities will disappear. Man, universal man, man everywhere and at any time, in all his variety, emerges and literary scholarship ceases to be an antiquarian pastime, a calculus of national credits and debts and even a mapping of networks of relationships. Literary scholarship becomes an act of the imagination, like art itself, and thus a preserver and creator of the highest values of mankind.

#### Notes

1. First published in *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Comparative Literature*, ed. Werner P. Friederich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 148-59. Reprinted in Wellek's *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 282-95.
2. Paul Van Tieghem, a French comparatist specializing in European Romanticism, had made this distinction in his widely used survey *Littérature comparée* (1931).
3. History of themes and motifs.
4. "Goethe en Angleterre, quelques réflexions sur les problèmes d'influence," *Revue Germanique* 12 (1921), 374-75.
5. Fernand Baldensperger (1871-1958), French comparatist who taught in France and the United States, and co-founded the *Revue de littérature comparée*.
6. In *L'Évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la littérature* (1890), Ferdinand Brunetière offered a Darwinian narrative of the development of literature.
7. "Unredeemed," the name for a nineteenth-century Italian nationalist movement that argued for the unification of all territories where Italian was the predominant language.
8. "I only know one way to be a good European: to powerfully possess the soul of one's nation, and to nourish oneself powerfully with everything distinctive to be found in the souls of other nations, whether friends or foes." *Französischer Geist im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Bern, 1952), 237.

9. M.-F. Guyard, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris, 1951), 124–25.
10. Literary influences and national pride.
11. *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire, générale et comparée, offerts à Fernand Baldensperger*, 2 vols. (Paris: H. Champion, 1930), 1:273.
12. "La Littérature comparée et l'histoire des idées dans l'étude des relations franco-américaines," *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Werner P. Friederich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 349–69.
13. *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 4 (1955), 57.
14. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 36.
15. History of ideas.
16. Researchers on stylistics.

## PART THREE

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### The Theory Years