The Inevitable Strength of Cultural Identity  
at the Beginning of the Twenty First Century  
Between Localizing and Globalizing Tendencies

*Rien T. Segers*

I. Introduction: a nursery rhyme to start with

Our workshop is entitled “Cultural Identity. Literature, History,  
Memory, 18th-20th centuries”. It is a great privilege and a great honor  
for me having been invited to participate in this workshop, since it comes  
at exactly the right moment and also —I think— at the right place.  
At least three reasons for this statement can be found:

for the right place:

(a) I am extremely glad to be back in Greece—a country which vitally  
and strongly has lived in my memory for so many years without having  
had the possibility to visit the Greece of my dreams once more, since the  
global winds took me to other directions. Greece is now a formal part of  
the EU. But obviously, the question is justified and I am sure it has been  
asked over and over again in your country: what is the specificity of the  
Greek cultural identity? what is so European in that identity? A  
fascinating and —I am sure— a difficult question.

for the right time:

(b) All current serious international political conflicts in the world  
circle around the topic of our workshop: cultural identity.

(c) At this particular moment Literary Studies finds itself amidst a  
fundamental change: a change which might be characterized as leaving  
the esthetic approach and moving into a functional approach, in which  
the text is no longer primarily studies from an esthetic point of view but  
from a representational perspective, where questions concerning  
identity (personal, regional, national) play a fundamental role.

I think I have the task to outline somewhat the background of our

* Professor of Cultural studies, University of Groningen, Holland.
workshop topic by giving the current scholarly context in which the title of our conference functions. I deliberately said "somewhat outlining the background", since I have to apologize for the general nature of my remarks. If you know that I have developed an intensive post-graduate on cultural identity, stretching out some 20 seminar hours, you can imagine what can be dealt with in just 45 minutes: the very basics along more or less general lines, practicing the noble art of deleting and skipping.

The title of our workshop denotes a specific set of (Western) assumptions concerning culture, literature and its functions, reading, nation and—above all—cultural identity. I shall concentrate on the latter concept, since this concept is not only en vogue in many scholarly circles around the globe, but also because the concept of 'cultural identity' determines to a great extent other concepts which are of crucial importance to the discourse of our workshop, to the many interesting and relevant papers which are going to be presented here tomorrow.

My guiding principle here is the systemic theory of culture (Luhmann, Maturana, Varela, Even-Zohar, bibliography Tótoasy de Zepetnek 1992). This theory considers as a system consisting of a number of subsystems such as the economic, educational, religious, technological and artistic subsystems. Each subsystem is based on all activities as performed by participants, people active within that subsystem. That means that a systemic approach is interested in all the 'actions', all the 'activities' as performed by the participants within a particular subsystem.

If we take the literary system as an example, being a subsystem of the artistic subsystem, we deal with five main categories of actions: actions performed by authors, general readers; these actions, in turn, take place against the background of a social context and are directed at texts.

But we are going to deal with literature tomorrow. Tonight I would like to give you the semantics and the strong and weak sides of the concept 'cultural identity'. To phrase this in other words: what I would like to do tonight is to show you the limits of a well-known and old nursery rhyme:
The Germans live in Germany, the Romans live in Rome, the Turkeys live in Turkey; but the English live at home.

II. How to recognize a culture when you see one?

An attempt at a definition

Before its anthropological incarnation “culture” predominantly, meant refinement. The nineteenth-century humanist Matthew Arnold, for instance, considered culture as a study of the mind and spirit. He saw culture people drawing ever nearer to ‘the beautiful’ and ‘the graceful’. Culture as the best that has been thought and said. This conception of culture remains very much en vogue in its use today.

Cultural anthropologists have reworked this accepted concept of culture to apply it not just to a learned and sophisticated few, but to all human beings. As Clifford Geertz noticed: “Culture (...) is not just an ornament of human existence, but (...) an essential condition for it (...). There is no such a thing as a human nature independent of culture”. This implies as human beings we are all cultured. ‘Culture’ in this sense has become a value-free concept as opposed to the value-loaden Arnoldian concept.

The question seems to be justified as to whether this concept of ‘culture’ is needed, since there exist so many other words seemingly describing more or less the same anthropological concept, such as set of norms, value system, behavior pattern, rituals and traditions. The organizational psychologist Edgar H. Schein (1992:10-11) correctly answers this question as follows. As opposed to all those other words just mentioned the concept of culture adds two relevant critical notions.

There is first of all the implication of structural stability in a community or group of people. Cultural elements are elements that are not only shared, but they are also stable and ‘deep’, which means less conscious, less tangible and less visible. Cultural elements also bind together into a coherent whole; they show at a deeper, invisible level a certain pattern.

Secondly, ‘culture’ denotes the accumulated shared learning of a
given group, covering behavioral, emotional and cognitive elements of the group's members total psychological functioning. Schein (1992:10) correctly observes: "For shared learning to occur, there must be a history of shared experience, which in turn implies some stability of members in the group".

The implication of the above points of departure is the constructive nature of culture. Culture is not a set of innate or ontological characteristics which have a static nature, but culture consists of a set consisting of a great number of actions, performed by those who participate in that (sub)culture. These actions are performed on the basis of more or less conventional schemes.

My understanding of 'culture' is influenced by Geert Hofstede's (1994:5) ideas about it. I shall subscribe to his view, because his definition unite three important elements: the decisive value of culture, the importance of cultural relativism and the constructed character of culture.

According to Hofstede culture "[...] deals with the things that hurt. Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another".

According to Hofstede culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes. He distinguishes culture from human nature based on the following reasoning: as a human being one can feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, etc. All those feelings belong to human nature. But the way these feelings are expressed is modified by culture. Culture is the software of the mind. It is also distinguished from the personality of an individual. The latter is described as her/his unique personal set of mental programs (s)he does not share with any other human being. Hofstede's description of 'personality' is somewhat naïve, but his concept of culture is extremely useful.

To give an example; the Lewinsky affair in the US or we better say the Clinton affair. In many cultures no wife, children or even an entire
nation wants her husband, their father and political leader to engage in adultery, perjury, or bribery. It doesn’t fit the image one constructs of a husband, a father or a president. Even the supposition of adultery, perjury or bribery would give rise to the same human feelings of anger, sadness and disgust in many cultures. It would result in the same headlines in the media and in the same criticism from the media in most cultures, since this is the level of human nature: violation of confidence, a central human in most cultures. But the way those feelings of violation of confidence are expressed is culturally bound, is dependent on “the programming of the mind” in that particular culture.

The programming of the Dutch political mind in this respect would be such that a Dutch political leader being in a similar position as Mr. Clinton, would have stepped down immediately on his or her own initiative, not necessarily out of respect for the people in the country or for his or her relatives, but out of fear for the Dutch House of Representatives. It would mean the definitive end of a political career. After a year of silence the fallen Dutch leader would become Chairman of the Association of Cheese Makers or Tulip Growers and he would be out of public sight for ever. The programming of the Dutch mind is still heavily Calvinist.

The programming of the Japanese political mind is completely different. The Japanese political leader in similar circumstances would step down immediately out of shame, since he thinks he has lost his face. At the press conference he bows very deep, apologizes and takes all responsibility also for the things he cannot be held responsible for. Recently a new phenomenon is added to this traditional program: the leader should weep and cry. After a year of silence the Japanese political leader would reenter politics through the backdoor of the Lower House, where he might direct his faction again and influence Japanese politics to an extensive degree, as if nothing had happened. The programming of the Japanese mind is heavily based on the Japanese version of Buddhism.

Back to Hofstede. Hofstede has a systemic (in sensu Niklas Luhmann) conception of culture. He doesn’t see “culture” as a vast
unspecified domain, but as an entity consisting of different levels, which are interrelated. At the same time a person always belongs to a number of the following levels, or indicators of identity, for instance: a national level according to one’s country; a regional / ethnic / religious / linguistic affiliation; a gender level; a generation level; a social class level; an organizational or corporate level for those who are employed. The implication is that it is impossible to speak about ‘the’ identity of a person or of a group; it may vary according to circumstances.

The question to be asked at this particular moment of my talk is: after a culture context has been formed, how is it changed, strengthened or weakened and perpetuated? Ulf Hannerz (2000:333) correctly distinguishes four cultural processes, which determine life and structure of a particular cultural context.

There is first of all the framework of the market. Within that framework cultural commodities are moved by selling and buying. In many cases the market process has a rather globalized character.

The second framework is that of the state; the state not as a bounded physical entity but as an organizational form. The state is engaged in the management of the state’s culture in numerous ways. One of these ways is to gain legitimate authority to forster the idea that the state is a nation and to construct its inhabitants culturally as citizens of such a nation.

The form of life is the third framework of the cultural process: it involves the everyday practicalities of production and reproduction, activities going on in work places, domestic settings, neighborhoods, etc.

The fourth and final framework is formed by the movements. Especially over the last 25 years or so globalized movements have become increasingly important, e.g. the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the human rights movement, the peace movement, etc.

A final question in the section concerning culture is directed at the topology of cultures. How can cultures be distinguished from each other, how can they be classified? Obviously, there are many different classifications possible. I shall mention here the one mentioned by Hofstede (1994). He undertook a large-scale intercultural research
project, which revealed the following five dimensions, on the basis of which cultures can be classified (p. 13):
1. Social inequality, including the relationship with authority;
2. The relationship between the individual and the group;
3. Concepts of masculinity and femininity; the social implications of having been born as a boy or a girl;
4. Ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions;

Hofstede’s conception of culture has a number of advantages. In his conception culture is an ever changing entity, not a static one; culture is learned not inherited; there are no criteria on the basis of which culture A is “intrinsically” better than culture B (with exceptions such as the culture that deliberately and seriously violates human rights); ‘culture’ is a mental construction rather than an innate property of a certain community. This implies that Hofstede’s view of culture is more useful with respect to its application in actual research than many other definitions of culture, which base themselves on ontological or essentialist conceptions.

III. The semantics of a container concept: cultural identity

The concept of cultural identity is needed to discuss questions whenever two cultures come into contact with each other or—at an academic level—are compared with each other. A key question such as “How can the distinctiveness or the specificity of this culture be determined?” is in fact a question concerning the cultural identity of a particular community. The extent to which a certain culture can be said to have distinctive and common traits can only be determined on a comparative basis. As the American sociologists Jepperson and Swidler (1994:368) recently stated: “The essential strategy for making the invisible is of course comparative research. And that is exactly why disciplines which have a comparative basis should take the lead in research in this domain” [italics are mine].
Giving a description of cultural identity is clearly linked to important other concepts such as ethnicity, nation and nation-state. I take here the recent book by Adrian Hastings (1997) to define those terms before moving on to cultural identity. Hastings (1997:3) considers ethnicity to be a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language. He correctly considers ethnicity to be the major distinctive element in a pre-national society, but an ethnicity—he adds—“may survive as a strong subdivision with a loyalty of its own within established nations”.

Hastings (1997:3) defines a nation as follows: “A nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity. Formed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own, it possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of specific territory, comparable to that of biblical Israel and of other independent entities in a world thought of as one of nation-states”.

This clears the way to a description of a nation-state: “(...) a state which identifies itself in terms of one specific nation whose people are not seen simply as ‘subjects’ of the sovereign but as a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs. There is thus an identity of character between state and people. (...) In [the state], ideally, there is basic equivalence between the borders and character of the political unit upon the one hand and a self-conscious cultural community on the other. In most cases this is a dream as much as a reality. Most nation-states in fact include groups of people who do not belong to its core culture or feel themselves to be part of a nation so defined. Nevertheless almost all modern states act on the bland assumption that they are nation-states” (Hastings 1997:3).

Books discussing the cultural identity of a particular nation or nation-state often refer to certain ‘special features’, ‘characteristics’ and ‘traits’ of that nation-state or its people. Often these observations are principally based on impressions, introspections, myths and—not to forget— jokes than on factual evidence or empirical research. Obviously, I do not want to deny for instance that the thousands of existing jokes
concerning national and cultural stereotypes can indicate particular aspects of the cultural identity of a particular community or nation. But they are just indicators and not more than that.

Consider for instance the following two jokes. The first originated in New York, the second in Tokyo.

In a New York hotel an American and Japanese engineer meet for the first time and they introduce themselves to each other. Obviously the American first: “Hello, my name is John, John Smith. Nice to meet you. I am an electrical engineer and –by the way– at this moment I am working for Kodak”. After two minutes of silence the Japanese says: “Hello, I am Toyota and my name is nobody”. This joke may serve as an indicator of the American self-image as individualistic, self-confident and successful. The joke also implicitly constructs an image in which Japanese professionals are not individuals, and neither self-confident, nor successful.

Obviously, the Japanese from their side have a pagoda full of American jokes, such as this one. An American and a Japanese meet each other on a safari trip in Africa. They take a walk together, somewhat outside the safe tourist path. All of a sudden, they are confronted with a hungry looking lion. The American immediately starts running and running. But the Japanese does not move and thoughtfully opens his black leather briefcase in order to take out a pair of gym shoes. Looking back at the Japanese the American starts shouting: “Come on, run for your life, leave those gym shoes behind; you don’t have a chance anyhow to run faster than the lion does”. The Japanese thinks, waits a bit and says politely: “The one I have to outrun is not the lion, but you”. This joke may serve to us as an indicator of the Japanese self-image as smart, civilized and competitive, whereas the American is seen as impulsive, thoughtless and pushy.

These jokes not only demonstrate the well-known fact handed over to us from social psychology that the image of a neighboring people is constructed as a negative counterpart of the one’s own image, on the basis of which the in-group people can identify themselves more easily with their own self-image (Fink 1991:453). But the jokes should also show
that the construction of cultural identity involves at least two parts: the in-group and the out-group, the perception of oneself and the perception of the other. (‘Selbstwahrnehmung’ and ‘Fremdwahrnehmung’). The Japanese looks at the American from a Japanese perspective, and the other way around.

In our time it is of great importance to have an adequate, well-balanced insight into the cultural identity of a particular nation. A distorted view can significantly hamper good understanding and adequate communication with citizens of that nation. Very often political conflicts and wars find their deep origin in distorted visions of one’s own and the foreign identity. What has been said so far concerning cultural identity applies also to literary identity, with the apparent exception that a misconception of the literary identity of a particular nation might not have such severe consequences as the distortion of the cultural identity.

In his latest collection of essays Ernest Gellner (1994:45) asks for serious attention to be paid to cultural identity: “[it] is not a delusion, excogitated by muddled romantics, disseminated by irresponsible extremists, and used by egotistical privileged classes to befuddle the masses, and to hide their true interests from them. Its appeal is rooted in the real conditions of modern life, and cannot be conjured away, either by sheer good will and the preaching of a spirit of universal brotherhood, or by the incarceration of the extremists. We have to understand those roots, and live with their fruits, whether we like them or not”.

Dictionary definitions of identity mainly refer to identity as the condition of “being a specified personal thing”. On the other hand, in contrast to this conception, postmodern discussions define identity in a much looser way. Stuart Hall, for instance, notices: “Identities are (...) points of temporary attachments to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us”. The postmodern definition implies that fixed identities don’t exist. I agree with Mathews (2000: 16) to conceive identity somewhat between these two extremes: identity is neither as clear as the dictionaries claim nor as flimsy as the postmodernists state it is. I shall explain my position here.
Much scholarly research and journalistic writing about ‘cultural identity’ take as their point of departure well-established stereotypes, which sometimes don't exceed the level of the type of jokes we just have seen. These writings are normally based on an ontological belief in the specificity of a certain community. What alternative can we offer which would make it possible to overcome the old ontological, essentialist approach to identity and to by-pass the new extreme relativism which says that identity escapes every attempt at definition and escapes any fixed position?

The cultural identity of a particular group or people is only partly determined by their national identity. Cultural identity is a broader concept than national identity. In this respect I subscribe to E. J. Hobsbawm (1990:182) who emphasizes that belonging to a particular state “is only one way in which people describe their identity among many others which they use for this purpose, as occasion demands”.

Whether it is justified to conclude on the basis of that argument that the power of nationalism is receding around the globe, as Hobsbawm does, is another matter and seems to be wishful thinking. The struggle between localization / nationalization and globalization is not yet decided. But based on recent political developments in some parts of the world, on the wars and fighting which are going on, my forecast would differ from that of Hobsbawm. I shall return to this point in the next section.

Often cultural identity has been seen as a range of characteristics, which are unique for a particular culture and ‘innate’ to a specific people. The Japanese scholarly tradition of Nihonjinron (Studies about Japaneseyness) is a typical example of this approach (for a critical survey see e.g. Dale 1986 and Yoshino 1992). But also in other cultures many examples of this type of thinking can be found, and in many cases not only practiced long ago, but even nowadays and also not primarily in the periphery of scholarship.

Another view suggests that cultural identity has a structuralist character, where a particular culture is seen as a set of characteristics, which are all related to each other, more or less independent from the people that make that culture.
The alternative for the conception of ‘identity’ as a set of unique or structural characteristics is the idea of identity as a construction. Within such a constructive framework the cultural identity of a particular nation or of a certain ethnic group within that nation can be attached to three factors: (1) The formal characteristics concerning that nation or group at a given time in history. (2) The programming of the mind (to use Hofstede’s words) within a particular community on the basis of which the cultural identity by the in-group is being constructed. (3) The way in which people from outside conduct a process of selection, interpretation and evaluation concerning the specificity of the in-group, which means in other words the outside image of the cultural identity of a foreign nation or group. The relationship between these three elements is a dynamic one. Ideally, the (scholarly) construction of identity should be based on all three factors (For a more extensive explanation see Segers 1992).

What are formal characteristics with respect to cultural identity? Formal characteristics are ‘facts’, figures that can be found in statistical handbooks concerning a particular country or an ethnic group and that determine to a great extent the programming of the mind of a given society, and the other way around. For instance: the total number of citizens of a country, the size of the country, the gross national product, average income, percentage of unemployment, the number of museums, the number of books produced, the genres, the relation between ‘native’ and translated books, etc.

Since we do not have direct access to the way in which peoples’ minds are programmed, we are driven back on visible indicators thereof. We have to look at the style of conduct and communication in a particular community, to use Gellner’s (1983:92) more pragmatically oriented definition of culture. This style of conduct and communication of the citizens of a state or the members of a particular ethnic group is their visible cultural identity. This visible cultural identity can be suppressed or thematized by opinion leaders (individuals and institutions) within that particular community. It is impossible to talk about cultural identity without taking into consideration which spokesmen / women are defining it and along which lines this happens.
The third element of the identity triangle consists of the constructions made by persons, most of the time opinion leaders or important institutions from outside concerning the conduct and communication of the people inside.

It would be somewhat misleading to think that the idea of considering national or cultural identity as a construction originated in systems theory (from Ludwig von Bertalanffy to Niklas Luhmann). Scholars working outside this domain arrived more or less at the same conclusion. An interesting example is Benedict Anderson (1983:15), who coined the term 'imagined community'. In an attempt to define the concept of 'nation' he states: "[...] it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". I am not saying that Anderson's 'imagination' is an equivalent to Luhmann's 'construction'. The similarity is to be sought in the emphasis on the mental processing of a particular object.

To consider cultural identity as a construction means that it is a mental conception which may vary according to the constructor, the time and place of construction. This implies that it is impossible to speak about 'the' cultural identity of a community. In theory there are as many cultural identities of a given community as there are times, places and people that construct that identity. That should not prevent scholars, however, from the necessary task of describing and systematizing the common characteristics based on those several existing identities. Moreover, in reality we are normally confronted with only one dominant construction of the cultural identity of a particular country.

The most recent development concerning the concept of cultural identity has been the addition of the prefix 'post', as an attempt to resolve the paradox between globalization and nationalization. The term 'postnational identity' is coined in a recent book by Dewandre and Lenoble (1994). It implies the paradox between the necessity of the construction of one political European identity based on the
development of the European Union as against the promotion of the cultural distinctiveness of the several European nations and regions. One political identity versus many distinctive cultural identities, all living under the same roof of a house called postnational identity. This concept of postnational identity looks rather academic, sponsored by wishful thinking 'from Brussels with love' (For more extensive criticism see Picht 1994; for an extensive discussion on European cultural identity see Segers and Viehoff 1999).

There is, however, still another caveat to be considered, which especially applies to cross-cultural or comparative studies concerning cultural identity. Richard Handler (1994: 27) has formulated the following reasonable objection in this respect: “Identity has become a salient scholarly and cultural construct in mid-twentieth century, particularly in social-scientific scholarship in the United States. Its prominence in that context, however, does not mean that the concept can be applied unthinkingly to other places and times”.

Western notions of collective identity are grounded in individualist metaphors. Attributes of boundedness, continuity, uniqueness, and homogeneity, that are ascribed to human persons, are ascribed to social groups as well. This leads Handler (1994:33) to his conclusion: “Thus it seems to me that if other cultures imagine personhood and human activity in terms other than those we use, we should not expect them to rely on Western individualistic assumptions in describing social collectivities”.

Clifford Geertz (1980: 24-25) tells an anecdote, which shows a completely different approach to boundaries and the essence of a community. It concerns the Balinese state where the rulers did not compete for boundaries (territory) but for the allegiance of men: “The Dutch, who wanted [...] to get the boundary between two petty princedoms straight once and for all, called in the princes concerned and asked them where indeed the borders lay. Both agreed that the border of princedom A lay at the farthest point from which a man could still see the swamps, and the border of princedom B lay at the point from which a man could still see the sea. Had they, then, never fought over the land
between, from which one could see neither swamp nor sea? ‘Mijnheer’, one of the old princes replied, ‘we had much better reason to fight with one another than these shabby hills’ “.

IV. The inevitable strength of cultural identity.

Between globalization and localization: the cultural turn

If we examine the interrelations between cultures now, at the end of the century, we can perceive two contradictory, but strong tendencies: “(...) on the one hand, there is the search for cultural authenticity, the return to origins, the need to preserve minor languages, pride in particularisms, admiration for cultural self-sufficiency and maintenance of national traditions; on the other hand, we find the spread of a uniform world culture, the emergence of supranational myths and the adoption of similar lifestyles in widely different settings. Modern technological societies have generated a transnational, composite, mass culture with its own language whose linguistic imprint is already universally evident” (OECD 1989:16).

This paradox between localization and globalization can be found in many parts of the world and in many different ways. Concerning European unification, for example, Philip Schlesinger (1994:325) has aptly described this paradox as follows: “On the one hand, the difficult search for a transcendent unity by the EC –one which must recognize component differences– throws the nation-state into question from above, arguably contributing to crises of national identity. The political and economic developments in the integration process, however, are out of phase with the cultural: what European identity might be still remains an open question. On the other hand, the ethno-nationalist awakenings in the former communist bloc and current developments within western Europe –whether neo-nationalist separatisms or racist nationalisms—tend to reaffirm the principle of the nation-state as a locus of identity and of political control”.

Schlesinger correctly points a finger at the ultimate paradox of the last decade of the 20th century: the clash between the indigenous, inner culture
of a particular community on the one hand and the global outer culture of a certain constructed ensemble of a number of communities. On a programmatic level this paradox goes under different catchwords and slogans, such as: localization or nationalization versus globalization, 'small is beautiful' versus 'big is necessary and inevitable', individual responsibility versus centralist efficiency, etc. On a pragmatic level slogans relate to conflicts at several distinctive levels: between an individual and his or her direct working environment (say a university department), between a department and a new faculty structure, between the faculty and the development of a new governmental system, between a national government and the regulations of the European Union, etc.

The paradox between localization and globalization has appeared under a great number of different labels. William Butler Yeats, long ago, said that our world is caught between the two eternities of race and soul. Race reflecting the tribal past and soul anticipating the cosmopolitan future.


The Jihad trend, named after the Islamic fundamentalist movement, stands for extreme localization: the balkanization of nation states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe. It's a movement against interdependence, against integrated markets, against modernity and against modern globalized technological developments.

On the other side, McWorld, according to Barber, paints the future in shimmering pastels, "a busy portrait of onrushing economic, technological and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast music, fast computers, and fast food -MTV, Macintosh and McDonalds- pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce" (Barber 1996:31).

Barber notices that the Jihad tendency pursues a bloody politics of identity, while McWorld strives for a bloodless economics of profit.
With regard to the latter movement (Mc World) Barber sums up his black observation: “Music, video, theater, books and theme parks—the new churches of a commercial civilization in which malls are the public squares and suburbs the neighborless neighborhoods—are all constructed as image exports creating a common world taste around common logos, advertising slogans, stars, songs, brand names, jingles and trade marks. Hard power yields to soft, while ideology is transmuted into a kind of videology that works through sound bites and film clips. Videology is fuzzier and less dogmatic than traditional political ideology; it may as a consequence be far more successful in instilling the novel values required for global markets to succeed” (Barber 2000:25).

As is evidently clear Barber holds an extremely negative view on the future in which localization and globalization will go hand in hand and will reinforce each other constantly. Is it all that dark? Will it be all that pessimistic? But let us first consider what is really understood by globalization, this fashionable container concept.

Arjun Appadurai (1990) has suggested that globalization consists of five dimensions, five cultural flows which cross each other at various levels in many parts of the world. “Firstly, there are ethnoscapes produced by flows of people: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles and guestworkers. Secondly, there are technoscapes, the machinery and plant flows produced by multinational and national corporations and government agencies. Thirdly, there are finanscapes, produced by the rapid flows of money in the currency stock exchanges. Fourthly, there are mediascapes, the repertoires of images and information, the flows which are produced and distributed by newspapers, magazines, television and film. Fifthly, there are ideoscapes, linked to flows of images which are associated with state or counterstate movement ideologies which are comprised of elements of the Western Enlightenment world-view—images of democracy, freedom, welfare, rights, etc” (Featherstone 1990:6-7).

It is tempting to speculate on the question: What will be the strongest force in the near future: localization or globalization, Jihad or
McWorld? Obviously, the question is too tricky to be answered in a couple of pages. In any case: both tendencies with their completely opposite aims exist at the same place and at the same time. Both movements have their own busy prophets and arduous spokesmen and women. Let us briefly turn to one representative of either movement.

As a representative of the globalization movement I would like to introduce the famous Japanese economist and consultant Ohmae Kenichi. His recent book *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies* became a ‘global’ academic bestseller. In this book Ohmae advocates the theory that nation states have already lost their role as—what he call—“meaningful units of participation in the global economy of today’s borderless world”. What are his arguments for his theory? He comes up with four reasons, which I shall provide in his own phrasing (Ohmae 2000: 207-208):

First of all, the ‘uncomfortable’ truth is that, in terms of the global economy, nation states have become little more than bit actors. They may originally have been, in their mercantilist phase, independent, powerfully efficient engines of wealth creation. More recently, however, as the downward-ratcheting logic of electoral politics has placed a death grip on their economies, they have become—first and foremost—remarkably inefficient engines of wealth distribution.

Secondly, and more to the point, the nation state is increasingly a nostalgic fiction. It makes even less sense today, for example, than it did a few years ago to speak of Italy or Russia or China as a single economic unit. Each is a motley combination of territories with vastly different needs and vastly different abilities to contribute.

Third, when you look closely at the goods and services now produced and traded around the world, as well as the companies responsible for them, it is no easy matter to attach to them an accurate national label. Is an automobile sold under an American marquee really a US product, when a large percentage of its components comes from abroad?

Finally, when economic activity aggressively wears a national label these days, that tag is usually present neither for the sake of accuracy nor out of concern for the economic well-being of individual consumers. It is there primarily as a mini-flag of cheap nationalism—that is, as a jingoistic
celebration of nationhood that places far more value on emotion-grabbing symbols than on real, concrete improvements in quality of life.

Another example frequently used to prove the supremacy of globalization is what has come to be called Americanization. Many scholars and journalists go so far as to suggest that those two concepts are synonymous. With Americanization is meant the spreading of American culture (or what is regarded as such) into all corners of the world: Hollywood films, American TV soaps, American bestsellers, American cars, Americanized food, etc.

There are two severe problems with the substitution of globalization for Americanization. First of all, one could ask the question to what extent those elements just mentioned are really representative for the culture of the USA. It is altogether possible that in constructing those art forms, parts of the value system and some of the artistic norms of the so-called non-American global periphery were seriously involved. As far as I know no serious research has tackled those and similarly structured questions.

Secondly, it should be stated that the reception of these so-called American cultural products might be different according to the specificity of the receiving culture. Important conventions that make up that specificity structure the direction and the depth of Americanization. I would venture the hypothesis that Americanization has been carried out differently in South Africa than in The Netherlands.

On the one hand we can observe that "nationalism is back today with a vengeance all over the world" (Radhakrishnan 1992:83) from Canada to India, from the former USSR to Iraq, from Japan to Turkey. For the time being I belong to those who believe that nationalization will dominate globalization at least in the foreseeable future, and not only outside western Europe as some critics want us to believe, but also to a considerable extent in the countries that belong to the key group members of the European Union. In this context Helmut Dubiel (1994:896) points at new forms of German nationalism: "sei es des inszenierten Lobs des Vaterlandes, der wahlkampfstrategischen Instrumentalisierung nationaler Ressentiments und des besoffenen Rufs Deutschland den Deutschen". But similar tendencies are alive and well in many other countries of the European Union.

On the other hand we see the severe impact of the five cultural flows of globalization. Globalization will persist as an extremely strong tendency, and its strength may even increase. But in the decades to come the nationalization tendency will be able to adopt and adapt many global trends to a considerable extent. Globalization will be nationalized to a great extent.

Let me add here that the threat to the nation, to nationalization or localization doesn't primarily consist of globalization tendencies, but the threat comes also from within the nation itself. We could think here of well-known ruptures, such of Canada, Belgium, Spain, of former countries such as the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, and in a way we could add paradoxically the unification of Germany, where the following joke could be heard shortly after the unification: an East-German says to West-German: “We are one people now!” The West German replies: “We too!”.

The understanding of the complicated paradox contained within localization versus globalization represents an object that is highly interesting and rewarding for a number of scholarly disciplines. The understanding of this paradox, however, can only be achieved through the central concept of cultural identity. This very concept represents the ultimate reason for those serious conflicts between the smaller
community and the larger constructed *ensemble* or between two or more smaller communities.

In applying the concept of cultural identity another fallacy should be deconstructed. It is the old opposition between the West and the Rest. This opposition is in many cases the hidden, invisible basis upon which theories, also famous and well-known theories, are being based. This fallacy of cultural imperialism considers – consciously or not, the West (which often means: just the USA) to be the center and ‘the rest’ to be the periphery. Localization is mainly performed in the periphery. Localizing movements are performed in the periphery. Globalizing trends are realized in the Center, such as the New Economy and successful and appealing TV programs.

Cultural imperialisms are not only believed to further a geographical dominance of the West (and mainly the USA), but they are also believed to construct an ideological dominance. This means, for instance, that soaps produced in the USA, were to trigger the same reception from western, American audiences, as from non-western audiences. Empirical media research, however, shows that the reception of a soap such as Dallas, varies according to the specificity, the cultural identity, of the culture of the receiving audience. As Tomlinson remarks (2000:311): “(...) audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and ‘invasion’ than many critical media theorists have assumed”.

Take another hero of the so-called transparently internationalized TV formats: the game show. Even this fully globalized show contains significant differences in the widely variant cultures in which it is popular. After studying popular game shows in 50 countries Anne Coopers-Chen was able to show at least three structural variants: East Asian, Western and Latin models. On top of these variants there were innumerable surface particularities (Sinclair et al. 2000:305).

In order to avoid cultural imperialism, the simplistic center - periphery oppositional geography should be replaced by a more realistic model of regions. Therefore, I fully agree with Sinclair (2000 : 301) who
presents a more realistic scenario: that of creolization. “Instead of the image of ‘the West’ at the centre dominating the peripheral ‘Third World’ with an outward flow of cultural products, we see the world as divided into a number of regions which each have their own internal dynamics as well as their global ties. Although primarily based on geographic realities, these regions are also defined by common cultural, linguistic, and historical connections which transcend physical space. Such a dynamic, regionalist view of the world helps us to analyze in a more nuanced way the intricate and multi-directional flows of television across the globe”.

Now one could ask why this focus on culture and cultural identity? In a moment of unsophisticated generalization one could state that half the Library of Congress consists of books which more or less deal with this very topic. But two reasons could be mentioned for the necessity to concentrate systematically on these topics and to reinterpret them according to the ever changing social circumstances. The scholarly reason is—as we have seen— that still too often ‘culture’ is conceived of as an ontological concept, which directly leads to unjustified claims of superiority, dominance and ultimately atrocious wars. Those wars and other evil developments immediately lose their raison d’être and their justification if culture is seen within a systemic and constructivist context.

A second reason is based on the socio-political relevance of the concept of culture around the turn of the century. A recent book, an academic bestseller in the USA, by Samuel P. Huntington (1997) convincingly argues for the central role cultures play now and will play in the next decades of the new millennium. His general thesis is that in the late 1980’s the communist world collapsed, which meant the end of the Cold War, the end of a world divided by ideological, political and/or economic principles.

Obviously, the end of the Cold War doesn’t imply neither eternal nor temporary peace, as some utopian voices were saying right after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Another distinction quickly arose: the cultural distinction. This implies ‘(...) that culture and cultural
identities, which at the broadest level are civilizational identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world. (...) The most important groupings of states are no longer the three blocs of the Cold War but rather the world’s (...) major civilizations” (Huntington 1997:20-21).

Huntington distinguishes nine different cultures: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese. One may disagree of course with Huntington about the number of civilizations he distinguishes or about his definition of each civilization. This comes down to questions such as: why is Japan recognized as a distinct civilization and Korea not? Is it justified to define ‘Africa civilization’ as sub-Saharan including the country South-Africa? Regarding this question Huntington sums up some of the problems himself: “The north of the African continent and its east coast belong to Islamic civilization. Historically, Ethiopia constituted a civilization of its own. Elsewhere European imperialism and settlements brought elements of Western civilization. In South-Africa Dutch, French, and then English settlers created a multifragmented European culture. Most significantly, European imperialism brought Christianity to most of the continent south of the Sahara. Throughout Africa tribal identities are pervasive and intense, but Africans are also increasingly developing a sense of African identity, and conceivably sub-Saharan Africa could cohere into a distinct civilization, with South-Africa possibly being its core state” (p. 47).

Whatever the justification for the number and specificity of the several civilizations may be, the message is clear: the most important distinctions among peoples are no longer ideological, political or economic, but cultural. To quote Huntington once more: “In this new world the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities” (p. 28). And Vaclav Havel (1994) mentioned along the same line: “Cultural conflicts are increasing and are more dangerous today than at any time in history”.

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Looking at the contemporary world, be it a region, a nation-state or an ethnic group within that nation, implies looking at that complicated wrestling game between globalization and localization. In order to understand the fact that in many cases localization will be the winner of the match, one should pay attention to a neglected force: the importance of the cultural factor which is always in favor of the local wrestler. Contemporary political and social developments, but also economic and technological developments, can only be understood via the concept of culture as it has been defined above. I call this situation ‘the cultural turn’ in contemporary global society. Without an interest in and an understanding of the severe differences and the striking similarities between cultures, no adequate construction can be made of modern civilizations and of group’s of people within those civilizations.

V. Cultural identity: The battlefield of the 21st century?

Some conclusions

In most parts of today’s world cultural borders no longer coincide with national borders; cultural diversity within one nation-state is more the rule than the exception. To give just one example out of many. Until the late sixties The Netherlands was a state with hardly any ethnic diversity, a rather homogeneous state, despite its international history, as so many others in Western Europe at that time. On January 1, 1991, however, the four largest cities of the country (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) had a total population of almost two million. Of those two million people more than 400,000 (21%) were aliens (i.e. mainly Turks, Moroccans and persons of Surinamese and Netherlands Antilles ethnic origin) (source: OECD 1992:71).

All over the world a growing number of severe political and ethnic conflicts have arisen, which find their origin in an imbalance of the relationships between the three cultural factors, as we have seen above. The nature of this imbalance may vary from place to place: it may be a wrong, one-sided selection of the material statistics, an inadequate and
too strong self-image or a distorted look at the foreign partner. The nature of the imbalance may be different, but the result is always the same everywhere: cultural relativism gives way to cultural absolutism.

It goes without saying that the current political situation in many parts of the world implies that the study of culture and of cultural identity has become an important item for scholarship. Literary scholarship also has a task to fulfill here and should not leave this work to other disciplines. Literary and cultural identity represent an important and complex study object, which the papers in our conference clearly showed. Not any approach within literary studies is able to perform this kind of task. Mary Louise Pratt’s (1995:62) conception of comparative literature comes close to such an approach, which would be able to do the job. She advances a concept of comparative literature “as a site for powerful intellectual renewal in the study of literature and culture”. She sketches the big picture of “comparative literature as an especially hospitable space for the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and genuinely global consciousness. It can develop these things both as scholarly endeavors and as new forms of cultural citizenship in a globalized world”.

The study of cultural and literary identity is important since it redirects literary studies to the relationship between text and social context. By focusing on this relationship literary studies will gain access to the major contemporary and historical social issues. This access had been denied due to the impact of a number of influential 20th century critical schools such as Russian Formalism, New Criticism, the German werkimmanente Interpretation, Structuralism and Deconstruction. They all more or less locked themselves up in textual prisons, from which escape to the social context was virtually impossible.

Issues related to culture and cultural identity seem to be and will stay the issues of the coming decades of this new millennium. The ‘Cultural Turn’ will continue to show its strong teeth. In one of its many reports the OECD (1987:43) writes: “Awareness of an ethnic or regional
identity, or of a minority status, can be hidden for many decades by the myth of national unity and identity, of ethnic homogeneity, of mass culture or planetary culture. It can also be hidden by an analysis in terms of social groups or the evocation of proletarian internationalism. Today, ethnic or racial claims, nationalist or regionalist movements, and movements for independence or autonomy, have broken up communities which were merely a facade. This process of breaking up seemingly homogeneous communities and the consequent struggle for identity will undoubtedly continue for a number of years in many parts of the world. To study this process from a literary and cultural point of view offers as many challenges as possibilities for literary and cultural studies in the years to come.

I have been trying to demonstrate in this article that the “English” in the following English nursery rhyme:

The Germans live in Germany, the Romans live in Rome, the Turks live in Turkey; but the English live at home.

can be substituted by any other nation or any ethnic group living in a particular nation. As Hofstede (1994:235) has observed: “Everybody looks at the world from behind the windows of a cultural home and everybody prefers to act as if people from other countries have something special about them (a national character) but home is normal. Unfortunately, there is no normal position in cultural matters. This is an uncomfortable message, as uncomfortable as Galileo Galilei’s claim in the seventeenth century that the Earth is not the center of the Universe”.

Moreover, one could ask whether there still exists a particular, indisputable own home. There are scholars who categorically deny the existence of such a home against the background of a cultural supermarket, as we have seen above. Mathews (2000:195) concludes in this respect: “(...) one’s particular cultural home can in most respects only be one more construction from the cultural supermarket”.

Also literary studies could show the dangers of this naïve nursery rhyme mentioned above, and of thousands of other texts, which in fact have the same semantics. This could be done, among other things, by
focusing on the way literature has stimulated, consciously or not, the construction of national identity. It also could be done by the study of representation, the way textual realities reflect contextual realities.

This approach might give literary studies a new perspective and a new prestige. To conclude with a variation on Hobsbawm (1990:183): the owl of Minerva, which brings wisdom flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling around cultural and literary identity.
RIEN T. SEGERS

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THE INEVITABLE STRENGTH OF CULTURAL IDENTITY


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