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Literary Universals

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Abstract This essay takes up the issue of universalism in relation to literature, arguing that unrelated literary traditions manifest a wide range of formal and substantive universals that should be the objects of systematic study. More exactly, the first section undertakes to refute common political objections to the study of universals, contending that these objections rest on a confusion between empirical universalism (the isolation of genuine cross-cultural invariants) and normative absolutism (the cross-cultural imposition of a culturally nonuniversal idea of practice). The second section considers the structure of a theory of universals. It outlines the varieties of the universal, illustrating these by reference to examples from a range of genetically unrelated literatures—European, South Asian, East Asian, African, and so on. The final section considers two unlikely universals in more detail, proposing, criticizing, and refining a number of descriptive formulations and explanatory hypotheses. Examining this process of theoretical evaluation and revision should serve to clarify the nature of literary universals in general and to indicate how a research project in literary universals could proceed.

Ideology and Universalism

Today there is little enthusiasm among humanists for the study of universals. Indeed, it is barely even a concept within the humanities, where the focus of both theory and practice tends to be on "difference," "cultural and historical specificity," and so on. What Carl Plantinga said recently of film theorists applies equally to literary theorists: they tend to seek "explicit ways to link" literary phenomena "to particular historical conditions and

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to ideology" (1993: 450). In keeping with this trend, a 1993 self-evaluation by the American Comparative Literature Association worries that comparative literature "may well be left behind on the dustpile of academic history" if it does not incorporate the current trends variously referred to as "culture studies," "cultural critique," and "cultural theory." Indeed, they insist that all work in comparative literature "should take account of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which . . . meanings are produced," which amounts to an insistence that all comparatist study be focused on historical and cultural particularities (Bernheimer et al. 1993: 5–6). When universalism is mentioned at all in humanistic writing, it is most often denounced as a tool of oppression. For example, in their influential volume *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin maintain that the notion of universality is "a hegemonic European critical tool" (1989: 149). There are exceptions, certainly, such as the Kenyan Marxist novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who recently proclaimed himself "an unrepentant universalist" (1993: xvii). However, the general trend is clear.

Part of the resistance to the study of universals derives from the politics, or rather the pseudopolitics, that vitiates much debate in the humanities today—the labeling of dominant theoretical views as "progressive" and the denigration of all alternatives as "reactionary," with relatively little concern for the political intentions of the theorists or the political consequences of the theories. In the case of universals, one might have expected some hesitation about such generalizations. After all, the major exponent of universals in our own day has been Noam Chomsky, a writer whose politics might be fruitfully contrasted with those of, say, Paul de Man or Martin Heidegger, whose work forms the background for much of the recent emphasis on difference. More importantly, no racist ever justified the enslavement of Africans or colonial rule in India on the basis of a claim that whites and nonwhites share universal human properties. Rather, they based their justifications on presumed differences among Europeans, Africans, and Indians, usually biological differences, but often cultural differences as well. Indeed, "liberal" racism and colonialism—with their paternalistic emphasis on leading the native out of primitive ways and into civilization—were always based on specifically culturalist differentialism.

This is not to say that antiuniversalist views are based on nothing. It has indeed happened that apparently universalist claims have been used to support some forms of oppression. Typically, humanist criticisms of universalism refer back to those putative universals that derive from and serve to further colonial, patriarchal, or other ideologies supporting unjust domination. However, as Kwame Appiah has noted, what anticolonial opponents of universals "are objecting to" in these cases "is the posture

that conceals [the] privileging of one national (or racial) tradition against others in false talk of the Human Condition" (1992: 58). In other words, they are objecting to false and duplicitous universalism, claims of universality that are untrue and are, in addition, offered in bad faith. Appiah continues, "Antiuniversalists . . . use the term *universalism* as if it meant *pseudouniversalism*, and the fact is that their complaint is not with universalism at all. What they truly object to—and who would not?—is Eurocentric hegemony *posing* as universalism" (ibid.).

Lalita Pandit has nicely defined this difference in an ethical context through her suggestive distinction between "hegemonic" and "empathic" universals (1995: 207). Hegemonic universalism involves the imposition of one set of local interests, beliefs, standard practices, etc., on everyone else, the absolutizing of a local law or custom, in such a way as to express and foster domination. Empathic universalism, in contrast, is based on the assumption that all people share ethical and experiential subjectivity, and that universality must both derive from and contribute to this sense of shared subjectivity, with all that it entails in terms of allowing each set of subjective experiences equal weight, etc. My only disagreement with Pandit is that, in my view, "hegemonic universalism" is not universalism at all, and would more appropriately be called *hegemonic absolutism*. I say this because "hegemonic universals" or "pseudouniversals" (in Appiah's term) are not merely false. They do not even satisfy minimal formal criteria for defining universals.

Regina Barreca, elaborating on an observation by Joanna Russ, provides a fine example of a hegemonic "universal" from humor: "When a man looks you in the eye after telling you an offensive and not even particularly funny story, and says, 'It was only a joke,' what he is really saying, according to Joanna Russ, is 'I find jokes about you funny. Why don't *you* find jokes about you funny?'" (1991: 71). The presupposition of the sexist joke-teller is the sort of universal claim to which humanists typically object. This perfectly fits Pandit's division, for it is an imposition of one group's views on all humanity—an absolutizing of local preferences—and it is at the same time straightforwardly antiempathic.

But, again, it is more appropriate to refer to this as a hegemonic *absolute*, for, strictly speaking, it is not a universal at all. Specifically, it is a formal property of universals that their universality is maintained at higher levels of explanatory generalization. Clearly, a more abstract explanatory generalization must have at least as broad a scope as any less abstract generalization that it subsumes. If the explanatory generalization is not universal, then the lower-level generalization is not universal either. Hegemonic "universals" lack this criterial property. In other words, they are not, ulti-

mately, claims of universal commonality. Rather, they are claims of group difference made to appear as universals.

Consider again the sort of sexist joke just mentioned. Barreca stresses that such demeaning jokes come from men who "bite their lower lips and drop their hands quickly" when they hear a similarly demeaning joke about men (ibid.). Thus they fully recognize that men do not enjoy jokes demeaning to men. In other words, these joke-tellers tacitly hold to a theory in which the lower-level universal, "Jokes demeaning to women are funny for everyone," is explained by a generalization to the effect that "men are offended—and thus not amused—by statements demeaning to themselves, but women are not offended by statements demeaning to themselves." This is a strongly differentialist claim. Thus, the "universalist" theory that men and women like to laugh at women is not universalist at all. It appears to involve a universal claim, but this "universality" is only the superficial manifestation of an underlying (presupposed) difference. The genuine universal here would be, in Barreca's words, "We don't like to laugh at hostile jokes directed at groups of which we are part" (ibid.: 72). And the strict implications of this genuine universal directly contradict the presupposed "universal" or hegemonic absolute of the sexist joke-teller. Thus, even in such paradigmatic cases of politically objectionable "universalism," it turns out that the objectionable claims are ultimately claims of difference—not universals, but the antithesis of universals.

It is important to stress that this conclusion in no way detracts from the standard forms of particularist literary study. It responds, not to their positive worth, but to their exclusivity. More exactly, the proponents of cultural and historical study are mistaken, not only in their condemnation of universalism, but in seeing the study of universals as somehow opposed to or contradictory of cultural study, in believing that the examination of universals would somehow preclude historical research. To argue for the study of universals is not at all to argue against the study of culture and history. All reasonable students of literature—including those engaged in universalist projects—recognize that particularist research and interpretation are extremely valuable. Indeed, it is the opponents of universalism who are most likely to limit our cultural and historical understanding, for the study of universals and the study of cultural and historical particularity are mutually necessary. Like laws of nature, cultural universals are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances (see Ngũgĩ 1993: 26). Thus, to isolate and test universal patterns, we often require a good deal of cultural and historical knowledge. At the same time, however, in order to gain any understanding of cultural particularity, we necessarily

presuppose a background of commonality (as Donald Davidson [1984: 183–98], for example, has forcefully argued; see also Brown 1991: 151–52).

Consider allusion, which appears to be a universal literary technique used to enhance the aesthetic effect of a new work by invoking in the reader associations with a prior work. Clearly, if we lack knowledge of the tradition in which a work is written, we will be unable to recognize its allusions. Conversely, if we fail to recognize that allusion is a universal technique, we will not look for allusions in particular works; in consequence, we will fail to understand those particular works, at least insofar as they rely on allusion. For example, a reader unfamiliar with the *Ramayana* will not recognize that Sakuntala's call for the earth to take her alludes to Sita's parallel call and subsequent descent into the earth when she refuses final reconciliation with Rama. Thus, on the one hand, he/she will not recognize the use of allusion as a significant literary technique here—and, presumably, elsewhere in Sanskrit literature. In other words, he/she will not be able to advance a universalist project. On the other hand, a reader who does not recognize that allusion is a universal technique is unlikely to look for such connections and thus is unlikely to advance a culturalist or interpretive project. Indeed, he/she will have a culturally impoverished experience of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, probably interpreting Sakuntala's appeal as an Indian version of the English cliché "I wish the earth would open up and swallow me," thus trivializing the scene, stripping the event of mythic resonance, masking the defiance of Sakuntala's act, occluding the play's implicit social criticism, etc.

The case of symbolism is the same. For example, particular types of birds have culturally specific associations in India, China, and elsewhere. When such birds appear in literature they are likely to have a symbolic function, which we can only recognize if we are familiar with those culturally specific associations. But we will only consider and interpret such an image symbolically if we recognize that symbolism is a universal literary technique.

Here too, then, the antiuniversalists have things backwards. It is not universalism but antiuniversalism that occludes cultural particularity, blocking historical research and contextualization, just as it is not universalism but antiuniversalism (sometimes masquerading as universalism) that manifests and fosters patriarchal, colonial, and other oppressive ideologies.

In the following pages, I should like to take up and reconsider the neglected and misunderstood topic of literary universals. In the first section, I articulate and illustrate with literary instances the various types and relations of universals. In the second section, I discuss two sets of literary

universals in more detail, considering how they might be systematized and how they might be explained by reference to broader principles of literature and cognition. The first section seeks to clarify the nature of cultural universals in general and to sketch out some representative universals of literature in particular. The purpose of the second section is to indicate how a research program in literary universals—a cooperative project of isolating, refining, systematizing, and explaining literary universals—can proceed, and what some of its principles might be.

The Structure of a Theory of Universals

The first important point about universals is that they are not necessarily properties of all literary works. Indeed, such properties are rare, and often trivial (i.e., a mere residue of our definition of a literary work). Rather, literary universals are properties and relations that are found across a range of genetically and geographically distinct literatures, which is to say literatures that have arisen and developed separately at least with respect to those properties and relations. More exactly, a property or relation may be considered a universal only if it is found in distinct bodies of literature that do not share a common ancestor having that property or relation. (Actually, things are slightly more complicated than this definition suggests. For example, borrowing across traditions may contribute to an understanding of universals insofar as such borrowing is selective and thus indicates that readers across traditions are sensitive to some techniques but not to others, prone to internalize and use some techniques but not others, and so on.)

It is not only unnecessary for universals to apply to all works, they need not apply to all traditions. Linguists use the term *universal* to refer to any property or relation that occurs across (genetically and areally unrelated) languages with greater frequency than would be predicted by chance alone (see, for example, Comrie 1981: 11–12, 19–22). An *absolute* universal is merely a special case—a property or relation that occurs across traditions with a frequency of one. Universals with a frequency below one are referred to as *statistical* universals. On the whole, we should expect to find a limited number of hierarchies of statistically universal properties and relations, ordered according to abstraction and thus according to frequency (again, as abstraction increases, frequency can only increase or remain the same), with a few absolute universals at the apex of these hierarchies.

This extension of "universal" to statistically unexpected properties may seem odd, even misleading. However, it is perfectly in keeping with standard practices and definitions in all sciences, and is inconsistent only with common prejudices about the nature of literary or, more broadly, cul-

tural universals. An example from the field of medicine may help to clarify things. It is a universal principle of medicine that secondhand smoke causes lung cancer, despite the fact that most people who have inhaled secondhand smoke never develop lung cancer. It is a universal principle because there is a statistically significant correlation between inhaling secondhand smoke and developing lung cancer (or, rather, there is a statistically significant correlation that cannot be explained by other factors—obviously it is important to distinguish between correlations that are primary or causal and those that are derivative or noncausal). Statistical universals of literature, as well as linguistics, anthropology, etc., are no different.

More exactly, a theory of literary universals would include a *repertoire of techniques* available to authors and a range of *nontechnical correlations* derived from broad statistical patterns. Nontechnical correlations comprise universal principles that are not, so to speak, devices or elements or structures that can be taken up and used in the making of literature, though they may define a range of or limits on usable devices. For example, standard line lengths appear to fall regularly between five and nine words. Clearly, a range of standard line lengths across different traditions is not a technique available to authors. Rather, it is a broad correlation across literatures. On the other hand, this universal correlation does presumably indicate a constraint on the techniques available to poets cross-culturally—or, if not a constraint, at least some sort of default tendency.

Techniques include all universal matters of "form" and "content"—including poetic meters, rhetorical devices, etc.—that an author may draw upon in composing a literary work. Many if not most basic techniques used in English literature appear to be universal. A partial list would include symbolism and imagery, which we shall discuss below; assonance—found not only in Indo-European works, but in Japanese (Bownas 1964: lii), Babylonian (Sandars 1971: 17), and other verse as well (on the related phenomenon of rhyme see Kiparsky 1981: 10); alliteration—important in Sanskrit (Miller 1977: 12), Japanese (Bownas 1964: lii), Ainu (Philippi 1982 [1979]: 29), and so on; verbal parallelism, found in Tikopia (Firth with McLean 1990: 41), Igbo (Egudu and Nwoga 1973), Basotho (Kunene 1971: 68), Kuna (Sherzer 1987: 105), Chinese (Cooper 1973: 92; Liu 1959: chap. 35), Babylonian (Sandars 1971: 17), Hebrew (ibid.), etc. Certain broader organizational devices appear to be universal as well—for example, foreshadowing and plot circularity, that is, beginning and ending a plot in the same place or situation or in closely analogous places or situations, often with the repetition of specific phrases concerning those places or situations (on these and other possibly universal organizational devices see Hogan 1995).

These techniques are organized into (explicit or implicit) *schemata* defining literary types and subtypes, such as "sonnet" in English. Within schemata, techniques may be *obligatory* or *optional*. If a certain poetic genre requires the use of end rhyme, then end rhyme is obligatory in the schema for that genre. On the other hand, the sonnet permits but does not require alliteration; thus alliteration is an optional technique available to a poet in composing a sonnet. We may also distinguish techniques that, while not strictly obligatory, are nevertheless standard and may be understood as the highest or default cases within a schema. Thus a standard technique is employed unless the author explicitly chooses otherwise, or some concurrently operating principle or schema prevents the implementation of the default.

Perhaps the best way to conceive of schemata is as cross-indexed lexical entries, wherein some techniques are specified, and others are made accessible indirectly by reference to distinct lexical entries. These other entries may simply be coordinated (i.e., fully distinct, though cross-indexed), but they may also be superordinate (encompassing the entry in question) or subordinate (encompassed by the entry in question). Thus the schema for "sonnet" might list features specific to the sonnet (number of lines, rhyme scheme), then add some reference to the overarching category "poem" (we could think of it as a "see 'poem' " instruction). The entry for "poem" would be a superordinate category to "sonnet" and would include a list of techniques standard in poetry and available for use in sonnets (e.g., alliteration). The precise nature of each of these techniques could be viewed as defined in coordinate categories, also cross-indexed (i.e., with a "see 'alliteration' " instruction). (Obviously, I do not mean that there is literally a "see 'alliteration' " instruction in a lexical entry. Rather, I mean that there are specifiable links between entries, which it is convenient for us to represent in this way. For a discussion of this issue see the final section of Hogan 1996a.)

The most broadly encompassing schema, and an absolute universal, is the minimally specified schema of verbal art itself. As Kiparsky has pointed out, all societies have verbal art (1987: 195–96). This may seem a mere triviality, but it is not. There is no logical necessity in the existence of verbal art, and in our own society very few people actually produce it. Why, then, should we expect it to appear in every society? As Chomsky has emphasized, one of the first tasks for researchers who study universals is to overcome habituation and to recognize how surprising universals are. We often "lose sight of the need for explanation when phenomena are too familiar and 'obvious' " (Chomsky 1972: 25). Once we have recognized that

our expectation of verbal art is a mere matter of habit, we come to see that, far from being trivial, it is in fact highly surprising that verbal art is produced in small nomadic groups as well as in vast, highly urbanized nations.

In their most general forms, the three major genres of European literature—poetry, prose fiction, and drama—appear to be instances of larger universal categories as well. Thus it appears to be a universal that all or almost all societies have verse, which is to say a verbal art involving formalized cyclical patterning of speech based on acoustic properties. Tale-telling also appears to be a literary universal. Probably in all societies, people articulate causal sequences of nonbanal events involving human agency (with banality defined relative to culturally specific expectations), and they do so at least in part for aesthetic enjoyment, itself based on identification, the patterned variation of emotional intensity, etc. Finally, some form of enactment for such tales seems to be universal as well, though in a more limited way. In many societies, such enactments may be confined to brief, farcical episodes on the one hand and ritual on the other. However, most literate societies have also developed some form of extended, nonritual theater; thus we find such theater in Europe, India, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and the Middle East. (As the Middle East is often said to have had no precolonial theater, it is perhaps worth referring the interested reader to Moreh 1992; Martinovitch 1933; and Badawi 1988: chap. 1.)

More specific schematic patterns are isolable as well. Perhaps every tradition—and certainly every literate tradition—tells tales of conflict in two areas, love and political power, and includes tragedies and comedies in each genre. Moreover, these tales involve a wide range of common character types and motifs and fall into similar subgenres. Consider, for example, love stories. A romantic comedy, in its most minimal form, typically involves two lovers who are separated, then reunited after a period of uncertainty. It is already surprising that this structure should be found in drama from Greece, Rome, India, China, and Japan, and in stories from other regions as well. More surprising still is the fact that more particular patterns in this genre are also widely shared. For example, the separation is typically a matter of conflict with social expectations and structures, often manifest in a conflict with parents. It is frequently resolved by some sort of recognition, leading to a reversal, in the standard Aristotelian manner. Moreover, this recognition not only reunites the lovers but often involves the unexpected reunion of parents and children as well. Love stories typically include such characters as a hero, a heroine, a hero's companion, a hero's parasite, a heroine's confidant, and so on. Indeed, the character typologies set out by Sanskrit literary theorists two millennia ago (e.g., in

Bharatamuni's *Natya Sastra* [n.d.]) and those drawn from New Comedy by Northrop Frye (1971 [1957]) are similar to each other, and widely applicable beyond their own traditions, because of this cross-cultural consistency.

Perhaps the most cross-culturally widespread version of the love plot is a particular variation on the comic love story. This variation, the "romantic tragicomedy," in effect incorporates the tragic love story, in which the lovers are separated, typically by death, and often with a suggestion of literal or metaphorical reunion after death—as in Arabic and Persian retellings of the Laila and Majnun story (e.g., Nizami's twelfth-century poem [Nizami 1963]), the *Ramayana* (100 B.C.E.), the love suicide plays of Chikamatsu (e.g., *Love Suicides in the Women's Temple* of 1708 [Keene 1990]), etc. Specifically, in romantic tragicomedy lovers are almost joined, then separated in a way that suggests death, then reunited in a sort of resurrection. The separation at the very least threatens not only to keep the lovers apart, but to prevent them from ever hearing of each other again (as in Zeami's early-fifteenth-century *Lady Han* or *The Reed Cutter* [Keene 1970]). This sort of separation is already akin to death, but the link with death is typically made more explicit. Thus, the separation often involves an apparent death (as in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* [the earliest extant Greek romance]; Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*; Bhasa's fourth-century *Vision of Vasavadatta* [Woolner and Sarup 1930]; Bhavabhuti's eighth-century *Uttaramacarita*; the Thai *lakon jatri*, *Manohra* [Brandon 1972]) or is represented in imagery closely associated with death (as in Sakuntala's assumption into the heavens or Chien-nu's "soul leaving her body" in Cheng's fourteenth-century play [Liu 1972]). In any case, the link with death is clear, consistent, and important in a wide range of literary traditions. Similarly, these works regularly associate the separation of the lovers with imagery of winter and their reunion with imagery of spring. Moreover, the more general comic universals—conflict with society, recognition, reversal, reunion of separated parents and children, etc.—carry over, giving this schema remarkable cross-cultural consistency. In Europe this sort of story most obviously reminds us of Shakespeare, but it has been a standard part of European literature since at least the "Erotici Graeci" of the early centuries of the common era. Outside Europe, beyond the works already mentioned, we could list the first-century *Toy Cart* and the seventh-century *Ratnavali* (Lal 1964) from India; the thirteenth-century *Chang Boils the Sea* (Liu 1972) and the roughly contemporary story of Cui Hu (see Dolby 1978: 155–56) from China; the final voyage of Sindbad and the story of Aladdin from the Middle East (Dawood 1955; on dating see 8–9); Kanami's fourteenth-century *Hanakatami* (see Waley 1988) and the eighteenth-century *Love Letter*

from the Licensed Quarter (Brandon 1992) from Japan—to take just two examples from each region that has produced a major written tradition.

It is important to point out that the universality of either a (general) technique or a nontechnical correlation in no way implies the universality of any specification or instantiation of that technique or correlation, nor is putative universality falsified by differences in such specifications or instantiations. For example, the patterning of images seems to be a universal technique. It is certainly found in the genetically and in part geographically distinct written traditions of Europe, the Middle East, India, China, and Japan (see Hogan 1996b); it is also found in the unrelated oral poetries of the Southern African Basotho (see Kunene 1971: chap. 7), the Polynesian Tikopia (see Firth with McLean 1990: 36–39), the Yirrkalla of Arnhem Land (see Berndt 1976: 73–76), etc. This patterning does not, in and of itself, imply that implementations of the technique share further universal properties. For instance, it may be a universal that love is commonly associated with images of birds, as it seems to be in the various written traditions. Yet, if so, it is a distinct universal. Even if different cultures used widely different image patterns—some linking love with birds, others with tubers, others with types of fabric—the use of image patterns would still be universal.

Note also that each level of a hierarchy of abstraction serves as a partial explanatory generalization of all elements on lower levels. Thus we may find that the use of bird images for romantic love and the use of seasonal images for human life are far more common than chance, but not at all absolute. We may then find the more general use of image patterns to be very widespread, perhaps absolute. In this case, the more abstract universal of imagery would partially explain the more specific avian and seasonal images. Other universals—literary and nonliterary—in combination with more specific accidental circumstances (e.g., environmental conditions), would yield a fuller explanation of these lower-level universals. For example, the cross-cultural connection between romantic love and bird imagery may derive in part from some universal, metaphorical, nonliterary correlation between "positive" emotions and the direction *up* (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980: chap. 5).

The more abstract universals may also be explained further. For example, the patterning of images may in turn be an instance of a still broader universal according to which patterning in normal discourse is generalized to all levels of structure in literary art (as I shall discuss in the following section). At the highest level, the specifically literary universals should indicate what is at the origin of the development of literature, what

defines the human urge to make and experience verbal art. Of course, these overarching literary universals are not the end of the story either, for they too should be open to further explanation in terms of even more encompassing universals, such as those of psychology, sociology, history, and so on. (I shall return to this topic also in the following section.)

Hierarchies of universals are defined not only by the schematization of techniques and by a receding series of explanatory abstractions, but also by a series of conditional relations. As a general methodological principle, linguists (like scientists in any other field) seek to redefine universals in such a way as to limit exceptions. Through repeated reformulation, they seek to bring statistical universals closer to absolute universals. Again, this may be done through abstraction, as when the (perhaps) absolute universal of image patterning is derived from merely statistically universal patterns of bird imagery, seasonal imagery, etc. However, the goal of absolute universality may be pursued further through the delineation of specific conditions in which statistically universal techniques or correlations occur. In other words, statistical universals of the form "q" may be revised into *implicational* universals of the form "if p, then q." Ideally, this reformulation would yield an absolute universal (i.e., there would be no cases of p and not q). At least it would limit the number of exceptions, bringing the universal closer to a frequency of one.

Alliteration provides a good example of how universals may be redefined to limit exceptions. It is an obligatory technique in certain forms of poetry in certain societies—more than would be predicted by chance, but with a great many exceptions. One may abstract from this articulation to some broader principle, such as the no doubt absolute universal that all poetry has some obligatory features relating to sound pattern. However, one may also seek to formulate an implicational universal, determining conditions under which alliteration is or is not obligatory. Kiparsky argues that alliteration "seems to be found as an obligatory formal element only in languages where the stress regularly falls on the same syllable in the word, which then must be the alliterating syllable" (1981: 9). While this does not fully fix the conditions under which alliteration is obligatory, it does fully fix the conditions under which it is not obligatory (i.e., whenever syllable stress varies in the language). Thus it yields the absolute implicational universal "If syllable stress varies in a given language, then alliteration is not an obligatory feature of poetry in that language." It also yields a second, more complex absolute implicational universal "If syllable stress does not vary in a language and if alliteration is an obligatory feature of poetry in that language, then the stressed syllable is the alliterating syllable."

Much as unconditional universals may be subsumed into hierarchies of

abstraction, implicational universals may be organized into *typologies* (on this and other aspects of universals linguistic study see Comrie 1981 and Croft 1990). A typology consists in a set of mutually exclusive categories, each of which coordinates a number of implicational universals, forming them into a pattern that is more informative, though less absolute, than any of the implications considered individually. Each type in a typology serves as a partial explanation of any given implication or correlation that it subsumes. In addition, the typology as a whole should come close to defining an absolute, disjunctive universal—that is, all or almost all literatures should fit under one or another type.

The broad distinction between oral and literate composition is a case in point (on this distinction see Ong 1982). In effect, it sets up a broad implication of the form "If a culture does not have writing, then its literature will be marked by frequent use of epithets, formulaic phrases, specific sorts of repetition, etc.," or more generally, "The degree to which a literature is marked by epithets, etc., is a function of the degree of literacy of the literary culture in which that literature is produced." As the second formulation indicates, there is a spectrum of historical change with a universal tendency, rather than a universal grid of discrete types; however, such a spectrum serves the same organizational and explanatory function. Though some writers have disputed the validity of this loose typological distinction (see, for example, Sherzer and Woodbury 1987: 9–10), it has been convincingly applied to a wide range of literatures: Slavic, Greek (see Lord 1960), Sanskrit, Tamil (see Kailasapathy 1968; Hart 1975), Ainu (see Philippi 1982 [1979]: introduction), Xhosa (see Opland 1983: chap. 6), and so on.

Indeed, this is a particularly interesting universal for our purposes because it refers to historical conditions. Humanists tend to think of historical change and universals as diametrically opposed. In fact, they are not. Marx's isolation of historical/economic laws (1867: 8) is an obvious case in which historical change has been understood in relation to universals. Moreover, historical linguists have been no less inclined to isolate universals than have their colleagues in other areas of linguistics (see, for example, Comrie 1981: chap. 10; Croft 1990: chaps. 8 and 9). In this case, the proposed typology not only involves historical contingency (the presence or absence of writing), it also involves historical development and thus specificity—though all in the context of a universal principle. Another instance of this type of universal is Arnold Hauser's hypothesis that realism in literature is a function of social structure, the more realistic art being produced in urban, market economies, with feudal or tributary economies fostering stylization (see Hauser 1957: 49).

A particularly important related distinction, relevant to historical and

cultural variation, is that between *indexical* and *nonindexical* universals. Indexical universals are those that are in part defined by reference to the particulars in which they are instantiated. For example, it appears to be a psychological universal that one's self-conception is structured into a hierarchy of properties; properties such as sex and race are high in the hierarchy while properties such as ring size are lower. It appears that readers and auditors identify with a character on the basis of shared high-level properties in their self-conception and that they prefer works involving characters with whom they identify (see Klemenz-Belgardt 1981: 367–68). This (likely) literary universal is indexical because those high-level properties necessarily vary from person to person (e.g., by sex, race, religion, etc.). Note that, contrary to one common preconception about universals, the existence of such indexical universals not only does not guarantee universal agreement in matters of taste, it works strongly against such agreement. Indeed, we have already seen one instance of this type of universal, that articulated by Barreca ("We don't like to laugh at hostile jokes directed at groups of which we are part") and implicitly denied by the sexist joke-teller.

Explaining Literary Universals: The Nature of a Research Program

One could draw further, consequential distinctions—for example, between universals bearing on aesthetic experience and those bearing on aesthetic evaluation outside of aesthetic experience (e.g., concerning canonization and dominant ideology). Obviously, however, it is beyond the scope of this essay to present a fully developed theory of literary universals. Indeed, an empirically based theory—unlike the speculative theories common in the humanities—cannot arise in a fully developed and final form, ready only to be "applied" in explications of individual texts. Rather, an empirically based theory is always and necessarily part of a *project*, an ongoing, broadly collaborative research program, of the general sort outlined by Lakatos (1970)—in this case, a program involving the collaboration of a wide range of scholars in different fields, with different areas of literary expertise. For present purposes, the preceding analysis should provide an adequate idea of how a theory of literary universals is likely to be structured, and what some parts of that theory might look like.

Of course, any empirically based research program necessarily seeks explanatory as well as descriptive adequacy (see Chomsky 1965: 24–26). Indeed, the two are closely interrelated and no research program can proceed without both. Obviously, explanation is founded upon empirical description. But empirical description is, at the same time, organized and

directed by reference to hypothesized explanatory principles. Thus, having treated some broadly structural and descriptive aspects of a theory of literary universals in the preceding section, I should like, in this section, to consider how the explanatory part of a research program in universals might proceed. To do this, I shall examine two specific cases, one concerning a complex of universal formal techniques and a principle that can be abstracted from those techniques, and the other concerning a universal statistical correlation and its likely derivation from cognitive structure.

As to the first, consider the list of formal devices that are used in a wide range of genetically distinct traditions—assonance, alliteration, parallelism, and so on. Again, these are best thought of as techniques available to writers in creating (and readers in experiencing) literary works. A first step in an explanatory research program would be to abstract some sort of principle from this list, a principle that indicates what these items share and what pattern they form—ideally, in such a way as to relate this pattern to more general structures and purposes of verbal art. We could call such an abstraction from empirically observable patterns a "secondary principle." Paul Kiparsky has noted this problem, observing broadly that "it appears . . . all literary traditions . . . utilize the same elements of form" (1981: 11). Following Roman Jakobson, he goes on to suggest a reason for this continuity: "Language allows certain ways of organizing sounds, and . . . poetic form must draw on this organization" (ibid.: 20). He concludes that the relations "between grammar and poetry account, at least in part, for the universality of poetic form" (ibid.: 22).

The general connection between linguistic sounds and poetic sounds is plausible; however, it seems to fall short of an explanation, even such a minimal explanation as is given in a secondary principle, for it does not say anything about the specific use of the linguistic phenomena in literature. Part of the point of these literary devices is that they are different from the ordinary linguistic phenomena to which Kiparsky reasonably relates them. For example, onsets (the beginnings of syllables) are not used in the same way in ordinary language and in literature. The two are continuous but not identical. We do not seek alliteration (or rhyme or assonance) in ordinary talk, but we do in poetry. To relate the two may be part of an explanatory account, but necessarily only part.

What, then, is going on in literature? Literary theorists from different traditions regularly stress the unusual degree of structure and relevance in literature (see, for example, the valuable discussion in Bateson 1970: esp. 14). All speech is patterned. Whenever we speak, we try to make a coherent statement, present a coherent narrative, and so on. We choose words with the right connotations. We try to avoid harsh or comic se-

quences of sounds, etc. However, in the creation of verbal art, we do more of this and we do it more intensively. Perhaps one could say that we seek to maximize this sort of patterning. In other words, we seek to render the causal sequence of the plot more rigorous, reinforcing it with foreshadowing and circularity. We seek to coordinate connotations and ambiguities of the words and phrases—including purely graphic connotations and ambiguities where these occur, as in Chinese (Cooper 1973: 68–72). We also seek to pattern the sounds through rhythm, assonance, alliteration, etc. One differentia of literature, then, would seem to be a maximization of the relevance or patterning.

But this is only a first approximation. The Jakobson/Kiparsky hypothesis indicates that formal poetic devices are not merely a matter of maximizing relevance, but of maximizing a certain sort of relevance—linguistically specified relevance, in their view. As Kiparsky stresses, "Certain patterns of considerable formal simplicity are never utilized in the construction of verse. . . . For example, no one thinks of filling in a stanzaic pattern on the principle that the last words of certain lines must contain the same number of sounds" (1981: 12–13). Why not? Kiparsky's answer is that no linguistic rule involves counting sounds in this way and thus no poetic rule will do so. But this formulation is clearly too narrow. It covers the case at hand but does not cover, for example, imagery, foreshadowing, or other nonlinguistic patterns open to maximization. Moreover, it does not seem to provide an adequate explanation of the limitations on maximization even in the case of linguistic phenomena. One is left asking, even in these relevant cases, "Why is there such a linguistic constraint?"

Kiparsky is responding to a genuine problem, but he seems to respond to it too narrowly. One way of trying to resolve this dilemma would be to consider what it is about Kiparsky's account that allows it to solve the linguistic cases, then see if this aspect of the account can be generalized. Consider again Kiparsky's examples. One obvious and crucial difference between, say, onsets (or beginnings) of syllables (used both in language rules and in poetry) and number of speech sounds (used neither in language rules nor in poetry) is that we "hear" the former but have to calculate the latter. More generally, any linguistic feature that is part of a linguistic rule is a feature we "hear"—not in the sense that we are conscious of it (typically we are not), but in the sense that it makes a difference to our experience. For the most part, we do not "hear" features not included in linguistic rules, but can at best calculate them. Indeed, when Kiparsky elaborates his hypothesis, he makes the point himself, arguing that the "faculty of language . . . equips" us with "modes of perceiving" certain features but not others (1987: 191).

Insofar as this notion can be generalized, it would seem to solve the problem we have been considering. And, as it turns out, the idea can be generalized easily. Indeed, it is well-known in cognitive science. The linguistic "hearing" or "perceiving" of onsets (but not number of speech sounds) is simply a specific case of a more general cognitive mechanism called "encoding." Encoding, then, appears to be what is crucial in all these cases, both those that fit Kiparsky's model (e.g., alliteration) and those that do not (e.g., foreshadowing). More exactly, when we perceive something, we cannot possibly perceive every aspect and relation of the thing. Rather, we perceive some aspects and store them in memory, while others escape us. The aspects we perceive and store are those that we "encode." Holland et al. give the following example: "Younger children often cannot learn about the rules underlying the behavior of balance beams" simply from observation because they "do not encode the distance of objects from the fulcrum" (1986: 55). However, when the distance is pointed out to them, they begin to encode the feature on new observations and are able to induce rules (ibid.). Linguistic rules are just a particular case of cognitive principles that allow for encoding.

Therefore, we must reformulate our earlier principle. Now we would say that a wide variety of formal literary techniques (alliteration, assonance, circularity, foreshadowing, etc.) function to maximize relevance or patterning across *encoded* properties or relations. This new formulation could be thought of as a sort of schema in which the properties or relations in question are values of variables confined to a specified, encodable class. Thus when applied to onsets, this schema yields alliteration. When applied to speech rhythm, it yields meter and related forms of patterning. When applied to imagistic analogy (a complex relation, but nonetheless one that is obviously encodable), it yields image patterning. And so on.

Note also that encoding can be learned, though there are obviously limits to what can be encoded. This is important because it seems clear that greater experience of and training in literature increases one's sensitivity to certain sorts of pattern, which is only to be expected when the process is understood in terms of the general cognitive process of encoding. It is less obvious that Kiparsky's hypothesis could accommodate this sort of development.

On the other hand, not all of our problems are yet solved. Our revised formulation does not allow for limits on maximization; it treats maximization as a good in and of itself. Literature, however, maximizes patterns only to a certain point (Bateson 1970: 18). One degree of alliteration is aesthetic, but too extensive alliteration becomes comic. And this too is true cross-culturally. Some traditions may employ more alliteration than

others, but, with rare exceptions, they do not equate more alliteration with a better poem (other things being equal), as this formulation would appear to imply. Rather, alliteration, rhyme, etc., reach a sort of ceiling, after which they detract from aesthetic effect.

To explain this phenomenon, we merely need to extend our analysis of perception. Again, in perceiving any object, we fail to encode some features at all; other features we do encode. Of those we encode, most never become objects of attentional focus. Typically we scan an object, and in the course of scanning we may intentionally focus our attention on one or another aspect of the object for a moment. However, in some cases, our attention will be drawn to a particular aspect against our will. A well-known example concerns background conversation. Typically we are not paying attention to background conversation when we are engaged in a conversation ourselves. However, if we hear our name mentioned, our attention will suddenly shift to the background conversation, entirely independent of conscious decision (see Johnson-Laird 1988: 148), and perhaps even against our will. Miller and Johnson-Laird note that "surprising stimuli" have this obtrusive or attention-forcing effect as well (1976: 133).

More generally, we might say that any perceptual feature has a certain degree of salience for a particular perceiver in particular circumstances. (Features that are not encoded could be thought of as having a salience of 0.) Various qualities of the feature, the perceiver, and the context determine that degree of salience. As just noted, the unexpectedness of the feature is one such quality. For temporally ordered occurrences, frequency of repetition would be another. Once the degree of salience (resulting from these qualities) exceeds a certain threshold, it automatically draws our attention. We can refer to this as the "threshold of forced attentional focus." Consider the quality of frequency. Suppose I use the phrase "of course" more than other speakers. If I use it once every other paragraph, readers are unlikely to "notice." As frequency increases, however—suppose I use it in every sentence—the usage will become obtrusive, "drawing attention to itself." In other words, it will eventually cross the threshold of forced attentional focus. This threshold probably varies somewhat both culturally and individually; however, it is also no doubt governed by broad cognitive constraints.

A further refinement of our general principle follows from this distinction: a wide variety of formal literary techniques (alliteration, assonance, foreshadowing, circularity, etc.) function to maximize relevance or patterning across encoded properties or relations *with a normative limit at the point where such maximization would surpass the threshold of forced attentional focus.*

There are still exceptions to this formulation, which typically involve an

extension of forced attentional focus to the point where use of the feature comes to be seen as humorous or as manifesting a cadenza-like virtuosity on the part of the poet. The precise nature of these exceptions would be further examined in an ongoing research program. However, this discussion should adequately illustrate the abstraction of secondary principles and their refinement in such a program. Therefore, I should now like to turn to another aspect of such a research program, considering a nontechnical correlation in relation to cognitive structure.

As I have already noted, standard line lengths for poetry in a wide range of traditions tend to fall between five and nine words. Standard line length is of course defined not in terms of words but in terms of some acoustic property, but it typically puts the number of words per line in this range. Thus in Chinese, a monosyllabic language, one standard line has only five syllables, which equals five words, while another has seven syllables and thus seven words (see Cooper 1973: 63). The Yirrkalla poems quoted by Berndt (1976: appendixes 1 and 2), the Dinka songs cited by Deng (1973), the Basotho verses quoted in Kunene (1971), many of the Hawaiian poems in Pukui and Korn (1973), and the Babylonian creation poems discussed by Sandars (1971: 17) also fit this pattern reasonably well. As to European literatures, the first twenty lines of *The Canterbury Tales* contain 144 words, about seven per line; the first twenty lines of *Paradise Lost* average a bit under eight words per line; twenty lines taken at random from the *Aeneid* have just under seven words per line; and twenty from the *Odyssey* have almost exactly seven words per line. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* have unusually short lines, but the first poem of the sequence (Kazin 1968 [1946]: 83), which is in no obvious way formally different from those that follow, has six words per line; French lines tend to be unusually long (recall Pope's parody of the alexandrine "that like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along" [1989 {1711}: 203]), but the first twenty lines of Racine's *Phèdre* include just under nine words per line and thus still do not exceed the range.

Nonetheless, there are many exceptions. In considering these, we need, first of all, to determine which counterexamples fall within the range of phenomena we are seeking to characterize. Clearly, our concern here is with literature structured around short, fixed, recurrent, nonsyntactic structures, such as iambic pentameter, which makes free verse irrelevant and thus eliminates a large number of possible counterexamples. Moreover, we are, as already noted, speaking about standard line lengths. Anyone can set out to create an odd verse form. Such individual exceptions are irrelevant as well.

Nonetheless, there remain a number of recalcitrant cases. One option would be to say that the universal is statistical and limited in application—

well above chance, certainly, but with many exceptions. This is, of course, possible. But it is an option of last resort. To choose this option is to put an end to one part of a research project.

Another option is to change the predicate of the universal. In every exception of which I am aware, the length of the written line is less than five words, not more than nine. One way of dealing with these exceptions would be to revise the universal to say that all lines are less than nine words. However, the five- to nine-word spread of line lengths fits well with the structure of rehearsal memory (see Garman 1990: 322; for a fuller discussion see Gathercole and Baddeley 1993). Specifically, rehearsal memory is structured in such a way as to include five to nine chunks of information—and thus, typically, five to nine words—at any given time. There are a number of reasons why this correlation is theoretically appealing. Most importantly, poetry in all traditions demands a sort of plenary attention. As the great tenth-century Indian theorist, Abhinavagupta, put it, we "savour" poetry:

> Aesthetical experience takes place . . . by virtue, as it were, of the squeezing out of the poetical word. Persons aesthetically sensitive, indeed, read and taste many times over the same poem. In contradiction to practical means of perception, that, their task being accomplished, are no more of any use and must then be abandoned, a poem, indeed, does not lose its value after it has been comprehended. (Quoted in Gnoli 1968: xxxii)

Abhinavagupta's view is almost a necessary consequence of the maximization of unobtrusive patterning. As more features become relevant to our experience of a literary work, we are less and less able to appreciate it without "savouring." More features must be encoded in our experience of poetry than in our experience of ordinary speech. And the most obvious way of ensuring this is through rehearsal memory, which does, in effect, allow us to "savour" segments of a poem. It makes a great deal of cognitive sense that the unit of savouring would be the poetic line. Or, rather, given this need for savouring, it makes sense that the recurring unit of poetry would develop in accordance with the structure of rehearsal memory. Moreover, this is true not only receptively but productively. A poet composing a poem is generating short, repeatable, nonsyntactic units. He/she has to revise and "polish" these units—to satisfy metrical and other constraints and the broader criterion of nonobtrusive maximization of patterning. Given the structure of human cognition, one would expect that any such unit would almost necessarily be structured in accordance with rehearsal memory. This is even more obvious when one takes into account the oral, bardic composition that is at the origin of poetry (on the nature

of oral poetic composition see Lord 1960 and Ong 1982). Without the aid of writing, the recurring unit of poetic form would almost necessarily be structured by rehearsal memory.

In short, rehearsal memory seems to provide a good explanation of the universal as initially stated. Indeed, it not only accounts for the five to nine words but relates such a universal to the maximization of relevance, and to other aspects of the experience and creation of poetry. Thus we have broad theoretical reasons not to adopt a formulation of the line length universal that would dissociate it from rehearsal memory. Of course, if lines are only shorter and not longer, then it is still possible to link the poetic line with rehearsal memory. Longer lines simply would not fit into the limited space available for rehearsal memory; shorter lines would fit, even though there is room left over. And we do sometimes use rehearsal memory in this way. On the other hand, the nature of any link with rehearsal memory is much less clear if we accept the reformulated universal ("less than nine words"). In this case, it would seem that rehearsal memory does not structure the line, but merely limits its extent, which would seem to argue against the central aesthetic function just mentioned. In short, the relation to the broader purposes of poetry is attenuated, and the explanatory function of rehearsal memory is reduced considerably.

One option that preserves the straightforward relation to rehearsal memory is to reconsider the notion of the line. Indeed, there seems to be no necessary reason to identify the unit at issue with what is in effect a convention of writing and printing. In many cases, the printed line is indeed the unit we want. In the case of the alexandrine or iambic pentameter or a wide range of other patterns, the printed line rightly defines the recurring nonsyntactic unit. Other cases, however, are less clear. One of the most obvious exceptions to the universal as initially formulated is the Japanese haiku, a seventeen-syllable poem divided into sections of five, seven, and five syllables. We typically conceive of this as a three-line poem. One way of reconciling the haiku with our universal and with the structure of rehearsal memory would be to conceive of the poem as a single line with a single caesura. Thus it fits perfectly well, yielding roughly six to nine words per unit (see, for example, the haiku in Keene 1968: 361–69). (An alternative account that preserves the structural function of rehearsal memory might incorporate silent "beats," akin to musical rests, which would fit with certain aspects of Japanese aesthetic theory. How precisely this might work in rehearsal memory would be a topic for cognitive research.)

On the other hand, a further source of exceptions may be found in such languages as Kuna and Dyirbal, which tend to have between two and four words per verse line (see Sherzer 1987: 107–110 and the poems in Dixon

and Duwell 1990), and in which the problem does not appear to be one of defining the recurring rhythmic unit. (There is also no obvious motivation for positing silent beats in these cases.) These counterexamples lead us instead to a reconsideration of the nature of rehearsal memory. Both Kuna and Dyirbal are morphologically complex languages. It may be that rehearsal memory is not appropriately measured in terms of words at all, but in terms of, say, morphemes. Even in European languages, it seems odd to count *habeo* as one word but *j'ai* as two, or *et* as one word but enclitic *-que* as none. Perhaps *et virum* takes up two slots in rehearsal memory and *virumque* takes up only one, but it seems counterintuitive.

In any case, at this point, the research project of literary universals abuts the broader research project of cognitive psychology. Before the literary project can proceed, the broader psychological study of rehearsal memory has to proceed further. Moreover, as this example indicates, aspects of this broader study can be inspired by literary study. The problems of Kuna and Dyirbal point to further areas for cognitive research—specifically, to the examination of whether rehearsal memory is best understood in terms of words or morphemes or something else. Should it turn out that it is best understood in terms of words, then the Kuna and Dyirbal data will be difficult to account for and we may have to weaken or modify our hypothesis. Should it turn out that morphemes are the crucial units, the Kuna and Dyirbal problems will be solved. On the other hand, it may render Chinese poetry problematic. Should it turn out to be something else, syllables for example, this too will probably produce anomalies. In any event, each possible outcome would point to areas of further research and theorization in an ongoing program. (The possibility of silent beats in Japanese haiku also points to a potentially consequential area for cognitive research, and it too could have significant consequences.)

The maximization of unobtrusive patterning and the relationships among rehearsal memory, line length, and aesthetic experience provide clear illustrations of what will necessarily be two central types of descriptive and explanatory study in a theory of literary universals. However, they are mere starting points for research, hypotheses to be modified, elaborated, and perhaps replaced. Again, the study of literary universals, like the study of linguistic universals, is a project that can progress only through the cooperative efforts of a broad range of researchers engaged in an ongoing process of empirical reevaluation of theories and theoretical reorientation of empirical research. As the final examples in particular illustrate, such a research program could be of great value, not only for our understanding of those cognitions and affections that generate and sustain literary art, but for our broader understanding of the human mind as well.

Finally, this sort of program is not politically inconsequential. Racial and cultural hierarchies are routinely and necessarily justified by an appeal to putative racial and cultural differences, even if these appeals are sometimes hidden behind universalist rhetoric (much as unequal treatment and double standards are often concealed behind a rhetoric of equality and fairness—which, happily, no one takes to imply that equality and fairness are politically objectionable). A universalist program that succeeds in uncovering genuinely universal principles of human thought and human society, principles that are not relative to race or culture, necessarily runs contrary to racism and ethnocentrism. Of course, we should not decide in favor of universalist hypotheses simply because they appear to be politically beneficial. On the other hand, in the current intellectual climate of the humanities, this seems an unlikely danger. Indeed, one can only hope that, despite the current denigration of universalism, more humanists will follow the lead of Ngũgĩ, Chomsky, Marx (1964: 114), Frantz Fanon (1963: 10), Samir Amin (1989: esp. the preface and final chap.), Kwame Appiah (1992: 58, 152), Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 316 and elsewhere), Edward Said (1996: 6 and elsewhere), and others, in recognizing both the intellectual and political value of studying universals.

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