Afterword: Compl(ic)it

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Complicit: in today's world, this is a word redolent with suspect connotations of participation in evil or, at the very least, of association with guilt, but a century and a half ago we are told that it smelled just as strongly, but considerably more sweetly, of the simple and innocent idea of complexity (or so the *Oxford English Dictionary* assures us). Our strange discipline, Comparative Literature, is certainly complex, as witnessed by the various position papers and timely meditations in this volume. But is Comp Lit also complicitous, that is, contained within the complicit – in more than the literal way suggested by my title?

I do not simply mean complicit with other disciplines, though it surely is that, even as it has constantly helped (or forced) many of them to rethink and redefine their disciplinary borders. I mean complicit in that more problematic and guilty sense, for that seems to be how Comp Lit is viewed by at least some people within the liberal Western academy today: complicit with economic (and cultural) capital, with globalization, with Eurocentric imperialism, and thus (it is often suggested) with the more general, but equally problematic, totalizing and homogenizing impulses that are said to be inherent in the very concept of 'comparability'. Reading the essays in this collection – especially reading them alongside the forthcoming ACLA report headed by Haun Saussy and the spate of new books and articles on the question – might well lead one to infer precisely such (plural) complicities. But at least in my reading, there are also numerous suggestions here for ways to attenuate this suspect accomplice role.

Comparative Literature is in crisis – a truism, it would seem. But provocatively, Thomas Docherty confronts us directly in his essay with the possible motivation for the recent attention given to the discipline's perceived critical state. He craftily points out that crises are often manufactured to sell new ideas: crises are turning points, new beginnings, and whoever manages to define these stands to sell books, and thus to gain influence, authority, and prestige. In other words, the

market economy has its academically complicit parallel. But it is also apparent that others see the economic system as having an even clearer and more powerful impact (in and of itself) on the academy: Gayatri Spivak has openly expressed her fears that the 'critical edge of the humanities' – which she associates with Comp Lit – risks being 'appropriated and undermined by the market.'[1] But what can this fear actually mean? In much of the world today, I warrant it would be hard to find any academic discipline that could honestly claim to operate totally outside the specific exchanges determined by the market.

Even if we were to accept this premise, however, that would not absolve Comp Lit of complicity with that larger economic and cultural issue *du jour*: globalization. Replacing the national(ist), the global has become the new focus of more than our discipline's attention lately, but because of its (perhaps too easy) association with Americanization and capitalism, it has come under serious critical pressure within the liberal academy. The study of World Literature – implicitly, in English – is for many the harbinger if not the symptom of academic globalization in North America. For this reason, among others, Spivak wants to replace this suspect notion of the 'global' with the more benign 'planetary' – in her eyes, an uncanny new collectivity in which the dominant no longer appropriates the emergent.[2] However, there are many in our field who do not see this complicity with globalization at all as a negative: one can be an accomplice to good as well as evil, they argue. Agreeing with the 1993 Bernheimer report to the ACLA, which urged Comp Lit to 'go global', Susan Bassnett's article in this issue draws a clear parallel between patterns of literary and philosophical exchange and shifting global information flows: the resulting collective, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and intercultural transfers are the positive side of globalization, she argues; David Damrosch and Ferial J. Ghazoul would second that motion – a motion outward to more mobile and plurivocal conceptions of knowledge and its exchange.

Certainly, for many, globalization offers a tempting model for escaping the now traditional accusation of the discipline's complicity with Eurocentrism. As many have pointed out, the history of Comp Lit in North America is closely tied to a generation of intellectuals who were refugees from totalitarian Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Its history in the Arab world and in China is also tied, though in different ways, to the (colonizing) impact of European literature, criticism and theory, as is clearly outlined in essays in this volume.

While it is therefore tempting to state that 'Europe' has dominated our discipline globally or internationally, we should remind ourselves that not all of Europe has been either culturally or politically imperialist (indeed, much was colonized, as Lucia Boldrini points out), and there are manifestly vast differences in Comp Lit's definition, role, and significance in basically unilingual nations like France and Germany compared to the multilingual Low Countries, with their smaller and forcibly more open 'contact cultures' (to borrow Geert Leernout's term). But the obvious answer to the risk of Eurocentric complicity is to expand, to move (imperialistically?) into the study of all the other many languages, literatures, and cultures of the world. For Spivak, this means looking specifically to the 'Third World' or southern hemisphere 'with attention to language and idiom and a respect for their grafting.'[3] But is this move as simple as she makes it sound? I do not mean this question only in terms of linguistic competence or even cultural background. As Jonathan Culler points out in his essay here: 'The more sophisticated one's understanding of discourse, the harder it is to compare Western and non-Western texts, for each depends for its meaning and identity on its place within a discursive system – disparate systems that seem to make the putative comparability of texts either illusory or, at the very least, misleading'. Might ignoring this danger mean substituting one complicity for another – complicity with all those various kinds of totalizing and homogenizing impulses in comparative literary studies?

Edward Said's suspicion of any such totalization can be seen in his wry institutional description in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, of the 'legendary wholeness, coherence, and integrity of the general field to which one professionally belongs' and of the 'homogeneous space supposedly holding scholars together.'[4] The words 'legendary' and 'supposedly' signal his disbelief in the existence and even value of such a unifying prospect. Historically, he knew that he was not wrong to worry: as Oliver Lubrich cogently reminds us in his essay in this issue, the Nazis too had a cross-national (if German-dominated) unified plan for Europe – in both cultural and philological terms. Clearly, comparativity need not necessarily be anti-totalizing – or anti-totalitarian. As a discipline, however, Djelal Kadir argues that Comp Lit has an ethical obligation to refuse complicity with what he calls ideological absolutisms like this. Not to combat 'antinomian fundamentalisms' – in other words, to ignore 'worldly reality' today – would be an ethical as well as an intellectual failure. In open opposition to totalizing

Realkultur and totalitarian *Realpolitik*, he offers a '*comparatism of multilateral negotiation*' to break through the claims of incomparability made by various exceptionalisms – or, we could add, the equally problematic claims of too facile comparability.

Happily, Comparative Literature, however defined and wherever practiced, seems to have always been an overtly self-reflexive, self-interrogating area of study, one of the rare few that can make such a claim. In North America, every decade for a half century has seen a report on the state of the discipline, part of the mandate of the ACLA. But articles and books examining the past, present and future of Comp Lit proliferate around the globe, sometimes related to professional organizations, but often not. This healthy process, I would argue, is less navel-gazing than soul-searching. Being a discipline receptive and open to change carries with it a series of burdens that are institutional, intellectual, political, and historical, as well as personal. Comp Lit's complicities may be multiple, perhaps even inevitable, but they are certainly not limiting – in any of these arenas.

NOTES

1 *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. xii.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 73 and p. 100.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
4 *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 228.