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Comparative Critical Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 37-46
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ccs.2006.0011*

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I

When I tell members of the general public, in airplanes or hotel bars, what I do for a living, the most common reply has always been: 'What do you guys compare literature to?' Nowadays I tend to answer: 'With everything else.' If I look at the courses I have given over the years, this is not even an exaggeration – I have taught courses on literature 'And Very Nearly Everything Else': literature and music, literature and the arts, literature and science, psychology, religion, sociology, history, philosophy. The trouble with literature, however defined, is that you cannot even begin to grasp its complexity if you do not fully understand its relationship to, well, everything else. In my personal life this has meant that I have found the perfect academic excuse for an unquenchable thirst for *all* kinds of information, some more, some less arcane (less charitably it could be argued that this has saved me from having to make up my Kierkegaardian mind about what I *really* want to do with my life).

There is a clear tension between the interrelatedness of the literary phenomenon with everything else on the one hand and on the other hand the autonomous status that literature as an object of study attained in the two decades after World War II when the New Critics attempted, at least in theory, to cut the links between the individual work and the context in which it had been produced. Strategically, the move of giving the literary object greater autonomy may have been a necessary step in the context of the new post-war universities to ensure a sort of scientific objectivity for the study of literature. But it is certainly ironic that a contemporary and parallel manœuvre by the so-called New Bibliography chose the exact opposite path, committing anew – and programmatically – what New Criticism once decried as the intentional fallacy. In the wake of W. W. Greg and others, the

editor Fredson Bowers described the basis of the editing of literary texts as defined by a given author's final intentions, whereas by the mid-seventies John M. Ellis, in his *The Theory of Literary Criticism*, showed no compunction about defining literary texts as 'those that are used by the society in such a way that *the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin*' [author's italics].[1] Ellis was trying to find a logical distinction between criticism and what he describes as scholarship or literary history, but it is clear that the older comparative literature did not really have an obvious place in the New Criticism, and this is also made clear by René Wellek and Austin Warren in their own *The Theory of Literature*. The concentration on close readings of individual works made it difficult or at least inconvenient that these works had been produced at a particular historical moment and within a specific national or international context. At the very moment when I began my graduate studies in 'complit' at the University of Toronto, the stage was set for yet another and even more radical change in literary studies with the arrival in North America of French theory. After my own peculiar path (lots of French theory as an undergraduate in Belgium, very traditional and decidedly untheoretical MA-studies in Dublin) my stay in Canada enabled me to look at the exciting and controversial introduction of French ideas in the North-American context from a slightly different perspective than my peers. What I felt as an advantage was the fact that I could distinguish and compare different incarnations of what was indiscriminately called 'theory' at the time. For me 'theory' could be understood fully only when it was *taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin*. Without fully realising it until I came to Toronto, I had always been a natural born comparatist, but that was not even something I could really take credit for.

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The Low Countries, like the Alsace, Switzerland or Luxembourg, are 'contact-cultures,' smaller cultural centres where two or more national or linguistic cultures rub against each other. In that sense the cultural traditions in these regions have always tended to be open to 'foreign' influences and this has been evident in the initial success of comparative literature as a university discipline in Belgium and Holland. In the Low Countries, language tuition has always been a priority in secondary schools, and because Belgium in theory at least

has three official languages (Dutch, French and German), the study of language and literature has had a central role at Belgian universities. Although other languages were also studied, the main emphasis has always been on two sets of three modern languages, German, Dutch and English within the departments of Germanic Philology, and Spanish, French and Italian within the departments of Romance Philology, with the classical languages Latin and Greek taught in departments of Classical Philology. This division was based on notions of nineteenth-century historical philology valid at the time when these distinctions were made. In recent years the Dutch universities have focussed language students' attention on just one foreign language, whereas in Belgium language students still have to study two foreign languages and their respective literatures.

That the level of linguistic proficiency of Belgian and Dutch students is generally high is due to a number of factors: the high standards of linguistic instruction in secondary schools and the fact that languages and literatures are studied and taught in the respective languages (and never in translation). More trivially, but not less importantly, both Dutch and Belgian television generally subtitle foreign television programmes, which exposes young children to the sounds of foreign languages, a luxury available only to those children in Germany, France, Spain or Great Britain who spend longer periods abroad. Finally: Belgium and Holland are small countries, and if you travel for more than a few hundred kilometres in any direction, you have to speak another language if you want to be understood. In any case the result has been that the linguistic competence of Belgian and Dutch students tends to be more developed than that of their peers in other parts of Europe (with the exception possibly of Switzerland). Our students tend to receive much higher marks when they study abroad with Socrates or Erasmus programmes and most of them are likely to achieve near-native levels of competence in their chosen language.

There have been signs in recent years that this positive state of affairs is changing, however, but it is not (yet) clear whether this is due to deteriorating secondary school instruction or because of other more general developments within our culture. In the Netherlands, foreign language departments at universities have lost students rapidly, and the academic study of some languages is on the verge of disappearing, whereas in Belgium it will only become clear in a couple of years what the impact on our students' linguistic competence will be of the

transformation of a four-year candidate/licentiate system into the new three-year bachelor and one-year master, under the Bologna agreement.

But linguistic competence can be at most only a necessary condition for success in a field like comparative literature. In the practical organisation of the teaching of languages and literatures, most universities used to have at least one compulsory course in 'comparative literature' and in some universities in Belgium this part of the curriculum was used to introduce students of Romance philology either to 'world literature' or more specifically to literature in the Germanic languages (and vice versa).

Precisely because of the relatively open cultural ambiance and our geographical proximity, French theoretical developments came to Belgium much earlier than elsewhere: the first monographs on Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida were written by Belgians. The result has been that new courses on literary theory were introduced more quickly here than elsewhere, vying with the existing comparative literature courses and, in some cases, actually displacing them; here and there, comparative literature courses survive only in the form of 'intertextual studies'. At some universities in Belgium literary theory was soon elevated to a 'minor', while in neighbouring Holland it even became possible to pursue a B.A. in literary theory ('algemene literatuurwetenschap,' or general literature) without much preliminary language instruction, a development that could earlier be observed at German universities. In those cases students read most of the foreign works in Dutch translation rather than in their original language.

Paradoxically, the Bologna overhaul of university education in Belgium and Holland has not resulted in a single programme or even compatible programmes in the study of language and literature, even within the geographically confined context of the former Benelux. Under the new system Dutch students still study one foreign language, whereas their Flemish colleagues cannot graduate without the study of at least two foreign languages and literatures. The departments of language and literature in the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium have used the overhaul to introduce one significant change: it is no longer necessary in the choice of the second foreign language to confine oneself either to the Romance or the Germanic set of languages; in this way combinations of English and Spanish or German and Italian have become possible. Simultaneously, the theory of literature has acquired an independent status on the same level with the national languages and literatures; hence it is now possible to study

a single language in combination with literary theory. But significantly, literary theory itself has changed considerably since the eighties; for example, at my own institution, the University of Antwerp, it has become only one component of an elective in a larger grouping comprising theory of literature, theatre and film studies. As a result of these changes, the institutional space of what we used to call comparative literature has become marginal, if it still exists at all.

On the level of the organisation of research we can observe similar developments. Whereas originally most researchers in philology were active either in the study of the different national literatures or in comparative literature in its older form (international, interartistic or intertextual relations, influence studies etc.), there was initially very little specialisation. In a small culture it is difficult if not impossible to read one's national literature without reference to its international context, and writers in small countries themselves very often define their poetics in terms of foreign influences and international relationships. In the same way most traditional comparatists looked both at their own national literature and to developments abroad, sometimes writing more incisive analyses of Dutch and Belgian writers than their colleagues who concentrated only on Dutch or Flemish literature.

Between the mid-seventies, when I did my undergraduate work, and the mid-eighties, when I began to teach, the theory wave hit the Low Countries, with the impact on the study of literature on the one hand and on criticism and writing on the other being immediate and momentous. Poets and novelists began to write structuralist and post-modernist works and young literary scholars wrote essays and dissertations applying Derrida, De Man and Lacan to a wide variety of literary texts. Interestingly, the impact of 'theory,' as it came to be called here as elsewhere, was not restricted to departments of Romance philology. Some of the earliest advocates of French post-structuralism worked in English and Dutch, while in some universities theory also had an admittedly more limited impact on the departments of philosophy and theology.

The result was in any case that in the last quarter of the twentieth century almost all the dissertations on literature came to contain a 'theoretical section' in which the candidates had to demonstrate that they were *au courant* of the latest theoretical developments. The 'theoretical turn' also had an impact on the articles and books published by the very limited number of young PhDs of that generation who managed to find and keep academic positions. Most of

the research produced by that generation of scholars contributed in some way to the theoretical discussion; in that respect their work seems to belong more to the field of literary theory than to what used to be called, more narrowly, the discipline of 'comparative literature.' In fact, by the eighties the difference between criticism and theory had almost disappeared: dissertations and academic work in the last quarter century – even on single authors or single works – always address theoretical issues. The introduction or first part of a dissertation in literature is invariably theoretical; this has become an unacknowledged requirement of doctoral work. It does not mean that old-fashioned criticism or close readings (even in the Low Countries this activity is confusingly called part of New Criticism) have completely disappeared: those doctoral students who want to write on a single work of literature simply have to go through the theoretical motions first, with the result that the first part of such dissertations oftentimes retains only the most tenuous of connections to the second more substantive or 'real' part. PhD students sometimes complain about this, but nobody seems willing to change this strange convention of our academic enterprise.

Most recently the theory of literature, in the wake of post-colonial criticism, but more obviously of New Historicism, has witnessed what has been called a 'return to the archives', a new interest in the material nature of history, which occasionally gives the impression of returning academic literary criticism to the old days before New Criticism when universities still taught old-style philology. This is evident when we look at what happened to university criticism in my generation. My professors had been trained in the old philological traditions by professors who studied the influence of one author on another or who traced the reception of various artists or philosophers. These kinds of subjects made comparative literature a hot topic that allowed scholars to look beyond the narrow philological borders that divided the field of literary studies. In all languages apart from their native language university critics, if they wanted to play a role in their field, tended to concentrate on the more esoteric authors or genres (e.g., non-canonical genres, Shakespeare's minor contemporaries), leaving the 'great' authors to native speakers, although even then there were exceptions. The University of Ghent professor Herman Uyttersprot wrote his dissertation on Heine's influence in Dutch literature and he published on the relationship between Rilke and Flanders, but he also played a controversial role in the international discussion about Max Brod's edition of Kafka's *Der Prozess*, and in return he was accused of

insufficient knowledge of the German language. Paradoxically, the majority of Uyttersprot's own colleagues in Belgium would probably have agreed with Brod's rather cheap line of defence, and as a young graduate I was advised to stick to the traditional form of intercultural comparative literature because I did not stand a chance competing with native speakers. A well-meaning older colleague told me that you can only write serious criticism of literature that is written in your own native tongue. In those circumstances comparative literature was an interesting option for literature students who wanted to do their graduate work abroad.

Many a member of the academic generation of literature specialists that preceded mine specialised in typically comparative work; and, like myself, many of them, too, had studied abroad, some even remaining there to continue their careers: Theo Hermans for example is professor of Dutch and comparative literature at University College London, André Lefevere is professor of Dutch and comparative literature at the University of Texas. And both of them are specialists in translation studies (among other things). As sub-discipline within comparative literature translation studies are an instructive case in point for another reason, too: There was a time when academic translation studies as a discipline seemed to be run by Flemish theorists; in addition to Theo Hermans and André Lefevere we only need to think of José Lambert in Leuven or Raymond Van den Broeck in Amsterdam who was one of the first professors of translation studies ever at his institution.

This generation of comparatists had received the early part of their training in the old philological tradition which was fast disappearing by the seventies, only to be replaced by the kind of ahistorical criticism that was associated in the United States and the United Kingdom with New Criticism, but that came to Belgium primarily in the guise of the *nouvelle critique*. A consequence of this shift was that, by the time I undertook my undergraduate studies in the mid-seventies, we were reading not just the early *nouvelle critique* by Roland Barthes, but also the writings of the mid-period Roland Barthes, alongside Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Next to translation and influence studies, theory seemed to afford my academic teachers a welcome alternative to the old dry-as-dust philology which most of them as students had learned to hate. Because they were always more oriented towards the Anglo-Saxon traditions than their counterparts in France and French-speaking Belgium, Dutch universities had made the turn towards new critical approaches earlier than

the Belgian institutions, whereas it took French theory and its American reincarnations much longer to have a real impact in Holland.

What would later become known as 'theory' *tout court* in the United States had become *doxa* by the time I returned to the Low Countries as a young PhD in the mid-eighties. In our part of Europe narratology, post-structuralism and post-modernism were introduced by scholars who like me had either studied in North-America or in the United Kingdom. My own generation of literature specialists, who received their doctorates in the eighties or early nineties, was not only almost completely 'theoretical', they were also very much centred on the British or North-American scene, publishing articles in British or American journals and books with British or, more often, American university presses. One of the unexpected positive side-effects of the theoretical turn has certainly been that the older reluctance to compete with native speakers on their own turf has now almost entirely disappeared. In fact, the publish-or-perish ideology of university administrations and, to be honest, pressure from colleagues who compete for ever diminishing resources nowadays, force scholars to publish only in the most prestigious peer-reviewed journals which are almost exclusively English-language. One of the recent bizarre and extremely problematic developments is that scholars are no longer free to choose their own fields: if you don't have tenure yet, or if you are speculating on regular promotions, you had better write and publish on the kind of subject matter and with the kind of methodology that will ensure regular publication in top journals in the United States or the United Kingdom. As a result, developments in the North-American academy are followed closely and every successive new wave of theory, be it gender studies, post-colonialism, new historicism or cultural studies, quickly finds a following among Dutch and Belgian graduate students and young university lecturers.

The evolution from philology to criticism to theory is also visible on the institutional and organisational level of our disciplines. In the seventies the new universities established chairs in what was called 'general literature' and many of these Flemish and Dutch comparatists were quick to embrace the new French and American theories. Philology survived in Belgium only in the name of the diplomas we gave out, but even that has since been abolished (my passport still claims that I am officially a 'philologist'). In April 1981 I gave a paper at the last of the 'Vlaams Filologencongres', a rather large-scale Flemish MLA-style conference, but if philology was still present, it

had already become a zombie. In the nineties I was involved in an aborted attempt to revive this conference and resuscitate a broader vision of philology in the form of a more liberally defined 'cultural studies' platform, but we failed miserably and I can't see anyone wanting to repeat this experiment for some years to come. In effect, linguists and literature specialists have long parted ways, and especially the latter have – for better or worse – developed a number of smaller academic organisations. Ironically, the very success of literary theory was one of the reasons why, in the late seventies in Belgium, we had not one but two organisations for comparative literature, the younger one not accidentally called an association 'of comparative *and general* literature', expressing its more theoretical bent. But since one of these organisations is Belgian and the other Flemish, it has been somewhat of a headache for the International Association of Comparative Literature.

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In Belgium and Holland, the future does not look good for comparative literature. The organisations of scholars survive, but they are no longer particularly active. Institutionally, larger research projects in the field of comparative literature are rare today and few young scholars write comparative dissertations – and even fewer go on to find work in Belgian and Dutch universities. If linguistic competence in several languages in secondary schools continues to decrease, and if in the new European Bachelor-Master structures we cannot preserve the standards that we used to have, it is hard to imagine how, in the future, we will be able to maintain a sufficient base – in terms of student numbers, language proficiency, and academic provision – to continue the traditions of comparative literature in the Low Countries as we know them. In this context, it can only be seen as ironic that the 'theory of literature' branch of literary studies – what once caused such a stir and excitement and new impulses within the field of comparative literature – today seems to be refining itself into total irrelevance – and I fear it is dragging the disciplines it is most closely associated with along with it. Is theory possibly degenerating into a mere footnote in today's senior academics' CVs.

But maybe I am exaggerating. And maybe the outlook is not all bleak, both for literary theory and for comparative literature: after all, Belgian and Dutch scholars are involved in a number of major

international comparative literature projects; in the recent Continuum project on the reception of British and Irish authors in Europe, two of the ten volumes published to date were edited by Dutch and Belgian scholars, and one of the editors of the forthcoming Modernism volume in the ICLA History of European Literature series is Belgian. John Neubauer of the University of Amsterdam has been singularly active in the ICLA. Belgian and Dutch comparatists continue to be engaged both in the more traditional fields of comparative literature as well as in the new theoretical approaches.

What I personally find the most promising development in literary studies both in the Low Countries and in the rest of the Western world is the 'return to the archives' that was announced by New Historicism.[2] In recent years young graduate scholars seem to be rediscovering the joy of truly historical archival work, returning to methods and approaches that went out of fashion some thirty years ago. They are once more doing the kind of documentary work on the sources of and influences on literary works, providing a contextual background for the annotation, editing and interpretation of literature that for two generations of academic scholars had been relegated to irrelevance and was frowned upon if ever a PhD student dared venture in that direction. In a similar vein, others are harking back to what was once called literary sociology, studying the ways and conditions in which literary works were produced and marketed and how they were read and received by the audiences for whom they were written in the first place. Today's young critics are daring to turn away from literary theory's interpretation-in-a-void – which once seemed so invigorating but now increasingly appears detached and sterile – to the kind of historical/contextual research that used to be called scholarship before first New Criticism and then literary theory took over. It will be interesting to see how this New Philology develops. In the meantime we can only hope that the younger generation of scholars, whatever their stance and whatever their approach, will still have students to teach.

NOTES

1 John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 44.

2 Although even this has in many cases turned out to be not much more than a return either to a very limited set of history or 'theory of history' books, or to a very particular and limited kind of archive.