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# Comparative Literature at a Crossroads? An Introduction

ROBERT WENINGER

As a discipline, Comparative Literature has always been peculiar. In many respects less a discipline than an inter-discipline or a trans-discipline, if not a meta-discipline – or is it all three packaged into one? – it seems to have neither a clearly delineated subject, nor a distinct methodology (although there is some debate about this), nor even a definable textual corpus. But how could it? Like the physical universe that surrounds us, Comparative Literature's textual universe is expanding at an ever increasing rate, and novel comparative/inter-disciplinary constellations are emerging every other day. Am I alone among my colleagues in feeling ever more uncertain about what still belongs to a comparatist's givens, either in terms of methodological premises or sets and classes of texts to be compared?

When I was a PhD student in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was occasionally asked by friends or relatives to explain what the field of study called Comparative Literature was all about. At the time I typically resorted to lengthy circumlocutions, describing the discipline's traditional parameters, such as the comparative study of genres, periods, forms and motifs; interart comparison; translation studies; and the problematics of literary mediation and influence, to which was added, more recently, intertextuality. That is, I more or less catalogued the chapter headings typically contained in the many introductions circulating in English, French and German in those days, notably Claude Pichois and André Rousseau's *La littérature comparée* (1967), Ulrich Weisstein's *Einführung in die vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (1968, English translation 1973), Siegbert S. Prawer's *Comparative Literature Studies: An Introduction* (1973), Hugo Dyserinck's *Komparatistik. Eine Einführung* (1977), Robert J. Clements's *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline. A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards* (1978), Gerhard R. Kaiser's *Einführung in die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (1980) or the volume *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft. Theorie und*

*Praxis* edited by Manfred Schmeling (1981). Today I prefer to spare my breath, stating laconically, and citing Peter Brooks in the process, that Comparative Literature is the quintessential 'undisciplined discipline'.<sup>1</sup> On occasion, I might even add, somewhat cheekily (and citing no one, I believe), 'there is no such thing as comparative literature'. But this is by no means meant as sophistry or prevarication. After all, if with German literature (which I also teach) I can at least provide a reasonable response like 'it is the study of literature – however broadly defined – written *in German*', with Comparative Literature the matter is less straightforward; after all, nothing is written or published *in comparative*. That is to say, 'comparative literature' does not exist in the same way that German literature – or Japanese literature or Brazilian literature or Spanish literature or even, moving to a higher level, African or South American literature – does, and so forth, however difficult we might find it to define or delimit these narrower or broader cultural and linguistic spheres. Even if perpetual sceptics like myself (who habitually make things more complicated for themselves than they need be) consider a relatively simple term like 'German literature' to be overly fuzzy and hence contestable for any number of reasons, in comparison with Comparative Literature 'German literature' appears resoundingly clear-cut. Amazingly, as I noticed only very recently, people aren't even agreed on the spelling of our discipline's name, the older version typically being Comparative Literature, whereas today's favoured spelling is a much less dignified, uncapitalized comparative literature; it would seem, as I have noted elsewhere, that today's comparative literature prefers to parade itself as a sort of 'lower case counter-science gaily juxtaposing itself to the grand (or, as Nietzsche would say, monumentalist) gesture of the capital C and L of the old-style Euro-American eurocentric Comparative Literature'.<sup>2</sup> This was certainly true of Charles Bernheimer's 1993 ACLA Report, which cast itself in this role when it privileged the lower case version throughout (even in the contributions of those who critiqued its proposals), but assiduously reproduced the upper case spelling in the Levin and Greene Reports preceding it in the same volume. If the Bernheimer Report was seemingly bent on discarding any vestiges of the old white male eurocentric *grand narrative* with its canon-invoking capital letters, it may be surprising to find Gayatri Spivak of all people most recently returning to the traditional upper case spelling – or maybe not so surprising, since one of her new book's main goals is the jettisoning of

the Greenheimer Report's controversial *rapprochement* of Comparative Literature with Cultural Studies. Meanwhile Haun Saussy in the draft of his 2004 ACLA Report oscillates between the two spellings, which in itself may be symptomatic of the state of the discipline at the beginning of the new millenium.<sup>3</sup>

Either way, uncertainty remains, and not just about the spelling of the discipline's name. Nor does the title of Gayatri Spivak's new book *Death of a Discipline* seem predestined to instill in its practitioners' minds much confidence about the discipline's future prospects. Indeed, programmes in Comparative Literature remain under attack (even as I write the University of Innsbruck is planning to close its small but energetic department of *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*) and alliances are shifting. The demise of theory, too (which is of course less a death, as some have giped, than a shift into a period of 'normal science', as Thomas S. Kuhn would put it), has brought about yet another phase of methodological (self-)reflection and reorientation.

And yet, ironically and all appearances to the contrary, Saussy claims that the discipline is out of the woods: 'Comparative Literature has, in a sense, won its battles', he opens his as yet unpublished report, only to continue:

It has never been better received in the American university. The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion. Authors and critics who wrote in 'foreign languages' are now taught (it may be said with mock astonishment) in departments of English! The 'transnational' dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized, even by the specialists who not long ago suspected comparatists of dilettantism. 'Interdisciplinarity' is a wonder-working keyword in grant applications and college promotional leaflets. 'Theory' is no longer a badge of special identity or mark of infamy; everyone, more or less, is doing it, more or less. Comparative teaching and reading take institutional form in an ever-lengthening list of places, through departments and programs that may or may not wear the label of Comparative Literature (they may be configured as humanities programs, interdisciplinary programs, interdepartmental committees or collaborative research groups). The controversy is over. Comparative Literature is not only legitimate: now, as often as not, ours is the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra. Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

But on a more cautionary note Saussy also and correctly sums up the dilemma that we face:

The successful propagation of traits from the Comparative Literature family has not been accompanied by mechanisms of identification and control (of 'branding,' to use a term shared by cowboys and marketing specialists). We are universal and anonymous

donors – in ethical terms, a glorious role to play, but a perilous one in the scramble for resources, honor, and institutional legitimacy that we experience every day in the shrinking domain of the university humanities faculty. (2)

It is hence a Pyrrhic victory of sorts: we may have won the battle but in the process we have lost (many of) our troops. Not to mention the fact that, as Saussy goes on to point out, 'Comparative Literature programs in most universities are thinly-funded patchworks of committee representation, cross-listed courses, fractional job lines and volunteer service' (ibid.), whereby staff (or in American parlance faculty) teaching on the programmes more often than not hold their appointments in other departments. If this is indeed the case (and my experiences at Frankfurt University in Germany in the 1970s, Washington University in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s and here at King's College in London at the beginning of the new century corroborate Saussy's analysis), it actually seems quite amazing that an academic enterprise that is institutionally so volatile and fragmented, so fraught with in-fighting, not to mention frequently threatened with closure or merger by our institutional superiors, could have ever achieved so much. But of course, as we all know, the price of success has been the field's permanent crisis of legitimacy.

To gauge the situation marking my inauguration as the new editor of *Comparative Critical Studies*, the peer-reviewed house journal of the British Comparative Literature Association (BCLA), I invited a number of colleagues from Europe and elsewhere around the world to share their views of Comparative Literature's current situation – institutional, methodological, regional, or other – as well as their perceptions of the challenge(s) facing Comparative Literature today. I encouraged the contributors to respond, where possible and if applicable, to the available ACLA draft documents, Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and the notion, now current, of the end of theory (or, put more cautiously by Terry Eagleton in his recent *After Theory*, the 'aftermath of what one might call high theory'<sup>5</sup>). Astonishingly, the resulting essays relate Comparative Literature today to a range of human activity that reaches, at its extremes, from terrorism to the act of love (although, on second thought, that may not be so surprising after all); from reading these contributions it becomes apparent that Comparative Literature as a discipline is at yet another crossroads – except that the crossroads would not seem to be the same in every part of the world.

The history of Comparative Literature and the history of literary

theory have always been intimately intertwined, even before the days of what Eagleton calls high theory. If theory *is* dead – and of course it is not, it has only changed shape and momentum<sup>6</sup> – its legacy is certainly still with us: has not theory more than anything else spurred us on to radically rethink the parameters of our discipline and our subject matter? And has not theory become a subject matter in itself, even to the point where, for some practitioners of criticism, it has completely displaced literature as the focus of our scholarly endeavours? But theory has changed in another regard as well: using a particular theory is no longer automatically an expression of a critic's ideological creed or *Weltanschauung*; to do feminist or gender-based research one no longer needs to be a feminist, to produce a Marxist critique one no longer needs to be a Marxist, to do a psychoanalytical reading one no longer needs to be psychoanalytically trained – although it does not hurt. The literary canon, too, which by all accounts has become popular again following the counter-cultural revolution of the seventies and eighties and the media and communications revolution of the eighties and nineties, has changed appearances: while mainly European/Anglo-American/Western in nature in former days (if in part because this was where Comparative Literature as an academic discipline was mostly at home), the advent of a globalised commodity culture has allowed authors from non-white and non-Western backgrounds to move from the periphery to the centre and to fundamentally transform our notion of high cultural status: Léopold Senghor, Aijaz Ahmad, Ahdaf Soueif, Assia Djebar, Salman Rushdie, Kobo Abe or Toni Morrison – and on the theoretical front Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Trinh Minh-ha, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, or Gayatri Spivak – have all substantially changed the ways in which we conceive and talk about Comparative Literature and world literature today.

Of course, none of these authors – or the myriad others their names stand for – has been translated into all of the world's languages. Spivak rightly deplores the fact that the anthologization of World Literature (with a capital W and L) in English translation is an industry nearly exclusively driven by Western publishing conglomerates, which means that 'students in Taiwan or Nigeria will learn about the literatures of the world through English translations organized by the United States'.<sup>7</sup> But if there is always the issue of what gets lost in English translation – both in terms of what is selected for translation and how it is translated – there is also an up-side to the sad processes of

homogenization: inasmuch as we are reading the same texts, many of us will be able to better communicate about world literature across linguistic and cultural borders. In other words, we may have as much to gain as to lose from this situation.

The other side of this coin is that Comparative Literature as a discipline is becoming more deeply rooted in non-Western countries (although even this phrasing is deceptive, since Comparative Literature has had a long and varied tradition in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China, to mention only some of the more prominent counter-examples). But while the former literary dominance of 'the West', whatever that signifies (are the former Eastern bloc countries, for example, now either already bound into or in the process of entering the European Union, suddenly to be seen as part of that 'West?'), is either already broken or on the verge of breaking, this opening up and globalisation of world literature and literary scholarship does have one down-side, namely, as the Chinese scholars Dan Shen and Xiaoyi Zhou note in their contribution for this volume, the replacement of one form of hegemony by another: that of Western literature by Western theory (not to mention Western market capitalism). Where literary exchange seems to be becoming a two-way street, theory largely remains hegemonically one-way, leading mono-directionally from the Western metropolitan hubs to the universities and academies of non-Western countries. (This formulation allows me of course to subsume Edward Said [Columbia University, New York], Homi Bhabha [Harvard University], Gayatri Spivak [again Columbia University] or Djelal Kadir [Pennsylvania State University] under Western theory, which by and large is where they belong.) As Shen and Zhou document – and Ferial Ghazoul's comments suggest a similar tendency within the Arab world – getting on the bandwagon of 'grand theory' (which ultimately stands for getting on the bandwagon of 'grand Western theory') can cause a veritable crisis of identity: it frequently induces scholars either to forsake their native traditions of literary exegesis and textual interpretation for Western models, or conversely to doggedly if not paranoically cocoon themselves in their native traditions. By comparison, the literary canon now houses an ever-growing number of non-Western writers, but how many of us in 'the West' – beyond colleagues in departments of Asian and Near Eastern languages, that is – have taken the time to read up on the poetological and theoretical traditions of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, or the Far East?

Closer to home, many of the European contributors to this volume are younger comparatists who feel the need to programmatically distance themselves from the colonialist legacy with which they find themselves unfairly associated when we speak, for example, of the 'restrictive Eurocentrism'<sup>8</sup> of yore; and not just that, they also express some resistance to the tendency to see the new Comparative Literature purely as a discipline that requires us to compare works of literature from many parts of the globe, in other words as a discipline that sacrifices the regional for the global. Globalising Comparative Literature as a discipline does not and should not mean giving up on regional perspectives, they argue. Or, to put it differently, younger European comparatists object to being branded as Eurocentrists simply because they deal with the comparison of exclusively intra-European works. As Oliver Lubrich points out, for example, there is a plethora of literature in the German language that calls for comparative analysis, works written by migrants (Western and non-Western) in German, German authors' travel accounts past and present to what used to be called the Third World,<sup>9</sup> works written by German-language authors born in or residents of other European countries (such as Franz Kafka, Elias Canetti, Paul Celan, Erich Fried, Paul Nizon, Herta Müller), and so forth. The fact alone that European nations were responsible for colonial aggression and subjugation in the past should not prevent scholars today from conducting comparative projects centring on the European languages, literatures and cultures, a point also made by Elinor Shaffer when she describes the *Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* project as a possible prototype for future research in world literature. While Eurocentrism as a term may continue to resonate with its colonial legacy for some time to come, we should remind ourselves not to see and use it as an exclusively pejorative term, inhibiting, if not prohibiting, legitimate contemporary Eurocentric literary criticism. And we should also remind ourselves that one of the earliest postcolonial nations was itself a European country, namely Ireland, freeing itself from the yoke of British colonialism in 1921 and gaining full independence in 1937 – not to mention those other post-1990 postcolonial European nations of the former Soviet Bloc that reached from the Black Sea to the Baltic.

In 1995 Charles Bernheimer rightly called Comparative Literature 'anxiogenic', in need of a cure.<sup>10</sup> But if the 1993 ACLA Report was ever intended as that cure, I am happy to note that it clearly was not the right one. In fact, I hope no one ever finds a cure for our ailment



(whatever that is perceived to be at any given juncture). After all, what keeps this discipline so alive and vibrant is its continual search for new remedies for our exegetical headaches and new antidotes for our many disciplinary disorders. So while Comparative Literature continues to be ailing, it is hardly breathing its 'last gasp',<sup>11</sup> as Gayatri Spivak has recently proposed. To be sure, Spivak was not referring to Comparative Literature overall, but rather to what she calls the old Comparative Literature as opposed to the 'new Comparative Literature' outlined in her most recent book. Nevertheless, I find even that diagnosis questionable. Looking at both Haun Saussy's 2004 ACLA Report and the essays assembled here, it might be fairer to say that Comparative Literature is neither in decline nor on the rise but simply changing and adapting to new circumstances and contexts, institutional, communicational, theoretical, methodological, disciplinary, literary. It may be ironical, but it is nonetheless true that our very proclivity to see ourselves as sick and ailing has inspired us more than colleagues in neighbouring disciplines to question our methods and presuppositions, and to continually redefine our subject's perimeters and parameters. Comparative Literature, in whatever constellation – with or without Cultural Studies, with or without Area Studies, within or without Translation Studies – provides a link between the disciplines, whether these be located in the humanities, the arts or the sciences. It is a space where these disciplines can creatively mingle and intersect, symbiotize, synergize, exchange, negotiate and bargain without immediately posing the risk of exclusion and banishment for the transgressional transdisciplinary practitioner. For this reason alone Comparative Literature is an academic discipline that no university, as the site of creative intellectual transfer and ideational traffic, should do without – never mind if, sadly, many a university administrator is not enlightened enough to recognise this. And this, coupled with Comparative Literature's propensity for critical self-scrutiny, goes far toward explaining why our discipline has remained at the forefront of theory for the past fifty years, and also why it has so often been located at the cutting edge of (humanities) scholarship.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, edited by Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 98.

- 2 See my review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?*, 'Worlds Apart? World Literature in the Age of Globalization/Planetarization', *Comparative Critical Studies* 2.1 (2004), 131–142, this quote p. 132.
- 3 I wonder whether this will be 'rectified' in the published version due out in early 2006, parallel with this issue of *Comparative Critical Studies*, or whether Saussy's vacillation is part of some programmatic design, to be reflected in the final print version. Indeed, I have not interfered with the decisions made by the authors in this volume, opting not to harmonize their varying spellings.
- 4 ACLA Report 2004, web-version as presented on the ACLA website in early 2005, p. 1 of the Adobe pdf-file typescript.
- 5 *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 2.
- 6 See most recently *Theory's Empire. An Anthology of Dissent*, edited by Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- 7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. xii.
- 8 *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, p. 41.
- 9 In discussing the case of Alexander von Humboldt, Lubrich mentions the Berlin writer Hans Christoph Buch, who is a prime example of a contemporary German author who has travelled the globe widely and written extensively on wars and violence in Third World nations. His Frankfurt lectures, subtitled 'Foundations to a Poetics of the Colonial Gaze', were published in 1991 (*Die Nähe und die Ferne. Bausteine zu einer Poetik des kolonialen Blicks. Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp), his journalism on what he calls the global civil war was collected in the volume *Blut im Schuh. Schlächter und Voyeure an den Fronten des Weltbürgerkriegs*, published in 2001 (Frankfurt: Eichborn Verlag), and his volume *Tropische Früchte* (tropical fruits) collects essays based on his travels to Africa and North and South America (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993).
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 11 *Death of a Discipline*, p. xii.
- 12 I would like to thank Michael C. Finke for his careful reading and annotation of the draft version of this introduction.