



PROJECT MUSE®

Whither Comparative Literature

Jonathan D. Culler

Comparative Critical Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 85-97
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ccs.2006.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199715>

Whither Comparative Literature?

JONATHAN CULLER

Once upon a time, the story goes, comparative literature focused on the study of sources and influence, bringing together works where there seemed a direct link of transmission that subtended and served to justify comparison. But then comparative literature liberated itself from the study of sources and influence and acceded to a broader regime of intertextual studies – broader but less well-defined. Comparative literature has been differentiated from other modes of literary study because it did not take it for granted, as did the departments of English, French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, that a national literature in its historical evolution was the natural and appropriate unit of literary study. Since comparative literature could not avoid, as the national literature departments could, the question of what sorts of units were most pertinent – genres? periods? themes? – comparative literature frequently became the site of literary theory, while national literature departments often resisted, or at least remained indifferent to the sorts of theory that did not emanate from their own cultural spheres. Comparative literature was thus distinguished by its interest in addressing theoretical issues, as well as knowledgeably importing and exploring ‘foreign’ theoretical discourses. It was the place where those questions about the nature and methods of literary study begged in other literature departments were taken up, argued about, even made the focus of teaching and research.

If neither of these features suffices any longer to distinguish comparative literature, it is because the views that once distinguished comparativists have become widespread. Even the study of American literature, once committed to exceptionalism and totalization (Americanists had to have a theory about the nature and distinctiveness of American literature), is now in the process of reconfiguring itself as ‘comparative American literatures,’ in the plural. In this sense, comparative literature has triumphed. But of course, institutionally, comparatists do not feel at all triumphant. How far their lack of joy

results from the general condition of the humanities in the techno university or the university of excellence is scarcely clear.¹ But certainly departments or programmes of comparative literature have not reaped the benefits of their methodological success. On the one hand, the spread of what once distinguished the field leads to a lack of distinctiveness and thus a crisis of identity. On the other hand, programmes in comparative literature are still small or struggling, and we have to tell the very smart and interesting graduate students we admit, 'Welcome to comparative literature, where we do not believe that the national literature is the logical basis of literary study, but be warned that while doing Comp. Lit. you also need to act as if you were in a national literature department so as to make yourself competitive for a job in one.' Though comparative literature has triumphed, and many other scholars are comparatists now, the jobs – such as they are – are still in the national language and literature departments.

If one took an intellectual rather than an institutional view, one should be pleased at this result. And it is worth noting that the triumph of comparative literature is similar to other triumphs that do not give cause for celebration. Theory has triumphed, in that it is everywhere these days – one needs only to sit on a hiring committee to see how far candidates have been influenced by theory, in the questions they are posing, in the references that are expected of them, even as people write books and articles declaring the passing of theory. Feminism, too, alleged to be dead, can be said to have triumphed in the academy, in that much of what feminist critics and theorists struggled for now goes without saying. Women students take for granted the equality sought by feminism. They may reject the label 'feminist' but have internalized the goals of feminism. This is an outcome, like the triumph of theory and the triumph of comparative literature, that one cannot *not* wish to have happened, though one still would rather that such triumphs gave more cause for joy and were not so easy to identify with the death of what has triumphed.

The by-laws of the American Comparative Literature Association mandate that a report on standards – which has been interpreted as a report on the state of the discipline – be prepared every ten years. The 1993 report, 'Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century,' was a collective document (though largely written by Charles Bernheimer) and published with 16 responses or position statements as *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*.²

The 2004 report, edited by Haun Saussy, avoids the appearance of

consensus: the central portion, signed by Saussy alone, is accompanied by nine other essays on aspects or problems of the field and a number of responses.³ There is little joy in this ACLA report, though it is too disparate and dispersed for one to speak of any consistent tone or take. But for thinking about the state of the discipline or field of comparative literature, it is instructive to identify some contrasts with the ACLA report of 1993. That report, 'Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century,' recommends two courses of action, each of which has a good deal to be said for it. On the one hand, it urges comparative literature to abandon its traditional Eurocentrism and turn global – an injunction entirely justified, both as a reflection of contemporary cultural realities and as a response to the growing understanding of how Western cultures have been determined by their relations to non-Western others. On the other hand, the 1993 report recommends that comparative literature turn from a concentration on literature to the study of cultural productions or discourses of all sorts. This too is a course for which a good case can be made. Scholars of literature have discovered that their analytical skills can shed light upon the structures and the functioning of the wide range of discursive practices that form individuals and cultures; and comparatists' contribution to the study of philosophical, psychoanalytical, political, medical, and other discourses, not to mention film, conduct books, and popular culture, has been so valuable that no one could wish to restrict literature faculties to the study of literature alone. Treating literature as one discourse among others, as the report recommends, seems an effective strategy.

Each of these turns, then, can be amply justified, but the result of both moves together, going global and going cultural, is a discipline of such overwhelming scope that it no longer sounds like an academic field at all: the study of discourses and cultural productions of all sorts throughout the entire world. If one were creating a university from scratch, one could doubtless construct a large department of comparative literature charged with global cultural studies, but then the question of differential identity raises its head: would there be any other departments in the humanities to contrast with comparative literature? Would there be a need for music, art, literature, and philosophy departments, or departments to study different areas of the world, or would comparative literature in this new dispensation cover everything in the humanities and much of the social sciences?

As soon as one tries to think about the place of the new, global and

cultural comparative literature in the university, one wonders whether the 1993 report is less a proposal for the reform of a particular department or discipline than a recommendation for how literary and cultural studies in general should proceed. But in fact, isn't this how things ought to be? Shouldn't a report on comparative literature project a future for the humanities? Comparative literature has functioned as a vanguard discipline in the humanities, open not only to various national traditions and their theoretical texts – Marx, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, Saussure, Freud, Durkheim, Wittgenstein – but also to experimentation with modes of critical engagement and critical writing, since there was no presumption that understanding a national literary tradition in its historical evolution was the overriding goal. Comparative literature has been where critical and theoretical, interdisciplinary projects could be freely tried, with results that are exemplary for other scholars and other fields and thus affect the direction of literary and cultural studies at large. But this success of comparative literature brings a loss of identity.

The most controversial topic in the Bernheimer report and the associated position papers was the role of literature in a comparative literature that was simultaneously going global and going cultural. In that report and the responses to it, those of us who defended literature, or opined that the study of literature ought to retain a central place in comparative literature, were treated as retrograde by Charlie Bernheimer. Defenders of literature were regarded as old fogies who were inexplicably resisting getting with the programme. Close reading of literary texts in the original languages manifestly seemed dispensable to Bernheimer – not a necessary part of the new dispensation.

In my own response to the Bernheimer report, I argued that as national literature departments have increasingly given a role to theory or, perhaps more accurately, allowed literary and cultural studies to reorganize themselves around questions that have emerged from theoretical debates rather than the conventional literary-historical periods, and as these departments have increasingly brought a wider range of cultural productions into their purview –not just film and popular culture but discourses of sexuality, the construction of the body, and the formation of national and cultural identities, for instance – they have become in effect departments of national cultural studies: English and American Studies, French Studies, German Studies, Hispanic Studies. The turn to culture makes sense for national literature departments: the division of literature by national or

linguistic boundaries was always rather dubious, but such divisions are a very reasonable way of organizing the study of culture. Perhaps, as German literature departments turn to German cultural studies, French literature departments to French studies, the national names will finally represent fields that are more intellectually coherent. And as the national literature departments turn to culture they will leave comparative literature with a distinctive role. If, having in large measure made possible the expansion of literary studies into cultural studies, comparative literature does not insist on claiming that field for its own, it might find itself with a new identity, as the site of literary study in its broadest dimensions – the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon. The devolution of other fields would have left it with a distinctive and valuable identity at last.⁴ Comparative literature, as the site of the study of literature in general, would provide a home for poetics.

This does not mean that members of comparative literature departments should be discouraged from studying literature in relation to other cultural practices or even pursuing projects to which literature is only marginally related – far from it. As always, comparatists will participate in the most interesting methodological and theoretical developments in the humanities, wherever these take them. Since literature is not a natural kind but a historical construct, the study of literature in relation to other discourses is not only inevitable but necessary, but, as opposed to the other departments of the humanities, comparative literature would have as its central responsibility the study of literature, which could be approached in the most diverse ways.

My argument that comparative literature should accept the differential possibility that the evolution of literary and cultural studies has created, as the site for the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon, did not gain many adherents, and the question of what comparative literature should be has remained as much in dispute as ever, except insofar as we agree that it is the nature of comparative literature to be the site at which the most diverse options of the humanities contend – not just a discipline in crisis but by its very nature a site of crisis. It is striking, though, that since 1994 the sense of literature as under siege has somewhat abated. While the question of the role of literature in comparative literature was central to the 1993 report, in the 2004 report the place of literature no longer seems such a contentious issue. This might of course be because the proponents of cultural studies have won and so no longer need raise the issue, but

then you would expect the partisans of literary study to be complaining that literature has been forced out of comparative literature, and that seems not to have happened. Haun Saussy, speaking of comparative literature as ‘comparisons with literature,’ presumes the centrality of literature, in the sense that comparative literature involves reading texts of diverse sorts but ‘reading literarily.’

One could say that while the legitimacy of comparative literature projects that do not involve literature has become established, the centrality of literature is not in question as it formerly was – if only by a swing back of the pendulum. This conclusion drawn from the 2004 report seems to me confirmed by observation: for instance, there is in the humanities manifestly an increasing interest in aesthetics, which for a while was a dirty word. In running a very broad job search in comparative literature, which attracted applications from many candidates working in postcolonial studies, I have been struck by the extent to which even dissertations that focus on social and political issues and would not need to address literature at all seem to include several chapters on Anglophone novelists – demonstrating that there has come into being a new hypercanon of Anglophone writers: Rushdie, Achebe, Walcott, Coetzee, etc.⁵ The role of literature in comparative literature seems very robust these days, even if literary works are frequently read symptomatically.

In fact, if there is an issue that emerges from the disparate essays that make up the 2004 report, it is not whether literary or cultural studies should predominate but how comparative literature should deal with ‘world literature.’ I emphasize that term, for the question is not whether we should study all the literatures of the world, but about the stakes in the construction by comparative literature departments in the United States of ‘world literature,’ as displayed most concretely in world literature courses. (I suspect that this issue is addressed in quite different ways in other countries.)

The question of world literature exacerbates the problem of comparability. What, in this newly globalized space, justifies bringing texts together? World literature courses that bring together the great books from around the world seem to base comparability on a notion of excellence that resonates, for me at least, with Bill Readings’s brilliant analysis of the ‘University of Excellence’ in *The University in Ruins*. Kant gave us the model of the modern university organized by a single regulatory ideal, the principle of Reason. Humboldt and the German Idealists replaced the notion of Reason with that of Culture, centering

the university on the dual task of research and teaching, the production and inculcation of national self-knowledge. But now the model of the University of Culture, the university whose task was to produce cultured individuals, citizens imbued with a national culture, has in the West given way. Today, Readings writes,

No one of us can seriously imagine himself or herself as the hero of the story of the University, as the instantiation of the cultured individual that the entire great machine labors day and night to produce.... The grand narrative of the university centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning subject, is no longer readily available to us.⁶

Similarly, while once we might have imagined the study of comparative literature as leading to the production of the immensely cultured individual – a Curtius or an Auerbach – who had mastered the literatures of Europe, now the subject is so large and so diversely specialized that no such exemplar can exist. The best we can imagine are accomplished comparatists with very different interests and ranges of knowledge, who would all be excellent in their own ways. Thus, the University of Culture gives way to the ‘University of Excellence.’

I am interested in the relation between the comparability of comparative literature and the ‘excellence’ that serves as a standard of comparison in the University of Excellence. The crucial thing about excellence, Readings points out, is that it has no content (there need be no agreement about what is excellent).⁷ In that sense, it is like the cash nexus. It has no content and thus serves to introduce comparability and bureaucratic control. As Readings explains, ‘its very lack of reference allows excellence to function as a principle of translatability between radically different idioms.’⁸ The idea of excellence enables us to make comparable various entities that have little in common as to structure or function, input or output. But that is only half of its bureaucratic usefulness. It also makes it possible to avoid substantive arguments about what teachers, students, and administrators should actually be doing. Everyone’s task is to strive for excellence, however that might be defined. What is the relationship between the comparability of comparative literature and the comparability instituted by excellence, which, to sum up, has the following characteristics: (1) it purports to have content but actually does not; (2) it grants groups considerable freedom (it does not matter what you do so long as you do it excellently), which is crucial to bureaucratic efficiency, but (3) ultimately it is a mechanism for the reduction or exclusion of activities

that do not succeed by this measure. How does the comparability of comparative literature compare with this?

The intertextual nature of meaning – the fact that meaning lies in the differences between one text or one discourse and another – makes literary study essentially, fundamentally comparative, but it also produces a situation in which comparability depends upon a cultural system, a general field that underwrites comparison. The meaning of a text depends on its relations to others within a cultural space, such as that of Western European culture, which is in part why comparative literature has been so much inclined to remain Western and European in its focus. 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. What has made possible much recent work in comparative literature has been the identification, largely by postcolonial theory, of a general postcolonial context within which comparabilities can be generated.

What sort of comparability, then, could guide the transformation of comparative literature from a Eurocentric discipline to a more global one? There is a difficult problem here. On the one hand, as Natalie Melas argues, comparison such as justifies a discipline consolidates a standard or norm which then functions to give value to works that match up to it and to exclude those that do not, so that comparison – the principle of comparability – rather than opening new possibilities for cultural value, more often than not restricts and totalizes it.⁹ But, on the other hand, as we try to avoid this imposition of particular norms, we may risk falling into the alternative practice, which Readings's account of excellence describes, where the standard is kept non-referential – vacuous – so that it is not imposing particular requirements, but where in the end, it provides a bureaucratic rather than an intellectual mechanism for regulation and control, and indeed the danger of world literature is that it will select what is *regarded as* excellent, without regard for the particular standards and ideological factors that might have come into play in the processes of selection. In his superb book, *In the Context of No Context*, which deserves to be better known as a guide to our condition, George W. S. Trow identifies as a crucial though unrecognized watershed in the history of American modernity, 'the moment when a man named Richard Dawson, the host of a programme called Family Feud, asked

contestants to guess what a poll of a hundred people had guessed would be the height of the average American woman. Guess what they've guessed. Guess what they've guessed the average is'.¹⁰ Will 'world literature' be what teachers guess others will have regarded as canonical?

The problem of comparison is that it is likely to generate a standard, or ideal type, of which the texts compared come to function as variants. Comparatists today are eager to avoid this implicit result of measuring one culture's texts by some standard extrinsic to that culture. Yet the more we try to deploy a comparability that has no implicit content, the more we risk falling into a situation like that of the University of Excellence, where an apparent lack of concern for content – your department can do what it likes provided it does it excellently – is in the end only the alibi for a control based on bureaucratic rather than academic and intellectual principles.

The virtue of a comparability based on specific intellectual norms or models – generic, thematic, historical – is that they are subject to investigation and argument in ways that the vacuous bureaucratic norms are not. One solution, then, is to attempt to spell out the assumptions and norms that seem to underwrite one's comparisons, so that they do not become implicit terms. A model here might be Erich Auerbach's conception of the *Ansatzpunkt*: a specific point of departure, conceived not as an external position of mastery but as a 'handle' or partial vantage point that enables the critic to bring together a variety of cultural objects. 'The characteristic of a good point of departure,' writes Auerbach, 'is its concreteness and its precision on the one hand, and on the other, its potential for centrifugal radiation'.¹¹ This might be a theme, a metaphor, a detail, a structural problem, or a well-defined cultural function. One could imagine basing cross-cultural comparison on linking principles whose very arbitrariness or contingency will prevent them from giving rise to a standard or ideal type, such as comparing works by authors whose last name begins with *B*, or works whose numerical place in a bibliography is divisible by thirteen. I confess, though, that this is scarcely the sort of thing Auerbach had in mind and not a general or principled solution to the problem of comparability. A further possibility is to attempt to locate the comparative perspective geographically and historically: instead of imagining the comparative perspective as a global overview, one might stress the value, for instance, of comparing European literatures *from* Africa, for their relations to the cultural

productions of a particular African moment. Better such points of departure that impose criteria and norms than the fear that comparisons will be odious. The danger, it seems to me, is that comparatists' fear that their comparisons will impose implicit norms and standards may give rise to a vacuousness that is as difficult to combat as is the notion of excellence that administrators are using to organize and reorganize the American university.

The 2004 Report of the American Comparative Literature Association makes World Literature a central problem of comparative literature. The virtues and the difficulties of teaching what Djelal Kadir calls the 'abstracted construct of world literature' are vigorously debated by a series of contributors and respondents.¹² The charge, of course, is that world literature is constructed from the perspective of a hegemonic power, which admits representatives on the terms that it establishes in order to compose and compare, and that this represents a McDonaldization, in which globalizing America colonizes various cultures, representing them by a bit of local flavour. Kadir cites the 'risk of instrumentalizing the literature of the world as objects of neocolonial usurpation and imperial subsumption.' Katie Trumpener, though, describing a Yale world literature course to which a lot of thought and a lot of faculty expertise has obviously been devoted, argues that one can avoid 'a thematically-driven, aesthetically and culturally-flattened view of global texts' by focusing in a well-constructed course on, for instance, 'questions of foundational violence and the ethics of conflict, of the logic of feud, massacre, terror, and genocide, as well as the quasi-theological role of literature in mediating ideological shifts and moments of historical crisis, enacting conversion and convergence.' Concentrating on a number of major narratives, one can also focus on questions of genre, temporality, and narrative technique, consciousness, and perspective, and thus prevent such a course from becoming an imperialistic sampling of national thematic flavors.

One can add that world literature is not just a construct of comparative literature departments, important though our role may be in articulating for a public of students and former students a world literature. Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres*, recently translated as *The World Republic of Letters*, describes a world literary system as a set of discursive practices, a system of power/knowledge, in which literary works from around the world come to engage – with reviews, translation, prizes, cinematic adaptation – a system in which

innovation has frequently come from the periphery and recognition emanates from various centers (especially, in her view, Paris).¹³ So before we comparatists spend too much time and effort castigating ourselves for imperfectly and imperialistically homogenizing the literatures of the world into world literature, we should recall that such processes already take place in the world of literature and have done for a long time. If we prefer we can think of ourselves as engaging critically, as Casanova thinks of herself as doing, with the world system of literature. Undertaking a critique of 'world literature' may suit some more than constructing it. I myself have not been a partisan of the construction and teaching of world literature, but I do find the concluding questions of Katie Trumpener's 'Geopolitical View' compelling: 'In some respects World Literature remains a daunting, perhaps impossible project. But if not us, who? If not now, when?'

Why not now? If America has forfeited any possibility of claiming to survey judiciously the riches of world culture, our horrific role in the world gives us all the more reason to try to see to it that new generations of American students have some knowledge of the complexity of the products of some foreign cultures. This is a teaching project more than a research project, though research in comparative literature can focus on theoretical questions about possible approaches to world literature, their dangers and virtues. But if it looks as though the field of comparative literature in the United States may in the coming years be in part defined by the problem of world literature, comparative literature should also be defined by those features that draw people to the field. And I imagine that this is not 'world literature.'

The attraction of the field for students and teachers has been tied, I believe, either to a polyglot experience or to an idea of cosmopolitanism. Some people who have lived multilingual, multicultural lives become comparatists because other choices would foreclose possibilities already available to them. American comparatists without a polyglot experience have been driven by a desire to avoid American parochialism, by an interest in other languages and cultures, especially European, both in relation to our own and in relation to the theoretical questions that arise in transnational literary or cultural study.

It is possible to take an interest in the literature of the world as a repertoire of possibilities, forms, themes, discursive practices: comparative literature, I have argued, is the right place, especially today, for the study of literature as a discursive practice, set of formal possibilities,

thus poetics. But it is scarcely possible to take an interest in all the literatures *and* cultures of the world, so comparative projects are likely to remain driven by particular interests, animated on the one hand by singular knowledge, commitments, languages, and on the other by the general theoretical questions that arise when one reflects on one's interest in multiple kinds of texts. Comparative literature has always sought to broaden the area of study, if only to define the particular objects of interest more precisely by differentiating them from others. This inclination to incorporate what previously was outside may be responsible for much of the peculiar history of the field. It is the combination of that comparative, lateral move with the *meta* move that is most distinctive of the discipline, and that makes comparative literature, as Haun Saussy puts it in the 2004 report, the 'test bed for the reconceiving of the order of knowledge.' As such reconceiving occurs, this should count as the triumph of comparative literature, though of course it will scarcely allow comparative literature to feel triumphant. Our triumphs seem destined to be triumphs without triumph.

NOTES

- 1 See Jon Cook, 'The Techno-University and the Future of Knowledge: Thoughts After Lyotard,' in Mieke Bal, *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 303–324. For the 'University of Excellence,' see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 2 *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, edited by Charles Bernheimer (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- 3 Haun Saussy, 'Exquisite Corpses Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes,' in the forthcoming American Comparative Literature Association, 2004 State of the Discipline Report. Saussy's title seems designed to prevent anyone from taking his essay as an authoritative report, though it is the core of this document. His essay and nine others, along with various responses, will be published as *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
- 4 Jonathan Culler, 'Comparative Literature, at last,' in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, pp. 117–121.
- 5 See David Damrosch, 'World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,' in *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization*, pp. 122–133.
- 6 Readings, *The University in Ruins*, p. 9.
- 7 When Readings was working on this book I was able to provide him with the example of Cornell's Department of Transportation Services (responsible for

campus buses and parking), which had received an award for excellence from its professional organization, whatever that is – apparently for its success in discouraging parking on campus (success in ‘demand reduction,’ they called it), by increasingly fees for parking permits and progressively eliminating convenient parking spaces. But it is not utterly impossible to imagine that excellence in this realm might have been assigned precisely the opposite content: excellence might consist of generating a high degree of satisfaction among faculty by making it easier to park on campus, though I agree that this is not very likely.

- 8 Readings, *The University In Ruins*, p. 24.
- 9 Natalie Melas, ‘Versions of Incommensurability,’ *World Literature Today* 69:2 (Spring 1995), 331.
- 10 George W. S. Trow, *In the Context of No Context* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), p. 58.
- 11 Erich Auerbach, ‘Philology and *Weltliteratur*’, *Centennial Review* 13:1 (Winter 1969), 15. I owe this reference to David Chioni Moore’s stimulating discussion in ‘Comparative Literature to *Weltkulturwissenschaft*: Remedying a Failed Transition’ (Southern Comparative Literature Association meeting, October, 1994).
- 12 The teaching of world literature is ably championed in the 2004 report by David Damrosch in ‘World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age’ and by Katie Trumpener in her response, ‘A Geopolitical View.’ Damrosch is the editor of the leading anthology of world literature and author of a judicious discussion of the problems, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). The reservations expressed in the report by Haun Saussy and by Emily Apter in ‘Je ne crois pas beaucoup à la littérature comparée: Universal Poetics and Geopolitical Comparatism’ are pursued most vigorously by Djelal Kadir in ‘Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism,’ all in *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization*.
- 13 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).