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THOMAS DOCHERTY

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It has become something of a commonplace in our times that any critical intervention that proposes itself as foundational should begin from the assertion that our subject is in crisis in some way. Criticism is inaugurated with and by the requirement to make a decision; but this is done in the name of the making or production of a critical state of affairs: *krinein* in all its etymological force. This is perhaps all the more true when the intervention in question pertains to matters of 'theory' or, in general, where matters of conceptual or definitional interest are at stake. Thus, when one is minded to consider, for example, the present state of the discipline of Comparative Literature, the nearly immediate tendency is to start from the assumption that, if the question has any import at all it must be because the discipline is 'in crisis'. Comparative Literature, we assume from the outset, is 'critical'; or, at the very least, our object of inquiry is thought of as contentious.

That attitude shapes some recent responses to the question concerning comparative literary study. It stands at the cornerstone of George Steiner's Inaugural Lecture for the Wiedenfeld Chair in Comparative Literature in Oxford in 1994 ('What is Comparative Literature?'), as it shapes Gayatri Spivak's Wellek Library Lectures, published in 2003 as *Death of a Discipline*, or Haun Saussy's 2004-2005 report to the ACLA. In the present ferment of interest, this sense of crisis or of paradigmatic shift within the discipline is also being shaped by the arguments around Franco Moretti's recent work in the *New Left Review* following from his 'Conjectures on World Literature' (2000).

For decades now, further, we have been living in the shadow of eschatology: ever since the famed 'end of ideology' debates inaugurated within the sociology of Daniel Bell in the 1950s and then revived in chiliastic fashion by Francis Fukuyama in the 1990s, we have been

presenting or imagining ourselves as being at the end of things, witnessing the death of this or that, finding ourselves to be 'post-just-about-everything', effectively ghosting ourselves and our own present tense as 'posthumous people'.[1] Beckett might have enjoyed all this, but for the observable fact that, as in the case of our great modernist precursor T. S. Eliot, we find that our ends are tantalisingly close to our beginnings: all those hypothesised endings – whether feared or welcomed – of Comparative Literature are themselves proposed in the form or in the name of establishing new beginnings for it.

A note of humility in these matters might also be apposite in the present times. Talk of 'crisis' in our discipline might properly be measured against what crisis might mean in Baghdad under occupation, or Louisiana under water, or Orhan Pamuk under the threat of imprisonment for his description of an event in Turkey's fraught history as essentially an act of genocide.[2] Put in the framework of these kinds of crisis, is it genuinely the case that our discipline is in any real sense 'critical'? What might Comparative Literature have to do or to offer to that realm of decision-making that we know as comparative politics; or what might a revived *Weltliteratur* offer to world politics or to world affairs? Moretti comes fairly close to the correct modality of humility, I think, when he accepts an essentially limited purchase for our work: 'Forms are the abstract of social relationships', he writes, and therefore 'formal analysis is in its own *modest* way an analysis of power' (emphasis added here).[3] In what follows, I will offer some considerations of the present state of our work and of what I see as its priorities; and I will also aim to set those priorities against other issues by asking about the place of Comparative Literature in a more general state of literary politics – an 'ecology' of literature, as it were.

The talk of crisis in the discipline compels us to think of ourselves as being at the start of something new or at least something refreshed. Crisis, like the schizophrenic's present tense, is explosive precisely because it is always a turning-point, a revolutionary instant in which we move from an old to a renewed condition. It is as if we are compelled to 'make it new' or to originate some new foundation for our concerns, some novel ground for our practices. As 'critics' in this particular mode or mood, we are 'moderns' through and through; and 'modern' here refers not so much to Eliot as to Swift and his satirical characterisation of the 'modern' author in *A Tale of a Tub*. This modern asserts an authority that is derived entirely from his being in the present moment, a being 'here, now': 'I here think fit to lay hold

on that great and honourable privilege of being the last writer. I claim an absolute authority in right, as the freshest modern, which gives me a despotic power over all authors before me'.[4] The essential triviality of such a position is itself revealed by Michel Serres in his *Eclaircissements* interviews with Bruno Latour. Serres indicates our propensity for viewing intellectual and other forms of progress as, fundamentally, the gradual correction or elimination of errors. Such a stance leads us towards a 'here, now' where, as he satirically puts it, 'Ouf! Nous sommes enfin entrés dans le vrai'.[5]

Two things drive this mood, and both are related to a global market. In the first place, and quite crudely, talk of crisis sells books: crisis, confounded in that word with the material substance of what happens in Baghdad, or Palestine, or burning cars and buses in the dix-huitième arrondissement in Paris (for random examples), is serious, worldly, of import. Secondly, and I hope less crudely, 'modernisation' (and all its correlates) is what drives the global by the bureaucratic homogenising of history across the world. Sadly, institutional forms of literary criticism have a tendency to be complicit with precisely these forms of marketisation and homogenisation of our work: who would not want to be Swift's modern author, in a banal sense? Who would eschew the possibility of inaugurating and being a founding originator of the next big thing – even something called, for example 'distant reading' (Moretti) or 'planetarity' (Spivak)? In the old sense of 'author' given by Foucault, who would not want to authorise a new school of literary criticism, a new inflection of comparative literature? Influence, authority and prestige are conferred by – and accommodated to – the market-place in which, for example, the honour of giving the Wellek Library lectures can be measured and quantified.[6]

I shall aim to avoid this marketisation, at least in the structure of the present argument. That is to say, I start – more modestly even than Moretti, I hope – from the position that Comparative Literature is not 'in crisis' at all. If whatever I advance here could have been predicted from the logic and structure of an incidental – such as a market-driven demand for novelty – then the argument becomes less useful, less marked by something that we might call an 'event' of thinking.[7] It is important to note, however, that while I may try to resist a position where this essay will have a market-ideology as its presiding impetus, I shall also, nonetheless, attend to the importance of certain political issues pertaining to the current condition of our work. It is simply that politics will not act as the central determinant of the argument (if I am

successful). As a corollary, I shall also be trying to avoid the natural tendency in which talk of 'crisis' polarises opposing sides into a polemic. In the spirit of comparativism, I hope it is better to allow for a comparison of positions that need not be seen as opposed or polarised at all. This is a position that, I believe, Moretti tries himself to respect when he points to the modesty of his own reading ('Many people have read more and better than I have'[8]); but it is also a position that tries, quite genuinely, to accept that the mastery of the field, of the kind that I, for one, assumed was natural to thinkers of an earlier generation such as Auerbach, Curtius, Etiemble, Steiner and others, is rather impossible to achieve. It is still desirable, but difficult.[9]

2

In 1994, Steiner indicates that the first and essential issue specific to Comparative Literature is and has to be that of language: 'Comparative Literature […] is immersed in, delights in, the prodigal diversity of natural languages. Comparative literature listens and reads after Babel'.[10] This position respects the traditional axiomatic view of the operation of Comparative Literature: to be a comparatist, it used to be the case that one had to be able to claim competence in at least three languages and in the literatures of those languages. The obvious logistical issue that follows from this is that not all comparatists share the same linguistic competences. Therefore, for the reader or audience of any article in the institution of Comparative Literature (including its journals, centrally), there is a strong chance, indeed a likelihood, that an act of translation will be required. I may understand the French and Italian, say, but as for those passages in Portuguese or Arabic, I am at a loss; and my own reader, proficient in German, say, may struggle with my Italian; and so on. This is obviously a matter of logistics; but I want to suggest here that it is also philosophically and structurally fundamental and intrinsic to the discipline.

Steiner is correct, but trivial, when he opens his Inaugural by stating that 'Every act of the reception of significant form, in language, in art, in music, is comparative. Cognition is re-cognition…'.[11] His lecture, however, is more significant when it focuses on the primacy of translation as an issue for Comparative Literature. The statement might have more purchase were it re-phrased to suggest that a philosophy of translation is required for any and every act of comparative reading – and, indeed, for any act of reading. Reading, I shall claim

here, is best carried out by those who are, as Milton was, 'ministers of foreign tongues'.[12]

We have a consequent issue which might be regarded as happenstance but which is, in fact, of great theoretical importance: the language that grounds most of this translation is English. Increasingly, English is the root language – our Latin, as it were, almost no longer a vernacular – into which everything is 'resolved'; and it is the ground – spoken or unspoken – on which all Comparative Literature stands. This remains an issue of substantive importance for two reasons. First, there is the implicit assumption in the institution of Comparative Literature that, in the end, all linguistic difference can be rendered a matter of commensurability: French and German literatures can be 'compared', and therefore can share a common (if unspoken) ground. Although unspoken, this ground nonetheless is the foundational language – the old Saussurean *langue*, if you will – of Comparative Literature; and thus, language differences are resolved, finally, into superficial differences which mask an essential homogeneity. Secondly, and as a corollary of this first position, it is assumed that the tacit translation of all difference into an unspoken English is the end of translation. In fact, of course, it is but the start of our difficulties, for it assumes that English is itself internally homogeneous, and not subject to an internal or intrinsic logic of translation. The merest glimpse at the history of English demonstrates that it is not one language; and the merest understanding of its historicity demonstrates that the English spoken at any single moment in the world is multiple and various, not single and unified. 'Tacit English', as we might call it – that ground on which the functioning of Comparative Literature stands – does not answer the problem of translation, but merely displaces and extends it.

Let us then revisit Steiner, with this problem now to the fore. We might say not just that all acts of reading involve translation, but rather something yet more far-reaching. A distinguishing characteristic of comparative literary study is that, by its attention to non-native languages, it serves the purpose of altering or 'othering' and alienating the relation that a 'native' speaker has to her or his first tongue. That is to say, Comparative Literature fundamentally undermines the very structure of 'nativity' as such, with the corollary that it calls into question the link of language to nation. That my 'first' language is English gives no substance to any claim for the primacy or priority of my 'national' links to England, or indeed to any Anglophone nation-state.

Two final glosses on this are important. The first is that, although English is routinely recognised as a world language, it is of course nothing of the kind: at best, it is a series of languages spoken and written in diverse ways in diverse parts of the globe. It may globalise our work *in principle*, but in fact globalisation of our domain remains essentially a matter for the economic and publishing markets. In this regard, it may well be the case that, ostensibly counter-intuitively, we can say that the world's *divisiveness* is occasioned precisely by the triumph of English, and especially of American-English.[13] Secondly, we can learn from Agamben. As his work on the figure of the refugee in *Homo Sacer* makes clear, one of the reasons why the figure of the refugee disturbs us so much is not due to contingent matters pertaining to specific political situations. Rather, refugees disturb the operations and, indeed, the very concept of the nation-state; and they do this 'because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality* [...] they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis. Bringing to light the difference between birth and nation, the refugee causes the secret presupposition of the political domain – bare life – to appear for an instant within that domain'.[14]

If we put these two glosses together, we reach the hypothesis that suggests that Comparative Literature is, properly speaking, the literature of refuge, the literary practice most intimately tied to the refugee. This would explain that historical reading of the discipline (shared by Spivak) that sees its roots in the wastes of Europe after the Nazi period; but it explains that reading in theoretical terms, and in such a way as to demonstrate the *intrinsic inevitability* of the condition of Comparative Literature. It makes refugees of its readers; and therefore disturbs the link of nativity and nationality. This is all the more so in the case of a literature whose tacit underpinning lies in an ostensibly global language, such as English. For those whose first language is one of the Englishes of the world, it demonstrates the foreignness of English to itself. That is to say, it suggests that there never was a 'first' language for any speaker, and that what appears as such a first language was itself and is itself always a translation, always grounded in an intrinsic translatability that would call into question its status as originary or authentic. The realisation that English is grounded in the variety of Englishes offers us a key to the alterity that lies within any identity that is characterised not by some chthonic nativity, not by any dangerous claims of blood or soil.

When Gayatri Spivak laments the 'politics of hostility' that she sees

at the source of contemporary comparative literary study, she is touching on the implicit desire for a certain commensurability among cultures. That is, though she wants to advocate substantial differences in our theoretical stance and procedures, she nonetheless retains the demand for a grounded and foundational comparativism. Like many, she traces a certain history of Comparative Literature to the flight of the intellectuals from Nazi Europe: 'Comparative Literature was a result of European intellectuals fleeing "totalitarian" regimes', she writes; and, in the light of this, which she sees as contributing to the inevitability of politics in the discipline, she continues 'I am proposing an attempt to depoliticize in order to move away from a politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions'.[15] Her moves, effectively, attempt to replace a politics of hostility with one of friendship, *à la* Derrida. That too will have difficulties, of course. This friendship is structurally shaped by inequality, and requires a demand for justice and grace.

The position outlined by Spivak is not that far removed from a sparkling analysis once made by Edward Said of the work of Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Having noted that *Mimesis* looks the way it does partly as a result of the library in which Auerbach found himself working in Istanbul while in flight from the Nazis, Said is able to attend to what is essentially a rather fantastic set of speculations in the work. One example will stand for many. Looking at Woolf, what Auerbach finds to say is that in Woolf's apparent interest in the random, we 'cannot but see to what an extent – below the surface conflicts – the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened'.[16] The burden of the thought (and the language of the rest of the passage is clearly marked by this, too) is that, even in a regime such as Nazism, dependent upon extreme discriminations among people, there is a fundamental and underlying unity that can be revealed in literature. It is as if Auerbach wants to use literature as a way of apotropaically warding off the threat of Nazism and even difference as such. Yet, however much literature may offer such solace, the reality differs. The key aspect of this that is important for the present piece is that Comparative Literature has itself been driven by this demand for an essential 'lessening' of the differences among people's ways of thinking and of living. It may be admirable, but it remains fantastical.

To put this into the language of Franco Moretti, it is as if we have been seeing Comparative Literature as essentially governed by the metaphor of the tree; and, as Moretti shows us, such a situation leads inexorably to a prioritisation of the question of the nation: 'Trees and

branches are what nation-states cling to'. While this metaphor proposes an underlying unity (one tree, many branches), by contrast, as he points out, waves – as a governing metaphor – 'observes uniformity engulfing an initial diversity'. Waves, therefore 'are what markets do'.[17]

It follows from my foregoing observations that, in fact, trees and waves, in Moretti's terms, do indeed have something in common above and beyond being metaphors that work as metaphors, despite his more modestly stated claims. Both attempt to regulate the relations between uniformity and diversity. Both accept the principle that such a regulation is available.[18]

What, however, if the task of Comparative Literature is the task of producing difference as such? What if we entertain the possibility of real diversity, as it were? What if there is a diversity that cannot be regulated under the sign of any uniform?

3

This difference – or even let us call it divisiveness – is and might properly be the end and aim of Comparative Literature. Starting from an analysis carried out in the mode of comparison, with a tacit assumption of commensurability among or between the elements being compared, it might be more appropriate and productive to stress the other aspect of comparison: contrast. There is, however, another way of looking at this and another way of formalising it. In this final section, I want to think of what it would mean to describe Comparative Literature as being 'without and beyond compare': that is, to characterise it in a language appropriate neither to conflict nor to the blandishments of that fallacious and potentially fantasy-governed demand of 'commensurability' of which I write above. The language in question here would be a development of the language of friendship: we might call it rather the language of love.

The model I have in mind for this derives from a combination of Lyotard and Badiou. It is from Lyotard that I am taking this particular notion of a differend that will be at the root of Comparative Literature; and that, in turn, derives from his earlier pronouncements, in his 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism' programme-essay. There, he wrote against the kind of unification and totalisation of thought that I myself have described as being, silently, at the core of much Comparative Literature. He wrote:

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.[19]

The multiplication of difference in the name of a counter-terror – or, more positively, in the name of love – is what I am after here.

Badiou's thinking on the issue of love closely resembles that of Lyotard on the differend. Badiou describes the situation of love as one of relatedness between positions. There are two positions, he argues; and, for the sake of argument, we might characterise them as 'man' and 'woman' (with no determinate biological or any other overtones). These two positions are absolutely disjunctive with regard to each other; and the characterisation as man/woman simply serves to illustrate the disjunctiveness in question. This is like Lyotard's two argumentative positions in a differend. Further, the disjunction between the two positions cannot be the object of an experience or of any direct knowledge; for such knowledge or experience would imply the existence of a third position that can assume or 'contain' the two disjunctive positions (the Lyotardian bar of a higher authority, as it were, to which both positions can subject themselves willingly). This is impossible for Badiou, because, axiomatically, there is no such third position.

Now, this is rather like the position I have described for Comparative Literature: there are (let us say) two literatures, in two languages; and these are disjunctive with regard to each other (this is the question of the difficulty of translation: no matter how hard we try, 'amore' is not 'amour', neither of these is 'Liebe'; and they cannot all be 'contained' in the Anglophone 'love'). There is no third position (no single English) that will totalise and adequately contain the two divergent positions.

For Badiou, it follows that we cannot 'know' that there are two such positions in the first place; for any such knowledge depends on the existence of a third position that transcends the two – and there is none. Thus, a knowledge of love gives way to an experience of sorts; and that experience is, for Badiou, 'a singular event. This event is what initiates the amorous procedures; and we can call it an encounter'.[20]

The result of this now is that we can no longer even say that there are two positions, for to say that would imply, in arithmetical terms, a

third position from which we could count back to two; and there is no third position. Thus, we now have a state of affairs in which there is a 'position-one' and a 'position-one'; and these can never add up to a two or a couple. There is, as it were, a position and another position; a literature and a literature; and the two can never be reconciled. This, however, is extremely positive news, for it means, in brief, that two separate literatures can now, for the first time, encounter each other without one 'containing' the other. Moreover, both resist containment under the general sign of a totalising 'English'. On one hand, we are in a predicament here; but, following Badiou, we might say that love is that mood that treats precisely of this kind of predicament. We are not in crisis; rather, we are – or can be – in love.

To read Comparative Literature in this way is to open ourselves to the possibility of reading for the first time; and such reading does not place an understanding at the centre of our work, but replaces that with the experience of an 'encounter'. This event of an encounter, like love, is what is without and beyond compare.

NOTES

1 The reference here is to Massimo Cacciari, *Posthumous People*, translated by Rodger Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
2 I owe this salutary reminder to my colleague Jeremy Treglown (private discussion).
3 Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* (New Series) 1 (2000), 66.
4 Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, in *Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, edited by Louis A. Landa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 310.
5 Michel Serres, *Eclaircissements: entretiens avec Bruno Latour* (1992; reprinted Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 76.
6 Lest this be thought of as a slight aimed at Spivak, recall that the most vigorous debates in this arena take place within the pages of *New Left Review*. My contention is that it is difficult, even for those critical of globalisation on the left, to avoid this complicity.
7 The sense of 'event' here is that given by Alain Badiou. See, especially, his *L'Etre et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988). For a more simple articulation of what is at stake, see his *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). I give my own gloss on this in my recent book, *Aesthetic Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
8 Moretti, 'Conjectures', p. 55.
9 For a fuller argumentation of my position here, see my piece 'On Critical Humility', in *Becoming Human*, edited by Paul Sheehan (Westport: Praeger, 2003), pp. 165–179.

10 George Steiner, *No Passion Spent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 150.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
12 I argue this at more length in my piece 'On Reading', in *Critical Quarterly* 45:3 (2003), 6–19.
13 Here, a word on 'globalisation'. As Bill Readings has pointed out, globalisation is not experienced in the same way in Dakar as it is in Washington. In many cases, what is at issue is not globalisation but Americanisation. See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
14 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 131.
15 Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 3–4.
16 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 552. Cf. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 5–9; and for my own commentary on this, see my *After Theory*, second revised edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 144–147.
17 Moretti, 'Conjectures', p. 67.
18 In stating it this way, that is, in terms of the regulation of uniformity and diversity, I am alluding to the aesthetic principles outlined by Frances Hutcheson in his 1725 *Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, reprinted in Hutcheson, *Philosophical Writings*, edited by R. S. Downie (London: Everyman, 1994). This fundamentally aestheticist drive, with which I am happy to concur, foregrounds beauty; but in what follows, I shall give a specific inflection to this, in an attempt to infuse the aesthetic with an ethics, which will result in an attention to 'love' as being central to Comparative Literary studies. For more on the aestheticist basis of this, see my *Criticism and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
19 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism', reprinted in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, edited by Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 46
20 Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 258. For a fuller explanation of the stakes of the argument here in a wider theoretical context, see my *Alterities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 203–205.