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Comparative Literature – in, from and beyond Germany

OLIVER LUBRICH

I

Prominent theorists have decried the ‘death’ of comparative literature and have pronounced the beginning of a new era ‘after’ its great theoretical models. The titles of Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*¹ and Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*² epitomise these provocative arguments. Is comparative literature dead? Have we seen the last of its theories? And if not, what state is the discipline currently in? What are its perspectives for the future?

In his book, Eagleton takes a polemical look at the literary and cultural theories of the 1960s, 70s and 80s which he considers ‘post-modern’ and laments their disinterest in politics. He demands a repolitisation of theory and, consequently, of the disciplines it inspires.

In the past years, the most widely discussed development in the humanities, so-called post-colonialism, has intended to do just that. Post-colonialism is both political and comparative in tendency. Post-colonial studies always treat cultures in their relationship to each other (conquest, colonization, domination, borders, migration, minority...); by definition they require a comparative approach.

In fact, the renewal of comparative literature with a post-colonial grounding is exactly what Gayatri Spivak has in mind. In reviewing the various academic trends at Anglo-Saxon universities (*cultural studies*, *ethnic studies*, *area studies* and so forth), Spivak looks into what she considers the most promising methodological combinations and proposes to bring together comparative literature with *area studies* and thereby to forge an alliance between the humanities and the social sciences. (Any strand of comparative literature which refuses to take part in this process of renewal is, according to Spivak, threatened by extinction; similarly, Eagleton declares only those theories obsolete that are not informed by politics.)

According to Spivak, the greatest asset of our contested discipline lies in its *close readings*. This capital, she argues, must be safeguarded and reinvested. A comparative literature which genuinely aims to involve a comprehensive study of writing in different languages cannot but arm itself with the tools of social sciences in order to understand the local conditions under which the examined texts have emerged. Modified in this way, the discipline can claim a new ethical legitimacy.

A close reading in the original language of any text is as much a cognitive process as it is a symbolic act. Philology is a cultural technique of communicating with the 'other'. In the context of post-colonialism, this means lending a voice (and an ear) to those who have been suppressed by colonialism, excluded by imperialism and marginalised by globalisation. Not surprisingly, Gayatri Spivak demands that comparative literature's field of research be widened beyond the boundaries of the 'West', meaning North America and Europe. A *world literature* should no longer be confined to, at best, English-language translations of 'Third World' texts,³ but should take into account all possible 'peripheral' cultures, which are to be read and studied in their native languages. Comparative literature should cast its area of competence as widely as possible. With today's rapidly changing historical conditions only a comparative literature that approaches *all* literatures in *all* languages will be able to adapt to the challenge of globalisation.

But can the discipline be truly global? Spivak's vision begs a number of pragmatical questions (some of which she names herself): Since its aim is to analyse given material in its original form, the linguistic competence of students, scholars and other professionals will always determine and limit the scope of comparative literary practice. Moreover, comparative literature will frequently exhibit site-specific affinities to and predilections for particular languages. German scholars' rising interest in the cultures of Eastern Europe, for example, as well as their engagement with the writings of Turkish or Russian immigrants rather than, say, with the idioms of a Pakistan transformed by British imperialism is only 'natural'.

With the linguistic abilities of scholars and their cultural affinities varying from place to place and region to region – as do their thematic priorities and conceptual designs – comparative literature cannot be global in a true sense. It is always bound to be particular, partial, contingent. It is by necessity highly dependent on its historical perspective, on its social and cultural positionality. At Stanford it has

different aims and agendas than in Cairo, in Paris different than Peking. Each environment encourages its own set of themes and approaches. Of all disciplines, and despite its efforts to transcend national borders, comparative literature is not, paradoxically, a universal science. If we define it – with Gayatri Spivak – as a means by which to grapple with otherness, we should not overlook its own alterity. Whenever the intrinsic logic of the discipline leads us to create abstract models from empirical cases, to move from the single to the plural, to negotiate the particular with the general, we are compelled to reflect on the point of departure from which our thoughts are emerging.⁴

Perhaps the questions we started out with should be reformulated and localised: How do different contexts shape the discipline in distinctive ways? How do specific perspectives open up new topics, methods and theories? How, then, can a comparative discipline be grounded in a particular country and yet transcend its local limitations? What can Germany, for example, contribute to the study of comparative literature today?

2

In twentieth-century Germany, political history and the history of science – *Wissenschaft*, the German word including the so-called literary sciences, *Literaturwissenschaft* – have been intrinsically yoked to one another. National Socialism, World War II, exile, Shoah and the division of the country, located on the frontlines of the Cold War, informed the development of a humanistic discipline, the subject of which is by definition transnational. Like in few other places, recent German history has left not just its marks, but its scars, both on the theory and the practice of literary studies.

A look at the range of authors, titles and themes listed in course catalogues, addressed in lecture series, journals and conferences and proposed in student papers and dissertations gives an impression of what emphases may be considered specifically German. Contemporary comparative literature pays ample tribute to writers, theorists and scholars who were persecuted, forbidden, displaced, suppressed and exterminated during the era of National Socialism; to literature by exiles and by non-German modernist authors, whose work could only be read after 1945; to developments in theory from Western democracies that Germans had been cut off from and that now needed to be imported. Lost time needed to be made up, too, by those who had not

been able to leave Germany during the Nazi era or had served in the German army. The Frankfurt School is a particularly instructive case in point with its three main proponents Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse all surviving in exile and returning to their native country after the war.

For obvious reasons Jewish Studies and Jewish authors play a central role in German scholarship today, not to mention the fact that some of the most influential scientists, scholars and writers of the twentieth century were German (or Austrian, as the case may be) Jews; Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein are maybe the best known examples. In the more literary realm, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka and Paul Celan have moved into the very centre of the canon.⁵ Comparative literature taught in Germany and German Studies taught abroad share a common interest in the epoch of National Socialism in general and in these authors in particular.⁶

As a discipline, comparative literature in Germany has constructed for itself a distinct trajectory, identifying – often Jewish – precursors and leading figures from within the German humanistic tradition whom it heralds as comparatists *avant la lettre*. Alongside Walter Benjamin,⁷ who neither restricted his topics to one national culture nor limited his method to philology, the following names recur: Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist who wrote predominantly in German and whose *Theory of the Novel* brings together history of genre and philosophy of history and refers to material from various literary traditions⁸; Ernst Cassirer, who conducted his all-encompassing study of ‘symbolic forms’ across world periods and cultures⁹; and Aby Warburg, whose ‘library of cultural science’ was compiled in such a way as to propose unexpected connections between various forms of cultural discourse and art otherwise dissociated by the borders of established disciplines.¹⁰

Another famous precursor is the Romance philologist Ernst Robert Curtius. His medievalist project of a ‘European Literature’ draws on the transnational concept of a ‘Latin Middle Ages’ that has a quintessentially comparativist structure.¹¹ Indeed, Romance philology overall, which by its very nature deals with a variety of languages and literatures, and notably Romance philology in exile during the Nazi period, have played a decisive role in the formation of German comparative literature. Many founders of post-war comparative literature were prominent Romance philologists, whose scholarship was informed in one way or another by their experiences under National

Socialism. Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer were forced out of Germany for being Jewish. Auerbach wrote his opus magnum, *Mimesis*, in exile in Turkey¹²; Spitzer emigrated to America.¹³ Werner Krauss, too, wrote his most important works in a state of – albeit internal – opposition against the Nazis.¹⁴ Viktor Klemperer, another Jewish Romanist, spent the entire war hiding inside Germany, documenting his experiences in his now famous diaries and later writing a seminal study on the language of the ‘Third Reich’.¹⁵

Like these leading Romance philologists, many Germanists left their native Germany or Austria in order to flee Nazi persecution, others left after the war to begin their careers abroad, among them Richard Alewyn, Bernhard Blume, Walter Naumann, Wolfgang Paulsen, Henry Remak, Guy Stern, Karl Viëtor, Werner Vordtriede, Hans Wolf, Erich Heller, Ruth Klüger, Heinz Politzer, Egon Schwarz, Walter Sokel, to name but a few. To some degree U.S.-American ‘German Studies’ came about through the activities and work done by many of these emigré scholars. Established as a discipline (starting in the 1970s) in opposition to its more traditional German counterpart, *Germanistik*, which represented a more narrowly defined classical philology with a special emphasis on ‘Goethe und Schiller’, ‘German Studies’ scholars tended to focus more on cultural contexts and intercultural research.¹⁶ Due to institutional pressures, however, foremost among them competition between departments, guidelines for curricula and language constrictions, German Studies in the United States are only comparative to a small degree and remain concentrated, when they do not share their professors with the departments of comparative literature, on the literature of the German-speaking countries. At the same time, the academic and life histories of Germanists in exile and thereafter, with their experiences ‘between cultures’ allowing them to bring their perspectives from ‘outside’ – whether defined in disciplinary or geographical terms – to the study of German literature and society, are important for rethinking comparative literature in Germany today, as are some of their non-traditional philological approaches.

3

A transnational approach to literature, however, is not the prerogative of people who were persecuted. In fact, a National Socialist variant of comparative literature, almost entirely forgotten today, also once emerged from Germany. This historical circumstance is as unexpected

as it is counter-intuitive for a discipline which today sees itself as a steadfast opponent of totalitarianism.

It is little known that in its late phase National Socialism supported a cross-national 'European' agenda which embraced 'crossing borders' both literally and figuratively. Germany's aggressive territorial politics led it to commission a boundariless literature. After descending upon the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the German government propagated an 'anti-bolshevist' struggle for the *Abendland*, which it exported to its allied, occupied and neutrally aligned countries. This geostrategic objective convinced Joseph Goebbels to forge a new concept for a cultural foreign policy that he was to run, and which at first competed with the 'pan-germanic' ideology proposed by Alfred Rosenberg and favoured by Adolf Hitler. Forced into action starting 1941, this new internationalist approach left its most visible mark in the shape of a typographic reform that would exchange Latin Antiqua for gothic lettering, which was (all of a sudden!) scorned as 'Jews' letters'.¹⁷

Writers who were to act as spokespersons for a German-dominated Europe in their native countries played an important role in this scheme. International congresses organised by the Propaganda Ministry took place in Weimar in 1941 and 1942, and many authors from countries all over the continent participated.¹⁸ They founded the *Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung* as a counter-institution to the international PEN-Club; established in 1941, it was formally disbanded in 1948.¹⁹ Almost 200 members from fourteen different countries committed themselves to its cause. The German participants (with the exception of the president, Hans Carossa) were almost exclusively '*Blut und Boden*'-Nazi-poets, while among the foreign writers were the well-known Swiss author John Knittel, the canonised Romanian novelist Liviu Rebreanu, the Hungarian modernist poet Lőrinc Szabó, and the Frenchmen Abel Bonnard, Robert Brasillach, Jacques Chardonne, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Ramon Fernandez, André Fraigneau, Marcel Jouhandeau, Georges Blond and André Thérive.

The journal *Europäische Literatur* served as the voice of the organisation,²⁰ as an instrument for German literary policy, and as a forum for National Socialist scholarship. It published poetry, essays, travel reports, translations, scholarly critiques and articles, and literary theory, along with such recurring columns as 'Panorama of Europe' and 'International News' by and on authors from various countries. Many of the contributions appeared in more than one language. From

a quick glance at some of the titles it becomes apparent just how comparative the subjects covered were. *Europäische Literatur* published studies on one or several national literatures ('On Japanese Poetry', 'Croatian Lyric Poetry', 'Contemporary Spanish Literature', 'Encounters in the North' or 'A Look at France', the latter translated into German from Flemish),²¹ comparative views ('Problems of Italian and German Literature', 'Danish Voices on Literature of the USA', 'A Visit to Nordic Countries'),²² investigations on international influence and effects ('Dante in German Humanities', 'The Importance of Gerhart Hauptmann Abroad', 'Herman Grimm and World Literature'),²³ research on translation ('What is Being Translated Now?'),²⁴ general and comparative literature as well as theory ('Thoughts on Humor', 'Ars poetica'),²⁵ essays on intermediality and comparisons between the arts ('Should Poetry be spoken?', 'The Language of Film', 'Which Novels Have Been Filmed?', 'Set Designs from Bucharest, Antwerp, Sofia'),²⁶ genre history ('Popular Novels in the 19th Century'),²⁷ motif studies ('The Danube' – with contributions from Germany, Hungary and Romania, 'Maria Theresa. The Image of the Empress in Contemporary Literature', 'Abraham a Sancta Clara. A European Celebrity'),²⁸ travel literature ('Travels to Greece')²⁹ and reports on particular events ('Book Fair in Brussels'),³⁰ along with reflections on how literature can function as a 'bridge' between nations ('Poetry as a Bridge between Peoples', 'Rhine Literature as a Bridge across Europe').³¹

Comparative literature, broadly defined as the treatment of literary subjects from a cross-national perspective, is – as uncanny and unsettling as it may seem – not necessarily an anti-authoritarian endeavour. As the example of *Europäische Literatur* illustrates, the National Socialists were able to exploit even comparative literature for their expansionist and racist agenda. A fascist comparative literature is by no means an oxymoron.

4

For post-1945 German comparative literature, which built its reputation largely on philologists persecuted by the Nazis and living in exile, there was no absolute need to dissociate itself from this precursor since its influence after the war remained marginal. Like the rest of German society German scholars (and writers) implicated in National Socialism after the war tended not to talk about their past, and some

even tried to reestablish their careers under different names. Thus it came about that, after 1945, comparative literature in Germany constituted itself as an alternative to *Germanistik*, German literary studies, which were much more thoroughly infiltrated by Nazi ideology, often entailing a long and in many cases grotesque after-life.³²

Comparative literature would not be what it is today in Germany but for one scholar, Peter Szondi (1929–1971), who was the driving force behind the reestablishment of the field from the 1960s on. When he was appointed to the Free University Berlin at the end of 1964, he, as a Hungarian Jew who had been bought free from the concentration camp at Bergen Belsen and had emigrated to Switzerland, was to be spared the prospect of having to work in a department of German literature still under the influence of former Nazis. Instead, he was offered to chair his own institute which he named *Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (General and Comparative Literature) or, for short, AVL.

The AVL institute at the Free University Berlin, of which Szondi was the first appointed professor, and which began carrying his name in the summer of 2005, was literally founded on a history of suffering. Szondi's student and successor, Gert Mattenklott, claims that comparative literature in Berlin was 'born out of a calamity' and is the 'result of an academic secession'. 'This institute would never have existed,' he says, 'if the history of German philology during fascism had not been so shameful.'³³ As one of the first Jews to write and defend his *Habilitation* – in the German system the follow-up book to one's dissertation, allowing one to become professor – in Germany after the Shoah (in 1961 at the Free University Berlin), Peter Szondi went on to teach at the institution he called into life until committing suicide in 1971, one year after his friend Paul Celan had committed suicide in the Seine in Paris.

Peter Szondi is rightfully remembered as *the* exceptional figure in German comparative literature. He contributed greatly to the formation of *Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, turning his attention first to the genre of drama,³⁴ then to lyric (and in particular hermetic) poetry,³⁵ and finally to hermeneutics,³⁶ all the while engaging himself in university politics³⁷ and corresponding with colleagues,³⁸ thus in many ways transgressing the boundaries of what already seemed like a boundariless discipline.

Szondi's seminal *Theory of the Modern Drama*, the doctoral thesis that he defended in 1954 and published in 1956, is typical of his way of

thinking. Szondi regards literary genres neither as purely formal or superficial, nor as a-historical phenomena. Instead, he considers them as dependent on and embedded within their social contexts, something whose evolution requires investigating and whose full semantic potential wants unlocking. Szondi's notion of comparative literature is political in so far as it consistently historicises the themes and poetics it treats, positioning literature in its social setting. For him literature is an ethical medium, posing existential questions that – in the hermeneutic mode – require an answer. Thus the scarcity of dialogue in modern drama and the ways in which it repeatedly eludes and thwarts exegesis is related to the very failure of communication that is so characteristic of modernity, which Szondi saw as a symptom of estrangement. For Szondi, theory is always already and intrinsically embedded in history, unfolding before the backdrop of social experience and emerging from the literary material rather than being a method 'applied' externally and retroactively to texts.

For Szondi, the term '*Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*' – literally, general and comparative literary science – is hence programmatic. It proposes to relate the specific to the general, to (re)connect literature with theory, to negotiate individual aesthetic contemplation and objective reflection and thereby to furnish – in a variety of ways – the 'scientific' foundation for sophisticated literary exegesis and comparison.

Szondi's vision of *Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* became evident in both his policy of inviting international guest speakers to Berlin and his introductions to their talks. Szondi welcomed, among others, Jacques Derrida (before he attained world-wide recognition), Pierre Bourdieu and Lucien Goldman from France, Paul de Man from Zurich, Gershom Sholem from Jerusalem, Theodor W. Adorno from Frankfurt, Hans Robert Jauss from the then young university of Constance, and from America René Wellek (Harvard), Geoffrey Hartman and Peter Demetz (Yale), along with the liberal publicist Lionel Trilling. The names of these visiting scholars, who form a programmatic network and a methodological canon, epitomise Szondi's conception of comparative literature. German comparatists working in the Federal Republic, however, were not invited, nor were recognised colleagues from France or the Netherlands.³⁹ Yet while he was oriented towards the West and the new allies of West Germany and paid little attention to comparatists in Eastern Europe, his conception of a transnational (and transatlantic) comparative literature

was very much influenced by East European literary theorists of the Russian and Prague schools of structuralism, from whose works René Wellek, too, derived many of his concepts, concepts that continue to have profound implications for comparative literary theory today.

Typical of Szondi's programmatic remarks are the following comments in his introduction to Jean Starobinski from Geneva, who lectured in Berlin in 1966 on melancholy and irony: scholars like Starobinski do not simply ask 'questions about influence (who read whom and when?),' Szondi contends, 'and they avoid merely speculating (about such things as the nature of irony), they mediate rather the general and the particular, the idea and history, the theoretical and the empirical.'⁴⁰ Starobinski, the Romance philologist, he argued, is in fact by his very nature a comparatist: 'Inasmuch as the research by philologists like Starobinski follows the principles of comparative literature and fulfils its programme, even if only within their own disciplines, comparative literature is made superfluous.' And: 'Anyone who ignores the boundaries set up by the traditional philologies [...] is helping to make comparative literature redundant, since they are doing of their own accord precisely what this discipline invites them to do.' Unlike Gayatri Spivak, Peter Szondi believed that comparative literature would cease *once its aims had been achieved*. The old-style *littérature comparée* – usually consisting of *mises en oppositions* of various national literary traditions, comparative panoramas of the image of the foreigner or of national stereotypes, or fact-based positivistic reception history (what the French call *rapports de fait*) – only works to strengthen the national philologies, reinforcing the barriers they have erected between one another. A modern comparative literature, by contrast, always strives to transcend the limits of traditional literary study by accommodating not just various philologies and several literatures alongside the manifold art forms (painting, architecture, photography, film),⁴¹ but also by exploiting as many modes as possible of interdisciplinary access to its subject matter (via for instance such disciplines as ethnology, anthropology, medicine, psychology or, today, even the new media).⁴²

This expanded vision of our discipline encapsulates Szondi's undogmatic approach, one that was so encompassing that it allowed him to avoid branding a specific 'school' of theory and criticism. Working from the margins of the traditional humanities, Szondi's version of comparative literature never felt the need to affirm its identity artificially or to defend itself against competing disciplines.⁴³

What all this makes apparent is that Peter Szondi's agenda for an *Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* is surprisingly up-to-date. By studying poetological programmes and positions (for example the 'bourgeois tragedy of the eighteenth century') in their social contexts and by conceptualizing literary forms as sociohistorical constructs, Szondi established the very connection between a methodologically trained philology interested in and underpinned by theory (*comparative literature*) and sociology (*area studies*) that we see Gayatri Spivak advancing today. Indeed, Szondi's work also meets Spivak's demand for *close readings*; his discussions of Hölderlin and Celan are exemplary prototypes of hermeneutical analyses, as is his treatment, in his *Theory of the Modern Drama*, of the dialectical relationship between dramatic and epic theatre in the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Brecht, Wilder and Miller, among others.

The discipline envisaged by Peter Szondi – with its existential motivation, ethical base and historical foundation – may well have lost its affinity to theatre, a literary form which the author of the *Theory of the Modern Drama* believed, in the 1950s, to be the privileged means of social reflection. But it has found a new favoured subject in a specific vein of narrative literature that deals with the experience of cultural foreignness and collective speechlessness in a rapidly expanding canon of, particularly, novels by writers from former colonies. This literature is shot through with the subject of alienation and such corollaries as the Other, hybridity, the subaltern, and linguistic and cultural diaspora. It frequently centres on 'solitude' as a poignant metaphor for the history of decolonised peoples – a term that figures prominently in the titles of such South and Middle American works as Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* or Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*.

In some respects Szondi's notion of crossing boundaries, and the programme he developed around it in 1960s Berlin, even anticipates the post-structuralist-inspired post-colonial critique of cultural theory formulated by Homi Bhabha some thirty years later. Bhabha criticises (in the vernacular of contemporary theory) the 'multicultural' concept of 'diversity' that is based on and reinforces seemingly stable paradigms of 'identity', 'difference' and 'otherness'. He focuses instead on processes of 'hybridisation' which take place *between* cultures and extend beyond their (only apparently fixed) borders.⁴⁴ The negotiation of the meaning of cultures (and hence literatures) is no longer defined as being 'intercultural' (between fixed givens) but rather 'transcultural'

(that is, across various contexts which are in permanent flux and impossible to disentangle from one another); the *différance* between distinctive traditions has given way to a continuous *différance* within and among themselves, engendering as a result a fundamentally open process of signification. Comparative literature's affinity to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction is not surprising in light of the fact that the newly established discipline – which saw itself in opposition to a *Germanistik* in alliance with National Socialism, presenting itself as a caricature of a racially essentialist national philology – had made the challenging of borders and fixed identities a cornerstone of its agenda. And the affinity of comparative literature to and its compatibility with today's predominant 'post-colonial' discourse is becoming ever more apparent.

If many comparative and post-colonialist readings have in common that they attempt to reveal the latent structures of dominance in European (or North American) texts, we of course also quickly encounter the limits of this kind of undertaking. Literary texts rarely adhere to a simple scheme of this sort and tend to resist reductionist interpretations. Instead of simply reproducing structures of power, advanced theoretical models of the relationship(s) between text and context (such as the recent publications by Homi Bhabha) leave room for the fact that texts always manifest an excess of meaning, that they survive interpretation through subversion, dialogism and polyvalence. Avoiding both the sweeping generalisations of post-colonialism in the tradition of Edward Said (along with the analogous reasonings of discourse analysis and New Historicism) and the more abstract propositions of a post-colonialism as put forward by Homi Bhabha that are not drawn from concrete readings is one of the challenges yet to be met. The post-colonial theories and the corresponding practice of a comparative literature as called for by Gayatri Spivak can be advanced only by recourse to the full range of tools of textual analysis developed by structuralism and post-structuralism. But, as Peter Szondi pointed out early in his career, the most sophisticated theoretical models should always be allowed to grow out of the literary texts themselves, rather than being forced upon them; it is simply not the case that they thereby deprive themselves of political relevance.⁴⁵ Comparative literature's theoretical potential is hence not exhausted because theory seems exhausted, quite to the contrary. Because theory should originate from the imaginative counter-reading of texts, and not vice versa, and because comparative literature has so many texts yet to read

and counter-read, theory is by no means dead, nor is its purported end, as Eagleton polemicalises, a question of generation.

5

In, from and beyond Germany today, comparative literature presents itself as a transnational discipline of many hues. In some areas it converges with what I would call ‘transcultural German literature’ which internationalizes ‘German’ issues (and which has only a partial overlap with what is currently called *interkulturelle Germanistik*). Four fields in particular, all of which are closely linked with German history, may exemplify possible future developments of German comparative literature and the transcultural study of German literature as I envisage it: colonialism, fascism, communism and migration.

1. (Post-)Colonialism:

Even though the phase of German colonialism was only short and has comparatively few repercussions today – unlike in Great Britain or France – German scholars have begun to engage in a debate on the legacy of (post-)colonialism for Germany and Germans all the same. Although it differs substantially from Anglo-American-type post-colonial studies, the German debate is nevertheless not unrelated to them. Prepared as it was by comparative imagology, that is, research on literary images of foreign cultures and cultural interrelations especially in German Latin American studies,⁴⁶ both German literature and comparative literature have at long last begun researching the long overlooked corpus of German texts from the colonial period.⁴⁷ Susanne Zantop has identified a ‘latent’ or ‘virtual’ colonialism in German intellectual history, with German texts frequently shot through with an attitude best described as a ‘colonialism without colonies’.⁴⁸ German travel writers, too (from Hans Staden through Georg Forster to the contemporary writer Hans Christoph Buch, who is both travel writer and postcolonial critic), have become popular subjects of investigation.⁴⁹ With some delay, post-colonial German studies have developed considerable momentum, with German comparative literature now also taking up the challenge of post-colonialism.

A particularly illuminating case in point is Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who experienced an unexpected surge in prominence in 2004 when several of his works turned bestsellers.⁵⁰ That Humboldt,

who is probably *the* German writer whose fame (as an almost mythic figure, most notably in Latin America) was most radically disproportionate to the reception of his texts, should experience such a remarkable posthumous renaissance can be attributed not least to the newly discovered relevance of his writing.⁵¹ Of all *Goethezeit* authors Alexander von Humboldt – a naturalist, traveller and artist – was by far the most polyglot, far-travelled and multi-disciplined; indeed, he was one of the earliest practitioners of a genuinely comparative pursuit of knowledge. ‘Everything is exchange’, he noted on 2 August 1803, thus coining a new motto for his unflinching belief in intellectual networks.⁵² In character with his transnational thinking, this note appears in German in the middle of the French section of his travel diaries – on Mexico, which at the time was a Spanish colony. In his cultural-historical essays Humboldt draws extensive comparisons between civilisations in Europe, the Orient and indigenous America. While juxtaposing one with the other, he seeks to combine a number of disciplines – anthropology, botany, art history, geology, linguistics and many more – continually transgressing the boundaries between the ‘two cultures’, the humanities and the natural sciences, at the very moment when their separation had become institutionalized.⁵³ By correlating the Aztecs with the Greeks or modern Prussians with the ancient Egyptians he dissolved the very hierarchies on which colonial hegemony was being premised, not to mention the fact that he explicitly criticised colonial practices and malpractices in his political writings.⁵⁴ Humboldt invented comparative and post-colonial *Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften*, cultural as well as literary studies, *avant les lettres*; his texts present themselves to us today as an originary form of *Komparatistik* originating in, from and beyond Germany, one, maybe even more remarkably, that already engages in the critique of the colonial condition while transcending the boundaries of national philologies and eschewing mono-disciplinarity.⁵⁵

2. Fascism:

With authors coming from nearly all the European languages and cultures, many today living outside of Europe, Holocaust studies are intrinsically comparative by nature; but other areas of the ‘Third Reich’ are also of comparative interest, yet have not received much attention. Something that has been overlooked for many years, for example, are the numerous foreign authors who experienced Nazi-

Germany at first hand from within, presenting their experiences in contemporary essays, letters, diaries or short stories.⁵⁶ Among them are Christopher Isherwood, Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre, Max Frisch, Albert Camus, Denis de Rougemont, Thomas Wolfe, Jean Genet, Meinrad Inglin, Sven Hedin and Karen Blixen. While some of these authors felt genuinely drawn to the ideology of fascism, others were overtly hostile to the regime; others yet saw their attitudes fluctuate over the course of their stay. Historically speaking, such commentaries based on actual experiences of contemporary observers are particularly illuminating in that they exhibit an air of immediacy and authenticity rarely contained in retrospective memoirs written and published long after the event. Such records are hence documents of both literary and factographical interest and belong in equal measure to the fields of (comparative) literature and history. But while they also provide material for a 'traditional' kind of comparative analysis of 'images of (Nazi) Germany', they simultaneously tend to challenge certain theoretical notions of intercultural exchange. For instance, especially those authors who responded most negatively towards Nazi Germany, assuming an overbearing posture and quasi-colonial rhetoric when they castigated it as a 'strange', 'foreign' and 'barbaric' place, in hindsight find themselves historically more than justified. Which only goes to show that accounts documenting particularly dynamic or erratic forms of perception, articulating contradictory or paradoxical positions, or showing ambivalences, idiosyncrasies and reversals of attitude on the part of the traveler, are likely to resist overly schematic models of discourse analysis.

3. *(Post-)Socialism:*

Revisiting the (literary) history of state-imposed communism is quite understandably a vast field calling for an international and multi-disciplined approach. Its 'reflection' in socialist and post-socialist literature seems predestined for comparative analyses. Just as it appears logical for former and current empires such as England, France, or the USA to turn to literature as a means to better understand the legacy of colonialism and decolonisation, scholars of East German and East European literature will want to use literary texts in order to illuminate the legacy of the state-imposed communism that dominated those societies in the second half of the twentieth century. Texts by authors from the former GDR describing their 'realsocialist' past and the

upheaval they experienced in the late 1980s and 1990s like Christa Wolf⁵⁷ offer much ground for comparisons with writers from other countries of the former Eastern block, for example the Russian author Vladimir Sorokin.⁵⁸ Other equally intriguing subjects for comparative research are authors who are ethnically or culturally German, but who were born outside of the German-speaking countries, such as Herta Müller from Siebenbürgen in Romania who in her texts, written and published in German, depicts life in her native country during the Ceaucescu-era.⁵⁹ As such cases show, the comparative study of post-socialist literature can in many ways contribute to the larger enterprises of diaspora studies on the one hand and post-colonialism on the other.

4. Migration:

Conversely, German-language writers with non-German backgrounds too are constituting a rapidly expanding area of research. While English literature from India, French literature from Algeria, Spanish literature from Colombia and Portuguese literature from Brazil have been making the headlines over the past decades, outside of Germany it has gone less noticed that Czechs (Jaromir Konecny), Poles (Radek Knapp, Dariusz Muszer), Russians (Vladimir Vertlib, Wladimir Kaminer), Turks (Feridun Zaimoglu, Emine Sevgi Özdamar), Spaniards (Juan Moreno) or Ethiopians (Asfa-Wossen Assef) have been increasingly leaving their mark on the German literary scene.⁶⁰

From a contemporary German perspective, vast fields of research are opening up. Even if Germany and Austria historically seem to offer only a coda to post-colonial topics, a post-colonially oriented comparative literature will find rich grounds for exploration in today's German-language culture and literature: non-German authors writing in German, German authors writing in a foreign language (like Humboldt), multilingualism, minority literature, migration, hybridity⁶¹ – these are some of the areas, concepts and catchphrases of a German philology that is increasingly transcending its borders.

Different contexts generate different sets of questions, and they require different approaches and solutions. Viewed from a country located in the heart of Europe, it seems much less 'colonial' or 'Eurocentric' in the pejorative sense to engage in the study of 'traditional' European languages and literatures and to participate in

the formation of a specifically European (German) comparative literature than may be the case from the vantage-point of North America. Hence, German comparatists may with good conscience focus on the study of their neighbours' cultures, on readings of British, French, Italian, Spanish or Russian or Greek and Latin authors (and, for that matter, give less priority to others). Perhaps it is this very positionality and specific geo-historical condition that enables our discipline to confine itself to a manageable field and thereby maintain a clear profile – a profile that might easily dissolve if too much material from too many cultural contexts are (as Gayatri Spivak suggests) tackled at once.

As particularly the German example shows, comparative literature can not and need not be oriented towards the same criteria and agendas all over the world. While variations and 'differences' are inevitable, they are also desirable; but precisely these variations and differences also deserve to be addressed and discussed from a comparative perspective.

NOTES

- 1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
- 3 See also, for example, *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast and Benedict Anderson (New York: Verso, 2004).
- 4 Not only does it make a difference in which language the literary material has been produced, but also in which language the studies are being conducted. The chances of literature becoming the subject of a particular discipline and the chances of scholarship being received internationally are likewise highly dependent on which language they use, where they are published, and what audience they reach out to.
- 5 The most important studies published by the comparatist Winfried Menninghaus, for example, are dedicated to the works of these three authors: (1) *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980); *Schwellenkunde. Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986); (2) *Paul Celan – Magie der Form* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980); *Über Paul Celan*, edited with Werner Hamacher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988); (3) *Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 333–484.
- 6 Mark M. Anderson, 'Atlantisches Zerrbild. Was interessiert die Amerikaner an Deutschland? Hitler und der Holocaust. Erfahrungsbericht eines New Yorker Germanisten', in *Die Zeit* 41 (2001).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 2 vols, edited by Rolf Tiedemann

- (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991 = *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 5:1–2).
- 8 Georg Lukács, *Theorie des Romans* [1916] (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1920).
 - 9 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1923/1925/1929).
 - 10 Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, edited by Martin Warnke with Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000 = *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Kurt W. Forster, Nicholas Mann, Salvatore Settis and Martin Warnke, section 2, vol. 1).
 - 11 Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke, 1948). See Hinrich C. Seeba, 'Ernst Robert Curtius: Zur Kulturkritik eines Klassikers in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte', in *Monatshefte* 95:4 (2003), 531–540.
 - 12 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1946).
 - 13 Leo Spitzer, *Representative Essays*, edited by Alban Forcione, Herbert Lindenberger and Madeleine Sutherland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
 - 14 On the connectedness of historical experience, biography and science see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten. Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Werner Krauss* (München/Wien: Hanser, 2002).
 - 15 Viktor Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen* [Lingua Tertii Imperii] (Berlin: Aufbau, 1947).
 - 16 Hinrich C. Seeba, 'Critique of Identity Formation: Toward an Intercultural Model of German Studies', in *German Quarterly* 62:2 (1989), 144–154; 'Zwischen den Kulturen. Wissenschaftsemigration und German Studies', lecture, Universität Tübingen, 14 February 1995.
 - 17 Martin Bormann, posting from 3 January 1941, cited after: Hans Peter Willberg, 'Fraktur and Nationalism', in: *Blackletter: Type and National Identity*, edited by Peter Bain and Paul Shaw (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), pp. 40–49, this quote p. 48.
 - 18 François Dufay, *Le voyage d'automne. Octobre 1941, des écrivains français en Allemagne. Récit* (Paris: Plon, 2000).
 - 19 Frank-Rutger Hausmann, 'Dichte, Dichter, tage nicht!' *Die Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung in Weimar 1941–1948* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004).
 - 20 *Europäische Literatur* appeared monthly, with eight issues in 1942 (May to December), twelve issues in 1943 (January to December) and nine issues in 1944 (January to September).
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 1:3, 2:8, 2:9, 2:12, 3:7.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 1:2, 1:5, 2:2.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 2:1, 1:7, 3:8.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 1:2.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 1:4, 1:7.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 1:5, 1:9, 1:3, 1:8.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 2:5.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, 1:8, 1:6, 2:10.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, 2:1.

- 30 *Ibid.*, 1:1.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 2:3, 2:10.
- 32 On the history of *Germanistik* and the careers of particular scholars see *Internationales Germanistenlexikon: 1800–1950*, edited by Christoph König with Birgit Wägenbaur, 3 vols (Berlin et al.: de Gruyter, 2003).
- 33 Gert Mattenklott, 'Rede aus Anlaß des Institutsjubiläums 1996' (18 January 1996), www.complit.fu-berlin.de/institut/institutsgeschichte/institutsgeschichte.html#Rede.
- 34 Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1956); *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1961); *Die Theorie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels im 18. Jahrhundert*, [posthumously] edited by Gert Mattenklott (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).
- 35 Peter Szondi, *Celan-Studien*, in *Schriften II*, edited by Jean Bollack with Henriette Beese, Wolfgang Fietkau, Hans-Hagen Hildebrandt, Gert Mattenklott, Senta Metz and Helen Stierlin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 319–398.
- 36 Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*, edited by Jean Bollack and Helen Stierlin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).
- 37 Peter Szondi, *Über eine 'Freie (d.h. freie) Universität'. Stellungnahmen eines Philologen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).
- 38 Gert Mattenklott, 'Peter Szondi – Bei Gelegenheit einer Ausgabe von Briefen', www.complit.fu-berlin.de/institut/institutsgeschichte/institutsgeschichte.html#Rede.
- 39 I am indebted to Gert Mattenklott for this and many other pieces of information. I am grateful to Manfred Pfister for his advice. And I thank Robert Weninger for his helpful suggestions.
- 40 Peter Szondi, typescript, from his unpublished writings, cited in: Christoph König with Andreas Isenschmid, *Engführungen. Peter Szondi und die Literatur (Marbacher Magazin 108)*, edited by Ulrich Raulff, 2nd edition (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2005), p. 77.
- 41 For example, photography: Gert Mattenklott, *Karl Blossfeldt 1865–1932. Das fotografische Werk* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1981).
- 42 Florian Cramer analyses digital codes (computer languages, software) with the tools of literary theory. He compares their 'poetics' with the procedures of baroque permutative poetry and postmodern literature: <http://cramer.netzliteratur.net>, <http://pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/research/fcramer/wordsmadeflesh/wordsmadefleshpdf>.
- 43 A manual published by the University of Munich lists 31 departments which offer a diploma in comparative literature in Germany, albeit some only as a 'minor'. These are: Augsburg, Bayreuth, Free University Berlin, Technical University Berlin, Bochum, Bonn, Chemnitz-Zwickau, Erfurt, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Essen, Frankfurt am Main, Frankfurt an der Oder, Gießen, Göttingen, Jena, Karlsruhe, Kassel, Konstanz, Leipzig, Mainz, München, Münster, Osnabrück, Paderborn, Potsdam, Rostock, Saarbrücken, Siegen, Stuttgart, Tübingen, Wuppertal. (*Der kleine Komparatist* [2003], www.komparatistik.uni-muenchen.de/klkomparatist/klkompneu.html#institut.) This situation is undergoing rapid change, however, since many universities are adapting to the new requirements of the recently introduced Bachelor and Master of Arts. German comparative literature is being squeezed by the traditional philologies on the one hand and

- more vocational programmes of study on the other which seek to offer students the practical knowledge they need for the working world (e.g., 'Applied Literature'). With German universities no longer educating their students primarily for an academic market, the necessity of a more vocational approach is becoming ever more evident.
- 44 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994).
 - 45 Oliver Lubrich, 'Welche Rolle spielt der literarische Text im postkolonialen Diskurs?', in: *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 157:242 (2005), 16–39.
 - 46 For example *Deutsche in Lateinamerika – Lateinamerika in Deutschland*, edited by Karl Kohut, Dietrich Briesemeister and Gustav Siebenmann (Frankfurt: Vervuert, 1996); *'Neue Welt' – 'Dritte Welt': Interkulturelle Beziehungen Deutschlands zu Lateinamerika und der Karibik*, edited by Sigrid Bauschinger and Susan L. Cocalis (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1994).
 - 47 Russell A. Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial discourse in German culture* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1998); Hans Christoph Buch, *Die Nähe und die Ferne. Bausteine zu einer Poetik des kolonialen Blicks* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991); *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, edited by Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).
 - 48 Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, family, and nation in precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1997).
 - 49 See for example *Der postkoloniale Blick*, edited by Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997) and *Schriftsteller und 'Dritte Welt'. Studien zum postkolonialen Blick*, edited by Paul Michael Lützeler (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1998).
 - 50 'Die Wiederentdeckung des Forschers, Aufklärers und Weltbürgers Alexander von Humboldt. Das Abenteuer und die Poesie der Wissenschaft' (title story), in *Der Spiegel* 38 (13 September 2004).
 - 51 Oliver Lubrich, 'Alexander von Humboldt als Paradigma', in *transversale* 1 (2005), 58–65; 'El científico como artista', in *Humboldt* 47:142 (2005), 79–80.
 - 52 'Alles ist Wechselwirkung.' Alexander von Humboldt, *Reise auf dem Río Magdalena, durch die Anden und Mexico* [selected texts from his travel diaries], Vol. 1: *Texts*, transcribed and edited by Margot Faak (Berlin, GDR: Akademie Verlag, 1986), p. 358.
 - 53 Ottmar Ette, *Weltbewußtsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2002).
 - 54 For post-colonial readings of Alexander von Humboldt: Oliver Lubrich, 'Alexander von Humboldt: Revolutionizing Travel Literature', in *Monatshefte* 96:3 (Fall 2004), 360–387; 'In the Realm of Ambivalence: Alexander von Humboldt's Discourse on Cuba', in *German Studies Review* 26:1 (2003), 63–80; "'A la manera de los beduinos". Alejandro de Humboldt "orientaliza" a América', in *Casa de las Américas* 232 (2003), 11–29; "'Como antiguas estatuas de bronce". Sobre la disolución del clasicismo en la *Relación histórica de un Viaje a las regiones equinocciales del Nuevo Mundo* de Alejandro de Humboldt', in *Revista de Indias* 61:223 (2001), 749–766.

- 55 Ottmar Ette places Alexander von Humboldt in the centre of his comparative studies on travel and post-modern literature (*Literatur in Bewegung. Raum und Dynamik grenzüberschreitenden Schreibens in Europa und Amerika*, Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2001) and on life sciences and Romance philology (*ÜberLebensWissen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie*, Berlin: Kadmos, 2004).
- 56 A first anthology appeared in 2004: *Reisen ins Reich, 1933 bis 1945. Ausländische Autoren berichten aus Deutschland*, edited by Oliver Lubrich (Frankfurt: Die Andere Bibliothek/Eichborn, 2004). See also: Oliver Lubrich, 'En el corazón de las tinieblas: Escritores viajeros en la Alemania nazi', in *Revista de Occidente* 266–267 (2003), 158–185; 'Formen historischer Erfahrung: Die Metamorphosen der Martha Dodd', in *Oxford German Studies* 34:1 (2005), 79–102.
- 57 For example: Christa Wolf, *Medea. Stimmen* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1996); *Lebhaftig* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2002).
- 58 For example: Vladimir Sorokin [*Goluboe salo*] (Moscow: ad marginem, 1999).
- 59 Herta Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* (Munich/Vienna: Hanser, 2003); etc.
- 60 The following is an (incomplete) list of 'German' literature by authors from non-German 'backgrounds': Jaromir Konecny, *Zurück nach Europa* (Riedstadt: Ariel, 1996); *Das Geschlechtsleben der Emigranten* (Riedstadt: Ariel, 2000) – Radek Knapp, *Franio* (Vienna/Munich: Piper, 1994); *Herrn Kukas Empfehlungen* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 2001); *Papiertiger* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 2003) – Dariusz Muszer, *Die Freiheit riecht nach Vanille* (Munich: A1, 1999); *Der Echsenmann* (Munich: A1, 2001) – Vladimir Vertlib, *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (Vienna: Deuticke, 2001); *Zwischenstationen* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1999); *Abschiebung* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1995); *Letzter Wunsch* (Vienna: Deuticke, 2003) – Wladimir Kaminer, *Russendisko* (Munich: Goldmann, 2000); *Schönhauser Allee* (Munich: Goldmann, 2001); *Militärmusik* (Munich: Goldmann, 2001); *Die Reise nach Trulala* (Munich: Goldmann, 2002); *Mein deutsches Dschungelbuch* (Munich: Goldmann, 2003); *Ich mache mir Sorgen, Mama* (Munich: Goldmann, 2004) – Juan Moreno, *Von mir aus* (Munich: DVA, 2004) – Feridun Zaimoglu, *Kanak Sprak* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995); *Koppstoff* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1998); *Abschaum* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1997); *Kopf und Kragen* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2001); *German Amok* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002); *Zwölf Gramm Glück* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004) – Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Mutterzunge* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998); *Das Leben ist eine Karamanserei...* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992); *Die Brücke vom goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1999) – Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *Manieren* (Frankfurt: Eichborn, 2003).
- 61 Oliver Lubrich, 'Are Russian Jews Postcolonial? Wladimir Kaminer and Identity Politics', in *East European Jewish Affairs* 33:3 (Winter 2003), 35–53.