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Comparative Literature in France: A Status Report

ALAIN MONTANDON

Comparative Literature in France has benefited not only from a solid academic tradition but also from an institutional recognition which has given support to students from the first years at university to the *agrégation* and doctorate level. This explains the relatively high number of lecturers/researchers who are comparatists in this country, around 200 academic staff (*maîtres de conférences* and *professeurs*) teach Comparative Literature from the first semester at university up to *agrégation* and doctoral seminars (although this number is considerably lower than it should be if we compare it to the staff/student ratio of other literary disciplines). The European reform (LMD) has confirmed Comparative Literature as a compulsory component of French literary studies at both undergraduate and master degree levels. This means that a taught component of Comparative Literature is compulsory for French literature students throughout their studies (and if they compete for the *agrégation* in modern languages and literature, they have to take two major examinations in the subject, one written and one oral). For foreign language students, Comparative Literature is an option they can take within the course of their studies.

While courses in Comparative Literature at undergraduate degree level (i.e., the first three years of study) can be very varied, they tend by and large to aggregate around the study of themes (e.g., jealousy in the novel), genre (e.g., the picaresque novel, the fantastic narrative, theatre during the Baroque era, etc.), literary myths, or the relationships that obtain between literature and the other arts (music, painting, cinema). The goal of many such courses is to introduce students to the main currents of European and extra-European literature; in most instances texts will be studied in French translation rather than the original, limiting the choice of texts.

The recently implemented new Master's degree, incorporating a

fourth and fifth year of study, the latter replacing the former DEA, prepares students either for advanced doctoral research or provides them with a particular vocational orientation. Teaching for the Master is supported by established research centres which are recognised by the Ministry of Education (*Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale*). The importance given to Comparative Literature varies from institution to institution and department to department, with each university offering a unique set of combinations. Some Masters are entirely comparative in focus and content whilst others offer only a comparative component (we occasionally encounter amongst French literature specialists a lack of recognition of a discipline that they consider non-essential to their parochial French priorities). A Master is typically composed of a specified number of taught components and involves at the end of the course of study the writing of a 100-plus page dissertation, which constitutes a student's first serious piece of academic research and often forms the beginning of a doctoral thesis.

In France like anywhere else, doctoral theses in Comparative Literature tend to encompass a broad range of themes and languages (generally from the classical period to the contemporary era). A working knowledge of the languages represented within the chosen literary corpus is a requisite. After four or five years on average, the student submits a thesis of an average length of 500 to 700 pages, which is followed by a viva voce in front of a panel of four or five professors.

Group research is organised either within a framework of units run in collaboration with the CNRS (but such units have never existed in Comparative Literature up until now), or within the framework of research centres, where research teams (*équipes d'accueil*) are financially supported by the Ministry. These teams are composed of comparatists but also of French and/or foreign literature specialists. They run study days, symposia, and conferences and provide support to PhD students who are automatically attached to a centre and in turn support the research of its members.

At the disciplinary level, activities in Comparative Literature are represented and supported by an association called the French Society of General and Comparative Literature (Société Française de Littérature Générale et Comparée, SFLGC), the equivalent of the American ACLA, the British BCLA or the German DGAVL, and whose internet site www.vox-poetica.org/sflgc is currently under construction. This site, once completed, will provide a directory of French comparatists and a detailed list of research centres in Comparative

Literature, stating their interests and research projects; it will also announce new publications in the field and forthcoming conferences and issue calls for papers. The SFLGC is also developing a web-based library with relevant articles on Comparative Literature.

With around 300 members, the SFLGC also publishes each year an internal quarterly and an annual centred on the main issues of the *agrégation* programme directed at all those who are concerned with the theme studied in any given year. Each year, students who are preparing for the *agrégation* are questioned on two aspects of Comparative Literature; some recent topics were 'Aspects of the Naturalist Novel: Zola, *l'Assommoir* – Giovanni Verga, *Les Malavoglia* – Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*', 'The Don Juan Theme: Tirso de Molina, *El Burlador de Seville* – Molière, *Dom Juan* – Pushkin, *The Stone Guest* – Lenau, *Don Juan*' and 'Love and the Fantastic in the Texts of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Théophile Gautier and Georges Rodenbach'. The SFLGC soon hopes to replace this publication with an international academic series entitled *Poétiques comparatistes* aiming to consider comparative questions of a theoretical nature. Filling a gap in the range of publications of our discipline in France, *Poétiques comparatistes* will provide scholars a place to address significant developments in contemporary theory, with each volume being devoted to the exploration of a select research issue through feature articles offering surveys of research and original investigations. Most articles are to be in French, but some can be published in other languages (English, German, Spanish, Italian). Each issue of the new series will conclude with a 'Critical Survey', a review section of works published within the last twenty years on the theme explored. The first two volumes will be devoted to 'Literature and Anthropology' and to 'Sexual Identities'. In sum, with each volume striving to be both a critical tool as well as providing useful and valuable background information, this series should form an ideal complement to the widely circulated French quarterly of Comparative Literature, the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*.

As may be known to readers of *Comparative Critical Studies*, the SFLGC organises a conference each year that is attended by a large number of comparatists from France and abroad. Last year's congress (as of my writing this article in late 2005), held at the University of Saint-Etienne, was on the theme of '*Métissages*' (Hybrid Voices), and its proceedings have just been published.¹ The topic of the conference taking place in September 2005 at Valenciennes is 'Analogies: Towards

a definition of the relationships between literature and other forms of arts'. In 2006, the University of Poitiers will be hosting the SFLGC annual conference and, in a drive to increase foreign participation, speakers from abroad are free to give papers in their native tongue.

Moreover, the SFLGC has recently launched two university summer schools in order to broaden interest in Comparative Literature. The first took place at the French national library, the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in Paris. Its theme was 'L'imaginaire de la bibliothèque' (The Imaginary World of Libraries). Thirty doctoral students from a wide range of European countries (selected from seventy applicants) were invited to participate in this event. In addition to the special privilege of visiting some of the most arcane spaces in Parisian libraries, and of being informed about their bibliographical wealth, these students benefited from taking part in specialist lectures given by some of the best known European comparatists and working collaboratively together in designated round table events, thereby getting to know one another, communicating, networking and exchanging ideas. The publication of the proceedings of these events and lectures is planned. The SFLGC hopes that such events, bringing together young European comparatists, might take place regularly in France as well as across Europe and that the European Network in Comparative Literature will be useful in developing such projects.

Another university project taking place in November 2006 and lasting for one week is a seminar for 200 secondary school teachers. With its theme 'Reading Foreign Works in Translation' it aims to boost high school teachers' awareness of and knowledge regarding the complexities of using translations in literary studies. Teachers of French in secondary schools typically study not just the classics of French literature, but also of foreign literature. We believe therefore that at least part of their training should be slanted toward an approach which only comparatists can provide. The French Ministry of Education has yet again given its moral and financial support to this unique project. The seminar aims to assist teachers planning to teach foreign language texts from antiquity to the present in translation, providing them with the necessary didactic tools to convey an adequate understanding of the problematics of linguistic transfer.

In terms of publication opportunities, French comparatists are fortunate to have numerous outlets and series for comparative research which are distributed through various university presses and large

publishing houses (such as the PUF European Literature section 'Littératures européennes', led by four highly respected comparatists). In particular the series 'General and Comparative Literature Library' (*Bibliothèque de littérature générale et comparée*) of the Champion Editions, with Jean Bessière serving as general editor, stands out and should be given special mention.

If Comparative Literature in France seems, as in many other countries, to be in a perpetual state of crisis, then maybe more in terms of its academic standing than its disciplinary parameters, which in France are possibly less contested than elsewhere – at least judging by the two last ACLA Reports and Gayatri Spivak's recent book *Death of a Discipline*. Nevertheless, it is still battling for recognition especially amongst those, should we call them 'mono-linguistic', colleagues in the larger field of literary studies who remain overly centred on French literature and claim to already have attained the lofty specialist status that they like to deny to their comparatist colleagues, whom they criticise for being far too general in their approach to the subject of literature. Differences in method and even in epistemology might be seen to explain such a phenomenon and justify such an attitude, not to mention personal quarrels, misunderstandings and differences of opinion; but some tensions also stem from the fiercely competitive academic environment and the continual battle for limited government resources. But at least through its longstanding history as a discipline, its many seminal publications and the numerous kinds of activities undertaken by comparatists today the field's institutional perimeters seem fairly accurately staked out and its disciplinary parameters are widely accepted, ranging from the role of travellers, translations, international literary exchange, *imagologie*, cultural mediations, reception studies, influences, imitations, rewritings and adaptations to issues of literary morphology and genre, theories and poetics, and the study of literary myths.

The seminal works in French Comparative Literature by Pierre Brunel, Yves Chevrel and Daniel-Henri Pageaux² supply university students and advanced researchers of Comparative Literature alike with a rich panorama of the field and provide extensive and essential bibliographical listings; and they are not alone in this attempt. Co-authored by a number of young university researchers, the University of Lille³ published a volume in 1999 entitled *Comparatism Today* ('*Le comparatisme aujourd'hui*'), which assembles chapters on myth and literature, reception studies, francophone literary studies, and the

interrelationship of literature and the arts, as well as providing stimulating new perspectives on the teaching of Comparative Literature; this volume reflects in a very acute, but also at times controversial way the thoughts of young French comparatists and their take on their discipline.³

This perpetual crisis, along with the widespread feeling of unrest, is of course and ironically due to the very wealth and dynamism that characterizes our discipline, one that does not shy away from tackling even the broadest of subject areas, that likes to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries, and that defines its methods interdisciplinarily rather than narrowly; as such, comparative research often involves some risk-taking which does not always sit well with the mono-linguistic traditionalist. Moreover, Comparative Literature defines itself through an essential and fundamental recognition of and opening toward the Other, focussing on analogies, affinities and influences as well as on significant differences, on *différance* and *alterité*. As D.-H. Pageaux has written, the question of Otherness is so central to the thinking of Comparative Literature because it 'proceeds from the awareness of [*une prise de conscience*], and thus from a mode of critical reflection on, what is foreign and unfamiliar in a text, in a writer, in a culture.' Polysystems research – which is by definition comparative in nature – gives special attention to the cultural differentials that engender a sense of otherness in human beings and adds a descriptive dimension to the study of (literary) cultures, with the focus being on exchanges, oppositions, variations, imitations, adaptations, analogies, equivalences or '*homomorphies*' (to use one of D.-H. Pageaux's terms). Another concept at the centre of comparative methodology is intertextuality, a term that was coined by and large by French theoreticians in the 1960s (notably Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes), but on which Gérard Genette has over the past three decades produced a number of seminal works.

Another central concern is the debate surrounding the concept of francophone literature: does it belong to French (national) literature or to Comparative Literature? While it is generally accepted that Comparative Literature deals only with literatures from different cultural and linguistic areas, would it not be overly hegemonic to simply subsume foreign literatures in French under the heading of French literature? The question is of course one of delimitation. Similarly, comparatists have long been engaged in asking how much the term literature itself can and needs to be stretched: for example,

children's literature can belong to French studies when the corpus is specifically francophone but to comparative studies when several literatures are considered. The same type of problem is evident when we compare literature and the arts, which, depending on the corpus and method(s) used in any given study, can be associated with French literature, musicology, art history, Comparative Literature and more. Similar issues emerge with what we in French call *parallitères*, namely comic strips, science-fiction, popular novels, detective stories and so forth, or with the study of cinema adaptations of literary works. As Didier Souiller has claimed, one might conclude that 'Comparative Literature studies constant exchange relationships which constitute a vast system of interactions and ramifications which, like all systems, is autonomous and characterized by specific laws and functions.'⁴ Comparative Literature is, then, first and foremost comparative reading, a reading whereby texts are positioned as mirrors, so to say, so as to reflect and highlight one another, whether through affinity or difference, distance or detour, in order to foster their better understanding. For an expansion of this notion of mirroring comparison I refer to Pageaux's excellent summary article 'Comparative Literature and comparisons' ('Littérature comparée et comparaisons'),⁵ to which the echo amongst French comparatists has been considerable.

It is predictable that in the near future the debate surrounding the orientation and definition of Comparative Literature in France will increasingly follow the Anglo-Saxon lead, for example in terms of the relationship of Gender Studies to comparative studies or the disciplinary reconfiguration of Comparative Literature in general, including the role(s) and delimitation(s) of francophone literatures, postcolonial literatures, minority studies, diaspora studies, etc. Nevertheless, the majority of French comparatists, although always open to epistemological debate, may turn out to be rather reluctant to accept certain North American orientations, especially where Comparative Literature's existence becomes threatened because it is subsumed under Cultural Studies, or even Area Studies as Spivak demands, where it is made to disappear as the study of literature proper. Still, discussions on the potential relationships – or maybe better: the potential of the relationships – between Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature are currently on the agenda in France, as are deliberations on the ways in which literature contributes to the formation of identities, be they cultural, sexual, political, or of any other kind.

NOTES

- 1 *Métissages littéraires*, edited by Yves Clavaron and Bernard Dieterle (Actes du XXXIIe Congrès de la SFLGC, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2005).
- 2 See for example Pierre Brunel, Claude Pichois, and A.-M. Rousseau, *Qu'est-ce que c'est la littérature comparée?* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1983); *Précis de littérature comparée*, edited by Pierre Brunel and Yves Chevrel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989); Yves Chevrel, *La Littérature comparée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989 – Series: Que sais-je?, No. 499); Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *La Littérature générale et comparée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994).
- 3 *Le Comparatisme aujourd'hui*, edited by Sylvie Ballestra-Puech and Jean-Marc Moura (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Université Lille 3 [Travaux et Recherches], 1999).
- 4 Introduction in *Littérature comparée*, sous la direction de Didier Souiller (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, collection premier cycle, 1997), p. 788.
- 5 In *RLC/ Revue de Littérature comparée* 3 (1998); also available on the SFLGC website.