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Henry H.H. Remak

THE SITUATION OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITIES

Jean Monnet, the extrospective founder of the contemporary European community, built his achievement on the insight of the introspective Swiss thinker, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, that individuals perish but institutions endure.

There, in a nutshell, lies the problem of Comparative Literature as an *enseignement* in Western universities today. Ask your colleagues in English or French or German literature operating in a major university lacking a Comparative Literature program why that is so, and they will invariably answer that they do not need Comparative Literature because they are already practicing it. "We are all comparatists". If they are Shakespeareans, they would, so they say, not dream of failing to refer to Plutarch or Amyot; if they are Racinians, Greek and Roman tragedy cannot be bypassed; without the *Nouvelle Héloïse* there would be no *Werther*; the history of the sonnet must necessarily take in all of Western and Southern Europe; Poe constitutes some of the lifeblood of Baudelaire, Baudelaire in turn of Rilke, Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, and what would Shaw have done without Ibsen? Everything is for the best – so they say.

The answer is as facile as it is common. First, dare one ask how much time and thought *really* go into comparative aspects in a course billed under a national literature label? Perhaps the equivalent of one lecture or at most two, perhaps one student paper or at most two, scattered allusions here and there – all, very likely, incidental if interesting appendages, 'exotic' tidbits, secondary illustrations of an essentially national phenomenon. Nothing systematic, no topography of a field of endeavor can ever develop from such fortuitous afterthought, from occasional cosmopolitan concessions.

But what *is* our field of endeavor? Here, again, a rather specious argument is used. "What do you mean by 'Comparative Literature'?

Don't we all compare literature?" And so we explain that the name is not really accurate, it is more historically than logically explicable: it means, on the most immediate level, the relationships between two or more literatures written in different languages. "So", we are told, "your criterion is purely spatial, it's still all literature, you don't have a methodology unique to you, you don't belong." Well, no serious comparatist has ever claimed that our method of analyzing literature fundamentally differs from that of a scholar in Chinese, Japanese, French, German, or Russian – but neither do these national literatures have any claim to methodologies distinct to themselves, and yet they are all represented by autonomous units in most major universities. They merit their recognition because they deal with sufficiently divergent historical (including linguistic and cultural) evolutions. It takes Comparative Literature, however, to coordinate and contrast these processes by both diachronic/vertical as well as by synchronic/horizontal comparisons. Without Comparative Literature, the pillars do not relate to each other and have no roof. And, while we have no ambition to establish a methodology all of our own, certain inherent factors do influence our methodology: contrastive linguistic analysis, *systematic* comparison, and both the esthetic and more broadly cultural interaction of foreign literatures demand a knowledge of, and empathy with, language of dimensions beyond monolingualism. The encounter between two different cultures furnishes challenges transcending those between subcultures; it requires a studied cultivation of a flair, of a bi- or multi-cultural familiarity not identical with one's rootedness in the home culture (though that is an essential part of the comparatist's equipment) or professional concern with *a* culture, domestic or foreign. The analysis of translations, a rapidly expanding field, is unique and exclusive to Comparative Literature. If conclusions are to be drawn about the phylogeny of a national literature and culture, inferences should also be made about the thrust of larger cultural units and between coherent (which is not synonymous with self-sufficient) cultural entities. They do not materialize if this larger perspective is left to the vagaries of a professor committed principally to the propagation of one language or culture.

But the hydra (pardon the expression) raises its head again: how about competence? How can you be proficient in all literatures?

Once again, excessive expectations are raised as smokescreens for delaying or frustrating action. Who claims to be an expert on world literature? Even in national literatures, expertises have consistently shrunk in the last hundred years. Comparative Literature is an opening up of literature toward its international implications and, while a cosmopolitan knack should be in the knapsack of every good comparatist, his or her area of expertise will not necessarily be so much more extensive than that of a colleague in a national literature. His competencies will simply be cut in a different but equally legitimate way: not, say, German literature from Grimmelshausen to Goethe or from Goethe to Grass, but European Enlightenment or Romanticism or Symbolism or Expressionism, or the history and structure of a *genre* (the novella, the essay, the comedy), or the metamorphosis of an intriguing and enduring theme or myth, or a combination of any of these. National and comparative aptitudes are, of course, not mutually exclusive; many legitimate and sensible combinations are possible.

Our challenger is, however, not yet down and out. He points to the recent and dramatic emergence, not only in the New World but also, if more gradually, in the Old, of the interdisciplinary forays of Comparative Literature: Literature and the Arts, Literature and Society, Literature and Religion, Literature and Science, etc. Will not, our persistent interlocutor claims, serious questions of how to combine divergent methodologies raise their heads? They have, they will. But that is just the point: entering the areas of related and yet significantly distinct purposes, phenomena, and effects such as Literature and Painting, Literature and Music, Literature and Film offers not only the best but the *only* way of testing the range and the limits of different methodologies. What else are scholarship and science about but to explore, test, weigh, accept, reject, extend, and qualify more universally valid explanations?

Here we confront the second major challenge to Comparative Literature today, the one that has taken the place, in some locations, of the somewhat shopworn argument of "national literature only". That most recent nemesis is called "general literature" and/or "literary theory". It is more dangerous than the old 'national only' foe because it conveys the claim that Comparative Literature is subsumed under

general literature and literary theory. There is no lack of current chairs in "General and Comparative Literature" or "Literary Theory and Comparative Literature" but, when one looks closely, one finds that Comparative Literature is submerged under the icebergs of "General Literature" (whatever that may mean) and "Literary Theory".

No serious and systematic scholar can gainsay the necessity for theoretical probing. At its best, 'theory' conveys a key to a number of observations, an explanation of representative behavior. It is an essential part and parcel of the mission of man to relate the myriads of phenomena with which we are overwhelmed, to discover cause and effect, to bring, in short, a reasonably logical or plausible order into chaos. An explanation that fits some or many findings has a scientific, economic, philosophical, religious, and social value higher than an elucidation that fits only one problem. I did not add the adjective "scholarly" to this list: to the extent that we are 'scientific', it belongs there; to the extent that we are esthetic, it does not necessarily, since analysis of the unique feature or combination of features is as justifiable in our endeavor as the locating of a common denominator.

But the kind of theory that has been flourishing abundantly these last fifteen years is very short of genuine textual verification in general, substantiation via Comparative Literature in particular, and notably and painfully deficient in literary-esthetic sensibilities. As the interdisciplinary ambitions of supposedly 'literary' scholars have mushroomed (linguistics, structuralism, history of ideas, philosophy, political and economic ideology, communication theory/semiotics), their literary sense and their knowledge of foreign language and cultures have declined. Comparative Literature is not well served in and through such a subservient arrangement. Instead of being the principal laboratory of any horizontally or vertically oriented theory of literature, we are, at best, a somewhat condescendingly treated footnote, with the explicit or implicit inference that we are antiquated.

That we are also at fault for having gotten into this tight spot shall not be denied. We have made far too little systematic effort to develop for *our* purposes whatever is productive in the new theories. Comparative Literature must be vital, creative, and risk experimenta-

tion if it wants to lead the pack rather than drag itself after it. But neither are we the old fogies a conveniently anachronistic view of our field accuses us of being. No approach to literature is 'bad' in itself, or obsolete. Three major concerns of older scholarship – erudition, morality, and biography – viewed as banes by subsequent generations have made a triumphant comeback, or at least demonstrated their continuity, in our own era, whether in the learned quotations and allusions of Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, Grass, and Borges, in the moral bases of the criticism of Irving Babbitt, T.S. Eliot, and Fredric Jameson, or in the great literary biographies written in our days of Milton, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Flaubert, Henry James, Pound, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Rilke, and Hesse. It is fashionable to poke fun at Comparative Literature as still beholden to "sources", "reception", "influence", "images of foreign countries", and "travelogues". In the first place, that is only partly so: the number and sophistication of purely comparative (analogy, contrast) or structuralist-comparative, not to speak of interdisciplinary, studies, in our field has increased measurably in the last ten years. But neither am I willing to concede that there is anything wrong *per se* with the old categories. Sources, reception (an old subject of Comparative Literature but now made far more searching and systematic as a result of newer 'reception theory'), and influence are facts of literary life. Their exploration is thoroughly justified, regardless of passing fashions. Everything depends on *how* it is done – and that is true for just about any subject or approach.

On any substantive, academic, and intellectual grounds, I do not see any justification for the not-so-benign neglect of Comparative Literature in many universities, especially in Scandinavia, England, Ireland, West Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Nor are economic factors the only culprits. True, the halting of academic expansion in the 1970's has adversely affected the 'newer' subjects, among them Comparative Literature. True, students have almost everywhere shifted to vocational subjects more likely to provide them with jobs. But these circumstances, though serious, will not last forever. Literary, *truly* literary, studies are experiencing a 'down'. They are bound to have an 'up' again. But there are doubts whether our 'up' will be as 'up' as in the 1950's and

1960's. Therefore the trend in the Humanities is towards academic protectionism rather than expansionism, and that is bad for Comparative Literature, which is expansionist by definition. Even more serious is what appears to me (though more as a distinct impression than a research finding) to be the decline in the knowledge *and the active use* of foreign languages *for literary purposes* among university students. We have never been overly blessed in the United States with linguistic student prodigies, but the situation in Europe seems to be deteriorating also. There is a reciprocally damaging relationship between the scarcity of teaching jobs in the foreign languages and the available pool of persons competent to teach foreign language, literature, and culture. Where there are few jobs, the incentives for students to enter the field decline, but conversely the jobs may further decline because there are too few good candidates. A further handicap to the institutionalizing of Comparative Literature in European universities is the lack of teaching positions in the secondary school system geared to that kind of preparation. We do not teach Comparative Literature in American high schools either, but candidates with strong competence in a foreign language or two plus Comparative Literature will find this combination useful for teaching masterpieces of (world) literature or even comparative cultures in the high schools. The advantage of the American college and high school system is that it is more decentralized and diversified, and therefore more flexible, than most European secondary school structures. As an indigenous structure, the happily muddled institution of the American College is totally absent from the European continent. The College has a great deal of independence and elasticity in experimenting with curricula and hiring staff. This facilitates joint appointments in Comparative Literature and another subject. Besides, changing professional orientation is easier, more part of our tradition and (non-)structure, than in Europe: it is increasingly common now for a foreign or comparative language and literature major to go into such fields as banking, industry, publishing, or the travel or hotel business.

It is always easier to analyze a problematic situation than to improve it. Our first commitment must be to our intellectual vigor: everything else follows from it. The world will continue to shrink, to

be more accessible, but at the same time people will become more conscious of preserving their cultural identity. Both tendencies provide opportunities for Comparative Literature. On the practical level, we need to be much more enterprising. While every newly created independent Comparative Literature program in a university is a professional and psychological boon to the development of our discipline, it is illusory stubbornness or vestigial feudalism to refuse to do anything unless a "chair" is established. With good will and a little abnegation, two or more professors from different departments or institutes in *any* university can get together at *any* time and resolve to combine efforts in a course or seminar of a comparative nature. Nothing succeeds like success. Institutionalized Comparative Literature seldom falls from the sky: it develops naturally and gradually from initial volunteerism that engenders growing student, faculty, and administration interest. Not every comparative colloquium or seminar has to be designed as a monument for all time. We need to experiment, to sift by doing, before we structure. But once a chair, a program, or an institute has been endowed, the university must be held to a continuous commitment to the substance of our discipline. All too often, especially in Germany, Comparative Literature disappears except in name when a new occupant of a chair is appointed who has no interest in Comparative Literature.

We must take a much greater interest in career opportunities for students in secondary and adult education as well as in colleges and universities, in administrative educational positions (there seems to be no shortage of these!), and in related industries. We must be not only willing but glad to teach introductory courses for students in their early stages who are not yet committed to a major or a substantive minor. We should be initiating and promoting team-taught courses for a double purpose: to arouse the interest of students and to engage colleagues, especially from national literature departments, in collaborative comparative ventures. We must take a greater and sustained interest in individual students on any level, practice what we preach. Any student receptive to literature deserves some humanistic individual attention himself or herself. We must be much more active and concerted on the educational-political (educational policy) and bureaucratic levels where decisions about curricula are

being made. We must find a place in our training which prepares students for what it means to be the member of a *profession* and of an *educational institution*, not just an individual teacher and researcher. Above all, we must counteract our own inclination to lay the blame on others and to use that as an excuse for not doing anything ourselves.

My generation has turned out to be, with some luck, the *beati possidentes* of the Comparative Literature Establishment. Its counterpart in the year 2000 may be severely truncated and static unless we take our responsibilities for the right blend of continuity and *renouvellement* in the next fifteen years as seriously as we took the struggle to get started after 1945.

Henry H.H. Remak

DIE SITUATION DER KOMPARATISTIK AN DEN UNIVERSITÄTEN
(Zusammenfassung)

Die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft hat als Lehrfach an den Universitäten in den letzten fünfzehn Jahren nicht die Fortschritte gemacht, die ihrer rapiden Entwicklung in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren entsprechen. Die Gründe sind keineswegs nur wirtschaftlicher Art. Sie bestehen aus Argumenten wie: „Wir brauchen die Komparatistik nicht, wir sind ja sowieso schon Komparatisten"; „Der Name paßt nicht für die Disziplin"; „Die Komparatistik hat keine eigene Methode"; „Die Komparatistik umfaßt ein zu weites und verschiedenartiges Gebiet, um akademisch achtbar zu sein"; „Die neuere interdisziplinäre Ausrichtung der Komparatistik verschärft dieses Identitätsproblem noch"; „Die Komparatistik hat zur Theorieauseinandersetzung der letzten Jahre wenig beigetragen und ist durch sie abgelöst worden."

Die Einwände werden systematisch geprüft. Ohne die Mängel und Grenzen der Komparatistik zu verbergen, wird festgestellt, daß sie eine dem Studium der Nationalliteraturen zwar übergeordnete aber nicht überlegene, zusätzliche Rolle spielt, daß sie einer literarischen Dimension und Realität entspricht, die nicht aus traditionsgebundenen oder universitätspolitischen Gründen unter den Teppich gefegt werden darf, und daß sie vor allem nicht nur von dem persönlichen Wohlwollen bzw. von der Abneigung eines Lehrstuhlinhabers abhängig sein darf: es muß ihr als Fach Fortdauer zugesichert werden. Das wird aber kaum über Nacht geschehen. Vor „Glücksquellillusionen" wird gewarnt. Die Aufwärtsbewegung der Komparatistik an den Universitäten wird eher durch eine stetige Strategie der persönlichen, konkreten, kleinen Schritte angebahnt werden, die sich z.B. in gemeinsam unterrichteten, durch verschiedene Fachvertreter geplanten Seminaren und engeren humanistischen Kontakten zwischen Professoren und Studenten auswirkt.