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## The Uses of the Useless: Comparative Literature and the Multinational Corporation

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## The Uses of the Useless: Comparative Literature and the Multinational Corporation<sup>①</sup>

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The study of comparative literature has been beset with two difficulties in the past, the first involving the word “comparative” and the second involving the word “literature”. The difficulty with “comparative” is rather straightforward; since the act of comparison requires familiarity with two references, there is a prior need, on the part of the comparatist, to be familiar with more than one literature. In the United States, this condition is not always easy to meet, since students emerging from high school are fortunate to have a solid grounding in one national literature—let alone two. This is perhaps a lesser problem in more cosmopolitan cultures, such as the French and the German (where comparative literature emerged and developed), because the strength of a European education in classical studies, Romance literatures, and comparative philologies engendered a substantial pool of students who are well-versed in the literature of more than one language.

The second difficulty is more troublesome to deal with, because it entails not only shifting definitions but also psychological effects. The root of the word “literature” refers to anything written down. When an insurance salesman offers a client some “literature”, he is definitely not referring to the classic texts of the tradition. “Literature” also has a sense, now archaic, but still vestigial in current usage, of “an acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books, polite or humane learning, literary culture.”<sup>②</sup> When Samuel Johnson writes, about Milton, that “His literature was unquestionably

great. He read all the languages which are considered either as learned or polite," he is referring to what Milton had read, and not what he had written. We may not often use the noun today in this way, but the word "literature" still bears the stamp—perhaps more than a stamp, as we shall see—of the high-toned, of the upper crust (In this sense, there is an assumption that only nobles are "polite" and that the lower classes are, almost by definition, coarse, rude, and vulgar.). In describing a rough-hewn, uneducated figure, William Dean Howells writes, "In many things he was grotesquely ignorant; he was a man of very small literature." Clearly, the word "literature" is close in meaning to what we might call "breeding" or "pedigree". The semantics of the word also inhabits a sense in which "culture" can only be high; and that the populus have either "no culture" or at best — "low culture." <sup>③</sup>

Even the early uses of "literature" to indicate what we call "literary work or production" had a distinct social nuance. The word was defined functionally as the products of "a man of letters" (although the word "products" would undoubtedly have been considered inappropriate for what a man of letters produces). "Literature" here is not defined constructively or generically, but merely as the outpourings whatever they may be, however variable from a professed "man of letters". It is the quality of the author, especially his social and cultural standing, that is reflected in the value ascribed to his "literature."

I contend this somewhat snobbish sense of "literature" still clings to the word, so that the reading of texts—poetry, novels, drama—is viewed as an almost "foppish" activity, one that bears no relation to the harsh facts of reality, or to the material benefits of hard work. The fact that devoted readers of fine literature celebrate the pleasures of reading makes the study of literature all the more dubious; in this guise, it hardly qualifies as a "discipline", which by its nature is systematic, serious, and usually arduous. There is in this image of "literature" an aura of self-indulgence,

not merely in the readers who have the leisure to enjoy reading, but the writers whose fictions are often self-absorbed if not entirely narcissistic.

In sum, then, the word “literature” has suffered from a host of unwanted associations: it reflects a pre-modern society that separated the literate elite from the illiterate masses; it represents an “amateur ideal” of leisure activity, in which the latitude to indulge in the fine arts was the result of a fortunate but ill-deserved inheritance of the upper class; it is perceived as prototypically vain, both with respect to its tendency toward self-indulgence and with respect to its total irrelevance to commerce, business, or the harsh realities of making a living.

In this view, the study of literature was considered “futile”—except for verbal daydreamers, insular academic scholars, and wannabe writers. In other words, the study of literature is “useless”.

To these animadversions, I would like to offer three refutations, the first ontological, the second historical, and the third heuristic.

To begin with, we need to examine our notion of the “useful”, for “usefulness” reflects a contemporary perspective, because what may be useless in one generation is hardly useless in another. Usefulness is not an innate attribute of an object but a reflection of the ingenuity of the user. One is reminded of this lesson, of course, in *Chuang-tzu* and his parable of the “useless tree”. Those who scorn the futilities of literature and of fiction are like Hui Tzu [Huizi] who complained: “I have a big tree named *ailanthus*. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them!”

Chuang Tzu’s answer can be applied to literature: “Now you have this big tree and you’re distressed because it’s useless. Why don’t you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes

will never shorten its life. Nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain" (Burton Watson translation: Chapter One, "Free and Easy Wandering," *Chuang Tzu: The Complete Works*, p. 35). Literature, just because it is, ultimately, immaterial in more than one sense of the word, may outlast all the material objects that suffer obsolescence and oblivion—like the perfectly functioning computers that are discarded after some three or more years of use. Utility is a sometime thing, and it takes imagination to make use of something which is commonly regarded as useless. Take, for example, the burrs and nettles that one finds in the shrubs and undergrowth in the woals. These nuisances will stick to one's clothes and one's skin and need to be picked off one by one. Yet, these annoyances were viewed differently by the Swiss inventor George de Mestral; when he took his dog for a walk, he noticed that his dog was covered with burrs. With the help of a textile plant in France, he developed a "unique, two-sided fastener"—which he called "velcro" and patented in 1955. Soon he was selling over sixty million yards of "Velcro" and now "Velcro" is omnipresent. What was useless, even annoying, to most people became a billion-dollar industry to George de Mestral.

But the version of the parable of the useless tree in the Chuang Tzu that is most apposite to comparative literature is the anecdote about Carpenter Shih [Shi], which is worth citing in full:

Carpenter Shih went to Ch'i and, when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills. The lowest branches were eighty feet from the ground, towering a dozen or so of them could have been made into boats. There were so many sightseers that the place looked like a fair, but the carpenter didn't even glance around and went on his way without stopping. His apprentice stood staring for a long time and then ran after Carpenter Shih and said, "Since I first took up my ax and followed you, Master, I have never seen

timber as beautiful as this. But you don't even bother to look, and go right on without stopping. Why is that?" (Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, Chapter Two: "In the World of Men", p. 63).

In its early days, comparative literature as a discipline might have been likened to the serrate oak. Disdained by the traditional language departments, ignored by the area studies fields, overlooked by the social sciences, comparative literature, like the serrate oak, appeared too comprehensive, too capacious to be of practical value. By trying to cover too much, some contended, it would become superficial: in aspiring to the broadest perspective, it was in danger of being "thin" in its coverage.

"Forget it —say no more!" said the carpenter. "It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree—there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old! (Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 63–64)

But it is precisely because comparative literature had no obvious "uses"—such as literary chauvinism, or raising the "cultural literacy" (defined usually in monocultural terms), or elevating the social level of its adherent—that has enabled the field to survive, perhaps even to thrive. It is precisely because it has no vested (nationalist) interest that comparative literature can be said to be free of chauvinistic propaganda. That lack of ulteriority guarantees the disinterestedness that underlies every truly intellectual discipline.

A certain historical perspective informs my refutation of the charge that comparative literature is useless. If we survey the development of literary studies in the United States since the Second World War, we find that the number of college and university students increasing from a figure of 7.839

million in 1969 to 14.488 million in 1994.<sup>④</sup> Clearly the high rate of literacy aspired to, or achieved,<sup>⑤</sup> in modern technological societies has revamped the entire notion of literature as the private enclave for “polite” society. It is no longer true that tertiary education—even post-graduate education—is available only for the upper classes.

In this context, the notion of “literature” has undergone a sea change. It cannot be merely the productions of our men of letters, since now men and women command the rudiments of writing; it cannot be restricted to “polite” society, since, presumably, 97% of the population in the United States is theoretically capable of producing literature; and it cannot be elitist, since literary value is no longer coterminous with social value.

The way in which the word “literature” is now used involves a sense, the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, “... of very recent emergence both in English and French.” This definition of “literature” refers to “literary productions as a whole, the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general.” The *OED* then adds an even more recent definition: “Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect”.

It is this latter sense that the teacher of comparative literature implicitly subscribes to when s/he undertakes his/her research, or selects the texts which are to be read in the classroom. And, given the democratization of the literati, these productions cannot emerge only out of the upper classes, since—theoretically—there are no intellectual class distinctions when virtually an entire population is literate. It should not be surprising, then, that in the last thirty years, comparative literature has been more inclusive than exclusive, and that it has comprised text and media that would have been disdained in earlier periods as “popular” and, *ipso facto*, “vulgar”. The inclusion of film as an important medium of literature is no longer ques-

tioned: its popularity among and accessibility to the general masses notwithstanding. The differentiations between “high” and “low” culture are no longer recognized, either by anthropologists or by the practitioners of cultural studies. Comic books or their Japanese counterpart, *manga*, are now legitimate subjects of study.

Even if “literature” is now based more on an aesthetic than a social value, one might still wonder about its “usefulness”, and it is this concern that I should like to address in the remaining part of this essay.

The value of literary studies when “literature” was viewed as a social grace rather than as a heuristic lay more in the status that one acquired than in the lessons that one learned. But the irony was that, as the numbers pressing to enter the restricted circles of the refined and the privilege increased, the status value of such “elite” membership declined. Academe, and especially what was called “higher learning”, had to perform the role of “gatekeeper”: which explains why teachers of literature could afford to bore their students (which was, after all, one way of excluding the rabble), and why scholarly presentations were more often more offputting than inviting. The needs for faculty to replace themselves involved the vain pursuit of fashioning their own clones, and those who wished to be successful in succeeding their mentors made sure that they imitated the proper models, followed the prescribed canon, struck the right pose. If all this sounds affected, that was because affectation, rather than the ability to teach, was what was being transmitted by the “old guard” faculty. For the sake of discretion, I offer no concrete examples of these types, since no one will have the slightest difficulty identifying in their own experience exemplars of what I am describing.

With the influx of new students from all classes in society (substantially influenced and augmented by the flood of mature students enrolling in colleges and universities after the Second World War under the G. I. Bill<sup>®</sup>), and the relative paucity of academic positions relative to the num-



bers being taught, another rationale for the teaching of literature was needed. Add to this the explosion of the tertiary education system, when the number of institutions of higher education mushroomed from 1851 in 1949—1950 to 4084 in 1999 – 2000, and it was clear that even the “elite” circles were no longer as exclusive as they had once been.<sup>⑦</sup>

The mere appreciation of beauty, admirable as it might be, could not provide a plausible rationale for educating this large a population. A nation’s needs for museum curators, art historians, and aesthetes of various kinds is, after all, always going to be limited. Another objective for the teaching of literature generally, and of comparative literature, specifically, has to be identified.

In an earlier effort, “Why Study Literature?”,<sup>⑧</sup> I attempted to indicate the heuristic value of studying literature. I suggested that a disciplined study of literature develops three intellectual faculties: (1) creative imagination; (2) vicarious sympathy; and (3) capacious intuition. I believe that education in the twenty – first century has radically different needs from previous centuries. The intellectual chores with which earlier generations were burdened have not been removed; they have been merely “complexified.” A diet of “Readin, Writin, and Rithmetic” no longer apply in the way they did in the past. We do still need to read<sup>⑨</sup>, but now reading in one language is not enough; we still must learn to calculate, but with the advent of a cybernetic culture, we not only have to calculate, we need to know how to program a computer to calculate. But analytical skills are no longer sufficient in a “globalized world” that is constantly changing, and survival, let alone success, depends on our ability to accommodate and understand new phenomena, unfamiliar ways of thinking.

Our education system has been previously based on teaching skills and on conveying knowledge: “vocational” institutions offered training in how to perform certain functions, whereas “institutions of higher learning” presumably stimulated students to develop strategies of learning, to learn experi-

mental procedures, to systematically explore the unknown, and to arrive at, even to speculate on, the metaphysical. Clearly, in this division between “vocational training” and “higher education” there is an opposition between the “useful” and the “useless”. However, utility is a sometime thing: “vocational training” may offer skills specifically for a particular activity or profession, but there is no guarantee how long any given technology will last. The computer programmer who was trained in such now-arcane programming languages as SNOBOL and COBOL and even PASCAL would not survive now in a world where UNIX and LINUX are the computer vernacular. Training almost always requires “retraining”. Education, however, is, or should be, a lifetime inoculation against ignorance (which, of course, involves the more and more sophisticated recognition of one’s own ignorance) and the perceived threat of change. A degree should not be conceived of—as it has been in the past—as a certification of lessons learned, or of knowledge acquired; it is, rather, a license to learn, to explore, to theorize, to imagine.

I have developed an “ontological grid” to illustrate the different needs of different stages of civilization. Which shows that the needs of society have changed from a reliance on labor, to one on skills, to one on knowledge, and finally, in our time, to a society in which nothing less than insight is required. Here is my globalization diagram:

ACT	THINK	Perspective	Technology	Needs
local	local	insular provincial parochial feudal	horses carts carriages tools	labor

global	local	nationalist imperialist hegemonic ethnocentric	steamship stream engine railroad automobile machines	skills
local	global	international transnational cosmopolitan cross – cultural	telegraph telescope television jets computers	knowledge
global	global	cyberspatial intra-worldly synergistic humanitarian	internet www SSTs cybernetics robotics	insight

Using the current mantra in business of “Act Local, Think Global” as an analytical tool, I have analyzed the stages of civilization into past periods when the mantra was “Act Local, Think Local” and “Act Global, Think Local”, and a new phase, into which we’re entering, of “Act Global, Think Global”.<sup>⑩</sup> (In one analysis, I see this phase initiating a new paradigm, in which the local and global are viewed as not separate, but as embodying “glocalized” synergies. )

The key to these new demands that our educational curriculum must satisfy involve aptitudes that computers are, at least at present, incapable of: inference, intuition, imagination.<sup>⑪</sup> May I say that there is no field of study that is more likely to develop these aptitudes than the study of literature, where we are asked to imagine difference perspectives (assume the viewpoint of different characters), to infer whole contexts of meaning (interpreting texts intertextually), and to intuit new thoughts and unfamiliar ideas (living vicariously). Creative imagination; vicarious sympathy; capacious intuition—these are the aptitudes that we’d like to develop in our students.

There are some signs that the business world is beginning to recognize these intangible assets. Businesses are investing not only in training, but in education. In their book, *Invisible Advantage: How Intangible Are Driving Business Performance*, Jonathan Low and Pam Cohen kalafut point out that United Technologies Corporation spent \$230.75 million on college educations for their employees in the five - year ending in 2000; which constitutes "59% more than Yale University and Dartmouth College combined spent on scholarships over the same period" (159 - ). For fifteen years, I have conducted cross-cultural workshops with middle managers in the Indiana University School of Business's Executive Education Programs, Workshops which were held in bloomington, Fontainebleau, Hong Kong, and Beijing. ② I might, just incidentally, remark how surprised I was at first to combine two fields that would, on the surface, have nothing to say to each other: business and literature.

In the drive to internationalize and globalize, more and more corporations are realising that insular attitudes and provincial mindsets are unlikely to be competitive in a global marketplace. It has been estimated, for example, that easily 70% of the business ventures of American companies in China have failed, not because of lack of capital, nor because of lack of interest, or even of corporate support, but because of cross-cultural misunderstandings. The extent of the problem might be epitomized by the French manager in Thailand Who was having a great deal of problem managing his Thai workforce who protested in frustration, Without any self-reflective irony: "I just want things to work here in Thailand the way they do in France!" The assumption that cultures are uniformly the same, and that one's homeland can be replicated anywhere in the world (a vestige of the "Act Global, Think Local" mentality of imperialists and colonialists) is part of a larger educational problem: the refusal of certain minds to recognize other cultures, different paradigms.

In reflecting over this experience, I cannot claim to have been suc-

cessful with all the workshop participants in breaking down their culture-bound, largely analytical Eurocentric mindset, although some have experience a mild form of *satori*. But in fifteen years, I have noticed some trends, which may be a bellwether of things to come.

At the outset, the bulk of the participants were U. S. managers, but over time, even with primarily U. S. corporations, the participants became more and more international, so that in the nineties, few if any groups of participants were exclusively North American. The addition of not only Europeans, but Asians as well, made the “comparative” approach a little less far-fetched, a little more inevitable and natural. The interactive contact between and among participants provided their own cross-cultural insights, at a level that was concrete more than abstract—although the lessons were not always extrapolated into a principle of learning and of adaptation.

As a teacher, or “facilitator” as I liked to call myself, I had to adopt not only to a primarily Western culture, but to a primarily Western *business* culture, one which is still largely male-dominated, Eurocentric, and biased toward the quantitative, the tangible and the empirical. Anecdotally, I found the French participants, on the whole, more receptive to the ironies of cross-cultural analysis, and the Americans less flexible in their thinking. The addition of Australians offered a salutary Southern Hemisphere perspective, exposing otherwise undetected Northern Hemisphere presumptions. The culture of the executive education program tended toward the interactive graduate seminar model, and not the lecture-from-podium undergraduate model. These orientations made things both easier and more difficult: easier because the group was empowered to instruct themselves, more difficult because the success of the workshop often depended on the instructor’s familiarity with each individual in the group and with the dynamics of the group.

Still, the overall “take-away” message was clear: with all the number-crunching expertise of financial statements and business plans, no ven-

ture in the world will succeed without some sense—ideally comparative—of the cultures involved.

In a series of television interviews broadcast in 1995 – 1996 with executives of Fortune 500 companies, one was struck by how many of them had multiple experiences abroad or who were themselves multi-and intercultural. Among the most successful C. E. O. 's of the past decade has been Carlos Ghosn, who in two short years turned the Nissan Motor Corporation around, from a situation in which the corporation had suffered nine years of successive losses, to profitability within two years. Nissan had been losing money for nearly a decade, accumulating a debt of US \$19 billion. Joining the company in 1999, Ghosn turned Nissan around, reporting a U. S. \$ 2.7 billion dollar profit in 2001, up from a U. S. \$ 6.4 billion loss the previous year. Ghosn is slated to become C. E. O. of the parent company, Renault, in 2005.

Ghosn is now the author of a best-selling book in Japan, "Renaissance", and has been described by the Los Angeles Times, Without exaggeration, as "the Brazilian – born French automotive executive of Lebanese descent."<sup>③</sup> Is it entirely accidental that this highly successful C. E. O. can claim cultural experiences in three continents?

Perhaps Ghosn is a precursor of the manager of the future, the one who goes beyond hard work (labor), who goes beyond technique (skill), and beyond merely being a repository of facts (knowledge), but who offers a vision of the future and a design on how to implement that future (insight).

This complex world, and these confounding times, require extraordinary leadership, rare individuals who can see what others cannot see. Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi] said: "All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless." Perhaps knowing the use of the useless is what will enable us to survive in the future.

## Notes:

- ① Paper presented at the meeting of the *Chinese Comparative Literature Association*, August 15, 2002, Nanjing, China.
- ② These definitions, and the quotes cited, are borrowed from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- ③ For a vivid cinematic representation of the vapidness of "high culture", I recommend Woody Allen's occasionally hilarious film, "Small Time Crooks".
- ④ The total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased from 6.884 million in 1969 to 12.681 million in 1999; the totals for graduate enrollments almost doubled as well, from 955000 for 1969 and 1.807 million in 1999 (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2001, National Center for Education Statistics).
- ⑤ In 1980, the United States claimed a literacy rate of 97%.
- ⑥ By the time the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944" ("The GI Bill of Rights") was phased out in 1956, 230000 veterans had availed themselves of the opportunity to pursue tertiary education (cf. "[http://www.gibill. va . gov/ education/GI Bill. htm](http://www.gibill.va.gov/education/GI_Bill.htm)").
- ⑦ Cf. *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2001, Table 244, National Center for Education Statistics ( cf. "[http://nces. ed. gov//pubs2002/digest2001/tables/ dt244. asp](http://nces. ed. gov//pubs2002/digest2001/tables/dt244.asp)")
- ⑧ Published in *Immuhwahak: The Journal of the Humanities*, vol. lxxi (June 1994), pp. 133 – 155.
- ⑨ It's amazing to me to read student evaluations of teachers who complain that, since they don't like to read, the course was of little value to them. Until an osmotic "mind-meld" of instruction is developed, reading is the principle conduit for learning.
- ⑩ I first developed this grid in a paper presented in Beijing in 1995, subsequently published in Chinese in *Comparative Literature in China* ( Beijing University), and included as Chapter 14 in my *Two-Way Mirrors: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Chinese-Western Comparative Literature* ( Lanham: Lexington Books, in press).
- ⑪ Artificial intelligence, especially in the analysis of the Asian game of Go is attempting to develop "intuitions" in computers: Cf. Katie-Hafner, "In an Ancient Game, Computing's Future," *The New York Times*, Thursday, August

1, 2002, who quotes one expert as saying, "We want the equivalent of a fruit fly to study. . . Chess was the fruit fly for studying logic. Go may be the fruit fly for studying intuition."

- ⑫ I owe to Cam Danielson, Director of the Executive Programs at the Indiana University School of Business the invaluable opportunity of participating in several executive education programs, including the Indiana Executive Program, an Indiana Bell Program, the Indiana Partnership for Executive Development, and (with thanks also to Francois Dupuy) to the International Partnership in Executive Development and the Global Partnership in Executive Development.

- ⑬ December 5, 2001, Wednesday Home Edition.

#### **About the author:**

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