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theories and methodologies

Comparative Literature?

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WHAT IS COMPARATIVE LITERATURE? NOT A THEORY OR A METHODOLOGY, CERTAINLY (WHICH RAISES THE QUESTION OF WHY this article should appear in a series so entitled), though theories and methodologies aplenty occur as part of its typical business. Is there, or can there be, an object of knowledge identifiable as "comparative literature"?

The Rule of Three

When I began hearing about comparative literature in the middle 1970s, there was a fairly straightforward means of distinguishing comparative literature on the university campuses where it was done. The English department pursued knowledge of language and literature in one language; the foreign language departments pursued similar studies in two languages (typically English, assumed to be most students' native language, plus the foreign tongue); and comparative literature committees, programs, or departments carried out literary analysis in at least three languages at once. The three-language rule identified the discipline as something apart from English, national-language studies, or studies of literature in translation; it set up a criterion of eligibility for new entrants, thus laying a basis for the discipline's continued social reproduction; but it did not always specify the three languages or dictate the substance of what was to be done in them. Now, in geometry three points make a plane, and three dimensions make a solid; Thirdness, in Peircean semiotics, makes signifying possible as a mediation between Firstness and Secondness (Peirce 387–90); but in comparative literature the effect of adding the magical third element is more elusive.

The third-language hurdle assured, demographically, that comparative literature programs would not expand to cover all the territory of the humanities (if anyone was worried about that), but it did not go far toward answering the question, What is, or is not, comparative literature? The rule defined the social membership of comparative literature better than it did the object of study. (And even in its influence on membership, the rule could be applied inconsistently: for lack of relevant programs or person-

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nel, a student fluent in English and Cantonese, or in Breton and Quechua, might on many campuses be in the same position as a strictly monolingual student.) This all made for a fragile discipline, one whose definition depended crucially on the definitions of the institutional cells surrounding it; and in pragmatic terms, this fragility was realized in the status of most comparative literature programs as epiphenomenal groupings without permanent funding. In North America at least, from the 1970s onward, comparative literature found its disciplinary object in, and based its case for institutional independence on, an always controversial set of practices known as literary theory. To hear some people tell it, the comparatists were no producers, but an army of Soldiers of Theory bent on occupying other people's fields and reducing them to tributary status.

The intervening years have brought changes to comparative literature in all its registers, not least because the neighboring disciplines have changed. We see more and more bilingual students, with instant repercussions on the idea of "foreign languages." The departments devoted to "major" languages are increasingly interested in and permeable to their less prominent relatives (ex-colonial creoles, new Englishes, pidgins, dialects, and sociolects). Languages once considered "less commonly taught" now often boast higher enrollments than some "more commonly taught" languages. Theoretical approaches have long since naturalized themselves in English departments. In comparative literature programs, too, the scope of the term *language* is no longer self-evident: a medium such as film or music now often substitutes for the third language. What defined comparative literature twenty-five years ago no longer distinguishes the field, positively or negatively, by reference to its membership or object of study.

Another menace to comparative literature's fragile identity comes from the very condition that made the discipline possible: cosmopolitanism.

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels 38–39)

Or as the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann puts it, "Under modern conditions . . . only one social system can exist. Its communicative network spreads over the globe. . . . A plurality of possible worlds has become impossible" (178). If distinctions are no longer meaningful, comparison becomes the likening of like and like, a hollow gesture with a predetermined outcome. Reduced to the scale of the university campus, a global economy of communication makes comparativists of us all, as "national one-sidedness" and the consequent "plurality of possible worlds" become "impossible" even as a scholarly concentration.

Comparative? Literature?

So, then, now more than ever: comparative literature? If the specificity of our enterprise is wearing away through its banalization, we need to think once more about what comparatists have done to see if there is anything for the discipline to keep on doing. What were the models for comparative work, and what lessons do they teach that may still apply in changed circumstances?

The name of the field—"comparative"—once denoted a method and, behind that method, a theory of how literature was organized. Comparative religion, comparative law, and the other comparative disciplines that arose in the nineteenth century under the strange dual patronage of comparative anatomy and comparative philology all began as what one might call tree-shaped disciplines, organizing historical and typological diversity into a common historical narrative with many parallel branches. Difference became *differentiation*, the subject of a historical-developmental account. Through that account, morphology became readable as genesis.

Indeed, one of the cornerstones of the development of comparative literature in this country, E. R. Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, makes exactly this sort of claim. Reaching back to a time before the national separation of the languages and their increasing mutual opacity, Curtius reconstructs a common basis for the major European literatures in Latin authors and topoi.[1] The Latin basis was there all along, hidden in the "one-sidedness" of the national languages; scholarship restores it to view, elucidating the differential paths taken and leading them back to the source. Curtius's mode of comparison is a phylogeny. But surely in many other contexts this would be a naive or impossible way of putting one's comparative claim.

Although new tools such as genetics and ethology confirmed the usefulness of tree-shaped comparativism for the biological sciences, in most of the human sciences the narratives providing the substantive ground for differentiation sooner or later broke up. General evolutionary paradigms (as in Maine, Morgan, or Frazer) could not be maintained without begging too many questions about the universal reach of the categories employed. Only in linguistics, mythology, and manuscript filiation are distal trees still important argumentative tools. In comparative literature, the typological tree of written culture was never more than a vestige anyway. Actual comparative studies covered only small pieces of the literary record, rarely venturing so far afield as to challenge the applicability of the discipline's terms; moreover, when widely separated literary traditions were involved, comparatists wrote as if little could be done to explain (as opposed to reciting) the typological differences among the traditions.

Comparative literature was thus a discipline with a branching logic, but the branches lacked a trunk. That trunk might conceivably have been furnished by a universal poetics, a historical origin of all literary traditions, or an ultimate typological category such as literariness.[2] But none was needed. Historical studies (influence and reception) could carry on in various sections of the tree without worrying about the existence of a trunk. Studies cast in the mode of difference and similarity could disregard it, taking for granted such generally applicable terms as they found necessary. "Theory," never a compact philosophical system, migrated from case to case or let itself be carried with the broadening acceptance of certain historical narratives or methodological metaphors.

Perhaps the best thing about comparative literature is its failure to live up to its name. Unlike the other comparative disciplines, this one is not principally about the relation of subsidiary phenomena to an original or ancestral source. And unlike Aristotelian comparison, it is not about discovering the "third thing" on which two other things stand as on a common ground of identity. It must then have an unusual logic. Perhaps a "rhizomatic" logic (Deleuze and Guattari 6–8)?

In and *And*

Some literary scholars have a penchant for the preposition *in*, some for the conjunction *and*. *In* suggests that a reading is a matter of observation and inventory; *and*, that a reading is a collision. A paper titled "Renunciation in *Mahābhārata*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*" claims to discover a common thread "in" a body of writings; a paper titled "*Mansfield Park* and *A Theory of Justice*" tells you to think about one thing in relation to another. Comparative literature is largely a discipline of the *and* type. It does its work best as a chain of *and*s: this relation and that relation and that relation . . . —each *and* modifying the sense of those that came before.

The *and* is comparative literature's answer to the tree model. Lacking a common substance to which the differences among its objects might be reduced, comparative literature has grown, not from the roots upward like a tree, but as the International Space Station does, through

the lateral construction of linking elements. Leaving aside Curtius's "Romania," with its orientation toward historical recovery, the model texts of comparative literature link together sets of examples whose mutual coherence is not obvious in advance of their combination. It is as if the reader who asks, "What do X, Y, and Z have to do with one another?" could only get the answer, "Nothing—up to now."

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* proffers a historical narrative (the growth of realism) but does not substantively develop realism or give it the role of a protagonist who might lead the story toward its outcome. (For that type of story, see Lukács.) Rather, Auerbach beckons us to examine a series of sample passages—touchstones—in historical sequence, each different from the others, each exhibiting a different mode of detail, each contributing indirectly to a mode of seeing that is also the critic's (the eye for just what makes *this* text a new turning for literary representation).[3] This is *and* criticism: but read it as *in* criticism, and the thing in all the examples is a thin thread indeed.

In Qian Zhongshu's work, comparability is the point to be made. Recognizing the utter dominance in Chinese scholarship of the kind of literary history that reduces a text to the general circumstances of its period—and thereby denies that the relation between two texts can be anything but historical—Qian answers this understanding of literature with a model of meaning as open-ended translatability. In a tacit rebuke to historical determinism, his essays simply juxtapose passages or motifs from Chinese classical literature with "equivalents" in Latin, Greek, English, French, German, and Spanish literature—an empirical but experimental challenge to the assumption of Chinese uniqueness.

Comparative literature books may be as elaborately structured as Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* or Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* or as loose as Qian Zhongshu's or Leo Spitzer's essay collections, but they all must raise the question of what glue holds them together. The job of every comparative literature book is to find that out, and rarely do two answers coincide. Metalepsis (the positing as accomplished of something yet to occur) is the structuring trope of these speculative investigations, which spin the rope before them as they walk on it. The willingness to tolerate readings that produce, rather than discover, meanings brings a risky, experimental quality to comparative literature and shows why its virtues are inseparable from its questionable legitimacy.

The Rule of Three Revisited

What might be called a third-language effect helps to explain comparative literature's past intellectual affinities and to mark what keeps the field open for particular kinds of innovation. The three-language rule precipitated (i.e., contributed to causing without necessarily entailing) a kind of questioning that the then-current state of practice in national-literature programs did not satisfy, and the moving frontiers of the discipline should continue responding to similar dissatisfactions now that so many of comparative literature's former specialties have been taken up by others. One cannot say that it always happened, but often and ideally the addition of a third language made it necessary to appeal to theoretical considerations where taste, common sense, or a shared literary history would have told the practitioners of English or a single foreign literature what was significant, beautiful, predictable, necessary, or controversial about their objects of study. Just as Anaxagoras, according to Aristotle (1071), attributed the intelligence of human beings to their having hands, so perhaps in comparative literature the third language as an organ created its own functions.

Most relations of influence that can be formulated historically (the original problem for comparative literature to resolve; see Schulz and Rhein) occur, like the standard model of translation, between two poles, with a source and a target. Typological considerations reduce to an

exchange between a type case and a candidate token. If a two-language pattern is adequate for formulating and answering most questions of historical influence or typological similarity, the third language, like an uninvited guest, points to the things that a two-language pattern leaves out. What is going on, even in a dyadic relation, that a dyadic explanation leaves unaccounted for? A relation occurs under particular conditions: what are those? What is the relation about; what in it illuminates relations not now under discussion? In my experience, the third language or field furnishes counterexamples. It frustrates the progress to universal literature—to the delivery of the same thing in different languages, ad infinitum. Because it is precisely not a tertium quid, it keeps things from settling down. The space of this third language—a space analogous to the yet-to-be-constructed relation and opposite to the missing trunk—might be held by an indefinite set of entities. Whatever occupies that space mediates less than it interferes, as signifiers do, and its interference produces something new.

What is specific to comparative literature, as distinguished from investigations into national literary histories or from literature taken as a single mass, is its propensity to *construction*—a technical term on which sociologists and geometers idiomatically cohabit. It would be a mistake, then, to seek to define comparative literature through its objects of knowledge or methods; lacking exclusive title to any of these, it is rather a practice, a way of constructing objects. As in surveying, every completion of a triangle makes measurement, and thus conclusive knowledge, possible; but the apex of the triangle just determined is also a point from which a new angle opens up for measurement. "The suitability of the figures [used in surveying] depends to a great extent upon the shape of the figures selected. Angles near 0° or 180° are subject to large computational errors and are avoided when possible" ("Surveying" 615).

Notes

[1] On Curtius's vision of a culturally unified Europe, see Menocal 133–37.

[2] A tension between folklore or linguistics and literary study structures some phases of the field's development. See the encyclopedic project of Chadwick and Chadwick, modeled on folklore and diffusionist history; see also the differing accounts of "literary language" produced by the New Critics and the inheritors of Slavic linguistics and folklore (Ransom; Jakobson).

[3] On the peculiarities of *Mimesis* as a historical narration, see the essays in Lerer.

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