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Author(s): Jan M. Ziolkowski

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Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not

Jan M. Ziolkowski

ABSTRACT

This essay traces the history, current state, and potential future of comparative literature. The great expansions have coincided with aspirations for international understanding. The term first emerged after the Napoleonic wars. The field soared in the late 19th century, became a discipline after the Second World War, and experienced its most vigorous growth (of departments and programs) in the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

Comparative literature has always worried its supporters as well as its skeptics. At the same time it has experienced a constant crisis within. In each episode it has responded by enlarging its purview and self-definition. Thus in the late 20th century it transcended the European literatures that had long been its bedrock to embrace East-West literary and cultural relations in ever-broader outward orbits, encompassing eventually first Edward Said's orientalism, then Homi Bhabha's deconstructivist postcolonialism, and finally Gayatri Spivak's eclecticism. The models that served during the extended pax americana seem poorly suited to terrorism, war, and globalization. Supranationalism cannot be lightly readjusted to fit transnationalism. But comparative literature can and will survive, so long as balances persist between theory and practice, so long as interdisciplinarity does not come at the cost of disciplinarity, and so long as the indivisible relationships uniting humanism, humanities, and humaneness are not forgotten. While comparative literature retains its emphases on language-training and critical skills, and while it satisfies desires of students to transcend boundaries culturally, interpretatively, and otherwise, it will not only always remain alive but even often thrive.

Thus, in a certain sense, comparative literature is not a history but an aggregate of independent enquiries, each covering its own set of periods, though all contribute knowledge with regard to the place of literature in civilisation.

—H. V. ROUTH¹

APOLOGIA PRO COMPARATIONE SUA

The well-being of comparative literature occupied my hours and energies for more than 20 years, during which I held an appointment split between comparative literature and classics (with additional involvements in Medieval Studies, Folklore and Mythology, and other such groupings). Over ten of them I served three consecutive terms as chair of comparative literature at my university, Harvard. Yet only since stepping away from administrative service to the Department, relinquishing the “and of Comparative Literature” that had been a constituent of my job description and title, and losing the perquisite of the departmental letterhead have I gained the perspective and time to confront in an essay the topic of the history, current state, and potential future of comparative literature.

Readying myself for this undertaking has forced upon me the jouissance of scholarly research, which has encompassed both hunting down books and articles and surfing the web. The scholarship has allowed and even forced me to indulge an appetite for industrial espionage by finding out how things have been and are being done at institutions other than my own. As a comparatist, I have felt duty- and honor-bound to compare—to explore what sorts of programs and proclamations about comparative literature have been issued at colleges and universities around the country.² Not too long ago I performed the same kind of research (it is tempting to call it “comparison shopping”) repeatedly in an administrative capacity, whenever our program undertook to revamp its rules and requirements. I collected and read all sorts of publications, running the gamut from books and journals through less formal bulletins of professional organizations to altogether informal newsletters, on the nature and future of “comp lit” (as the name is often affectionately and efficiently truncated), but I never had a motive, or an invitation, to synthesize my findings systematically and process them intellectually.

A second pleasure of collecting my thoughts has been to realize how the study of comparative literature over the longue durée has dovetailed with broader social and political concerns. I use the word “dovetailed” very deliberately, with my thoughts on the dove as a bird emblematic of peace, since most moments of greatest expansion in the study of comparative literature have coincided with aspirations for international harmony and understanding. Ulrich Weisstein, author of what remains the fullest institutional history of comparative literature, characterized the years of World War II in words that hold relevance to

many phases in the development of these studies: “As so often in the history of Comparative Literature, a war, along with the pacifist tendencies sparked by it, gave new impetus to the now lingering discipline” (Weisstein 215).³

As we shall see, the term “Comparative Literature” first emerged in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, when Europe was being reshaped culturally and politically. Much later, what had been a *field of study* that took off in the last years of the 19th century, perhaps partly under the influence of the 500th anniversary of Columbus or the centenary of the French Revolution, became a *discipline* at the end of the Second World War. Eventually the most vigorous growth in numbers of departments and programs occurred in the United States during the Vietnam War, a development that set the stage for major reconceptions of the discipline. Later I will return to this chronology.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Beyond the seductions of spying on other institutions and situating comparative literature in its historical and sociopolitical context, I am motivated by the topic to reveal a little about my own curriculum vitae. My studies of languages and literatures have intersected particularly intensely with comparative literature at intervals since 1981, when I began teaching at Harvard. I began then with an appointment half funded by the Department of the Classics and half by the Department of Comparative Literature. Despite being housed only a floor apart at the time (both in Boylston Hall—now they reside in separate buildings), the departments stood worlds away from each other. Classics emanated conservative philology, whereas the Comparative Literature department for a fleeting moment attained the status, duly recorded in the *New York Times Magazine*, of being one of the top ten “in” things at the Modern Language Association. For an untenured assistant and associate professor, the two departments were like Scylla and Charybdis in classical mythology or, to put it more colloquially, a rock and a hard place. Classics made me fear that I would never measure up to my seniors in their erudition and precision in handling dead languages; comp lit left me feeling inadequate about my command of theory and spoken languages. On the top floor, where the comparatists roosted and I had my office, people smoked exotic pipes, unfiltered French cigarettes, and even occasional contraband Cuban cigars. When I went to wash my hands, the man at the neighboring sink could be the Polish Nobel laureate in literature Czeslaw Milosz (1911–2004) or the world-famous Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes (1928–). Meanwhile, on the floor below, the classicists decanted glasses of bourbon into wooden legs and displayed a daunting memorial command of the Greek and Latin texts with which they dealt. As a non-smoker with only average tolerance for alcohol, I had to be very careful to hide how out of my depth I felt.

If the journey of a junior professor is analogous to a voyage to the underworld, then like Heracles, Aeneas, or Dante I survived and in 1987 had the good fortune to be tenured by both departments. On the day the news arrived, my eldest daughter wanted to know what all the commotion was about, and I explained that I had been granted tenure. After she asked what that signified, and after I tried my best to inform her, she looked puzzled and asked, "If it's for forever, then why is it called *ten-year*?"

In 1991–1992 I served a year as acting chair of Comparative Literature. That episode of debility doomed me to three successive terms of the regular chairmanship. Despite years of endeavoring to read widely about comparative literature, my grounding in it entailed many more hours of practical experience in dealing with faculty and students rather than in the bliss of devouring academic books about it. In any given term, the roster in the degree program tended to include around 50 graduate students, many of them clustered in the course- and exam-taking years. The corresponding undergraduate degree program, called Literature, enrolled more than 50 majors per year.

Colleagues, although numbering only between 15 and 20, demanded as much care as the students. Our departmental meetings were always affable and often stimulating. Occasionally they even accomplished the business at hand. The departmental administrator, who retired in 2000 after four legendary decades of holding sway (and who was quite devoted to her own tabby), described these sessions with a mixture of fondness and exasperation as "herding cats."⁴ Although she was absolutely right, at the same time the monthly two-hour meetings were brainstorming sessions of a small-scale think-tank about the issues facing the humanities, with colleagues displaying inexhaustible vitality and creativity as well as genuine gratification at mixing with peers from outside their usual departmental stomping grounds. Nowhere else in the humanities would professors from such a diversity of departments come together to thrash out business: Comparative Literature draws upon voting members from English, Romance Languages and Literatures, Classics, Slavic Languages and Literatures, Germanic Languages and Literatures, Visual and Environmental Studies, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and East Asian Languages and Civilizations.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE THROUGH THE LENS OF WORTPHILOLOGIE

Before sounding too naive a note of optimism, I hasten to concede that comparative literature has always worried those who have favored it as well as those who have questioned it. If you keyboard *comparatist* or *comparativist* in Microsoft Word, the spellchecker kicks into action by underscoring in red both strings of offending characters. But that is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, since all the standard expressions for comparative literature in various

languages have an illogic to them (Furst 114, 124). French language and culture have often been blamed for practices or objects that have been deemed questionable in Anglo-American culture. Thus the adjective *French* was used in euphemisms to indicate venereal disease (syphilis was the “French disease”: Nelkin and Gilman 365) and condoms (“French letter”), while French kissing, even shortened to “Frenching,” remains very much alive to designate a smooch in which the tongue of one kisser enters the partner’s mouth. One more factoid to be added to the list of discredits is that we owe the formulation “comparative literature” to French. Long before the theory boom of the 1980s brought deconstruction courtesy of Jacques Derrida and his America-based posse, the French language disseminated [sic] the construction “comparative literature.”

The French basis for the English expression “comparative literature” dates back to 1816 (and think what unsettled years preceded this one) in the title *Cours de Littérature comparée* attached to a series of anthologies used for the teaching of literature. From there the phrase, literally meaning “compared literature” and modeled on sciences such as comparative anatomy, seeped into wider currency over the next two decades, despite the illogic of the singular *literature*: If comparison is going on, then there should be more than one (Weisstein 9).⁵ Yet the collective noun is revealing, since for more than a century and a half the French tradition of comparative literature contained a presumption that the comparing would involve, *de rigueur* one might say, French literature as either the source or destination of the comparison.⁶ In 1835, Philarète Euphémon Chasles (1798–1873) attempted to define “Littérature étrangère comparée” with an unabashedly Gallocentric viewpoint: “France is the most sensitive of all countries. What Europe is to the rest of the world, France is to Europe.”⁷ Plus ça change.

Other Romance languages followed suit later, such as Spanish with “literatura comparada,” Portuguese with “litteratura comparada,” and Italian with “letteratura comparata.” German has the corresponding expression “vergleichende Literatur,” which becomes established in the second half of nineteenth century. Its first attestation is in a book which refers to “vergleichende Literaturgeschichte.” The peculiarity of the German formulation and the corresponding Dutch one (“vergelijkend literatuuronderzoek”) is that they convey the idea of comparing literature, but in such a way almost as to imply that the literature itself is doing the comparing. The most common German term, “vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft,” could be translated as “comparative study of literature.”

In English, the first usage involves the plural “comparative literatures,” recorded in a letter written in 1848 by none other than Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), the English poet and critic (Wellek “Name” 2–3). The singular has been standard for more than a century. But what does it mean? Both elements in the seemingly straightforward pairing “comparative literature” can be stumbling blocks. In the 1920s, a professor at Cornell refused to call his department Com-

parative Literature. As he put it, “comparative literature” was a “bogus term” that “makes neither sense nor syntax. . . . You might as well permit yourself to say ‘comparative potatoes’ or ‘comparative husks’” (Cooper 75). Instead of Comparative Literature, this professor preferred “The Comparative Study of Literature.” In recent decades there have indeed been departments of “Comparative Literary Studies” (Furst 114), a wording that works admirably and that gives real competition to the well-entrenched comparative literature.

English does have a tradition of using “literature” as a shorthand for “the study of literature” or “literary study.” By the mid-19th century the range of meaning attached to literature had been narrowed to “belles lettres” of creative literature, both prose and verse, but the potential of the word to carry a broader meaning was later restored. Indeed, the broader meaning has itself been stretched still further as the concept of the text, which often includes cultural artifacts beyond the printed word, has taken hold in the humanities.

If we construe *comparative* as denoting “based on or involving comparison” and *literature* as an ellipsis for “literary studies,” the two words become intelligible. The question still remains of defining both the kind of comparison implied by *comparative* and the kind of literature presumed by *literary studies*. Both terms are slippery, but probably *comparative* proves to be the more elusive of the two. The uncertainties only multiply: Like the heads of the Hydra in Greek myth, once one question has been answered, another two emerge in its stead. How are we to know what the methods or goals of the comparison should be? How are we to determine what may be compared with what? What is comparable, and what is not? Is anything incomparable?

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CRITICISMS FROM WITHOUT

Maybe because comparatists pay closer attention to myths than to numbers and history, the information that is available in print on the institutionalization of comparative literature is hazy and conflicting about the specifics. One of the most recent, fullest treatments claims at the top of one page (Bassnett 22) that “It was not until later in the [19th] century that Chairs of Comparative Literature were established, and the subject acquired academic status. The first Chair was set up in Lyon in 1897 and subsequently other Chairs appeared in France.” Down on the same page the author says that

In the United States . . . Charles Chauncey Shackwell [read Shackford (1815–1895)] taught a course in “general or comparative literature” at Cornell from 1871 onwards, and Charles Mills Gayley [1858–1932] taught comparative literary criticism at the University of Michigan from 1887, while the first Chair in the subject was established at Harvard in 1890.⁸

There is obviously some chronological embarrassment in starting out by stating that the first Chair was set up in 1897, but adding later that one had been established elsewhere in 1890. Presuming that that the author wrote from an Anglo-European perspective may explain the error.

But beyond the so-called Eurocentrism lies the possibility of plain old sloppiness. To scrutinize just what this author states about my institution, no chair of Comparative Literature existed at Harvard in 1890.⁹ According to the guide to the Department, "Harvard University has offered courses in comparative literature since 1894. The Department was established by vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 10, 1906 . . . " (*Guide*). Furthermore, a chair of comparative literature in Naples was instituted in 1861 and first held by Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883) from 1871–1875 (Croce 219). The inaccuracies about dates signal that it would repay the efforts of researchers to plumb the archives of the various universities, most simply in old course catalogs, to garner more (and more reliable) information.

Whatever the precise facts about dates, a two-part pattern is clear. First the study of comparative literature took root in the United States of America and on the European continent in the 1890s, with the gradual establishment of courses, positions, and departments and with the publication in 1894 of a call for the foundation of a society for comparative literature (Gayley 84–85). Simultaneously, the very existence of the study came under attack. Thus in 1903 we find the highly influential Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) delivering a broadside against comparative literature as a non-discipline. He disliked the very term, which to his way of thinking concealed what should be the comparative *history* of literature. Characterizing comparative literature as the study of literary themes and concepts across literatures, he concluded: "There is no study more arid than researches of this sort" (Croce 220).¹⁰

If Croce faulted comparative literature for being insufficiently broad and historical, the other stiff resistance to it has come from exponents of what are usually called national language and literature departments, who have fretted that those working in comparative literature will not be solidly grounded enough in a single language and literature. Literature has traditionally been studied under the auspices of national language and literature departments. This circumstance remains even truer today, when at least in an American context the bull in the china shop (and china shop can be taken in at least two ways) may be English departments.

English has distended to encompass the world, partly through world literature in English-language translations but equally through increased attention to literature by and about hyphenated cultural groups inside the United States and to Anglophone literature written from and in points throughout both hemispheres. Comparative literature has long had misgivings about world literature in translation, and English departments and professors have some-

times held sway over such courses, which may create frictions. After all, advocates of comparative literature such as Emily Apter and David Damrosch have seen its particular mission as relating closely to the enterprise of translation. Furthermore, they have related this translation to their own conceptions of world literature, which have often related to the essay on *Weltliteratur* that carries the dual credentials of having been written by Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) and translated into English by Edward Said (1935–2003).¹¹ In any case, the exponents of the so-called national languages and literatures over comparative literature have had serious reservations about the notion that literature should be studied and taught outside the context of conventional language departments (Nichols v). They have feared a diminution of standards, as well as (perhaps) a reduction in their own enrollments.

THE CONSTANT CRISIS WITHIN

So much for attacks from without. From within, titles of books and articles on comparative literature reveal acute anxiety. Part of the angst arises from the very name “Comparative Literature.” In 1958 the comparatist Albert L. Guérard (1880–1959) spurned the term as vehemently as had Croce.¹² He wrote: “My attachment to the *principle* of Comparative Literature gives me the right to express my opinion that the *term* Comparative Literature is useless, dangerous, and ought to [be] abolished.”¹³ Beyond mere terminological fussing, there have been recurrent bouts of severe fretting over the prospects of comparative literature. Maybe most tellingly, a 1960 article bears the title “Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prognosis.”¹⁴ Both a 1970 and a 1993 volume addresses *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*.¹⁵ The spring-summer 2000 issue of *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire*, devoted to a forum entitled “The ‘Natural’ Enemies of Comparative Literature,” contained essays bearing titles such as “The Natural Enemy of Comparative Literature is Translation,” “Waiting for the Barbarians,” and “Is Comparative Literature Its Own Worst Enemy?”

Two influential assessments, one in English from the late 1950s and one in French from the 1960s, grapple with “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (Wellek “Crisis”; Etiemble). The former is by René Wellek (1903–1995), one of the founders of comparative literature in North America in its post-World War II guise.¹⁶ To Wellek the thorniest matter was that comparative literature had not been constituted yet fully as either a field or a discipline. In his words, “the most serious sign of the state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology” (Wellek “Crisis” 282). The same held true a decade later, when a preface to an overview of comparative literature concluded both optimistically and pessimistically: “Although comparative literature continues to expand at a rather

astonishing rate, it may safely be said that many people, and not only students, remain unclear as to the concept and nature of the discipline" (Nichols v).

It may seem peculiar and even perverse to derive hope from these recurrent crises. All the same, I take reassurance from surveying these studies and finding that the wrestling between doubt and confidence as well as the resistance from outside and persistence from inside have gone on almost incessantly for more than the past half century. Gayatri Spivak (1942–) belongs to a lineage that reaches back much further than merely Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in the seeming fatalism in the title of her recent (2003) 128-page tract about comparative literature, *The Death of a Discipline*: If comp lit has died, there has been a continuous supply of necrophiliacs. Her worry about the viability of comparative literature was anticipated in 1995 by Tobin Siebers, who wrote: "To my mind, there is no doubt that comparative literature as a discipline is dying" (196). Also in the Bernheimer volume, Lionnet refers presciently to the "fear" of comparatists in the face of "the messiness of globalization" (Lionnet 173).

In each past episode of anxiety about its own viability, comparative literature has responded by enlarging its purview and self-definition. The question now is how to expand the field in the face of a globalization that threatens to reduce comparison to a multiplicity of texts in English and English translation and perhaps also to diminish the importance of literature, whether high or low, within the hierarchy of forms of expression being compared. If both comparison and literature fall by the wayside, it is hard to see how comparative literature can remain comparative literature. Even if literature is retained, the rise of world literature in translation requires careful adjustment of the comparisons we teach.

Insofar as the intellectual and the political may be separated, the crises of comparative literature may be seen as systemic. They reflect a regular ebb and flow in the humanities, between an emphasis on immersion in individual disciplines and an emphasis on interaction among disciplines. The flux does not betoken an opposition, since disciplines and interdisciplinarity require each other for survival. To pursue the possibility of a sea simile encouraged by "ebb and flow," the humanities bear a likeness to oceans extending over the surface of the earth. Like oceans, they cover broad but distinct areas and bear separate names, but at the same time they overlap.

The tides that wash in and out of these oceans can support a vast number of species. Among them are creatures as different as mollusks and crustaceans. Both of these genera are marvels to behold. Among mollusks, oysters hold fast against the waters and sometimes generate pearls. Among crustaceans, hermit crabs are a favorite of mine to watch, as they scuttle rapidly about in shells that would otherwise go to waste and that they try on for size and inhabit for a while. If forced to draw an analogy between marine life and literary scholars,

I would call the experts in so-called national languages and literatures the oysters, while the comparatists would qualify as the hermit crabs. But fortunately it is not necessary to choose to be solely one or the other: In the multi-tasking that literary studies require these days, ever fewer students and professors have the luxury or inclination to remain enclosed forever within a single genus. Instead, we become devotees of metamorphosis, being oysters some of the time and hermit crabs the rest.

Probably the hermit crab is a poor comparandum for the comparatist. At the outset I mentioned that throughout its existence comparative literature has belonged self-knowingly within a setting of more expansive political and social concerns. At the risk of creating an oxymoron, I will go on record by stating categorically that all forms of reductionism leave me cold. For this reason, I was not charmed by the circumstance that one type of thinking that pervaded the humanities in the late 1980s and 1990s reduced any and all developments in culture to questions of politics and power. That said, it would require self-inflicted blindness on an Oedipal scale not to recognize that comparative literature burgeoned against the backdrop of specific political circumstances. I refer particularly to the heyday of comparative literature in this country from 1945 to 1968, which rested on a determined and explicit ambition to take literary studies beyond nationalism to supranationalism, all in the service of a world literature that would help to underpin a world peace.

From Harvard's *Guide for Students of Comparative Literature* I quoted a few pages ago only the first half of the second sentence, which I would like now to complete: "The Department was established by vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 10, 1906 . . . and was reorganized upon its present basis in 1946" (*Guide*). Also in 1946 René Wellek assumed a professorship of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Yale. The coincidence in timing was no accident. If we look at Austin Warren (1899–1986) and René Wellek's classic *Theory of Literature*, we find the oft-quoted claim that "the study of comparative literature . . . asks for a widening of perspectives, a suppression of local and provincial sentiments, not easy to achieve. Yet literature is one, as art and humanity are one; and in this conception lies the future of historical literary studies" (Wellek *Theory* 42).¹⁷ The same supranationalism comes to the fore in René Wellek's lapidary definition of comparative literature as "the study of all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unity of all creation and experience" (Wellek "Name" 19).¹⁸

FROM POST-BELLUM PAX AMERICANA TO GLOBALIZATION IN A DECADE OF TERRORISM AND WAR

These asseverations are rooted generally in aspirations that had been expressed already in the foundational years of comparative literature in North America.

For instance, in 1903 George Edward Woodberry (1855–1930), who since 1891 had been professor first of literature and then of comparative literature at Columbia University, promulgated an editorial in the first number of the short-lived *Journal of Comparative Literature* in which he heralded a oneness in humanity, a rosy-eyed perspective upon a kind of globalization *avant la lettre*:

The parts of the world draw together, and with them the parts of knowledge, slowly knitting into that one intellectual state which, above the sphere of politics and with no more institutional machinery than tribunals of jurists and congresses of gentlemen, will be at last the true bond of all the world. The modern scholar shares more than other citizens in the benefits of this enlargement and intercommunication, this age equally of expansion and concentration on the vast scale, this infinitely extended and intimate commingling of the nations with one another. . . . (Woodberry 211)

Beyond the general tendencies of comparative literature, the boom that began in the late 1940s must be set against the backdrop of post-World War II desires for a *pax Americana*—or rather a *pax Americo-Europeana*. Indeed, the constitution of comparative literature was linked explicitly with that of the United Nations. For instance, an American comparatist, Werner Friederich (1905–1993), delivered an address to his French confreres soon after the Second World War in which he drew an overt connection between the cultural activities of a Europe-centered comparative literature and the economic-political initiative of the Marshall Plan (1947–1951) to assist Europe in its reconstruction. To cap the address, Friederich professed:

For somehow we feel, with joy and with pride, that what we are doing is part of the deeper meaning of the Marshall Plan, that our vigorous activity somehow goes beyond the realm of mere book-learning, that we are here to help each other, to understand each other, and to save, together with you, the great cultural heritage that belongs to us, the Western World. (Friederich 10)¹⁹

This sentence is preceded by one in which Friederich offers on behalf of his fellow Americans to help impoverished colleagues elsewhere: “to incorporate in our journal a reasonable number of articles written not by North American but by European and South American scholars, and . . . to this end we are willing to accept contributions not only in English, but also in French, in German, in Italian, and in Spanish” (Friederich 10).

It was partly owing to this joy and pride at belonging to the Western tradition that the comparatists of this era took as two of their foundational works Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and Ernst Robert Curtius’s (1886–1956) *European Literature and the Latin*

Middle Ages. Just look at the epilogue to the former, written by a man who had had to flee the racial laws of Nazi Germany. The epilogue closes with this statement:

With this I have said all that I thought the reader would wish me to explain. Nothing now remains but to find him—to find the reader, that is. I hope that my study will reach its readers—both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered. (Auerbach 557)

That the European tilt to comparative literature was not always beneficial and had the potential even to become myopic can be deduced from an address that C. L. Wrenn (1895–1969), president of the Modern Humanities Research Association in England, delivered in both Chicago and London in 1967. In his Presidential Address Wrenn substantially excluded much of the non-European, saying: “An African language, for example, is incompatible with a European one for joint approaches in comparative literature study” (Wrenn 5).²⁰ Wrenn’s statement crystallizes strikingly a creed that reflected the past rather than the future. He was out of step with the times or at least with the times as they would shortly become, as is evident also in the discomfort that he manifested toward many of the areas that have attracted increasing attention in postcolonial studies (2, 11). And more than a bit of his disapproving rhetoric still resounds, more than 25 years later, when George Steiner (1929–) derides what he regards as the excesses of multiculturalism for setting “classics too long prepotent, too long dusty beside, often in the boisterous shadow of, the Afro-American, the Chicano, the Amazonian traditions” (8).

A deeply European stamp remained upon comparative literature until the Vietnam War era, when a variety of factors conjoined to bring about a shift toward a more global perspective. This reorientation (*nomen omen*) coincided with the rapid expansion of comparative literature in universities around the country. Between 1965 and 1975 the study of comparative literature exploded, from 80 programs in 1965 (of which half were only five to ten years old) to 150 in 1975 (Bernheimer 21, 30). Government funding and draft avoidance played a role in enrollments, but so did a desire to attain international understanding through the comparative study of literatures.

The late 1960s provoked major changes in all literary studies. On both sides of the Atlantic authors and authorities were scrutinized as never before: The T-shirt slogan “Question Authority” reflected a reality that can be documented in the near-simultaneous publication of Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” (1969); Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (1968); and Hannah Arendt’s “What is Authority?” (1968). These works were not just cliché expressions of 1960s anti-authoritarianism. Rather, they paved the way for

the transition from authors and works to deconstruction and texts that came about in the theory boom of the 1970s and 1980s.

In the startlingly productive minting of new words in English, many words that become associated through frequent use with a later period turn out upon closer examination to have been coined much earlier, before they entered general circulation. Such is the case with both “Eurocentric” and “multiculturalism.” Although the more properly-formed adjective “Europocentric” had been used already in 1935, “Eurocentric” appears as early as 1963—in a newspaper article about Charles de Gaulle! “Multiculturalism” makes its initial appearance in 1957.²¹

After the late 1960s the traditional sort of comparing one literature with another expanded to encompass not just the European literatures that had been the bedrock of comparative literature but also East-West literary and cultural relations. The East-West axis became a well-established modulation of comparative literature, even better established than a survey of current comparative literature offerings in North America would lead one to suspect since it has come to enjoy a considerable vogue in other regions of the world, such as China and Taiwan, Japan and Korea, and India. The vitality of comparative literature in these other areas cannot be ignored, since it helps explain the critiques of Western literature and literary studies by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha’s (1949–) deconstructivist postcolonialism, and Spivak’s eclecticism. Their criticisms have exercised great magnetism, because their perspectives as partial outsiders have enabled them to see weaknesses, biases, and complications to which others of us have been too close ever to appreciate fully on our own. The literature included within comparative literature has been stretched not only horizontally to comprehend more and more of what could be labeled “world literature” but also vertically to cover both extra-literary and non-verbal (visual) texts. If the spatial dimension could be called an X axis and that of style and medium a Y axis, then the Z axis (the only one that has suffered in this expansion) has been the chronological one. But I will put aside the last point for a moment.

NULLICULTURALISM AND THE WELTS OF WELTLITERATUR

Through the 1960s comparative literature had been restricted to what goes now by the name of “high culture.” Initially the exclusion of what was not “high culture” focused upon folklore, which was relegated to folklorists. For instance, Paul Van Tieghem (1871–1948), the doyen of French positivism in comparative literature, swept aside folklore: “This [the fairy-tale, myth, legend, and hagiography] is folklore and not literary history; for the latter is the history of the human mind viewed through the art of writing. . . . Art plays no part in these anonymous traditions whose nature it is to remain impersonal” (Van

Tieghem 89).²² By the 1980s and 1990s the issue was no longer folklore but instead mass culture and media such as television and film. These changes have been mirrored at my own institution in the name of the center that we use for extracurricular seminars: What went at its inception in 1984 under the name of the Center for Literary Studies morphed into the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies before settling down finally (?) as the Humanities Center.

The basis for including television and film in the mix of literature and culture had been there all along, since comparative literature had been defined as comparing two or more literatures *and* as comparing literature with other arts. My own take is that we ought ever more to incorporate the visual into teaching and research. We must participate in training our students to read images. The more they learn, the better they will grasp the other media they study. Equally important, the likelier they will be to understand their own times. But by the same token, those of us who are concerned with languages and literatures cannot jettison texts. It is one thing to recognize that literature needs sometimes and perhaps even most of the time to be approached in context and that therefore literature cannot be “the exclusive focus of our discipline.” But it is another matter to downgrade literature as an object of study and teaching for comparatists to being only “one discursive practice among many others” (Bernheimer 42). At a time when as many adults in the United States do not read even a single book in a year as do, we need, for our own sakes but even more for the good of the country, to foster the interests of students in learning to read closely, to analyze language, to interpret, and to enjoy all these processes.

In pronouncing those desiderata, I am mindful of the changes being wrought by globalization. The supranationalism that many proponents of comparative literature espoused for the quarter century after the Second World War has played a contributing role in the the creation and facilitation of the globalization that now prompts at least some practitioners of Comparative Literature to voice anxiety.²³ Why should we be concerned? A greater connectedness, interdependence, and integration of economies, politics, technologies, and cultures could lead to the gradual erasure of national identities and boundaries that could be argued to have underlain the conception of comparative literature, especially since the Second World War. Such transnationalism, based on both increased interconnections between people throughout the world and relaxed boundaries between nations, could allow for greater freedom of self-expression, not merely for nationless ethnic groups.²⁴ And yet globalization of this sort could lead to greater standardization, not the least in culture and language. All can end up being nothing or, to state the matter differently, multiculturalism may lead unintentionally to uniculturalism or (viewed even more pessimistically) nulliculturalism.

In a US setting, one has to wonder just how much knowledge of German or German literature lies in the penumbra surrounding the use of the word

“Weltliteratur,” even by comparatists; and such speculations seem all the better founded against the backdrop of world literature taught in English translation and in English departments. But such questions may be prompted by an unfounded Weltschmerz or even by the etymologically unrelated welts that come from lost battles over language requirements. The still broader question is whether much of the debate over globalization that has taken place within the US is not itself so parochial as almost to belie the basic assumptions of globalization: Globalization has been taking place in different ways in different nations, with China a case in point.²⁵

LANGUAGE, NEVER TO BE GLOSSED OVER

Many departments and programs that used to be devoted formally to language and literature have been altered to reflect new realities and focuses. Thus Germanic Languages and Literatures becomes German Studies, Slavic Languages and Literature becomes Slavic Studies, and so forth. By and large Comparative Literature remains Comparative Literature. Although much of the reading in comparative literature will have to be done in translation, the analysis should focus on texts, whether verbal or visual, and should involve close reading. I am an enthusiastic proponent of foreign-language study, when it is feasible. At a conference I attended in Canada in March 2004, a historian from Austria described a team project to assemble a database with editions of all documents, including charters, wills, deeds, contracts, letters, and literature, that mention Jews in Austria from the beginning through the 14th century. The moderator, an economic historian, asked nicely at the end when the database would be translated into English. She stated without batting an eyelash that English is *the* global language and that no one outside Germany will consult the database if it is available solely in German. To me such an attitude harbingers even sharper dangers in the future than the world has endured already since the turn of the bimillennium. Even if a self-servingly American outlook is taken, the arguments in favor of resisting monoglottism seem overwhelmingly compelling: If we have to rely exclusively on immigrants and foreigners for our knowledge of other cultures, we will be damaged in our ability to conduct foreign policy, to compete economically, and (last but not least) to understand and engage cooperatively with other cultures.

But national self-interest is only one small element. Linguistically this century may turn out to resemble the aftermath of the collision that brought to an end the dinosaurs, except that the cause of the die-off will be a handful of global languages such as English. Whether or not we accept that 3000 of the world's 6000 languages will be seriously endangered or extinct by the year 2100, there is no denying that many are threatened. An extraordinarily poignant episode is reported by the early 19th-century German explorer, Alexan-

der von Humboldt (1769–1859), who while journeying through South America happened upon an aged parrot which was the sole surviving speaker of an Indian language that had been spoken by the Atures tribe (Humboldt 2: 598–599). Such occurrences will take place more than annually in the 21st century, except that this time the parrots are likely to die out before the human beings. The problem bulks far larger than any group of humanists can hope to solve, but we can do our part by encouraging the study of languages. And they do not have to be living: People of the past matter as well as those of the present, and good training in close reading could contribute much when arguments rage over what the framers of the Constitution intended or what the prophets of Scripture had in mind when they composed particular sections of their respective documents.

None of this is to privilege a practical linguistic knowledge, which often results from chance living conditions, over a fuller academic understanding. Although (to appropriate an insight I heard articulated first by my father) many a Swiss waiter can handle rudimentary communications in four or more languages, that circumstance does not mean we should admit Swiss waiters as freshmen (or appoint them as professors!). Nor would I venture to talk politics, especially not in a time in which international political issues divide us with an even more vehement intensity than I remember from the Vietnam days of my boyhood.

But if our government has not had thus far in this decade a post-Sputnik-type epiphany that we need (even if merely for the most self-serving political and economic purposes) to improve our understanding of the languages and cultures in the other value systems with which ours is in friction, and that such comprehension cannot be achieved solely in monoglot think tanks within the Beltway, then universities must provide leadership on their own. Ours has become a culture of résumé building and consultancy, but there are realms in which analytic intelligence without years of hard-won knowledge is inadequate. Universities need to ground students in what they will *not* necessarily get in the normal course of things, and if we do not help to keep alive these domains, I do not know who will. Language, including a historically informed knowledge of the local languages, is one such domain, literary texts and books another, history a third, and woe betide the person or nation that becomes inattentive to any or all of them.

The perspective assumed in the last paragraph was American, used particularly in reference to the United States. By announcing that point of view I hope not to be succumbing to provincialism—au contraire—but rather to be facing up to the reality that when grappling with comparative literature we are wrestling with a field which has been of greatest moment to the United States. The departments of Comparative Literature, the appointments in Comparative Literature, and the books about comparative literature have been heavily

American phenomena. Within this context, the concern about the effects of globalization on comparative literature has been not exclusively, but preponderantly American.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

By proceeding to the issue of globalization and language study, I leapfrogged over what was once among those who study languages and literatures a divisive topic, which may be summed up in one word: *theory*. Literary study comprises three main branches, namely, literary criticism, literary history, and literary theory. Until the 1980s and 1990s theory was seldom regarded as an end in itself. The goal was supposed to be the study of the work of literature. The patriarch of comparative literature in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when I arrived was Harry Levin (1912–1994), who averred simply but memorably in 1969 that the purpose of comp lit was to “compare the literature.” He opined that: “We spend far too much of our energy talking . . . about Comparative Literature and not enough of it comparing the literature.”²⁶

Little did Harry Levin foresee what a phantasmagoria of methodologies would soon test the flexibility and stability of comparative literature! In the 1980s comp lit became associated above all with literary theory, especially post-structuralism and deconstruction. Subsequently came a phenomenon that its antagonists labeled *The Bonfire of the Humanities*, in which one approach succeeded another: Women’s Studies and Feminism, Gender Studies and Lesbian/Gay criticism or Queer Studies, Marxism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonialism.²⁷ “Comparing the literature” became ever less simple a task as literature blossomed into texts, as texts swelled to subsume other media such as films, and as texts demanded to be situated in ever more complex and multi-dimensional contexts. At the same time, the materialism, the commercialism, and even the unequal distribution of wealth of American culture at large may have come to be mirrored in the concerns of comparative literature. Inadvertently, but tellingly, the general introduction to a “classic” overview of comparative literature that came into print in 1969 features on its opening page a comparison between the comparatist and a comparison shopper: “The comparatist, instead of being confined to the wares of a single nation, shops in a literary department store” (Aldridge 1).

Where are we now? Theory has long been implanted throughout the spectrum of languages and literatures. The trick has been and will be to ensure that the theory (and the plural would reflect much more accurately what now exists) comes hand in hand with commensurate training in languages and literatures. The attention to balance is all the more necessary as so-called national literature departments lose the comparative scope that they once had through linguistic requirements. The person who looks back to the first half of the 20th

century will find that departments such as English and Romance Languages formerly required the study of multiple languages. For example, in most programs a graduate student in English would have taken courses in Old English, Old Norse, and Latin, while one in French would have had exposure to most of the other Romance languages as well as German and Latin. Most such requirements fell into desuetude or were discarded outright long ago.

And yet those of us who administer examinations and evaluate dissertations need to ask ourselves candidly: For all the work that we have heard criticized over the past three decades for being undertheorized, how much have we encountered that suffered (without being faulted) from the opposite flaw of being underpracticed or, to be less mealy-mouthed, just plain ignorant or wrong? For fear of slipping into a positivism that overvalued “just the facts,” we allowed a successive era in which it became possible to dismiss an objection as “just a fact,” and now we pay the consequences. There must be a patient balancing, with collaboration and mutual respect between those who by inclination and training gravitate toward theories and concepts and those who are drawn toward knowledge and facts.

Erich Auerbach concluded his essay on philology and world literature with an ultimatum, at once sweeping and specialized, that “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation” (17). Although the much-touted resistance to theory ended long ago, the return to philology has not taken place: a return is possible only if an initial visit has been paid to a place, and however much philology those such as Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, and Leo Spitzer had acquired in their university studies, their skills do not pass by osmosis to those who invoke their names. New Historicism, New Philology, and other renovatory movements have paid obeisance to the virtues of setting texts in context, after a couple of decades in which theory exalted a literariness or even simply a wordiness that eschewed such contextualization.

Although the rise of theory has helped to prevent the narrowing of perspective that could have ensued as students and scholars were channeled more and more toward single languages and literatures, pitfalls of course exist. Many, both professional humanists and laypeople, have faulted literary study for having succumbed to a proclivity toward jargon. Despite being criticized and ridiculed, the verbiage has become as distinctive a feature of these days as it was of scholasticism. Does a proliferation of dictionaries and glossaries of terminology betoken corresponding advances in the field of literary studies, or does it signal a fetish for neologizing gone wild? Consider all the books of this sort that have appeared since 1990 and ask whether developments in other disciplines have necessitated such tools: *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*; *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*; *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory*; *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*.²⁸ Have we entered that most paradoxical of places, a unilingual Babel—a wild

zone (“a specifically female area of culture, often presented in a Utopian or idealized manner for polemical effect”: Hawthorn 374) or an estimate (“the psychotic encounter with radical exteriority”: Hawthorn 112)?

Sometimes it seems as if aspiring *termini tecnici* and the names of their creators, rather than languages or literatures themselves, have become the badges of the professional in literary studies. Here it bears remembering that John Duns Scotus, despite earning from his admirers the sobriquet of doctor subtilis (“subtle doctor” or, less literal-mindedly, “discriminating teacher”), lives on most notoriously in the noun “dunce,” which derives from the use of his name by his detractors to characterize him and his adherents. Even if we subscribe to the arguable proposal that we ought to make our political convictions and goals, alongside our ethnic, religious, and sexual identities, manifest in our teaching and writing, we need to realize that rarefied and even incomprehensible language will seldom help to persuade and motivate. Rather, such self-expression will insulate its users from the very political processes they may wish to influence. Indeed, if we do not stand by the need for intelligibility and even elegance in language and texts, we will be contributing to the degradation of discourse in general.

The predisposition to cant on the part of some comparatists sometimes coincides with a “flavor of the month” mentality that has helped us to lose sight of the canon—and even sometimes of literature itself. One anecdote illustrates the resolute mutability to which one particular breed of literary scholars has committed itself. A colleague of mine in the English department, whom I would have considered at that moment, among other things, a cultural studies person, declared vehemently at a meeting five years ago, “Cultural studies is over. Cultural studies was the 90s.”²⁹ Although I had noticed the phrase diminishing in frequency and visibility, I had not known that the cultstud.com bubble had burst definitively. I would hate to think what this same colleague would have to say about the condition of comparative literature, the field to which Spivak refers in *Death of a Discipline*. But it would be premature to label comparative literature extinct or even endangered, since no matter how protractedly dire the job market has been, the numbers of professors who covet “and Comparative Literature” as a component in their job titles and of students who apply to Ph.D. programs continue to outstrip the supplies of such titles or studentships.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

A far more positive stance could be taken, with acknowledgement of the consistent attraction that comparative literature has seemed to exercise upon outstanding students with unusual backgrounds, language skills, and interpretive aptitudes. They like to grapple with different languages and literatures. Some

of them are drawn to theory more, others less. Some have tastes that cut across time, while others prefer a specific period. Some gravitate toward a particular genre, others not. The discipline should be flexible enough to welcome the best in all these pairings.

Not unrelatedly, comparative literature constitutes an ever more promising locus for interdisciplinarity applied across national boundaries. “Interdisciplinarity” has a rich history.³⁰ Since originating in the mid 1920s in New York City in the Social Science Research Council, it has served as a buzzword that has appealed greatly to bureaucracies. In my own area of specialization, Medieval Studies, interdisciplinarity made its début in 1951 in a notice about American Council of Learned Societies fellowships that appeared in the journal of the Medieval Academy of America. Interdisciplinarity could be defined functionally as doing work that relates closely to the specializations of faculty members in two or more departments that have distinct disciplines associated with them. However it is defined, interdisciplinarity constitutes one protection—and maybe the best protection—against arid and insulated specialization. And since even before comparative literature was formally instituted, literary scholars have intuited that comparative literature would be a bulwark against such narrowness. Nearly 100 years ago a prophetic contributor to *The Modern Language Review* offered a solution to the vast output of obscure scholarship:

Can all this erudition be put to any ulterior and nobler use, or must most of it lose its vitality as soon as created? The present writer believes that the “voluminous and vast” body of knowledge, which has now been made so easily accessible, can be coordinated and interpreted in a way impossible half a century ago. He believes that a subtler and higher kind of knowledge can be extracted from it by a method rather inadequately designated as that of Comparative Literature. (Routh 1)

Yet interdisciplinarity is not without its dangers. As Anthony Appiah observed more than a decade ago, “If we give up the idea of distinctive trainings, what we are going to get is not interdisciplinarity—the disciplines will have disappeared—but an unstructured postmodern hodgepodge” (Appiah 57).

What can help to avoid the pitfalls, while retaining the advantages, of interdisciplinarity? The intermittent obsession of comparatists with philology over the past three decades may offer a hint at one commonsensical solution: interdisciplinarity presupposes disciplinarity, and a discipline that lends itself well to literary study is philology. The interrelatedness of comparative literature and Romance philology as it was practiced by German-speaking emigrés stands to reason, since the practitioners of the latter had or acquired de facto a command of the most important languages in Western European culture and of a discipline that positioned them to work knowledgeably with those lan-

guages as well as with texts produced in them. If all comparatists obtained a philological grounding in at least one discipline, they would not only give their indisciplinarity a leg to stand on, but they would also position themselves better for employment. The Bernheimer Report emphasized the imperative that comp lit students be able to show “solid training in their primary national literature” (47).

Can the study of comparative literature lead to dilettantism or trendiness? Absolutely. But can it propel us to achieve the best of interdisciplinarity? Without doubt. I have fixated on the concept of interdisciplinarity not only for sheer intellectual reasons but also for practical ones. We have to ask ourselves what we aim to provide our students. Very few undergraduate students trained in the humanities will or should proceed to Ph.Ds in any of our fields. Rather than becoming professional scholars, they will end up “doing” something else. We want to give them the best that our own learning has to offer, but we are not readying the majority of them for our world, the so-called ivory tower.

What awaits these undergraduates after college? For one thing, a job market in which most of them will change careers at least twice and probably repeatedly. Even when not moving from one field to another, they will be expected constantly in their workplaces to ground themselves responsibly (or at least convincingly) but rapidly in novel areas of knowledge and new types of analysis and synthesis. Many of us humanists are multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary by both predilection and necessity, and we have much to share. Many of the smartest students, despite pressure from their parents and peers to flock into a small number of preprofessional majors, discover the allures of our studies for themselves, and some of them will be attracted by the joy and perhaps even the utility of studying languages and cultures, both living and dead, and of coming to grips with the literatures and related forms of artistic expression produced in those languages and cultures.

The graduation surveys of undergraduates who opt for interdisciplinary majors attest to enormous satisfaction with their choices. Indeed, the evidence shows that many students are happiest in comparative disciplines, which allow them to work closely with texts (whether verbal or visual) and languages, and to enjoy the benefits of tailor-made programs. The backgrounds they acquire please me, not just because I like to think that they will be helped in their own careers, but even more because it reassures me that if I grow to be old, society will be run at least in part by people who have been trained carefully to read between the lines of what we are told and shown by businesses and governments, to analyze words and images, and to think for themselves.

And what can we say about the graduate students who opt to pursue doctorates in comparative literature? For professors with tenure or even in tenure-track positions who discuss the nature and meaning of comparative literature, talking about globalization is almost a game in comparison with the realities

that confront the degree-seekers. If they are non-citizens of the countries in which they are studying, they are the ones who must contend with the challenges of obtaining student visas and funding opportunities while they are pursuing their degrees and of stretching out those visas and low-paid teaching positions afterward. If they are citizens, they may find themselves in competition with native speakers of the languages that they wish to teach. The job market is a lived reality for them, and they may well experience years of ivy-covered colonialism in having to do years of poorly remunerated teaching both as and after they earn their degrees, all the while hearing talk on a theoretical level about postcolonialism from the full and associate professors whose limited teaching and high salaries they ultimately support.

HUMANISM, HUMANITIES, AND HEROISM

Neither talking about comparative literature nor “comparing the literature” will solve all the ills that face the world, either inside or outside universities. But the communities that form when students and teachers compare and contrast languages, texts, approaches, and ideas can provide solaces and solidarities that matter as profoundly to the well-being of societies as do the contributions delivered to the common weal by hospitals, laboratories, armies, courts, police, banks, businesses, and legislatures, to name only a sampling of important institutions. Although contrasting the neologism of “planetarity” (Spivak) to the specter of globalization is one option, the older alternative is to profess humanism, a concern with the achievements and interests of human beings. As the resemblance of the words indicates, the area of learning that embodies the aims and values of humanism is the humanities. If as a whole the humanities work to overarch the gaps between human beings, comparative literature is ideally situated to function as one of the main spans. No bridges last forever, but the viaducts that Comparative Literature has erected have done much good and have aged surprisingly well.

The acceleration and multiplication of exchange between different parts and peoples of the world means that the arcs that comparatists draw between cultures may bear more of a resemblance to contrails than suspension bridges. Some of the routes will fail to attract subsequent wayfarers, but others will become heavily frequented. Among those who journey along these trajectories, I like to think that those involved in comparative literature will be in a category of their own, neither tourists nor businessmen, but something else. That “something else” is what we can avow through our reading, writing, and teaching, whatever style or styles of comparing we resolve to seek in this daunting new century of ours. If we evidence passion for literature and for the complex interrelationships among the world’s many literary traditions, if we foster delight in languages (both our own and others, alive and extinct), and if we seek in our

teaching and scholarship to be engaged in the present while not neglecting to train our eyes on both the future and the past, then comparative literature will be no likelier to have died in 2003 than authors did 35 years ago in 1968.

These recommendations sound simple, but in fact they may be difficult to achieve because of the blurring that has occurred among those engaged in comparative literature. For all the advantages of broadening culture to include media and levels that were once excluded as a result of the sharp focus on canonical high literature, the effect has been to reduce still further the exposure of students who are ever less likely before college to have read literature in general, past literature in particular, and poetry above all. And the anxious aspiration to achieve relevance by making literature relate to present-day preoccupations, no matter how worthy of our attention those may be, has probably not helped. Students who want immediate ways of solving problems in today's world will not be attracted by politicized courses on culture.

Nor ultimately will another form of prestidigitation help, in which events and investigations that belong essentially to the social sciences are called the humanities. Comparative literature has learned much and has much to learn from economics, politics, anthropology, and other branches of the social sciences, but it needs to learn from the vantage point of clear perspectives about its own distinctive missions. An interdisciplinarity that emerges without an adequate grasp of at least a single discipline will give the lie to its own name and aspiration: It will be indiscipline, rather than interdisciplinarity.³¹ Furthermore, it needs to possess a knowledge that is particular to itself. In a climate that has encouraged interdisciplinarity, social scientists have been as able to incorporate literature and especially narratives into their research and writings as comparatists have been to avail themselves of methods drawn from the social sciences. If comparative literature becomes comparison with literature (Saussy 241), then it is hard to see what of its own comparative literature will have to offer other disciplines—or even if it will be a discipline or a distinctive umbrella of disciplines.

Another part of the explanation for why comparative literature has reached the present pass is that it has become yoked too narrowly to questions of national identity. In the process it has not allowed enough space for the prenational alongside the national, supranational, postnational, and other categories—some relating to premodern periods and others now to postmodern ones. The chronology that comparative literature aspires to cover need not, indeed should not, be dictated by globalization. The notion of globalization has existed only a short time. Defined narrowly, the processes of globalization have become acute only recently (Bessière 14). Their onset may be stretched back to a few centuries ago, with European imperialism and colonialism. Viewed still more loosely, globalization may be related to such flows of trade, technology, wealth, and ideas as took place (for instance) along the Silk Road.³² But must our con-

ception of literature be straitjacketed by the economic and political paradigms of our own important but nonetheless small moment in the vast sea of human history? Such presentism may be a manifestation of provincialism as deformed and deforming in its own way as any geographic closedmindedness.

Comparative literature can promise the best of what has been for millennia the stock-in-trade of those concerned with teaching the correct and persuasive expression of words and ideas in conjunction with the study of important texts. We may no longer call what we do grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, but all of us in the so-called language and literature departments should continue to devote ourselves at least most of the time to language, to the reading and interpretation of texts, and to composition and oral expression. If we relinquish these pursuits, most of them will be neglected by others, and all of us will be impoverished as a result. Those of us who engage in comparative literature—whether certified nominally as comparatists by our degrees, titles, or stationery or whether instead merely through our intellectual aspirations as evidenced in our teaching or research—have the blessing of being able to pursue these goals connected with language and texts across the boundaries of single fields and disciplines.

Does such an emphasis on language and texts mean that comparative literature can or must abandon any and all connection with the great challenges that confront the world outside the confines of books? Far from it. What we teach and write in comparative literature has no more chance of being value-free than most other disciplines. But what are the lasting values of comparative literature? I would argue that one has been its striving for peace, through the recognition of human values that transcend national and temporal borders as well as through appreciation of the distinctive qualities that cultures possess in consequence of their unique linguistic and cultural heritages. Ultimately these basic emphases—peace, language, and culture—seem to me to hold great promise of abiding and of carrying conviction. If we do accept a positive (and that does not mean simplistic) stress on peace, then we would be doing the field a disservice by tying it too tightly to the doctrines of war and terror that have been purveyed since 9/11 by terrorists and their professed opponents alike. Once again, if comparative literature becomes a pale imitation of what happens in the social sciences, it will disappear. It must take what it can use, but it must apply what it finds within a discipline that has a self-definition of its own. Comparatists must push themselves beyond the confines of the languages and cultures most familiar to them, and to do so they will need to rely sometimes on translations, either as the first line of commentary on works they wish to read or even as the sole avenue of access. But if comparative literature sheds its requirements in languages, it will become indistinguishable from English in translation. Last but not least, the ambit of comparative literature has been, and will continue to be, broadened beyond just literature and beyond

just high literature. But let us make no mistake: If comparative literature loses its emphasis on literature, it will survive by having become media studies in all but name.³³

The world of comparative literature seems to long for heroes who have lost their homes and who have stood in a complex relation to the languages and cultures into which they were born. Emily Apter has observed that “the discipline of comparative literature . . . is unthinkable without the historical circumstances of exile” (“Comparative” 86). Early in its evolution after the Second World War it seized upon Romance philologists, most notably Erich Auerbach, who suffered dislocation as a result of the German racial laws, as its founders. More recently it elevated Edward Said to a similar status as heroic exile, blurring the line between his individual history and the expropriations his extended family suffered, and invoking his prolonged battle with leukemia as if his disease related somehow to the postcolonialism that arose out of his work on orientalism.³⁴ His gesture of hurling a stone at an Israeli watchtower, while an understandable expression of frustration and solidarity, set him apart from—and symbolically set him against—Auerbach, a fact which must not be overlooked simply because Said chanced at the start of his career to have put into English a key essay of the earlier critic.

The impulse to seek heroes and founding fathers (and they seem always to be men), while understandable, is unnecessary and even seems oddly dissonant with the abstraction that so often prevails in comparative literature. It is all the odder in view of the fact that neither of the figures in question (nor for that matter any of the others, such as Walter Benjamin, Leo Spitzer, and Jacques Derrida, who are sometimes similarly invoked) achieved their official formation—their higher degrees—in comparative literature.

What makes a comparatist? Not a degree, but instead abilities and an outlook. Those abilities and that outlook will inevitably modulate in response to the times, as too will our understandings of literature and interpretation, and even the name under which comparative literature passes may shift in response to developments in the world as a whole. But globalization should not spell the end of a recognizable comparative literature. The world may be warmer, more populous, more polluted, and more interconnected, but it has not turned from round to flat. And although some languages may be spreading and others dying, the human beings speaking them have not altered rapidly beyond recognition. More people may spend more of their time watching television, films, and online audiovisual resources for entertainment than reading, but the book is far from extinct—especially if it is redefined to be understood as a form of content that may be purveyed in many different media. The abilities and outlook that comparatists have always received, in the form of language-training, critical skills, and a desire to transcend boundaries, will (*mutatis mutandis*) continue to stand them in good stead. What globaliza-

tion crushes—appreciation of both similarities and differences in language and culture; a sense of history; values, desires, and appreciations that are independent of consumerism and that cost little or nothing—these were constituents of comparative literature in its first inception in the late 19th century and again in its long flourishing in the second half of the 20th century. They remain its destiny.

Notes

1. See Routh 7.
2. At present, information on these programs is most readily available on the British Comparative Literature Association's website. See "Comparative."
3. See also Weisstein 167–252 for the "History" as a whole.
4. For a concise expression of gratitude to Bette Anne Farmer, see Furst 119.
5. See also Weisstein 3–28 for his chapter on the question of "Definition."
6. In France this presumption remains in place. See Coste.
7. The translation is from Schulz and Rhein 21–22. The quotation, with one phrase omitted and no acknowledgment of Schulz and Rhein, also appears in Bassnett 20.
8. For biographical information on Shackford and a sample of his writing on comparative literature, see Schulz and Rhein 39–51. For Gayley, see Schulz and Rhein 79–103.
9. For basic landmarks in the history of Harvard's Department of Comparative Literature, see "Harvard's." Schulz and Rhein 115, Weisstein 209, and Levin in Gossman and Spariosu 14 report that Arthur Richmond Marsh (1861–1937) was appointed assistant professor of Comparative Literature around 1891.
10. Qtd. also in Bassnett 2.
11. See Apter "Global" and Madsen.
12. Albert L. Guérard (père) is not to be confused with Albert J. Guérard (fils) (1914–2000). For an essay by the latter about the former, see 89–97.
13. Albert L. Guérard, qtd. in Gossman 89.
14. See Remak.
15. See Friederich and Guillén, respectively.
16. For an autobiography that focuses on his involvement in comparative literature, see Wellek in Gossman 1–11.
17. Qtd. also in Bassnett 4 & Yokota-Murakami 177
18. Qtd. also in Hernadi 23. Compare the editorial statement in the opening issue of *Comparative Literature*, published by the University of Oregon.
19. Qtd. also in Yokota-Murakami 180 (in a subsection entitled "Comparative Literature as a Marshall Plan"). For interesting observations on the events and atmosphere in 1946, see Levin in Gossman 17.
20. Qtd. also in Bassnett 19–20.

21. For the information in this paragraph, my source is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
22. Translated by Weisstein 4. Qtd. also in Bassnett 25.
23. See Spivak, Kadir "Globalization."
24. For a few interesting pages on "Comparative Literature, the Transnational, and the Global," see Kadir.
25. Wang "Comparative" & "Death."
26. Whereas Nichols quotes the expression approvingly in 1968 ("The primary purpose of comparative literature . . . remains what Harry Levin has felicitously called 'comparing the literature'"), Bassett expresses the belief that Levin was already out of step with the times. See Nichols vi, Bassett 5.
27. See Marc, Hanson.
28. See Childers, Cuddon, Harris, and Hawthorn, respectively.
29. Terry Eagleton made a similar pronouncement in 2003. See Eagleton 1. The perceived competition or opposition between Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies was a major topic of the Bernheimer Report. Nor has it disappeared as a matter of concern to comparatists, as the work of Tötösy and Wang demonstrate ably.
30. In all details about interdisciplinarity I am indebted to Frank.
31. For thoughts on indiscipline that are far richer than the brief opposition here with interdisciplinarity, see Ferris.
32. See Cooppan 15.
33. In these remarks I am responding to the judicious advice of Wang, and simultaneously to the declaration of the Bernheimer Report that "The term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study." See Wang "Confronting" 66 and Bernheimer 41–42, respectively.
34. Said himself was clear in interviews that were published after his death: "We left Palestine in 1947. We left before most others. It was a fortuitous thing. . . . I never said I was a refugee, but the rest of my family was. My entire extended family was driven out." Qtd. in Singh 19, 219.

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