

PREFACE

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Gerald Gillespie has organized a select group of scholars for the purpose of studying the roles of comparative literature in the light of “real world practices.” All four of the participants—Manfred Engel, Jean Bessière, Dorothy Figueira, and Gerald Gillespie—find themselves in unusual agreement as to the “new realities” that comparative literature faces as a discipline. Where Yeats could write that “the center does not hold,” the new problem lies in the multitude of centers, all deserving of attention.

As Bessière indicates, no single paradigm exists for all. Yeats feared “mere anarchy,” but the writers under consideration in common lament semi-literacy, a superficiality, and Figueira takes multiculturalism to task for its trading in brief snippets from a few mainly female novelists and then considering its work to be done. Surprisingly enough, all are in agreement as to the problem, whether they call it globalization, modernization, multiculturalism, and that is a proliferation of intellectual structures and demands; they are all in agreement with the solution and that is a thorough knowledge of the language(s) required and a deep immersion in the cultural context(s), and they all see comparative literature in its native form, after its intervention in and spread beyond the European sphere, as providing these needed correctives.

While this is an accurate general summary, though highly foreshortened, there are individual differences worth noting. Figueira criticizes the “institutionalization” of multiculturalism. She regards it as a form of bureaucratic tokenism, co-optation, patronizing tolerance, and a balkanization of people of color. In reality she is sounding a political klaxon, whereby multiculturalism becomes exposed as a diversion from addressing real political problems. This emphasis might represent an intrusion (welcomed or unwelcomed) in the argument of comparative literature. But she

does address this last fully: multiculturalism “does not involve really learning about another culture or demand mastery of another language” (184). Among its many deficiencies multiculturalism has “no respect” for deeper aspects of a culture, its genealogies, its history and body of scholarship (184-85). She ends by urging “us” to reclaim our discipline which she believes to be “the study of literature as a social practice.” Praxis in the Sartrean sense has many folds of meaning and Figueira attributes to it the largest scope of meaning possible.

Neither Engel nor Gillespie is allergic to the changing conditions of the world—globalization, or modernization; but each regards comparative literature as offering some crucial form of preservation from slipshod or simply careless work. Engel introduces three rules (3 a, b, c) to restrict harmful practices and on the same page he indicates what are the various deleterious devices employed to avoid the complexity of issues. His sense of the responsiveness of comparative literature to the changing world is quite dynamic, calling attention to the many shifts and recycling of what makes up the “canon” as well as denoting the many movements already recorded from the center to the periphery and back again. Thus the centuries-old European experience of modernization reflected in literature proves highly relevant for understanding contemporary globalization in other regions. His piece is more of a defense of the adjustments comparative literature has already made as a pioneering movement and will continue to make. 177

Gillespie is roughly on the same shelf. He asks for more thorough historical grounding of such topical issues as slavery and nationalism. He requires a level of scholarship that transcends the journalistic headline and is genuinely transcultural. Yet to his credit, in his deeper insights into the past, he does not conclude with historical relativism. Because slavery was practiced for millennia does not justify more recent examples; history does not preclude the normative when we make “final” judgments and celebrate moral advances. Still his plea for comparative literature is for greater “*épaisseur*” in our understanding of politically-charged issues, a greater density both in breadth and in depth of scholarly research and theory.

Bessière does not write as an advocate but rather as an analyst. In highly technical language he describes (without complaint) the demise of the central paradigm that had been governing the body of European literature. It’s not that literature has been exhausted; the problem lies in the loss of this unifying paradigm. He thus turns to “third world” literature for suitable responses to this new condition. Rather than typical, or hierarchized aesthetic forms, he finds instead a series of “localizations,” parts that are “homogenous,” and thus interchangeable. That is, the structure of the artistic presentation has been altered and complies with the collapse of any totalizing paradigm. Hybridity (a term also used by Engel) enters into the picture, a mixture of signals that defy and deny outmoded assumptions of singularity.

It is obvious from my brief descriptions that all of these essays are of the highest intellectual quality. Each presents major arguments as to the future role of comparative literature, and most miraculously there is a great deal of agreement among them.

Because of the workshop's deliberately "negative" questioning thrust as an exercise to liberate current international Comparative Literature from poor and retarding practices, these selections always suggest the desirability of further, complementary exercises in affirming what comparative literature "is" in positive terms. I felt stimulated to review some of these possibilities in my own mind, but will limit myself here to just one. A classical definition of what our field "is" or what ideally constitutes it is given by history: in the successive stages of its development, CL is the best practice of the acknowledged finest comparatists. Thus it would be fitting that we step back and inquire into the remarkable accomplishments which particular scholars and teams have achieved.