Old Europe[1] and Comparative Literature

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Let me start with a personal reminiscence. Quite a few years ago, but rather late in my life, I visited the American continent for the first time to attend a congress. I remember quite well two moments from my flights: The first one occurred well before the arrival when we flew over Newfoundland in brilliant sunshine and with a delightfully clear view. I recollect looking down at the landscape for quite a long time, with a feeling of fascination and wonder. So vast a country, I thought, and so few signs of human settlement. If I had a penchant for using fashionable terms I might call this my first encounter with the American (at least North-American) "other". The complementary experience happened on my way back. As all frequent flyers will know, airlines like to show a map of the country below the plane on the TV screens on board—especially when they have run out of Hollywood movies. When I awoke, the movie session must have been over and I saw this map, showing nothing but the ocean with the small sign of the airplane above it. But then, all of a sudden, the picture changed and I recognized the contours of the European continent. And suddenly I felt as if I was coming home. Non-Germans among my readers may have some difficulties in understanding that this feeling came upon me with great suddenness and intensity. To passengers from, say France or Great Britain, this would maybe have happened when they recognized their actual home country on the map. For a German, things are a bit more complicated. In Germany, nationalism has been fought so successfully that even what, in quite innocent a way, might be called patriotism, or (even more basically) the feeling of an inner affiliation with German culture, has become suspect and politically incorrect. What I felt might thus well be called an epiphany of cultural identity. "Yes, indeed," I thought, "this continent, small and somewhat vulnerable, bordering on this vast ocean, is where I feel at home." And this feeling helped me to

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organize and focus my American experiences in retrospect. Too vast a continent, too many people centred in too few places, crowding together in these strange agglomerates which only by a very vague analogy could be called "cities," at least from a European point of view.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Stanley Fish, as you will know, has written much about interpretive communities.[2] I do not agree with all of his conclusions but I certainly share his belief that changing one's interpretive community is at least as difficult as becoming fully aware of the concepts, the implicit tenets, on which it is based. Personally, I would never trust a European who tells me that he has overcome Eurocentrism—which of course applies in the same way to all other continents and to all national or cultural points of view. So, inevitably, Eurocentrism is my personal epistemological handicap as a literary critic, just as USA-centrism,[3] Latin-American-centrism, Africacentrism, or Asiacentrism may be that of others, and we could leave it at that—if it were not for the fact that Eurocentrism carries a historical burden of cultural imperialism which other "Centrisms" are (still) free of. Bad luck—but as a German I am quite well used to the fact that history is not always on your side. But maybe real world practices are.

Global Players and the Limits of "Good Practice"

We are all well aware of the fact that in the last two or three decades the concept of comparative literature has changed in many ways.[4] The origins of the discipline, at least as we know it, lay in Europe, and Eurocentrism was a natural consequence—regarding the canon, the knowledge of (hegemonic) languages but also basic assumptions about the definition of literature, about genres, periodisation, etc. The overcoming of this narrow concept of Comparative Literature is certainly one of the benefits of globalisation. One consequence is that literature, too, has become global in a way that early proponents of "world literature" could never have dreamed of. Quite obviously, Comparative Studies as a discipline can and should not relapse into a eurocentric past. But what about the single comparatist, what about the discipline as it is actually taught in different countries?

"I dare do all that may become a man/ Who dares do more is none," says Macbeth. Of course, this is old white male eurocentric speech, uttered by a perhaps not completely trustworthy person. So I will have to rephrase it—maybe like this: "I dare do all that is professionally correct[5] for a comparatist". Which means for me: (a) I will not write about a text which I cannot read in its original language; (b) I will not write about a text whose cultural context I do not know; (c) I will not write about a text which I have not read.

These are—or should be, shouldn't they? —truisms of good practice, at least for texts which are at the centre of our books or articles. Teaching will have its pragmatic limits, too, depending on the size of Comparative Literature departments and on the language competence of students, both of which vary greatly from country to country and even from university to university. If this means that no single comparatist can ever become a global player in the true and proud sense of the word, and that some sort of provincialism is unavoidable, I would far more readily accept this fate than opt for global dilettantism.

To read more and learn more (more languages) is always a good piece of advice—but here it will not do the trick. Of course, there are obvious ways to escape this dilemma (at least to a certain degree): concentrating on literary theory, i.e. producing tertiary literature instead of secondary literature; adopting a presentist point of view, i.e. forgetting about history and viewing all texts through the glasses of present-day concepts; concentrating on current literature, where in many cases the knowledge of one hegemonic language only—English, French, Spanish or, yes, even German—will enable you to do comparative work; abandoning literary studies and choosing the cheap alternative of cultural studies instead,[6] where all you have to do is to play the role of the high inquisitor and put the same questions to all texts: "What is your view of race, class and gender?"—knowing that in the end the verdict will always be: "Guilty of heresy!" All these are strategies for achieving what Niklas Luhmann so aptly called "reduction of complexity"[7]—but unfortunately I have never been particularly interested in any of these options.

Bad luck, once again—so I will have to reduce complexity in my own, old-fashioned way. For instance, by reiterating an old *ceterum censeo*:[8] When its subject is world literature—or even: literature written in European languages—Comparative Literary Studies will by necessity have to be a joint-venture, based upon one of the basic principles of the modern world: the division of labour. This means, of course, that we will have to find joint-labourers who are interested in processing the small parts, which alone we can fabricate. To achieve this we will have to advertise our fragmentary products or accessories on the global comparative market. And this is what I will try to do. What is it, I will ask, that a reformed Old-European comparatist—reformed in the very modest sense of having become aware that Europe is no longer the hub of the world (if ever it was)—could offer to his non-European colleagues?

I hope that there many answers to this question—perhaps there are even more possible answers than possible definitions of Europe and of European identity. And I am well aware of the fact that all of these definitions will be, at best, partial truths—partial in the double sense of the word: certainly incomplete, and certainly relative to the speaker's spatial or geographical and to his historical point of view, and also relative to the historical period of European history which will be his subject. As I am trying to sell an outdated product to rather reluctant buyers I should link it to a well-known current catchphrase—which I will do in my next chapter.

Old Europe and the Concept of Modernisation

There have been many attempts to define European identity.[9] Two obvious and strong markers have always been Christianity and Classical Antiquity[10]—but they certainly will not do much to promote sales in non-European, non-Western markets. So I choose their younger, often forgotten brother who in olden days would have been called "Enlightenment" and is today commonly known by the name "modernisation".[11]

Although modernisation is certainly a European invention, we may well wonder if Europe still owns the copyright for it. Roughly at the end of World War I, the role of modernisation's main protagonist was usurped by the USA—in what we might call a sort of *translatio imperii,* a Hegelian migration of the *Weltgeist*. There it mutated (or maybe became hybridised) into a new form which we commonly call globalization. One could explain globalisation as the necessary consequence of a political situation—one superpower dominating (or trying to dominate) the rest of the world—and of the global spread of capitalist economy, and consider Macdonald's, Coca Cola, Hollywood, pop music and the Internet as its main agents. And this would, of course, be far from wrong. But in one of the last of the *grand récits* globalisation could also be defined as the globalisation of modernisation.

Quickly progressing from bad to worse, my non-European readers may say. As he is, quite rightly, despairing of selling us Christianity and Antiquity anymore he is trying to sell us modernisation. Will those Europeans never learn… Peace, I will answer, modernisation is not the goods I am trying to sell—what use would there be in selling you goods which, however grudgingly, you have already been buying for years… What I am offering, is Old Europe's experience with modernisation, the troubled and complicated cultural and literary history of inner-European modernisation. What can be learned from this experience, is for non-Europeans to decide. For years, Europe looked at the world as the past—the barbarian past—which it had overcome. Now non-Europeans might turn the tables.

In my attempts to give a very brief definition of modernisation I will not talk about its sociological aspects because I am no sociologist (I am taking the principle of the division of labour rather seriously, indeed). In fact, modernisation is one of the many good reasons for the existence of disciplines—true professional competence is today, by necessity, limited to a discipline or even to a small part of it.

So, my definition will be one of *cultural* modernisation only, of the transition from tradition-oriented to modern societies. Quite often, this transition has been described by four criteria:[12]

(1) *Differentiation*: In the course of modernisation, an exclusive system of symbolic world interpretation and the equally exclusive system of values with which it is linked is gradually substituted by a growing multitude of systems, which all have a discrete logic and a value-code of their own. When we move through these systems as agents

we change our value logic and our modes of explanation according to the system in which we act.

(2) *Individualisation*: This process is a necessary complement to the first one. As our identity is no longer defined by belonging (by birth) to one fixed place in society (socially as well as geographically) our *individual* identity will tend to become dissociated from the growing multitude of collective identities to which we (alternatingly) belong—and this will lead to the emergence of an emphatic concept of the individual.

(3) *Rationalisation*: This is a process of secularisation and demystification; more and more areas of life are defined and explained by laws which at least *claim* to be the laws of reason and efficiency—e.g. bureaucracy, the overly refined system of legislation, the laws of the market, natural laws, or causal explanations of human behaviour.

(4) *Domestication of nature*: This is, of course, the domain of science and technology which allow man to control his body and all other forces of nature to a seemingly ever increasing degree.

All of these developments could equally be defined as processes of emancipation, of gaining more and more freedom, or as processes of control and loss (control by anonymous forces and loss of certainties and anthropomorphic orientations). I will not even try to discuss this tricky question of the appraisal of modernisation but merely ask: What do these cultural processes mean for the history of literature? How can they be turned into a research project for the European comparatist?

Modernisation and European Literature

I will sketch my answer by looking at three areas of possible research work:

(1) *The literary system*: Quite obviously, the literary system was in many ways influenced by modernisation—and many of the results have become fairly global by now: Just think of the emergence of the literary market, the corresponding bifurcation into high and popular culture (and its change), the rise of mass media, or the idea of the autonomy of the literary system. The concept of realism, when based on rational causal explanation and psychological motivation, is equally a product of cultural modernisation—as is the rise of the novel, the newcomer and outsider, which soon became the champion genre of cultural modernisation. But, of course, there is also the heroic fight for the survival of the tragedy, and the redefinition of poetry as the proper genre for the self-expression of the individual.

(2) *The history of literature:* A sociologist might tell the history of modernisation as a rather simple, straightforward and linear tale. For the cultural and literary historian it is full of gaps and counter-movements and of strange renaissances of bygone traditions. In fact, a cultural or literary historian might even—in a similar and similarly biased one-sidedness—rewrite the history of modernisations as that of a sustainable

growth based not on the annihilation of the past but on an almost unlimited capability for continuous recycling. Romanticism was, in many European countries, a very successful countermovement to modernisation. The case of Modernism is even more complicated. At first glance, Modernism seems to be the ultimate attempt to modernise literature—and in a way it certainly is. At the same time, a large part of modern literature is definitely a counter-movement to modernisation: critical of metaphysical tradition *and* of science, deconstructing unities and beliefs, and at the same time constructing new, all-encompassing poetic totalities, which quite often link back to the synthetic potential of mythology. Poststructuralism, by the way, might well be considered as the latest of the many successful anti-modernisation movements.

(3) *Centre and periphery:* Europe is a continent of many centres—different ones in different periods. So comparative research in European modernisation may help us to find empirical evidence for answering the old question: Will centres always dominate their periphery? Obviously, cultural and literary hegemonies are never without exceptions—there is always import as well as export. But equally obviously, there are definite cultural and literary hegemonies at certain periods—which sometimes coincide with a pole position in the process of modernisation (implying a leading position in technology and economics, quite often also in political power) and sometimes clearly contradict it. Germany, very strong in Romanticism and Modernism but always far behind France and Great Britain in sociological modernisation, is a case in point, Scandinavia's pioneering role in Naturalism another.

Conclusion

So much for my short sketch of a possible project of comparative research which, though inner-European, might be of interest for non-European comparatists and could be joined with their work.

As my readers will certainly have noticed I have used an old selling trick: presenting an old good in a new design. It's a buyers' market—comparatists from nations who today have to bear the full brunt of modernisation/globalisation will have to decide if they are interested. All I can do is offer three arguments which might be worthy of consideration: (1) Old Europe seems to me like an experimental laboratory of modernisation—with the additional advantage that you can study its progress in, so to speak, slow motion, whereas the current advance of globalisation looks more like a movie filmed with a time-lapse camera. (2) A second advantage is that European cultural and intellectual history is a store-house of attempts to pinpoint the manifold ambivalences of modernisation. If overcoming binarisms is one of the aims of political correctness then the binarism of "good" vs. "bad" (or even "evil") might be a good starting-point. (3) A third advantage is the outcome of the story: Modernisation is the self-appointed arch-enemy of tradition. But Europe is, quite probably, the continent which has preserved its traditions more successfully than any other. So its story

might even offer some consolation or reason for hope, and could perhaps help to gain (or regain) qualities like composure, or even serenity—which comparative literary studies in its present preoccupation with resentment and alarmism, at least in my personal opinion, so sadly lacks today.

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Endnotes

1 In my use of this term I am paying reverence both to Donald Rumsfeld and to Niklas Luhmann who used it to denote something outdated and overcome, a world of the past.

2 Cf. Fish 1990.

3 I wonder why nobody ever invented a handy word for it; "Anglocentrism" and "Angloglobalism" are rather poor substitutes.

4 Cf. for instance Saussy 2006.

5 For a discussion of "professional correctness" cf. Fish 1999.

6 Cf. Engel 2008.

7 Luhmann 1987, 48-57 and passim.

8 Cf. Engel 2007.

9 Cf. for instance Gillespie 1995.

10 Cf. for instance T.S. Eliot's famous definition: "the Western world has its unity in […] Christianity, and in the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity we trace our descent" (Eliot 127).

11 I must confess that I do not particularly like the word; no doubt it was invented by a staunch moderniser. But the term is much younger than the concept, and the idea of modernisation has been used at least as often in a critical as in an affirmative meaning. One of its loci classici, by the way, is probably the sixth of Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters*, written in the early 1790s. Of the many studies on modernisation, cf. for an overview for instance Beck 2001, Giddens 1990, van der Loo/van Reijen 1992.

12 Cf. van der Loo/van Reijen 1992.