

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION: A REVIEW

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The bylaws of the American Comparative Literature Association stipulate the writing every ten years of "a report on the state of the discipline." The present collection *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* represents the latest in the series and is a follow up to Charles Bernheimer's *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1994). The structural similarities between the two titles, with their repetition of "Comparative Literature in the age of " is striking, and I will come back to it.

The nineteen essays in the collection have been written by a team of eminent scholars and they respond not only to Bernheimer's collection and to the general theme of "globalization" but also to each other. The result is an interesting series of kaleidoscopic interventions, some highly readable and pulling lots of punch; others less user-friendly and, in attempting to arise to the occasion, somewhat convoluted and over-written. Granted: the "report" is a very awkward genre for which there are no rules and, given this need to improvise, the editor Haun Saussy has made a good job of providing a nuanced and multiperspectival account of the "state of the discipline". It would have enhanced the impact of the present volume, however, had it been at times less an inward looking colloquy among seniors and more inviting to the as-yet not initiated graduate student. As it is, it makes very interesting reading for the die-hard senior member of staff (and presumably the members of the ACLA) while being less accessible to the future scholar or to those working in other disciplines and interested in finding out what Comparative Literature stands for, where it is going to, and why it might be important.

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A survey attempting to do justice to the complexity of an academic field and what is at issue in it, almost inevitably leaves the reviewer less with a single argument than with a variety of perspectives on a variety of issues (on among other things, the importance of historical approaches, the value of study of graphic novels and other visual forms alongside texts; the nature of comparative literature as a "metadiscipline" or exploratory space). So what is really surprising about this collection, then, is the degree of convergence that it nevertheless manifests. To begin with, the majority of contributors do address some issue within the broad frame of "globalization" taking their cue from the substantial introductory essay by Saussy, himself a specialist in Chinese literature. Where the 1994 report focused on questions of the boundaries between literature and other cultural expressions, ten years later the main emphasis here is on themes that are in many ways more traditional within the multilingual field of comparative literature: the concept of world literature or "literatures of the world" and how best to teach it (David Damrosch and Katie Trumpener provide interesting solutions); the cultural rôle of translation and its status as a medium in teaching and research (Steven Ungar); the nature of comparison itself and the grounds upon which texts or movements from different cultural and linguistic traditions, even from different periods, may usefully be compared with each other and if indeed, as Emily Apter argues following Alain Badiou, if grounds for comparison are always needed; the future rôle of (East) European literature and theory within the much larger body of world literature now becoming available (Caryl Emerson). Even Marshall Brown's enthusiastic celebration of the close reading of particular texts, using the example of *Effi Briest*, reflects the concern with globalization: the very fabric of Effi's provincial life is woven through, as Brown shows, with the impact of more distant and general developments.

Such concerns suggest that we are witnessing the return of Comparative Literature to its origins as the inter-cultural and multilingual study of literature. As if to confirm this, the polyglossic *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Literatur* established by Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz in 1877 is cited on more than one occasion as the foundational text of the discipline (rather than say, the Russian Formalists' programme for a general literary science as promoted among others by René Wellek). The phrase "return to origins" might seem at first sight a merely conservative retreat to older positions, but re-engaging with roads taken earlier in comparatism is not a symptom in this case of burnout. Instead, the present concern with intercultural and interlinguistic "comparatism" as the basis for the common pursuit of literary studies represents not just a return, but also a revitalization: a return to a well-established tradition that had been marginalized as long as other theoretical formations, taking a more universalist approach to literary texts, dominated the academic study of literatures, as they did from the 60s on. But it also represents a revitalization and expansion of this tradition: at a time when globalized communication networks, intercultural exchanges and human mobility are such dominant features of our lives, some of the traditional concerns of comparative literature à la Meltzl de Lomnitz and Paul van Tieghem

among others have become relevant in new ways and have the possibility of taking central stage in the field of literary studies at large.

All of this is good news for those who continue to want to disengage the study of literature from the inevitable parochialism of the separate language departments and who are committed to the study of literature as a trans-national medium that has long been crossing borders—before even the term globalization was invented—both in the original and in the form of translations. The report thus bespeaks confidence in the Comparatist project and a certain excitement at the sense that literature has become an even richer domain now that we in the West are becoming belatedly aware of the variety of literatures in the world and, thanks to work done in the last years to make it more accessible in the form of anthologies, a little better equipped to talk about non-European literatures. As several contributors point out, the success of comparatist concerns in the field of literary studies at large along with the more general acceptance of translation as a legitimate medium for teaching, may mean that Departments of Comparative Literature as such may become less distinctive. The even greater risk is also there that the inter-linguistic and inter-cultural aims of the Comparatist project may end up being reduced to the derivative study of "literatures of the world" through the monolingual filter of a globalizing English. For globalization, of course, is always double-edged: while providing a greater awareness of cultural diversity it also tends to reduce that diversity by the very fact that it makes cultures more widely accessible in an homogenizing lingua franca.

Given this downside of globalization, the distinctive aims of Comparative Literature as the multilingual study of literature have become all the more urgent. As the present collection demonstrates, however, the traditional demand that students of Comparative Literature be at home in three (European) languages is no longer enough for the task at hand. More language skills are needed. But since there are presumably also limits to the number of languages any individual scholar can master, there is new need for different forms of collaboration between specialists in various fields—a point implied by a number of contributors, though not extensively thematized in the present collection. Indeed, given this need for collaborative projects, the core of Comparative Literature may no longer be in a particular "disciplinarity" (i.e. that it is carried out by individuals who are skilled in various languages, though hopefully these people will continue to exist) but in its function as a platform for research and teaching: the fact that it brings together scholars who are committed to exploring in a collaborative way the cross-currents and exchanges between literatures written in different languages across the world at different periods.

This report on "the state of the discipline" thus gives not only food for thought but also reasons for confidence. Nevertheless, it also leaves me with some niggling doubts about the very way in which we as literary scholars think about our work. My concern centres on the generic title: "Comparative Literature in the age of..." The problem lies not so much in the epochal tone, suggesting as it does that in the course of 10 years we have moved from the "age of multiculturalism" to that of "globalization" (as if mul-

ticulturalism were somehow no longer relevant or globalization a new thing). The problem is more with the implicit assumption that one should define "the state of the discipline" by looking at its relation to "the age" around it as if it should be its mirror. Behind this conceptualization lies, of course, the legacy of Matthew Arnold and the belief that criticism's main task is to provide knowledge, not so much of literature as such, as of the world itself as this is represented or reflected through literature.

"Comparative Literature in the age of " bespeaks this grand commitment to be the conscience of the world and to interpret the "best" that has been thought in it. This continues to be a self-evident aim within literary studies. Hence the ongoing self-searching about what is the proper object of study fuelled by the belief that the choice of object (world literature, literatures of the world, popular fiction or highly regarded works of literature) involves an ethical decision about what is relevant at the present time or in the present world. With our present global perspective and our awareness that there is more to literature than the canon of European classics, that "worldly" task has become an even heavier one and the way to its realization more fraught by the need to select carefully.

Far be it from me to trivialize the importance of cultural criticism or a commitment to seeking out interesting literary phenomena to study above more banal ones. Nevertheless, there is something paradoxically ostrich-like about the ways in which Comparative Literature defines itself in relation to the world around it and in relation to "the age" as a whole. The very moral authority accorded to literature is also a throw-back to a time when literature (vide Arnold) was the dominant cultural form. But for all its ostensible worldliness, the present collection arguably puts its head in the sand when it comes to the changing status of literature in the highly mediated world in which we live and where globalization has been effectuated more obviously through the medium of television, film, popular music and internet than it has through literature. In paying so much attention to world literature and how it should be defined and taught (in itself a really positive development) the collection nevertheless succeeds in ignoring the fact that literature's relation to the world, and its place in the world, has fundamentally changed. More precisely, it ignores the interface between literature and other media, and between literature and other forms of knowledge at the present time. In raising this point, I do not mean to suggest that we should all drop the study of literature in favor of looking at other media (a possibility raised briefly by Malti-Douglas), for that would be to perpetuate the belief that literary studies is somehow a super-discipline that provides the conscience for the humanities and has a responsibility for all of culture. Rather it is an argument in favor of reconsidering the changing relations between literature and other cultural media, and the impact both in the past and in the present of new technologies and changing literacies on the very possibilities we have for expression and interpretation. It is also an argument for considering new forms of collaboration with specialists in other fields of culture.

In other words, the next challenge is to conceive of literary studies itself from a comparative perspective, that is, in relation to other forms of knowledge about culture and media. In the last decades, certainly in Europe, media studies have been institutionalized and have been providing increasing competition for literary studies both when it comes to attracting students and to attracting research funding. The question which needs to be addressed, sooner rather than 10 years down the line, is how to reposition comparative literary studies in relation to these adjacent fields. In the first place, this will mean becoming more modest: accepting the fact that writing and reading are just one form of culture among other, albeit the one with the longest history and about which there is the greatest body of knowledge (here we should be much less modest). It will also involve becoming more pro-active as we define more clearly, and become once again surprised by the magic of language in its various manifestations, what literature can and can not achieve (Jonathan Culler's intervention hints in this direction). Instead perhaps of soul-searching continuously about the identity of Comparative Literature in relation to the set of objects (world literature, counter-canons, etc) and in relation to "the age" as a whole, we need to look outside the discipline and accept that there is an outside. Hopefully the next report will focus less on "the state of the discipline" as seen from within and be more specific about what we have to offer the world of learning at large.