

New Ways in Comparative Literature: A Review Article of New Work by Tötösy and Tötösy, Dimic, and Sywenky

Ernst Grabovszki
University of Vienna

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Ernst Grabovszki,

**"New Ways in Comparative Literature: A Review Article of New Work by Tötösy
and Tötösy, Dimić, and Sywenky"**

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Ernst GRABOVSZKI

New Ways in Comparative Literature: A Review Article of New Work by Tötösy and Tötösy, Dimić, and Sywenky

The following is a review article of two recent volumes: Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. Softcover, 298 pages, bibliography, index) and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and/et Milan V. Dimić with/avec Irene Sywenky, eds. / Textes réunis et présentés par, *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature Comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. Hardcover, 930 pages, bibliography). It is always refreshing and soothing to read new introductions to or surveys of a discipline because this makes evident that a discipline is not dead -- as Susan Bassnett claimed for comparative literature in 1993 (47). Tötösy de Zepetnek made the effort to put comparative literature in the context of cultural studies and to apply his theoretical framework of the systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture which is a conglomerate of the schools of Siegfried J. Schmidt's *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*, Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, the theory of the literary institution (Jacques Dubois), Robert Estivals's *système de l'écrit* theory, and of other theoretical approaches. He does so because of his conviction that comparative literature is in need of a methodological background in order to avoid marginalization by academic and political institutions: "My basic premise is that in the current situation an approach that promises innovation and where the results of study may have an opportunity to persuade the taxpayer, the politician, indeed, the general public -- not to speak of university administration -- to recognize the importance of the study of literature as a socially constructive and necessary educational and life force should be paid serious attention to" (19). Tötösy expects from his systemic and empirical approach a more evidence based and a less speculative or essayistic study of comparative literature. Besides the Bernheimer Report of 1993, this book is another step towards the contextualization not only of the literary text, as Bernheimer and his contributors suggest (42), but of the discipline itself which, when based on strong methodological grounds, would be able to acquire a very much needed disciplinary identity. It should set us thinking that, for instance, Earl Miner is not able to find an answer to the question "What *is* literary comparison?" (21) and therefore notes disappointedly: "I could find nothing on literary comparison, whether by my own searches or in questions to colleagues. To my surprise, philosophers were equally dumb" (21). Of course, I do not want to give the impression that Earl Miner is to blame for any absence of methodology of comparison, but there is evidence that there have been too few endeavors towards defining the notion and the methodology of comparison *by comparatists*. It is thus astonishing that other sciences such as history, ethnography, etc. have sounded comparative methodology more or less comprehensively (for history, see, for example, Haupt and Kocka, for ethnography see Schweizer, and for the social sciences see Ragin). And the same is with other theoretical approaches against which comparative literature often seems to be immune.

The best characterization of Tötösy's view of comparative literature is reflected by his ten "general principles" of the discipline and field which cover 1) the importance of method in comparative studies, 2) the comparatist's ability and willingness "to move and to dialogue between cultures" (16), 3) the knowledge of several languages, literatures and disciplines, 4) to study literature in relation to other arts, 5) the use of English as a *lingua franca* of communication, scholarship, and knowledge transfer, 6) the study of literature within the context of culture, 7) the encouragement of the approach of inclusion: "This inclusion extends to all Other, all marginal, minority, and peripheral and it encompasses both form and substance" (17), 8) the attention on methodology in interdisciplinary study, 9) the effort to avoid the paradox of globalization versus localization within the institutional margins of the discipline, and finally 10) the vocational commitment of the student and scholar of comparative literature, that is the necessity of the practitioners' reflections on the reason for and the goals of their studies. So, what is new about these principles? Tötösy's "manifesto" will not surprise anyone working in the field of comparative literature or even in other areas of literary study. But they sum up matters of course for any comparatist while there is a built in solicitation for interest in the discipline. Also, many points in the principles have been discussed, for instance, by the diverse reports on professional standards (e.g., see Bernheimer for the most recent of such reports). In sum, it seems

useful to emphasize these principles especially when facing students who are asking themselves what studies to take up or when faced by such questions by colleagues as by Miner (above).

Following the general principles of comparative literature Tötösy then presents work in which he applied them: "Literature and Cultural Participation," "Comparative Literature as/and Interdisciplinarity," "Cultures, Peripheralities, and Comparative Literature," "Women's Literature and Men Writing about Women," "The Study of Translation and Comparative Literature," and in his final chapter, "The Study of Literature in the Electronic Age." An aspect of importance for the recent global social development is the process of migration, immigration, ethnicity, and cultural diversity and that Tötösy discusses, with regard to literature, in some detail. Clearly, this area of interest binds comparative literature to topical and explosive political and social questions and it is therefore near at hand and desirable that comparative literature would contribute to these social and cultural processes in order to strengthen its relevance within the humanities. From my perspective, Tötösy's discussion would have benefitted from work in intercultural German philology, an area that has made respectful steps towards the study of xenologia (see Wierlacher). More, it would be rewarding for both German studies and comparative literature if there were more intensive cooperation and interdisciplinarity. I would also like to suggest that for comparative literature -- and for Tötösy's own work -- theoretical discussions in ethnology and the writing of ethnography are also fields worth to look at attentively. For example, one of the first steps towards a reception of auto-ethnography and its transfer to literary studies and comparative literature, at least in the German speaking countries, was surveyed by Doris Bachmann-Medick (1996; see also Clifford and Marcus; Berg and Fuchs). It is in context that Tötösy's book offers some interesting insights into the notion of border writing and the centre/periphery-model in postcolonial theory, paradigms he develops into a theory of "inbetween peripherality" (131) in order to apply this framework to the work of three (East) Central European authors (Cartarescu, Kukorelly, and Esterházy). The application of the framework to the texts of these authors reveals a "narrative of change" after 1989, which means that certain "thematic, linguistic etc., features in the literature of the region are new in form and content" (136). The new situation is also represented by a differentiated discourse on the erotic, the lack of politics and history, and other thematic parameters owing to a shift in the social status of the author and tendencies that are characterized as "subjective sensibility." A stimulating example of peripherality within as well as of a literary text in the context of both Central Europe and ethnic minority writing is devoted to Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize winning novel, *The English Patient*.

Broad space is devoted to "Women's Literature and Men Writing about Women." Tötösy starts from a "functional and operational framework of gender responsibility" (175) (based on ethical constructivism in radical constructivism), arguing that it is necessary for male academics to overcome any beliefs or attitudes of/toward negative discrimination, this of course not only in academic but also in private, political, social, etc., life. But reading a paragraph -- in Tötösy's proposal of gender parity -- like "Whether your spouse is at home or whether she is working, housework must be shared. If you have the misfortune of having grown up without acquiring skills such as cooking, doing laundry, etc., you should learn them. Also, it is important that we [the husbands/companions] do the less 'fun-type' housework..." (175) in a book on comparative literature leaves me puzzled: is a man a better comparatist if he is able to cook and do the laundry? And what about non-Western societies where the woman is forced by social and religious tradition to do the housework and raise children all by herself? In applying the gender parity proposals and his basic comparative literature framework, in this chapter too Tötösy develops a methodological and -- in this case -- an ideological (ethical constructivism, as he designates the question, or politically correct?) basis by means of an interpretation of several texts by the modernist Hungarian Margit Kaffka and the English Dorothy Richardson. The volume's last chapter is devoted to "Literature in the Electronic Age." It is true that the new media, especially the internet and the world wide web, are of increasing importance for any literary study and academic life not only because of the internet's rapid growth. The user benefits from the possibility of faster, cheaper, and less circumstantial communication as well as from information retrieval by means of both primary and secondary texts and from online bibliographies and theme-oriented sites. The new media on the other hand effect the traditional roles of author, distributor, and reader, and, of course, our notion of the printed text, especially when discussed in the context of the digital space (cyberspace) and it is these aspects that would have deserved more attention in Tötösy's discussion.

Tötösy's most recent collected volume he co-edited with Milan V. Dimić and Irene Sywenky is a selection from presentations at the XIVth Triennial Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), held at the University of Alberta in 1994. The volume contains chapters -- with selected articles in English and French -- on "Comparative Literature and Literary Theory," "Literary History and Histories of Literature," "Genres and Textual Properties," "The Novel and Other Prose," "Drama and Literature and Other Arts," "Literature and Film," and "Literature and Technology," and a final chapter with Tötösy's "A Bibliography of Theories, Methods, and Histories of Comparative Literature." The volume is closed with one of the co-editor's, Dimić's -- who was, with Tötösy, the general organizer of the Alberta ICLA/AILC Congress and who recently retired from the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta -- thoughts on the "Future(s) of Comparative Literature." According to Tötösy's introduction to the volume (13-18), the third co-editor, Irene Sywenky, was responsible for one of the most onerous and time-consuming tasks of the publication of this volume of 930 pages, namely for the electronic transfers, formatting, and MLA style formatting of the articles (see 16-18). To a certain extent these papers can be read as a supplement to Tötösy's approach towards a new comparative literature although the papers were not selected for this purpose of course. Interestingly, the French-language abstract on the back cover of the volume makes this clear: "Ce volume ... est ainsi offert un examen pratiquement systématique des questions de littérature comparée qui définissent le champ présent de la recherche." The section "Literature and Technology" for instance contains further remarks on "Postmodern Textuality in the Age of the Computer" by Benzi Zhang or "Computer Database Use in Literary Study" by Rüdiger Campe up to "The Machine as Allegory and the Literary Text" by Monika Schmitz-Emans, all containing relevant discussions about historical and/or contemporary issues relating to new media.

Traditional topics in comparative literature such as world literature (see Hendrik Birus' article on "Main Features of Goethe's Conception of World Literature"), or comparisons of single authors and works (e.g., Ming Dong Gu's "A Comparison of Some Chinese and English Poetic Concepts" or Yiu-Nam Leung's "Lord Chesterfield and Tseng Kuo-fan") appear among newer approaches demonstrating the interdisciplinary strength of comparative studies. In his article, "Littérature comparée et histoire des mentalités: Concurrence ou collaboration?," Yves Chevrel for instance dares to (re)sound the relation between comparative literature and the *histoire des mentalités*, a central paradigm of French social history. This is interesting if for no other reason that Marc Bloch has regretted the missing methodological parallels between social history and comparative literature already in the 1920s because of the latter's restrictive use of comparison. But the *histoire des mentalités* of course challenges literary and comparative studies simply for the reason that literature is -- or ought to be? - - their *raison d'être*. Another rewarding aspect of interdisciplinarity for comparative literature is outlined by Antony Tatlow in his article "Literature and Textual Anthropology" by examining some works of Bertolt Brecht and is therefore an opportune addition to Tötösy's own discussion of cultures and peripheralities.

If it is legitimate to observe methodological as well as thematic tendencies within comparative literature studies by consulting scholarly textbooks and conference papers -- and it seems legitimate insofar as such volumes often describe a discipline's state of the art at a certain point of time -- one could argue that contemporary comparative literature is concerned with intra-, inter-, and extra-textual problems; a strong effort to establish a theoretical and methodological basis for the discipline; to include the new media and their theoretical aspects into literary and comparative studies; to break open the limits to other arts; the question of the social and political relevance of the comparative study of literature and culture; and a more global view of the discipline by paying attention to such countries that have not yet been noticed so much by scholarship such as Japan, Spain, India, etc. All these efforts seem to be appropriate to enrich the "modest universe of Comparative Literature" (Dimić 927).

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Reviewer's profile: Ernst Grabovszki works in theory of comparative literature and social history of literature at the University of Vienna. He has contributed articles to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary German Culture* (Ed. John Sandford) (1999) and *Makers of Western Culture, 1800-1914: A Biographical Dictionary of Literary Influences* (Ed. John Powell and Derek Blakeley) (forthcoming). He also reviews books for the *Wiener Zeitung*.