

The New Comparative Literature: A Review Article of Work by Bassnett, Bernheimer, Chevrel, and Tötösý

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Joseph PIVATO

The New Comparative Literature: A Review Article of Work by Bassnett, Bernheimer, Chevrel, and Tötösy

For a long time now students of comparative literature in North America have needed a good up-to-date introduction to the discipline. In one volume Steven Tötösy has produced a very competent introduction that can help anyone understand what comparative literature is about: Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (Amsterdam: Rodopi <<http://www.rodopi.nl>>, 1998. 297 pages, ISBN 90-420-0534-3, US\$ 47.00, paper). After a theoretical introduction and the author's own approach, the "systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture," the first chapter gives us a ten-point "manifesto" which outlines the general principles for comparative literary study. Tötösy clearly explains important foundations such as the comparative principle, attention to other languages, other disciplines, cultural difference, inclusion, methodology, and the use of theory. We can appreciate that this is to be an inclusive approach to the study of literature and culture rather than one which excludes texts, authors, and genres -- implicitly or explicitly, by design or by oversight -- because of languages or cultural differences. Not since Ulrich Weisstein brought out his *Einführung in die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (1968) in an English translation in 1973 have we had a more useful introduction to comparative literary study.

Tötösy is a proponent of systemic and empirical approach for the study of comparative literature and culture and his volume is an example of the approach applied to the analysis of current trends and problems in comparative literature. Each of the seven chapters is devoted to an important general issue in this discipline: theory and method, cultural participation, interdisciplinarity, women's literature, translation studies (with a "Taxonomy for the Study of Translation" based on Anton Popovic's work), and the study of literature in the electronic age. The longest chapter, number four, is devoted to multiculturalism and the relation of ethnic diversity to modern literary study. This is a significant chapter and demonstrates the importance of this volume in furthering comparative studies into the next several decades. Multiculturalism is an area much neglected in all previous volumes on this discipline; a sad irony given the large number of emigré professors who have been involved in the development of comparative literature in North America. And we can add that this very quality of cultural diversity is what made this area of study so attractive to so many students. That this is neglected or misunderstood is an indication of the present crisis in comparative studies.

If we look briefly at the other volumes on the state of comparative literature published in this decade we can understand the difficult situation in which this discipline finds itself. That there are only three other titles in English is a clear indication of a crisis in identity, direction, and status. Susan Bassnett in *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) declares that, "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead. The narrowness of the binary distinction, the unhelpfulness of the historical approach, the complacent shortsightedness of the literature-as-civilizing-force approach have all contributed to its demise (47). Bassnett's critique of comparative literature is from a European, if not British, point of view which still seems to revolve around the traditional centres of the literary institution: France, Germany, England, and the United States. While Bassnett does deal with the spread of Western literature in the former colonies of the European powers, she neglects the growing cultural diversity within those very self-centered Western nations. Although she argues for reform in the comparative study of literature, Bassnett, in 1993, does not seem to be aware of the many changes which are taking place in many fields of study. With this dated perspective this volume is of limited use for North American students.

The other volume, Yves Chevrel's *Comparative Literature Today: Methods and Perspectives*, was originally published in French in 1989 and very intelligently translated into English by Farida Elizabeth Dahab (Kirkville: The Thomas Jefferson UP, 1995). Because the perspective is French and the focus is on European literature, this text is also of limited use to the North American student. Dahab has added her introduction and two essays in the appendix to update this volume, but in 1999 this is not enough. For example, unlike Tötösy's volume, there is no attention to the ever-changing configurations taking place in comparative literary studies. And the situation is similar with the only other volume of the last ten years that is in some ways is as wide-ranging -- at least with regard to

Western literatures -- as Tötösy's volume, namely the English version of Claudio Guillén's original Spanish volume of 1985 translated by Cola Franzen, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

One book which does seem to address these transformations on the American landscape of scholarship is Charles Bernheimer's *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), a collection of essays by major scholars in comparative literature. Bernheimer is the author of the 1993 Report for the American Comparative Literature Association on the state of the discipline and the nature of the crisis. The various essays in this volume are supposed to be a response to that timely report. The fact that the sixteen contributors cannot agree on how to accommodate multiculturalism in comparative literature is indicative of the serious cultural, political, and linguistic problems which this discipline has in the U.S. Bernheimer, and his male colleagues, see the inclusive and contextualizing politics of multiculturalism as incompatible with comparative scholarship, a scholarship based on quality and not quotas. Bernheimer complains that "advocates of multicultural canon revision wish to extend the ethical demands for recognition of marginalized cultural groups and expressive traditions, which began with the civil rights and women's movements, to include both minority ethnic cultures in this country and non-Western cultures globally" (8). Many of the essays have a narrow American focus, a blind phobia, or conversely, an adoration, of cultural studies, a hidden resentment of women's studies, and little support for the study of foreign languages. With the exception of four essays by women contributors, this volume is a disappointment as a reasoned and fair evaluation of the state of comparative literature and the multi-ethnic society of North America. Mary Louise Pratt and Rey Chow call for the study of different languages, while Elizabeth Fox Genovese, and Emily Apter propose a discipline which is open to historical change and Third World cultures. Bernheimer and most of his American colleagues want to keep comparative literature an exclusive domain built on the English and European canon. Their nostalgia for the past dominance of comparative departments is sad, all the more so since they seem to have nothing to offer to new students of literary theory and cultural studies who wish to study literature comparatively.

The outstanding quality of Tötösy's book is its inclusive approach, both on the theoretical level and in practical applications of systems theory. It saves us from the narrow academic politics of Bernheimer's colleagues and opens up possibilities to the future. His fourth chapter on multicultural issues is as enlightened as it is different from anything in Bernheimer's collection. Here is an example of Tötösy's approach: the "model of recognition and inclusion suggests an approach that in my opinion contains both in theoretical and in pragmatic terms conditions which would be applicable to the situation in Western European countries -- and follows my own postulates of a New Comparative Literature" (123). In a wide-ranging study that uses examples from Canada, Germany, Hungary, and Romania, Tötösy examines the multicultural topics of: the American melting pot, postcolonialism, border writing, "inbetween peripherality," self-referential writing, life writing, and historical reconstructions, all using his systemic and empirical approach in comparative study. And Tötösy demonstrates his inclusionary approach throughout his publications, for example in his article about comparative literature in China and in Taiwan in his collected volume, *Canadian Culture and Literature and a Taiwan Perspective* (1998) or in his volume *Wen hsüe yen chiu ti ho fa hua. Chen t'i hua ho ching yen chu i wen hsüe yü wen hua yen chiu fang fa (Legitimizing the Study of Literature. A New Pragmatism: The Systemic Approach to Literature and Culture* [1997], trans. Ma RuiQi); for examples of his work, see passim and the Works Cited of the volume; see also his list of publications at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/totosycv>>. There is an understanding here of multiculturalism that goes far beyond the identity politics behind many of the essays in Bernheimer's volume. Tötösy is not blind to the serious issues of cultural difference in many regions of the world but tries to see hopeful new developments for the future. We may not all agree with the author's views but he has provided us with ample and detailed examples for us to consider.

The other important chapter is devoted to interdisciplinarity which as one of the motherhood principles of comparative literature, but which is often the most neglected. The unvoiced problem about comparative study in the sixties and seventies was that it was still dominated by formalism and new criticism, *les rapports de fait*, and did not really allow for interdisciplinary study. The critical theory dominant at the time did not encourage cross-disciplinary links. Only more recently, and

possibly because of the crisis in comparative literature, have programs in our discipline been more open to interdisciplinary investigation. Using previous work by Julie Thompson Klein and Siegfried J. Schmidt, the author proposes the adoption of comparative and method principles outlined in his manifesto. In this chapter Tötösy looks at realist literature and film and gives us a convincing demonstration of both the theory and practice. Throughout this volume the theory is applied to literary examples from all over the world.

The final chapter deals with the study of literature in the electronic age and is a very important contribution in pointing the way to the future for this discipline. The information sciences are changing how we read and study literature. However, this is not reflected in the literature programs across the campuses of North America. Tötösy agrees with Schmidt that the study of literature is in need of renewal and that this can best be done in the context of other media. While we can still focus on the primacy of the literary text we can also be open to its links with, and its transformations into other media, which now includes not just theatre and film, but also video, the internet, CD-ROM, and hypertext. These are all changing our relationship with the printed word and our relationship with two thousand years of literary traditions. As Tötösy points out, the work of George P. Landow and other theorists on electronic technology try to demonstrate how one of the effects of new media is "the decentralization and the proliferation of communicative possibilities" (258) and at the same time electronic links across all kinds of boundaries. Tötösy correctly points out that this is all having a profound effect on readers and will inevitably impact on the study of literature and literary theory. Literary research is already changing as the ordinary student can now access massive amounts of information on any aspect of a literary subject. This quick and easy access to literary material from any part of the world and from a number of languages would seem to support many of the methods and approaches in comparative literature. That Tötösy is the only scholar to my knowledge in North America to deal with these new developments in the comparative context is an indication of the sorry condition of this discipline in 1999.

Is there a future for comparative literature? Tötösy's book is a demonstration that there may be a future, but under certain conditions. An other question is, "will our colleagues in this discipline make any changes, are they open to changes"? Beyond this timely volume there are indications that the answers to these questions are still very uncertain. One of these uncertainties is the state of literary journals in general and of comparative literature journals in particular (Tötösy was one of the editors and the desktop publisher of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 1989-97). While there are now a number of literature and theory journals that are electronic, none is devoted to comparative literature and culture, with one exception, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, founded, edited, and published by Steven Tötösy at the University of Alberta (<<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clcwebjournal/>>). In his volume he refers repeatedly to a New Comparative Literature and he follows through with theoretical and applied studies as well as in his practical activities. Let us hope this optimism in word and deed comes true.

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