

Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?

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Volume 2 Issue 4 (December 2000) Article 13**Eva Kushner,****"Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/13>>

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Abstract: In her article, "Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?" Eva Kushner observes that throughout its history, comparative literature has internalized as part of its own objectives and directives a major challenge: The need to renew its problematics and curriculums in response to the inherent diversity of literature within culture. She emphasizes that the vitality of the discipline depends on an authentic pluralism capable of resisting the dominance of unanalyzed hierarchies and universals. Acknowledging that the entire history of world literature remains the potential material of comparative literature studies, Kushner favours an "open system" approach. The concept of an open system may be paradoxical but it is not self-contradictory: Its openness guarantees that access to canonization will be truly global while its systematicity guarantees that all data will be treated with equivalent criteria. Finally, Kushner favours an inductive rather than a monumentalizing approach to literary history and considers theory as a reflective process rather than an a priori framework.

Eva KUSHNER

Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?

One approach to discuss the question, "Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?" would consist of discussing professional and institutional aspects of comparative literature. But I am haunted by the constant intellectual challenge of the changing nature of our field of knowledge. My title is meant to underscore that challenge, rather than to exaggerate the importance of the turn of the century, useful only as a metaphor for possible continuities and discontinuities in the near future. As well, it is a risky attention getting device, in that any generalization is a construct, and can be suspected of trying to impose a common meta-narrative on a community which may not even perceive itself as a community. I am dutifully diffident of such pretensions; my thoughts are simply based on many years of sustained observation, and sporadic analysis, of the comparativist discourse.

This leads me to imagining three possible attitudes with respect to the near future of comparative literature. The first would be strongly optimistic in its hopes for literary studies in the global village, improved possibilities of dialogue, more cogency and depth in the self-understanding and in the theoretical systematization of literary studies. The second on the contrary would be strongly pessimistic, envisioning a rapid decline of comparative literary studies as a cogent area of knowledge, a construction condemned qua construction because based upon uncritical notions of comparability, both epistemologically and programmatically. The third attitude would be a pragmatic one, accepting the extreme pluralism of the field, welcoming it in fact as an opportunity to counteract the artificiality and ultimate monologism of comparative literature envisioned as a kind of sophisticated international information highway. Strongly armed by a heterological approach against comparative literature as a purveyor of metafiction, this attitude would look beyond institutionalized definitions and rigid programs towards a renewed commitment to cultural exploration, and, to that end, towards methodological innovation; and, for individual scholars, towards a greater degree of personal independence and commitment to philosophical articulateness. It is the third attitude, the experimental, even existential one, which seems the most fruitful, as opposed to both extreme optimism and extreme pessimism, but it does presuppose a moment of disciplinary analysis of ourselves, and, once again, of self-disclosure.

One of the weaknesses of comparative literature has been its anxiety over not always being situated *à la fine pointe de l'avant-garde* where the action is thought to be. We welcomed the cross-fertilization with linguistics, psychoanalysis, structural anthropology that occurred in the heyday of structuralism; but many studies then bent the analysis of literary texts entirely to the criteria of one or more of these disciplines. At the same time, and ever since, something called literary theory which (all other things being equal) should be deeply internal to our studies, began to be construed as just about their obverse, on the one hand by theoretically inclined comparatists dissatisfied with the epistemological imperfections of such practices as positivistic literary history or naïve thematology; on the other hand by those who saw theory as an invading body, foreign to comparative literature. This in turn literature was being displaced by that invader, as if theory were not the very process of on-going critical examination and reshaping of the conditions of acquisition and construction of our knowledge; and to the impression that theory and its frontier proponents do not work in the comparative literature field, whereas they possess a specialization that should be brought in to restructure comparative literature from the outside. Deconstruction and postmodernism have similarly gained territory as external agents whereas both are ideally suited to be internalized by comparative literary studies; this is not a question of territoriality and ownership, but of the fundamental motives that structure what we teach and write.

The development of cultural studies signals another reshaping of the disciplinary spectrum, and another round of risks and opportunities. Opportunities: I strongly believe that our studies have been immeasurably enriched by every one of the so-called invasions. Risks, because of the tendency of comparative literature scholarship to submit to the various paradigms of these successive interlocutors too readily, too completely, still not critically enough. If you think of us, for a moment, as a scholarly community with a culture of its own, you can immediately envision,

as you would for culture X or Y, mechanisms of domination and liberation, inclusion and exclusion at play. The point here is that all too often, perpetually wavering as to its own identity, comparative literature has given ground to this variety of solicitations. For the sake of the future investment of our intellectual resources it is crucial that we probe our own cultural identity and decide whether the dissolving tendency is to continue or whether we have grounds yet again to assert a dynamic identity of our own within the plurality of disciplines.

Even to refer to comparative literature as a discipline or set of disciplines arouses suspicions of hierarchical thinking and unanalyzed undercover ideology; to speculate about a collective intellectual future implies a degree of predictability and therefore questionable epistemological self assurance. In the era of suspicion there exist no simple, untainted verbal tools with which to communicate our findings to one another, so systemically determined are all our words and concepts. "Intercultural Dialogue," one of the themes of the 1985 Paris Congress of the ICLA/AILC: International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée has been slow in progressing from its dream status to solid reality. In many ways, we continuously have had before us a tabula rasa. Is it not time to rally around our many commonalties which lie in questioning and problematizing, rather than in defending certain answers? To agree on a set of problematics, recognizing them as problematics? A research field, in other words, free of predetermined conclusions, and an open system allowing for modifications? I do not doubt that there is consensus on the object of our inquiry, which is literary; but even the specificity of literature within culture, and the mode(s) of approach to the literary text, as well as the very identity of that literary text, are grounds for discussion rather than tenets of a common faith. The process of intellectual change in our time appears to be guiding us towards ever new encounters with other fields of knowledge (cultural theory on the one hand, epistemology of science on the other, unless you go as far as somehow linking them together). Let us not equate literary studies with the study of the entire cultural universe; but let us ever be mindful of their living interdependence.

That "comparative literature" has always been a misnomer is certainly no secret; but the reasons for its mistaken identity need once and for all to be brought to light and remedied. Assuredly one of these is the identification of literatures with nationhoods or even political statehoods normally associated with a single language. Comparative literature as a study of commonalties and differences arose from that identification, and let us face it: it suited well the mental habits of a number of university systems in which the literature of their nation in their language represented the familiar, the culturally safe, and compatible. It also confirmed conscious or unconscious nationalisms at stages in the development of national cultures when these cultures needed to look within themselves. Such a statement, however, carries within itself a risk of oversimplification, since it sounds as if nations, and national literatures would eventually reach a point of greater maturity at which their self-involvement would cease, and minds could only then freely venture to make discoveries beyond national borders; and only then could inter nationality take over.

One look at literary developments in the Early Modern period would suffice to document the fertility of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and transhistorical encounters during that epoch. It is not, then, the case that a phase of internationalism follows a phase of nationalism in literary studies; rather, both tendencies are co-present at every stage; what fetters them is the thought that to look towards the other is somehow extraordinary, whereas the other is already in us and every text is a response to factors both exogenous and internal. The distinctive quality of comparative literature studies in this regard is indeed their emphasis on inter nationality; but inter nationality in the sense of crossing linguistic fields and national borders is not, if it ever has been, the sole criterion. Inasmuch as studies of intertextuality and of the workings of literary (communication) systems help us to understand how much interaction occurs in the genesis, formation and subsequent trajectory of any literary work, and we are thus led to grasp the systemic aspect of all literary phenomena, we can easily see that literature qua literature is intercultural regardless of whether the exogenous elements in a given corpus hail from a different culture or not. Literatures exist together in and as system.

In the structuring of curricula, research topics or even institutional groupings such as departments, institutes and programs, lines of division are necessary. If they claim to be "comparative," they should focus on languages, literatures, and cultures in contact rather than on any one of them in isolation. What comparative literature as an intellectual pursuit, regardless of institutional barriers, has to offer is far more than a history of what these literatures have received and given, and what processes of transformation they have undergone; it also develops a systemic understanding of these processes. At this point, we must evoke the perceived problem of hierarchies: the reproach often directed towards comparative literature is that in its systematizing it has been creating, at least implicitly, scales of values the higher of which are often situated in a past, or in an elsewhere. In my view, this danger by no means automatically vitiates the examination of literary interactions; it places upon each scholar the burden of problematizing in such a way that the search for universals does not become the search for his or her own universals. This is a challenge, in particular, to our so-called East-West studies where gradually Western scholars have learned the limitations of one-way, Eurocentric influence studies. The question is how to structure a study without imposing, let us say, a given concept of poetics; and, philosophically, whether or not the concept of poetics itself harbors unexamined presuppositions on which no consensus has been reached.

Yet, as long as there has been poetry and wherever and whenever there has been poetry, there has also been reflection upon it, and comparison among different approaches to, and conclusions from, that reflection. A combination of problematizing rather than asserting, and of inductive approaches, would go a long way towards keeping the ghost of any dominance away from comparative poetics. This in turn entails a willing acceptance of pluralism -- not only in the phenomena studied, but also in the self-image of comparative literature. We are, and will be, bearing the marks of postmodernity. My saying this does not imply lip service to postmodernism as an aesthetic, which provides a substantial field of study in itself, as well as a pervasive and challenging model for instant interdiscursivity in the making. It is simply the acceptance of the era in which we live and brings in the conditions to which our discourse responds. It forces upon us both the solitude and the togetherness of all cultural identities in the global village and of their fragmentation and internal interactions; and we cannot forget that cultural identities are not linked by ethnicity and/or language alone but may be linked with or be perceived as linked with factors of race, gender, social status. It imposes in the most acute way the presence of the Other not only in society but as part and parcel of the self. It roots us in history once again, it destabilizes elitism, it rejects and mocks all metanarratives. How, then, in this ambience, do we legitimate the pursuit of an order? Such a legitimation is not difficult, as long as the emphasis is on the pursuit of intelligibility rather than the imposition of an abstract order. Just as the postmodern artist, according to Lyotard, invents his aesthetic post facto, so the literary scholar can set aside, in the initial stages of his or her research at least, preestablished axiologies and let postthat which is inventoried guide the inventory, and schemata remain instrumental. Such, for example, are historical schemata. Postmodernity likes to treat them ironically, which opens the way -- if one wishes -- to transhistorical reappropriations and new ways to translate diachronic into synchronic configurations.

Another pervasive aspect of postmodernity, which is likely to remain with us, is the dialectic of the margin and the centre whereby the marginal tends to move towards the centre and the central towards the margin. This has certainly been noticeable in the comparatist discourse; for example, in the ongoing redefinition of what is literature and what is not, which in successive waves focuses attention upon areas previously considered extra-literary and relegates to the margin the already familiar and canonized. But the interplay of centre and margin is not only a question of corpus; as well it is a question of voice -- who speaks, and how, in a known corpus or in a newly explored one. For a variety of reasons and in a variety of settings we are led to seek out voices previously silenced or neglected and to reinterpret texts in the light of such discoveries. This is why feminism and postcolonialism are far from being strange bedfellows *vis-à-vis* each other and postmodernism; and why the canon demands constant revision. (By the way, why do we persist in calling it THE canon? That definite article, and that singular, perpetuate the notion that once all the

desirable readjustments are made there will be perfected sets of criteria, and bodies of texts; but will this not once again lead to hierarchically based exclusions at some point of the future?)

Scholars need not submit to the new trends around them as if they were absolute imperatives (imposed by whom? after all, the very idea is to quietly turn away from all imperatives!); yet they might be wise to deepen their awareness of them so as to retain their freedom of choice, recognize institutional pressures as well as the winds of fashion for what they are, and go with, or perhaps against the trend clearsightedly. Here, I seem to suggest that there are ethical issues involved in our theoretical and methodological stances; that it is sometimes ethically necessary for the comparatist thinker to go against the stream but sometimes to go with the stream, for equivalent reasons of ethical conscience. Indeed I believe there is a link between theoretical thought and ethics. Theoreticians certainly have not been explicitly affirming such linkages, yet one can detect, in some recent theoretical writings, a more than passing interest in relationships between theoretical choices and ethical responsibility towards the text and its interpretation, towards the audience, towards the critical and theoretical activity in society. Indeed, poststructuralist thinkers are beginning to point out that implicitly the ethical concern has been there all along inasmuch as even their denials had greater human understanding as their ultimate goal. J. Hillis Miller announces in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) "a focus on the question of the ethical moment in writing or narrating novels, acting as a character within them, reading novels, writing about them" (8).

In the ethical moment "there is a claim made on the author writing the work, on the narrator telling the story within the fiction of the novel, on the characters within the story at decisive moments of their lives, and on the reader, teacher or critic responding to the work. This ethical 'I must' cannot, I propose to show, be accounted for by the social and historical forces that impinge upon it.... The ethical moment, in all four of its dimensions, is genuinely productive and inaugural in its effects on history" (8-9). Tobin Siebers in *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988) explores the way in which particular schools of criticism seek to ethically justify their theoretical choices; and the way in which these choices contribute to a definition of ethical thought. And again, Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) treats as a matter of ethics the way in which we articulate our response to literary texts so that our responses inform, in turn, our theorizing and teaching. This emphasis is not the mere result of a swing of the pendulum, nor does it exactly come as a surprise; it is a timely reminder that even the heaviest emphasis, let us say the formalism and consequent impersonality that were inherent in New Criticism, did not exclude, on the part of the critical thinker, a complementary ethical concern which was not formulated in earlier works but became formulated later. Again, the thought of Northrop Frye appeared at first to disengage literary texts and the study of them from what he calls the myths of concern, that is, established religious and moral ideologies which in his view can only generate repetitive, uninteresting literature; against and within it there arise myths of freedom which generate liberated views of reality. Literature as portrayed in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is anything but a tool of ethics; yet in the perspective of Frye's whole thought they are allies.

The point concerning the ethical linkages of theoretical stances does not, however, extend only to thinkers who in their alternative writings, so to say, specifically attract our attention to the ethical dimension of theoretical choices. It extends even more to those whose ethical engagement is implicit and is there for us to perceive, although it will not say its name, because, if it did it, it would rejoin the very humanism that much of contemporary theory has contested. It is an ethical engagement which coincides with the exercise of intellectual responsibility; which requires the scholar as subject to either adopt the stance that is proposed or dissent from it. From the disarticulation of all philosophical, moral and aesthetic hierarchies there arises the necessity for scholars to chart their course, to situate themselves *vis-à-vis* a number of alterities, and alterity in general. In particular, there is little sense in looking for a specific function for comparative literature if we have not decided that, in ways which may vary widely according to individuals and according to collectives, literature calls upon us to examine visions of the world as means of communication within cultures and among cultures. It is our mode of response to this call that I

regard as an ethical matter, because it pertains to the exercise of our social responsibility as individuals.

Saying this implies, in turn, attention to the subject, so problematic in the eyes of postmodernism, and thus to the self. The status of the subject is of the essence in countless ways. For example, in theory of history it has been recognized for a long time that the historian's self is greatly involved in the writing of history, and that history is a construct. This statement of course has to be modified where quantitative methods are used; but even they in the end are instrumental to an historian's interpretation of the past. As to theoretical thought, it is steeped in history much more than many of its exponents like to admit. The recent evolution of Julia Kristeva provides an example of the importance of historical self-knowledge on the theoretician's part. From a cognitive viewpoint the personal source of a theory may be of no importance. Yet theoretical stances are responses by, and investments of selves in historical situations; and so for ourselves as teachers, authors, communicators, as well as those whose thought we communicate and discuss, their historicity is significant. Voices speaking in and for comparative literature also have their own historicity which need both attention and self-analysis, so that they will not be merely relaying voices from neighbouring disciplines, but be heard for their own sake.

Without this audibility in comparative literature studies and scholarship of the future *qua* comparative literature scholarship, the dissolution I mentioned earlier as the worst case scenario will be even closer, because our best exponents will have invested their subjective and ethical commitment elsewhere in the spectrum of knowledge. But what is that specificity of comparative literature, and to what degree is it viable? At the Tokyo 1991 ICLA/AILC Congress I called for a typology of Comparative Literature Studies (typology in the classificatory sense usual in the human sciences) (see Kushner, 1993). This was my reaction, which still subsists today, against the prevalent tendency to dichotomize (and thereby simplify), to opt on one side (e.g., "history" or "theory," as the choice appeared to be not so long ago). A typology recognizes the existing pluralism of the field without renouncing a pragmatic ordering, and strict criteria. It is by definition inclusive; it would recognize the comparatist discourse as a critical discourse of our time among other discourses, not exempt, therefore, from the characteristics of contemporary discourse. The concept of typology itself constitutes an alternative to classifications of discourse that imply a priori centres, hierarchies, preestablished models. It calls, at the outset, for inductive research into literary relationships within a given culture set in a given socio-historical situation, and from there into relationships among literatures of comparable cultures existing under similar conditions, without positing a preconceived unity. But this can occur in several ways, and one can envision a typology of comparative typologies. It could follow Claudio Guillén's concept of three kinds of "supranacionalidad," as delineated in *Entre lo uno et lo diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada*: International literary relations which can be studied genetically, those which can be based on social and economic conditions, and those established on theoretical grounds (93); to the latter I would add other groupings, founded on formal kinships or on semiotic models. Indeed, José Lambert advocated a map of comparative studies in "A la Recherche de cartes mondiales des littératures," a concept implying a virtual order, based on inclusiveness rather than on one kind of "supranacionalidad" only (Lambert 1990). From a pedagogical viewpoint, and in our endeavours to construct renewed literary histories (and perhaps, more importantly, to gain an historical understanding of the dialogue of alterities through literature), comparative literature still comes across as a set of approaches to literature liberated by its potential for combining the study of difference with the quest for human universals.

This very freedom makes it difficult to produce new textbooks in a discipline which lives by reformulating itself: few dare to encapsulate a plan of study that could be proposed to classrooms internationally, even if its goals were typological rather than hierarchical. Of course, the ideal book or curriculum would stress, along with the international, interlinguistic and intercultural nature of comparative literature studies, the function of literature within culture. In *Théorie littéraire. Problèmes et perspectives* (Angenot, Bessière, Fokkema, and Kushner, eds.) a serious attempt was made to combine approaches to the problem of literature within culture, beginning with the formation of literature within culture; to preclude both elitism and populism; to avoid isolating

literature from other human activities but equally to avoid representing it as completely immersed in other forms of discourse. It has been said many times: specificity is not autonomy, no one advocates autonomy, but, unless specificity is the case, literary studies may cultural studies. I attribute specificity to literature, which implies belief in a continuing and in fact an enhanced role for literary studies once the processual nature of literature is taken into account.

Lubomír Doležel reminds us that the fictionality of "possible worlds" vested in literary works bears witness, first of all, to their specific existence in human imagination; but also to the fact that as the imagination tracks relationships between the fictional and the real world, human lives are enriched by the fictionality of possible worlds (see Doležel). We cling to our narratives; their iconicity is part of our culture and of our individual selves. Consequently, possible worlds can be mutually studied throughout the global village, so that every possible world potentially belongs to every inhabitant of the global village. In the world of today, a whole aesthetic dialogue is in the process of being learned, because the number of cultural identities to be explored is increasing as political empires become fragmented by the cultural aspirations of more and more groups; but also because scholars across the board are learning to divest themselves of hierarchical mental habits. But specificity cannot be solely based upon formalist grounds; if it is warranted at all it must also be validated by hermeneutic means, by reception studies, and last but certainly not least by relational studies linking literary and cultural phenomena.

Jean Bessière has described the dual citizenship of the literary work beautifully: "à partir de l'oeuvre, suivant l'interrogativité de cette affirmation que l'oeuvre fait dans son apparence, il peut être dit qu'il y a quelque savoir, que les choses sont, sans qu'il soit conclu que l'oeuvre donne quelque savoir, qu'elle soit avec les choses ou qu'elle donne les choses, ou qu'elle soit, par son arbitraire, la négation inévitable du savoir, du réel. L'interruption que fait l'écriture quelconque dans les discours se réinterprète: elle est ce moment, cet exercice de transgression des discours tant qu'ils sont leur propre identité. De la même manière, l'élaboration calculée de l'oeuvre est le moment et le moyen, dans l'identité d'une forme, de la transgression des identités du savoir, du réel, suivant la quaestio. La nouveauté de l'oeuvre est cela même, et secondairement son éventuelle innovation formelle" (225). Or more aphoristically, in the words of Mario Valdés from his *World-Making: The Literary Truth-Claim and the Interpretation of Texts* (1992), "Truth in literature does not depend on verification, even where it is possible" (156). Thus, it would not be an exaggerated claim to state that literature fulfils comparable sets of functions in all cultures, although this fulfilment follows different patterns at earlier stages of societies in the passage from myth to poetry, from orality to writing than in later, modern societies. Nor are these differences solely chronological, as Brian Stock shows in his study of the relationship between written and oral texts, and of the formation of textual communities (see Stock). The comparative studies of tomorrow have an extraordinary responsibility in rediscovering the symbolical function of literature within culture, and its working within and among cultures. Identity operates by identification, a kind of bonding which explains why groups and members of groups feel so strongly about formal features of cultural artifacts relating to their self-expression, to the formation of their collective personalities and to the individual's problematic relationship to such collective personalities. This does not mean that the symbolic function of the literary text is simple to understand and to describe. A distance tends to set in, lending to the formalized, "marked" utterance greater dignity and durability apt to *donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*. Potentially, all literatures of the world can be studied in this way, though such factors as the lesser diffusion of a number of languages are obstacles. I believe it, however, to be a matter of consensus that the corpus of comparative literature is the entire system of literatures of the world. Access does not rest on the inventory of texts alone; it also depends on the mode of presentation and analysis of texts. This is where comparative literature can demonstrate the need for, and the benefits of, heterological attitudes.

In the future, the survival but also the validity of comparative literature studies will depend on our ability to serve all cultures in ways that will ensure and enhance their membership in the world system of literatures. The nuance of cautious optimism which I announced earlier consists in thinking that our hesitations about truth-claims in literary studies can be reversed, on the

grounds, for example, of Gianni Vattimo's faith in poetry to survive and surpass philosophy in the quest for truth (see Vattimo). If at least some of the points we have raised about the continued internationality and interculturalness of comparative literature, and about the continued pertinence of the concept of literature, were matters of consensus, then we could also remain confident about its aspirations to theoretical validity and social relevance, and it could be said that comparative literature is getting ready for the twenty-first century, whether or not the twenty-first century is ready for comparative literature.

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