

Review of Didier Souiller and Wladimir Troubetzkoy's *Littérature comparée*

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**Thomas PAVEL**

**Review of Didier Souiller's and Wladimir Troubetzkoy's *Littérature comparée***

One of the enviable features of scholarly life in France is the high intellectual level of college handbooks. Far from representing mere syntheses of existing points of view, university manuals are entrusted with the task of formulating new hypotheses and experimenting with new ideas. The little books published in the ubiquitous series "Que sais-je?" (PU de France) often express theses as powerful and original as those contained in any scholarly monograph, and, more recently, the series "Collection Premier Cycle" (also PU de France), which is devoted to undergraduates, brings out works that deserve the attention of advanced scholars. I learned a considerable amount from Didier Souiller's *Roman picaresque*, Roger Zuber's *La littérature française du XVIIe siècle* (both in "Que sais-je?"), Christian Biet's *La Tragédie* (Armand Colin), Marie-Claire Bancquart and Pierre Cahné's *Littérature française du XXe siècle* (PU de France). Many other examples could be cited. The recently published *Littérature comparée*, edited and largely written by Didier Souiller and Wladimir Troubetzkoy, is destined to serve as an undergraduate manual of comparative literature, but its wealth of insights and originality of views makes it into an important scholarly contribution, worthy of being read by all comparatists. The contributors include the two editors as well as several younger talented scholars: Dominique Budor, Philippe Chardin, Vivette Pouzet, Sophie Rabau, Jean Raimond, Armand Strubel, Pascale Volney, and Georges Zaragoza. The authors discuss the main concepts of literariness, examine the history of literary genres, sketch the historical evolution of the most important European literatures, and conclude with a survey of textual criticism.

Myths, motifs, and themes are the units of literary content highlighted in the first part of the book ("The Literary Fact"); they usually emerge in a single national tradition and, thanks to their flexibility they radiate in all directions (Pierre Brunel's important insights on literary circulation of values are instrumental here). The fortune of a literary work is the result of this process, while the aggregation of successful works creates the image of a national literature abroad (the notion of image belongs to D.-H. Pageaux). Recent reception theories and the structuralist "intertextuality" are in turn examined and criticized. Next, literary writing is linked to the expression of the self and to the world it imagines. First-person narratives slowly evolve from a picaresque view of the self as the site of sin and guilt to the modern vision which at first examines the self with attention and curiosity (39), and later promotes it to the position of absolute ruler of literary experience. After a rich chapter on the ways literary traditions envision the imaginary worlds they evoke, the authors discuss representation, mimesis, symbolism, and temporality. A highly suggestive section on the literary expression of the "inexpressible" explores the links between poetry and mysticism.

The second part, "A Comparative Approach to the History of Genres," is divided into six chapters dealing with poetry, tragedy, comedy, the novel, the fantastic, and the short story. At first sight, the division of the topic appears somewhat disconcerting, insofar as it sometimes employs discursive criteria (the chapter on poetry includes both lyric and epic poetry) while on other occasions it concentrates on well-defined genres (the novel, the short story) or on ways of building the fictional world (the fantastic). But since genre theory is far from having established a coherent taxonomic system, the informal approach selected by the authors makes sense: by focusing on intuitive divisions, they group together large sets of texts which have either a common history or a common thematics. The chapter on the novel, significantly entitled "The Adventure of the Novel," is particularly successful in demonstrating the complexity of the novelistic tradition as well as its incessant and unpredictable renewal. The tradition of the ancient novel, presented as the ancestor of the modern European prose narrative, conflicts with the indigenous medieval tradition, which, according to the authors, appears to have little influence after the sixteenth century. The picaresque and the epistolary novel bring about a "subjective turn," while in eighteenth-century English realism the objectivity of the surrounding world is emphasized, both trends contributing to a long term process that the authors call "naturalizing fiction" (255). Realism rules the nineteenth-century novel and the historical novel is seen as an autonomous tradition grounded in the historical continuity of humanity. Finally, twentieth-century narrative

prose is discussed in relation to meta-fiction and the creative self-awareness it encourages. The third part, "A Comparatist Approach to Literary History" offers broad historical sketches of French, English, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, and Scandinavian literature. These sketches obviously do not aspire to replace the existing literary histories of these national traditions. Rather, they attempt to show how comparatist thinking enhances the appreciation of vast historical movements, since genres and literary trends in one country cannot be fully understood without reference to its neighbours. Interestingly, while for older periods national distinctions are maintained, the literature of the twentieth-century is treated as a specifically international enterprise, in which the mutual awareness of its participants appears to erase national cultural borders. Finally, the book contains a section on critical practice, entitled "Working with Texts in Comparative Literature." Analytic and synthetic techniques of reading are presented, together with sensible advice on writing examination papers (the nightmare of the French students, who are subjected to an endless series of written ordeals).

The material presented in the volume is so vast and so diverse that inevitably readers might find some decisions questionable. I, for instance, would have preferred to find more details on the oral tradition, both in poetry (during the discussion of the epic and of lyric forms) and in relation to narrative forms. For instance, Adalbert Stifter's importance for Austrian literature and nineteenth-century realism might have been better emphasized. Curiously, late nineteenth-century Spanish prose-writing (Perez-Galdos and Alas) is entirely neglected. Some sections on narrative prose -- the one on the American novel, for instance -- would have made more sense if they had been integrated in the chapter on the novel rather than in the section on the English speaking tradition. The intergeneric links could in some instances have been brought forth more energetically, as for instance in the case of the novel and the novella. But these are small points, which do not diminish the remarkable achievement of the authors. In *Littérature comparée*, they gave us not only a wonderfully rich handbook and a well-written work of criticism; it is also a distinguished, thoughtful contribution to the field of comparative studies.

Reviewer's profile: Thomas Pavel works in Romance languages and literatures at the University of Chicago. His books include *The Poetics of Plot: The Case English Renaissance Drama* (1985), *Fictional Worlds* (1986), *The Feud of Language: A Critical History of Structuralism* (1988), *L'Art de l'éloignement* (1996), and, with Claude Brémont, *De Barthes à Balzac. Fictions d'un critique, critiques d'une fiction* (1998). He now works on a history of the novel.