

European Comparative Literature as Humanism

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Abstract: In his article "European Comparative Literature as Humanism" Bernard Franco presents an epistemological reflection on comparative literature in the context of the evolution of the relationships between different forms of knowledge. Franco argues that in the late nineteenth century the notion of the "humanities" replaced that of the "human sciences," but that we have recently returned to a humanist concept of knowledge linked to ethics. Franco focuses on the origins of this critical reflection about the nature of knowledge and on the debate in the Romantic period between rational and non-rational forms of knowledge. The *idéologues* (Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy, Fauriel) and Dilthey, Goethe, and Humboldt were at the heart of this epistemological debate, a debate that in early modernity had already been related to the question of humanism in the dialog between Erasmus and Luther. In the mid-twentieth century Zweig and Thomas Mann looked to literature to seek a European spirit and to build a model of cosmopolitanism in which literature becomes a deeper source of knowledge.

Bernard FRANCO

European Comparative Literature as Humanism

Whether art studies belong to what we nowadays call human sciences remains an issue. Comparatism includes historical approaches as well as interdisciplinary ones and deals with philosophy, psychoanalysis, or even geography, thus moving the boundary lines between literature and different fields of scholarship. An evolution in the kind of knowledge about the human being in the second half of the twentieth century was signaled by changes in the denominations of disciplinary categories. The main disciplines which prompted the invention of the notion of "human sciences" — anthropology, sociology, ethnology, psychology, etc., all born at the end of the nineteenth century, but developed throughout the twentieth century — correspond to new kinds of knowledge which do not fit with the old notion of the "humanities" linked to the notion of humanism. Such an epistemological turn raises questions about the new orientation that contemporary critical approaches are bound to give to their exploration of the human. Institutionally established boundaries between different disciplines are often disregarded in interdisciplinary intellectual practices which effect a reconciliation between the arts and the humanities and comparatism may be seen to go even further through its active rejection of such disciplinary boundaries and in its adoption and exploration of a humanist perspective. While these issues are not limited to European intellectual history or to a European comparative literature and connection can be made with current debates on "world literature" led by, for example, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, or Emily Apter, my focus is on the European (and even more precisely, the Franco-German) evolution of this trajectory.

Both the humanities and humanism appear to be allied with European idealism. For it is at least since the Renaissance that in Europe knowledge and ethics were grounded in cosmopolitanism, just as they are now in comparatist traditions considered as ways of looking at the world, such as the approach exemplified by George Steiner's work. Still, might this contemporary restoration not be, in fact, a regression? Might it not be the case that humanists are just like Molière's doctors in *Le Malade imaginaire*, who know the humanities and can speak good Latin ("savent pour la plupart de fort belles humanités, savent parler en beau latin" [III. 3]), meaning that they are, in fact, useless? Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we note a progressive separation of technical and "useful" knowledge from the "useless" (i.e., impractical) ones of the humanities. But the humanities nevertheless include a certain way of considering Europe, even in Molière's funny lines. For if they are linked with the knowledge of Greek and Latin literatures, it is because these literatures are the common legacy of all European cultures. According to Friedrich Schlegel, who was the very first (in 1812) to think about the idea of a "European literature" (*Geschichte der europäischen Literatur* in the singular) and also according to his brother August Wilhelm, European culture was born from Christianity superimposed on a Greco-Latin legacy. Still, the humanities are distinguished not only from a scientific approach to knowledge, but also from a metaphysical approach. Montaigne, for example, distinguished between the theological and the humanist cultures when he wrote that theologians writing like humanists is a mistake that occurs more often than its opposite, humanists writing like theologians.

"Humanities" is the name for a certain type of content, but also for a certain type of relationship to knowledge. The Latin *humanitas*, closely related to the Greek *paideia*, means culture, education, civilization. In 1878 Emil Littré defined the humanities making them coincide with "letters" as what was taught in high school after students have been taught grammar and before they were taught philosophy. This entails that the humanities are concentrated around literature. For example, humanist knowledge is discussed in the Préface of the 1835 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* as one who has a deep knowledge of Greek and Latin culture. The traditional opposition between culture (pertaining to the humanist) and science (which would have both a more direct utility and a more rigorous methodological approach) comes from the assumptions implicit in this definition. Unlike the humanities, the "human sciences" are based on a distinction between object and subject of knowledge and they were developed against the humanist relationship to knowledge. This is the case even in assumptions which underpin a discipline such as ethnology. The human being becomes an object of knowledge so that "human sciences" are opposed to "exact sciences" just as

Naturwissenschaften — the sciences of nature — are opposed to *Geisteswissenschaften* — the sciences of the spirit. The word *Geisteswissenschaft* was coined in 1883 by Wilhelm Dilthey in his *Einführung zu den Geisteswissenschaften*, which was translated in French as late as 1942 as *Introduction aux sciences humaines*. Here knowledge seems to be divided into two parts: one having natural laws as an object, the other examining the human mind.

Dilthey considered the knowledge of social, cultural, and political reality as autonomous and opposed it to positivist epistemology. In the same way, although much later, Gadamer would highlight the way in which the *Geisteswissenschaften* — in contrast to the *Naturwissenschaften* — questioned their own scientific identity. By making such a distinction between the two different objects of knowledge — the laws of nature and the human mind — Dilthey intended to go further than Kant had done in the *Criticism of Pure Reason*, so as to elaborate a "criticism of historical reason." What Kant had done for the sciences of nature was then to be done for the sciences of the mind. Whether the study of the arts belonged to the human sciences as comparative literature seems to assert, still had to be determined. The idea of science itself has to be examined through the idea of knowledge. Henry Gifford held the distinction between knowledge and judgment as a highly suspect one: "One would like to amass little knowledge that does not conduce directly to judgment" (64). Such an ideal aims to set literary criticism free from the presence of the *ego*, free from any subjectivity. It aims to make it a science. Yet, this concept is grounded on two presuppositions: the aspect of a phenomenon and its universality. Whereas literary or artistic creation in its unique, contingent, and unrepeatable way seemed to escape (at least as far as the French academic tradition was concerned) any attempt at scientific description. The German designation *Literaturwissenschaft* helps to make the variations between different European academic traditions more clear. In the introductory chapter to the papers from a US-American-French colloquium held at Johns Hopkins University in 1984 entitled *The Case of the Humanities: Questionable References*, Vincent Descombes noted the different designations of disciplines in different national traditions point to the differences in their conception. The "Faculty of Humanities" at US-American universities is an equivalent to the French *Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines*, a name which supposes that the first — *lettres* — are different from the second — *sciences humaines* (12). The separation in French universities between these two happened in 1958 when the former *Facultés des Lettres* were renamed *Facultés des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines*, a category which seemed more appropriate for and inclusive of disciplines like philosophy, history, geography, etc. Note that Claude Lévi-Strauss in his 1958 *Anthropologie structurale* makes a distinction between three groups of disciplines or three faculties: the "faculté des arts et des lettres," the "faculté des sciences sociales" (including law, economics, and politics), and the "faculté des sciences humaines." In the 1960s the publisher Gallimard started a *Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines* to create a symmetry with his well-known *Bibliothèque des Idées*. The comparative method seems to stand in-between the three categories identified by Lévi-Strauss and the two inherent in the publisher's collections.

"Human sciences" is not only the name for the more modern or broader "humanities." It also implies another relationship towards knowledge than that of the humanist for whom knowledge is linked to ethics. It is significant that "moral sciences" was changed into "human sciences" in the French university system after World War II, while the chair of "Colonial Geography" was replaced by that of "Comparative Literature" at the Sorbonne in the 1920s. In both cases knowledge was separated from ethics, although in the second case the decision was taken on ethical grounds because the discipline of "colonial geography" was felt to be founded on an immoral premise. The emerging notion of "human sciences" differs from that of comparative literature, since it supposes that true knowledge, or true scientific methods are incompatible with ethics. Such a way of thinking is at the source of Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*. Jean Beaufret considered Heidegger's position during World War II to be incompatible with that of the philosopher and Heidegger tried to answer Beaufret's question whether humanism can still have a meaning after World War II. The genesis of Goethe's *Faust* is an illustration of and gives way to the hesitation between science and literature. Goethe's intellectual progression for example in his *Wahlverwandschaften* or *Zur Farbenlehre* tell of his aim to unify science and literature (incidentally, this project would also be, much later, at the heart of the poetics of naturalism, when thinking would be dominated by the very critical positivism that was

at the origin of the creation of the first chair of comparative literature in France at the University of Lyon and awarded to Joseph Texte).

Both title and plot of *Wahlverwandschaften* are a fictional application of the theory of chemist and mineralogist Torbern Olaf Bergmann (1735-1784) on the attraction and repulsion of bodies: Goethe made this explicit in the well-known argument of part 1 chapter 4. In *Zur Farbenlehre* Goethe followed the opposite path, moving from the scientific perspective of physics to a symbolic system of colors. In both cases, however, it was poetic knowledge that made a complete vision of the object of knowledge possible by contrast with the short sighted vision of scientific knowledge alone. Yet, in *Wahlverwandschaften* Goethe refutes the unity between chemistry and literature first suggested as if the human being were finally expressing his/her autonomy from any scientific law and asserting his/her deep freedom. The human being is thus placed above any scientific description or prediction: this is the lesson the *Wahlverwandschaften* teaches us in the end, refuting the laws of chemistry it had set out to illustrate. Goethe resigned himself to the distinction between arts and sciences, and at the end of his *Bildungsroman* the main character, Wilhelm Meister, gives up his artistic calling to become a middle-class person, more precisely a doctor, a scientist.

It was mostly in the legend of Faust that Goethe found a way to wonder — and this was for him a permanent question — about the relationships between knowledge and ethics. The main source of Goethe's play was the anonymous *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, a *Volksbuch* published by Johann Spies in Frankfurt in 1587. Its anonymous author, a Lutheran, intended to write against humanism and made his main character a caricature of Erasmus. The story insists on some important aspects of the idea of forbidden knowledge, for Faustus is at the same time a theologian and a magician thus locating the origin of knowledge outside of the circle of reason or understanding. The historical figure of Dr. Faustus, who lived in the years 1480-1540, is known to have been proud of being able to call back, thanks to magic, Plautus's and Terence's lost comedies and thus he uses his magical knowledge for an objective belonging to the field of the humanities. Because of his contract with the devil, Faustus can be seen as the opposite of a scientist. Could he be the representation of a humanist? Could this figure represent in literature what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*, a kind of literary cosmopolitanism which frees literature from borders and makes it a universal endowment of humanity? At the very least, Faustus raises a question and perhaps provides a model for the comparatist. Let us then go back to the exchange of letters between Beaufret and Heidegger: as discussed above, the question the former asked, namely what humanism means after the war, was answered by the latter with his *Brief über den Humanismus*. This exchange may be seen to replay an earlier one, one that had taken place in the sixteenth century when Luther wrote to Erasmus on 28 March 1519 and Erasmus's answer on 30 May of the same year reproaching Luther for the abuses carried out in the name of religion. Beaufret's reproach to Heidegger is analogous to Erasmus's: can knowledge justify any inhuman behavior? In other words, can we even consider knowledge without ethics? The violence of the Reformation and of World War II have provided opportunities to question the idea of forbidden knowledge.

At the same time when Goethe wrote *Faust*, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis follows in his *Rapports du physique et du moral* the ideal of a *science de l'homme* (126), the main critical project of the *idéologues* and may also be seen to be at the origin of comparative literature. This project seems to be based on opposite premises from the project which intended to separate knowledge from ethics when the human sciences were born. It is as a physician that Cabanis elaborated his project of a critical method built on a scientific basis. In the same way, Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), defines ideology in his *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser* of 1796 so as to separate it from metaphysics, since ideology does not include "anything doubtful or unknown" ("rien de ce qui est douteux ou inconnu") and explores "the knowledge of the human being only through the analysis of his faculties" ("la connaissance de l'homme que dans l'analyse de ses facultés" [322]; see also Kitchin). This is the reason why Destutt de Tracy rejects in his *Eléments d'idéologie à l'usage des écoles centrales* the notion of "psychology" proposed by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, because it supposes a presence of the soul. Ideology is knowledge which cannot remain purely speculative and which, according to Pierre Maine de Biran, has to "change the face of the world" ("changer la face du monde" [Maine de Biran qtd. in Destutt de Tracy, *Mémoire* 3]) and participate in the progress of human kind. This search for rationality and the use of all knowledge is illustrated by the first essay of

the first issue of the journal *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique*, the review of the *idéologues*: "In the moral world, just as in the physical world, everything is action and reaction; it is a perpetual chain of causes and effects" ("Dans le monde moral comme dans le monde physique, tout est action et réaction; c'est un enchaînement perpétuel de causes et d'effets" [1]). The ideal of a science of the human being grounded in literature comes especially from historicism, which belongs to a way of thinking that has the human being as its object. Goethe too distinguishes human relationships — both psychological and emotional — from the physical relationships between bodies in the *Wahlverwandschaften* and the human being escaping scientific discourse is at the heart of the novel.

However, the attempt by the *idéologues* to separate science and the humanities is certainly not the first elaboration of a science of the human being. On the contrary, it is an old *topos*, and *l'étude de l'homme* is an expression also employed by humanists and it was used, for example, by Pascal. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Giambattista Vico expressed the ambition to make historical experience a new science of the human being. After Herder's or Hegel's reflections about historicity, Dilthey's analyses show the ambiguity of history towards scientific knowledge, an ambiguity already noticed by Vico: can experience become the object of science? From this basis on, as pointed out earlier, Dilthey tries to elaborate a criticism of historical reason, after Kant's three criticisms. Dilthey undertakes to ground *Geisteswissenschaften* in immediate experience. He borrows Schleiermacher's structure of interpretation and uses the concept of hermeneutics for history itself: history is read like a text to be interpreted. But is it possible to rank history between the creations of the human being and to submit it to interpretation? According to Dilthey in his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, history expresses the human being's action just as religion or art do without it being the result of any individual will or of individual creation. In *The Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer also asked about the questionable position of history toward science concluding that history — the phenomenon of which cannot be repeated — could not be ranked among the sciences. What differentiates Schopenhauer and Dilthey is a definition of science: Schopenhauer relates it to the universal laws of nature and links it to the idea of necessity, while Dilthey defines it as a general knowledge, including contingency. In sum, for Dilthey history is part of a science of the human being, as history, like art, is a human creation, even if not individual or intentional.

Such a relationship with the notion of the human being refutes any presence of the subject in the object and aims at the identification of universal laws. On this basis, Humboldt had proven the scientific nature of the study of language. Today, Humboldt is considered to be the father of the modern university, but what is less well known is that he is also one of the founders of the comparative method for literature, especially in his essay on Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*, dedicated to Mme de Staël (see, e.g., Lubrich). As one of the founders of the philological method, he linked his study of literary works to that of language and of the history of peoples. In his 1836 *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, Humboldt elaborated on a general theory of language as the core of an eternally renewed process through which the human kind (*Menschengeschlecht*) becomes humanity (*Menschheit*). This might well be the beginning of a scientific approach to human identity, which was to dominate the late nineteenth and the whole of the twentieth century. Refusing any non-rational approach to knowledge, it leads to a rejection of humanism as I have defined it, and, with humanism, to a rejection of the ideal of culture in which the object is not distinct from the subject.

After the Enlightenment, the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries show through the development of the sciences the decline of a knowledge based on non-rational modes. However, the ethical and epistemological debates around World War II would again question pure rationality in science and rehabilitate the idea of non-scientific knowledge. Let us take the example of Stefan Zweig, who in 1934 published his biography of Erasmus before moving to London as a political refugee, deprived of his Austrian nationality, but without having become a British subject. A stateless person, he is in a way, even if not a citizen of the world, at least a European citizen. The original title of his work is, significantly, *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*. His biographical work is built on the opposition between Erasmus and Luther and ends with the victory of the latter's fanaticism over Erasmus's humanism. But this historical opposition between the two figures does not only underline two different relationships to knowledge. Because the opposition between the rationalism of

the fanatic and the irrationalism of the humanist — which Zweig describes as the artist's and the thinker's (*Triumph* 25) — is clearly connected to a relationship with Europe and its nations. According to Zweig, Luther is the inventor of nations: "Europe, Christendom are going to fight for ages: Catholics against Protestants, North against South, Germans against Latins" (*Triumph* 22) while Erasmus is the opposite, "the first European, the first self-conscious cosmopolitan man" and is following "a purely pacifist, humanitarist and internationalist ideal," with "ideas of European union" (*Triumph* 16, 19, 20). These ideas were linked with the idea of the humanities: "Latin was a language of brothers, the first esperanto of the mind ... a new European culture was being born with Erasmus' republic of scholars" (*Triumph* 18). This is the reason why we might consider him a tutelary figure of comparatism as a path towards a modern humanism. Further, "republic of scholars" and "republic of the arts" were used by Zweig frequently and I assume he was referring to Voltaire's *république des lettres*. Voltaire differentiated the *république des lettres* from political states in his *Siècle de Louis XIV* as follows: "a republic of arts was established all over Europe despite wars and religious differences" (Voltaire qtd. in Chevrel 12) and the link between Erasmus and Voltaire is emphasized by Zweig when he writes about Erasmus's legacy that "To this small light were Spinoza, Lessing and Voltaire able to light their own torch, as all future Europeans will do" (*Triumph* 24).

The Europeans Zweig is writing about might be comparatists who may well take Erasmus as the point of departure in their intellectual thought process. One of their missions, indeed, will be to rehabilitate the redefined idea of humanism based on a non-scientific relationship to knowledge, even based on a Faustian ideal giving way to a more intimate exploration of the human being. Zweig argued that Erasmus associated the European calling and the quest for humanity: "The intellectual, he writes, has to feel sympathy for everything that is human" (*Triumph* 23). Zweig joined the concerns of the Romantic period: Adalbert von Chamisso for instance, son of refugees from the French Revolution living in Germany, found the solution to lacking a country in being a kind of "citizen of the world." In his *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, his character meets a strange man with a grey coat and a hat, who proposes to buy his shadow — that is, nearly nothing. But Peter Schlemihl then misses this nothing as being his very nature. This reinterpretation of the famous pact with the devil to whom the soul is sold (the strange man is no devil and a shadow is not the soul) leads to a questioning of the essence of our identity. Schlemihl's shadow is interpreted by Chamisso as the lost motherland, but also as one's identity. The solution found by the character to the loss of his shadow is his travels around the world — a way, for Chamisso, to link the true identity of the human being with cosmopolitanism and to make the traveler a figure of the citizen of the world. In a different context, this quest for cosmopolitanism is also Zweig's.

One of Zweig's most famous biographies is titled *Sternstunden der Menschheit* in which he transformed the genre of biography into a collective and international biography to show humanity behind the individuals giving a universal dimension to the particularity of biography. Some of the individual biographies are organized as relationships or conflicts between two or more artists, thinkers or scientists (for instance Castellion against Calvin). Zweig went from Dostoevsky to Balzac, from Nietzsche to Freud, from Heinrich Mann to Romain Rolland. Zweig worked for many years for the publishing company Insel as a translator and introduced foreign authors. He described himself as a middleman between people, cultures, and literatures. Thus biography, translation, and editing make Zweig a major figure of comparatism and he could be this thanks to his cultural cosmopolitanism. This ideal of a European humanism, this figure of the intellectual are the model for the calling of the comparatist for the thought process of comparatism cannot be separated from the universal knowledge to which it aims: "*Europa provincia mundi est*" (Chevrel 18).

René Etiemble called for such a wider process in his 1963 *Comparaison n'est pas raison* with the subtitle *La Crise de la littérature comparée*. Writing about a review by Calvin Brown about Marius-François Guyard's work about comparative literature, Etiemble noted how Brown pointed to Guyard's Franco-centric structure: "French writers abroad, foreign writers in France, Influences between foreign literatures ... Who would dare forbid Yankee comparatists to give their own literature the same central position?" (10). He underlined the necessary world-widening of the perspective as a consequence of the cosmopolitanism of this European epistemological identity. Zweig himself called for such a wider approach when he published his life story *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers* in 1942, one year before he committed suicide. He was fleeing the war in Europe to join what he called

"the world of tomorrow," Brazil. *Sternstunden der Menschheit* and *Die Welt von Gestern* built a symmetry and Zweig also looked at Europe from the external viewpoint of Brazil. In *Die Welt von Gestern* he told about his being at the University of Berlin which offered, at the time, an image that was the opposite of a cosmopolitan humanist ideal, trapped as it was within German language and culture. Pierre Brunel opposes this sclerotic image of the university to that of the French university which "was not at the time so locked in the national language and culture as the University of Berlin was" ("n'était pas à l'époque aussi enfermé dans la langue et la culture nationale que l'était celle de Berlin" [97; see also, more generally 96-98]). Even Charles Péguy, who in 1910 in *Victor-Marie, comte Hugo* saw the Sorbonne as an institution with a "lack of culture" ("maison d'inculture"), a place of error and of barbarism ("maîtresse d'erreur et de barbarie"), and called for "an amiable French Sorbonne" ("Sorbonne aimable, française" [112]). Ferdinand Brunetière, too, in his 1898 *Cours d'histoire de la littérature française* started his research into the relationships between French and Spanish literatures by drawing an image of the critic and also of the poet: he analyzed the Spanish sources of Corneille as a traveler of the mind. The *homo Europaeus* celebrated by Paul Valéry at a conference in Zürich in 1922 makes the notions of Europe and humanism into a single one through three characteristics of the European mind, embodied in three cities — the spirit of thought, Athens, the spirit of organization, Rome, and the spirit of dignity, Jerusalem — and through the filiation between Judaism and Christianity (Brunel 97).

Thomas Mann wrote *Mehrfahrt mit Don Quijote* in 1934, the same year when Zweig wrote *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*. Similar to Mann who was leaving Europe for the United States, it was through Brazil that Zweig found the mental distance which allowed him to define the European spirit. Mann's narrative is framed by the ten days of the boat trip from Europe to New York and it is at the same time a narrative of biographical reflections about the situation of Europe, a critical reading of Cervantes's novel, and comings and goings between these two points: Mann reads Cervantes in the light of Europe at the time of the rise of nazism. For Mann it is the critical sense illustrated by Cervantes that represents the true identity of Europe, an identity destroyed by nazism. Like Zweig observing Europe from the point of view of Brazil, Mann observed this identity of Europe through the distance afforded him by the Atlantic and once in the United States he gave seminars on "European literature" rejecting the existence of national borders in literature. When in his *Mehrfahrt mit Don Quijote* Mann expressed his regret of the collapse of the European spirit because of nazi-dominated Germany, he anticipated Paul Hazard who in the conclusive chapter of his 1946 *La Pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle de Montesquieu à Lessing* — entitled "L'Europe et la fausse Europe" — the European spirit is expressed. According to Mann, it is this spirit that represents the heritage of humanity that Goethe called *Weltliteratur*. And to me it is this European spirit, both a critical point of view and the quest for cosmopolitanism which can and should be expressed in European comparative literature.

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