SUSAN BASSNETT

Comparative Literature

A Critical Introduction

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Contents

Introduction: What is Comparative Literature Today?

Sooner or later, anyone who claims to be working in comparative literature has to try and answer the inevitable question: What is it? The simplest answer is that comparative literature involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across both time and space.

Most people do not start with comparative literature, they end up with it in some way or other, travelling towards it from different points of departure. Sometimes the journey begins with a desire to move beyond the boundaries of a single subject area that might appear to be too constraining, at other times a reader may be impelled to follow up what appear to be similarities between texts or authors from different cultural contexts. And some readers may simply be following the view propounded by Matthew Arnold in his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1857 when he said:

> Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures.[1]

It could almost be argued that anyone who has an interest in books embarks on the road towards what might be termed comparative literature: reading Chaucer, we come across Boccaccio; we can trace Shakespeare's source materials through Latin, French, Spanish and Italian; we can study the ways in which Romanticism developed across Europe at a similar moment in time, follow the process through which Baudelaire's fascination with Edgar Allan Poe enriched his own writing, consider how many English novelists

learned from the great nineteenth-century Russian writers (in translation, of course), compare how James Joyce borrowed from and loaned to Italo Svevo. When we read Clarice Lispector we are reminded of Jean Rhys, who in turn recalls Djuna Barnes and Anaïs Nin. There is no limit to the list of examples we could devise. Once we begin to read we move across frontiers, making associations and connections, no longer reading within a single literature but within the great open space of Literature with a capital L, what Goethe termed *Weltliteratur*. Goethe noted that he liked to 'keep informed about foreign productions' and advised anyone else to do the same. 'It is becoming more and more obvious to me,' he remarked, 'that poetry is the common property of all mankind.'[2]

At this juncture, one could be forgiven for assuming that comparative literature is nothing more than common sense, an inevitable stage in reading, made increasingly easier by international marketing of books and by the availability of translations. But if we shift perspective slightly and look again at the term 'Comparative Literature', what we find instead is a history of violent debate that goes right back to the earliest usage of the term at the beginning of the nineteenth century and continues still today. Critics at the end of the twentieth century, in the age of post-modernism, still wrestle with the same questions that were posed more than a century ago: What is the object of study in comparative literature? How can comparison be the object of anything? If individual literatures have a canon, what might a comparative canon be? How does the comparatist select what to compare? Is comparative literature a discipline? Or is it simply a field of study? These and a great many other questions refuse to go away, and since the 1950s we have been hearing all too frequently about what René Wellek defined as 'the crisis of Comparative Literature'.[3]

Comparative literature as a term seems to arouse strong passions, both for and against. As early as 1903, Benedetto Croce argued that comparative literature was a non-subject, contemptuously dismissing the suggestion that it might be seen as a separate discipline. He discussed the definition of comparative literature as the exploration of 'the vicissitudes, alterations, developments and reciprocal differences' of themes and literary ideas across literatures, and concluded that 'there is no study more arid than researches of this sort'. This kind of work, Croce maintained, is to be classified 'in the category of erudition purely and simply'.[4] Instead of something

called comparative literature, he suggested that the proper object of study should be literary history:

> the comparative history of literature is history understood in its true sense as a complete explanation of the literary work, encompassed in all its relationships, disposed in the composite whole of universal literary history (where else could it ever be placed?), seen in those connections and preparations that are its raison d'être.[5]

Croce's argument was that the term 'comparative literature' was obfuscatory, disguising the obvious, that is, the fact that the true object of study was literary history. Considering the pronouncements on comparative literature made by scholars such as Max Koch, founder and editor of the two German comparative journals, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur* (1887–1910) and *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*(1901–9), Croce claimed he could not distinguish between literary history pure and simple and comparative literary history. The term, 'comparative literature', he maintained, had no substance to it.

But other scholars made grandiose claims for comparative literature. Charles Mills Gayley, one of the founders of North American comparative literature, proclaimed in the same year as Croce's attack that the working premise of the student of comparative literature was:

> literature as a distinct and integral medium of thought, a common institutional expression of humanity; differentiated, to be sure, by the social conditions of the individual, by racial, historical, cultural and linguistic influences, opportunities, and restrictions, but, irrespective of age or guise, prompted by the common needs and aspirations of man, sprung from common faculties, psychological and physiological, and obeying common laws of material and mode, of the individual and social humanity.[6]

Remarkably similar sentiments to those expressed in 1974 by Francois Jost, when he claimed that 'national literature' cannot constitute an intelligible field of study because of its 'arbitrarily limited perspective', and that comparative literature:

> represents more than an academic discipline. It is an overall view of literature, of the world of letters, a humanistic ecology, a literary Weltanschauung, a vision of the cultural universe, inclusive and comprehensive[7]

Such claims go far beyond the methodological and shed some light on quite why the debate on comparative literature should have been so bitter. For Jost, like Gayley and others before him, are proposing comparative literature as some kind of world religion. The underlying suggestion is that all cultural differences disappear when readers take up great works; art is seen as an instrument of universal harmony and the comparatist is one who facilitates the spread of that harmony. Moreover, the comparatist must possess special skills; Wellek and Warren in their *Theory of Literature*, a book that was enormously significant in comparative literature when it first appeared in 1949, suggest that:

> Comparative Literature . . . will make high demands on the linguistic proficiencies of our scholars. It asks for a widening of perspectives, a suppression of local and provincial sentiments, not easy to achieve.[8]

The comparatist is here depicted as someone with a vocation, as a kind of international ambassador working in the comparative literatures of united nations. For Wellek and Warren go on to state that 'Literature is one; as art and humanity are one'. It is an idealistic vision that recurs in the aftermath of major international crises; Goethe could confidently (and quite wrongly) assert in 1827 that 'national literature means little now', and Wellek and Warren offered the cultural equivalent of the movement towards a United Nations Assembly that was so powerfully felt in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The high ideals of such a vision of comparative literature have not been met. A decade after *Theory of Literature* appeared, Wellek was already talking about the crisis in comparative literature and even as the subject appeared to be gaining ground in the 1960s and early 1970s, flaws in the idea of universal values and of literature as one could already be seen. The great waves of critical thought that swept through one after the other from structuralism through to post-structuralism, from feminism to deconstruction, from semiology

to psychoanalysis – shifted attention away from the activity of comparing texts and tracking patterns of influence between writers towards the role of the reader. And as each new wave broke over the preceding one, notions of single, harmonious readings were shattered forever.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, high-flying graduate students in the West turned to comparative literature as a radical subject, because at that time it appeared to be transgressive, moving as it claimed to do across the boundaries of single literature study. That there was no coherent methodology did not matter, nor did it matter that the debates on whether the subject existed or not still continued unabated from the previous century. 'We spend far too much of our energy talking . . . about Comparative Literature and not enough of it comparing the literature,' complained Harry Levin in 1969, urging more practical work and less agonizing about the theory.[9] But Levin's proposal was already out of date; by the late 1970s a new generation of high-flying graduate students in the West had turned to Literary Theory, Women's Studies, Semiotics, Film and Media Studies and Cultural Studies as the radical subject choices, abandoning Comparative Literature to what were increasingly seen as dinosaurs from a liberal – humanist prehistory.

Yet even as that process was underway in the West, comparative literature began to gain ground in the rest of the world. New programmes in comparative literature began to emerge in China, in Taiwan, in Japan and other Asian countries, based, however, not on any ideal of universalism but on the very aspect of literary study that many western comparatists had sought to deny: the specificity of national literatures. As Swapan Majumdar puts it:

> it is because of this predilection for National Literature – much deplored by the Anglo-American critics as a methodology – that Comparative Literature has struck roots in the Third World nations and in India in particular.[10]

Ganesh Devy goes further, and suggests that comparative literature in India is directly linked to the rise of modern Indian nationalism, noting that comparative literature has been 'used to assert the national cultural identity'.[11] There is no sense here of national literature and comparative literature being incompatible.

The work of Indian comparatists is characterized by a shift of perspective. For decades, comparative literature started with Western literature and looked outwards; now what is happening is that the West is being scrutinized from without. Majumdar points out that what Indian scholars call western literature, regardless of geographical precision, includes those literatures which derive from Graeco-Roman matrices via Christianity, and he terms English, French, German, etc. as 'sub-national literatures'. It is quite clear that what he is bringing to comparative literature, in the terms in which he uses it, is a radically alternative perspective and a revaluation of the discourse of 'national' literature. Accustomed as those of us in the West are to thinking in terms of 'great' literatures, of 'majority' versus 'minority' literatures, the Indian perspective as articulated by Majumdar is a startling one. Homi Bhabha sums up the new emphasis in an essay discussing the ambivalence of post-colonial culture, suggesting that:

> Instead of cross-referencing there is an effective,productive cross-cutting across sites of social significance, that erases the dialectical, disciplinary sense of 'Cultural' reference and relevance.[12]

Developments in comparative literature beyond Europe and North America do indeed cut through and across all kinds of assumptions about literature that have come increasingly to be seen as Eurocentric. Wole Soyinka and a whole range of African critics have exposed the pervasive influence of Hegel, who argued that African culture was 'weak' in contrast to what he claimed were higher, more developed cultures, and who effectively denied Africa a history. James Snead, in an essay attacking Hegel, points out that:

> The outstanding fact of late twentieth-century European culture is its ongoing reconciliation with black culture. The mystery may be that it took so long to discern the elements of black culture already there in latent form, and to realize that the separation between the cultures was perhaps all along not one of nature, but one of force.[13]

What we have today, then, is a very varied picture of comparative literary studies that changes according to where it is taking place. African, Indian, Caribbean critics have challenged the refusal of a great deal of Western literary criticism to accept the implications of

their literary and cultural policy. Terry Eagleton has argued that 'literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology,'[14] and he discussess the way in which the emergence of English as an academic subject in the nineteenth century had quite clear political implications. The establishment of the subject in the universities, he maintains, followed the vast social changes brought about in the aftermath of the first World War:

> The Great War, with its carnage of ruling class rhetoric, put paid to some of the more strident forms of chauvinism on which English had previously thrived . . . English Literature rode to power on the back of wartime nationalism; but it also represented a search for spiritual solutions on the part of the English ruling class whose sense of identity had been profoundly shaken . . . Literature would be at once solace and reaffirmation, a familiar ground on which Englishmen could regroup both to explore, and to find some alternative to, the nightmare of history.[15]

Eagleton's explanation of the rise of English ties in with the aspirations of many of the early comparatists for a subject that would transcend cultural boundaries and unite the human race through the civilizing power of great literature. But just as English has itself entered a crisis (what, after all, is English today? Literature produced within the geographical boundaries of England? Of the United Kingdom? Or literatures written in English from all parts of the world? And where does the boundary line between 'literature' on the one hand and 'popular' or 'mass' culture on the other hand lie? The old days when English meant texts from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf are long gone, and the question of what to include and exclude from an English syllabus is a very vexed one); so also has Comparative Literature been called into question by the emergence of alternative schools of thought. The work of Edward Said, pioneer of the notion of 'orientalism', has provided many critics with a new vocabulary. Said's thesis, that

> the Orient was a word which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations and connotations, and that these did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word[16]

provides the basis for essays such as Zhang Longxi's 'The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West', in which it is argued that 'for the West, China as a land in the Far East becomes traditionally the image of the ultimate Other'.[17] The challenge posed by non-European critics to the colonizing nations' systematic process of 'inventing' other cultures has put ideology firmly back on the agenda of literary studies.

A European or North American literature syllabus could, until fairly recently, concern itself primarily with an established canon of great writers. But a syllabus devised in a non-European culture, particularly in one which underwent a period of colonization by a Western power, has to tackle completely different issues. Hence the vexed question of Shakespeare in India, for example, a canonical writer hailed in the nineteenth century as the epitome of English greatness. Indian students have the problem therefore of dealing with Shakespeare not only as a great figure in European literature, but also as a representative of colonial values: two Shakespeares, in effect, and in conflict with one another. One way of tackling this problem is to treat Shakespeare comparatively, to study the advent of Shakespeare in Indian cultural life and to compare his work with that of Indian writers.

The growth of national consciousness and awareness of the need to move beyond the colonial legacy has led significantly to the development of comparative literature in many parts of the world, even as the subject enters a period of crisis and decay in the West. The way in which comparative literature is used, in places such as China, Brazil, India or many African nations, is constructive in that it is employed to explore both indigenous traditions and imported (or imposed) traditions, throwing open the whole vexed problem of the canon. There is no sense of crisis in this form of comparative literature, no quibbling about the terms from which to start comparing, because those terms are already laid down. What is being studied is the way in which national culture has been affected by importation, and the focus *is* that national culture. Ganesh Devy's argument that comparative literature in India coincides with the rise of modern Indian nationalism is important, because it serves to remind us of the origins of the term 'Comparative Literature' in Europe, a term that first appeared in an age of national struggles, when new boundaries were being erected and the whole question of national culture and national identity was under discussion

throughout Europe and the expanding United States of America. In chapter 2 we shall be looking more closely at the process of development of both the term and the subject.

It is possible to argue that as we come to the end of the twentieth century, we have entered a new phase in the troubled history of comparative literature. That the subject is in crisis in the West is in no doubt, though it is interesting to speculate on what will happen as the former Eastern European states revise their syllabuses, for they are living through a phase of nationalism that has long since disappeared in the capitalist Western states. Falling student numbers, the uneasiness of many comparatists that is revealed in defensive papers or a reluctance to engage in definition of what exactly their subject consists of, the apparent continuation of the old idea of comparative literature as binary study, i.e., as the study of two authors or texts from two different systems (though the problem of how to define different systems is a complex one and unresolved), all these factors reinforce the picture of a subject that has lost its way, even as courses in literary theory and post-colonial theory proliferate and publishers' catalogues list books in these areas under separate headings. But equally, it is also apparent that the subject is expanding and developing in many parts of the world where it is explicitly linked to questions of national culture and identity. Comparative literature as it is being developed outside Europe and the United States is breaking new ground and there is a great deal to be learned from following this development.

Whilst comparative literature in the Third World and the Far East changes the agenda for the subject, the crisis in the West continues. The new comparative literature is calling into question the canon of great European masters, and this process coincides with other challenges – that of feminist criticism, which has questioned the male orientation of cultural history; and that of post-modernist theory, which revalues the role of the reader and, through the work of writers such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu, has exposed the part played by the subterranean forces of institutionalized power structures, masquerading as centres of universal liberalism.

Significantly, however, Western readers are approaching these challenges without recourse to something called 'Comparative Literature'. The rush of books on post-colonial literature at the start of the 1990s reflects a new interest in this hitherto neglected area of study. The opening statements of *The Empire Writes Back*

(subtitled: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures) include the following phrases: 'the term "post-colonial" . . . is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has merged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted.'[18] What is this but comparative literature under another name?

Another rapidly expanding development in literary studies, and one which has profound implications for the future of comparative literature, is 'translation studies'. Since the early usage of this term in the mid-1970s, the subject has developed to such an extent (through publishing, conferences, the establishment of Chairs in universities, research programmes, etc.) that there are many now who consider it to be a discipline in its own right. What distinguishes translation studies from translation as traditionally thought of, is its derivation from the polysystems theory developed by Itamar Even-Zohar and later by Gideon Toury in Tel Aviv.[19] Translation studies will be discussed in more detail later in this book, but essentially the key to its rapid expansion and successful entry into literary studies lies in its emphasis on literature as a differentiated and dynamic 'conglomerate of systems', characterized by internal oppositions and dynamic shifts. This notion of literature as a polysystem sees individual literary systems as part of a multi-faceted whole, thereby changing the terms of the debates about 'majority' and 'minority' cultures, about 'great' literatures and 'marginal' literatures. Moreover, translation studies derives from work in linguistics, literary study, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology and ethnology among others, and posits the radical proposition that translation is not a marginal activity but has been and continues to be a major shaping force for change in the history of culture. Comparative literature has traditionally claimed translation as a sub-category, but this assumption is now being questioned. The work of scholars such as Toury, Lefevere, Hermans, Lambert and many others has shown that translation is especially significant at moments of great cultural change. Even-Zohar argues that extensive translation activity takes place when a culture is in a period of transition: when it is expanding, when it needs renewal, when it is in a pre-revolutionary phase, then translation plays a vital part. In contrast, when a culture is solidly established, when it is in an imperialist stage, when it believes itself to be dominant, then translation is less important. This view explains why, in simple

terms, the emergent European nations in the early nineteenth century, those engaged in struggles against the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman Empires, translated so enthusiastically, and why translation into English began to decrease as the British Empire extended its grasp ever further. Later, as English became the language of international diplomacy in the twentieth century (and also the dominant world commercial language), there was little need to translate, hence the relative poverty of twentieth-century translations into English compared with the proliferation of translations in many other languages. When translation is neither required nor wanted, it tends to become a low status activity, poorly paid and disregarded, and the implications of this process have come increasingly to be studied by people working in the field of translation studies, which effectively offers a new way of looking at cultural history, taking into account both the implications of socio-historical changes that affect literary production in different cultures and the linguistic structuring of a text as it is transported across language boundaries. It may well be, as is suggested in chapter 7 below, that we need to reassess the role of translation studies vis-à-vis comparative literature, for whilst comparative literature in the West seems to be losing ground, even as it becomes more nebulous and loosely defined, so translation studies is undergoing the opposite process. Just as it became necessary for linguistics to rethink its relationship with Semiotics, so the time is approaching for comparative literature to rethink its relationship with Translation Studies. Semiotics was at first regarded as a sub-category of linguistics, and only later did it become clear that the reverse was the case, and linguistics was in effect a branch of the wider discipline, semiotics. Comparative literature has always claimed translation as a sub-category, but as translation studies establishes itself firmly as a subject based in inter-cultural study and offering a methodology of some rigour, both in terms of theoretical and descriptive work, so comparative literature appears less like a discipline and more like a branch of something else. Seen in this way, the problem of the crisis could then be put into perspective, and the long, unresolved debate on whether comparative literature is or is not a discipline in its own right could finally and definitely be shelved.

1
How Comparative Literature Came into Being

First Appearance of the Term

There is general agreement that comparative literature acquired its name from a series of French anthologies used for the teaching of literature, published in 1816 and entitled *Cours de littérature comparée*. In an essay discussing the origins of the term, René Wellek notes that this title was 'unused and unexplained'[1] but he also shows how the term seems to have crept into use through the 1820s and 1830s in France. He suggests that the German version of the term, 'vergleichende Literaturgeschichte', first appeared in a book by Moriz Carrière in 1854, while the earliest English usage is attributed to Matthew Arnold, who referred to 'comparative literatures' in the plural in a letter of 1848.[2]

Regardless of whether named individuals can be credited with having introduced the term into their own languages, it is clear that some concept of 'comparative literature' which involved a consideration of more than one literature was in circulation in Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century. The term seems to have derived from a methodological process applicable to the sciences, in which comparing (or contrasting) served as a means of confirming a hypothesis.

In his inaugural lecture at the Athénée in 1835, entitled *Littérature étrangére comparée* (Foreign Literature Compared), Philaréte Chasles endeavoured to define the object of study in the following terms:

> Let us calculate the influence of thought upon thought, the manner in which the people are mutually changed, what each of them has given, and what each of them has received; let us calculate also the