Pauline Yu

Comparative literature in question

> Comparative literature is at once a subject of study, a general approach to literature, a series of specific methods of literary history, a return to a medieval way of thought, a methodological credo for the day, an administrative annoyance, a new wrinkle in university organization, a recherché academic pursuit, a recognition that even the humanities have a role to play in the affairs of the world, close-held by a cabal, invitingly open to all ....[1]

So begins the foreword to Herbert Weisinger's and Georges Joyaux's translation of René Etiemble's *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*, published in 1966 and itself one of many polemical contributions to a substantial body of writings on the nature of comparative literature.

As Weisinger and Joyaux suggest, there has been scant consensus about the definition and purpose of the field from its very inception. Debates have been waged about its name and what to call those who practice it. Disputes have swirled about whether or not their task is one of comparison. Questions have been raised about whether or not whatever it is they do constitutes a discipline, producing delight, consternation, or despair in the hearts of those who care. Like the humanities as a whole, comparative literature seems to face one 'challenge' after another and to exist in a state of perpetual 'crisis,' as even a quick glance at the titles of numerous works on the subject can confirm.

Is it, as one critic describes it, "a house with many mansions," or should we regard it as "permanently under construction"?[2] Perhaps this is why Charles

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[1] Herbert Weisinger and Georges Joyaux, foreword to their translation of René Etiemble, *The Crisis in Comparative Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), vii – viii.

[2] S. S. Prawer, *Comparative Literary Studies* (London: Dudworth, 1973), 166, and Roland Greene, "American Comparative Literature: Reticence and Articulation," *World Literature Today* 69 (Spring 1995): 297.

Mills Gayley, a professor of English at Berkeley, writing in 1894, believed that the members of his proposed new Society of Comparative Literature "must be hewers of wood and drawers of water. Even though they cannot hope to see the completion of a temple of criticism, they may have the joy of construction . . . ."[3] Joyful or not, the hewers and drawers have toiled for more than a century, struggling to define an enterprise that – at once chameleon and chimera – has defied such attempts by mirroring the shifting political climate and intellectual predilections of each successive age. In comparative literature's history, then, we can witness a series of contests that have shaped the past two centuries, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, scientism and humanism, literature and theory, and within the very notion of disciplinarity itself.

In an *Outline of Comparative Literature from Dante Alighieri to Eugene O'Neill*, first published in 1954, the Swiss émigré Werner P. Friederich traced the roots of comparative literature to the influences of Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures on ancient Greece and of the latter, in turn, on Rome, although for him the real activity began during the Renaissance. His history of the discipline set out to demonstrate "the essential oneness of Western culture and the stultifying shortsightedness of political or literary nationalism," a unifying impulse shared by many other scholars writing after the ravages of World War II. All national literatures, he argued, have incurred "foreign obligations," for "even the greatest among our poets have borrowed, and borrowed gladly, from values given by other lands. In the words of a witty Frenchman: we all feed on others, though we must properly digest what we thus receive. Even the lion is nothing but assimilated mutton."[4]

Friederich's study exemplifies on a grand scale what had become by the middle of the twentieth century a signature method of comparative literature, the study of literary influence. Viewed from such a transnational perspective, literary reputations could shift in interesting ways, with some individuals neglected by historians of the national literature vaulting to surprising prominence abroad, and some locally eminent luminaries finding their significance in the international arena eclipsed. What is important here is the light Friederich's history casts on a fundamental tension within the founding impulse of the discipline: the relative priority of the transnational versus the national.

Cosmopolitanism, comparison, and a transcendence of strictly national interests and characteristics presuppose an awareness of what the latter in fact might be. Just as contemporary exhortations toward interdisciplinarity require thriving disciplinary bases, so the tracing of relationships across national traditions depends on a strong sense of what they separately are. Comparative literature's early forebears were thus as inclined to focus on the local and particular as they were on moving beyond them, but the oscillation between these two alternatives left the question of precedence unclear.

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[3] Charles Mills Gayley, "A Society of Comparative Literature," *The Dial*, August 1, 1894, 57, reprinted in Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip M. Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years. An Anthology of Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 85.

[4] Werner P. Friederich, preface to *Outline of Comparative Literature from Dante Alighieri to Eugene O'Neill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954). The "witty Frenchman" was Paul Valéry.

Consider two pioneers in comparative literature, Herder and Goethe. Johann Gottfried Herder urged German writers to study foreign literatures in order to learn how others had succeeded in "expressing their natural character in literary works," not for the purposes of emulation but rather to understand their differences and "develop along their own lines."[5] His research into and revival of interest in German folklore was central to this process of national identity formation, which, he hoped, could help to ameliorate the "dismal state of German literature."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, by contrast, shifted the balance toward the cosmopolitan, urging writers to eschew an easy provincialism and recognize the larger literary community to which they belonged, the home of *Weltpoesie* (world poetry), the common property of humankind, and of *Weltliteratur* (world literature): "National literature means little now, the age of *Weltliteratur* has begun; and everyone should further its course." Having learned much from various foreign perspectives on his own writings, Goethe proposed the concept of world literature not as a canon of works to be studied and imitated but rather, anticipating the world of a David Lodge novel, as "the marketplace of international literary traffic: translations, criticism, journals devoted to foreign literatures, the foreign receptions of one's own works, letters, journeys, meetings, circles."[6]

Goethe's views would be echoed at various points over the next two centuries as scholars called upon literary study – and specifically comparative literature – to exercise a form of cultural diplomacy that would affirm a shared heritage of aesthetic excellence as an antidote to parochial political animosities. For some this would be interpreted as a return to the world of the Middle Ages, "a universal culture expressed in a universal language and comprehended in a universal mode of thought."[7] For others, Goethe's ideal provided rather a cultural mirror for the anticipated withering away of capitalism and the nation-state, as Marx and Engels declared in the *Communist Manifesto*: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."[8] In any event, most scholars agree that while Goethe's notion of world literature – a term that would resurface later – was not coterminous with what was to become comparative literature, we can reasonably regard it as comparative literature's logical prerequisite. As François Jost observed, one provides the "raw materials and information" for the other, which then groups them "according to critical and historical principles. Comparative literature, therefore, may be defined as an organic *Weltliteratur*; it is an articulated account, historical and critical, of the literary phenomenon considered as a whole."

Having provided this concise definition, however, Jost was almost immediately forced to concede that the very term 'comparative literature' has long been a "source of confusion," for it "affirms the idea that literature is to be compared, but does not indicate the terms of comparison."[9] What, then, has it meant to different critics? In an authoritative essay on this question, René Wellek has recounted in detail the history and variety of meanings attached to a term that may have occurred in English for the first time in a letter written by Matthew Arnold to his sister in 1848 – though Arnold played no role in the birth of the discipline. Meanwhile, in France, '*littérature comparée*' had already appeared without explanation on the title page of a series of textbook anthologies of French, classical, and English literature compiled by Jean-François-Michel Noël and two collaborators in 1816. Ten years later Charles Pougens lamented the absence of a course on the subject, a lacuna that Abel-François Villemain addressed in a series of lectures at the Sorbonne in 1828 – 1830 that offered *amateurs de la littérature comparée* a comparative analysis of several modern literatures.[10] When one of the founders of modern criticism, Sainte-Beuve, referred to "*l'histoire littéraire comparée*" and "*littérature comparée*" in two articles on Jean-Jacques Ampère published in 1840 and 1868, comparative literature appears to have achieved recognition as both an academic discipline and a critical system.[11]

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[5] Robert Mayo, *Herder and the Beginnings of Comparative Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 107.

[6] J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, January 31, 1827, trans. Joel Spingarn and reprinted in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, 6, 3.

[7] Weisinger and Joyaux, foreword to *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*, xii.

[8] Cited in David Damrosch, "Comparative Literature?" *PMLA* 118 (2) (March 2003): 327.

Wellek and others have noted that its most important model was likely the new field of comparative anatomy; Georges Cuvier's *Anatomie comparée* had been published in 1800. As practiced by natural scientists like Cuvier and subsequently in such disciplines as philology, linguistics, religion, and law, the comparative method introduced an historical dimension to the cosmopolitan impulses that motivated Goethe. Haun Saussy has observed that they "all began as what one might call tree-shaped disciplines, organizing historical and typological diversity into a common historical narrative with many parallel branches," but that in most of the human sciences this methodology was difficult to sustain "without begging too many questions about the universal reach of the categories employed," and in the case of comparative literature, "the typological tree of written culture was never more than a vestige anyway."[12] Still, the conviction that the existence of a common ground for the major European literatures could and should be demonstrated was shared with proponents of the notion of world literature and was to inspire the work of many great comparatists until well into the twentieth century.

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[9] François Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), 21 – 22. In a footnote here, Jost recounts some of the variations in terminology that have been employed in various languages. In French one finds *littérature* both '*comparative*' and '*comparée*'; Germans switched from '*vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*' to '*vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*,' and then from '*Komparativistik*' to '*Komparatistik*.' In English both 'comparatist' and 'comparativist' are used; Jost states that the former has replaced the latter, though the evidence does not support this. He introduces the term "comparatistics" as a substitute for terms that have not gained wide acceptance – 'comparatism' and 'comparativism.'

[10] René Wellek, "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature," in Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., and Richard B. Vowles, eds., *Comparatists at Work: Studies in Comparative Literature* (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1968), 8 – 9.

[11] Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature*, 10.

[12] Haun Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" *PMLA* 118 (2) (March 2003): 337 – 338.

Although Wellek credited Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, an Irish barrister who became a professor of classics in New Zealand, with the first "decisive" use of the term 'comparative literature' in English in 1886, it appears to have been discussed even earlier by a professor of English at Cornell, Charles Chauncey Shackford, who delivered a lecture on the subject at the university in 1871. Clearly influenced by Cuvier's work, Shackford argued that the comparative method provides a means of analyzing, classifying, and relating the numerous facts and details that histories only collect, revealing thereby "universal laws of mental, social and moral development." Comparative literature, he declared,

> traces out the analogies that exist between the literary productions of remotest nations, the peculiarities which distinguish each as belonging to a particular period of social and mental development, the variations in type with the causes, thus bringing together related points of excellence and power, with the exceptional results produced by peculiarities of climate, race, and surrounding institutions.

Working back from individual branches to a common trunk not only affords a deeper understanding of each national literature, he claimed, it also provides a proper understanding of literature "not in the isolated works of different ages, but as the production of the same great laws, and the embodiment of the same universal principles in all times."[13]

Shackford's contribution to the literature was never published outside of local university records and thus went largely unnoticed in favor of Posnett's more visible intervention, both in a book he published in 1886 and an equally influential article published fifteen years later on "The Science of Comparative Literature." There Posnett made the audacious claim "to have first stated and illustrated the method and principles of the new science." These principles, according to Posnett, were simply "social evolution, individual evolution, and the influence of the environment on the social and individual life of man."[14] Here Posnett acknowledged the influence of Ferdinand Brunetière, a powerful and prolific French scholar who had applied Darwinian theories to the study of literature, arguing, for example, that genres grew, declined, and evolved into new ones just as animal species did. Concepts drawn from comparative anatomy and evolution were thus instrumental in shaping the emerging field of comparative literature, as the nineteenth-century literary comparatists shared the presumption of both sciences that unitary principles linked disparate phenomena.

Other American pioneers followed Posnett's lead in embracing evolutionary principles as models for the practice of comparative literature. Charles Mills Gayley, who introduced a course on the topic into the curriculum at Berkeley, believed that "trustworthy principles of literary criticism depend upon the substantiation of aesthetic theory by scientific inquiry," which, given the vastness of the subject, requires systematic collaboration within the scholarly community. He therefore proposed the creation of the "Society of Comparative Literature (or of Literary Evolution)," whose members would each specialize in the study of a given literary type or movement, pooling their findings in a systematic way to achieve "an induction to the common and therefore essential characteristics of the phenomenon, to the laws governing its origin, growth, and differentiation."[15]

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[13] Charles Chauncey Shackford, "Comparative Literature," *Proceedings of the University Convocation* (Albany: New York [State] University, Albany, 1876), reprinted in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years,* 42, 46.

[14] Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, "The Science of Comparative Literature," *The Contemporary Review* LXXIX (1901): 855–872, reprinted in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years,* 188.

Gayley's contemporary Arthur Richmond Marsh, a professor of comparative literature at Harvard, also recognized his discipline's debt to the comparative method in the natural sciences. Rejecting the notion that the point of comparing literary works is to determine "their relative excellence," Marsh argued for a less subjective and more scientific goal: "To examine, then, the phenomena of literature as a whole, to compare them, to group them, to classify them, to enquire into the causes of them, to determine the results of them – this is the true task of comparative literature."[16] However, both Posnett and Gayley acknowledged that the very term 'comparative literature' did not appear to make grammatical sense, a point that both critics and adherents would reiterate. In the 1920s, Lane Cooper of Cornell insisted on calling the department he headed "The Comparative Study of Literature." Otherwise, he pointed out, "You might as well permit yourself to say 'comparative potatoes' or 'comparative husks.'"[17] In any case, the grammatical infelicity was reason enough for many to wonder not only what the term meant but also what the activity it denoted was aiming to achieve.

Undaunted by continuous uncertainty about the name and nature of the field, universities established professorships in comparative literature during the second half of the nineteenth century in both Europe and the United States. Journals began publishing from the 1870s on in Romania and Germany, and from the turn of the century in the United States. Louis Paul Betz, a lecturer at Zurich, published the first comprehensive bibliography of the field in 1896; enlarged in 1904, it contained some six thousand entries. A sequel published by Fernand Baldensperger and Werner P. Friederich in 1950 contained over thirty-three thousand items.[18]

Betz's bibliography, in particular, was instrumental in stabilizing the use of the term 'comparative literature.' The majority of the works he included, and this is even truer of Baldensperger and Friederich's compilation, reflected the dominant principle in the field, established by French scholars and thus referred to as 'the French school': comparison was to engage in analysis of at least two national literary and linguistic traditions between which actual *rapports de faits*, i.e., factual relations or historical contact, could be demonstrated. One could focus on either terminus of the traffic across national boundaries (Goethe in France, the French impact on Goethe) and shift the labeling of 'emitter,' 'intermediary,' and 'receiver' accordingly. Influence studies shaded naturally into those examining imitation and reception, and from there it was but a natural step to considering the role translations played in literary relations.

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[15] Gayley, "A Society of Comparative Literature," in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years,* 84.

[16] Arthur Richmond Marsh, "The Comparative Study of Literature," *PMLA* XI (2) (1896): 151 – 70, reprinted in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years,* 128.

[17] Lane Cooper, *Experiments in Education* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1943), 75; cited by René Wellek, "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature," in Nichols, Jr., and Vowles, eds., *Comparatists at Work,* 4 – 5.

[18] See Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years,* 133 – 151; Robert J. Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), 4; and David Malone, introduction to Werner P. Friederich, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature and Other Addresses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), xi.

In addition to studies of sources and influence, comparative scholarship up through the middle of the twentieth century typically examined literature across national frontiers and centuries with a focus on one of three levels: movements and trends (e.g., romanticism or naturalism); genres and forms (e.g., the short lyric); and motifs, types, or themes (e.g., the image of the shrew). All these approaches sought to make the study of literature more systematic and objective, achieving for comparative literature, in Gayley's words, "the transition from stylistic to a science of literature which shall still find room for aesthetics, but for aesthetics properly so called, developed, checked, and corrected by scientific procedure and by history."[19]

But if by this time a virtual consensus had been reached regarding the practice of comparative literature, its inspirational power was limited. The first generations of comparative scholars were largely European and predominantly French. Indeed, François Jost has suggested that comparative literature in France was "mainly an ancillary discipline within the field of French literary history." Its major figures employed the historicist and positivist assumptions and methods of the new field to demonstrate how French literature "formed the backbone of the universal literary system, and the task of the comparatist consisted in examining how and why the English, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian ribs were attached to it."[20] Whether or not such nationalistic impulses were always discernible, it was clear by mid-century that the method had ceased to flourish across the Atlantic. In the United States after the war, Werner P. Friederich tried with some success to revive the field through various institution-building efforts – newsletters, journals, the creation of a special section for comparative literature in the Modern Language Association, etc. But it was René Wellek, a Czech émigré and doyen of literary and critical studies as professor of comparative literature at Yale, who diagnosed the malaise and prescribed a cure that took.

Wellek attributed what he described as a "crisis" in comparative literature to the baleful positivistic legacy of influence studies in a calcified French school, which had

> saddled comparative literature with an obsolete methodology and have laid on it the dead hand of nineteenth-century factualism, scientism, and historical relativism.... They believe in causal explanation ... [and] have accumulated an enormous mass of parallels, similarities, and sometimes identities, but they have rarely asked what these relationships are supposed to show except possibly the fact of one writer's knowledge and reading of another writer.

As a consequence, comparative literature had become but "a stagnant backwater."[21] Wellek based his objection to the obsessive focus on causality not only on his belief that any individual example was at best only plausible and rarely generalizable, but also on his conviction that the entire positivist project of nineteenth-century scholarship – the scientific model – had been discredited as well. Croce, Dilthey, and others had challenged it already, but the destabilization of the political order wrought by World War I had sealed the case: "The world (or rather our world) has been in a state of permanent crisis since, at least, the year 1914. Literary scholarship, in its less violent, muted ways, has been torn by conflicts of methods since about the same time." Wellek bemoaned as well the fact that comparative literature seemed to have lost its early inspiration as a truly cosmopolitan enterprise. Having arisen, often in the hands of worldly émigrés, "as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of much nineteenth-century scholarship, as a protest against the isolationism of many historians of French, German, Italian, English, etc., literature," it appeared to have been recaptured and corrupted by the revival of patriotic political sentiments, which had "led to a strange system of cultural bookkeeping, a desire to accumulate credits for one's nation by proving as many influences as possible on other nations or, more subtly, by proving that one's own nation has assimilated and 'understood' a foreign master more fully than any other."[22]

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[19] Charles Mill Gayley, "What Is Comparative Literature?" in Schulz and Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, 102.

[20] Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature*, 25.

[21] René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," in *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Asso-*

If comparative literature had forgotten its cosmopolitan roots, in Wellek's eyes equally serious was the risk that it had lost sight of fundamental questions of aesthetic value as well. He therefore recommended moving beyond all such demarcations – of language, country, history, theory, and methodology – to recognize "literary scholarship as a unified discipline." Moreover, if comparative literature had "become an established term for any study of literature transcending the limits of one national literature,"[23] it was time to acknowledge that it "can and will flourish only if it shakes off artificial limitations and becomes simply the study of literature."[24]

Wellek fired this salvo across the bow of the French school at the second congress of the recently established International Comparative Literature Association in 1958. Out of the subsequent brouhaha emerged what became known as the 'American school' of comparatists, who were less exclusively positivist and historicist in their orientation and more interested in comparative literature as a broadly critical and humanistic enterprise.

Still, many Americans were less willing than Wellek to shed the adjective 'comparative,' even as they sought to expand its definition. In addition to being less nationalistic (indeed, American literature was and is still often not included in the discipline's purview) and more open to a multiplicity of theoretical and methodological models, these scholars introduced to the field a new term – 'affinity' – that did not require any documented historical contact at all. As A. Owen Aldridge put it, "Affinity consists in resemblances in style, structure, mood, or idea between two works which

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ciation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 1, reprinted in Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), 282, 285, 292.

[22] Ibid., 282, 287 – 289.

[23] Ibid., 290.

[24] Wellek, "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature," in Nichols, Jr., and Vowles, eds., *Comparatists at Work*, 13.

have no other connection." He also argued strongly for the discipline to move beyond its European frontiers: rather than being "confined to the wares of a single nation," the comparatist "shops in a literary department store,"[25] which includes not just the European tradition but those of the rest of the world as well.

Equally important in the development of an American school was an expansion of the discipline's definition that took comparative literature beyond the bounds of the strictly literary. Henry H. H. Remak is generally credited with this innovation, evident in the opening statement of his essay, "Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function":

> Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression."[26]

While this extension of the domain of comparative literature did not meet with universal approbation, some version of it gradually worked its way into most descriptions of comparative literature programs in universities today and into UNESCO's definition of the field as well.[27]

However controversial, Remak's addition to comparative literature's agenda reflected a continuing degree of fluidity in articulating its distinctive features. Whether positivist or literary-critical in orientation, some of its practitioners worried about how in fact they could be differentiated from scholars working in a single literature who might also be interested in exploring larger questions of genre, theme, motif, and influence. Bean counters wondered whether or not 'disciplinarily valid' comparisons could take place between literatures of two countries written in the same language, or with examples from a country within which more than one language was used. Boundaries began to dissolve, with Aldridge writing that "the study of comparative literature is fundamentally not any different from the study of national literatures except that its subject matter is much vaster, taken as it is from more than one literature and excluding none which the student has the capacity to read,"[28] and Remak flatly declaring that "geographically speaking, an air-tight distinction between national literature and comparative literature is sometimes difficult," and "there is no fundamental difference between methods of research in national literature and comparative literature."[29]

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[25] A. Owen Aldridge, *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 3, 1. At the Sorbonne, René Etiemble's essay, "Littérature comparée ou comparaison n'est pas raison," published upon his 1958 election to the chair in comparative literature, also called for a "different conception of our discipline," a truly international comparative literature that would not be dependent on the demonstration of *rapports de faits*, and thereby rattled the positivistic foundation of the French school as well. See Etiemble, *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*, an English translation of a longer version of the essay published in 1963, 4 and passim.

[26] Henry H. H. Remak, "Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function," in Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz, eds., *Comparative Literature, Method and Perspective* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 3.

[27] Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline*, 8.

[28] Stallknecht and Frenz, eds., *Comparative Literature, Method and Perspective*, 1.

Attempting to shore up some vanishing distinctions, others asked whether a comparison should require examples from more than two different traditions: should a 'rule of three' be invoked? Haun Saussy recalled that when he began graduate studies in the 1970s,

> The three-language rule identified the discipline as something apart from English, national-language studies, or studies of literature in translation; it set up a criterion of eligibility for new entrants, thus laying a basis for the discipline's continued social reproduction; but it did not always specify the three languages or dictate the substance of what was to be done in them.

As he went on to note, the point of the "magical third element" was "elusive," and it "defined the social membership of comparative literature better than it did the object of study."[30]

In 2002, when stepping down as president of the International Comparative Literature Association, Jean Bessière confided to his constituents that he was "in the process of abandoning the idea of comparison."[31] Many of his colleagues over the years had already remarked upon the paucity of actual comparisons undertaken by scholars in the field, some with alarm, but others with approbation. As if bracketing the first half of comparative literature's name were not enough, questions about its second half have also been raised in recent decades as programs previously dedicated to the study of literature have opened their doors to theory and to postcolonial and cultural studies. Following the establishment of a first beachhead in a 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins on "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," successive waves of new approaches to literary texts, informed by methods and arguments developed outside the domain of literature in fields like anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy, began to wash across the shores of American universities from the early 1970s on. They found their most hospitable moorings in comparative literature departments and programs, both because the foundational texts of these approaches were still being translated from French and German, and also because comparative literature's methodology inclined it, however variously, to transnational and often ahistorical conceptualizations of the literary, in contrast to the chronological march through the centuries typically mandated by English and foreign language curricula.

Some departments – like those of Yale, Cornell, Hopkins, Irvine, and Emory – embraced European theory with special fervor, but across the country students began to sort themselves out, choosing between the study of a national literature and comparative literature often in relation to their degree of interest in theoretical approaches. Some national literature departments quite happily ceded responsibility for teaching theory to their comparative literature colleagues; others began to note with some alarm that the best graduate students then seemed to be applying to those very neighbors. Comparative literature's fascination with theory thus exacerbated the longstanding tension between the national and the transnational as institutionalized in university departmental structures. It also, in some eyes, obscured what some thought was their reason for being. Should students care more about what de Man thought about Derrida's reading of Rousseau than about reading Rousseau himself? Theorists would quickly respond, of course, that one needed to ask their questions to understand both the conditions and the possibility of such a reading, but those nostalgic for a more humanistic and less jargon-clogged past began to wonder where the literature had gone.

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[29] Remak, "Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function," in Stallknecht and Frenz, eds., *Comparative Literature, Method and Perspective*, 10 – 11.

[30] Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" 336.

[31] Jean Bessière, "Retiring President's Address," *ICLA Bulletin* XXI (1) (2002): 11.

This question became even more salient as the interdisciplinarity that Remak and others had proclaimed as intrinsic to comparative literature's mission also made it a congenial home for cultural studies approaches that rejected literature's privileged position as a window on the human condition. The call for comparisons of literature to other 'spheres of human expression' has, in extending the critical purview to film, media, and other forms of popular culture studies, often succeeded in pushing literature off the stage entirely. And as postcolonial studies have found a home in comparative literature departments as well, the geographical field has expanded and, in many departments, marginalized its old-world center. The perceived monolingualism of these emerging fields also eroded, in some eyes, the discipline's time-honored expectation that students would study several literatures in the original languages.

The gradual extension and revision of comparative literature's territory did not, therefore, come without controversy. Commission reports mandated by the by-laws of the American Comparative Literature Association sought to define the field's "professional standards" in 1965 and 1975, with the second generally upholding the recommendation of the first to sustain rigorous, "arduous," even "elitist" expectations for work in multiple languages. In 1985 enough dissension and dissatisfaction had evidently developed that the committee's chair never submitted its findings. The 1993 effort, consisting of a committee report proposing a significant reorientation of comparative literature away from its traditional roots in studies of European literature and toward multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies, provoked enough commentary – three 'responses' and eleven 'position papers' – to fill a volume. Some disgruntled scholars resigned their memberships in the American Comparative Literature Association in protest. Small wonder, then, that the committee's chair, Charles Bernheimer, characterized the discipline as "anxiogenic" and titled his introduction to the volume "The Anxieties of Comparison."[32] In his 2003 report, Haun Saussy sought to invoke the "power and attractiveness of a concept of 'literariness,' however variously put to work, for comparative literature," but flanked his arguments with thirteen other opinions from the members of his committee.[33]

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[32] Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 1. Bernheimer recounts the history of the earlier commissions in his preface, ix, and includes the first two reports of the commissions, chaired by Harry Levin and Thomas Greene, respectively, in the volume.

[33] Haun Saussy, *ACLA Report* 2003 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming), 14. I am grateful to Haun for sharing the manuscripts with me.

Whatever the anxieties and disagreements, comparative literature has managed to maintain a modest but surprisingly stable profile in the landscape of American higher education. What does a comparatist look like? Chances are that she will have begun her formal study in comparative literature as a graduate student rather than as an undergraduate. While some eight hundred B.A.s were awarded in the field last year, the relative proportion of Ph.D.s to B.A.s is six times greater in comparative literature than in other humanities disciplines.[34] In many institutions, the undergraduate degree in the field is a relatively recent innovation, owing to the typically demanding language requirements. Chances are about equal that an interdepartmental program rather than a department will have offered her course of study, a fact that has been both defended for its flexibility and contended for its instability. Whatever the case, she has been part of a relatively flourishing cohort within the humanities: undergraduate degrees have increased modestly over the past three decades, with doctoral degrees awarded rising by approximately 50 percent. Chances are that she will have done coursework in at least one written tradition comprehensively and intensively enough to be located, at least for some portion of her professional appointment, in a national language and literature department, even though she will probably also work with materials from other languages. Chances are that she will have studied works of literature, while acquiring as well a substantial background in literary and cultural theory. It is less likely than was the case a few decades ago that her focus will be exclusively European.

When I applied to graduate school in 1971, Harry Levin regarded the notion of doing a comparative literature degree using French, German, and Chinese with considerable skepticism. While he admitted me to Harvard's program, I not unsurprisingly decided to go where people thought it was, in fact, a good idea. The other departments to which I applied were also willing to give me a chance, but only the newly minted program at Stanford expressed enthusiasm about the prospect. Now, some three decades later, such a combination would be unexceptional, along with enagement in what Wlad Godzich has referred to as "emergent literatures," which "cannot be readily comprehended with the hegemonic view of literature that has been dominant in our discipline."[35]

Yet some scholars remain concerned about the implications of such an expansion. In his 2001 presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association, for example, Jonathan Culler observed that "comparative literature seems always to have been a discipline in crisis, but simultaneously going global and going cultural, as we have been doing, has created special problems. We don't know what we are supposed to teach." Although Culler went on to attribute this uncertainty to the faculty's inability to assume that students can work in original languages,[36] others have argued that language competence remains remarkably strong, in no small measure owing to a more richly multilingual immigrant population in the United States and to the high numbers of foreign students in American graduate programs. Jean Bessière's presidential remarks to the International Comparative Literature Association in 2002 situated this transformation in a different and broader context, the "crisis of the humanities," which is "nothing other than the progressive erasure of the model of literary study established during the nineteenth century in Europe. This model was symbolically and ideologically a mixture of tradition, universalism, nation, and positivism." Comparative literature participates in the crisis, but it is also, he hoped, "the step beyond all of that."[37]

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[34] Data in this section provided by Benjamin Schmidt of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

[35] Wlad Godzich, "Emergent Literature and Comparative Literature," in Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, eds., *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 35.

[36] Jonathan Culler, "Comparing Poetry," *Comparative Literature* 53 (3) (Summer 2001): xvi.

Where that step might take us should be reviewed in the context of the path taken thus far. As Claudio Guillén observed, in what should now be a very familiar refrain, "a peculiar trait of comparativism, for good or for ill, is the problematical awareness of its own identity, and the resulting inclination to rely on its own history."[38]

Two aspects of this history are particularly worth recalling as we consider the situation of comparative literature today. First, if we have called into question the universalism that inspired Goethe's promulgation of the notion of world literature because of the European hegemonic presumptions that it could all too easily conceal, it is also the case that some arguably less sinister impulses have motivated this obsession with universals. As has been noted, comparative literature's origins coincided with the rise of European nationalism, which, on the one hand, it presupposed and to which, on the other, it also represented an oppositional response, an attempt to reunify a Europe divided by the Napoleonic wars through the salutary consideration of native traditions in a larger and cosmopolitan context. More than one historian has noted that subsequent revivals of interest in the discipline have occurred at similar moments in world history, and we might then consider the field as part of a larger and periodically renewed effort to emphasize humankind's possible commonalities. As Werner Friederich commented,

> It is one of the ironies and the tragedies of Comparative Literature that it seems to flourish only after the catastrophes of World Wars, when men are sufficiently aroused to denounce the folly of political or cultural chauvinism and to advocate a far more tolerant program of literary internationalism instead.[39]

A twenty-first-century version of this phenomenon, Vilashini Cooppan has suggested, is the linkage of comparative literature with globalization. Arguing that "globalization is by no means reducible to the universal reign of commodification" and is, rather, "an inherently mixed phenomenon, a process that encompasses both sameness and difference, compression and expansion, convergence and divergence, nationalism and internationalism, universalism and particularism," Cooppan declared that "the history of comparative literature is also to some degree the history of globalization." While cautioning against "reanimating" Goethe as a "globalization theorist before his time," Cooppan nonetheless credited him with "the unmistakable shattering of the national paradigm that is one of the hallmarks of our own moment" and comparative literature's "foundational aspirations to a broadly imagined, incipiently global knowledge of literature."[40]

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[37] Bessière, "Retiring President's Address," 17.

[38] Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, trans. Cola Franzen (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 93.

[39] Werner P. Friederich, "The First Ten Years of Our Comparative Literature Section in the MLA," in Friederich, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature and Other Addresses*, 11.

So Goethe's ideal of *Weltliteratur* has returned, having traveled many paths over the years. Most recently associated with survey courses on great books in translation, it has resurfaced in connection with examples of comparative literature at its most ambitious, resolutely multilateral, nonhegemonic, and nonhierarchical. Some recent proponents of a new world literature, like Franco Moretti, have argued that only "distant reading" works in this cosmopolitan literary universe, whereas others, like David Damrosch, have insisted on the continuing validity of close readings that move dynamically across contexts and translations.[41] Whatever the case, world literature embraces a body of texts "that, even as they represent particular national spirits . . . , also manage to traverse, even to transcend, their national, linguistic, and temporal origins, effectively deterritorializing themselves."[42]

This reference to deterritorialization brings us to a second distinctive feature of comparative literature's disciplinary history, its association with scholars who share a personal history of emigration, if not exile, associated with war. If, as Cooppan suggested, Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach are to be counted among the "patron saints" of the discipline, the path to canonization was laid for both scholars during their escape from Nazi depredations to Istanbul. As Emily Apter put it, comparative literature "is unthinkable without the historical circumstances of exile,"[43] and she has traced in fascinating detail the ways in which a seminar Spitzer offered while in Istanbul that granted equal time to the study of Turkish literature "furnished the blueprint" for postwar departments of comparative literature. These continue to bear the "traces of the city in which it took disciplinary form – a place where East-West boundaries were culturally blurry and where layers of colonial history obfuscated the outlines of indigenous cultures."[44] Among those instrumental in building the field in the United States, both Wellek and Friederich, as already noted, were European émigrés, along with Renato Poggioli and Claudio Guillén, and the list goes on. Indeed, two-thirds of the contributors to a recent collection of essays chronicling the beginnings of the field in the United States are immigrants, including the volume's editors, who observed that "an experience of uprootedness and exile occasioned by war lies at the basis of the very being of many of the contributors."[45] Remarkably apt in this context, therefore, is Claudio Guillén's invocation of a passage from Hugh of St. Victor's twelfth-century educational program, the *Didascalicon*, in his conclusion to a history of comparative literature: "That mind is still tender for whom the homeland is sweet, but brave for whom the whole world is a homeland, and truly mature for whom the entire world is a place of exile."[46]

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[40] Vilashini Cooppan, "Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine: The Uncanny Life of World Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (1) (2004): 12 – 16.

[41] See Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 2000): 54 – 68, and David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[42] Cooppan, "Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine," 13 – 14.

[43] Emily Apter, "Comparative Exile: Competing Margins in the History of Comparative Literature," in Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 86.

[44] Emily Apter, "Global Translation: The 'Invention' of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003): 271.

If most historians of the discipline have, as Guillén believes, tended 'problematically' to rely on its history, others have chosen to advocate that the past be rewritten, if not interred. In her obituary for the discipline, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seeks to "undo" comparative literature's own version of its European provenance to reveal an "unacknowledged prehistory" in a Muslim Europe and Arabic-Persian cosmopolitanism familiar to scholars of Middle Eastern studies and history, if not to comparatists. And she urges us to "redo Comparative Literature" as a truly "planetary" discipline that will "collaborate with and transform Area Studies," sharing with it a respect for serious study of languages but moving beyond its borders in a new alliance with cultural studies.[47]

As others have observed, such a globalizing perspective also offers a salutary counter to the tendency of many area studies specialists to limit access to and interpretations – beyond the biographical and philological – of materials they control by virtue of special linguistic expertise.[48] By the same token, it must constantly take care to ensure that a new cosmopolitanism does not disguise a much older form of metropolitan thinking. For instance, when the field of 'East-West comparative literature' first opened up to introduce consideration of Asian examples, comparisons were inevitably one-sided or unwittingly invidious: similarities or 'affinities' could be demonstrated if something Chinese was just like something European. Discussions comparing Chinese to Western poets on an individual basis proliferated, uncovering the proleptically 'romantic' or 'symbolist' practices of the former, or discovering that deconstruction's heralds were fourth-century B.C.E. Daoists. If differences existed, it was to the detriment of the Chinese example (China 'lacked' epic and tragedy, for example, or its fiction suffered from the 'limitations' of a strong didactic impulse). Entire richly varied traditions became homogenized as unqualified monoliths in the face-off of East and West, with a selected group of Asian texts and figures charged with the burden of being 'representative,' reduced to distillations of an already essentialized culture, and subject to the measure of literary 'universals' that turned out, to no one's surprise, to be Western ones.[49] Such early discussions only confirm a point Natalie Melas has made, that comparison "is a highly normative procedure" that "seems always constrained by an invisible binary bind in which comparison must end either by accentuating differences or by subsuming them under some overarching unity."[50] It is perhaps a good thing, therefore, that unabashed comparison is rarely a feature of comparative literature these days and that the discipline, as Haun Saussy put it, "has failed to live up to its name."[51]

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[45] Lionel Gossman and Mihai I. Spariosu, foreword to Gossman and Spariosu, eds., *Building a Profession: Autobiographical Perspectives on the Beginnings of Comparative Literature in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), ix.

[46] Book Three, Chapter 19, cited in Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 334. Guillén's reference (erroneously to III.20) is from Erich Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," in *Weltliteratur: Festgabe für Fritz Strich zum 70. Geburtstag* (Bern: Francke, 1952), 49. See *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 101.

[47] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 87, 19, 5.

[48] See, for example, Jale Parla, "The Object of Comparison," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (1) (2004): 118.

In the end, however, for all its hand wringing and self-questioning, its fretting about names, standards, and identities, comparative literature has managed to do quite a lot over the past two centuries. If its methods and focus have continually shifted, it is to a large extent owing to the ways in which, like a chameleon, it has absorbed powerful contemporary influences, be they the dynamic tension between nationalism and transnationalism, the appeal of a scientific method to humanistic study, the reassertion of humanistic values, or the impulse to challenge the boundaries of disciplinarity. Its current practice reflects a hard-fought understanding that the commitment to language study does not require a narrow nationalism and that a hegemonic comparative literature swallowing up foreign language departments would soon risk starvation. Its turmoils have been those of the humanities writ large. The upheavals wrought by a theoretical climate of suspicion that questioned the coherence and credibility of both the literary work and its critic; the increasingly eager unwillingness of some, and reluctant inability of others, to continue to disregard the presence of new or hitherto unrecognized players on the literary scene; the destabilization and decentering of a largely European, 'elitist' canon of study; the changing demographics of the American scholarly and student community; and the inherent impulse of the humanities in general to question their very premises – are all shared to some extent by comparative literature with its sister disciplines.

In his contribution to the 2003 ACLA draft report, David Ferris suggested that there is a "logic that drives Comparative Literature to question continually what constitutes it as a discipline," a will to what he called "indiscipline" that ensures that "the answer to what Comparative Literature is should always fail in order to preserve the question." And indeed, precisely because of its incessant anxieties and continuing flirtation with crisis, its habits of engaging in "a critique that seeks to sustain the limits within which it operates," comparative literature has become "a theoretical account of the humanities in general."[52] In that relentless questioning of aims and contexts resides, after all, one of the most important strengths of all the humanistic disciplines.

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[49] For a recent discussion of some of these issues, see James St. André, "Whither East-West Comparative Literature? Two Recent Answers from the U.S.," *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 20 (March 2003): 291 – 302.

[50] Natalie Melas, "Versions of Incommensurability," *World Literature Today* (Spring 1995): 275. Melas refers to the first case as "contrastive literature," a term employed two years earlier as the title of an article by Michael Palencia-Roth in the *Bulletin of the American Comparative Literature Association* XXIV (2) (Spring/Summer, 1993): 47 – 60.

[51] Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" 338.

[52] David Ferris, "Indiscipline," 2003 ACLA draft report manuscript, 2, 11.