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Comparative Literature in the United States

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Manuela Mourão,

"Comparative Literature in the United States"

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Abstract: In her article, "Comparative Literature in the United States," Manuela Mourão offers a historical overview of the debates about comparative literature as a discipline, from the early years of its institutionalization in the United States until the present. Mourão summarizes the most pointed -- and anxious -- interventions of prominent scholars in the field and she discusses the permanent sense of crisis that has typically been part of the discipline. Further, Mourão links the permanent anxiety of the discipline with the prescriptive tendencies that have continued to endure until the present. She then looks at the debates that followed the controversial "Bernheimer Report" of 1993, discusses briefly the development of the field since then, and points out specific ways in which comparatists have continued to push the discipline forward despite decades of self-conscious scrutiny and anxiety.

Manuela MOURÃO**Comparative Literature in the United States**

In this article, I present an updated version of my observations with regard to the history and current situation of the discipline of comparative literature in the United States I published in the collected volume, *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations* (see Mourão 1999). The 1993 "Bernheimer Report" of the ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association made very clear that the discipline had evolved to such an extent that an expanded definition of the field has become essential. The report stressed that "the different ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres, that the term literature may no longer adequately describe our object of study" (Bernheimer 42). The debate sparked by this and related statements is not quite over yet. Inevitably, there are those who perceive such an evolution as a threat to the fundamental nature of the discipline and who therefore reject the on-going broadening of the scope of literary studies. But the evidence of the work of comparatists in the last few years proves that the broadening of the field has happened irreversibly; moreover, and even if there is still talk of crisis, it has energized the discipline in very significant ways.

If we put the present situation in perspective and look back more or less a half a century, we realize that from the very beginning comparative literature has been in some crisis or other, contending with, among other things, problems of definition and method. As early as 1958, addressing those at the IInd Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, René Wellek stresses that "the most serious sign of the precarious state of our study [was] the fact that it [had] not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (282). Literariness, aesthetics, and art, Wellek maintains, should be the focus of the discipline. By 1961, Henry Remak's "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function" lamented the trouble, controversy, and confusion in the field (18). In 1963, Etienne Etiemble's famous "comparaison n'est pas raison" claimed that the crisis in the discipline had been going on for at least two decades (9) and cited differences in the methodologies of the so-called French and American schools as part of the problem.

Comparatists' frustration with the endless discussions about the problems with the discipline became rather noticeable and by the end of the 1960s and A. Owen Aldridge and Harry Levin, among others, were pleading for the methodological polemics to stop (see Aldridge 110-16; Levin 5-16). But the discussions of the proper object of comparative literature and of its methodological problems showed no signs of abating. In fact, the shift in emphasis in literary studies brought about by the widening of critical debate -- particularly noticeable in American scholarship from the 1970s on -- actually increased them. In 1981, Henry Remak acknowledged the tendency of the discipline towards interdisciplinarity and urged caution: "It is therefore necessary to work into our volumes new approaches and areas...: structuralism, semiotics, reception and communications theory, the sociology of literature (including Triviallitteratur), linguistics, rhetoric and the interdisciplinary study of literature ... while making sure they are used primarily to make the literary phenomenon more understandable, more significant, more authentic" (1981, 221). Four years later, however, he had come to believe that such a tendency was proving to be one of the causes of the problem with comparative literature and writes that "As the interdisciplinary ambitions of supposedly 'literary' scholars have mushroomed (linguistics, structuralism, history of ideas, philosophy, political and economic ideology, communication theory, semiotics), their literary sense and their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures have declined. Comparative literature is not well served in and through such a subservient arrangement" (1985, 10).

As Remak expressed them, the perceived dangers to the discipline had become quite different from those of twenty years before. Standards remained an issue, but the crux of the matter, it was rapidly becoming apparent, was no less than survival itself. Decades of polemics and insecurity had translated, by the 1980s, into open questioning of the future of comparatism at the institutional level. The symptoms of this were unmistakable then and became consistently more

substantial. For example, as I started graduate work at the University of Illinois in Urbana in 1986, there were attempts at merging the Comparative Literature Program with different language departments. Then, students and faculty succeeded in preventing what would have amounted to a dissolution of the program; still, by the summer of 1994 the program was scheduled to be terminated. Fortunately, a change in deanship saved it, but the prospect of dissolution still looms on the horizon of this and other American programs and there are many examples of similar situations with a less fortunate outcome at American universities. Thus, mere survival has been very much on the mind of American comparatists. For some of the scholars of earlier generations this survival continues to be equated with the enforcement of standards, a clear object, and a set of methodologies. Etiemble, his anti-chauvinistic understanding of comparative literature notwithstanding, still discussed methodology in his 1988 book on the future of the discipline: "Une fois fix? le sens des mots de la tribu comparatiste, il importerait d'étudier systématiquement les diverses méthodes dont il est loisible au comparatiste, au généraliste, de s'armer pour exercer correctement son difficile métier" (178). Like the new generation of comparatists, he sees comparative literature perishing unless it refuses to be Eurocentrist -- but unlike them, he sees it perishing unless it upholds its traditional methods: "Nul avenir ... pour la littérature générale et comparée, si elle ne s'applique pas ... toutes les littératures qui ont vécu ou qui survivent sur la planète; nul avenir non plus si, acceptant toutes ces littératures, écrites et orales, elle refuse de les scruter selon les méthodes que je viens de suggérer" (182).

Arguing for the keeping to traditional approaches continues to be the advice of more than one prominent scholar of the discipline. For example, Michael Riffaterre, at the 1993 convention of the Modern Language Association of America voices his concern with, among other things, what he perceives as the multiculturalist comparatists' downplaying of literature and its literariness (as he sees it, the true object of comparative literature) in favor of non-literary texts. And he is very skeptical of the efforts to expand the field by teaching literature in translation in undergraduate classes, despite the obvious limitations this imposes (see Riffaterre). Thus, at the closing of 1993, there was, as always, a sense of crisis in comparative literature. Unlike previous ones, however, this crisis is no longer just a disagreement about methodologies or schools. The gradual disappearance of comparative literature programs owing to diminishing institutional support but also to a scarcity of students, and the lack of positions available to comparatists -- this is considerably more dramatic than in English or other foreign languages -- makes the debates more poignant and relevant.

The question of what had to be done in order to stop this downhill trend was largely addressed via commentary on the 1993 ACLA report by Charles Bernheimer. Attacked as it was for having remained prescriptive (although in my opinion it really was far less so than its predecessors) and for a lingering stress on "standards," the report was also praised for offering significant insights. It recognized, on the one hand, that its function should be to describe the current critical practices in the field, rather than to continue the polemics about what these ought to be; on the other hand, it pointed out that those practices did show the broadening of the scope of literary studies: More and more scholars were approaching literature as one discursive practice among many others and did not necessarily view aesthetic value as the primary criteria for their interest in a text. If, as we saw, several comparatists have repeatedly worried about the boundaries of the field, the fact of the matter was that by 1993 comparative literature as a discipline had already been significantly transformed by a broadening of its scope. The general sense of the coming to an end of a practice of comparatism exclusively modeled on the traditional approaches was poignantly obvious in *Building a Profession: Autobiographical Perspectives on the History of Comparative Literature in the United States* (Gossman and Spariosu, eds.). Published in 1994, shortly after the "Bernheimer Report," *Building a Profession* offered a retrospective of the early days of comparative literature in the United States. Through autobiographical sketches by some of its most influential comparatists, it maps the beginning and the development of the discipline in the United States. As they describe well over a half a century of American comparatism, these senior comparatists also reflect on their vision of the future of the discipline. Some show strong concern about the changes; others acknowledge the need to follow the new directions being carved out for literary studies. All,

however, and regardless of their position on this matter, unequivocally express a sense that a moment in the history of the discipline had come to a close.

Marjorie Perloff, in her essay "On Wanting to be a Comparatist," discusses the changes comparative literature started undergoing in the mid-1980s and notes that "in the abstract, the demand for the 'opening of the field' made perfect sense" (133) but that what "seemed at first like a simple and much needed opening of the canon ... effectively spelled the end of Comparative Literature as René Wellek and his colleagues had conceived it [although that] was not immediately clear to those who taught the subject" (134). Thomas G. Rosenmeyer's essay "Am I a Comparatist?," reveals his distance from the practices of today's younger comparatists whose tendency "to philosophize about and generalize from texts, or to use the texts to vindicate preestablished theories, has made the loose and exhaustive study of the primary texts unfashionable" (62). But he acknowledges -- even if he is not pleased -- that comparative literature had become a "laboratory for exploration at the margins" (62). This is also acknowledged, and much more positively, by Thomas M. Greene. In his "Versions of a Discipline" he states that "the growth of cultural studies, the growth of political methodologies, the hegemony of theory, are disturbing developments only if they betoken an indifference to the marvel of the text" (48). Greene's sense of the future of comparative literature might well have proved accurate. According to him, the discipline crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries; it presupposes the mutual reinforcement of theory and interpretation; it transgresses disciplinary barriers without sacrificing the autonomy of the poetic text; it gestures toward the still inchoate field of historical semiotics (48). Two other scholars, Anna Balakian and Gerald Gillespie, offered the most openly critical views of the process of change comparative literature was then already undertaking. Gillespie was particularly upset at the attacks made by multiculturalists who claim that comparative literature is Eurocentric and elitist: "The consequences of the altered cultural climate have been devastating for CL," he writes. Furthermore, he is angry at practitioners who, in his words, "learned to tolerate the most banal assaults on one of the most complex civilizations imaginable (Europe and its extensions)" (171). He calls our attention to the wide acceptance of what he considers another potentially Eurocentric practice: The application of Western critical theories to the analysis of non-Western literatures and cultures and claims that the redefinition of the discipline was, in some institutions, taking place "without the agreement of the experts involved" (172). Anna Balakian's reservations are, for example: "We have arrived on dangerous ground. We are threatened ... with a host of scholars crossing over without union cards to participate through our discipline in the newer concepts of interpretation of literature and the study of sociocultural texts within the context of comparative relationships.... Innovations are what keeps a discipline vigorous and dynamic but each generation cannot reinvent Comparative Literature from scratch" (84). In particular, she worries that comparative literature might be "headed towards a struggle with political correctness" (87), and she fears that the current rejection of Eurocentrism might damage comparative literature's study of relations between literatures if one of them is a literature of a "so-called developing country" (85).

By contrast, senior comparatists such as Mary Louise Pratt believe that the survival of the field entails openness and the tearing apart of boundaries. When she addresses this issue at the 1993 MLA meeting, she urges comparatists to end "fencing" and "vigilance." Unafraid of mixtures, unafraid even of the inevitable disorder that, she admits, must temporarily ensue, her belief that "literature does not lose its power and expressive force because of other things being brought into the picture" was most encouraging for those of us who believed, and continue to believe, that the best possible course for comparative literature is to refrain from censoring the on-going redefinition of its goals and methods in light of current multiculturalist, interdisciplinary practices. The concerns these scholars voice, and others like them share, continued to be echoed in a number of articles and books published since the "Bernheimer Report." The essays in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Ed. Bernheimer), for example, offer an ideal overview of the immediate shape of the debate. In his essay "Must We Apologize?" Peter Brooks criticizes the report for what he saw as a passive acceptance of the devaluation: "Far from believing with the ACLA report that 'the term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study,' I

would hence urge that literature must very much remain our focus, while by no means restricting its dialogic interaction with other discourses and its various contexts" (104). In turn, Jonathan Culler, in "Comparative Literature at Last" points out that treating literature as a discourse among others seems an effective and commendable strategy ... [but] the turn from literature to other cultural productions will not help to differentiate or define comparative literature.... If it resists the rush into cultural studies, comparative literature will find itself with a new identity, as the site of literary study in its broadest dimensions" (117-19). In "Between Elitism and Populism: Whither Comparative Literature," Elizabeth Fox-Genovese carefully addresses the charge of elitism against traditional comparative literature studies and concludes that "Comparative Literature is and should remain an intellectually elitist enterprise, on the proud conviction that intellectual elitism may not be taken as a proxy for social elitism" (142). Marjorie Perloff, in "Literature in the Expanded Field" asks "what is the role of a discipline that trains people for a jobless future?" and emphasizes that "if you don't yet have a position, you won't get one by entering the so-called expanded field of the discipline" (178).

In all, these and other essays in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* reflect a general understanding of the fact that literature is at the center of our field. The disagreement -- and the anxiety -- is not so much about that; rather, it is about whether the expansion of the field of comparative literature would eventually lead to a marginalization of literature, and about how to achieve this "pluralized and expanded contextualization of literary study" (Bernheimer 11). But if there is something comparatists are used to doing, it is precisely to scrutinize their discipline. A steady stream of publications has continued to engage in this dialogue. Gathered in the 1996 volume *Multicomparative Theory, Definitions, Realities* (Nemoianu, ed.), Gerald Gillespie's "The Internationalization of Comparative Literature in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," Virgil Nemoianu's "Globalism, Multiculturalism, and Comparative Literature," and Anne Paolucci's "National Literatures in a Comparative Spectrum: Theory Practice and the Marketplace," among others, continued to explore possible, more conservative paths for the discipline. Also published in 1996, *The Search for a New Alphabet: Literary Studies in a Changing World* (Hendrix et al., eds.) features short essays from comparatists the world over. Among them, Hans Bertens's "From Over-Confidence to Clear and Present Danger," Yves Chevrel's "On the Need for New Comparative Literature Handbooks," Amiya Dev's "Globalization and Literary Value," Earl Miner's "Canons and Comparatists," Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's "Universalism and Cultural Relativism," and Wang Ning's "Cultural Relativism and the Future of Comparative Literature: An Oriental Perspective," offer a more international view of the issues under discussion. Their positions are representative of the range of the debate: Bertens, for example, warns that "where comparatism assumes an underlying common identity for all human beings, multiculturalism assumes irreconcilable differences, an assumption that puts an awkward spoke in the comparatist wheel" (10). In turn, Dev stresses the distinction between internationalism and globalization: "Cultures," he maintains, "are resilient," and "rather than cultures going global, only their surfaces will do so -- the result will be a limited sameness everywhere" (66). He urges comparatists to subvert the hegemony of globalization and to remain committed to "holding up cultural identities" (66). Wang Ning focuses more centrally on the literature versus cultural studies issue and concludes that "it is unnecessary to be afraid of the strong impact of cultural studies" (294).

This overview, while far from exhaustive, clearly indicates that sustained attention to the shaping of comparative literature remains at the heart of comparatists' endeavors (about this, see also, e.g., Foley; Franci; Lorant and Bessière; Tötösy). But alongside work debating what the discipline should be, comparative work has steadily continued. Much of it shows not only a willingness to accept the expanded definition of the field announced in the Bernheimer report, but also that such changes have neither entailed a lowering of standards nor a marginalization of literature. *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature* (Higonnet, ed.), published in 1994, and *Cultural Interactions in the Romantic Age: Critical Essays in Comparative Literature* (Maertz, ed.), published in 1998, are wonderful examples of the renewed energy of comparative work that represents the ideological and multicultural concerns of the present intellectual climate. These volumes demonstrate unequivocally that comparative literature can,

more easily than national literatures, commit itself to the kind of broad understanding of literary studies entailed by contemporary critical thinking. In their cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approaches, the essays in these works show that branching out into cultural studies does offer relevant points of departure for the comparative analysis of literature and culture without posing a threat to more traditional, exclusively textual studies.

While institutionally the fate of comparative literature remains uncertain, the practice of comparatism, the evidence suggests, has been systematically revitalized since the Bernheimer report. Moreover, scholars specifically concerned with the institutional future of comparative literature have begun to offer practical strategies to address the problem. Steven Tötösy's *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, for example, proposes a new approach to the discipline (what he calls the New Comparative Literature) with a view to make its relevance apparent to those outside the academy and, consequently, to facilitate a strengthening of its institutional standing. Tötösy's answer to "the question of the social relevance and legitimization of the study of literature and culture" (262) is the Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture, a method which borrows from the social sciences, and which, his analyses seek to demonstrate, can contribute in no small measure to a revitalization of the study of literature and to an end to the "current marginalization of the humanities" (19). Another new model of comparative literature is advanced by Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time: The Promise of Comparative Literature." This "engaged" model, in place at the authors' home institution, Brown University, has resulted in a thriving department with strong undergraduate and graduate programs (see Bernheimer 80-81). As the authors describe it, the program is at once culture specific and cross-cultural (80), interdisciplinary and engaged with cultural studies (81-82). "Most strikingly," they explain, the program has "developed and pursued an interest in secondary education which is unique for comparative literature programs in the country but which demonstrates the particular pertinence of the comparatist stance for today's educational needs" (82). While the first model (Tötösy) calls for a more radical re-thinking of the practice of comparative literature, and the second for a wider dissemination of "the comparative principles that undergird the discipline" (Ahearn and Weinstein 85), both require an imaginative and flexible understanding of the nature of, and the place for, comparatist work that leaves no room for intellectual rigidity. Indeed, the institutional future of our discipline may well depend on our willingness to overcome such rigidity. It may also, as Tobin Siebers suggests, depend on our efforts to overcome skepticism (Bernheimer 203). But while there are still very few positions available for comparatists, and while there are still problems with our discipline at the institutional level, the vitality of the current scholarship in the field is undeniable, as is the commitment of comparatists to doing.

Note: The present publication is an updated version of Manuela Mourao, "Comparative Literature Past and Present" in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic, and Irene Sywenky. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. 165-72. Publication of the new version is by permission of Honoré Champion.

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