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Comparative Literature and Common Knowledge Against the Ideologies of the Absolute Power of Literature

We may present the argument of the pages that follow in a brief manner: in order to study Literature within interlinguistic and intercultural contexts, Comparative Literature must rid itself of an hypothesis, that of the absolute power of Literature — without this hypothesis, we may not, strictly speaking, speak of Literature of domination, nor of Literature of resistance —, and arm itself with a clear conception of the symbolic status of Literature and of various literatures.¹

I. Literature, Absolute Power of Literature, and Comparative Literature

The absolute power of Literature, as it is thus illustrated by literary works and by literary criticism, may be defined as follows: the diverse literatures may be read in the perspective of the generality of Literature because they are defined, in the West, since the 19th century, in light of their power to interpret all

1 This article has a triple source: the address that we read at the Congress of the International Association of Comparative Literature in Pretoria in August, 2000, when we were President of the Association; our book which will be published by the Presses Universitaires de France in Paris, *Quel statut pour la littérature*— this book deals, amongst other things, with the interpretation and the counter-interpretation of the absolute power of Literature, such as it has been defined in the West over the last two centuries —, and our book which is currently being written, *Lisibilité de la littérature*, which is a reformulation of the theory of Literature in light of a clarification of the notion of the literary symbol and of the practice of literary symbolization.

phenomena.² That is to suppose, in this game of diversity and of generality, that Literature is immanent to discourse, as if it were transcendent: any difference of Literature is ultimately secondary with regards to this game of immanence and transcendence.³ Any type of literary and cultural relationship is conceivable and may be traced within such a game of immanence and transcendence, and has such a game as its condition of existence. Following this logic, we may characterize in a similar way the studies of literary influence, and the theoretico-aesthetic studies, the first category stemming from the French tradition, and the second category from the American tradition. Following this same logic, all the analyses of the power or the resistance of literature *per se* refer to the hypothesis of absolute power, be it in those analyses which are intended to be ideological in nature, as in *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin), be it in that which comes from or under Deconstruction and intertextuality — the diversity of Literature is involved in the hypothesis of a power to affect or not to affect meaning, and in the explicitness of the immanence and the transcendence of Literature, which is expressed by means of the notion of the text (Descombes). In this perspective of an absolute power of Literature, we consider that there are various literatures, which are historically, geographically and culturally arranged. We also consider that this diversity creates a manner of context in itself which justifies or is justified by the diverse types of studies, the diverse methods, whatever may be the characterization which is then proposed regarding this diversity or the general literary context. Conceiving such a context means, indeed, returning to the hypothesis or the idea of an absolute power of Literature, and of the various literatures. This idea of an absolute power of Literature may thus be found in the hypothesis of a *Weltliteratur*, from Goethe to formalist contemporary criticism, although there is no direct link between the latter and the former, and from the principles of Comparative Literature, such as it was developed in France and England in the 19th century, to the cultural studies in Literature today, although the latter intends itself, most often and explicitly, as criticism of the former Comparative Literature.

For the purposes of examination and criticism, we will retain only a few important contemporary orientations: those which, following an indissociable

paradox of the doxy of the absolute power of Literature, are based on the hypothesis that Literature and the various literatures constitute a context in themselves, in which all literatures may therefore be read, and to which all the situations that the world offers may be referred. In this perspective of the absolute power of Literature, the study of various literatures is less concerned with their limits, and with the limit of Literature, than with their relations, which are visible from many points of view, amongst which are found those that the various methods offer, as well as those that unanimously suppose the absolute power of Literature.

The main part of Western literary criticism, over the last two centuries, as well as of studies in Comparative Literature, may be interpreted as the recognition of the absolute power of Literature. In order to consider the contemporary situation and to present the first elements of a demonstration on this point, we will examine the contemporary relationship between literary studies and the humanities. This relationship determines the greater part of the points of view held on Comparative Literature, and is entirely commanded by the ideology of an absolute power of Literature. A few illustrations, common but particularly clear, suffice in order to characterize certain contemporary paradigms of literary studies, and in order to show how they set out the comparability of the various literatures according to the hypothesis of the absolute power of Literature.

The characterization and the linguistic interpretation of Literature are initially technico-poetical characterizations and interpretations; they identify Literature as such by means of the possibilities of the power of language and use this identification as a means of returning to the observation of the absolute power of language. An absolute power of Literature is thus expressed, as well as the relationships between various literatures, according to this absolute power which may be a polemical absolute power. The comparability of the various literatures, through the absolute power which is attributed to Literature, is assigned to language. We must keep in mind, concerning these examples, Giorgio Agamben's demonstration in *Homo Sacer*. There is a way of thinking about Literature, particularly that which is derived from the linguistic characterization of Literature, which merges with a way of thinking based on the law — the authority — of Literature.

The characterization of Literature as fiction, possibly representational in nature, rests without a doubt upon the diverse commentaries on the notion of *mimesis*, and upon forms of technical identification, from the philosophy of speech acts to modal logic. Based on these forms of identification, the

2 The most effective characterization of this movement is to be found in Charles Taylor's book *La liberté des modernes*.

3 For a discussion of the identification of Literature with immanent and transcendent characterization, see Vincent Descombes, *Proust. Philosophie du roman*.

characterization makes Literature into a power of fiction, homogenous in itself. This power justifies any and all references to authors and to History, and sets out a manner of image-world of Literature in which everything may be rearranged, and that allows for a constant comparability of the various literatures. As Marc Augé has observed, in *La Guerre des rêves. Exercices d'ethno-fiction*, such a generalization of the status of fiction perceived in Literature, which is one of the bases of comparability, makes Literature into that which stems both from the realization of fictional singularities, and from a general status of fiction, which would become the substitute for the collective imagination. It is thus that the ultimate realization of the absolute power of Literature and the justification of the comparability of Literature is derived.

The characterization of Literature according to its power of discourse (it is the liberal arrangement of discourse), and according to its power of configuration (it is the configuration of time), without giving rise to the necessity to distinguish between individual or collective time, presents Literature as being the possible representative of any expressed feeling and of any situation, be it individual or collective. Inherent to this characterization are the ignorance of the reciprocal limites of representations, and the ignorance of historicity (Bessière 65); thus, Literature, through its absolute power, is that which always acts out a form of representation, and that which is always perceived as History. We may consider in this light certain critical paradigms, such as those that have been reformulated by means of the ideas developed by Richard Rorty and by Paul Ricoeur. These paradigms redefine the composition of the various literatures according to the double power of the act of representation taken in an almost legal sense: the act of representing individuals, the act of representing the History of individuals. We are thus confronted with the hypothesis of an homogenous power of Literature, which is, in fact, the basis for an identical reading of the various literatures.

We may interpret a certain form of theoretical criticism as being the inevitable consequence of the relations between the humanities and literary studies: the only common discourse which then becomes available or possible is that which deals with the general survey and the articulation of critical view points. An excellent illustration of this may be found in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. In this book, the alliance of Marxism, Deconstruction, History and a certain form of Ethnology sets out both a critical perspective and the continuity of History, and thus, the power of Literature, particularly its critical power,

which is not so much a specific power, visible in certain circumstances, as the absolute power of Literature and of the critical paradigms which accompany it.

The paradox of this type of approach is the following: when literary history, formalist analyses and cultural studies (particularly when they deal with games of power and of alienation) are considered within the framework of the hypothesis of the absolute power of Literature, the nature, the status of the literary object, its difference with regards to other objects, and the difference between literary objects are all taken for granted. The weakening, in a contemporary context, of studies in comparative poetics corresponds exactly to this state of affairs: the design of the absolute power of Literature may designate both the generality and the singularity of Literature. We may also specify, in this perspective, that the hypothesis of comparison and that of the treatment of difference, are paradoxical in themselves: the exist through the hypothesis of the homogeneity and of the power of Literature; they obviously do not exclude the coexistence of older and more recent literary models, with the effects of time-lag and of superimposition that this implies. If Literature contains its own power structure, literary realizations may be interpreted doubly: according to the sequence of their rhetorical figures, and according to their effectiveness. Which means defining the history of Literature as the series of Literature. Which means, independently of the expression of the series, relating each literary realization to the absolute power of Literature. We must then interpret according to this duality and in a manner of continuity, the paradigms and the critical practice of the theses stemming from the Frankfurt School and from Deconstruction, as well as the analyses of discourse which relate the various literatures to power games and to the criticism of these games.

In any case, we observe, in the domain of theory and of what is often a type of methodological syncretism, a game of continuity and of power of Literature which should first be attached to the examination of the limit of Literature and to the examination of the limits of various literatures — the only types of examination which rid themselves of the hypothesis of the absolute power of Literature.

II. Limits and Limitations of Literature

Because it is the study of the relations between various literatures, Comparative Literature finds itself at the centre of a debate which, in fact, never ceases to suppose the absolute power of Literature and of its critical substitute, which

has been described and illustrated, for example, by the reference to literary theory and to literary criticism. Ridding oneself of such an hypothesis and specifying this symbolic status allows for two things: the reinterpretation and the reformulation of the principal orientations in Comparative Literature today, and the characterization of literary studies today. The difficulties that literary studies, and particularly studies in Comparative Literature, may encounter today have to do with the hypothesis of immanence and transcendence, which attributes pertinence *a priori* to Literature, to various literatures, and to any and all literary studies. In order to escape from such a syncretic doxy of Literature, which does not exclude the recognition of the diversity of various literatures, the supposed context, created by various literatures, must be characterized within perspectives more specifically oriented towards anthropology and cognition, thus taking into account the limit of Literature, and the limits of the various literatures, and which allow the treatment of differences outside of the hypothesis of an absolute power of Literature.

The Limit of Literature: the paradox of the hypothesis of the absolute power of Literature is that it supposes a characterization of Literature and that it presents Literature as infinite — the result of this is the discussions of literary discourse and of ordinary discourse, as well as of the identification of Literature with a manner of general writing, as is suggested by Deconstruction. It would be better to examine what might be the specific act of limitation of Literature, insofar as it possesses no guaranteed formal marks of identification. The act of limitation must evidently also be valid for Literature which is formally marked as such. This limit of Literature may be interpreted doubly: firstly, according to the reformulation of what is implied by the game of immanence and of transcendence, which is indissociable from the design of the absolute power of Literature; secondly, according to the reformulation of the fact that Literature is presented as being interpretive of all things and of itself, from the moment that it is identified with language, with its reflexive power and with its power to distribute meaning.

In order to reform the characterization of Literature according to the game of immanence and of transcendence, one may suggest, as we have done, a characterization of literary discourse according to the game of power and of action, and according to the representation of such a game.⁴ The examples of the types of Literature which are particularly illustrative of this game, and which

explicitly define its themes, are science-fiction and heteronymous poetry. Time in science-fiction is not essentially defined as another time, but is presented as the design of the power of time, which is to say the design of the possibility of narrating any and all time and, consequently, any and all History and any and all states of the present. The poetry of the poet who has many names, as Pessoa and Valéry Larbaud have shown, is not essentially concerned with the representation of the poet in many forms, but rather, within the hypothesis of poetry, the design of poetry as the possibility of many poetries. That which constitutes, in these examples, the limit of Literature, is firstly its temporal irrelevancy with regards to discursive realization, with regards to symbolical realization, including its own forms of realization — written under certain conditions, presented in a certain form or without form, etc. The rupture of the figure of the absolute power of Literature thus appears: the explicit realizations of Literature do not establish either the immanence or the transcendence of Literature. Thus appears as well the obvious fact that Literature is that which indicates both existing discourse and the possibility of discourse — which no existing discourse may represent. What limits Literature in terms of identification, is thus the fact that it represents the power of expression — a constant and shared power, which makes Literature into the anthropological figure of the power of speech, radically distinct from and all discursive realizations. To define thus the limit Literature amounts to identifying Literature as an act of liberation with regards to discourse as a whole and with regards to symbolical construction as a whole, even if it be written and legible in a manner which may be entirely common, that is to say according to the symbolism and the pertinence which also belong to discourse produced within the social framework. The most effective way of linguistically expressing the limit of Literature is to reconsider the contemporary debate on Literature and discursive acts. This debate is directly linked, through its enterprise of characterizing writing, to the state of equality between performative and autoreferential literature: this amounts to indicating that Literature in itself realizes the absolute power of language. It may also be said that the debate on the status, the value and the law of the performative may be re-characterized within the framework of a debate on the duality of power and of action. The limit of Literature is to be found in the limit that this game of power and of action puts to the distribution of meaning, or to the refusal to distribute meaning: the limit of Literature is to be found in the fact that it designates the ability to speak and to write (Bessière 169). This is its ideological, symbolical and pragmatic limit insofar as literary writing is thus deprived of an

4 For a discussion of the power of action in the contemporary philosophical context, see Paolo Vimo, *Il ricordo del presente: saggi sul tempo storico*.

accomplished authority; this is also the formal limit of all literary writing: its form cannot be a lesson or a law in itself, because it supposes the existence of another form by the fact that it represents the ability to speak and to write. Let us repeat that this fact identifies the characterization of the limit of Literature with the possibility of free speech.

The Reciprocal Limits of Literature: these limits are expressed in national terms and in cultural terms, or in other words, in terms of identity, which do not exclude the theses and the themes which are converse to this type of definition — hybridization, migration, the Other, etc. These limits may thus be observed. They may be analyzed according to the games of confrontation and of exchange, of power and of alienation. The game of identity and of hybridization, which is today the usual game of criticism, may be defined typologically as the game of the closure of identity and as the game of the acceptance of the Other in an undecidable manner. This is expressed through the terms of Deconstruction (the unconditional acceptance of the undecidable otherness of the Other), or in the recognition of hybridization, which supposes the recognition of the criteria of hybridization (Kearney 95-98). Let us remark that this critical typology, be it in its most contemporary formulations, is the direct heir to the notions of the nation, of identity, and of individuality, as they were constituted in the 19th century. Expressing the reciprocal limits of various literatures amounts to pondering — without entering into a discussion of the concept of the nation —, over, firstly, the manner in which individual works fit — or are lodged by criticism, or by tradition — into a collective framework, identified with a nation, a nation-state or a culture, and secondly over the manner in which this process correlates with the external world. The paradox here is that the definition of the collective framework is initially formal in nature, before being illustrated by the singularities which may be related to it. To express the nation, to express the nation-state, to express culture, as entities, is to express the fact that over and above their empirical determinations, these entities are symbolical poles. These symbolical poles show how society is; they show society as being outside of itself; and, through this, they point towards an outside state from which society defines itself. This habitual definition of the national, cultural, or social entity as a symbolical entity allows us to reformulate the reciprocal limits of various literatures and of the entities to which they belong, based on the habitual characterizations of these entities, be it with regards to the undecidable and to hybridization. Considering a society or a culture as a symbolical pole means recognizing a double movement belonging to it: the exteriorization of that which is social goes together with its

interiorization (Beckouche 67). To express the reciprocal limits of various literatures is thus not to express, essentially, their territories, their common points, their differences, their polemics, their exchanges, but rather the way in which, insofar as they are prone to national or cultural identification, they constitute this game of exteriorization and of interiorization. The game of exteriorization is both a game of the expression of Literature towards the exterior and of the inevitable recognition of the exterior, and this movement is itself a movement of interiorization. The relational game of various literatures and cultures is not necessarily a game that places identity against identity, or identities against identities (by which we would return to the typology which has been indicated above), but the following, explicit, game: in its very moment of explicit definition, culture becomes the external expression of its own society and, thus, the extraneous expression of the society or of the culture, and the expression willed by that which is outside of the society or of the culture. The transposition of this fact in literary terms, in terms of literary works, is easily expressed. In order for it to fit within the cultural and symbolical game of its own culture, of its own nation, the literary work must present itself as belonging to two classes, or to two types of symbolization, or of discourse — those which, on the one hand, represent the process of exteriorization; those which, on the other hand, represent the process of interiorization. This creates the identity of the literary work. This duality also situates the work with regards to otherness: the fact that the work may be of two types, or of two classes, belonging to a movement of interiorization and of exteriorization of its own symbolism and of cultural symbolism, is what makes the work, at the same time, into a relationship with what it does not manifestly designate, with what it does not manifestly belong to, with what constitutes its limit. This means, in fact, situating Literature within a double movement: as though it were, in cultural terms, seeking a pertinent level of collective identity—which expresses everything simply and practically through the search for a form of symbolization which would be suited to its own milieu. Literature never ceases to create otherness, to create the Other — it may constitute itself as an Other —, and, through this, it is led to confrontation with the obviousness of meaning created by others, whether they be individuals or communities. It is necessary to understand that in the eyes of its own culture, Literature defines identity and otherness as being relative, and that in the eyes of another culture, and of the observation of its limits, it acts in the same manner. This means defining the limits of various cultures as forms of mediation, without having to substantiate different identities (Auge 1994).

III. Principal Orientations of Comparative Literature

The ambiguities of the creation of the context constituted by various literatures, are apparent insofar as this context is not dissociated from the hypothesis of the absolute power of Literature, within the principal orientations of Comparative Literature. These orientations are: *synchronic readings of diverse literary periods*, of diverse linguistic areas, of diverse cultures; *literary and cultural histories of diverse regions*; studies relative to questions of identity and of cultural or literary transfers; *metacriticism*,⁵ which is without a doubt the name which should be given to literary theory. I will elaborate upon the position of each of these types of study in order to define the problem created by the constitution of a context according to the absolute power of Literature, and I will rapidly characterize, in each case, a solution to this problem, based on the indications which have been given for the characterizations of the limits and of the limitations of various literatures.

A. Synchronic Readings

In dealing with synchronic readings of diverse literary periods, of diverse cultures, of diverse linguistic areas, the question, within a perspective which avoids the design of the absolute power of Literature, is not, essentially, to reach conclusions of a positive or empirical character, but rather to develop categories which give a common understanding of these periods or cultures. Outside of the search for these common categories, the synchronic readings lead, for the most part, to placing the literary entities within the framework of dominant characteristics — this is the very tradition of European Comparative Literature — which suggest, in fact, a unification of the field of "synchrony" and lend to Literature, and to the various literatures, such a power of unification. Two examples, that of realism and that of modernism, may be considered in light of the observations concerning the limits and the limitations of Literature.

When we speak of a realist model in Literature in the 19th century, we speak, in fact, and quite evidently, of several different aesthetics and realist realizations. In order to transcend the problem of modelization according to a set of dominant characteristics, it may be said: realism explicitly expresses a

given culture or a given society as being outside of itself, at the same time that it arranges the cognitive function of this expression, or in other words, the interiorization of this expression. The synchronic comparison of diverse types of realism consists in examining the diverse degrees of realization and of relationship in this game of expression and in this game of cognition, as well as their symbolical functions in the eyes of the various societies or cultures which are being considered, and the involvement of other cultures in this game of expressivity — an involvement which is necessary because this game is a game of exteriorization.

When we deal with modernism, we deal with a literary movement, definable in a relatively simple manner, in historical terms, but also witness to multiple literary realizations, whose concordances, formal or otherwise, are not manifest. The term "modernism" identifies the dominant critical characteristic with an aesthetico-historical characterization — an historical moment and various "modern" aesthetics. In light of the characterizations of the limits and of the limitations of various literatures, these various literatures and the various modernist aesthetics appear as being literatures which play explicitly, on the one hand, on the discursive representation of the game of power and of action, and, on the other hand, on the game of symbolic expressivity of a cultural whole. A common reading, for example, of Joyce's *Ulysses* and of the principal realizations of Surrealism, is possible without having this common reading suppose either the identification of a dominant critical characteristic, or strict comparisons. The interior monologue and the importance, in Surrealist poetics and works, of the unforeseen and of the subconscious, may be held to be *representations of the game of power and of action* — the interior monologue, a manner of discursive action, supposes the psychic power of the unforeseen. This game of power and of action is commensurate, in the works, to a movement of symbolical exteriorization and interiorization which affects public cultural entities — this movement is that of the interior monologue, and is also that of the assimilation of the unforeseen, which, as we know, for the Surrealists, is part of social or cultural symbolism. Hypothetically, it might thus be said: modernism puts explicitly into place the characterization of literary works according to the game of power and of action, in order to put into place a game of cultural expressivity, which supposes explicit recourse to the representation of the game of power and of action, which is itself presented as representation of free speech.

⁵ This is the current disposition of the discipline, such as it may be defined from what I have witnessed within the AILC/ ICLA.

B. Cultural and Literary Histories of Diverse Regions

In dealing with *cultural and literary histories of diverse regions*, the question here is to transcend the strict national divisions of regions in order to understand literary histories as histories of regional entities. These regional entities determine the outline of new critical, cultural and sociological paradigms. These literary histories are indispensable because reality and our perception of regions change. This may be noticed with regards to the History of any continent. In an historical perspective, the play on paradigms is the list of the manners in which a region, in itself, has developed its sense of identity and of otherness (it is necessary to refer back to the definition of these terms which has just been given). These paradigms are, in fact, without a doubt, relative to political, cultural or linguistic entities; they are relative to states and to nations which are created and dissolved in the course of History. They are also relative to the manners in which a given region and its entities have created their identity and their otherness, doubly: according to each sub-entity, according to each regional entity, whose characterization is itself historically variable. This means invalidating two hypotheses concerning studies of regional Literature: firstly, that the various literatures of a region constitute a context in themselves and consequently may be studied according to their similarities and their differences — which supposes a common context —; secondly, that they are congruent to that which is observed regarding the political and administrative organization of the region and of its sub-entities. Such hypotheses imply ignorance of the fact that firstly, the idea of the region supposes a doxy of the region, which is a constant geopolitical and symbolical negotiation of its identities and of its otherness, and that secondly, the same is true of the various literatures associated with the region. This implies, as well, ignorance of the fact that any given literature is a form of play on its own internal limits — the minimal duality of its own identity according to two classes or two types — and on its own external limits. The context exists through this duality and through these limits. This amounts to underlining the following point: considering various literatures within a regional context, which is itself subject to diverse definitions, comes down to questioning, explicitly, the external nature which such literatures recognize within themselves, as well as the external nature which they designate, and to examining how this recognition influences, for each individual literature, the form that it gives to its own otherness within the context of a given region. The region is both that to which the literature belongs, and that which represents its external nature and its exteriorization.

The definition of this external nature and of this exteriorization changes as do the definitive paradigms which are attributed to the region. This definition also changes as does the characterization of the symbolical pole constituted by the region: would we say of Europe, today, that it is still essentially Roman, or would we define it as being the region of the separation of the temporal and of the spiritual (Brague)? It is clear that this is the source of the play on the double identity of literary works, and of the diverse characterizations of symbolical exteriority, which is to say of symbolical otherness.

These remarks have essential consequences. In the framework of regional studies, the diverse literatures must not be conceived as constituting, when added together, the literature of the region. On the contrary, a regional study of literature always brings us back to the *mutual* otherness of the various literatures, and to their ways of appropriating these forms of otherness. In other words, for any given literature, its source is external. We can thus speak of a European literary history which would have as many versions as there have been geopolitical patterns in Europe, as there have been manners in which Europe has conceived and recognized its sources and what is outside of it, as there have been variants on that which would be the definition of the identity of Europe. Such a literary history would be, in fact, the History of the ways in which each individual literature makes of this external nature a characteristic which it may finally claim. Such a history would be, as well, the History of the recognition that the diverse countries and the diverse literatures have had of Europe, and of the symbolical pole that it may have constituted.

C. Identities and Cultural Transfers

In dealing with *identities and cultural and literary transfers*, and in a general manner, with *cultural studies* in a literary framework, the constant hypothesis, in these two types of studies whose perspectives are in contrast, is double: they suppose a reciprocal equivalency of literature and of culture — through which literary textualism and anthropological and ethnological textualism join together⁶ —; they suppose, in an equally constant manner, that the relations between various cultures and literatures are an unequal relation, as though the characterization of an individual literature or culture were expressed, in the first place, not

6 A common thesis in anthropology today. In our perspective, it is one of the elements of the confirmation of this general law and of the absolute power of Literature. For a classic discussion, see Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*.

according to its limits, but according to the relationship with an Other. In this perspective, we understand that the reference to cultural blending is most often presented as a reference to a lack of identity, composite without doubt. We understand, as well, that the various literatures are not considered according to the duality of class or type-oriented relations, and of relations of implication. Within a strict logic of cultural studies, given that the limit of Literature and the limitations of various literatures have not been set out as they have been here, the proximity of various literatures is most often expressed according to a form of constancy and of near pathology of otherness.⁷

There is nevertheless a lesson that cultural studies in the literary field should take from anthropology and from ethnology. The question of cultural identity is that of the relationship between an individual and the diverse communities of which he or she is or is not a part.⁸ The identity crisis, which is often mentioned in the same breath as the question of identity, is only, in fact, a manner of designating an imbalance between the discourse on identity, thus favoured, which establishes the relationships which have just been described, and the discourse on otherness, on the relation to the Other, to the entirely Other, constituent of all individual and collective identity. To put it another way, we must clearly distinguish, in an intercultural study, the internalization of the relationship to the Other in a given culture, and the manner in which this culture symbolizes, for example by religion, its relationship to the exterior, and to the entirely Other. It is easy to show that the European imperial model entails, from a cultural point of view, an easy acceptance of internal otherness, at the same time that it represents, through the Christian sacred order, the entirely Other as being commensurate to its space (Beckouche 131). In other words, we must characterize, on the one hand, a potentially polemical space for culture and for the various cultures, which is inclusive of the Other, and of its representation, and on the other hand a space for sharing of the Same and of the Other — this space for sharing is, of course, a determination of the polemical space, but it is also the limit and the doxy of limits which a culture recognizes for itself. This is conveyed in literary and

cultural terms: the various literatures and cultures create their limitations through this doxy of otherness which is constituent of the symbolical armour of the various literatures and cultures; the various literatures and cultures create their common space from the relationships between an individual, a culture and the diverse communities of which the individual or the culture are or are not a part. The idea of being or not being a part of indicates explicitly that the common space that the various literatures may recognize for themselves is not necessarily an homogeneous space, and that it may be a space for exclusion. This space must not be confused with the space constituted according to the symbolical limit of otherness. We may easily see this game of two spaces in the contemporary francophone literatures of Africa: the outline of sharing according to the internal figure of otherness is constant and linked to historical, colonial, post-colonial, cultural and symbolical facts, as well as to the larger field of colonization and post-colonization, or to the whole of the African field. We might thus see, through the observation of transfers and of the outline of the various literatures, a group of literary works perceived according to a double type and an implication of their external nature. There is also the outline of the symbolical limit created by any and all forms of otherness, and which may be expressed by diverse allegories, that of the land which is radically Other — for example in the *Terrasses d'Orsol* by Mohammed Dib —, and that of the otherness of reality, considered beyond all the figures of cultural transfers, and which is thus the figure of the interdependance of all the cultural and symbolical spaces. Through this, there is the outline of Literature as that which is determined and limited by all otherness, and the indication of the relativization of the representation of the intercultural through Literature — in which we must see the denial of the absolute power of Literature. In this process, we rediscover the notation of the entirely Other and of its limit, taken as mediations of their own identity, and as means of bringing up to date, for the culture under consideration, the internal game of identity and of otherness relative to one another.

D. Metacriticism

In dealing with *metacriticism*, we know that currently the trend is not necessarily towards developing the core of literary theory. This does not mean that we must abandon all metacriticism and all theory. This means that we must explain how metacriticism and literary theory, through the construction of their critical

7 For an example of this type of interpretation, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* and for the denunciation of such a pathology, see Jean Baudrillard, *La Transparence du mat: Essai sur les phenomena extremes*.

8 For an example of the redefinition of those questions which are attached to cultural identity, see Alain Touraine, *Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble? Egaux et différents*.

models, have made Literature and the literary object limitless, within a sort of faithfulness to the design of the absolute power of Literature.

The miming of the absolute power of literature is expressed exemplarily through the construction of a critical model and through thought about the model, which are equivocated with their own ends. These acts of construction and of thought become a reflexive movement which ends up designating only itself. This is illustrated exemplarily by all the Deconstructionist theses, which express the generality of their demonstration through its infinite nature, and which set out its pertinence according to the constant possibility of the attribution or the lack of attribution of meaning. This double possibility defines a power of criticism that is congruent with the absolute power attributed to Literature. The continuity of the reflexive movement exempts its authors from considering the limit of Literature and the limitations of various literatures. This is why the following notions are indissociable from Deconstructionist literary criticism: the notion of (general) writing which amounts to the notation of an indifferentiation of Literature, and the notion of equality amongst literary objects, whatever may be their place or their time, with regards to this critical posture. The construction of a critical model leads in this case to the reification of the model.

Such a process of reification and that which it implies — the miming of the absolute power of Literature, and the illimitation of the literary object — are still evident within the frameworks of historical and of formal theorization of Literature. In an historical perspective, we must mention the critical models which put into practice the notions of power and of alienation and which lead to the reification of these notions. We might multiply our examples; we will retain only one. The identification of modernity with the power of reason alone — which becomes the figure of all power and therefore designates all human beings, seen in the light of rationality as alienated beings — makes us the heirs and cognitive *slaves* to the 18th century.⁹ This process of reification of rationality makes it difficult to reflect upon cognitive, aesthetic and literary rationality today. This form of criticism of rationality, when it becomes a medium of literary criticism, is, in fact, a false generalization in the sense that it does not consider the diverse realizations of rationality, and is also a manner of making Literature limitless to the extent that it transforms Literature and the various literatures into the by-products of power or of counter-power, without having these relationships trace the functional sharing processes of the various

literatures. We may also notice that the principles which define these analyses are contradictory, particularly in the extensions of critical theory. Suffice it to underline that the criticism of rationality, expressed in the name of its victims, has as its presupposition the hypothesis of progress in History. This hypothesis of progress is itself, for this precise reason, indissociable from a doxy of rationality — that which is refused or criticized within the analytical perspectives which have just been mentioned. It is easy to underline that this is what creates the contradiction in Adorno's philosophy — the criticism of the rationality of the Enlightenment, the criticism of oppression which supposes that progress has meaning. This contradiction explains why criticism may express, in all cases, both good and evil, both power and alienation, and why it transforms implicitly or explicitly Literature and the various literatures into that which shows the loss of goodness or that which designates a future based on goodness. The congruency with the recognition of the absolute power of Literature is manifest: criticism is, implicitly or explicitly, an evaluative absolute power; it lends to Literature the same absolute power. This question of the absolute power attributed to Literature — be it ideological absolute power or critical absolute power — leads, within a single critical work, to ambiguities: an example is Edward Said — Aijaz Ahmad has underlined the fact that critical power attributed to Literature may lead to a false rhetoric of otherness and of liberation: false because it is entirely based upon the absolute power of Literature (Ahmad).

It is difficult to deny the interest and the importance of literary formalism, of the approach which considers Literature *per se*. But we must be aware that formalism, insofar as it has been reified, leads either to positivism — what I call, for example, the positivism of literary narratology — or to subjectivism — once the formal remarks have been made, Literature apprehends itself subjectively. Gerard Genette is an excellent illustration of this double movement, which lands in the dead-end of subjectivism. It will suffice to mention, on the one hand, his *Figures III*, and on the other hand, his essay on aesthetics, *L'Oeuvre de l'art*. This form of implication of a *per se* approach towards Literature and of aesthetic subjectivism results from the identification of Literature with phenomena of language. This type of identification, although it is presented as being the means to formal description, has two consequences. On the one hand, it leads to the indifferentiation of Literature — Gerard Genette's remark (discourse only imitates discourse) suggests this —; on the other hand, because of this very indifferentiation, it restores to the subject the right to make a decision on Literature. This takes us back to the duality which

⁹ For an approach to this problem, see Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity*.

characterizes the absolute power of Literature, transposed within the field of formalist and aesthetic criticism: the absolute power of Literature is such that it involves itself in all discourse; this absolute power is indissociable from the absolute power of the subject, who may make a decision on Literature, because he or she is involved in the game of immanence and of transcendence of language.

The answer to these internal contradictions of metacriticism and of contemporary literary theory is in a double characterization of Literature according to its own limit and its limitations with regards to other forms of discourse, such as these have been defined above. Literary discourse is both discourse considered for itself and discourse which exposes the game of power and of action: it preserves the implicit designation of a possibility — through which it may not be reduced to its semiotic status, and through which it designates the possibility of all other discourse. Literary discourse is the practice of one's own symbolization; it is also the discourse which designates the limit which any and all otherness creates, as well as the symbolism that it thus constitutes.

The first part of this double characterization — the representation of power and of action — leaves a prerogative to all that is said of poetics, of formalism, of the linguistic identity of Literature, and does not define the relationship of Literature to reality through a game of knowledge — all the realist hypotheses —, or through a game of non-knowledge (this is what happens when we hold to be antimimetism the discourse which only imitates other discourse). This amounts, in both cases, to rejecting the representation of the game of power and of action. The alliance of these two elements — formalism, and the relationship to reality, interpreted as a relationship to knowledge, or as a relationship, for example, of ignorance — was one of the characteristics of the absolute power which Literature attributed to itself: when we conclude that there is knowledge, or lack of knowledge, we conclude that there is a power of categorization of Literature. In the hypothesis of the linguistic representation of power and of action, literary discourse is understood as being the discourse which is identifiable only as itself, and as the discourse which suggests all other discursive possibilities. In the perspective of a reformulated critical theory or of a redefinition of the critical rationality of Literature, this point is important: if literary discourse calls less for discussion of its autonomy or its lack of autonomy, of its power to assert or not to assert, than for the observation that the equivocacies of literary discourse exist through the context of indetermination that it traces within itself and which is

the very representation of the power of action, this literary discourse appears as being the representation of all that is possible with regards to the action that it constitutes — it is a written realization — and with regards to any and all representations that it may produce. We see in this both the design of the critical power of literary discourse and the certainty, in some manner, of its lack of power — it cannot present itself as being completely defined, by its own standards or by the standards of a given form of knowledge. Paolo Virno's remarks, which clarify this lack of determination, are useful here: literary discourse might be considered as that discourse which will always set out, through the representation of power and of action, this incompletely defined entity, which may not be confused, symbolically, with the unadulterated "white space" of our origins — according to a thematics of Deconstruction — nor with the figure of some original chaos, but with the design of the power of time in all time, and with the design of the possibility of any and all qualitative transfers.

Such perspectives and emendations may be illustrated by certain aspects of contemporary thought on the novel. The fact that the novel is defined as a narrative game without strict characterization thus takes on new relevance. This fact may be interpreted less as a form of chosen indetermination or formal deconstruction, than as the textual figure of the game of power and of action. We could thus outline, for the modern era, from Goethe's *Bildungsroman* to the contemporary novel which plays on collective and individual time frames — for example, Carlos Fuentes' *Cristóbal Nonato* — the novel of the reciprocity of time, of the reciprocity of the subject and of History, of the subject and of the world, because, in the figure, implicit or explicit, of power and of action, and in the exchange of the design of the indeterminate and of that of the determinate, the novel expresses both the figures of the limits of all beginning and of all continuity, of all designs of reality and of the subject, and of their mutual integration. This suggests that the novel is the genre which exchanges the positions and the functions of the subject and of reality, of the subject and of the object, to infinity — this is the characterization of the liberty of discourse.

The second part of this characterization—reciprocal limits of the various literatures and of the various cultures — leads us to understand that there is no constitution of a literary symbol other than through the hypothesis of another symbolical pole. This possibility is regarded as a necessity for two reasons: there cannot be a doxy of man alone, as there cannot be a doxy of the group alone, or of the community alone, be it that of cultural transfer; there cannot be an

homogenous doxy of the universality of the human community. One of the characteristics of Literature, which recognizes its absolute power, is to present, erroneously, the alliance of the constitution of the literary symbol and of the symbolical pole as stemming from the subject of from the group, who express themselves, for example, through cultural transfers. This same metacriticism interprets the indissociable nature of expressivity and of the aims of the Other as a power of the subject or as an un-power — a thematic un-power of the erasure of the subject —, or as a transfer of this indissoluble nature to language. In any case, this means rejecting the following necessity, constituent of the symbol: to designate the limit inherent in all otherness. This situation with regards to contemporary metacriticism may be interpreted as characteristic of those literatures and of those critics who think of themselves, be it in a pluricultural framework, as having ended their juridical autonomy and, in consequence, as setting out their own laws — which amounts to saying that Literature, in the exposition of intertextuality or of interculturalness, may set out its own closure, and the representation of all things according to its laws. We might treat the works of Salman Rushdie as an illustration of this.

In the same perspective, the duality of formalist thinking and of subjectivist thinking, which is at work within the characterization of Literature *per se*, in other words, within the characterization of its own limits, refers entirely to the refusal of the representation of power and of action. In this, we see the refusal of the tracing, attached to the symbol, of the necessary symbolical limit created by the Other. In this alliance of formalism and of aesthetic subjectivism, there is the implicit definition of Literature as being that which has value according to any and all discourse and any and all subjects, and, consequently, may not be articulated with regards to any other thing, nor opposed to any other thing, but goes together with all things and with anyone, with no further play of discrimination.

A way of restating the limit of this absolute power of Literature, expressed largely by contemporary metacriticism, consists in examining in what manner Literature may be considered as designating an Other symbolical pole, although it seems to play only upon its own formal identification or upon its own identification with language, or upon the extension of its own discursive model to all discourse — in this, we may perceive a manner of understanding intertextuality.

That is to say, to begin with, a manner of reconsidering formalist thought on Literature. The paradox of this type of thought is that it expresses both the assertion and the loss of Literature — in language and in common discourse.

This double game may also be understood through a manner of reversion of this observation: Literature gives of all discourse an interpretation according to the designs of Literature. We must thus express, not so much the confusion between literary discourse and common discourse, as this fact: literary discourse designates common discourse as being capable, as being the power of its own symbolical assertion, which might be made autonomous in the same way as literary discourse. We thus obtain a means of analysis and of continual comparison of those literatures which are said to be realistic, and of that which may be held as being their contemporary variants, the minimalist literatures: the recognition of that which is common and the possible identification of Literature with that which is common is the means of constituting, in Literature, the "any and all Other" as a symbolical pole. This amounts to considering the Literature of realia of the last two centuries, not according to a game of knowledge and of a manner of desublimization of knowledge — this is literary minimalism — but according to a game of the constitution of all reality whose dominant consideration is the possibility of a symbolical pole of otherness.

That is to say, in conclusion, a manner of reconsidering the absolute power of Literature, which furnishes an explanation and the laws of the intercultural and what it wishes to say about reality: there is no literary element which has not already been schematized by Literature: there is no reality which has not already been schematized by Literature — that is why Literature may explicitly represent the intercultural. But this is not necessarily to be understood according to the absolute power of Literature. This may also be understood as the ability that a given literary realization has to schematize reality itself, Literature itself — that is to say, to put into practice, through the mediation of the reader, reality itself, Literature itself, designated in another way. This may also be stated in the following way: to constitute and recognize symbolical poles in the form — and by means — of literary invention. Literary invention has value neither in itself nor as the occasion for representation: it is literally the invention of the Other within reality, insofar as Literature exposes its power of schematization. The invention of the Other means: the constitution and the recognition of the Other as a symbolical pole. Carlos Fuentes defines this power of Literature with regards to the Quichotte : "The permanent lesson in Cervantes is that creation needs tradition in order to exist: Don Quichotte is born of his preliminary reading; but the tradition may not continue without creation: Don Quichotte is only real because he is not to be found in reality. This is why, because he adds something to reality, he is a reality which is

stronger than any other" (Fuentes 1992, 337). This statement may easily be commented upon: the addition which is the Quichotte is a manner of interpreting reality and of designating it as otherness. In this case, it is because Literature presents itself as a deciding factor that it is the means of designation the symbolical pole that all other reality constitutes.¹⁰ To designate Literature within modernity, within a European context, is thus no longer to designate Literature that creates its own image, Literature which identifies itself with a power of knowledge. It is to designate Literature that, knowing its own invention and its aptitude for inducing interpretation of all things according to its own means of expression, makes this game into the means of designating constant symbolical limits: those of all human reality, near or far.

IV. Mutual Knowledge of Various Literatures, Mutual Knowledge of Comparative Literature: Methodological and Cognitive Questions

One of the characteristics of the four themes of research which I have characterized is that, once their perspectives have been corrected as I have done, they deal with Literature based on its own limits, with the various literatures based on their own limits, with cultural identities based on their own limits, and with critical theses based on their own limits. This game of the limits of the various literatures, of the various cultures, and of critical hypotheses, may not therefore be confused with any form of generality of Literature, with any inter-literature, inter-culture or inter-criticism. (The practices which are related to these forms of generality and of "inter" — action often correspond to a manner of critical syncretism.) This game is commensurate to the observation which has just been made with regards to the various literatures: in their differences, the various literatures are a form of mutual knowledge determined by the meaning of what is the practice of symbolization: to recognize or to constitute the Other symbolical pole.

The method of Comparative Literature is defined in consequence: that is to say, to construct, in terms of knowledge, the limit of Literature and the limits of the various literatures, in such a way that these constructions be descriptive and explicative of the differences concerning the various literatures or concerning

the common knowledge of the various literatures — that which is attached to the recognition or to the constitution of the Other symbolical pole.

Thus, characterizing Comparative Literature as the tracing of the limits of various literatures and therefore, as the tracing of their community, and of their common knowledge — they only derive meaning from the double orientation, attached to symbolization, from their discourse, and from their mutual implications —, creates, in terms of literary studies, a *specific cognitive problem*; how may we define the validity of Comparative Literature with regards to its objects, the validity of its constructions with regards to the literary contexts which it retains?

The construction of interliterary, intercultural and interlinguistic critical models has no other function than to designate the limits of our fields of knowledge, the intersections of our cognitive environments, and to propose the figure of common critical knowledge which allows us to refer back to the diverse literatures in a specific manner — according to the designation of the common knowledge that these literatures constitute — the common knowledge which is constituted by the knowledge of the limits and of the limitations of the various literatures.

The validation of Comparative Literature is defined in consequence: the context which validates the constructions of Comparative Literature is that of the limits of the various literatures and of the various cultures, and that of the recomposition of these limits, according to the games of symbolization of the various literatures. The validation of Comparative Literature is thus made possible through the analogy which exists between the intersection of the cognitive environments that it creates and the common knowledge that the various literatures set out through their own differences.

Thus, it is not a question of validating Comparative Literature through a form of positivism, nor of denying its validity because it cannot deal with its objects in such a strict manner as does a more localized literary study. It is a question of validating it through its own power of contextualization and through the broadest coordination of literary studies that it consequently implies. I am giving a broader expression to what I just stated: that is to say, to allow each critical construction to interpret the greatest number of literary contexts; to allow the diverse contexts to constitute a questioning of the common knowledge which the various critical constructions and Comparative Literature comprise; to allow our critical models, which result from this movement, to distinguish, through inference, new contexts — as "broad as possible. This amounts to establishing the movement of Comparative

10 For the notion of schematization, applicable to Art and to Literature, as well as the power of mediation to designate all otherness, see Alain Roger, *Nus et paysages. Essai sur la fonction de l'art*.

Literature as the equivalent of the movement of recomposition of the various literatures according to their play on symbolization and on limitation.

This methodological characterization and this cognitive justification of Comparative Literature allow us to confront certain literary, cultural and contemporary realities. Suffice it to express the reality of globalization and its opposite, which is just as real as globalization — the multiplication of nation-states and the multiplication of assertions of identity, often indissociable from geographical and cultural spaces. This simply means observing that the hypothesis of a possible state of cultural homogeneity is not possible without the multiplicity of the limits of various cultures and of various literatures. There is a literary translation of all this. Suffice it to think of Africa and of what, in these conditions, and African Comparative Literature might be. I might give many other examples, but I will mention only one: it is clear that Comparative Literature which deals with European literatures must be partially redefined in light of the fact that Europe has become a community and will perhaps become a federation. Geopolitics may thus suggest another outline of the mutual limits of the various literatures. Be it a question of Africa or of Europe, for example, this reorganization of our fields of knowledge is a reorganization which does not abolish the former fields of knowledge. This reorganization is essentially the search for new possibilities of contextual readings: to trace the articulation of literary contexts today, within the paradox that I have indicated — globalization and multiplication of nation-states, nation-states and multiplication of the forms of regional recognition within nation-states — in such a way that these limits be mutually comprehensible, and without initiating a process or reification of globalization, nor of reification of difference. From this movement emerges the critical function of Comparative Literature — of the common knowledge that the various literatures imply through their play on limits, as the relativization of any and all reification and of any and all cognitive and cultural power, without identifying this critical function with a critical absolute power.

V. Comparative Literature and Literary Studies

In expressing a critical function of Comparative Literature, I am obviously expressing a critical function of literary studies in general. This critical function is obtained when we reject the ideology of the absolute power of Literature and when we define the use of uncertainty within the literary disciplines. A brief commentary, beginning with a reference to Derrida, will be of use. Derrida

once said that Comparative Literature is an uncertain discipline, which was, of course, a condemnation of Comparative Literature. The condemnation is strange, coming from someone who has developed a philosophy of the undecidable. But perhaps he reproached Comparative Literature with making bad decisions — for example, with constituting near-essences of Literature. We must recognize that Comparative Literature has felt free to reify its objects — be it through thematic studies or through the abuse of references to the nation, which has often turned into a sort of nationalist criticism.

It is nonetheless worthwhile to reconsider the notion of uncertainty in order to contrast it with the specific notion of the undecidable. Comparative Literature is uncertain if it dedicates itself to reifying its objects and its methods, because it then misses out on the play on limits of the various literatures and on the intersections of cognitive contexts. Comparative Literature is undecidable, not in the sense in which Deconstruction uses the term, but in the sense that Comparative Literature knows that it cannot, particularly in the context of the play on relations of type, of class, and on relations of implication, construct complete models of the various literatures and of the various cultures — if only models which outline each type of literature according to a form of duality — that of power and of action, that of the identity and the otherness which are mutually relative in a given culture — and according to a relation of implication with the Other symbolical pole. Its efficiency is thus entirely in this undecidability, which is a dynamic undecidability. That is to say, an undecidability which never ceases to revive the observation of the limit of Literature, of the limits of the various literatures, of the intersection of cognitive contexts, and, through this, the cooperation which mutual knowledge supposes. Comparative Literature needs neither radical undecidability nor the reification of fields of knowledge and of literary and cultural objects.

Against the diverse forms of positivism and against the diverse forms of reification that I have described, against a hierarchical vision of the various literatures — for example, that of domination or of resistance to domination — against the reflexive movement that corresponds to a *per se* approach to Literature, which in the final analysis closes the reflexive game and leads to paradoxes, against the infinite reflexivity of Deconstruction which undoes the relevancy of any and all contextualization of an analysis, we must say that each literature, each culture, each literary object, and each cultural object constitutes a fixed point, and that working with and from these fixed points, we may vary our critical models. The expression "fixed point" refers to "on-monotonous

reading" which is a part of logic. A fixed point is a value which logical and cognitive operations cannot alter, whatever may be the norms of the operation. In comparing literary and cultural objects to fixed points, the diversification of critical models neither ignores nor alters these objects. It designates these objects according to their limits, according to the play on relations of type and of class, and on relations of implication, and refers them to the cognitive environment which we trace. This cognitive environment makes visible the very game of the limit of Literature and of the limits of the various literatures, that these last create amongst themselves. This type of designation and the non-conclusive character of critical models are unique to open cognitive approaches. Redefining the undecidable thus brings another benefit: to create a place for Comparative Literature in current critical debate. What is called, in many places, the crisis of literary studies or the crisis of the humanities, is only the progressive erasure of the model of literary studies established in Europe in the 19th century. This model was symbolically and ideologically a mixture of tradition, of universalism, of nationalism and of positivism. It was congruent with the hypothesis of an absolute power of Literature; it identified various literatures with acts of expressivity and with fields of knowledge, and held these various literatures to be forever understandable within the context of the certainty of expressivity and of the recognition of fields of knowledge. Most contemporary critical schools work on and from this heritage, in order to modify it or in order to try to become free of it — viz. Deconstruction. The step beyond all of this will perhaps be taken by Comparative Literature. The crisis of the humanities corresponds to the fact that the humanities may no longer define their own coherence, insofar as the organization of their ideological, symbolical and cognitive components is no longer functional, and insofar as the pertinence of Literature, defined through its absolute power, is no longer visible. The contradictions of formalist criticism are a good illustration of this loss of pertinence. Deconstruction's choice of undecidability is merely an answer to this loss of the pertinence of Literature. A way of emerging from the crisis and of preserving the number and the diversity of our literary objects is to promote the idea of a dynamic form of undecidability. We must be aware that this form of dynamic undecidability is not dissociable from common knowledge, and from the search, by inference, for broader literary contexts. This in itself is not dissociable from the manner in which Comparative Literature deals with various literatures and cultures — by retaining the limits of the various literatures and cultures; by making reciprocal contexts of these literatures and cultures; by understanding them according to

the double game of relations of type and of identity, and of relations of implication; by knowing that this reciprocal contextualization is the basis for common knowledge in Literature.

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