

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THEORY: TROUBLING THE BOUNDARIES

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On this 40th anniversary of Comparative Literature, it seems only appropriate to briefly reconsider what were for me the three most productive intersections of Theory and Comparative Literature during my long career. Unlike today's highly professionalized graduate students, I discovered both Comparative Literature and Theory more or less by accident. Pursuing a double undergraduate major in English and German and a minor in French at the University of British Columbia, I couldn't decide which field to pick for graduate studies. It was at this point that a professor drew my attention to Comparative Literature as a convenient compromise. As will become clear a bit later on, this compromise was all the more fortuitous as I had also considered Philosophy as an attractive alternative academic career. Although I was hired by the University of Victoria's English Department to teach Theory, my roots in Comparative Literature run deep and have remained decisive in career choices for these three main reasons. 191

In my experience, Theory and Comparative Literature are intricately connected and mutually constitutive. In the first instance, theorists in North America tend to read French commentators analyzing German continental philosophers. It was after all a comparatist, namely Jonathan Culler, who introduced Jacques Derrida's analyses of German continental philosophers (Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Kant, Nietzsche) to our campuses. And it was another comparatist, namely Fredric Jameson, who drew on Louis Althusser's reading of the Marxist tradition to supplement his own readings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels through the lens of Theodor W. Adorno. Renowned theorists who are also accomplished comparatists would take too long to list here: suffice it to mention Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson, Linda Hutcheon as well as Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. Although it seems now so acceptable to read the French interpreters of German texts in English translations that nobody

seems to question the authority of monolingual (English-speaking) theorists to use words like "sublation" or "différance" as if they could be rendered unproblematically into English, I would like to insist that multilingual comparatists like Jameson or Hutcheon are better equipped to make sense of complex theoretical issues in all their subtle nuances. While monolingual theorists are undoubtedly able to "get the gist" of what is being said, they are more likely to "graph" the "foreign" text into the English linguistic and cultural context, and they tend to do so unconsciously or unwittingly. But most significantly, I think, multilingual comparatists read widely and are consequently more open to theoretical issues than monolingual colleagues.

It is not only that theorists are comparatists but comparatists are also theorists. Even comparatists, who are not in the least interested in what we call Theory with a capital-T, are compelled to be at least minimally self-conscious about their methodology. In other words, Comparative Literature has always been asked to justify *why* texts from different national traditions should be compared. Where it seemed obvious to everybody what an English professor teaches or writes on, it was distinctly less clear on what basis comparatists engaged with texts. In what must be one of the earliest theoretical inquiries, René Wellek and Austen Warren see themselves as having written a book "which, so far as we know, lacks any close parallel" (Wellek 7). The title itself posed significant difficulties. In the end, they simply called it *Theory of Literature* (1942), but they had toyed with the cumbersome possibility of "Theory of Literature and Methodology of Literary Study." The impetus for creating a "literary theory," that is, "an *organon* of methods," which they considered "the great need of literary scholarship today" (Wellek 19), came from their background in Comparative Literature. But their analyses were an invitation to methodological self-consciousness on the part of all critical readers of all literary texts.

Crucial to the explosion of specifically literary theory in the 1960s were the Russian Formalists, a group of Russian scholars whose wide knowledge of European literature inspired them to attempt a systematic understanding of what made literature literary. Shut down in 1933 by the Soviet government, their dynamic movement filtered to the West by way of exiles like Roman Jakobson and later Tzvetan Todorov as well as Jurij Striedter. In their attempt to determine what made a literary text unique or different, they in effect elaborated a methodology focused on what texts share, thereby mobilizing what came to be known as French Structuralism. But even the so-called post-structuralists could be seen as a continuation of methodological questions raised by Comparative Literature. Why are we literary critics so interested in philosophers like Derrida, psychoanalysts like Lacan, or historians like Foucault? I would argue that they find a more comfortable home in literature departments rather than in the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, or history because they provide us with interpretations of interpretation. Not unlike the comparatist who has to justify why and how she compares texts, the post-structuralists ask themselves not only what and how we know but also who knows how. In "Structure, Sign and Play," Derrida concludes with a disquisition on two unavoidable yet incommensurate interpreta-

tions of interpretation. On the one hand, there is the nostalgic Rousseauist search for origins and hence certainty. On the other, there is the Nietzschean affirmation of writing as infinite dissemination, as an adventure without safety. As he tells us, it is not a matter of choice; we inevitably live both simultaneously (Derrida 264-5). It is not without significance that Derrida makes this highly self-conscious methodological point by drawing on a French and a German philosopher.

Finally, I would argue that both comparatists and theorists draw on and promote interdisciplinarity. If one could not compare national literatures, one could always compare literature with music, painting, photography, film, philosophy, psychology, or history. Do the rhythms of words in a poem share characteristics with the rhythms of notes in a musical composition? Does the spatialization of time in a literary text have any affinity with cubist painting? Theory is if anything even more interdisciplinary. Where the comparatist chooses to compare, say, literature and music, the theorist is always up to her ears in philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, art, science, or media. Theory is by definition interdisciplinary; it has no disciplinary home in either the academic institution or the intellectual tradition. Derrida writes not only on philosophers but also, among others, on psychoanalysts, linguists, anthropologists, poets, dramatists, and novelists. Foucault also ranges rather widely, discussing psychoanalysis, medicine, linguistics, natural sciences, economics, literature, philosophy, penal institutions, etc. And while Lacan is more narrowly focused on psychoanalysis, he often refers to literature. Moreover, through their interactions and responses to each other's theoretical statements, the post-structuralists spin a web of intertextual complexity that perhaps finds its culmination in Žižek's allusive texts.

Theorists have been accused of doing philosophy or psychoanalysis "badly," an accusation that resonates with similar attacks on comparatists as dilettantes. The underlying assumption seems to be that interdisciplinarity allows one to be superficial; that is, insufficiently informed. But I have found over the years that colleagues deeply versed in, say, English Romanticism seem woefully ignorant of French, German, Spanish, or Italian Romanticism. In my own modern period, the criticism of writers like Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, who acknowledge having been influenced by French novelists like Gustave Flaubert, tends to marginalize interdisciplinary affinities. In my own case, I escaped from analytic philosophy into literature so as to be able to devote my energies to continental philosophy at the same time as I embraced Comparative Literature to escape from a narrow historical focus on one national literature.

That is why I cannot help but see, as I have laid out here, Theory and Comparative Literature as inextricably linked. Although I remember performing close readings or *explications de texte* as if this capacity were some natural or genetic predisposition, I preferred to think of reading as a learned or culturally specific activity open to theoretical analysis. This analytical approach also dispelled the myth that some readers of literature were more empowered to pontificate about literature simply because they declared themselves to be more sensitive to the aesthetic than lesser

mortals like myself. It was now possible to understand metaphors not as the spontaneous outpouring of some aesthetic genius but as a discursive construct implicated in ideological complexes. Formal devices or techniques could be examined for what Fredric Jameson calls their "political unconscious." It was Comparative Literature that initially compelled me to become methodologically self-conscious, and Theory that gave me the analytical paradigms to grapple with the complexities of the interpretative enterprise we call literary criticism.

194 Theory may in fact have replaced the emphasis on the great European masterpieces as the cement for Comparative Literature. "So, it's said," comments David Damrosch, "we rely on Butler, Foucault, Said, and Spivak to provide the common basis for conversations formerly underwritten by a common fund of knowledge of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Proust, and Joyce" (Damrosch 44). Although Damrosch himself argues that the "old-economy authors" continue to be studied, it is nevertheless the case that the politicization of the aesthetic by theorists has opened the door to a multicultural canon that Charles Bernheimer celebrated in his 1993 ACLA report and Haun Saussy deplores in the 2004 ACLA report for its overly thematic readings of literary texts. Where Comparative Literature used to be threatened by parochial disciplinary departments closing their doors to comparative research and teaching, our openness to "foreign" literatures is now being appropriated by these same disciplinary departments, especially English, in the name of multiculturalism and globalism. In an effort to carve out a place for ourselves in the academic marketplace, Saussy recommends that we reclaim "literariness" as our analytical focus. As it so happens, "literariness" or *literaturnost* is a term coined by the Russian Formalists who provided my first exciting encounter with theory. At the end of my career, I have now come full circle back to where I started. But is it really possible to go home again?

What seems to be at stake in the debate between Bernheimer and Saussy is first of all the status of translation. For Bernheimer, it was more important to expand the multicultural canon than to insist on linguistic competence; he thereby invites thematic readings of texts for their culturally representative messages. For Saussy, it is imperative that "language—the language of the original, but the language of the translation as well – be recognized as something more than a delivery system for content, that it be understood as having a weight and resistance of its own" (Saussy 14). This privileging of language reinstalls language competence as a distinguishing feature of comparatists. It is not that all translations are to be eschewed in Comparative Literature seminars; however, it *does* mean that not only language but also formal features regain some claim to our attention. But the debate is not only about translation; it is about conflicting theoretical positions on the relationship between literature and the sociopolitical conditions under which texts are produced and consumed. The emphasis on "literariness" seems to accord priority to the aesthetic at the expense of the ethical and social responsibility of art. Troubling this simple opposition, Saussy and the Russian Formalists before him understand that "literariness *emerges from* contexts and methods of reading" (Saussy 17); the aesthetic is here always already

implicated in cultural, social, political, and economic discourses. If situated within sociocultural contexts, then the emphasis on a text's literariness surely constitutes an enrichment of our analysis and perhaps a corrective to overly thematic readings.

What worries me is that Saussy's "literariness" parallels a renewed interest in formal criteria or aesthetics in the Department of English where I teach. Why is this a problem? I suspect that the call for a return to formalism is here being promoted as a turning away from the politicization of the aesthetic that has been central not only in multicultural studies but also in much theory. In other words, what I seem to be hearing is a call for the depoliticization of the study of literature that has as its underlying concomitance the reinstallation of an elitist canon and culture hostile to multiculturalism. Our current revision of the curriculum, for instance, is informed by such aesthetic considerations as genre and mode. What follows from this emphasis is a return to canonical literatures at the expense of what counts as literature driven by predominantly political rather than purely aesthetic preoccupations. I detect in my department an emerging sense of pride in a conservative curriculum that will supposedly attract students in great numbers. Although I am in some sympathy with the desire to expose students to increasingly neglected canonical authors, I hope that I am not at the same time complicit with this conservative agenda. Since Comparative Literature has strong commitments to literatures from around the globe, I speculate that it will prove resistant to the conservative agenda while the perceived aesthetic turn may pose new intellectual and institutional challenges. Just as one can never go home again, we cannot simply reinstall literariness as the proper subject matter of Comparative Literature.

Even if the emphasis on literariness should supply us with a distinctive *subject* matter, it does not provide us unproblematically with a clearly articulated methodology. Comparative literature has by its very nature invited a methodological self-consciousness that monolingual disciplines can more easily dispense with. The very act of comparison has always necessitated theoretical justification. As already mentioned, the first *Theory of Literature* was published in 1942 by two comparatists, René Wellek and Austin Warren, and this interlacing of theory and interdisciplinarity finds its most apposite culmination in Jacques Derrida's contention that we rely simultaneously on two incommensurate interpretations of interpretation. For Derrida, this means we inhabit a contradictory space that is saturated with ideological assumptions. We can therefore neither escape nor fully inhabit the paradoxical position of the interpreter; it follows that aesthetic form and thematic content are so mutually constitutive that the literary could not be isolated from the ideological.

On a less abstract theoretical level, it may be possible to navigate such treacherous waters with the help of another comparatist-theorist. Jameson's Marxist engagement with the interplay of aesthetic form and their sociohistorical embeddedness has convinced me that all formal features are ideologically significant; form is itself a site of ideological inscription. Jameson's famous call always to historicize is in his own practice intimately linked to questions of representation or mimesis. Having learned

his lesson from Adorno, he asks himself why certain forms become dominant at certain historically specific moments in time. What do aesthetic experiments in fluid form have to tell us, for instance, about the flows of capital in our own moment of global capitalism? Is it a relationship of resistance or complicity? At the very least we need to remember with the Russian Formalists that the “literary” is unavoidably always contaminated by the sociopolitical.

In short, Saussy’s revitalization of the Russian Formalist concept of “literariness” is institutionally promising in that it allows comparative literature to differentiate itself from other literature programs as well as from encroaching postcolonial and cultural studies initiatives. In spite of my nostalgic sympathies with Russian Formalism, I would at best only cautiously endorse “literariness” as a panacea for both the institutional and intellectual problems faced by comparative literature. I would want the “indiscipline” (David Ferris) that has been my intellectual home for so many years to remain vigilant about the appeal of the “literary” as a distinctive subject matter and methodological program so that I can continue to count myself lucky to have found a disciplinary home in English which accommodated my ex-centric interests in both Comparative Literature and Theory.

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