

MILAN V. DIMIĆ

W[h]ither Comparative Literature?

Excusez-moi, mon père, dit Zénon. Non decet. Je ne commettrai plus l'indécence qui consiste à essayer de montrer les choses comme elles sont. (Marguerite Yourcenar)

Once more the discipline of Comparative Literature is asked to define its field of study and to justify its intellectual and institutional existence. Doubts about the discipline are not new; almost at random, one may point out the joyful debate in *Books Abroad* in 1936 asking "Is It Dead?" (Chandler) and "Can It Come Alive?" (Putnam). Nevertheless, the anxious and usually defensive questioning from within the ranks of comparatists and the concerted and frequently accusatory interrogation coming from the outside have now more intensity and a more ominous ring to them than in the past few decades. *Toutes proportions gardées*, I am for one unpleasantly reminded of the opprobrium cast against comparative studies in the closed academic worlds of the *Herrenvolk* and the Edenic countries of "real socialism." But then I have earned my share of paranoia in the profound upheavals of what was Yugoslavia and experienced, since my Balkan days, many a cut, budgetary and otherwise, in the skirmishes at the University of Alberta.

Before returning to such musings, let me first introduce the thematic cluster which follows. It is not the result of a single unified plan initiated by the two coeditors, but rather the result of a deliberate *post factum* blending of three groups of contributions, which were con-

STEVEN TÖTÖSY

Perspectives of Comparative Literature Today

Rissiges Leben, verdorrtes Gedächtnis mit Gesichtern, schattengefärbt die Seele. Der bereifte Weibstuhls des Fremdsens webt grobes Sackkleinen über die Nacktheit. (Niko Grafenauer)

With constant and ever increasing pressure to produce research with which to convince not only deans and university presidents, but more importantly politicians and the taxpayer in order to receive funding — meagre as it may be at present — the study of literature seriously needs to legitimize itself. This may always have been a daunting task, from Aristotelian times through those of François Villon's to the *maecenas* of the Renaissance or the Chinese ruling dynasties to today's corporate world. But — at least in my opinion — the discipline has to rethink itself in pragmatic and functional terms after the impact of Deconstruction's self-deconstruction of the study of literature (as appropriate and legitimate as this indeed may be). Stephen Greenblatt's *New Historicism*, the various literature and anthropology approaches, etc., and Feminist criticism's contention, rightly, again, that "our literature is not about women. It is not about women and men equally. It is by and about men" (Russ 4; and a similar opinion may extend to the scholarship of literature). As several articles in this thematic cluster of the *CRCL/RCLC* demonstrate, this has been recognized and is being acted upon. And indeed, there are viable alternatives, such as my own theoretical designation and version of Niklas Luhmann's Operational Constructivism, developed from Radical Constructivism (e.g., Maturana; Schmidt);

or, for instance, Chanita Goodblatt, Normann N. Holland, David Miall, and Will van Peer's plan to establish a new MLA Discussion Group "Real Readers," with the objective of studying the reading and readership of literature; or the relevance of Neuropsychology to the study of literature.

But then there is also the discipline of Comparative Literature which historically represented and continues to represent "that cohesion of the humanities which single author studies tend to bypass (Rajan 152), and its well-known interest in *alterité*, whether with reference to race, gender, or popular literature, film, the media, etc. And these areas of research pre-date the parameters of the current Cultural Studies orientation in the Humanities. This paradigm of Comparative Literature is expressed throughout the articles in this thematic cluster of the *CRCL/RCLC*.

To me, the basic definition of Comparative Literature includes — apart from the traditional and historic approach to "compare" literary texts from different literatures — the study of the literary text in its relationship with "extra"-literary areas (e.g., sociology, history, economics, the publishing industry, readership, the history of the book, geography, biology, medicine, etc.), the other arts, etc. But most importantly — and here the discipline has played, traditionally, a significant role with regard to the aforementioned *alterité* — Comparative Literature means the recognition of and the engagement with the "Other," whether that is "non-canonical" text (i.e., popular literature), the "other" arts, or the literary and cultural aspects of another race, gender, nation, etc. Also, in the context of theory approximation (see Tötösy 1995) of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies (see, for example, Bernheimer; Gunew), while Cultural Studies is concerned with literature as one of many cultural activities and

ceived and written with separate goals in mind.

The first group consists of revised versions of presentations made at a panel which took place at the Learned Societies' annual meeting of the CCLA/ACLC held in May 1995 at UQUAM. These are the papers by the Association's guest, Peter Brooks of Yale and the responses and adumbrations by Linda Hutcheon (Toronto), Richard Cavell (UBC), and Walter Moser (Montréal). The starting point of the presentations is the Bernheimer report and US reactions to it (see Bernheimer 1995). While the authors take divergent roads, which are in keeping with their own work and place in scholarship, they arrive at a similar destination of cautious optimism: if Comparative Literature willingly continues to change, as it has often done in the past, and shows itself open to diversity and innovation in objects and methods of inquiry, then the future is not behind us. Simply put, if cultural and cross-cultural studies are the real game, then we can say, "I'm your [wo]lman" (with Leonard Cohen). The quality of the panel and the interest shown by members of the Association and other scholars made the publication of these texts in the *CRCL/RCLC* imperative.

The second group consists of papers offered to or solicited by the editors. This group includes statements about present and future directions in the discipline — an Italian perspective by Armando Gnisci (Rome) and a Chinese one by Wang Ning (Peking) — and papers sketching the evolution of the discipline in diverse parts of the world — Sandra Nitriti (São Paulo) about Brazil and Marián Gálík (Bratislava) about Slovakia. To this group belongs also the paper by Richard Teleky (York) about an experience in teaching Central European literature in translation. These papers bear witness to the continuing importance of

cultural production, Comparative Literature maintains a focus on literature proper. This, in my opinion, is a significant difference which justifies my insistence that the study of literature as a distinct field of study is a legitimate and needed — socially relevant — function of social discourse. At the same time, it is in this context that the study of literature is in need of rethinking, and this call for action is evident in the articles of this issue of the journal.

Admittedly, Comparative Literature has never been institutionally established in Europe (see, for instance, Müller-Solger) or Canada, and while it has been so in the US but it is now retreating owing to the discovery of theory by English and other national literature departments and *in toto* by Cultural Studies. It has been, also, a profoundly Eurocentric (and patriarchal) discipline. But while national literatures have been *a priori*, self-centred, Comparative Literature has always been concerned with *alterité*, as several contributors to this issue argue. In this context, a number of articles in this issue are responding to Charles Bernheimer's volume that includes the report of the American Comparative Literature Association of 1994, a book that generated much discussion. And the traditional Eurocentric point of view in Comparative Literature is undergoing substantial change, witness Armando Gnisci and Franca Sinopoli's recent *Compare i comparatismi* (1995), for instance, which comprises articles about the discipline in Japan, China, South America, etc., in addition to its status and situation in European countries.

Scholarship in the Humanities had an accepted place in the university tradition, but the output has never been as prolific as in the last thirty years or so. In the post-Second World War era, unprecedented material wealth — here I am referring to the Western hemisphere — allowed for a

Comparative Literature in the exploration and teaching of literature in an interdisciplinary, international, multilingual, and multicultural context.

The third group is a group of one, the paper on canon formation by Douwe Fokkema (Utrecht). The Dutch scholar and past president of the ICLA/AILC presented in the Fall of 1995 at Alberta lectures and seminars on the state of Comparative Literature. Inevitably, many of the topics reflected upon in the talks and the ensuing discussions — which to the best of my observation did not benefit from the participation of colleagues or Graduate Students from English — turned upon matters raised by Bernheimer, his supporters and detractors. The text published here is that of one of the lectures; by its nature and presentational strategy, it can be read without its accompanying pieces.

All these papers contribute — in the belief of the co-editors — to the debates about Comparative Literature and the study of literature today. The information about the discipline offered to the reader and especially the range of reflections upon literary scholarship and its role in academe, are a timely attempt to strengthen our ability to (re)assess the situation without complacency but also without creating confusion between mirage and reality. I tried to express my impressions about the intellectual and institutional evolution of the discipline in the last 30 years in an article initially meant for this cluster. After it grew to over 100 printed pages, with more than 600 works cited, it became advisable to publish the text separately; it will be inserted in one of the following issues of the journal.

This brings us back to the opening paragraph. Is it possible to speculate about the "external" and "internal" reasons for this sharp crisis in the definition and self-definition of the discipline and the rapid

massive influx of funding for the Humanities; from the founding of new universities to the funding of research and scholarship. With the resurgence of neo-conservatism of the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher era, the abundance of funding began to dissipate. And in the last two decades the rise of national debt and several waves of recession imposed the fiscal stringency affecting the Humanities. This situation should have struck an alarm with scholars in the Humanities. And it did, but only rhetorically. While deans, university presidents, and scholars speak and write about the social relevance of the study of culture and literature and hence, they argue, the necessity of continuing funding, in reality this relevance has not materialized. True, in some areas such as Feminist theory and criticism, Multiculturalism, or Gay and Lesbian Studies scholars have amply demonstrated how socially relevant their work can be. However, such areas of research and their output are doubly marginalized within the academe and scholarship, and generally in society.

In my view, traditional scholarship continues, largely, to produce work irrelevant to society. The vast majority of scholars in the Humanities argue for the "special" status of the study of culture and literature. Fair enough, as said. But at the same time they also propagate the notion of two or more cultures in scholarship and research. It is without doubt in my mind that the two (or more) cultures of scholarship and research *must* draw on each other. Within the Humanities there are some serious problems, which compel me to state that scholarship in the study of literature, in general and also in the specific, is flawed and consequently affecting the general perception of the study of literature. This problem of scholarship extends, to a point, to Milan Dimić's criticism of the dominance of

loss of institutional support in the US and in Canada, as well as the particular time of this upheaval? Could it be that whatever the intellectual components might be — and they cannot be dissected in an instant — the turmoil in the humanities, and in our discipline, is also one of the distant consequences of the changed political and economic macrocosm, especially of North America and the Anglophone parts of the Commonwealth, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the "Evil Empire"? Is the financial squeeze on the universities and the pressure to down-size and to become more effective, not related to the triumph of world-wide free market forces? Is it not the expression of a corporate agenda hostile to the nation state, to welfare societies, and to those jugglers, singers, and dancers who cannot earn their up-keep without public support? At the same time, as neoconservative ideologies have conquered not only board rooms but also ruling political parties, and informed public discourse in the media, is it not natural that many academics will feel that their domain is the last space for social critique and for an educational stance which questions the basic assumptions of tradition and of the new society?

This frustration with the usual venues for political confrontation fosters, I believe, the politicization of the humanities and social sciences and, as we still live in puritanical times and spaces, the overt moral didacticism in much of the discussions about gender, race, ethnicity, colonialism, and culture. (There is more, and much better, about all this in two recent books by Saul and by Emberley.) Unfortunately, previous examples of attempts to engineer better human beings by turning education and scholarship into tools of ideologies, enlightened or otherwise, is not heartening. Moreover, the critique of society encouraged in many a Faculty of Arts in the US and Canada seems more effective

English departments and his claim that "it is possible to profess, in apparent good faith, that the best study of otherness and diversity can be pursued on the basis of paradigms drawn up in departments of English, often by happily unilingual scholars teaching unilingual students," thus side-lining the discipline of Comparative Literature (see Dimić's "Preface" here). But the problem is also deeper than the marginalization of Comparative Literature as Jonathan Rose argues in his article about the situation of the history of the book and the study of literature (see the thematic cluster in this issue), for instance. Jonathan Rose's contentions — as a historian who also knows literature — raise several points illustrating my argument. Most importantly, his contention about the uninformed state of literary criticism is to the point and here we are dealing with a problem *within* the Humanities, English, Comparative Literature, or other. And what he says goes for not only the prominent scholars in his examples — who, incidentally, are representatives of the *crème de la crème* of literary scholars — but it holds for the whole range of scholarship from New Criticism to Deconstruction, etc.

The point is, how can literary scholarship make itself socially relevant by producing relevant and outstanding work for both its own immediate fields and the general population if even within its own larger field, the Humanities, it is found that it is lacking? My own argument is that obviously it is the neglect of *scientific* principles — i.e., the basic postulates of such approaches as the Systemic and Empirical framework I promote — which results in the flaws I mentioned. And I am not pleading for the re-instatement of the German tradition of *Literaturwissenschaft*, although in some instances even that would be better when compared with some of the recent works appearing on the North

American landscape of literary scholarship. In the study of literature — especially on the said North American landscape of scholarship although the situation is much the same from a global perspective — these flaws include the insistence on "intuition," the metaphorical narrative in scholarly description, the resistance to real inter-, intra-, and multi-disciplinarity and teamwork (i.e., the insistence on solitary scholarship), the lack of precise taxonomy and clarity, and, most importantly, the dissonance between doing "high" science in research and publishing such studies and writing for the general public for the popularization of the said "high" science. In addition, there is also the question of the political agenda prevalent in both literary scholarship and in its institutional setting and mechanisms.

It appears to me that the articles in this thematic cluster of the *CRC/LRCLC* respond well, at least conceptually, to the above outlined problems and their counteractive postulates I argue for. And most importantly, they respond within the parameters of the discipline of Comparative Literature, demonstrating, again, this field's vitality despite its institutional marginalization.

In the present thematic cluster of our journal, Peter Brooks, Richard Cavell, Douwe Fokkema, Armando Gnisci, Linda Hutcheon, and Walter Moser ask to maintain the essential theoretical and methodological premises Comparative Literature offers but at the same time in a more explicit extension — a welcome pragmatic postulate, indeed — to the "Other." Peter Brooks's criticism of the Bernheimer report's apologetic tone and his plea for retaining the focus on literature and literariness, while I very much agree with him, does not detract from the pragmatic and *political / ideological* argument for Comparative Literature. The articles of Marián Gálík and Richard Teleky remind us that

studies, African studies, the East Asian diaspora, Native studies, Canadian studies, film and media studies, and so forth, requiring *expressis verbis*, from time to time, advanced degrees in Comparative Literature. (When there are new programs in Cultural Studies, as is the case in some universities, their description reads as a catalogue of a miniature Faculty of Arts.)

In an expanding academic institution, this reorientation would have had a different and more benign impact than in a zero sum game (or a game of shrinking sums), where for each new position in English or in a new program there has to be a loss of one or two positions in another area. Is it not a world where more than 50% of all printed books are in English (according to the jubilant *U.S. News & World Report*, rpt. in *The Globe and Mail*, 5.10.1995, p. 22, under "Social Studies"). Is it not a fact that even in countries, such as Germany, which have strong traditions of world-wide horizons, seven out of ten translated books are from English? (Exactly 71.4% of the total of 10,457 translated titles is from English; the closest contender is French with 10.6%, and any other language is represented with less than 3% — *Wöchentliches Verzeichnis der deutschen Nationalbibliographie*, 1994, qtd. by Buhrfeind, 10 and 11. In 1992, the activity of West German publishers can be measured by the fact that they have published 67,277 titles compared to 86,573 in the United Kingdom and only 49,276 in the U.S.A. [*Statistical Yearbook 1994*, qtd. by Buhrfeind, 8].) Is not, moreover, a new world order exemplified by *Windows95* and the English language based Internet and World Wide Web? Is it not then easy to fall into the hubris of feeling, and thinking, that whatever is relevant can be and should be done in English?

Therefore, it is possible to profess, in apparent good faith, that the best study of otherness and diversity can be pursued on

Eurocentrism may be problematized from its North American *locus* further to the centre/periphery perspective that is very much alive *within* Europe. Sandra Nitirni's and Wang Ning's articles, then, call our attention to the enactment of the non-European perspective by drawing on the examples of Asia and South America. And here, too, it should be pointed out that it was the International Comparative Literature Association/Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée and its members that paid attention, from its founding in the early 1950s, to the East-West paradigm, while the conventions of the Modern Language Association, for instance, have even today virtually no representation of the study of East-West and neither does the MLA have organizational representation of such concern except in the essentially regional context of North American multiculturalism. Although only a detail but which is of note from a pragmatic — and institutional-systemic — point of view, Sandra Nitirni's call for a bibliography of Comparative Literature has been, since, responded to and the International Compa-rative Literature Association's ongoing project, an International Bibliography of Comparative Literature, is present on the World Wide Web (see Tötösy and Deltsheva). The postulate of "border crossings" and the enactment of the study of the "Other," the non-European, is perhaps the most compelling argument of the articles in the thematic cluster of this issue of the *CRCL/RCLC*. This postulate is, essentially, an argument for the pragmatic and systemic approach to the study of literature, theoretically and methodologically. And again, Comparatists are responding to it as Yves Chevrel's *Comparative Literature Today: Methods and Perspectives* (1995) or the aforementioned volume by Gnisci and Sinopoli demonstrate. And a related aspect of *alterité* in the

the basis of paradigms drawn up in departments of English, often by happily unilingual scholars teaching unilingual students. If one adds to this the old North American aversion for history — after all, it is *not* a common past which binds together the peoples of the US or of Canada! — the concern for the present and the preoccupation with the future can easily be combined with a disdain for the tradition. For those who celebrate the postmodern spirit, this provides another possibility to consider the ensuing loss of memory, the split and fragmentation as beneficial and propitious in the new march towards receding horizons.

The scarcity of academic positions and the abundance of qualified applicants, as well as the last two decades of relative stability in the permanent academic staff, with its preponderance of male members, have created explosive frustrations and internal pressures in all disciplines. Instead of a gradual evolution of theoretical assumptions and priorities, which reflects the steady substitution of one generation of scholars for another, there is now a virtual chasm separating the generation of those retiring or about to be retired and of those applying for their jobs. Having humanly and intellectually little in common, these two groups are, not so surprisingly, experiencing difficulties in managing an orderly transformation instead of creating ruptures and completely new departures. About the frustrations of some of the comparatists belonging to the older generation one can read eloquent testimonies by Gerald Gillespie, Marjorie Perloff and others (see Gossman and Spariosu). Those who would be tempted to explain the phenomenon by the inevitable nostalgia of aging scholars may want to test this assumption by comparing this collection of reminiscences about Comparative Literature with that published eleven years earlier in Germany by Koppen and von Tiedemann.

context of communication, that of translation — in national literatures a traditionally neglected area and where Comparative Literature, again, excels — is another prominent postulate in this issue. For the Canadian context, the Antoine Sirois *et al.*'s "Bibliography of Comparative Canadian Literature" indicates the vitality and *élan* of Canadian Comparatists' excellence.

In sum, it appears to me that while historically, theoretically, and methodologically Comparative Literature is at the forefront of literary study as the articles here suggest, the problem lies in the institutionalization of the discipline in the face of the still overpowering "national" parameters in the scholarship of literature in addition to the institutional as well as global dominance of English. To achieve a higher level of institutionalization of the discipline of Comparative Literature at the present time of financial stringency, the dominance of Cultural Studies and English, Comparatists will, I hope, pay close attention to such scholars as Chevrel or Gnisci, for instance, and to the thoughts and points of view expressed in the articles of this issue of the *CRCL/RCLC*.

University of Alberta

At the present point of our institutional journey, which is from time to time a true *voyage au bout de la nuit*, we are hard pressed from both sides, in a pincer movement objectively combining pressures from the right of the political spectrum with those from the (subjectively) progressive wing of academe. Some would like to offer us the choice between the emulation (*imitatio*) of the historical philosopher Zeno(n) of Citium or the fictional Flemish philosopher, alchemist, and physician Zénon of Bruges (Brugge). The first, Greek Zeno from Cyprus, founded towards the year 308 B.C. the school of stoicism, legend has it that towards the year 284 he died voluntarily, considering that his work was accomplished and his career at its natural end. The other, a character invented by Yourcenar, had to commit suicide in 1569 to avoid being burned in an *auto-da-fé*. Preferably, we should work at a third solution, which would allow the continuation of the great *œuvre au noir*, which in our case consists in the continued innovative, open ended and changing, pursuit of sceptical inquiry, without preconceived conclusions, and the persistent confrontation of English North American truths (and virtual realities) with opinions and perceptions coming from elsewhere. *L'alterité ne reside pas dans le conformisme*.

University of Alberta