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Comparative Literature's "Anxiogenic" State

It is no secret that the state (and the state of health) of the discipline called "Comparative Literature" has been the topic of much discussion in recent years.¹ This concern can be read as a sign of either institutional anxiety or intellectual excitement, depending on your perspective and temperament. Books with titles like *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, *Building a Profession*, *The Comparative Perspective on Literature*, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* or *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* are some indication of the urgency felt by comparativists these days to rethink and even to reconfigure their affiliations in the light of recent intellectual and institutional realignments. The American Comparative Literature Association's 1993 Bernheimer Report entitled "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century" was one of the first in a series of documents to have contributed to what has been called this "anxiogenic" state of Comparative Literature in the North American academy — in Canada as much as in the United States.

This state of anxiety is not new to our discipline, of course: René Wellek had already expressed it in 1958 in the essay, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." There, he worried about the lack of both subject matter and methodology in Comparative Literature. Indeed, the various shifts in the discipline's focus since World War II have been viewed as a series of attempts to "cure, contain, or exploit" this anxiety of comparison (Bernheimer 3). The most recent in this series of attempts has been brought about by that new ACLA document: just like the Levin Report of 1965 and the Greene Report of 1975, the 1993 Bernheimer Report is unavoidably the product of a particular generation of comparativists (see Greene). There has clearly been a generational shift from the North Americanization of the work of those post-war European émigré philologists and literary historians through to the domestication of what was called "theory" when

¹ This piece was written primarily in response to the American Comparative Literature Association's 1993 "Bernheimer" Report entitled "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century" and to the book of replies to it, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, which I have reviewed in more detail in *World Literature Today* 69.2 (1995): 299-303.

it was housed in Comparative Literature departments to the current questioning of the very centrality of the "Lit" in Complit.

From a survey of the current debates, there would appear to be four major areas of concern for comparativists today, and all four are reflected in that ACLA Report: 1) the historical Eurocentrism of the comparativist tradition and its relation to the multicultural reality of the present in Canada and the U.S.; 2) the continuing concerns about the desirability of reading — and comparing — literatures in their original languages and not in translation; 3) the position of theory in the discipline today; 4) the debate between what might be called the "formalists" and the "contextualists" — or, put in institutional terms, literary studies versus cultural studies.

The Report's advocacy of "a pluralized and expanded contextualizing of literary studies" (Bernheimer 11) is one broad response to these diverse problems. But perhaps Comparative Literature, by its very nature, is already a particularly "hospitable space" for what (expatriate Canadian) Mary Louise Pratt calls "the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and a genuinely global consciousness" (62). This somewhat utopian view of the discipline as the "site for powerful intellectual renewal in the study of literature and culture" (Pratt 62) is, however, part of its history too, in a way: in the nervous post-war years of its North American founding, our discipline was seen as symbolizing the spirit of peace, cooperation, and hope (see Siebers 195). Inherently pluralist, Comparative Literature was argued to be, by definition, aware of and sensitive to differences in culture and language, and thus, by extension, differences in religion, race, class, and gender (Ahearn and Weinstein 78).

One important dissenting view today is the one that suggests that Complit's day may, in fact, have passed, that now is the time for *postcolonial* not *comparative* studies. According to this argument, postcolonial studies (with its investigation of cultural identity and its attention to the relations between that identity and national language) is what should simply inherit Comparative Literature's historical role (Apter 86). Such a view usually rejects any consensual or utopian model in favor of a dissensual one that would confront First with Third World cultures. Postcolonial work is, of course, being done in national literature departments as well, largely because of its frequently unilingual focus — proof that the cultural power of colonialism does live on, and it lives on in language. And this marks another source of anxiety for comparativists — the familiar one of linguistic competence and of the pedagogical and ethical issues involved in "engaging" two or more literatures adequately in their original languages. This issue of translation merges with that of Eurocentric critique in a third area of worry to comparativists today. The ready availability of English versions of the work of European structuralist and post-structuralist theorists has threatened comparative literature departments' housing of theory: national

literature departments of all kinds can now "do" theory — even those once resistant English departments. Comparativists seem divided in their views of the continuing importance of theory to Complit's self-definition. Many feel theory is still the *lingua franca* of the discipline (Brooks 103; Fox-Genovese 139); others, while agreeing that theory has been important historically to Complit, do not see it as either its goal or its defining uniqueness (Appiah 53).

The theories of textuality that, say, deconstruction represents are not, of course, the only components of what we lump together as "theory." With the increasing importance of feminist theory in North America, a major interest in context — social, cultural, historical, political context — was added to poststructuralist theory's concern with textuality. The impact of feminist work dovetailed with the theories of Foucault, Bakhtin, and Benjamin, and of Marxist, post-colonial, New Historical, gay and lesbian (and queer) theorists to make ideological context an unavoidable issue in literary studies, comparative or otherwise.

One of the results of this shift of focus has been the rise of our particularly North American version of what in Britain had first been dubbed "cultural studies" — with a broadening of its original leftist ideological underpinnings to include other kinds of politics. The ACLA Report expresses this shift in quite cautious terms as a broadening of the field of inquiry that — in its words — "does not mean that comparative study should abandon the close analysis of rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features but that textually precise readings should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced" (Bernheimer 43).

This may sound like a safe enough compromise, though you too may wish to join Peter Brooks in protesting the "abjectly apologetic tone" of the Report which suggests that the teaching of literature is, in his words, "an outmoded mandarin practice" (99), instead of the study of the "processes by which meaning is made, the grounds for interpretation" (101). Warning of the dangers of interdisciplinary amateurism, Brooks has eloquently argued that "real" interdisciplinarity comes "when thought processes reach the point where the disciplinary boundary one comes up against no longer makes sense — when the internal logic of thinking impels a transgression of borderlines. And to the extent that this is teachable at all, it requires considerable apprenticeship in the discipline that is to be transcended" (102). I want to return to this point about what is "teachable" shortly, but first I would note, in passing, that cultural studies, by definition (at least so far) has *needed* disciplinary borderlines to cross; indeed, it has defined itself precisely in terms of that very border-crossing.

Many of us may well share Brooks's implied belief in the value and the specificity of literature and its study. For some of us, this will be a reason for remaining, to use his term, a "viable interlocutor to cultural studies," one that can insist that "contextualizations of literature in ideological and cultural terms

remain aware of literature's institutional definitions and of the uses of poetics and rhetoric in understanding the ways in which literature creates meanings that both resemble and differ from those produced in other discourses" (103). But need CompLit's position here merely be the secondary one of interlocutor? I would argue instead that comparativists were among the first to challenge the very idea that text and context were separable points at opposite ends of a spectrum (Bathrick 320) — a spectrum constructed by certain institutionalized forms of national literary critical study. It did not take the existence of cultural studies to problematize the borders of textuality and to interrogate the constitution of fields of knowledge: it was "theory" — based first in comparative literature departments in North America — that made such problematizing and interrogating even conceivable.

The disciplinary training of a comparatist, like that of any scholar today who studies English or French or Korean or Nigerian literature, teaches that interpretation does not happen in a vacuum, that it is always historical, relational and dynamic. Our literary disciplines may well traffic, not in political wisdom, but in "metrics, narrative structure, double, triple and quadruple meanings," as Stanley Fish has argued in his attack on cultural studies a few years ago (12). But the analysis of narrative structure, to take one of his points, just might have to deal with the fact that stories are written — and read — in certain ways for certain reasons (conscious or unconscious reasons) in certain contexts at certain times. These are the kinds of insights that our comparatist training allows us to carry forward — should we so choose — to the interpretation of other cultural artifacts or other discourses. But, if we *do* so choose, we never stop being comparative *literature* trainees; our "déformation professionnelle" is powerful, if not permanent. At least, it is — *if* we have *had* that training.

The ACLA document is not only a report on the state of research in the discipline as it now stands; it is a provocative challenge to broaden the scope of what we *teach* in comparative literature departments. Like many of us, that Report's authors were formed and "deformed" as comparativists. By that I mean: they have that training to build upon and to deploy in new cultural areas of study, should they make that move. However, the very real danger for our *students* in broadening what is already perhaps an impossibly broad discipline is the loss of any useful and distinctive training, even in skills of interpretation. The result may not be interdisciplinarity but what Stuart Hall deems a "slack form of pluralism" (292) or what Anthony Appiah calls "an unstructured postmodern hodge-podge" (57). For those of us who are teachers, this is a warning we must heed — and heed for our students' sakes.

That ACLA Report had advised caution for Comparative Literature *vis-à-vis* cultural studies where most scholarship has "tended to be monolingual and focused on issues in specific contemporary popular cultures" (Bernheimer 45). But cultural studies as it is now constituted also takes as its mandate the

investigation of the interrelations of discourse and *power*. The combined historical and theoretical commitment of comparative studies, especially if conjoined with the serious archival work of historians and the broader cultural perspective of anthropologists, might be precisely what the emerging field of cultural studies could most profit from in its work on the production of cultural value. And the seeming expansion of scope to include not only high art but also popular culture is maybe more apparent than real: minimal historicizing is needed to remind us that Shakespeare's plays were not what we would now call "high art" for the entire audience of the Globe Theatre, and that writers like Rabelais deliberately chose to write in the vernacular, not in Latin (Lionnet 172). The current textuality-based, monolingual, and often parochial nature of much cultural studies work need *not* stand as the final definition of this emerging field. The addition of the textual and contextual, ideologically sensitized and historicized research of comparativists could work to expand it in significant ways. We need not simply be interlocutors, in other words.

However, given the anxiety and the sheer amount of discussion recently, it is hard not to believe that something else must be fueling these debates — something beyond arguments over texts and contexts or over challenges to disciplinary borders — and this is something Stanley Fish *did* get right, perhaps, in his attack. The larger and more contentious issue may be the very role of the academy (of us) in today's society. For some (and not only for the children of the Sixties) the appeal of cultural studies may reside in the possibility of having some transformative impact through its critique of cultural systems — an impact that might be broadly social and not only local and institutional. The "agency quandary" many academics feel does not go away just because Stanley Fish (or anyone else) may call it naive.

Comparative Literature's major disciplinary strength and major intellectual attraction have always seemed to me to lie in a positive version of what has been called its "quality of dispossession — a kind of haunting by otherness" (Bernheimer 12). I remain as worried as ever, both in pragmatic and in political terms, about its vast scope — even vaster in the new definition being urged upon it. Is it now to be "charged with the study of discourses and cultural productions of all sorts throughout the entire world" (Culler 117)? I also share many of the worries of people across the country about the possible institutional consequences of a move outward from the literary: in these days of financial constraints, unstable disciplinary boundaries can mean unstable funding (Perloff 182). Of course, you might argue that the inherent versatility of comparativists can also mean the kind of institutional flexibility that could spell survival (Russo 193).

If you have ever taught or been taught in a Comparative Literature program you will know that comparatists may appear to have little in common with each other: it has been called "a discipline with no common body of knowledge other than literary studies, and without a central purpose except to carry out its

asringent or stimulant motions" (Greene 145). But this too is part of the intellectual vitality of the field and part of the continual self-criticism of a protean discipline that has never been willing (or able) to fix its self-definition. That is what is frustrating about CompLit, but it is also what attracted many of us to it.

The American Comparative Literature Association, as the professional voice for comparativist studies in the United States, has provoked an important debate on the future of the discipline through its Report. This is not the last word, of course. No Canadian would ever admit to that. But, there can, luckily, be no last word on this subject, even though there must be continuing debate.

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