Comparative Literature in the Postmodern Condition

It is hard to escape a sense of irony at the thought that while the preparations for the ICLA Congress in Pretoria were underway, the only Department of Comparative Literature in South Africa was being closed down. In this context, the Congress marks a disappearance that seems to be appropriately captured in the words of a song by Joni Mitchell: “don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone” (Mitchell 1970/1971).

Being gripped by passion in the face of what has disappeared is, I would argue, not just a matter of melancholia at the sense of loss. Rather, it is a symptom of the form of knowledge that we have been pursuing under the aegis of Comparative Literature: it is emptied of the sensibility proper to the appreciation of literature.

In this paper, I would like to chart the role of the type of inquiry that has characterised Comparative Literature, within the landscape of the humanities and the university. The discipline might have been demoted, or might have chosen to sail under a different flag; yet the questions raised in the history of the inquiry germane to Comparative Literature have not lost their relevance within a reconfigured face of knowledge. For Comparative Literature’s critical stance on literature as an expression of national culture has perspectives to offer for the much lamented crisis of the humanities in the face of the disintegration of the University of (National) Culture.

Most handbooks on Comparative Literature will tell their readers that the impetus for Comparative Literature was provided by Goethe’s
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notion of a “world literature”. It found its framework in what Readings, in his historical typology of universities, has called the University of Reason. The University of Reason was based on the interarticulation of ethnic nation, rational state, and philosophical culture (including aesthetic education) that linked speculative philosophy to the reason of history itself (Readings 1993:176).

By the turn of the 18th/19th century, however, the reason of history could no longer act as a basis for the University of Reason. The notion of “humanity” came to be normatively tied to that of the “nation”. The idea of culture that informed the thinking on the role of the university and the character of the nation-state ensured a symbiotic relationship between the two. The synthetic unity of culture through Bildung pursued at the autonomous university, was to act as a model for the unity and autonomy of the nation-state. The task of this synthesis that animated the university, was entrusted to speculative philosophy. It was within this model of the university—its role understood as custodian and transmitter of national culture—that literary studies were first institutionalised.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the onus of creating and maintaining an autonomous and unified national culture shifted from philosophy to the study of literature. The exemplary figure was no longer seen to be the man of reason, but the man of letters (Weber 1999:6).

With the declining role of the nation-state, the notion of culture at the base of the university loses its relevance. The loss of the nation-state’s privileged hold on the production of knowledge, and on judging what is true and just (Lyotard 1993b:xxiv-xxv, 5), signals the end of the synthesis of knowledge and culture, of politics and ethics, of teaching and research within the University.

The current crisis of the humanities, and of literary studies in particular, was prefigured by an earlier one, namely around the turn of the 19th/20th century. This crisis inaugurated the first theory-boom that overlapped with and in many instances found a home in the field of

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1 This interarticulation of the national and international cultural forces has spawned a variety of versions: e.g. the evolutionist notion of a “world literature” as the culmination of cultural development from clan to city to nation, and finally, to cosmopolitan humanity (Posnett quoted in Nethersole 1983:7); or comparatist readings inflected by the identification of traits of “national character” in literature in various national languages (Sedgwick quoted in Nethersole 1983: 6-7).
Comparative Literature. Under the impact of theoretical questions, Comparative Literature vastly expanded its scope.

Comp Lit has since become the name for theoretical investigations into the interface between language, literature, poetics, and rhetoric. It has refused the role of providing a window onto national imaginings. It has eschewed an understanding of language as medium of communication, expression, and representation that would provide a link between the subject, experience, culture and nation or class.

With the recent conjurings-away of Comparative Literature, the absence that constituted its field has apparently been compensated for by unexpected returns. The gap has been filled with “comparisons” of a different type. “Rationalisation” in the humanities has tended to amalgamate all literature departments into one “Department/School of Languages and Literatures”. The constituent departments often find their common denominator and didactic/pedagogic rationales in particular forms of thematic criticism. This thematic criticism makes quick shrift with questions of methodology and theory. Three concerns can thus be dealt with by one hammer blow: texts tend to be read in English translation, obviating the requirement of advanced linguistic competence in any one of the component languages; linguistic/textual analysis is marginalised, and with it, questions of representation, history, theory, and epistemology; and the literature courses can neatly dovetail with the Landeskunde imbibed with the national-cultural commonplaces of the introductory language courses. By way of thematic readings, students can now learn how the French, Italians, Germans and Brits/Americans respectively do it. The thematic comparisons bring the baggage of national culture, national literature, national philology through the back door, though in a form very different from the cultural ideals of the nation-state that gave birth to the universities in the shape that we have known them for the last 200 years.

This shift in literary studies has gone hand in hand with what I would propose to call “the pedagogic turn” that has changed the teaching face over the last ten years or so. The “pedagogic turn” is, in its turn, a consequence of the break-up of the unity of teaching and research that had characterised the University of Culture. “Stripped of the responsibility for research [...]”, universities “limit themselves to the transmission of what is judged to be established knowledge, and through didactics they guarantee
the replication of teachers rather than the production of researchers” (Lyotard 1993a:39).

Policies of education ministries and higher education councils translated the break-up of the unity between research and teaching into a division between elite research institutions and the large number of state universities and colleges. (A division along these lines is envisaged also by the recently released [South African] Report of the Council for Higher Education.) The teaching of academic literacy and composition in the so-called “bedrock” institutions of higher learning was conducted with a populist, anti-elitist educational rhetoric, while linguistics and theory and history of literature were seen fit only for the ivy-league. This division, initially advocated under the banner of remediation and redress, has by now congealed and been surrounded with institutional boundaries (Godzich 1994:4). South Africa has more recently followed these international trends.

The pedagogic turn in university education keys into two things: on the one hand, it differentiates the legitimation strategies of knowledge production, and universities as institutions on the whole. Secondly, it provides for contractual arrangements that make for a new understanding of professionalism. Teaching becomes a fee-for-service activity, corresponding to the designation of the fee-paying student as the ideal student. Research, in its turn, is de-linked from teaching, and done on commission by the client (usually corporate clients or government agencies). Within this re-orientation, the humanities come to play a role “that wavers between consumer service [...] and cultural manicure” (Readings 1996:174). The dictates of accountability are shifted from the understanding of civic obligation to financial auditing: the university is increasingly understood to be accountable to what in the new lingo are called its stakeholders—namely those who pay for its running, i.e. large corporations, individual taxpayers, and students or rather, their parents. With the understanding of teaching as a fee-for-service activity, moreover, the quality of teaching as tutelage, involving a transferential relationship, goes out of the window; the transactions around the exchange of knowledge as commodity require a formal relationship of equality between buyer and seller in the marketplace of knowledge as know-how. As knowledge becomes commodified, intellectuals come to jealously guard their research findings and teaching insights as private property. They lose their erstwhile status of public intellectuals with some claim to representing the common good through
“disinterested service”. In short, the university increasingly loses its public role. It simultaneously loses its capacity to bring together a community of scholars, or a community of interpretation, or to give rise to schools of thought. The lack of unity of purpose would compromise its ability to initiate any social project (the gilt-edged declarations of university mission statements notwithstanding).

In the face of this shifting sand that universities today occupy, three options have been outlined by Bill Readings:

1. Either we seek to defend and restore the social mission of the university by simply reaffirming a national cultural identity that has manifestly lost its purchase—the conservative position

2. Or we attempt to reinvent cultural identity so as to adapt it to changing circumstances—the multicultural position

3. [Or we] [...] abandon the notion that the social mission of the university is ineluctably linked to the project of realising a national cultural identity [...]  

Universities, those in South Africa at any rate, seem to have opted for an uneasy combination of all of these three options. With regard to the path embarked on by literary studies, I would argue that the emergence of thematic criticism from the ashes of literary theory and Comparative Literature, as well as particular forms of the pedagogic turn in university education, could be seen as the worst possible combination that is not just the result of, but has actively contributed to the ruination of the humanities.

However, contrary to the scenario outlined by Readings, I do not think that the University of Excellence condemns us to living in the ruins of the University of Culture. Indeed, I would say that these are poorly because they are too schematically and mutually exclusively conceived models.2

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2 A recent critique of Readings’s account has been formulated by Dominick LaCapra, in terms of what he calls “Readings’s hyperbole”, consisting of an understanding of the university as an excessively homogenised, categorical and uniformly bureaucratised institution: “Readings stresses only the way in which the university has become a corporation in the modern, market-oriented sense, and for Readings this market model is hegemonic to the point of creating but one dominant identity for the modern university” (LaCapra 2000: 43, 34).
Moreover, I would dispute that this is the only possible and necessary outcome of the new informational global economy with its call for a reconfiguration of knowledge and of the University. As disconcerting as the instrumentalisation of knowledge, information and communication is, there is a long tradition of responses to this process that does not condemn us to start the work of mourning all over again, or to remain transfixed in melancholia.\(^3\)

For purposes of my positive critique, then, I would like to take an excursion into the thinking of Max Weber who, it seems, was faced with the ruin of the University of Culture as early as 1918—with its headcounts and point-scoring type of democratisation, its contract-ethos, and the corresponding pedagogic imperatives:

[... ] German universities, especially the small universities, are engaged in a most ridiculous competition for enrolments. The landlords of rooming houses in university cities celebrate the advent of the thousandth student by a festival, and they would love to celebrate Number Two Thousand by a torchlight procession. The interest in fees [...] is affected by appointments in [...] fields that “draw crowds”. And quite apart from this, the number of students enrolled is a test of qualification [...] Almost everybody thus is affected by the suggestion of the immeasurable blessing and value of large enrolments [...] [The question as to whether a lecturer] is a good or a poor teacher is answered by the enrolments with which the students condescendingly honour him. (Weber 1967b:133)

About the expectations raised and nurtured by American democracy, Weber observes: “The American’s conception of the teacher who faces him is: he sells me his knowledge and his methods for my father’s money, just as the greengrocer sells my mother cabbage” (Weber 1967b:149).

However, far from outrightly condemning this version of the democratisation of education, Weber attempts to find a “grain of salt” in it.

\(^3\) “Left melancholy” struck Walter Benjamin as a narcissistic attachment to a particular political analysis or ideal at the expense of mobilising for change in the present (cf. Brown 1999:20). Wendy Brown supplements the analysis of this state of immobilisation with categories gleaned from Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, in which melancholia (as opposed to mourning) is defined as “the attachment to the object of one’s sorrowful loss that supersedes any desire to recover from this loss” (Brown 1999: 20).
It is worth its salt precisely in so far as it is not dependent on, and actually runs counter to the principle of leadership of an externalised or internalised, actual or symbolic kind. It signals a point of no return that Weber calls “The Disenchantment of the World”. The “Disenchantment of the World” entails a two-fold process: firstly, the exorcism of the sacred from political and knowledge structures; and secondly, the disappearance of all vestiges of the derivatives of the sacred in the political sphere, notably in the structures of political leadership as vocation. The second type of rationalisation, though derived from and reliant on the conditions created by the first type of rationalisation, is absolutely discontinuous with it. The political and knowledge structures of the nation-state have become unreachable, irredeemable, and unreconstructible from the position of the second stage of rationalisation.

Acknowledging both the common transcendental root of the kind of calling (Berufung), the vocation (Beruf) that goes into living for politics (making politics one’s life, in an internal sense), and the teaching of science, Weber presents his twin lectures “Politics as a Vocation” and “Science as a Vocation”, held at the University of Munich in the midst of the political turmoil of 1918 (the mutiny of the Kiel sailors, and the setting up of the revolutionary government of workers’ and soldiers’ councils). Yet, contrary to the reader’s—and probably the audience’s—initial expectation, Weber marks a radical disjuncture that separates the content of these two lectures.

Politics, Weber says, is integrally linked to and based upon the legitimation of violence, which lies at the foundation of the state. The most important form of legitimation is the exercise of domination through the charisma of the leader. The notion of a “calling”, a “vocation”, is derived from this form of the social bond of primary groups; the leader can be the source of this calling inasmuch as he is personally recognised as the internally “called” leader. His followers believe him because he himself raises the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a “cause” (Weber 1967a:84). In addition, he cultivates a sense of “an exclusive personal responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer” (p.95). His sense of responsibility arises from the ethical question of how he could do justice to the power that accrues to him from his appointed task of controlling the violence of the founding of the state. Being confronted with and acting in the knowledge of this question constitutes the ethos of politics as cause (p.117).
Recognising the traits of what we would be inclined to call a responsible teacher, we would expect the same sense and source of “the calling”—the vocation that ethically stands above the profession. Indeed, Weber sketches out such an expectation of the teacher: “[...] I am tempted to say of a teacher […] he stands in the service of ‘moral’ forces; he fulfils the duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility” (Weber 1967b:52).

While the ethical/political and scientific legitimations of knowledge emanate from the same source, however, their strategies diverge. They impose different criteria, categories, procedures, and solicit different affective responses from their scholars.

Weber insists that science cannot exercise the calling that makes a vocation of it for its devoted disciples (Weber 1967b:140).

What is the meaning of science as a vocation, now after all these former illusions, the “way to true being”, the “way to true art”, the “way to true God”, the “way to true happiness”, have been dispelled? (Weber 1967b:143)

Science, Weber is adamant to assert, cannot give an answer to this, as the question is not phrased in such a way that science can answer it. Science does not speak to the believer; unlike the believer, science does not know of miracles and revelation. The teacher of science, even and especially one who practices science as a “vocation”, is neither a leader nor a seer nor a prophet (Weber 1967b:152).

In many respects, “science as a vocation” demands from its practitioner a very different habitus than that imposed by “politics as a vocation”.

[A teacher stands in the service of “moral” forces if] he fulfils the duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility […] he will be the more able to accomplish this, the more conscientiously he avoids the desire to impose upon or suggest to his audience his own stand. (Weber 1967b:152)

The integrity of the “so-called” teacher of science is measured not by his loyalty or belief, but precisely (in contrast to the man living for politics), by his inclination to teach students the distinction between facts
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and values. His teaching, Weber stipulates, should include counter-intuitive, counterfactual and counter-inductive methods (Weber 1967b:147):

One can [...] demand of the teacher that he have the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the value or culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations. These are quite heterogeneous problems. If he asks [...] why he should not deal with both types of problems in the lecture-room, the answer is: because the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform. (Weber 1967b:146)

Modern science leaves behind the metaphysical search for its legitimation; as the legitimacy principle of knowledge is eroded, the conditions of truth move to a position immanent to science’s own language game (Lyotard 1993:29). What, among other things, is interesting in Weber’s outline of this shift is the fact that he puts an analysis of the internal structure of cultural values on a par with the analysis of mathematical or logical relations. At the moment that the analysis of literary texts moves away from intuiting, appreciating, or describing cultural values, it moves very close to the language game of science. That is precisely the domain of literary theory and Comparative Literature:

Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic considerations, or [...] when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment. (de Man 1986:7)

The aesthetic values ascribed to literature are not immediately and automatically compatible with the linguistic structures operative in texts. Thus, the distinction between fact and value that has mapped diverging paths of the sciences and the humanities, has been drawn into the field of literary theory and Comparative Literature itself. In an extended sense, it could be argued that what the scientific investigation and literary theory have in common is the fact that they can allow and account for a conflict between method and knowledge. Both scientific and literary theory can live with the conflict/tension of method and “truth”, without bowing to the
expectation, brought to it from the teaching face, to resolve this tension/conflict.

Literary theory shares, at least in some important aspects, in the pragmatics of postmodern scientific knowledge. And neither is effectively going to be done away with by the “positivism of efficiency” of the University of Excellence. As Lyotard points out,

the pragmatics of postmodern scientific knowledge per se has little affinity with the quest for performativity. Science does not expand by means of the positivism of efficiency. The opposite is true: working on a proof means searching for and “inventing” counterexamples, in other words, the unintelligible; supporting an argument means looking for a “paradox” and legitimating it with new rules in the games of reasoning.

(Lyotard 1993a:54)

In de-linking its disciplinary and institutional practice from national culture and the idea of humanity, Comparative Literature has largely steered away from an expressive or representational notion of language and literature. It has had to deal with the challenge of an encounter of language with the untranslatable, with the unknown, and with the unthought. In that sense, it has moved closer to philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis and to the work of art in its ontological status. This capacity has been stretched by virtualisation where the relation of knowledge to the unknown is being reconfigured. No longer featuring as the other or negative side of knowledge, the unknown has been drawn into knowledge itself (Weber 1999:9). In following and analysing these shifts, whose logic it shares, Comparative Literature is likely to provide the parameters for the kind of imagination—the aesthetic reflexive judgement in advance of concepts—that drives the sciences and could drive the humanities in the postmodern condition. This entails a shift in the status of aesthetic experience, as it is no longer primarily expressed in judgments of taste, but as it comes to intervene in cognitive procedures (Lyotard 1993b:3).4 In the face of a techno-science that apparently erodes the status of the human, the ontological question as to the status of the human resurfaces from the epistemological-historical mists of philosophical anthropology. Similarly, in the face of disappearing epistemological rationale of the notion of

4 Lyotard ascribes this insight to Wellmer and Habermas, in order to subject it to a critique. What he critiques, however, is not so much this insight itself, as the further predications elaborated by Habermas, to the effect that aesthetic experience, thus understood, is to provide the “bridge over the gap separating the discourses of knowledge, ethics, and politics, thus opening the way for a unity of experience” (Lyotard 1993b:3).
representation in literary, cultural and media studies, the ontological question as to “What is art to be (and what is literature to be)?” is being posed. However, this is no longer a question confined to aesthetics, art history, and literary studies; it has become a question of knowledge and being in the postmodern condition. To liberate this question from disciplinary and national confines has been and remains part of the contribution of Comparative Literature and literary theory.

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5 As Lyotard remarks, “[...] the whole field of STS (science-technology-society) appeared within a decade of the discovery of the subject’s immanence in the object it studies and transforms” (Lyotard 1993b:21).

6 Accordingly:
The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of the philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules or categories are what the work or text is investigating. (Lyotard 1993b:15)
Bibliography
The Task of Comparative Literature Today

It is known that Comparative Literature has always been a discipline in permanent crisis. In this context "the crisis" does not have a negative connotation, but more of that ascribed to it by Paul de Man in his *Blindness and Insight* (1971) the crisis as a motor which drives the development of criticism. It seems, however, that this time the crisis—although apocalyptically intoned crisis perception is probably a constant companion of critical consciousness—is perhaps more serious than before. It is not merely that the very institution of Comparative Literature is losing its legitimacy and is therefore exposed to political, financial and institutional pressure and reductions, nor that part of its activity is being shifted to similar disciplines, but its firmness has also been shaken to its foundations, there where the traditional subject\(^1\) of not only Comparative Literature, but also literary research lies: in literature itself. In 1962, Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* declared that the end of the hegemony of literary culture was approaching; for many people the new media are now announcing the real end of literature. Literature is, of course, not a Hegelian substance, given from the beginning of time and forever, but an institution, a concept, in some respects, from the point of view of radical constructivism, also an ideological construct, which is historically bound. This means that its image, role and significance for society are changing, and from this

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\(^1\)It needs to be mentioned here that for most modern comparativists the discipline is not determined by subject, but by method (cf. Tótósy 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Fokkema 1996).
viewpoint its extinction is, of course, not impossible. However, I am not interested in this question at the moment. I would like to focus on the fact that this scepticism, which threw up announcements and theses on "the death of literature" (I believe this is as unfounded as the many announcements of the death of the novel), has also been shifted to Comparative Literature, since in one of the most recent books on this subject we can read that "[t]oday, Comparative Literature in one sense is dead" (Tötösy 1999a:47).

Reactions to this crisis vary. Most apocalyptic visions are not really accepted within Comparative Literature explicitly, but implicitly this notion is contained in various reflections on "Comparative Literature Today". It seems that special weight is given today to the institutional aspect of the crisis, which is connected to the pragmatic level of the discipline. The mainstream answer to this crisis therefore is now of a mainly pragmatic nature. As correctly ascertained by one of the most agile comparativists, deserving credit for self-reflection on the crisis, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek: the "material" or institutional preservation of the discipline Comparative Literature should first of all be socially legitimised,2 and professionally consolidated. According to Tötösy: "The question raised is, how can literary scholarship make itself socially relevant by producing relevant, outstanding, and replicable work for both its own immediate field and the general public?" (Tötösy 1998:21).

In the current study of literature the answers to the above question are different. They are probably also culturally, ideologically and institutionally conditioned. In some environments, literary science is best defended by a retreat to national literary history;3 in some others, obviously,

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2 "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—meager as it may be at present—the study of literature seriously needs to legitimize itself" (Tötösy 1996:6). And: "My basic premise is that in the current situation an approach that promises innovation and where the results of study may have an opportunity to persuade the taxpayer, the politician, indeed, the general public—not to speak of university administrations—to recognize the importance of the study of literature as a socially constructive and necessary educational and live force should be paid serious attention to" (Tötösy 1998:19).

3 "Budgetary restrictions have caused literature departments to define their needs in conservative ways, making it all the more important that Comparative Literature students be able to demonstrate solid training in their primary national literature" ("The Bemheimer Report" in Bernheim 1995:47).
in a shift towards cultural studies. Tótósy himself is in favour of the second option; however, he does not explicitly articulate the answer only with the above alternative, but with a much more grounded and far-reaching approach: he believes that Comparative Literature will be best legitimised when it becomes truly scientific or, more precisely, when it “adopts some of the methods, exactitude, replicability, and objectivity—as questionable as that may be—employed in the natural sciences” (Tótósy 1998:22). By so doing, it will slough off the most grounded reproaches of its not being a serious discipline, based only on intuition, speculation and metaphorical description. Tótósy found the theoretical and methodological model for this in “The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture”.

This proposal, which has been reiterated in new publications by Tótósy with an impressive vitality for a decade, has brought a welcome freshness into Comparative Literature and also resulted in prominent and successful research. As such, it is a great gain for Comparative Literature. However, at the same time it also raises doubts which concern not only the essence, but also the very existence of the discipline. Let me mention only two:

1. The social sciences and the humanities, with much theoretical effort, which represents a great part of philosophical and literary hermeneutics from at least Dilthey onwards, have won the autonomous status of being scientific, in a different way than the natural sciences. This special status also means that the “exactitude, replicability, and objectivity” referred to by Tótósy have a different meaning in the humanities and in natural sciences. (And his remark between the two dashes illustrates that he is aware of this; but this does not have any consequences.) I think that the humanities should retain their autonomous status as far as both the natural sciences and

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4 The Canadian political orientation towards multiculturalism and the acknowledgment of one another is undeniably a strong pragmatic accelerator of the Canadian theoretical and methodological comparative orientation.

5 It is almost ironic that constructivism as a theoretical basis of an empirical approach is also well aware of this; it is precisely because of this that it tries to ascribe a different meaning to the notion of “empiric”.

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social sciences\(^6\) are concerned, until the demand for the abolition of this autonomy is theoretically (and not merely pragmatically!) grounded.

2. A consistent use of the "literature and culture" syntagm, which, in more recent work by Tótösy, has even become just "culture", provides a strong reason, expressed a number of times, for a fear not only of integration with cultural studies, but also an equating with them and their travesty with Comparative Literature. The tactical and pragmatic reasons for such mergence are evident and worth taking into account: contemporary information society is becoming more and more uncontrollable, therefore it borrows its cognitive models\(^7\) from sociology and philosophy. A good example of this is Slavoj Zizek as an analyst of the political with Lacan and genre film. Trendy cultural studies\(^8\) are on the increase, because they offer great service to the state. From this point of view the link to cultural studies would be beneficial to Comparative Literature. However, there is a real danger here, which was unequivocally explained a few years ago in reactions to "The Bernheimer Report": that Comparative Literature completely loses its independence and turns into cultural studies. Many, including Tótösy, believed this danger was exaggerated. The case of Tótösy, on the other hand, demonstrates that the danger is real: a transition from the ten General Principles of "the new Comparative Literature", as presented in his \textit{Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application}, into the ten General Principles of "comparative cultural studies" in articles such as "Toward a Comparative Cultural Studies" and "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies", where principles remain more or

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\(^6\) According to S. Schmidt, literary science should become a social science.

\(^7\) In other words: for the society or the state, cultural studies and social sciences are acquiring a similar role for an individual as that held (or: is still held?) by literature.

\(^8\) Which, ironically, take from Comparative Literature both methodologically and thematically, as has been noticed before.
less the same, and only the word "literature" is replaced by the word "culture", best shows the obvious trend, not only on a lexical level, but on a deeper level. These principles are of a methodological nature. In the first "General Principle" on the methodology of the discipline (of Comparative Literature or comparative cultural studies) Tötösy writes:

The First General Principle of Comparative Literature [comparative cultural studies] is the postulate that in and of the study, pedagogy and research of literature [culture] ... it is not the "what" but rather the "how" that is of importance. This means that it is a method that is of crucial importance in Comparative Literature [comparative cultural studies] in particular and, consequently, in the study of literature and culture as a whole.

(Tötösy 1998: 15-16; 1999b: 97; and also 1999a)

It seems that inasmuch as, in the functionalist context, the discipline is determined by the method, or by the "how", Comparative Literature and comparative cultural studies are actually sharing the same method; thus the two disciplines are therefore identical. In other words; one is redundant, and as chronological development shows it is Comparative Literature that is redundant.

The problem, which I present intentionally somewhat drastically, cannot, like the discussion on "The Bernheimer Report", be reduced merely to an opposition between the contextualisation and decontextualisation of literature, between research of the literariness of literature and the analysis of its interconnections with culture and society, for the simple reason that they are not alternatives. I would definitely be among the first to sign up to Bernheimer’s demand for a greater emphasis on contextualisation, if he had grounded such contextualisation by saying that it

does not mean that comparative study should abandon the close analysis of rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features, but that textually precise

9 Tötösy (1999b:87) speaks of "methodological overlapping of Comparative Literature and cultural studies".
readings should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced.

(“The Bernheimer Report 1993”)

Research into literature in a wider context is undoubtedly an eminent topos of Comparative Literature, and literary concepts of otherness must be applied to general cultural, social, political and other practices or the research of these practices. However, I cannot agree with the definition that “literature” may no longer “adequately describe our subject of study”, nor that literary texts are merely “one discursive practice among many others”. This means that a Comparative Literature research described thus would ascribe only a secondary role and significance to investigations of literariness, or research into literature qua literature. And “The Bernheimer Report” has been accused of doing just that by critics like Peter Brooks and Michael Riffaterre in the publication Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism of which the “Report” forms a part. However, the realisation that literariness is an ideological construct or a functional notion is not an adequate reason for excluding discussions on it from Comparative Literature or to marginalise its significance. To properly argue for such a conviction would demand a lengthy hermeneutical treatise, which cannot be undertaken here. However, let me briefly argue only with the following simplified reflections:

1) All historical definitions of literariness have not only enriched our knowledge of literature, but at the same time they have opened up new cognitive dimensions in general. They also had a wide cultural and intellectual influence (cf. the role of literature as a cognitive or hermeneutic model in Heidegger, Gadamer or Derrida).

2) The “constructivist” realisation that “literariness” is not once and for all a definable, fixed characteristic of literary works, but is always a result of a constructive perception conditioned by cultural, intellectual, anthropological or ideological circumstances does not mean that such a “construction” is necessarily unscientific or unmethodical. As a construction it can be scientific or methodical in the sense given to the words “science” or “method” by Husserl or
Gadamer. Literariness is always a cognitive construction, conditioned by special circumstances, which is synchronised with all other constructions of our historical Lebenswelt.

3) This construction of literariness also influences the self-understanding of Comparative Literature. If we again use a suitable definition by Tötösy: Comparative Literature is today understood as “the recognition of and engagement with the ‘other’” (Tötösy 1996:7). This self-understanding is, of course, conditioned by too many factors to enumerate here. Let me mention only two initiatives which originate in a reflection on the essence of literature, one now almost forgotten, and another, still very vital. The first is signified by Hans Georg Gadamer (and in literary science by Hans Robert Jauss) by the notion of “self-understanding in the Other”, and with his realisation that it is literature that possesses an eminent place in the disclosure of the Other. The second is, of course, signified by Bakhtin with the concepts of heteroglossia and the dialogic, the two forms of otherness, which also find their eminent place in literature, or more precisely, in the novel. This literary otherness is that intellectual foundation upon which Comparative Literature draws; after all, this is finally demonstrated in the overall theme of our congress.

I therefore believe that Comparative Literature should be engaged in research and should with its methodology demonstrate particularly this otherness, which is illustrated in literature and is closely related with its “essence”, namely literariness. This otherness, which can be found in many definitions of literariness, from defamiliarisation to paradox, ambiguity and heteroglossia, is for literature and literary science, and also for Comparative Literature, constitutive. However, as it is always also constructed, functional, relationally conditioned, ideologically marked, and therefore historical and transitory, an attempt to redefine it is an endless task of literary science.

This Sysyphean nature—in the case of natural sciences, definitely unscientific—should be contained in every definition of otherness for yet another reason. The moment otherness is theorised, it is already
appropriated and it ceases to be otherness. A metaphorical expression of this process can be found, for example, in Borges's story, “The God’s Script”. It is even more precisely illustrated by the so-called “paradox of the tourist”. This paradox is about a culturally and ecologically conscious, white European tourist, who desires a truly primal experience and looks for a village in the jungle that has never seen a white European tourist: but the moment he finds such a village, it is no longer a village that has never seen a white European tourist. Or if we formulate in slightly more serious terms: “Is it at all possible to understand the other culturally?”, as Lutz Danneberg asks (1996:100), or more generally: is it possible to understand the Other in its otherness, without appropriating it and therefore taking away its otherness?

This scepticism is not unfounded. As is well known, pluralism, multiculturalism and post-colonialism have been accused of an appropriation by Eurocentric discourse, which, if I may state just one of the many arguments, with the cunning of the Hegelian mind, by reflecting on the peripheral and marginality, actually merely consolidates its status as the centre and, as is known, it externalises into the Other only to integrate it into its own identity. The concept of Otherness in theory, including Comparative Literature, remains exposed to this danger. This can be proved in practice by, to take only one example, the many treatments of Latin-American Magical Realism which explicitly emphasise its otherness, yet the writing characterised by this term became reduced to “Sameness”, whether by expanding the concept of Magical Realism to authors such as Calvino, Proust, Kafka and so on, or by placing it within a Eurocentric periodic model, namely postmodernism. Even in the period and in a discipline in which a strong sense of constructionism and the ideological markedness of our perception is predominant, it is obviously hard to avoid this danger. It seems that—both literary and other—otherness can again and again only be approached with intuition, metaphorical expressions, despite Tökösy’s (1996:11) categorical rejection, and interpretation, which do not try to reduce it to an a priori determined system of concepts and taxonomies, but—and here I am referring to Heidegger—let it be in its otherness.

This does not mean that Comparative Literature has to renounce its scientific pretensions. Comparative Literature ought to research literature from all aspects and at all levels. Therefore it necessarily also contains an
attempt to scientifically systemise its subject, to establish a terminology, scientific and empirical methodology and the like. As comparative it also has to maintain contact with other discourses: historical, sociological, philosophical, culturological; and other arts. However, the very thing from which it takes its vitality and identity, and with which it finally also tries to legitimise itself, i.e. Otherness, as the “surplus” of literary work (allow me to use this old-fashioned expression) by definition cannot be reduced to a discourse dictated by exact sciences. Comparative Literature has to follow new trends in the theory of science, its methodology, and in social development; it is also true that at a time which is unfavourable to it, Comparative Literature has to be pragmatic. However, it is necessary for its identity that it remain emphatically open also to that which addresses it from literary art as the Other.

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On Barren Ground: Multiculturalism and Comparative Literature Beyond 2000: A Critical Agenda

The last quarter of the twentieth century has witnessed profound changes, such as have not been seen since the previous global restructuring (industrial and economic) more than a century ago. Although some of the problems society is confronted with have been prophetically foreshadowed by artists, thinkers and visionaries, the speed with which these changes have taken place on a global scale in the past thirty years has made a fair and equitable translation of scientific and technological development into broad-based social benefit impossible. As a matter of fact, material and social circumstances for many millions from the lower classes (and entire countries and even continents) have alarmingly deteriorated and the economic disparity between the rich and the poor has intensified as reflected in the North-South Divide (Thirlwall 1989). Unfortunately, it is not only the disparity in the distribution of wealth, but also worldwide discrimination based on race, ethnic origin, gender, class, language, culture, sexual preference and disability associated with it which causes grave concern.

While solutions to these issues must be found in the first instance on political level, educational strategies are equally (or perhaps even more) important for the promotion of a fairer and more just and humane world in the twenty-first century. However laudable well-meaning expressions of goodwill and advocacy of democratic principles and respect and tolerance towards others might be, they alone will have little impact on the status quo, locally and globally, as Bertold Brecht already pointed out convincingly many years ago in his play Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe (Saint Joan of the Stockyards). The main objective must rather be a sustained and educationally oriented promotion of critical self-consciousness and the
individual's self-realisation as a social being in the context of dominant political and economic forces and all-pervasive ideological manipulation.

In the light of the global promotion of thoughtless leisure activities and anti-intellectual mindsets, such an undertaking will be very difficult. Also, the growing stranglehold, which free-market economists are gaining on educational institutions worldwide through privatisation and sponsorship, is bound to further complicate the situation. The danger of forcing universities more and more on a commercial footing has been highlighted by the Australian Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans in 1996. Recent developments in Australia show that his warnings have been well founded. The commercialisation of education at the expense of the traditional university will have global implications (cf. Ryckmans 1996). In the overall strategy of eradicating prevailing forms of discrimination in order to meet the challenges of a world of advanced technology, global demographic mobility and unfair distribution of resources, the study of cultural diversities will have to play a key role. While this is by no means a novel idea, past and present approaches will have to be reviewed and restructured, if we are to achieve a heightened understanding of human nature, race, class, gender and power relations, an understanding necessary for the search of social justice.

The interest in intercultural studies goes back to the early nineteenth century and gained momentum about the middle of the nineteenth century and was motivated primarily by intellectual curiosity. S.S. Prawer provides perhaps the most succinct historical overview:

When Latin lost its position as a “universal” language, and growing nationalism divided Europe more and more, comparative literary studies assumed new functions: that of restoring a lost unity and universality, or that of enriching narrow native traditions by beneficial contacts with others. Increasingly, too, comparatists looked beyond the Western world: to the Indian classics at first, with the German Romantics; to Arab, Persian and even Chinese literature, with Goethe; and in our time to other far eastern as well as to African literary and oral traditions. As new and subtle methods of analysis and classification benefited literary studies of all kinds, comparisons across linguistic frontiers were used to shape (by contrast) a sense of native traditions, to alter (by example) the course of a particular national literature and to construct (with unrestricted width of reference) a general theory of literature. (Prawer 1973:10-11)
The desire to look beyond Europe for cultural achievement and literary excellence was provocative to say the least in nineteenth century imperial Europe. The famous African writer Léopold Sédar Senghor (1968) highlights the attitude of European hegemonic thinking in his reference to Lord Macaulay’s infamous dictum on Arabic and Indian literature and culture:

I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. (Senghor 1968)

and in his own experience as a student in a French school in Dakar. Unfortunately, cultural Eurocentrism still characterises the majority of studies in comparative literature today, a fact readily acknowledged by experts.

This experience of nationalism as a dividing and destructive force again generated a strong desire for unity among nations in the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the excesses of nationalism and fascism of the Second World War, the need for international understanding and co-operation gained momentum, not only in Europe but worldwide, culminating in the foundation of international bodies designed to avert conflict between nations and to solve global problems on a political, economic and cultural level. The urgency of co-operation was further intensified by a large-scale displacement of peoples during and after the war and massive population shifts from rural areas to industrial urban centres across state and even continental boundaries, which, in turn, contributed to the gradual loss of that ethnic and cultural homogeneity which has been promoted by the social sciences. As a consequence, anthropological research into post-war industrial society began to use the term “multicultural” in defining characteristics of social groups with diverse cultural backgrounds. However, most societies still define themselves in terms of national identity, although their definitions hardly went beyond shallow generalisations and stereotypes. In practice, most Western societies in the post-war period considered themselves monocultural, and minority groups (or “the other”
were expected to assimilate voluntarily for economic reasons in order to gain access to the dominant culture. (The “White Australia Policy” is a good example outside Europe, although it is essentially a reflection of British conditions and attitudes). This situation was further aggravated by the legacy of Europe’s colonial past, since an important sector of the population in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal and Belgium had its cultural origin in former colonies, while other countries had considerable populations of “guest workers”, refugees and immigrants who, with their families and children became new permanent settlers, willing to accept the risk of losing their cultural identity.

Parallel to the growing political integration of Europe was the resurgence of nationalism and ethnic identity. The voices of discontent became increasingly strident and at times led to violence. Such violence was often deeply rooted in history, as for example, in the Balkans, the Basque region and Northern Ireland. Also, at a time when acts of violence, discrimination and abuse of human rights resulting from cultural, political or religious differences were displayed by the media day after day, individuals were harmed globally by an uninhibited market economy in the name of economic efficiency. The desire for a more humane society gained momentum particularly among exiled intellectuals and young people dedicated to the quest for cultural diversity and social justice. Their efforts had considerable influence on the discussion of multiculturalism in the sixties and seventies. The establishment of “comparative literature” programmes and intercultural studies as academic disciplines in the United States and Europe is closely related to it and to a large degree the result of social and ethnic exclusion and an “inward diaspora” (Steiner 1994:7; Gossman & Spariosu 1994).

As a result, multiculturalism has become a topic of public discussion, being debated in the media and in the political arena, with varying intensity and outcomes ever since. As multiculturalism has been promoted and misused for many conflicting reasons and agendas and charged with widely differing meanings and connotations depending on the ideological point of view (e.g. challenge to traditional, white male European value systems in the eyes of conservatives), some of the more important ideological positions of multiculturalism must be defined in order to avoid the kind of misunderstanding that is still skilfully used by opponents of
multiculturalism in the promotion of their own position and the creation of the illusion of social justice.

In light of the burgeoning literature on this subject and the diversity of critical opinion, it will suffice here to refer to some of the models developed by experts in the field, be it from a historical, educational, political or philosophical perspective (Sleeter & Grant 1994; Carby 1992). Peter McLaren has perhaps most succinctly characterised Western multiculturalism and identified five key ideological positions: conservative multiculturalism or monoculturalism, left-essentialist multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, pluralist multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism (McLaren 1994). A detailed discussion of McLaren’s multicultural models can be found in Joel L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg’s outstanding study Changing Multiculturalism (1997). Generally speaking, the first four models of multiculturalism are intrinsically flawed as they only partially, and in varying degrees, address the key problem areas of discrimination and deprivation, namely race, class, gender, language, culture, sexual preference, and disability.

Conservative multiculturalists or perhaps more accurately “monoculturalists” represent white, middle-class thinking with strong views on the superiority of Western patriarchal culture and civilisation (including religion). Poverty and social marginalisation are generally attributed to personal incompetence, insufficient motivation and lack of family values, and rarely to flaws in the dominant culture. Their favoured solution to problems associated with tensions between mainstream interests and minority groups is the “melting pot” or “assimilation” model which has been promoted in many Western countries until recently (e.g. Australia). Unfortunately, it still has many supporters in white upper-middle-class constituencies. Since in their eyes the roots of social failure and marginalisation are to be found primarily in the individual, no one else can be made accountable:

White supremacy, patriarchy or class elitism do not exist in this construction and, as a result, no need exists for individuals from the dominant culture to examine the production of their own consciousness or the nature of their white, male or class privilege. Males, for example, do not have to consider their complicity in the patriarchal marginalisation of women or examine the competitiveness, depersonalisation and violence that
many times accompany patriarchal domination. Since Western societies are superior to all others, the last thing needed is widespread reform.

(Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:4)

The “common cultural model” advocated by Western middle-class monoculturalists or conservative multiculturalists (backed up globally by the economic interests of multi-national companies) “in defence” of Western culture and traditions mirrors in many ways 19th-century imperialism (colonialism) and has been exposed as such. Intercultural studies and comparative literature are well placed to do so. However, present teaching strategies and methodologies must be reviewed and adjusted to the needs of the new century. The work carried out by critical multiculturalists (which will be discussed later in this paper) could assist in determining new critical directions, particularly with reference to an increased sociological and historical-political contextualisation of the discipline, an approach rejected by René Wellek and the “new critics” (Wellek 1953:4).

While liberal multiculturalists reject the notion of white superiority embraced by conservative monoculturalists, their programmatic belief and commitment to universal “sameness” and “humanity” is just as dangerous since it distracts critical attention from the manipulative impact of political and economic interest groups on the construction of public consciousness. As a matter of fact, the promotion of a feeling of impending multicultural harmony discretely undermines critical efforts to discuss questions of racism, sexism, class-bias and economic domination by corporate and private wealth in support of the status quo. The notion of a strict separation of education and politics and “educational neutrality” is widespread in Western nations, particularly in universities and higher educational institutions. The strategy of “neutralising” the educational identity-forming process by isolating it from history and societal (particularly social) contexts, as widely reflected in the decontextualisation of cultural (literary) studies, is designed to blind (and numb) the critical mind to inequality and discrimination:

At the end of the twentieth century, ideological and dominant cultural discursive power holds an exaggerated impact on the production of subjectivity. By ignoring the webs of power in which race, class and gender operate, liberal multiculturalism ends up touting a human relations
curriculum that conflates white racism toward blacks with black racism towards whites. (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:12)

Such ideological camouflage constitutes another important objective comparative literature will have to embrace if its practice is to be challenged. Also, much more attention will have to be given to the mass media, particularly to globally syndicated network television programmes and their cultural domination and destruction of cultural and linguistic diversity (Adams 1999:32). The right-wing liberal’s belief that a fair and just society can be achieved by reason alone (the rationalist approach), cut off from social and cultural bonds and traditions, is cleverly designed to hide widespread discriminatory social practice in Western culture and is a major obstacle to democratic multiculturalism and humane social diversity. The exposure of such practice must therefore become a major objective if comparative literature is to have social relevance at present and in the century to come. And since the electronic media, especially film and television, constitute a central role in the dissemination and promotion (or prevention) of liberal multiculturalism, comparative literature should carefully consider inclusion of television material and film in its curricula and sustained sensitisation of students in these matters.

Pluralist multiculturalism represents another important perspective of present-day Western multiculturalism. As it seems to reflect the mainstream notion of multiculturalism, it is often identified with some justification in the wider community as an exemplary model of multiculturalism. Although it has certain attitudes in common with those of liberal multiculturalism (e.g. Eurocentrism), it is essentially different in so far as it subscribes to cultural pluralism and diversity, and not to the belief of “liberal multiculturalists” in universal sameness. The ideological model of pluralist multiculturalists, however, also has numerous flaws which are difficult to discover in the overall pursuit of race and gender differences and social diversity as highlighted by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997:15):

In the context of identity politics that have arisen in Western societies since the liberation movements of the 1960s, advocates of pluralism argue that democracy involves not merely the concern with the rights of all citizens but the history and culture of traditionally marginalised groups as well. Pluralism in such a construction becomes a supreme social virtue,
especially in the postmodern landscape where globalisation and fast and dynamically flexible (post-Fordist) capitalism are perceived as pushing the international community towards a uniform, one-world culture. Diversity becomes intrinsically valuable and is pursued for its own sake to the point that difference is exoticised and fetishised.

(Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:15)

Nevertheless, pluralist multiculturalism is anxious to dismantle prejudice by familiarising mainstream thinking with value systems and beliefs outside dominant culture and experience, thus facilitating communicative exchange between marginalised groups and mainstream majority. While activities such as reading literature of minority groups (including indigenous people), studying recipe books (this is also to a large extent the kind of multiculturalism promoted by the government, states and federal in Australia) and preparing ethnic dishes, promoting interest and pride in ethnic customs, costumes and cultural backgrounds may be seen as an important first, preparatory step in the development of multicultural literacy, they contribute little to the actual change of existing conditions, since the impact of socioeconomic forces on society as a whole is not addressed (cf. Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:16). It is therefore not surprising that pluralist multiculturalism has gained considerable intellectual respectability, while at the same time the social and material (educational) circumstances of marginalised groups are continuously deteriorating worldwide. But this is of minor relevance, as pluralist multiculturalism functions outside socioeconomic and political configurations, which is welcomed by those who ultimately determine the fate of nation-states and societies. Pluralist multiculturalism acts to some extent as a successful and trusted organiser and facilitator of package tours to multicultural landmarks and tourist sites which generate interest, but without lasting social impact:

A multiculturalism that operates within these pluralist boundaries will always serve the status quo as an unthreatening construction that consumes the cuisine, art, architecture and fashion of various subcultures. In many ways pluralist multiculturalism castrates difference, transforming it into a safe diversity.

(Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:17)
In contrast to the inclusive perspective of pluralist multiculturalism, “left-essentialist multiculturalism” concerns itself exclusively with oppressed and marginalised groups, each group being considered on its own, for example, in women’s studies, African studies, indigenous studies, gay and lesbian studies. The single focus on one particular form of deprivation or discrimination gives left-essentialist multiculturalist ideology a fundamentalist bias and alienates it from a broader democratic strategy for cultural diversity and social justice. Also marginalised (and oppressed) minority groups are normally not in a position to break free and assert themselves in dominating cultures without assistance from sympathetic supporters from outside the group concerned. For that reason, a great deal of the very valuable work carried out by left-essentialist multiculturalists does not achieve the desired result:

Most oppressed groups in Western societies simply do not possess the power to shape political, social and educational policy without help. At the same time, the politics of authenticity allows unsympathetic outsiders to go unchallenged in their anti-democratic or problematic race, sexual preference and gender-related beliefs and activities.

(Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:18; Gray 1995)

In the context of the different models of multiculturalism outlined so far, “critical multiculturalism” is without doubt the most significant one in many respects. It has its theoretical roots in the Frankfurt School and the works of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Leo Löwenthal and Herbert Marcuse and their critical preoccupation with (economic and political) power and domination in industrial society in light of the German depression and the rise of fascism in the 1920s (cf. Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:23). White feminists are a particularly good example to illustrate the counterproductive exclusiveness of their critical strategy (cf. Butler & Scott 1992). Critical multiculturalists learned from the works of the Frankfurt School that consciousness (identity) construction takes place predominantly in an ideological and social context and in material circumstances, that is to say, an individual’s self-development as a social being is contextualised. It is therefore of paramount importance for the individual to understand the dynamic interplay between personal and social reality:
An individual who has gained such consciousness understands how and why his or her political opinions, socioeconomic class role, religious beliefs, gender role and racial self-image are shaped by dominant perspectives.

(Arato & Gebhardt 1978; Connerton 1980)

The prime responsibility for bringing this about, however, rests with education which must encourage students to critically examine all existing perspectives and "to reflect upon the contradictions they uncover among them" (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:23). Critical multiculturalism is not prescriptive and regulative. Rather it provides a framework of principles in which problems can be critically dissected, analysed and discussed:

When Western schooling is viewed from this perspective, the naïve belief that such education provides consistent socioeconomic mobility for working-class and non-white students disintegrates. Indeed, the notion that education simply provides a politically neutral set of skills and an objective body of knowledge also collapses. (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997:22)

Critical multiculturalism is thus also diametrically opposed to the conservative white fundamentalist Christian mindset that promotes an intolerant brand of monoculturalism with frightening success in some Western countries. Since critical multiculturalism in many ways draws upon the analytical methodology of cultural studies in order to gain a deeper understanding of race, class and gender dynamics in social contexts, comparative literature could be greatly enriched as an academic discipline by adopting some of the principles and perspectives of a critical multiculturalism, among them the endeavour to be not only academic students of culture but also initiators of social justice and change.

In order to identify aspects of critical concern with regard to the educational effectiveness and social relevance to comparative literature as an academic discipline, it is necessary to examine some of its basic tenets and methodological practices. Fortunately or unfortunately, there has never been (and there isn’t at present) general agreement as to the exact meaning of "comparative literature", used casually by Matthew Arnold in a letter to his sister in 1848 (Arnold used the plural form, i.e. "comparative literatures". For a detailed study of this question see Wellek 1970:1ff.).
Arguments about the scope, objectives, methods, and requirements of comparative literature have characterised the discipline from the very beginning. However, it cannot be the purpose of this paper to try to trace the origin of these disputes and their development and attempted resolutions past and present (Wellek 1949; Weisstein 1968; Prawer 1973), as the observations presented here are oriented towards the future.

Nevertheless, a few attempts to delineate and define comparative literature as a scholarly discipline will have to be considered as a starting point and the basis for the proposed changes and modifications. René Wellek’s (1949:50) characterisation of comparative literature as “literary history on a super-national scale” identifies suppression of provincial sentiments and narrowness of perspective as major hurdles. As René Wellek’s classic study is still widely used as a standard reference book in universities, his views still exert considerable influence. His almost exclusive emphasis on historical perspectives (influenced by Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948)) raises serious concern because of this still dominant perspective of comparative literary practice at the expense of more relevant contemporary texts. Exclusive historicisation of comparative literature deprives the literary text (and the reader) of the immediacy of human experience as reflected in the text in order to keep it “safely” at bay in a neutral distance. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the well-known contemporary German poet and writer H. M. Enzensberger (1964:13) accommodates poetry in a “museum which echoes with the ghost-like presence of Catullus; in which one can find images that derive from Indian or bantu poetry; in which there are reminiscences of Japanese haiku, the choruses of Greek tragedies, the verse of the Vedas or the Metaphysical Poets, the art of fairy tales and that of madrigals”.

While Enzensberger’s *musée imaginaire* contains voices from different cultures, traditions, and forms of artistic expression (including music), René Wellek’s critical horizon and interest is essentially Eurocentric (Western) and mirrors another still widespread practice in comparative literature, which even a cursory glance at current research (periodicals included) will confirm. The same also applies to George Steiner’s approach to comparative literature. Eurocentricity and historical bias are two major problem areas which ought to be dealt with urgently in a review of
comparative literature as a relevant and effective scholarly discipline for the 21st century. Directly related to this matter is the process of canonisation of poets and writers. Also, the selection of worthy candidates for “beatification” (i.e. elevation to literary “sainthood”) is rather narrow and predictably Western (Eurocentric) oriented and predominantly male. Edmund Wilson’s famous study in imaginative literature entitled *Axel’s Castle* (1954) is exemplary in this respect. It focuses on white male icons of European literary culture and civilisation (W. B. Yeats, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Axel, and Rimbaud) and includes no women except Gertrude Stein. Many scholars of comparative literature have followed Edmund Wilson’s example and still do. Not only in major publications, but also in the daily lecture routines in universities worldwide.

The problem is even more conspicuous in one particular aspect of comparative literature, normally referred to as “world literature”, a translation of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*, which is used here in a sense that has little to do with Goethe’s vision of *Weltliteratur*. (According to Wellek (1949:48f.) the term was used by Goethe to indicate a time when all literatures would become one. It is the ideal of the unification of all literatures into one great synthesis where each nation would play its part in a universal concert. But Goethe himself saw that this was a very distant ideal, that no single nation would be willing to give up its individuality. Wellek also cites another use of “world literature”, namely the “great treasure house” of the classics such as Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Goethe, whose reputation has spread all over the world and has lasted considerable time.) This is a major area of research in which Western cultural and literary superiority is overtly demonstrated and class and gender bias openly displayed. For example, Karl Otto Conrady (1966:130-33) has in his still widely marketed *Einführung in die neuere deutsche Literaturwissenschaft* a chapter headed “Weltliteratur”, in which he lists seventy authors: all European, all male, all white and not one woman. A similar bias, though more subtle and balanced with some modest gender and non-Western representation, can be found in Gero von Wilpert’s *Lexikon der Weltliteratur* (1993) and also many other standard works of this kind. Wilpert’s volume lists well over 4 800 major works of “world literature” and more than 1 700 authors, and the most eminent literary scholars are not
immune to such practice as Wolfgang Kubin (1985:9-11) has pointed out. Unfortunately, this trend also leads to serious distortion of cultural reality.

The Eurocentric emphasis in the past and present paradigm of world literature requires correction since it perpetuates Western hegemonic thinking and domination on a cultural level. Moreover, the emphasis on “rationality” in Western thinking (at the expense of the emotional, intuitive and creative dimension in social relationships) and its uniquely monolithic mode (e.g., religious monotheistic exclusiveness) is at odds with the fundamentals of human experience in other cultures. The imposition of Western (Eurocentric) norms therefore devalues non-Western cultures in order to supersede them eventually. Although the awareness of this problem is by no means new, the steady enlargement of the canon of world literature in favour of Western bias increases the urgency of corrective action which should involve greater emphasis on differentiation at the expense of hierarchisation and on “contrastive” methodologies for the purpose of identifying and delineating “the other”. Also related to this issue is the still widely used concept of the “nation-state” as an essential building block in the world literature model and research associated with it. At a brief glance, such an approach seems to provide neat demarcation lines for the comparativist, but the concept is flawed and contrived in many respects and should also be reviewed together with the concept of “national literatures” as a matter of urgency (Clüver 1986:14-24; Steinmetz 1985:2-19; Jauss 1969:44-56). Apart from unashamed bias with regard to author selection (canonisation), there is still the vexed question of scope, method and objectives in studying “world literature”, not to mention the role of “national literature” and “translation” in the overall critical strategies of comparative literature as a scholarly discipline and its potential of widening the student’s understanding of human nature and social relationships.

In his “working definition”, S. S. Prawer defines comparative literary study as:

[...] an examination of literary texts (including works of literary theory and criticism) in more than one language, through an investigation of contrast, analogy, provenance or influence; or a study of literary relations and communications between two or more groups that speak different languages. (Prawer 1973:8)
While the reference to "more than one language" is dismissed by the author more as a nuisance requirement (complicating particularly the situation of bilingual authorship, as for example in the case of Samuel Beckett, and in diglossic situations), this aspect, nevertheless, has been discussed at great length by, as Prawer (1973:9) points out, comparativists such as Claude Pichois, A. M. Rousseau and others. However, much more important is Prawer's definitive focus on "contrasts", "analogies", "provenance", "influence", "relations" and "communication", which has its origin in the very narrow and inflexible model of comparative literature advocated by the orthodox Paris School chiefly represented by Paul van Tieghem, Jean-Marie Carré, Marius-François Guyard, Claude Pichois and André-M. Rousseau. It is not so much the historical domination of all facets of investigation promoted by French comparativists that is of concern, but the rather fuzzy and nebulous concepts of the proposed objectives and the positivistic insistence on factuality, that is, concrete, factual data (rapports de fait). As the historical dimension is predominantly one of locating authors and texts in a timeline and ordering them chronologically, the relevance and impact of the historical (social) background on the identity formation process of individuals and groups received little or no attention. Comparative literature was to a large degree preoccupied with the diligent collection of often more than doubtful (i.e. conjectured) data on influences, personal and textual affinities, spiritual relationships, folkloric themes and motifs and the spirit of the time. Also, the desire for "literary security" led to extensive efforts to discover and collect literary parallels, analogies and similarities without putting them into a larger social or cultural context.

The scholarly approach promoted by the French comparativists still has a powerful influence on teaching and research in present comparative literature, particularly in respect to the decontextualisation of the study of literary texts from their social, political, economic and cultural background and issues such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and "otherness". Admittedly, some progress has been made in this respect, but the advocates of comparative literature and multicultural studies and language departments have to co-operate much more closely and become focused if their disciplines are to have relevance and moral justification in the 21st century. In order to gain relevance, comparativists will have to
abandon their ivory-tower position of “pure” research (that is, research without socioeconomic relevance and social orientation) in order to analyse the way it fits into a larger whole and how insights (results) gained articulate with broader discursive and institutional contexts. Such a dialogue will be of crucial importance if Samuel Huntington’s (1996) visionary prediction of political developments in the 21st century as Clash of Civilisations is to be taken seriously. The bleak picture Huntington paints in his book and in discussions in defence of his views worldwide has direct implications for all culturally and socially non-homogenous societies, that is, for most societies. However, the solutions offered by Huntington are retrograde and counterproductive, as they do not address the real problem underlying the socioeconomic malaise and conflict. The fear of “otherness” prevalent in most societies and the hatred and marginalisation resulting from it, has its roots in ignorance and lack of understanding. For example, Western ignorance, prejudice and distrust with regard to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism and their cultural traditions is frightening, and a major contributing factor to current problems nationally and globally. While solutions cannot be found instantly, a constructive dialogue between alienated cultures, a genuine opening up to the “other” or the “strange” and “foreign”, will assist in overcoming social acrimony and conflict. A great deal can and ought to be done in this respect in the field of education, in human relations, intellectual and emotional sensitisation and strategies in cultivating legitimate concern, empathy and cooperation. Comparative literature is well placed as a facilitator and eminently qualified to turn Samuel Huntington’s predicted clash into a productive dialogue in Goethe’s sense of cultural oneness.

Comparative literature must highlight culture (art, music, literature) as an inclusive living structure (not museum exhibit) that shapes the way people live, view themselves and understand the world around them. This will only be possible if comparativists no longer focus exclusively on cultural icons selected by a minority representatives of privileged Western “nation-states” in order to seriously and constructively confront the development of the electronic mass media which have produced new ways of seeing (and manipulating) the reality people live in. It will mean that comparative literature (together with multicultural studies) must examine the values that audio-visual media produce, market and distribute in the new
culture of television, film, CDs, computer networks, advertising and so on. Of course, this does not mean that literary artefacts will no longer be studied. On the contrary.

But unless comparative literature succeeds in identifying and developing new paradigms based on a more comprehensive (inclusive) perspective of society and the study of culture as a living process that shapes the way people live, view themselves and understand the world around them (including aspects of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, media, to name the most important ones), it will fail to become an even modest instrument in the promotion of humanism in an age of rapid global change and the potential seeds of a fairer, more decent and humane world will fall on barren ground.

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Bibliography


Comparative Literary Histories?

My presentation is the product of an ongoing reflection on the theoretical and practical problems in writing literary history today. I started out some thirty-five years ago as a cultural historian and a historian of ideas because I was dissatisfied with the exclusively literary concentration of the tradition of New Criticism that was then dominant in Europe and America. But over the years I gradually became disillusioned with the results and became interested in Foucauldian and New Historical approaches. More recently, I have become involved in the ICLA volumes on the comparative history of literature in the European languages and in a comparative history of the literary cultures in East-Central Europe. These involvements have forced me to reflect on the possibilities and limits of writing literary history today. I have presented some of these ideas at meetings in Rome, Toronto, Amsterdam, Paris, Aberdeen and Columbia (SC), as well as the Leiden ICLA Congress. I will take up certain themes and problems from these earlier presentations, but I shall present new ideas and perspectives. All of this material will eventually go into the introduction I am preparing for the volume on East-Central Europe, of which I, together with Marcel Cornis-Pope, am the editor and which will be published by the Oxford University Press.¹

¹ Editor's comment: The volume referred to is part of "A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages", sponsored by the ICLA. It is Vol. XIX in the series and inaugurates the subseries on Literary Cultures: History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Juxtapositions and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries, vol. I, edited by Marcel Cornis Pope & John Neubauer. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins 2004.—For an extended version of this essay see pp. 2-18.
As I have argued elsewhere, the first modern literary histories that the Schlegel brothers and Coleridge presented around 1800 were cosmopolitan, comparative and nonprofessional. By the latter I mean that these men had no institutional status yet. The establishment of university chairs for the teaching of literature and the writing of literary histories and the introduction of vernacular literature into the school curricula took place in the nineteenth century. This institutionalisation of literary studies was a tremendous boon to literature but a price was to be paid: literature was put to the service of national purposes; it came to be seen as one of the most authentic expressions of the national spirit.

Conventional opinion holds that these and other cultural and institutional changes came about first in the “more developed” western part of Europe and spread from there to the more backward eastern and southern parts. I beg to differ. The institutionalisation of literature was not primarily an economic question but one of national identity. The two undoubtedly hang together, but my preliminary conclusion is that the institutionalisation of literature proceeded relatively slowly in England and France, Europe’s most stable and industrially advanced countries, as well as in nations like the Netherlands, which, in the early nineteenth century, had no serious problems with their national self-image. In the forefront of institutionalising literature were societies that had rather problematic national identities: Germany, Italy, most East-Central European and some Scandinavian countries. In these countries, the process of institutionalising literature was part of a struggle for a national language, a national culture and a unified political structure. I suggest that this institutionalisation involved similar mechanisms and elements, even if there were important local differences in timing, tempo and concrete social details.

Of what then did the national project of institutionalising literature consist in countries with problematic national identity? If, as Ernest Gellner argues, nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist” (1964:169), then the poets, philologists and other agents involved in constructing a national literature were key inventors. They constructed two distinct elements: texts and institutions. The former, the text construction, consisted of several distinct activities: 1) a linguistic revival, 2) a revival of vernacular poetry, 3) the (re)construction of a national literary past consisting of the...
of oral poetry and of medieval and baroque vernacular literature, 4) the canonisation of national poets and, last but not least, 5) the writing of national literary histories.

Each national literary programme started with the revival of the vernacular language and the writing of poetry in the vernacular. The literary philologists contributed to the national programme in three main ways. They were first and foremost literary archaeologists who dug into the national past, recovering from it forgotten oral and written vernacular texts, many of them consisting of heroic songs and ballads, about ancient struggles against invading foreign powers. To call these activities discoveries or even rediscoveries is potentially misleading, for the finding was not by serendipity. The philological work of editing and publishing the texts was shaped by a national demand for foundational texts that would project a proper national self-image. The final outcome was a product of the nineteenth century, often even a forgery, not an objet trouvée.

Two further philological tasks pertained to more modern literature. On the one hand, the philologists re-established texts from the Middle Ages and the Baroque, which, on the one hand, often represented glorious chapters in the national history, on the other they chose and canonised national poets. In the first phase of compiling the programme of national literature this often meant the revival of an older poet, while the second phase led to the apotheosis of a great nineteenth-century national poet. All nations needed national idols and the philologists readily sculptured the monuments for them.

The philological contribution to the national project culminated in the writing of national literary histories, for these linked the basic texts, the revival of medieval texts, the story of the linguistic revival and the canonisation of national poets into grand narratives. The story of the national literature synthesised all the literary elements and gave an uplifting account of what came to be regarded as a mirror held to the soul of the nation. “I cannot claim that I can reconstruct the soul of the whole nation, but I shall attempt to offer some hints about the changes it underwent, as reflected in the literature of the last nine centuries”, wrote the Polish literary historian Piotr Chmielowski (1989:23). Others saw their task in similar terms.
While the details and the circumstances varied from country to country, the genre had an archetypal structure and a set of stock roles that could, of course, be filled by different actors. The nation assumed in these grand narratives of literary history the role of a collective hero or “logical subject” (Ricoeur 1984:97), whose birth, growth, maturing and occasional decline was recounted in an organic, developmental history, where each stage followed on the previous ones. What Croce says about de Sanctis’s great *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-71) is true of most of them: “[H]e wrote a history, whose protagonist was exactly Italian literature, even Italy; the individual writers were presented only as phases in the general development” (de Sanctis 1925:433). Though the biological metaphor of development injected (explicitly or implicitly) an element of inevitability into these histories, they were not necessarily smoothly linear, as many contemporary critics claim. David Perkins exaggerates the restrictions on the organic model by claiming that the notion of development excluded “jumps, reversals, returns, clean slates, or beginnings” (1992:2). Such exclusion was not demanded even in the metaphor’s native environment, namely biology. Indeed, the story could include many patterns of events and could be cast in the form of a divine *Bildungsroman* or a comedy, a drama of fate or even a national Golgotha. Common to all these scenarios was merely that their consistency and coherence demanded the suppression or exclusion of everything that threatened their integrity. In this sense Ernest Renan can claim that collective amnesia is as important to a nation as shared remembrances (1947:892).

The national literary projects also involved the founding and developing of literary institutions. Every national project aimed at establishing nationally representative key literary institutions: the National Academy, the National University, the National Library and the National Theatre. These were to become symbols of the national culture, turning the leading city into a genuine national capital.

The founding of these national institutions, together with the development of governmental structures, turned the capital into a symbolic site of the nation. At the same time, however, this cultural capital of the nation also functioned as a gathering place of foreigners and a site of cosmopolitanism. Every capital city had its German language newspaper (the venerable and liberal *Pester Lloyd* in Budapest was published from...
1853 until W.W.II) and each of them attracted foreigners, many of them from the suppressed minorities. Jan Kollár, a leading champion of Slovak national consciousness was, for instance, a minister at the Lutheran church at the Deák tér in Budapest. As a consequence, almost every East-Central European country witnessed a populist rural movement that vilified industrialisation, urban decadence and the immigrant Germans, Jews and other foreigners, while glorifying the countryside, where the healthy roots of the national oral culture were to be found.

II

The national literary histories that I have just described flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but came under severe attacks in the latter, especially in the just concluded second half of it. The criticism was not only directed against the national scope of the histories but against some basic traditional assumptions of literary history in general. Since I have dealt with this vast and complex subject elsewhere I shall skip it this time. Suffice to say that two major directions of literary history emerged in the last decades: one inspired by the reception theory and the other by Michel Foucault. The enormous promise of the former has, in my opinion, not materialised, whereas Foucault has become directly and indirectly productive in the development of New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and various forms of cultural history. Though Foucault has not written literary histories and not even written extensively about literature, he has taught a whole generation to read culture and cultural products as texts, he has stimulated the writing of histories in which the discourse of literature is embedded in an interdiscursive system and he has suggestively written about the intertwining of power and knowledge. Furthermore, Foucault had a strong impact on literary studies through his theoretical reflections on the meaning of authorship, on genealogy, on the agencies of history and on the need to write new histories without humanist and anthropocentric presuppositions. The bearing of these reflections on historical and cultural approaches to literature were instantaneously recognised; by now they have become part of the postmodernist theoretical canon in narratology, intertextuality, authority and authorship. Interdiscursive cultural histories, one of Foucault’s major legacies, are exemplified in the work of Stephen Greenblatt and other New Historicists. My own comparative study of the
The possibilities and limitations of Foucault's thought for cultural history have been discussed in a series of conferences at Amsterdam, Aberdeen and Columbia (S.C.). My own contributions at the latter two conferences pertained to literary history. As I see it, the fundamental question for literary historians today is whether to merge the historical treatment of literature into a Foucauldian or other type of cultural history, or whether to develop new kinds of histories specific to literature. The discussion on the question is ongoing and heated, for it raises fundamental questions about the relation between cultural and literary studies. All I can do here is to give an indication of my position by briefly outlining a project that attempts to answer in a non-Foucauldian manner the national literary histories I have discussed.

III

The comparative history of literary cultures in East-Central Europe, which we are now preparing with more than eighty contributors, attempts to limit culture to literary culture. This means concentrating on literature and its institutions. The social, political and economic and other extra-literary dimensions will not be presented independently, only inasmuch as they were relevant to literature, namely as literary themes, as events involving the writers and, last but not least, as institutions and events shaped by the literary imagination.

A second major feature of the project is that it has no overarching narrative. We want to avoid the impression that some kind of "organic" development exists within which the elements are given and causally interrelated. Of the four sections only the first one, on time, is chronologically structured, but even here the scenario is projected in reverse, moving from the most recent backwards. The narratives of the remaining three sections (about literary space, literary institutions and literary figures) never "tell the whole story", but function rather as microhistories in Carlo Ginzburg's sense: they are localised and situated stories that cannot be easily read as a symbol or a synecdoche of an overarching organic system.
Several recent literary histories—to some extent even the Latin American one—redialogise literature by weaving it into a broad cultural tapestry of discourses. In the East-Central European project, "literary culture" is limited primarily to the institutions specific to literature. The linguistic, social, political and other extra-textual dimensions are not presented independently, only inasmuch as they were relevant to literature, namely as literary themes, as events involving the writers and, last but not least, as institutions and events shaped by the literary imagination.

The volume is structured in terms of a single concept that designates the meeting point of different elements and tendencies: the node. [Editor: see here History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe, pp.33-38 for additional explanation and examples.] Each of the four major sections places nodes in a distinct system of coordinates, to wit temporal, spatial (or topographical), social and figural. We may distinguish, as a result, at least three distinct uses of the term nodal, each of which corresponds to a specific conception of comparative literature.

The first meaning of node refers to comparisons of mechanisms. As we saw, the projects of national literature ran through analogous processes and stages, though usually out of phase with each other and at different speeds. This sense of the node is dominant in the third section of the book, which deals with the institutions and genres of literature and in the chapters on the national poets in Section IV.

If the first sense of node focuses on the national paradigm, the second directs our attention to transmissions and translations: nodes refer here to modes of reception, which may be auto- or hetero. When a culture revives, reconstructs and manipulates its own older texts we may speak of auto-reception, which fortifies national identity. When a culture adopts from abroad we may speak of hetero-receptions that weaken the national cohesion.

The modes of reception just described assume the existence of two separate, reasonably well-defined identities. The independence of these subjects is, as it were, a presupposition for the various postulated transactions between them. The third and most radical sense of node puts the presuppositions of the first two comparisons into question by deconstructing the national identities. It emphasises internal differences and displays a hybridity that underlies their presumed consistency. What the
projects of national literatures tended to ignore or label as alien "contamination" or "corruption" is shown here to be indigenous. The elements are brought together here in such a way that the nodes intranationally become points of dispersion, showing thereby that literary works, authors, regions and ideas are more complex and multifaceted than their reductive images within the national projects.

Ideas such as these are easy to dream up but fiendishly difficult to realise in practice. I hope that you will be able to judge for yourself by the next ICLA Congress to what extent we have succeeded in mastering this diabolical task.

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Bibliography


