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What Was Comp. Lit. and Where Did It Go?

MICHAEL WEBSTER

In 1954, David H. Malone said that “Comparative Literature is more of a camp for academically misplaced persons than a coherently and purposefully developing scholarly and critical movement” (13). The development of comparative literature may not have been purposeful, but I think it was coherent, at least in historical terms. It will be difficult in this short space to sketch that development without falling into generalizations and simplifications, but perhaps I can give the reader something like a broad outline, or framework for discussion. I’ll start, though, not with history or theory or generalities, but with a text well-known to comparatists, and a dream text at that. The classic version of this text is Harry Levin’s:

Several years ago, I have been told, the wife of a graduate student of mine dreamed that they were awakened late at night by the sound of a truck and a knocking at the door. The husband arose and went downstairs to find out what was happening. Standing there were two men in overalls, who turned out on further inspection to be Renato Poggioli and myself. The student reacted with that *savoir-faire* which is always so happy a feature of dreams. He simply remounted the stairs and reported to his wife: “The men are here to compare the literature.” How she responded, or what she thought it meant, she could not recall. (Levin 6)

For a professional hermeneutist, Levin, too, was surprisingly reluctant to offer any interpretation of the dream: “Her waking dream has yet to meet its Joseph, and I do not presume to venture any interpretation” (6). Well, I may not be a Joseph, but I do presume. It is certainly significant that it was the wife who had the dream. No doubt she had often wondered why she and her husband should endure the poverty and privations of graduate school life so that he could receive a degree in the arcane subject of “comparative literature.” What could she tell her friends with more “normal” lives and jobs? The fact that two eminent Harvard professors came to call in a truck and wearing overalls indicates her unease as to the exact nature and character of this curious job of “comparing the literature.” Perhaps she wished that the job of

comparing the literature were as simple and finite as two men coming to repair a leaky faucet. Her unease certainly stemmed from those two words, “comparative” and “literature” (perhaps symbolized by professors Poggioli and Levin), which are not finite in meaning, and whose economic utility is not readily apparent. At bottom, the dream asks how these two words could label and constitute a profession, and what possible concrete meaning they could have when uttered in tandem.

To solve her dilemma, let’s look at how those two words came to be put together in the first place. The German comparatist Horst Rüdiger thinks, along with Friedrich Schlegel, that the study of national literatures has no meaning without reference to the whole, which they call “universal,” not “comparative” literature. National literatures are only manifestations of this universal literature, a concept they say, that was “self-evident” from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment (Rüdiger 3). If we examine the assumptions behind this statement, we can see why an academic discipline called “Comparative Literature” appeared in the nineteenth century and why it acquired its comparative and historical character. First of all, the statement assumes that such a thing as a “national literature” exists. But the idea of a national literature goes back only as far as the eighteenth century. Just as Romanticism signaled the rise of the concept of the individual genius — the mimetic mirror of the neo-classical artist turning into the inspirational lamp of the romantic genius — so too were national literatures now considered individual entities, each displaying the genius of a particular nation’s folk. The Romantic period, with its emphasis on local folk culture, invented national literatures, and so erected theoretical barriers between one set of writings and another. Barriers across which one could “compare” one “literature” with another.

For comparison depends on difference. You might think that linguistic differences would be enough to start comparison going, but the fact remains that medieval authors like Dante wrote about various vernacular literatures as if they formed a single literary tradition. In his treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (“On Eloquence in the Vernacular”) Dante compares various languages and dialects in order to find a vernacular “illustrious” enough to compete with Latin as a literary language, but he does not compare “literatures.”

Steeped as he was in the ancient traditions of rhetoric, Dante did not speak of “literature” at all, but of “eloquence” or “speech” (3-4). René Wellek has pointed out that the word “literature” formerly meant “learning” or “literary culture, particularly a knowledge of Latin” (“Name” 4). Thus Boswell speaks of a person, a certain Baretti, as “an Italian of considerable literature,” much as we might say that someone possessed con-

siderable culture. Wellek notes that it was only around 1730 that the word “literature” came to refer clearly to a body of writings, or to all literary production (which at that time included essays, philosophical papers, and historical writing). Later in the eighteenth century, however, the term “often lost its original inclusiveness and was narrowed down to mean what we would today call ‘imaginative literature,’ poetry, and imaginative, fictive prose” (“Name” 5-6). Furthermore, Wellek says, the drawing of this distinction of imaginative literature “is connected with the whole rise of the modern system of the arts and their clear distinction from the sciences and crafts, and with the formulation of the whole enterprise of aesthetics” (“Name” 27).

Thus, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, two crucial elements that would allow for the new discipline to form were already in place: 1) an object of study (imaginative aesthetic literature) and 2) convenient national barriers demarcating the basic units of comparison. It only remained for nineteenth century comparative historicism to be added for a discipline to be born. Hans Robert Jauss has speculated on the ideological roots linking national literatures and historiography:

The new paradigm was the method of historical explanation. In a literary work, whatever could be defined by the coordinates of time, place, and environment was held to be capable of explanation. The cohesion of literary phenomena was to be mediated by the concept of national individuality. Only from the nation’s individuality, immediate to God, could the series of works derive its direction and destination. Politically, this expectation corresponded in the nineteenth century to the striving for national unification and international competition. It is in this context that literary history achieved its greatest significance: it became the ideal form of all historiography, for its documents appeared to verbalize what could only be inferred from the documents of political history. Literature became the highest medium in which a nation could be shown to realize itself, from its quasi-mythical beginnings to the achievement of a national classicism. (quoted in Clüver 18)

To discover the dominant preoccupations of the new discipline we have only to examine the title of a pioneering volume by Jean-Jacques Ampère: *Histoire de la littérature française au moyen âge comparée aux littératures étrangères* (1841). The title announces

that the book will deal with the history of a certain national literature (in this case French), and that it will view relations with other literatures as a kind of natural extension of French literary history. It should not be surprising that an age that thought with Thomas Carlyle that literature was “the truest emblem of national spirit and manner of existence” (quoted in Wellek, “Name” 30) should use the national literature as a starting point for comparative studies.

Although this nation-centered, historicist approach came to be known as the “French school,” the French held no monopoly on nationalism. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were soon applying the methods of comparative philology (which had achieved spectacular results in historical linguistics) to themes in folktales. By studying comparatively the migrations of themes from one people to another, the Grimm brothers hoped to trace the themes back to what they considered their pure, wholly mythic source in the dim past. Early comparative folklorists thought modern tales were but a poor reflection of the original glory of stories born in a more “mythopoeic” age. Tracing themes back to this source might help recover these more powerful original stories. Thus they founded the branch of comparative literary studies known as “Stoffgeschichte” (literally “Themehistory,” but usually called thematology in English).

Thematology took two directions. The first, the study of themes, motifs, and tale types in folktales, culminated in Stith Thompson’s massive *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Nowadays this sort of study is usually considered comparative folklore rather than comparative literature. The second branch of thematology concerned itself with tracing permutations of major themes in world literature (examples: Faust theme or Don Juan theme), a kind of literary branch of the history of ideas. Scientifically-minded scholars have wondered how to define a theme (if you have a story in which the Oedipus-figure fails to marry his mother, could that story still be considered part of the Oedipus theme?). Wellek objects that such studies have more to do with the history of taste or political sentiment than with literary history (*Theory* 160). But for a historicist comparatist of the French school the real problem with such studies is that they do not confine themselves to *rappports de fait* (“factual contacts”).

Facts. We don’t have to have read Dickens’ novel *Hard Times* to know that nineteenth century learning was obsessed by facts. Any discipline that aspired to write comparative history must be scientific in its method; it must deal with facts. Thus, early comparatists busied themselves with tracking the influence of one author’s work on another’s, or that of one author on an entire national literature (Byron in France, for example). They traced the rise and fall of literary genres within or across cultural

boundaries (some, like Fernand Brunetière adapting evolutionism to the task). They would very carefully study the role of intermediaries like Mme. De Staël in popularizing, transmitting, or translating foreign authors. And some would write histories of the reception of an author in a particular country by charting the rise and/or fall of a reputation through documents such as reviews and contemporary accounts. Often, reception and influence studies were combined.

Studies like these that stress historical digging over aesthetic reflection are still done, and they impart a respect for fact and historical milieu that never quite leaves the comparatist. I call works like David Hayman's *Joyce et Mallarmé* or Betsy Erkkila's *Walt Whitman Among the French* "Classic Comp. Lit.," and this is the sort of thing, if anything, that usually comes to mind when "comparative literature" is mentioned. For a long time, these historical researches were the only kind of work that the men (and a few women) who came to compare the literature did. As late as 1951, Jean-Marie Carré called comparative literature "a branch of literary history" that studies "spiritual international relations, the *rappports de fait* which took place between Byron and Pushkin, Goethe and Carlyle, Walter Scott and Vigny, between the works, the inspirations, and even the lives of writers belonging to several literatures" ("Avant-propos" in Guyard 5). At the same time, another French scholar simply called it "the history of international literary relations" (Guyard 7).

Many scholars, however, complained that reducing the study of literature to purely historical relations was like carefully charting and measuring the construction of a pie without ever being allowed to taste one. One such hungry scholar was René Wellek, who invited fellow comparatists to sample more substantial fare in his article "The Crisis in Comparative Literature." In it, he objected to the "attempt to narrow 'comparative literature' to the study of the 'foreign trade' of literatures," to "the dead hand of nineteenth century factualism, scientism, and historical relativism," and to the notion of comparative studies as a branch of national literary histories (282-283). Basically, he called for a leavening of positivistic historicism with some sensitive aesthetic appreciation: "Works of art . . . are not simply sums of sources and influences: they are wholes in which raw materials derived from elsewhere cease to be inert matter and are assimilated into a new structure" (285).

In a later article, Wellek outlined his vision of this newly-expanded discipline:

It cannot be confined to a single method: description, characterization, interpretation, narration, explanation, evaluation

are used in its discourse just as much as comparison. Nor can comparison be confined to actual historical contacts. . . . Nor can comparative literature be confined to literary history to the exclusion of criticism and contemporary literature. Criticism, as I have argued many times, cannot be divorced from history, as there are no neutral facts in literature. The mere act of selecting from millions of printed books is a critical act, and the selection of the traits or aspects under which a book may be treated is equally an act of criticism and judgment. ("Name" 19-20)

Wellek points out that even "factual" literary history necessarily involves one in criticism and aesthetic judgment. But he goes further than this: he says the historical method is not the only way to look at literary works. For these works "are monuments and not documents." And even though they may spur us to acquire some knowledge of historical setting and literary tradition, they are "immediately accessible to us today." For many of us, there is a contradiction or at least a tension inherent in the very notion of an immediately accessible monument. But Wellek glides past this tension in order to make a further point: if we add criticism and aesthetic judgement to our study, then we no longer need this annoying modifier "comparative," with all its disagreeable connotations of positivism and of an exclusive, clunky methodology ("Name" 20).

By suggesting that we simply study literature without its modifier, Wellek subtly demotes the historical side of the discipline, while being careful not to expunge it altogether. This demotion was not unique to comparative literature, but merely part of a general shift in humanities research away from historical, philological methods and towards the criticism and interpretation of works of art. In his book *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff has followed some of the sinuous twistings and turnings of this long (at least from 1890 to 1960) dispute between "scholars" (historicists) and "critics" (aesthetes). When Wellek first came to the University of Iowa in 1939, he found that not all of his colleagues were ready to embrace the new interpretive approach:

The conflict between literary history and criticism was very acute and even bitter at Iowa. I still remember vividly how Austin Warren and I met a highly respected member of the department, a good historical scholar, and tried to suggest to him that, in writing about

Milton and the English essay in the seventeenth century, he had written some criticism. He turned red in the face and told us it was the worst insult he had ever received. ("Comparative" 40)

The move away from history was inevitably a move towards aesthetics. For Wellek, the diffuse field of comparative literature needed a central subject to hold it together, and that subject was an aesthetic one, the "literary work of art:"

Many eminent men in literary scholarship and particularly in comparative literature are not really interested in literature at all but in the history of public opinion, the reports of travelers, the ideas about national character — in short, general cultural history. The concept of literary study is broadened by them so radically that it becomes identical with the whole history of humanity. But literary scholarship will not make any progress, methodologically, unless it determines to study literature as a subject distinct from other activities and products of man. Hence we must face the problem of "literariness," the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature. ("Crisis" 293)

I suppose you can imagine how Wellek, who fought so hard to defend "literariness" and the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art, greeted new theories which attacked the very concept of a separate art, which substituted "text" for "work" and "discourse" or "writing" for "literature." Hardly had he finished slaying the dragon of positivist pedantry when a new, perhaps even more dangerous foe arose to threaten the hard-won gains of a critical, aesthetically-focused discipline. As early as 1965 he was writing

The whole enterprise of aesthetics and art is being challenged today; the distinction between the good, the true, the beautiful, and the useful known to the Greeks but most clearly elaborated by Kant, the whole concept of art as one of the distinct activities of man, as the subject-matter of our discipline, is on trial. . . . Whatever the merits of these criticisms of the great tradition of aesthetics may be — and I am willing to grant much to the critics of its obscurities, verbalisms, and tautologies — the main conclusion, the abolition of

art as a category, seems to me deplorable in its consequences both for art itself and for the study of art and literature. ("Comparative" 48-49)

In our time, the attacks on aesthetics have continued, and not just by artists, but by critics, too. The notion that "literature" or "literariness" can somehow be separated from other linguistic activities has been severely questioned by structuralists, semioticians, feminists, deconstructionists, and Marxists, all of whom have attempted to dissolve works and authors into their contextual components of language, history, and desire. It is no longer the fashion to look at a piece of literature as a complete, autonomous, aesthetically-intended "work," but rather to see it, as Roland Barthes does, as "text," as "a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centers of culture" (146).

Not only has the notion of "literature" come under fire, but the assumption that literatures have "natural" national boundaries corresponding to the boundaries of modern nation-states has also come to be seen as a construct rather than a fact to be taken for granted. Claus Clüver puts it this way:

. . . it has become increasingly difficult to maintain that verbal texts naturally divide into a body of "works" that is essentially "literary" and another that is not; instead, it appears more tenable to think of "literature" as an institutionalized concept variously applied by various cultures to verbal texts that are read as "literary" according to changing criteria. Similarly, "national literature" is no longer seen as the label for a body of "literary" texts that naturally forms a more obvious and cohesive unity than any of the numerous other series into which these texts could be inserted; rather, it has come to be understood (though by no means universally) as a historical construct, a particular way of considering and using these texts in the light of a specific dominant ideology. (17)

Now that national boundaries are merely a construct, now that Wellek has taken away our cherished, positivistic comparisons, and now that everyone else has obliterated our object of study, namely "literature," we seem to be right back to Harry Levin's graduate student's wife's question: what do people in those anachronistically-named comparative literature departments *do* for a living?

I suppose some of you think I am going to answer that question with one word, the “T” word — Theory — but I am not. For one thing, Wellek by no means advocated the elimination of the historical component in literary studies. Indeed, for him, criticism was ultimately subservient to a concept of literary history: “Criticism means a concern for values and qualities, for an understanding of texts which incorporates their historicity and thus requires the history of criticism for their understanding, and finally, it means an international perspective which envisages a distant ideal of universal literary history and scholarship” (“Name” 36). As for the attacks on “literature,” they may have raised our consciousness and removed from us a theoretical object of study, but we still deal with many of the same texts, only under different philosophical presuppositions.

Though now enclosed in quotation marks and hemmed round by philosophical caveats, the practice of “comparing” “literature” has somehow survived the depredations of Theory, and the new motto of comparatists seems to be identical with that of François Rabelais’ mythical Abbey of Thélème: “FAIS CE QUE VOUDRAS” — “Do what you will” (*Gargantua* ch. 57). A recent compilation of essays in comparative literature (Koelb, *The Comparative Perspective on Literature*) shows that people continue to do influence/reception studies (“William Styron’s Fiction and Essays: A Franco-American Perspective”), genre studies (“The Modern Lyric”), and, an always popular topic, studies redefining the nature of comparative literature (four essays). The editors of this 1988 volume do note, however, that there has been a shift in concerns from earlier such collections. The articles often reflect new critical approaches like semiotics, and many show an awakened interest in widening the canon and field of study. One article reexamines the role of aesthetics in the discipline. The editors state that contributors show “no special interest” in the history of criticism or in discussing “such widely used period/movement designators a romanticism or symbolism” (Koelb 6). (We might note that both these areas were cultivated with undisputed mastery by René Wellek.) Now scholars pay more attention to areas that were formerly considered marginal — “emergent literatures,” relations with other disciplines and arts, women’s studies — often touting their concerns as new and different ways of reading and talking about texts.

The expansion into areas outside the literary text does not simply constitute a return to philological, historical methods, as Clüver has pointed out (17). For we have passed through the looking glass of Theory, which has dissolved our object of study, our national borders, and our postivist comparisons. “What is left for us today is the study of ‘literature’ without any qualifier but not without quotation marks. For our discipline

can be held to have an indisputable object as long as we agree not to define it" (Clüver 23).

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