The Cross-National Mission of the Humanities in Higher Education: Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Ursula Franklin

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol1/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
The Cross-National Mission of the Humanities in Higher Education: Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Understanding

The question raised for inquiry in this 10th Anniversary Symposium of Grand Valley State College and the University of Sarajevo addresses itself to one of the most urgent problems of our time: "Cross-National Perspectives on the Ideal of the Well-Educated Person." I should like to recall the mission of the Humanities in general, and more specifically discuss that of my own discipline, Comparative Literature, in furthering cross-cultural understanding; for we have learned that without cross-cultural no informed cross-national comprehension and exchange are possible. In the United States, the leading role of higher education and the universities in this endeavor has been clearly recognized, and our Symposium marks ten years of commitment and service in its behalf.

Schools educating all children to become free and active citizens of their democracy, a free enterprise economy, and the learning and research conducted at American universities both public and private, have together accomplished scientific and technological feats that have changed not only our own country, but the world; and the world over, science and technology have thus not merely changed the standard, but also the way of living. Small wonder, then, that some serious division should threaten the traditional unity of the arts — or the humanities — and sciences. I recall one of the most famous pronouncements signaling the sundering of Naturwissenschaften and Geisteswissenschaften in our time, C. P. Snow's Rede Lecture of 1959, subsequently published as The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. In this now celebrated book, the author points to the deepening gulf between literary intellectuals and scientists and their mutual incomprehension. Lord Snow, himself a product of the traditional "humanistic" education, is clearly on the side of the men of science; for, although their dim comprehension of literature may be deplorable, they are not obsolete. But what of the literary humanist who does not grasp the second law of thermodynamics? But long before that, the humanities or liberal arts have had to render accounts on the table of higher education. And some of America's most brilliant educators have spoken in behalf of their accountability. Thus Robert Maynard Hutchins, educator and moralist, committed to become Chairman of the President's Committee on Cultural Freedom and Independence in Europe in 1959 headlined a book: The Soul of Higher Education. And, committed to the education in Euro-Asia, he became President of the University of Chicago. Robert Hutchins, himself an alumnus of Harvard and a product of education in history and the arts and in social work, has repeatedly attempted to gain acceptance of the ideas which he cherishes, even in those who hold his views in disdain; for nobility of ideas is clearly a virtue.

But Hutchins himself once recalled that old "liberal" education turned out working men who are no longer content to remain within the confines of the liberal studies which provided introductions between the arts and sciences. The universe in which we live is the liberal culture. But, in this case, what is it about human intelligence that is important?

Both liberal education, as well as cross-cultural, is clearly for the other, for the enrichment of the culture. The Philosophers and the humanists. The dignity of choice, "the dignity of human choice," the dignity of human action. The issue of...
Robert Maynard Hutchins believed that “either we must abandon the ideal of freedom or we must educate our people for freedom. If an education in the liberal arts and in the great books is the education for freedom, then we must make the attempt to give this education to all our citizens... To formulate, to clarify, to vitalize the ideals which should animate mankind — this is the incredibly heavy burden which rests, even in total war, upon the universities. If they cannot carry it, nobody else will; for nobody else can. If it cannot be carried, civilization cannot be saved.” This is clearly a voice from a time of world crisis.

But Hutchins also proposes a new vision and program of the humanities — no longer that old “liberal education” for an elitist leisure class, but an education liberating all working members of today’s society. When we define the humanities today, we need no longer concentrate on ancient Greece or Rome, nor trace the rise of humanism in the Renaissance, though all of these moments in our history, their monuments and the litterae humaniores, have contributed to shaping the arts and letters and their liberal studies in our time. And this brings us to one of the principal and valid distinctions between the sciences and the arts; whereas the former study nature and the universe in which we live, the latter study the products and the artifacts of human culture. But, as John Dewey reminds us, “knowledge is humanistic in quality not because it is about human products in the past, but because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy.”

Both liberated intelligence and sympathy are essential for fruitful interpersonal as well as cross-national relations, which rest on an understanding of the self and respect for the other. In a lecture series several years ago devoted to “The Role of the Humanities in Ordering a Peaceful World,” Sidney Hook, then Chairman of the Department of Philosophy of New York University, spoke about the philosophical bequest of the humanities. He found it to reside in both the freedom and burden, or obligation, of choice, “the indispensability of human choice in every moral situation, and the dignity of human choice as constituting the glory and the tragedy of man. Indeed,” he continues, “the operating effectiveness of human choice is what we mean by freedom. The issue of freedom so conceived is not free enterprise — but the freedom to choose...
the economic system under which one wants to work and live. The issue of freedom so conceived is not grounded in religious faith or faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The issue is not one of religion versus atheism...or the religious values of the West as opposed to the great non-Christian religions of the East. It is simply," he reminds us, "the freedom to choose one's faith according to one's conscience."4

The ideal of the well-educated person imposes that we not merely be able to deal with modern technology and understand the world as science interprets it for us, but that we be modern humanists who beyond understanding our own immediate culture seek to understand that of others, as those other cultures are endeavoring to understand ours. It is to further this end, the ideal of well-educated citizens, that the Congress of the United States established the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts exactly twenty years ago. The mandate of the NEH from its inception has been "to develop and encourage the pursuit of a national policy for the promotion of progress and scholarship in the humanities" (National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965).5 The National Endowment for the Humanities began with a little over $4.1 million in 1967 and had expanded its funding to $100.3 million for the fiscal year 1980 and has, moreover, encouraged funding from private and state sources by a mechanism of matching and challenge grants.6 Private funding — we think here of Foundations like Mellon, Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Ford, Carnegie and many others — has traditionally played a vital and decisive role in American life, the arts and education. And I should like to acknowledge here, with gratitude, that my own research in Comparative Literature has been most generously supported by Fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as the American Council of Learned Societies.

In Public Law 89-209, establishing the National Endowment, Congress defined the humanities as including the study of: "Language, both modern and classic; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; the history, criticism, theory, and practice of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods."7 And while we are free to quarrel with this as with any other definition, we would probably all agree that human language — as distinct from artificial languages — and the literature created of it represent one of the principal branches of the humanities. "Language," says Albert W. Levi, "we have not had to wait for the instruction of Wittgenstein and his followers to inform us, is the matrix of our existence, the foundation of human sociality, and the elementary condition of our literary expressiveness. But nonetheless Wittgenstein put it well: 'Und eine Sprache vorstellen heisst, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen.' (And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.)"8 And all teachers of foreign languages

and literature understand and accept this. In the 1980 Report of the President's Committee on the Humanities, the importance of the knowledge and study of foreign languages and the responsibility of cultural interdependence for a common future of the well-educated person."
and literatures know, of course, that they are also teaching their students to understand and appreciate another way of life, a foreign culture. Recommendation 11 of the 1980 Report of the Commission on the Humanities reads: "Efforts to give fresh meaning to liberal education must continue; all such efforts should emphasize the importance of the humanities for developing the mental capacities and historical knowledge for," among other aims, "understanding (preferably based on knowledge of foreign language) of other cultures." For the Commission recognized that "today the responsible citizen must look beyond native borders. The political, economic, and cultural interdependence of nations affects our everyday lives and will shape our common future." It is thus fully supportive of the cross-national perspectives on the ideal of the well-educated person and recommends transforming that ideal into reality.

In a world ever more threatened with nuclear overkill, and at a time when so many countries are engaged in hostile confrontation, the study of Foreign Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature does constitute a vehicle for developing cross-cultural understanding. That our government realizes the need to foster the development of educating Americans with a view to a greater understanding of other peoples and cultures was also evident in the establishment, a few years ago, of the President's White House Commission on Global Education. For American colleges and universities, then, one of the tasks in this national endeavor for international understanding lies in the development of academic disciplines such as Foreign Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature. And our field now principally restricted to the Western Heritage and hemisphere might ideally expand to comprise East-West and finally truly global dimensions in generations to come. We must be the firm base of this development and lay the cornerstones of the structure. And this has traditionally been the role and function of students and teachers everywhere: to transmit the heritage on which the future will build.

I proposed to speak of the role of the Humanities and of Comparative Literature in education for cross-national understanding. And yet, I cannot give you my definition of "Comparative Literature," for, in my view, it is in fact a misnomer, like "Comparative Anatomy." There is literature, there are many literatures, and there are various approaches to its, to their, exploration. The comparative approach is among the most fruitful, and it is the one in which I have done my research for some years. Robert Clements of New York University lists in his *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline* numerous definitions of the field by some of the most distinguished comparatists. As we examine some of these, we find in each case that they define not literature, but a field of study instead, or the comparatist who is engaged in that study. Thus, to cite but a few: "The comparatist stands at the frontiers, linguistic or
national, and surveys the exchange of themes and ideas...between two or several literatures. His working method will adapt itself to the diversity of his researches," writes M. F. Guyard in his *La Litterature comparee*. Or, "It is now generally agreed that comparative literature does not compare national literatures in the sense of setting one against the other. Instead, it provides a method of broadening one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature...Briefly defined, comparative literature can be considered the study of any literary phenomenon from the perspective of more than one national literature or in conjunction with another intellectual discipline or even several," says A. Owen Aldridge, former president of the American Comparative Literature Association, in his *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*. Henry Remak, in *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, summarizes his definition as follows: "In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparsion of literature with other spheres of human expression." 10

It is probably the relative newness of the discipline, which really only matured in the first half of our century, that is responsible for this flexibility or looseness in defining it. But I find this much more attractive than any fixed and rigid definitions that would stifle, force, or even mutilate any academic endeavor in a Procrustean manner.

In Comparative Literature, as in other fields of the Humanities, the study of one major field must not necessarily be restricted to that field. In other words, the student of Comparative Literature, or of any foreign literature, or of his own, should not be restricted to taking only language and literature courses. The study of literature cannot strictly be confined to strictly literary studies; might it not most fruitfully involve connections with, and therefore the study of, non-aesthetic fields, like history, philosophy, psychology or sociology? Most educators would agree that the aesthetic fields, like art and music, cannot be excluded. Especially today, the interdisciplinary nature of literature and other areas of the humanities becomes more and more apparent.

Thus, for example, Freud's influence on literature is overwhelming — crossing all national boundaries. But even more interesting to me has always been the overwhelming influence of literature on Freud — from the Greeks to Heinrich Heine. Who would deny that Nietzsche, one of the most influential modern philosophers world-wide, is a poet; who would deny, moreover, that Zarathustra — who proclaimed the death of God — was inspired significantly, namely stylistically, by the Bible? Nietzsche, the son of a Protestant minister, knew it by heart. With the influence of Wagner on one of Nietzsche's best-known texts, "Die Geburt der Tragodie aus dem Geiste der Musik," we cross the disciplinary boundaries of literature, philosophy and music. And Nietzsche formally concerned himself with that theme as classical philologist! French Symbolism was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who was profoundly influential for his non-philosophy, for his non-genre of the philosophy literature is every character. We should be far from the other hand, French and American.

It is perhaps the relative newness of the discipline, which really only matured in the first half of our century, that is responsible for this flexibility or looseness in defining it. But I find this much more attractive than any fixed and rigid definitions that would stifle, force, or even mutilate any academic endeavor in a Procrustean manner.

In Comparative Literature, as in other fields of the Humanities, the study of one major field must not necessarily be restricted to that field. In other words, the student of Comparative Literature, or of any foreign literature, or of his own, should not be restricted to taking only language and literature courses. The study of literature cannot strictly be confined to strictly literary studies; might it not most fruitfully involve connections with, and therefore the study of, non-aesthetic fields, like history, philosophy, psychology or sociology? Most educators would agree that the aesthetic fields, like art and music, cannot be excluded. Especially today, the interdisciplinary nature of literature and other areas of the humanities becomes more and more apparent.

Thus, for example, Freud's influence on literature is overwhelming — crossing all national boundaries. But even more interesting to me has always been the overwhelming influence of literature on Freud — from the Greeks to Heinrich Heine. Who would deny that Nietzsche, one of the most influential modern philosophers world-wide, is a poet; who would deny, moreover, that Zarathustra — who proclaimed the death of God — was inspired significantly, namely stylistically, by the Bible? Nietzsche, the son of a Protestant minister, knew it by heart. With the influence of Wagner on one of Nietzsche's best-known texts, "Die Geburt der Tragodie aus dem Geiste der Musik," we cross the disciplinary boundaries of literature, philosophy and music. And Nietzsche formally concerned himself with that theme as classical philologist! French Symbolism was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who was profoundly influential for his non-philosophy, for his non-genre of the philosophy literature is every character. We should be far from the other hand, French and American.

It is perhaps the relative newness of the discipline, which really only matured in the first half of our century, that is responsible for this flexibility or looseness in defining it. But I find this much more attractive than any fixed and rigid definitions that would stifle, force, or even mutilate any academic endeavor in a Procrustean manner.
wo or several researches," generally agreed on the sense of setting one's perspective. Comparative literature is not the province of more than one academic discipline and its practitioners belong to the American Comparative Literature Association. Henry James, in his definition of 'setting or others, like history,' observation.10

...matured in manner. The student of one foreign words, the study of another, or both, should be familiar with the translation of literature and the arts in the same, fruitful in understanding. But I am speaking of the aesthetic appreciation of the chronological and geographical boundaries of the art. The study of a foreign language in crossing all boundaries in the study of literature and the arts, should not be restricted to \"reading the death of Nietzsche, the philosopher of \"der Musik,\" the spirit of music. And Nietzsche was profoundly influenced by Buddhist thought; again, we are crossing national and disciplinary boundaries. And this philosopher was certainly also a literary creator; for his non-philosophical texts, the Parerga, are a model of literary style and of the genre of the essay, as any Germanist would agree. The cross-national dimension of literature is evident in just these few examples, which also manifest a cross-disciplinary character. While for some authors, for example Mallarme, it is not essential that the student be familiar with French history, the German exile poet Heinrich Heine, on the other hand, is practically incomprehensible without a fair understanding of both French and German, of European history.

It is perhaps because of its interdisciplinary nature that the study of Comparative Literature has become so attractive to students and scholars who go to all the hard work of acquiring mastery in one or several foreign languages in its pursuit. The academic discipline is clearly rising to prominence in the humanities, since its inception by Fernand Baldensperger at the University of Paris around 1900. And that the United States, with its rich and multiple ethnic, linguistic and cultural composition should be its natural home has been borne out by the facts. In our country, the founders of the discipline of Comparative Literature have been Werner Friedrich at North Carolina, Rene Wellek at Yale, and Harry Levin at Harvard. And as early as 1950, there were major centers of Comparative Literature at Harvard, Yale, North Carolina, Indiana, Wisconsin, Duke, Minnesota, Washington and Southern California.

Yugoslavia, formed of several national groups, and with three official languages, some of its people using the Cyrillic, others the Latin alphabet, is a natural home of comparatism, if I may be allowed the neologism. And with its rich historical heritage, Yugoslavia has absorbed many varied influences which, in turn, have formed its artistic expression. Literature and the arts, by their very nature, reach back and extend forward beyond national boundaries.

I have concentrated my scholarly work over the past twelve years on French Symbolist and post-Symbolist poetry, and during the past seven specifically on Franco-German literary relations. Thus it is fascinating to me to trace Symbolism, after it began to be surpassed by other movements in France after the death of Mallarme, in other countries, as in Germany under the influence and followers of Stefan George. As Professor Vladeta R. Kosutic of the University of Belgrade has pointed out, French Symbolism became an international movement as German Romanticism had almost a century before. Nothing could better illustrate the cross-national nature of literature and literary movements than the introductory paragraph of Professor Kosutic's study on \"Symbolist Elements in Serbien Poetry,\" I should like to quote it in demonstration of the Cross-National Perspective of Comparative Literature:
It was when Symbolism began to lose its significance in its native land after the deaths of Verlaine and Mallarme that it spread to other countries becoming, like German Romanticism, an international movement. Often linked with the Parnassian ideals and theories in its spread outside of France, Symbolism marked a turning point in the poetry of such countries as Russia, Germany, England, Italy, and Spain. It also made its impact on Serbian lyric poetry, which had already become Westernized and accepted "l'art pour l'art" theories along with the vast impact of Baudelaire on Serbian poets. Considering the fact that this influence reached Serbia not until the early years of the twentieth century, it places the Symbolist element in Serbian poetry in the same chronological period as the assimilation of Symbolism in the Modernism of Spanish, Russian, and American poetry.\(^\text{11}\)

The author then continues to demonstrate the continuation of French Symbolism at the turn of the century in the poetry of Jovan Ducic and Milan Rakic. He has also reminded his American readers, of course, of the impact of French Symbolism on major American poets like T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, and finally Wallace Stevens.

Thus the mission of the Humanities, and especially Comparative Literature, in furthering cross-national understanding. But most profoundly, the Humanities involves living human beings and their interaction in their pursuits, be they those of study or of exchange in the market place. Thus I hope that soon some of our Grand Valley students will be preparing for study in your country, the GVSC Study Program in Yugoslavia, where East meets West. And a survey course of nineteenth-century French literature this past semester at Grand Valley was enriched for us all by the presence of Aida Hadzig, a beautiful Yugoslav visitor among my American students. Surely, this is the best realization of our ideal education with a view to cross-national perspectives, when not merely the study of academic disciplines, but studying itself brings us together.

---

had already been present in the vast influence of Symbolism, which Symbolism had already had an influence in England, where American Symbolism, in further studies, involves the presence of study in the Grand Valley History Program in the presence of students. Surely, the humanistic perspectives of American life itself brings

6 Ibid., pp. 162–3.
8 Ibid., p. 79.