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Jan Ziolkowski
Harvard University

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Always Beyond Compare: The Past, Present, and Future of Comparative Literature

Jan Ziolkowski

Jan Ziolkowski is Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature, and former Chair of Comparative Literature at Harvard University. He is the author of On Philology (1990), Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex: The Meaning of Grammar to a Twelfth-Century Intellectual (1985), and Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry (1993). He is currently working on a study of attitudes toward the verbal activities of old women in pre-industrial Europe.

The well-being of Comparative Literature has occupied my hours and energies for more than twenty years, but I have not previously confronted in an essay the topic of its history, current state, and potential future. Ready myself for this undertaking has forced upon me the *jouissance* of scholarly research, which has encompassed both hunting down books and articles and surfing the web. The scholarship has allowed and even forced me to indulge an appetite for industrial espionage by finding out how things have been and are being done at other institutions. As a comparatist, I have felt duty- and honor-bound to explore what sorts of programs and proclamations about Comparative Literature have been issued at colleges and universities around the country.¹ I had performed the same kind of research (it is tempting to call it "comparison shopping") before in an administrative capacity, whenever our program undertook to revamp its rules and requirements, and I collected and read all sorts of publications on the nature and future of Comp Lit (as the name is often affectionately and efficiently truncated); but I never had a motive to synthesize my findings systematically and process them intellectually.

A second pleasure of collecting my thoughts has been to realize how the study of Comparative Literature over the *longue*

durée has dovetailed with broader social and political concerns. I use the word “dovetailed” very deliberately, with my thoughts on the dove as a bird of peace, since most moments of greatest expansion in the study of Comparative Literature have coincided with aspirations for international harmony and understanding. Ulrich Weisstein, author of what remains the fullest institutional history of Comparative Literature, characterized the years of World War II in words that hold relevance to many phases in the development of these studies: “As so often in the history of Comparative Literature, a war, along with the pacifist tendencies sparked by it, gave new impetus to the now lingering discipline” (Weisstein 215).² As we shall see, the term “Comparative Literature” first emerged in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, when Europe was being reshaped culturally and politically. Much later, what had been a *field of study* that took off in the last years of the nineteenth century, perhaps partly under the influence of the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus or the centenary of the French Revolution, became a *discipline* at the end of the Second World War. Eventually the most vigorous growth in numbers of departments and programs occurred in the United States during the Vietnam War, which set the stage for major reconceptions of the discipline. Later I will return to this chronology.

Beyond the seductions of spying on other institutions and situating Comparative Literature in its historical and sociopolitical context, I am motivated by the topic to reveal a little about my own curriculum vitae. My studies of languages and literatures have intersected particularly intensely with Comparative Literature at intervals since 1981, when I began teaching at Harvard with an appointment half funded by the Department of the Classics and half by Comparative Literature. Despite being housed only a floor apart at the time, the departments stood worlds away from each other. Classics emanated conservative philology, whereas the Comparative Literature department for a fleeting moment attained the status, duly recorded in *The New York Times Magazine*, of being one of the top ten “in” things at the Modern Language Association. For an untenured assistant and associate professor, the two departments were like Scylla and Charybdis in classical mythology or, to put it more colloquially, a rock and a hard place. Classics made me fear that I would never measure up to my seniors in their erudition and precision in handling dead languages; Comp Lit left me feeling inadequate about my command of theory and spoken languages. On the top floor, where the comparatists roosted and I had my office, people smoked exotic pipes, unfiltered French cigarettes, and even occasional contraband Cuban cigars. When I went to wash my hands, the man at the neighboring sink could be the Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz or the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. Meanwhile, on the

floor below the classicists decanted glasses of bourbon into wooden legs and displayed a daunting memorial command of the Greek and Latin with which they dealt. As a non-smoker with only an average tolerance for alcohol, I had to be very careful to hide how out of my depth I felt in both.

If the journey of a junior professor is analogous to a voyage to the underworld, then like Heracles, Aeneas, or Dante I survived and in 1987 was fortunate to be tenured by both my departments. On the day the news arrived, my eldest daughter wanted to know what all the commotion was about, and we explained that I had been granted tenure. After she asked what that signified, and after we tried our best to inform her, she looked puzzled and said, "If it's forever, then why is it called *ten-year*?" Not a bad question for a seven year-old. In the intervening decade and a half, besides retaining a keen attention to words, she has evidently figured out what tenure represents and liked the notion, because she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Italian and Comparative Literature.

In 1991-92 I served a year as acting chair of Comparative Literature. That episode of debility doomed me to three successive terms of the regular chairmanship. Despite years of endeavoring to read widely about Comparative Literature, my grounding in it has entailed many more hours of practical experience in dealing with faculty and students connected with it than the bliss of devouring academic books about it. In any given term the roster in the degree program includes around 50 graduate students, many of them clustered in the course- and exam-taking years but others at the dissertation stage. The corresponding undergraduate degree program, called Literature, has enrolled between 50 and 85 majors in each of the past five years.

Colleagues, although numbering only between 15 and 20, demanded as much care as the students. Our departmental meetings were always affable and often stimulating. Occasionally they even accomplished the business at hand. The departmental administrator, who retired in 2000 after four legendary decades of holding sway and who was quite devoted to her own tabby, described these sessions with a mixture of fondness and exasperation as "herding cats."³ Although she was absolutely right, at the same time the monthly two-hour meetings were brainstorming sessions of mini think tanks about the issues facing the humanities, with colleagues displaying inexhaustible vitality and creativity as well as evidencing genuine gratification at mixing with peers from outside their usual departmental stomping grounds. Nowhere else would professors from such a diversity of departments come together to thrash out business: Comparative Literature draws upon voting members from English, Romance Languages and Literatures, Classics, Slavic Languages and Literatures, Germanic Languages and Literatures, Visual and Environ-

mental Studies, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and East Asian Languages and Civilizations.

Before sounding too naive a note of optimism, I hasten to concede that Comparative Literature has always worried those who have favored it as well as those who have questioned it. If you keyboard *comparatist* or *comparativist* in Microsoft Word, the spellchecker kicks into action by underscoring the offending characters in red. But that is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, since all the standard expressions for comparative literature in various languages have an illogic to them (Furst 114, 124). French language and culture have often been blamed for questionable practices or objects. The adjective *French* was used in euphemisms to indicate venereal disease (syphilis was the “French disease”: Nelkin 365) and condoms (“French letter”), while French kissing, even shortened to “Frenching,” remains very much alive to designate a kiss in which the tongue enters the partner’s mouth. One more factoid to be added to this list of discredits is that we owe the formulation “comparative literature” to French. Long before the theory boom of the 1980s brought deconstruction courtesy of Jacques Derrida and his America-based posse, the French language disseminated [sic] the construction “comparative literature.”

The French basis for the English expression “comparative literature” goes back to 1816 (and think what unsettled years preceded this one) in the title *Cours de Littérature comparée*, which was attached to a series of anthologies used for teaching literature. From there the phrase, literally meaning “compared literature” and modeled on sciences such as comparative anatomy, seeped into wider currency over the next two decades, despite the illogic of the singular *literature*: If comparison is going on, then there should be more than one (Weisstein 9).⁴ But the collective noun is revealing, since for more than a century and a half the French tradition of Comparative Literature contained a presumption that the comparing would involve, *de rigueur* one might say, French literature as either the source or destination of the comparison. In 1835 Philarète Euphémon Chasles (1798-1873) attempted to define *Littérature étrangère comparée* from an unabashedly Gallocentric viewpoint: “France is the most sensitive of all countries . . . What Europe is to the rest of the world, France is to Europe.”⁵ Plus ça change?

Other Romance languages followed suit, such as Spanish with “*litteratura comparada*,” Portuguese with “*litteratura comparada*,” and Italian with “*letteratura comparata*.” German has the corresponding expression “*vergleichende Literatur*,” established in the second half of nineteenth century. Its first attestation is in a book that refers to “*vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*.” The peculiarity of the German formulation and the corresponding

Dutch one (“vergelijkend literatuuronderzoek”) is that they convey the idea of comparing literature, but in such a way as to imply that the literature itself is doing the comparing. The most common German term, “vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft,” could be translated as “comparative study of literature.”

In English the first usage involves the plural “comparative literatures,” recorded in a letter written in 1848 by none other than Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the English poet and critic (Wellek “Name” 2-3). The singular has been standard for more than a century. But what does it mean? Both elements in the seemingly straightforward pairing “Comparative Literature” can be stumbling blocks. In the 1920s a professor at Cornell refused to call his department Comparative Literature. As he put it, Comparative Literature was a “bogus term” that “makes neither sense nor syntax. . . . You might as well permit yourself to say ‘comparative potatoes’ or ‘comparative husks’” (Cooper 75). Instead of Comparative Literature, this professor preferred “The Comparative Study of Literature.” In recent decades there have indeed been departments of “Comparative Literary Studies” (Furst 114), a wording that works admirably and gives real competition to the well-entrenched Comparative Literature.

English does have a tradition of using *literature* as shorthand for “the study of literature” or “literary study.” By the mid-nineteenth century the range of meaning attached to literature had narrowed to “belles lettres” of creative literature, both prose and verse. But the potential of the word to carry a broader meaning was later restored. Indeed, the broader meaning has itself been stretched still further as the concept of the text, which often includes cultural artifacts beyond the printed word, has taken hold in the humanities.

If we construe comparative as denoting “based on or involving comparison” and *literature* as an ellipsis for “literary studies,” the two words become intelligible. The question still remains of defining both the kind of comparison implied by “comparative” and the kind of literature presumed by “literary studies.” Both terms are slippery, but probably “comparative” proves to be the more elusive of the two. Where are we to determine what may be compared with what? How are we to know what the methods or goals of the comparison should be? The uncertainties only multiply: Like the heads of the Hydra in Greek myth, once a question has been answered, another two emerge in its stead.

Maybe because comparatists pay closer attention to myths than to numbers and history, the information available in print on the institutionalization of Comparative Literature is hazy and conflicting about the specifics. One of the most recent, fullest treatments claims at the top of one page (Bassnett 22) that “[it] was not until later in the [nineteenth] century that Chairs of Com-

parative Literature were established, and the subject acquired academic status. The first Chair was set up in Lyon in 1897 and subsequently other Chairs appeared in France." Down on the same page the author says that

In the United States . . . Charles Chauncey Shackwell [read Shackford (1815-1895)] taught a course in "general or comparative literature" at Cornell from 1871 onwards, and Charles Mills Gayley [1858-1932] taught comparative literary criticism at the University of Michigan from 1887, while the first Chair in the subject was established at Harvard in 1890.⁶

There is obviously some chronological embarrassment in starting out stating that the first Chair was established in 1897, but adding later that one had been established elsewhere in 1890. The explanation is presumably that the author wrote from an Anglo-European perspective.

But beyond the so-called Eurocentrism lies the possibility of plain old sloppiness. To scrutinize just what this author states about my institution, no chair of Comparative Literature existed at Harvard in 1890.⁷ According to the Department guide, "Harvard University has offered courses in Comparative Literature since 1894. The Department was established by vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 10, 1906 . . ." (Guide). Furthermore, a chair of comparative literature at Naples was instituted in 1861 and first held by Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883) from 1871-1875 (Croce 219). The inaccuracies about dates signal that it would repay the efforts of researchers to plumb the archives of various universities, most simply in old course catalogs, to garner more (and more reliable) information.

Whatever the precise facts about dates, a two-part pattern is clear. First the study of Comparative Literature took root in the United States and in Europe in the 1890s, with the gradual establishment of courses, positions, and departments and the publication in 1894 of a call for the foundation of a society for Comparative Literature (Gayley 84-85). Simultaneously, the very existence of the study came under attack. Thus in 1903 we find the highly influential Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) delivering a broadside against Comparative Literature as a non-discipline. He disliked the very term, which to his way of thinking concealed what should be the comparative *history* of literature. Characterizing Comparative Literature as the study of literary themes and concepts across literatures, he concluded: "There is no study more arid than researches of this sort" (Croce 220, also qtd. in Bassnett 2).

If Croce faulted Comparative Literature for being insufficiently broad and historical, the other stiff resistance to it has come

from exponents of national language and literature departments, who have fretted that those working in Comparative Literature will not be solidly grounded enough in a single language and literature. Literature has traditionally been studied under the auspices of national language and literature departments. This circumstance remains even truer today, when the bull in the china shop (and china shop can be taken in at least two ways) may be English departments. English has distended to encompass the world, partly through world literature in English-language translations but equally through increased attention to literature by and about hyphenated cultural groups inside the United States and to Anglophone literature written from and in points throughout both hemispheres. In any case, the exponents of the so-called national languages and literatures over Comparative Literature have often expressed serious reservations about the notion that literature should be studied and taught outside the context of conventional language departments (Nichols v). They have feared a diminution of standards, as well as (perhaps) a reduction in their own enrollments.

So much for attacks from without. From within, titles of books and articles on Comparative Literature reveal acute anxiety. Part of the angst arises from the very name "Comparative Literature." In 1958 comparatist Albert L. Guérard (1880-1959) spurned the term as vehemently as had Croce.⁸ He wrote: "My attachment to the *principle* of Comparative Literature gives me the right to express my opinion that the *term* Comparative Literature is useless, dangerous, and ought to [be] abolished."⁹ Beyond mere terminological fussing, there have been recurrent bouts of severe fretting over the prospects of Comparative Literature. Maybe most tellingly, one 1960 article bears the title "Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prognosis."¹⁰ Both a 1970 and a 1993 volume address *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*.¹¹

Two influential assessments, one in English from the late 1950s and one in French from the 1960s, grapple with "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" (Wellek "Crisis"; Etiemble). The former is by René Wellek (1903-1995), one of the founders of Comparative Literature in North America in its post-World War II guise.¹² To Wellek the thorniest matter was that Comparative Literature had not been constituted yet fully as either a field or a discipline. In his words, "the most serious sign of the state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (Wellek "Crisis" 282). The same held true a decade later, when a preface to an overview of Comparative Literature concluded both optimistically and pessimistically: "Although comparative literature continues to expand at a rather astonishing rate, it may safely be said that many people, and not only students, remain unclear as to the concept and nature of the discipline" (Nichols v).

It may seem peculiar and even perverse to derive hope from these recurrent crises. All the same, I take reassurance from surveying these studies and finding that the wrestling between doubt and confidence as well as the resistance from outside and persistence from inside have gone on almost incessantly for over a half century. Gayatri Spivak (1942-) belongs to a lineage that reaches back much further than merely Roland Barthes (1915-1980) in the seeming fatalism in the title of her recent (2003) 128-page tract about Comparative Literature, *Death of a Discipline*: If Comp Lit has died, there has been a continuous supply of necrophiliacs. In each past episode of anxiety about its own viability, Comparative Literature has responded by enlarging its purview and self-definition. The question is how to expand the field in the face of a globalization that threatens to reduce comparison to a multiplicity of texts in English and English translation and perhaps also to diminish the importance of literature, whether high or low, within the forms of expression being compared. If both comparison and literature fall by the wayside, it is hard to see how Comparative Literature can remain Comparative Literature.

Insofar as the intellectual and the political may be separated, the crises of Comparative Literature may be seen as systemic. They reflect a regular ebb and flow in the humanities, between an emphasis on immersion in individual disciplines and an emphasis on interaction among disciplines. The flux does not betoken an opposition, since disciplines and interdisciplinarity require each other for survival. To pursue the possibility of a sea simile encouraged by "ebb and flow," the humanities bear a likeness to oceans extending over the surface of the earth. Like oceans, they cover broad but distinct areas and have separate names, but at the same time they interlock.

The tides that wash in and out of these oceans can support a vast number of species. Among them are creatures as different as mollusks and crustaceans. Both of these genera are marvels to behold. Among mollusks, oysters hold fast against the waters and sometimes produce pearls. Among crustaceans, hermit crabs are a favorite of mine to watch, as they scuttle rapidly about in shells that would otherwise go to waste and that they try on for size and inhabit for a while. If forced to draw an analogy between marine life and literary scholars, I would call the experts in so-called national languages and literatures the oysters, while the comparatists would qualify as the hermit crabs. But fortunately it is not necessary to choose to be one or the other: In the multitasking that literary studies require these days, ever fewer students and professors have the luxury or inclination to remain enclosed forever within a single genus. Instead, we become devotees of metamorphosis, being oysters some of the time and hermit crabs the rest.

Probably the hermit crab is a poor comparandum for the comparatist. At the outset I mentioned that throughout its existence Comparative Literature has belonged self-knowingly within a setting of more expansive political and social concerns. At the risk of creating an oxymoron, I will go on record by stating that all forms of reductionism leave me cold, and one type of thinking that pervaded the humanities in the late 1980s and 90s reduced any and all developments in culture to questions of politics and power. That said, it would require self-inflicted blindness on an Oedipal scale not to recognize that Comparative Literature burgeoned against the backdrop of specific political circumstances. I refer particularly to the heyday of Comparative Literature in this country from 1945 to 1968, which rested on a determined and explicit ambition to take literary studies beyond nationalism to supranationalism, all in the service of a world literature that would help to underpin world peace.

From Harvard's *Guide for Students in the Department of Comparative Literature* I quoted a few pages ago only the first half of the second sentence, which I would like now to complete: "The Department was established by vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 10, 1906 . . . and was reorganized upon its present basis in 1946" (*Guide*). Also in 1946 René Wellek assumed a professorship of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Yale. The timing was no accident. If we look in Austin Warren (1899-1986) and René Wellek's classic *Theory of Literature*, we find the oft-quoted claim that "[t]he study of comparative literature . . . asks for a widening of perspectives, a suppression of local and provincial sentiments, not easy to achieve. Yet literature is one, as art and humanity are one; and in this conception lies the future of historical literary studies" (Wellek *Theory* 42). The same supranationalism comes to the fore in Wellek's lapidary definition of Comparative Literature as "the study of all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unity of all creation and experience."¹³

These asseverations are rooted generally in aspirations that had been expressed already in the foundational years of Comparative Literature in North America. For instance, in 1903 George Edward Woodberry (1855-1930), who since 1891 had been professor first of Literature and then of Comparative Literature at Columbia University, produced an editorial in the first number of the short-lived *Journal of Comparative Literature* in which he heralded a oneness in humanity, a rosy-eyed perspective upon a kind of globalization *avant la lettre*:

The parts of the world draw together, and with them the parts of knowledge, slowly knitting into that one intellectual state which, above the sphere of politics and with no

more institutional machinery than tribunals of jurists and congresses of gentlemen, will be at last the true bond of all the world. The modern scholar shares more than other citizens in the benefits of this enlargement and intercommunication, this age equally of expansion and concentration on the vast scale, this infinitely extended and intimate comingling of the nations with one another . . .

(Woodberry 211)

Beyond the general tendencies of Comparative Literature, the boom that began in the late 1940s must be set against the backdrop of post-World War II desires for a *pax Americana* — or rather a *pax Americo-Europeana*. Indeed, the constitution of Comparative Literature was linked explicitly to that of the United Nations. For instance, American comparatist Werner Friederich (1905-1993) delivered an address to French comparatists soon after World War II in which he drew an overt connection between the cultural activities of a Europe-centered comparative literature and the economic-political initiative of the Marshall Plan. To cap the address, Friederich professed:

For somehow we feel, with joy and with pride, that what we are doing is part of the deeper meaning of the Marshall Plan, that our vigorous activity somehow goes beyond the realm of mere book-learning, that we are here to help each other, to understand each other, and to save, together with you, the great cultural heritage that belongs to us, the Western World.¹⁴

This sentence is preceded by one in which Friederich offers on behalf of his fellow Americans to help impoverished colleagues elsewhere: “to incorporate in our journal a reasonable number of articles written not by North American but by European and South American scholars, and . . . to this end we are willing to accept contributions not only in English, but also in French, in German, in Italian, and in Spanish” (Friederich 10).

It was partly owing to this joy and pride at belonging to the Western tradition that the comparatists of this era took as two of their foundational works Erich Auerbach’s (1892-1957) *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and Ernst Robert Curtius’s (1886-1956) *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Just look at the epilogue to the former, written by a man who had had to flee the racial laws of Nazi Germany. The epilogue closes with this statement:

With this I have said all that I thought the reader would wish me to explain. Nothing now remains but to find him

— to find the reader, that is. I hope that my study will reach its readers — both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered.

(Auerbach 557)

That the European tilt to Comparative Literature was not always beneficial and had the potential even to become myopic can be deduced from an address that C. L. Wrenn, president of the Modern Humanities Research Association in England, delivered in both Chicago and London in 1967. In his Presidential Address Wrenn substantially excluded much of the non-European, saying: "An African language, for example, is incompatible with a European one for joint approaches in comparative literature study" (Wrenn 5, also qtd. in Bassnett 19-20). Wrenn's statement crystallizes strikingly a creed that reflects the past rather than the future. He was out of step with the times, as is evident also in the discomfort that he manifested toward many of the areas that have attracted increasing attention in postcolonial studies (2, 11).

A deeply European stamp remained upon Comparative Literature until the Vietnam War, when a variety of factors conjoined to bring about a shift toward a more global perspective. This reorientation (*nomen omen*) coincided with the rapid expansion of Comparative Literature in universities around the country. Between 1965 and 1975 the study of Comparative Literature exploded, from 80 programs in 1965 (of which half were less than ten years old) to 150 in 1975 (Bernheimer 21, 30). Government funding and draft avoidance played a role, but so did a desire to attain international understanding through the comparative study of literatures.

The late sixties provoked major changes in all literary studies. On both sides of the Atlantic authors and authorities were scrutinized as never before: the T-shirt slogan "Question Authority" reflected a reality that can be documented in the near-simultaneous publication of Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) "What is an Author?" (1969); Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1968); and Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) "What is Authority?" (1968). These works were not just clichés of 1960s anti-authoritarianism. Rather, they paved the way to the transition from authors and works to deconstruction and texts that came about in the theory boom of the 1970s and 80s.

In the startlingly productive minting of new words in English, often words associated with a later period because of their frequent use turn out actually to have been coined much earlier, before they entered general circulation. Such is the case with both

"Eurocentric" and "multiculturalism." Although the more properly formed adjective "Europocentric" had been used already in 1935, "Eurocentric" appears as early as 1963 — in a newspaper article about Charles de Gaulle! "Multiculturalism" makes its initial appearance in 1957.¹⁵

After the late 1960s the traditional sort of comparing one literature with another was expanded to encompass not just the European literatures that had been the bedrock of comparative literature but also East-West literary and cultural relations. The East-West axis became a well-established modulation of Comparative Literature, even better established than a survey of current comparative literature offerings in North America would lead one to suspect, since it has come to enjoy a considerable vogue in other regions of the world, such as China and Taiwan, Japan and Korea, and India. The vitality of Comparative Literature in these other areas cannot be ignored, since it helps to explain the critiques of Western literature and literary studies such as Edward Said's (1935-2003) *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha's (1949-) deconstructivist postcolonialism, and Spivak's eclecticism. Their criticisms have exercised great magnetism, because their perspectives as partial outsiders have enabled them to see weaknesses, biases, and complications to which others of us have been too close to appreciate fully on our own. The literature encompassed by Comparative Literature has been extended not only horizontally to comprehend more and more of what could be labeled "world literature," but also vertically to cover both extraliterary and non-verbal (visual) texts. If the spatial dimension could be called an X axis and that of style and medium a Y axis, then the Z axis (the only one that has suffered in this expansion) has been the chronological one. But I will put aside this last point for a moment.

Through the 1960s Comparative Literature had been restricted to what goes now by the name of "high culture." Initially the exclusion of what was not "high culture" focused upon folklore, which was relegated to folklorists. For instance, Paul Van Tieghem (1871-1948), the doyen of French positivism in comparative literature, swept aside folklore: "This [the fairy-tale, myth, legend, and hagiography] is folklore and not literary history; for the latter is the history of the human mind viewed through the art of writing Art plays no part in these anonymous traditions whose nature it is to remain impersonal" (Van Tieghem 89). By the 1980s and 90s the issue was no longer folklore but instead mass culture and media such as television and film. These changes have been mirrored at my own institution in the name of the Center that we use for extracurricular seminars: What went at its inception in 1984 under the name of the Center for Literary Studies morphed into the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies before settling down finally (?) as the Humanities Center.

The basis for including television and film in the mix of literature and culture had been there all along, since comparative literature had been defined as comparing two or more literatures *and* comparing literature with other arts. My own take is that we ought ever more to incorporate the visual into teaching and research. We must participate in training our students to read images. The more they learn, the better they will comprehend the periods and other media they study. Equally important, the likelier they will be to understand their own century. But by the same token, those of us who are concerned with languages and literatures cannot ballast texts. At a time when as many adults in the United States do not read even a single book a year as do, we need for our own sakes but even more for the good of the country, to foster the interests of students in learning to read closely, analyze language, interpret, and enjoy all these processes.

In pronouncing these desiderata, I am mindful of the changes being wrought by globalization. The supranationalism that many proponents of Comparative Literature espoused for the quarter century after World War II has played a contributing role in the creation and facilitation of the globalization that now prompts at least some practitioners of Comparative Literature to voice anxiety (Spivak, Kadir). Although much of the reading in Comparative Literature will have to be done in translation, the analysis should focus on texts, whether verbal or visual, and involve close reading. I am an enthusiastic proponent of foreign-language study, when it is feasible. At a conference I attended in Canada in March 2004, a historian from Austria described a team project to produce a database with editions of all documents, including charters, wills, deeds, contracts, letters, and literature, that mention Jews in Austria from the beginning through the fourteenth century. The moderator, an economic historian, asked nicely at the end when the database would be translated into English. She stated without batting an eyelash that English is the global language and that no one outside Germany will consult the database if it is available solely in German. To me such an attitude harbinger even sharper dangers in the future than we have encountered already over the past few years. If we have to rely exclusively on immigrants and foreigners for our knowledge of other cultures, we will be damaged in our ability to conduct foreign policy, to compete economically, and (last but not least) to understand and engage cooperatively with other cultures.

But national self-interest is only one small element. Linguistically this century may turn out to resemble the aftermath of the collision that brought to an end the dinosaurs, except that the cause of the die-off will be a handful of global languages such as English. Whether or not we accept that 3000 of the world's 6000 languages will be seriously endangered or extinct by the year

2100, there is no denying that many are threatened. An extraordinarily poignant episode is reported by the early nineteenth-century German explorer, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who while journeying through South America happened upon an aged parrot that was the sole surviving speaker of an Indian language that had been spoken by the Atures tribe (Humboldt 2: 598-599). Such occurrences will take place more than annually in the twenty-first century, except that this time the parrots are likely to die out before the human beings. The problem bulks far larger than any group of humanists can hope to solve, but we can do our part by encouraging the study of languages. And they do not have to be living: people of the past matter as well as those of the present, and good training in close reading could contribute much when arguments rage over what the framers of the Constitution intended or what the prophets of Scripture had in mind when they composed particular sections of their respective documents.

None of this is to privilege a practical linguistic knowledge, which often results from chance living conditions, over a fuller academic understanding. Although (to appropriate an insight I heard articulated first by my father) many a Swiss waiter can handle rudimentary communications in four or more languages, that does not mean we should admit Swiss waiters as freshmen (or appoint them as professors!). Nor would I venture to talk politics, especially not in a time in which international political issues divide us with an even more vehement intensity than I remember from the Vietnam days of my boyhood.

But if our government is not going to have a Sputnik-type epiphany that we need (even if merely for the most self-serving political and economic purposes) to improve our understanding of the other value systems with which ours is in friction, and that such comprehension cannot be achieved solely in monoglot think tanks within the Beltway, then universities must provide leadership on their own. Ours has become a culture of résumé building and consultancy, but there are realms in which analytic intelligence without years of hard-won knowledge is inadequate. Universities need to ground students in what they will *not* necessarily get in the normal course of things, and if we do not help to keep alive these domains, I do not know who will. Language, including a historically informed knowledge of English itself, is one such domain, literary texts and books another, history a third, and woe betide the person or nation that becomes inattentive to any or all of them.

By proceeding to the issue of globalization and language study, I have leapfrogged over what remains among those who study languages and literatures a divisive topic, which may be summed up in one word: *theory*. Literary study comprises three main branches, namely literary criticism, literary history, and lit-

erary theory. Until the 1980s and 90s theory was seldom regarded as an end in itself. The goal was supposed to be the study of the work of literature. The patriarch of Comparative Literature in Cambridge when I arrived was Harry Levin (1912-1994), who averred simply but memorably in 1969 that the purpose of Comp Lit was to "compare the literature." He opined that: "We spend far too much of our energy talking . . . about Comparative Literature and not enough of it comparing the literature."¹⁶

Little did Levin foresee what a phantasmagoria of methodologies would soon test the flexibility and stability of Comparative Literature! In the 1980s Comp Lit became associated above all with literary theory, especially poststructuralism and deconstruction. Subsequently came what its antagonists (Marc; Hanson, Heath, Thornton) labeled "The Bonfire of the Humanities," in which one approach succeeded another: Women's Studies and Feminism, Gender Studies and Lesbian/Gay criticism or Queer Studies, Marxism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonialism. "Comparing the literature" became ever less simple a task as literature blossomed into texts, as texts swelled to subsume other media such as films, and as texts demanded to be situated in ever more complex and multi-dimensional contexts. At the same time, the materialism, the commercialism, and even the unequal distribution of wealth of American culture at large may have come to be mirrored in the concerns of Comparative Literature. Inadvertently but tellingly, the general introduction to a "classic" overview of Comparative Literature that came into print in 1969 features on its opening page a comparison between the comparatist and a comparison shopper: "The comparatist, instead of being confined to the wares of a single nation, shops in a literary department store" (Aldridge 1).

Where are we now? Theory has been implanted throughout the spectrum of languages and literatures. The trick has been and will be to ensure that the theory (and the plural would reflect much more accurately what now exists) comes hand in hand with commensurate training in language and literature. The attention to balance is all the more necessary as so-called national literature departments lose the comparative scope that they once had through linguistic requirements. The person who looks back to the first half of the twentieth century will find that departments such as English and Romance languages formerly required the study of multiple languages. In most programs a graduate student in English would have taken courses in Old English, Old Norse, and Latin, while one in French would have had exposure to most of the other Romance languages as well as German and Latin. Most such requirements fell by the wayside long ago.

Although the rise of theory has helped to prevent the narrowing of perspective that could have ensued as students and schol-

ars were channeled more and more toward single languages and literatures, pitfalls of course exist. Many, both professional humanists and laypeople, have faulted literary study for having succumbed to a proclivity toward jargon. Despite being criticized and ridiculed, the verbiage has become as distinctive a feature of these days as it was of scholasticism. Here it bears remembering that John Duns Scotus, despite earning the sobriquet of *Doctor Subtilis* from his admirers, lives on most notoriously in the noun *dunce*, which derives from the use of his name by his detractors.

The predisposition to cant on the part of some comparatists sometimes coincides with a “flavor of the month” mentality that has helped us lose sight of the canon—and even sometimes of literature itself. One anecdote illustrates the resolute mutability to which one particular breed of literary scholars has committed itself. One of my colleagues in the English department, whom I would have considered, among other things, a cultural studies person, declared vehemently at a meeting a few months ago, “Cultural studies is over. Cultural studies was the 90s.” Although I had noticed the phrase diminishing in frequency and visibility, I had not known that the cultstud.com bubble had burst definitively. I would hate to think what this same colleague would have to say about the condition of Comparative Literature, the field to which Spivak referred in *Death of a Discipline*. But it would be premature to label Comparative Literature extinct or even endangered, since no matter how protractedly dire the job market has been, the numbers of professors who covet “and Comparative Literature” as a component in their job titles and of students who apply to Ph.D. programs continue to outstrip by far the supplies of such titles or studentships.

My own stance is far more positive, because I see Comparative Literature as constituting ever more a promising locus for interdisciplinarity. “Interdisciplinarity” has a rich history.¹⁷ Since it originated in the mid 1920s in New York City in the Social Science Research Council, it has served as a buzzword that has appealed greatly to bureaucracies. In my own area of specialization, Medieval Studies, interdisciplinarity made its *début* in 1951 in the journal of the Medieval Academy of America, in a notice about American Council of Learned Societies fellowships. Interdisciplinarity could be defined functionally as doing work that relates closely to the specializations of faculty members in two or more departments that have distinct disciplines associated with them. My hunch is that we term “interdisciplinarity” what we like, “dilettantism” or “trendiness” what we do not.

Can the study of Comparative Literature lead to dilettantism or trendiness? Absolutely. But can it propel us to achieve the best of interdisciplinarity? Without doubt. I have fixated on the concept of interdisciplinarity not only for sheerly intellectual reasons

but also for practical ones. We have to ask ourselves what we aim to provide our students. Very few of the undergraduate students trained in the humanities will or should proceed to Ph.D.s in any of our fields. Rather than becoming professional scholars, they will end up "doing" something else. We want to give them the best that our own learning has to offer, but we are not readying the majority of them for our world, the so-called ivory tower.

What awaits them? For one thing, a job market in which most of them will change careers at least twice. Even when not moving from one field to another, they will be expected constantly in their workplaces to ground themselves responsibly in novel areas of knowledge and new types of analysis and synthesis. Many of us humanists are multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary by both predilection and necessity, and we have much to share. Many of the smartest students, despite pressure from their parents and peers to flock into a small number of preprofessional majors, discover the allures of our studies for themselves, and some of them will be attracted by the joy and perhaps even the utility of studying languages and cultures, both living and dead, and of coming to grips with the literatures and related forms of artistic expression produced in those languages and cultures.

The graduation surveys of undergraduates who opt for interdisciplinary majors attest to enormous satisfaction with their choices. Indeed, the evidence shows that many students are happiest in comparative disciplines, which allow them to work closely with texts (whether verbal or visual) and languages, and to enjoy the benefits of tailor-made programs. The backgrounds they acquire please me, not just because I like to think that they will be helped in their own careers, but even more because it reassures me that if I grow to be old, society will be run at least in part by people who have been trained carefully to read between the lines of what we are told and shown by businesses and governments, to analyze words and images, and to think for themselves.

Neither talking about Comparative Literature nor "comparing the literature" will solve all the ills that face the world. But the communities that form when students and teachers compare and contrast languages, texts, approaches, and ideas can provide solaces and solidarities that matter as profoundly to the well-being of societies as do the contributions delivered to the common weal by hospitals, laboratories, armies, courts, police, banks, businesses, and legislatures. Although contrasting the neologism of "planetarity" (Spivak) to the specter of globalization is one option, the older alternative is to profess humanism, a concern with the achievements and interests of human beings. As the resemblance of the words indicates, the area of learning that embodies the aims and values of humanism is the humanities. If as a whole the humanities work to overarch the gaps between human beings,

Comparative Literature is ideally situated to function as one of the main conduits in that activity of spanning. No bridges last forever, but the viaducts that Comparative Literature has erected have done much good and have aged surprisingly well.

The acceleration and multiplication of exchange between different parts and peoples of the world means that the arcs that comparatists draw between cultures may bear more of a resemblance to contrails than suspension bridges. Some of the routes will fail to attract subsequent wayfarers, but others will become heavily frequented. Among those who journey along these trajectories, I like to think that those involved in Comparative Literature will be in a category of their own, neither tourists nor businessmen, but something else. That "something else" is what we can avow through our reading, writing, and teaching, whatever style or styles of comparing we resolve to seek in this daunting new century of ours. If we evidence passion for literature and for the complex interrelationships among the world's many literary traditions, if we foster delight in languages (both our own and others, alive and extinct), and if we seek in our teaching and scholarship to be engaged in the present while not neglecting to train our eyes on both the future and the past, then Comparative Literature will be no likelier to have died in 2003 than authors did in 1968.

The abiding value of Comparative Literature has been its striving for peace, through the recognition of human values that transcend national and temporal borders as well as appreciation of the distinctivenesses that cultures possess in consequence of their unique linguistic and cultural heritages. Ultimately these basic emphases — peace, language, and culture — seem to me to hold more promise of abiding and carrying conviction than does a resistance to globalization espoused by frequent fliers who travel business class. Students deserve professorial models for a humaneness that spurns the materialism and power hunger that typify the worst of our world. They are entitled to words that can be understood and are matched by deeds. The world of Comparative Literature may find its Mahatma Gandhis and Nelson Mandelas, but not in those who strive to profit too consistently from the fruits of the very systems they claim to reject. The peril today may be less the death of the author or of a discipline than the decline of the professor.

Notes:

1. At press time information on these programs is most readily available at <http://www.swan.ac.uk/german/bcla/clusa.htm>.
2. See also Weisstein 167-252 for the "History" as a whole.
3. For a concise expression of gratitude to Bette Anne Farmer, see Furst 119.

4. See also Weisstein 3-28 for his chapter on the question of "Definition."
5. The translation is from Schulz and Rhein 21-22. The quotation, with one phrase omitted and no acknowledgment of Schulz and Rhein, also appears in Bassnett 20.
6. For biographical information on Shackford and a sample of his writing on Comparative Literature, see Schulz and Rhein 39-51. For Gayley, see Schulz and Rhein 79-103.
7. Basic landmarks in the history of Harvard's Department of Comparative Literature appear online (2 June 2004) on the Department's website at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~complit/prog_intro.htm. Schulz and Rhein 115, Weisstein 209, and Levin in Gossman 14 agree that Arthur Richmond Marsh (1861-1937) was appointed assistant professor of Comparative Literature around 1891.
8. Albert L. Guérard (père) is not to be confused with Albert J. Guérard (fils) (1914-2000). For an essay by the latter about the former see Gossman 89-97.
9. Albert L. Guérard, quoted by Albert J. Guérard in Gossman S89.
10. See Remak.
11. See Friederich and Guillén, respectively
12. For an autobiography that focuses on his involvement in Comparative Literature, see Wellek in Gossman 1-11.
13. See Wellek "Name" 19. Compare the editorial statement in the opening issue of *Comparative Literature*, published by the University of Oregon.
14. Friederich 10, qtd. in Yokota-Murakami 180 (in a subsection entitled "Comparative Literature as a Marshall Plan"). For interesting observations on events and atmosphere in 1946, see Levin in Gossman 17.
15. For the information in this paragraph my source is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
16. Whereas Nichols quotes the expression approvingly in 1968 (VI: "The primary purpose of comparative literature... remains what Harry Levin has felicitously called 'comparing the literature'"), Bassett 5 expresses the belief that Levin was already out of step with the times.
17. In all the details about interdisciplinarity I am indebted to Frank.

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