

The Foci of Comparative Literature

By Laurence DeLooze

From the standpoint of traditional academic (read: national) disciplines, the essay I have contributed to this issue of *AmeriQuests* would perhaps make little sense. As a latter-day Gregory the Great might put it, complete with Latin neologisms, *Quid America prae-columbina cum littera europaea?* However, from the standpoint of Comparative Literature as it is presently evolving or from that of “Transatlantic Studies” as it is currently constructed, the aims of my article seem quite reasonable and perhaps even a bit conservative – or at least this is what I wish to argue in the paragraphs that follow.

A colleague of mine recently suggested to a group of graduate students in Comparative Literature that “The Brown Stocking” in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (Auerbach 1953) was as much a manifesto for Comparative Literature as a model for it – or at least for a certain, perhaps slightly antiquated, form of Comparative Literature. I countered that if we were going to limit ourselves to *Mimesis*, “A Knight Sets Forth” and “The World in Pantagruel’s Mouth” spoke, in my opinion, the interests of Comparative Literature best in that volume, now as well as in the late 1940s. It may not come as a surprise that my colleague is a modernist, whereas I was trained as a medievalist. Indeed, I could not help but think that each specialist might find in Auerbach’s great book a door or passage that would provide him or her with a segue into both the enduring and the evolving interests of Comparative Literature. But if we are to believe the voices that have filled the volumes that the last two reports of the ACLA have produced, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1995) and *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Saussy 2006a), then, I wish to suggest, the two chapters from Auerbach that have most marked my thinking are definitely very *à propos*. We are familiar with the repeated statements that Comparative Literature is “the one area in literary studies that has no object in the sense of a corpus, a set of languages, or a normative method” (Roland Greene 2006a, 214) and that it is “a discipline defined by the search for its proper objects” (Haun Saussy 2006b, 12) or even, as Roland Greene states more generally in his review of Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*, that it is “a discipline always in search of itself” (2006b, 154); to my mind, these comments suggest that as a mode of inquiry Comparative Literature is caught up in a perpetual search, like the quests of Chrétien de Troyes’ romances whose knights were gradually led to hunting for, but never quite possessing, the Holy Grail.¹ Moreover, in its move from the multicultural to the global (or, as Spivak would have it, the “planetary”), Comparative Literature is now looking to stuff the whole world into its mouth *à la Rabelais*. Indeed, many of the “comparatists” who argue against the Eurocentric stances of comparative literature are, in my experience, often scholars whose linguistic range is limited to the Western languages (I include myself in this group). Only when the major voices of our generation have handed the baton to a new generation of scholars coming out of Africa and Asia will we have researchers who can truly do original-language work on the texts and “networks” (Greene, 2006 [again]) in non-Western languages;² and likewise only when the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australia and elsewhere are brought into the academic academy at the highest levels will comparative literature begin to address what Spivak calls the discipline’s greatest “scandal” (Spivak 2003, 72). Comparatists, then, need to have the audacity of Rabelais’

¹ As David Ferris, argues, this “anxiety about defining what it is” has been “the enduring theme of comparative literature” (Ferris 2006, 80).

² One of the great successes of postcolonial studies in many English departments – as well as French and Spanish departments – is that the languages have largely remained European: English, French, and Spanish. Witness Damrosch’s graph of the rise of studies on Rushdie (2006, 49)

Panurge and to venture into the mouth of our ill-defined discipline in order to achieve true “planetary” (Spivak’s word).

I conceived my essay in this volume as a meeting place for a variety of intellectual, but also practical, concerns. Despite some very good published research, the “transatlantic studies” movement on the rise among Hispanists needed, I felt, to investigate further the interactions – Greene’s “networks” – between not just the New and Old Worlds, but more specifically between the conquering Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas (or at least what was left of them after the first ravages of the 16th century). Moreover, I wished to acknowledge fully the hegemony of European power that “shows through,” if one is willing to pay attention, even the most indigenous-looking productions in Mexico after 1520. But at the same time I hoped to avoid the sort of facile, manichean approach that has guided some recent scholarship. I was limited, naturally, by my own range of (European) languages and by the fact that I am still in the process of schooling myself in the indigenous expressions of Meso-america during the pre- and immediately-post-conquest periods. The crosscurrents that were created as real or pseudo Meso-american cultural productions entered Europe, while at the same time Europeans were colonizing the Americas, seemed a choice project. The giant’s “mouth” in which I sought to observe these transactions was the gaping maw of textuality: what happened when the European letter came up against the pictogrammic manifestations of Meso-american textuality? That the European letter achieved dominance was a given. But beyond such a simplistic conclusion, what sort of imprint or trace did these interactions leave, both in the New World and in the Old? How were the societies and mentalities on both sides of the Atlantic affected? I was aware from the beginning that I was bound to discover large shifts in the textuality of the New World – the conquest and colonization ensured this – but what perhaps surprised me was that the Old World was affected far more than is generally recognized. Stated implicitly in my essay is that the New World changed the Old World forever: the former shook the latter to its foundations precisely at the moment when Europe believed it had not only recovered the level of Antiquity but perhaps surpassed it. Although I cannot prove this, I am convinced that the Renaissance had such a short duration in part because the indigenous cultures of the New World exposed its many fallacies. Despite the fact, as I note, that numerous thinkers and writers of the period suggest that the foundations of European “learning” were called into question by the encounter with the New World, a long tradition of scholarship has maintained that the New World affected European culture little, if at all, and only in relatively trivial ways (the introduction of maïs, tomatoes, chocolate, tobacco, etc.). I believe the opposite to be the case. I am convinced that the Americas is the occulted subject that shows through again and again, and that it is capital in explaining the transition from Renaissance to Baroque culture.

The previous paragraph has led me into the heart of European cultural constructions, and many comparatists will charge that in my intellectual journey to the New World and back I have fallen into the Eurocentrism of “Europe and its others.” No doubt my own limited expertise – linguistic above all – makes such a trajectory almost inevitable. I can only venture out, as a Westerner, into the other cultures that Europe invaded, and then return. I cannot possibly stay in those places as an autochthone. Nevertheless, I believe that this work has value, and for two reasons. First is, as Christopher Braider has argued (2006), the fact that the horizontal spread of globalized Comparative Literature has caused it to be poured increasingly thin in terms of its historical soundings. Despite the statistics of Caroline Eckhardt (2006), which prove little beyond the number of theses that have deployed the word “comparative literature,” there is a dangerous tendency in this “indiscipline,” as David Ferris wishes to call Comparative Literature, to find in Pantagruel’s mouth only the productions of the most recent centuries along with continental philosophers back to the 18th century. Myself, I firmly believe that Pantagruelian hunger should roll out its long tongue toward the past as well as the future, to New Worlds that have been lost or

destroyed as well as those lurking in the many postmodern, postcolonial corners of our present world.

Second is that in its post-national reformulation, Comparative Literature wisely wishes to move beyond the confines and tacit comparisons between the objects of study defined by national disciplines. In its cross-cultural migrations, however, our ill-focused discipline runs a real risk of falling prey to one of the first propagandistic successes of modernity, namely to the construction of “cultures” as coherent unities – totalities, albeit complex ones – that have conditioned behaviors. Serge Gruzinski has critiqued this stance which has characterized thinking in both the social sciences and the humanities.³ Indeed, Comparative Literature grew out of a mindset that conceived of an isomorphism between nation and culture (hence “national cultures”). Inherited from the 17th and 18th centuries, this notion is still with us in many ways. But prior to the world of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods, one speaks simply of the different sectors of Europe – Catholic, Protestant, Slavic, Scandinavian, etc., or of regional principalities. One has to go back to the High Middle Ages to discover a period in which the lack of a stable national or European culture is acknowledged, though that thousand-year period is often subsumed by modern critics – wrongly – under the monolithic term “the Church.” But upon closer examination, the medieval person looks surprisingly “post-modern.” In 1066 the Normans were Norsemen who had become French-ified and crossed over the English channel to take Great Britain in the name of returning Celtic peoples who had been driven out by the Anglo-Saxons centuries earlier. Or, to take another example, Edward III in the 1330s could be seen as a vassal of the French crown, or the rightful heir to the French throne, or an Englishman invading the land of the French (we are at the naissance of nationalism), or a feudal lord simply defending his far-flung parcels of land in Burgundy and Aquitaine. Similarly, most of the men who accompanied Cortés to the New World went as people from Extremadura (or, in some cases, another region), not from “Spain” as such, and depending on how one looked at it Charles V himself ruled the Americas not as King of Spain but rather as the king of Castile and/or as the Holy Roman Emperor. People juggled complex and multiple social personae, and in some ways the feudal world compartmentalized their roles to an extent greater than that of our own time. As Montaigne put it in “De la Vanité”, “un honneste homme, c’est un homme meslé” (ed. Villey, v. III, 986).⁴

Neither “European culture” nor “Meso-american” culture, then, existed as such when Europeans first landed on the shores of the New World. If the *conquistadores* and colonizers of the 16th century had multiple identities, so, too, did the indigenous peoples they encountered. The “Meso-american” world (often reduced, wrongly, to the term “Aztec”) was a patchwork of related realms, with complex alliances and struggles among them, as Cortés quickly came to realize. When we approach the question of the transatlantic relations in the 1500s, we are juggling a set of negotiations between peoples endowed with complex series of identities and whose identities change depending on which side of the Atlantic they are on (the farmer from Extremadura becomes a

³ “[L]e terme [culture]...entretient la croyance – avouée, inconsciente ou secrète – qu’il existerait un «ensemble complexe», une totalité cohérente, stable, aux contours tangibles, capable de conditionner les comportements: la culture...[C]ette démarche «culturiste» conduit à imprimer à la réalité une obsession d’ordre, de découpage et de mise en forme qui est en fait le propre de la modernité...La catégorie de culture est l’exemple parfait du plaçage d’une notion occidentale sur des réalités qu’elle transforme ou fait disparaître...Il incite à prendre les métissages pour des processus qui se propageraient aux confins d’entités stables, dénommées cultures ou civilisations. Ou comme des sortes de désordre qui brouilleraient soudain des ensembles impeccablement structurés et réputés authentiques.” (Gruzinski, *La Pensée Métisse*, 45-46).

⁴ As is so often the case with Montaigne, this sentence does not translate easily. M.A. Screech makes the following attempt: “a proper gentlemen is a man of parts” (Montaigne 1991, 1115).

conquistador in the New World; the most humble follower of the dead Moctezuma becomes an exotic specimen and spokesman for an alien culture when he arrives in Rouen).

In his 1995 contribution to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, David Damrosch suggested that Comparative Literature was elliptical, holding always in its gaze two foci. In the wake of the Saussy volume, we might say, “at least two.” We can in fact plot a dotted line from Damrosch’s comments to the insistence a decade later that Comparative Literature cannot quite find its objects. The latter formulation simply indexes the difficulty that has come with the realization that a globalizing view expands the number of foci immeasurably, the result of which is a discipline in search of its object (i.e. its focus). But it would be a mistake to hope that Comparative Literature will find that “object” because this would mean a reduction to a single central point at which to set the sharp end of a compass and then try to circumscribe, like William Blake’s Newton, the world.

On the contrary, if we extend Damrosch’s suggestion to mean *at least* two foci, we can understand that Comparative Literature is necessarily somewhat baroque in its construction – and as a result always a little off-balance as well: a bit unstable, even slightly out of “focus.” Moreover, if Comparative Literature arose as a response to a sense of differences between, and a desire to define or establish, national “cultures,” this anxiety response may well have arisen precisely because European culture lost its clear sense of being the epicenter of civilization after the discovery of the Americas. Indeed, the Conquest engendered a falling away from the arrogant self-assuredness of the European world and brought about the first perceptions of unsettling relativism (see, for example, Montaigne). This new sensibility, which we have come to call the Baroque, traded in the single, vanishing point – that is, a single focal point – of Renaissance art’s characteristic “window on the world” for an art of ovals and distorted shapes in which there were (at least) two foci. The examples of this are of course many, though the most eloquent is perhaps Bernini’s brilliantly propagandistic Piazza in front of St. Peter’s in which the reach of the Catholic Church now embraced an *oval* space for humanity, just as it elliptically reached out to associate the New World with the Old. Should we be astonished that the oval insistently returns centuries later in Cubism, that other art born of a new reflection on relativity at the beginning of the 20th century?

If I ask Damrosch and Gruzinski to speak across their writings to the question of Comparative Literature (and perhaps to help me justify my own transatlantic consideration of the alphabetic letter in the 16th century), the results might contain some of the following. Comparative Literature, it might prove, provides a healthy undoing of a politics of identity, both at the level of *recherches* and of *chercheur*. If Comparative Literature is always in motion and always moving between a plurality of objects in its quest, this also implies that the comparatist him/herself is equally unsettled and equally “multiple.” I have always wondered at the desire of some academics to concentrate simply on the texts of the countries from which they come, accepting as natural the national cultures that have been constructed for them. In Comparative Literature it is impossible – as well as unacceptable – for the Italian only to work on Italian texts or the Peruvian on Peruvian ones. The constant quest and the multiple foci of Comparative Literature deconstruct the constructions of singular or national identities both in terms of the objects of our attention and of our own affiliations. Are we surprised that this should prove unsettling or that some people should repeatedly predict a forthcoming complete collapse?

Nevertheless, Comparative Literature, with its multiple foci, offers (like Bernini’s Piazza) a huge embrace. If we return again to that *soi-disant* “old fashioned” approach to Comparative Literature that we find in Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, an even earlier chapter than those already mentioned can perhaps serve as a model for Comparative Literature in the 21st century. As a Classicist colleague has pointed out to me, for her it is the chapter on Odysseus’ scar that perhaps speaks most powerfully to the comparatist. After all, is it not in that chapter that, as my colleague writes to me in

a personal correspondence, the scar “asks to be identified, narrated, interpreted, compared with other tokens of identity”? The grand old man of Comparative Literature has, in a sense, anticipated the concerns of our postmodern and poststructuralist age in his chapter on one of the earliest seminal texts of the Western world.

Auerbach reminds us, then, of the fields of inquiry that lie ever open to comparatists. In the end, to say that there is nothing new under the sun and that everything under the sun is new is, at a second level of generation, to say the same thing. Against those who would declare Comparative Literature as moribund or even already DOA, we then can rightly counter that *tout reste à faire*.

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