

Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A View from Europe and the UK

LUCIA BOLDRINI

This issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* will appear shortly before the publication of the ACLA's decennial report on the state of the discipline in the United States.¹ Haun Saussy's 2003 draft report opened with the claim that 'Comparative Literature has, in a sense, won its battles',² words that immediately recall, by contrast, Susan Bassnett's assertion, ten years earlier, that 'Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead'.³ Although apparently claiming opposite fates for comparative literature, these assertions in fact converge in that 'one sense' that qualifies them, and both turn out to suggest something quite different from what they appear to say. Bassnett's death notice was for a discipline born out of the European nineteenth-century, with its emphasis on national literatures, its redefinition of the notion of literature itself, its focus on a direct relationship between literature and (national) identity, and which now would give way to a new, more open, lively, politically aware understanding of the discipline beyond its Eurocentric historical definition, and its relocation in the wider field of the study of intercultural processes, of which translation studies would furnish the principal model (to the point that comparative literature becomes for Bassnett a sub-section of translation studies).⁴ Similarly, Saussy's declaration of victory is followed by considerations on the institutional low status, even anonymity, of comparative literature, whose successes (the development of literary theory, the opening up of the syllabus to books and authors from outside the national canon) have been assimilated by other disciplines and departments; this victory turns out to be, in effect, a kind of death by dispersion, and requires comparative literature to continue to fight for institutional recognition and survival: what risks extinction here is an academic discipline safe

within the boundaries of academic departments, with a solid supply of jobs and students.

Saussy writes in and of the US context, but, as I write this from a UK perspective, I am also aware of the continuing decline of the number of students taking modern languages degrees and the consequent closure of several departments and programmes of modern languages and literatures. Paradoxically, this has led in the UK to a certain resurgence of comparative literature, as some departments of modern languages merge with departments of English to form departments of (Comparative/European) Literature. At the same time, from a European perspective, I am also aware of the recent decision by the University of Innsbruck to close the Institute of Comparative Literature, and the similar institutional straits under which the discipline exists in many other European countries. The two issues of the lack of uptake of modern languages in the UK and the institutional pressure on comparative literature departments in parts of Europe may appear unrelated, but I believe that they should be seen as sides of the same coin, and that, together, they point to a need to re-think today the very premises of our understanding of our discipline.

The question of the European origins of comparative literature deserves some attention, as it has often been the focus both of identity claims and of disputes about the legitimacy of that identity, and not only in Europe. Accounts of comparative literature in the US often recall the founding role held in the middle of the twentieth century by immigrant scholars arriving from a Europe devastated by totalitarianism and war.⁵ Programmes of comparative literature in the European mainland and in the US usually require two, or better three, modern languages,⁶ one or two of which must generally be French, English or German; their syllabi include major works of 'European' literature – and I place 'European' in quotes because what this boils down to is canonical works in the literatures of the three main languages, plus some other few works from other literatures, often read in translation: 'European' has a rather restricted sense when we speak of comparative literature. At the same time, from the post-colonial perspective on comparative literary studies, the European origins and identity of the discipline are seen as marks of its colonialism, its compromised history of exclusion, and its repression of indigenous languages. In this sense, 'Comparative Literature', born in nineteenth-century Europe, is already tainted from its origins.

I do not intend to dispute this history and the justification for these

associations; I do however wish to reflect on the problems and the consequences, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, of such continuing identification of Europe on the one hand with *some* Western European countries and, on the other, with 'the West' and therefore with colonial history – of the reduction, that is to say, of Europe to the colonial history of some of its states. The Europe of the twenty-first century is different from that of the nineteenth century, but also different from the mid-twentieth-century Europe from which Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek and other comparatists emigrated to (re-)found, or reinvent, the discipline in the United States. Certainly the history of comparative literature must not be disregarded; but nor should we disregard the new context in which the discipline exists, and the new shape of a post-colonial Europe no longer formally divided between East and West by an iron curtain, and in which the European Union plays a key role in removing barriers and promoting contacts and exchanges. In the new European Union that extends from Portugal to Poland, from the Baltic republics to Greece, and that is in accession talks with Romania, Turkey, Croatia, and Bulgaria, new centres of intellectual as well as political power are emerging. Of course, the European Union is not all of Europe, just a (very large) part of it. Iceland in the North, Albania in the South, Russia in the East, and Switzerland right at its centre, all have much to contribute to the European identity without being part of the EU. At the same time (and this is the other side of the coin), while Britain holds on to its links with the Anglophone world, its ex-colonies and dominions, and while, with its lack of interest in foreign languages, it looks towards the postcolonial field and a 'world literature' that can be read in English translation rather than to the comparative literature that relies on multilingual expertise, English remains the most studied second language in Europe, and hence literature written in English is, almost by default, part of the comparative syllabus throughout the continent.

There are thus some major questions facing comparatists in Europe and the UK that require addressing, and require us to do so quite urgently.

Many European countries have no imperial history if not a passive one, having themselves been 'colonised', subjugated or controlled by other political powers. A 'decolonising' of the European mind needs to take place not only in relation to its history of imperial domination over other continents, but also in relation to the entirety of Europe and the historical relationships between its different geographical and

geopolitical areas. This also applies to our understanding of comparative literature and what can be regarded as, in effect, first- and second-class partners in the field. In this context, the recently formed *European Network for Comparative Literary Studies / Réseau Européen d'Etudes Littéraires Comparées*⁷ (precisely thanks to its nature of a *network*) can play an important role in reflecting on the new identity in Europe of comparative literature, its 'decolonisation', the notion of Europe itself, through the exchange of information on teaching and research practices, by promoting the mobility of staff and students, by operating through existing EU schemes and institutions or through bi- or multi-lateral agreements to establish new links and common projects across what have traditionally been perceived as divides or separate cultural areas, such as East and West; North and South; Mediterranean and Baltic; even Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, or Christian and Muslim.

Emily Apter has recently reminded us (and we clearly needed reminding) of the *centrality* of Istanbul in the formation of a European and American comparative literature identity.⁸ However, as I write in November 2005 (and I hope this will have been redressed by the time the article appears in print in early 2006), there is as yet no Turkish representation on the ENCLS – just as there is yet no Russian representative, no Icelandic, no Ukrainian. Can we afford to have Russian literature excluded from European literature and our comparative interests, even if only in this institutional context? I see it therefore as one of the more urgent tasks of the ENCLS to lead a Europe-wide reflection on who we are, who we include and – since, as the saying goes, every inclusion is always also an exclusion – what exclusions our modern inclusions provoke, and why; we need a fundamental rethinking of Europe, one that is aware of, but not stuck in, the old historical perceptions and preconceptions and is thus able to embrace with new openness the richness and variety of its cultural, literary and linguistic heritage.

There are models that can help us reconfigure the study of comparative literature in Europe (comparative ways of studying, understanding, and re-conceptualising Europe). One such example could be the literary-historical comparative model described by Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés in their *Rethinking Literary History*, where literary history is re-thought 'away from the concepts of nations and nationalisms' through the concept of nodal points, where different cultures come into contact, and from which different historical, artistic, cultural forces irradiate. 'Sometimes these nodes are cities whose nationalities

have changed through wars and subsequent border changes (e.g., Gdansk/Danzig); sometimes they are people (e.g., Kafka, a Jew writing in German in Prague); sometimes they are geographical forces (e.g., the Danube River, which has made possible the material flow of culture and thus interactions between different groups).⁹ Temporal nodes are studied as axial points radiating to incidents bearing on them before and after, and allowing comparisons of how the same historical moment is perceived, and what its consequences are, in different places.¹⁰ Hutcheon and Valdés describe the literary-historical project in progress for East-Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the model could fruitfully extend to many other European areas, and to the whole of Europe itself. Our choices of nodes for such study can and ought to be both predictable and surprising: Sicily, Istanbul, Prague, Cordoba, Lisbon, Trieste, Kiev, Rome; the Baltic countries, the Balkans; the Berlin wall and the Iron Curtain, the boundary with the Ottoman Empire; the Channel, the Bosphorus, the Strait of Gibraltar; the shifting borders within Europe: Alsace, Tyrol, the western and eastern borders of Poland, the eastern borders of the Soviet Union, now Russia; the great rivers of Europe, the North Sea, navigation lines in the Mediterranean; Cyprus, Algiers, Damascus, Jerusalem (not to claim these last as European but to examine how they became loci where Europe has historically encountered otherness and defined itself against and through it); the Middle Ages and their ideological use in later periods; 1789, 1848, 1989, 2005; Roma and Gitano narratives, songs, poetry; migrant literatures; the great monastic libraries where culture was preserved and reshaped, modern libraries and sites of cultural production, and more.

At the same time, comparative literature needs to rethink several of the assumptions that underpin it – and for this the sobering experience of the UK outlined above can offer the occasion for such rethinking in especially one field: the question of the necessity of a second or third language. This may be a problem particularly applicable to the UK, but it is also one that, if traditional comparative literature is indeed ‘dead’ or so victorious that it is destined to die out, needs to be addressed more widely.

The sharp decline in uptake of foreign languages in the UK, due to become worse as a generation of students enter university from whom the government has removed the need to continue studying a foreign language after the age of 14,¹¹ means that if we insist on the requirement of a third, or even just a second, language, our courses will become the

almost exclusive province of foreign students who, having studied English in their countries of origin, can take advantage of their native knowledge of their own language and literature and come to the UK to study comparative literature. But – while there is no doubt that comparative literature needs *a* linguistic divide and even less doubt that the more languages a student is fluent in, the greater his or her potential for informed comparative literary analysis – this, to my mind, remains to a good extent a false problem, and one that the current situation allows us to confront. To put the questions baldly and, probably, controversially: is the knowledge of one or more foreign languages really necessary to study what comparative literature is, what it does, and how it does it? And then, is it necessary in order to actually *do* it?

If we claim that the knowledge of two or more languages is necessary because comparative literature operates across linguistic boundaries, we are then led to infer that English and (for example) Nigerian literature written in English (or Indian and Canadian, etc.), do not belong to the field of what can legitimately be compared under the label of comparative literature – i.e., that the linguistic boundary between Nigerian English and British English (or Canadian and Indian, etc.) is not a sufficiently strong one; and that the novels of, say, Angus Wilson and Chinua Achebe (i.e., authors who write at about the same time, the 1950s, about defining features of their countries' histories and cultures) cannot be studied comparatively. As this also implies that the literatures of bilingual, trilingual, multilingual countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Nigeria, India, Algeria...) are inherently comparative, the paradox then would be that we treat as more legitimate objects of comparative criticism two Nigerian works, one written in Yoruba and one in English, than those of – to continue my example above – Achebe and Wilson, or perhaps Defoe and Coetzee, or Rhys and Emily Brontë (but Condé and Charlotte Brontë would be all right, as would Césaire and Shakespeare). Unless we invoke another requirement: that we also move across national boundaries – and therefore we remove (for me, unreasonably) the legitimacy of the comparative label from the Nigerian works in English and Yoruba, or Yoruba and Igbo, or Indian works in Hindi and Urdu, or Belgian works in Flemish and French, on the (reasonable) grounds that they belong to the same 'national' literature. These paradoxes, indeed aporias, of comparative literature, certainly not new ones, are corollaries of the traditional though problematic assumption of a natural association of language and nation.

The equivalence of language and nation is a historically justifiable

feature of comparative literature insofar as the subject appeared at the same time as, and as part of, the emergence in Europe of projects of self-consciously national literatures in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. But, today, we need to be more critical of this implicit association. Scholars like Robert Crawford have shown how 'marginal' literatures contribute to, or even create, the identity of the 'major' literatures within which they are usually subsumed,¹² but I am also thinking about the ways in which we continue to see national literatures as the building blocks of comparative literature; and how this, associated with the requirement to work across languages, perpetuates the identification of nation and language, and skews the comparative perspective in ways that I do not think we can continue to hold legitimate. Bertrand Westphal has well expressed a similar point to mine in a paper read at the first ENCLS conference in Florence, September 2005, in which he spoke about Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall, the war in the Balkans, the Maastricht treaty: 'L'Europa sta fra un territorio perduto e una riterritorializzazione che non è (ancora) avvenuta. L'Europa si è deterritorializzata; si è cioè spostata in un limbo che si situa fra un reale che si è indebolito e un immaginario, o forse un *immaginale*, che potrebbe prefigurare il reale di domani.' (Europe is situated between a lost territory and a re-territorialization that has not (yet) happened. Europe has de-territorialized; that is, it has moved to a limbo located between a real that has weakened and an imaginary, or perhaps an *imaginal*, that could prefigure the real of tomorrow.)

Take Yiddish literature, Roma literature, regional literature, literature written in a language different from a country's official language (Carmine Abate's Arbëresh, but also Andrea Camilleri's Sicilian, in Italy; Lewis Grassie Gibbon's Lallans or James Kelman's Glaswegian in Scotland¹³). Or take any of the many new immigrant literatures into Germany, France, Italy, and many other European countries in the years following their colonies' independence, and, more recently, the post-1989 'decolonisation' of Europe. All of these are clearly privileged objects for comparative literary study, not because they allow us to compare works from two national corpuses but because they prise open any national corpus. Reading the Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (to take an example that goes back to 1956 and belongs therefore to the same period in which Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Wilson writes *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), allowing me thus to continue with my previous example), with its

mixture of standard English, street English and Creole, forces the reader to pay close attention to the use of language in its diversity, to the way it creates identity (personal, national, ethnic, of a community), and embodies the sense, or desire, of belonging to a nation and/or community and of alienation from another – an attention and a focus that are typical of the comparative approach to literature.

Selvon is a Caribbean writer, and of course the category of 'Caribbean' itself is problematic in the context of the identification of nation and language. A relevant question, however, would be: as a book set in London, written in a form of English, and addressing the condition of immigrant communities to Great Britain, can *The Lonely Londoners* also be studied as part of English literature? I would say it can, with the necessary qualifications. I am of course not proposing to call Selvon 'English' and re-colonise his work, but that one of his novels can *also* be studied as part of English literature, because categorizations of the literature of England need to reflect its multi-cultural, international nature in ways that it has not done until recently,¹⁴ and because all literatures should be more open, flexible, variable, adaptable fields. Many books or authors can be studied as part of a literature or as part of another – just like Beckett can be studied within Anglo-Irish or French literature; like Eliot can be studied as part of American (where he came from) or English (where he lived and published) literature.

A traditional question on the nature of comparative literature is whether it is a discipline defined by its object or by its method – indeed, whether there are an object or a method that are specific to comparative literature. One answer would be that just as the literary historian chooses what to include from the literature produced in a country and its languages and what story or stories to narrate, so the comparatist scholar chooses what can be compared and how. But of course this would be banal and simplistic. Comparative literature cannot be defined simply by its object (what is the comparative literary corpus?), nor does it have a specific method of analysis that is proper to it: what unifies the method of comparison of, say, Vintila Horia's *Dieu est né en exil*, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, and Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*, all of which are concerned with the final years of Ovid's life, with, say, a stylistic comparison of Petrarchan sonnets in Spanish and English? Both are comparative studies, but the methodology of analysis will perforce be different, and the latter example would have more in common with an analysis of medieval

Italian sonnets than with the study of twentieth-century novels based on Ovid's old age.

It would be more useful to see comparative literature as a way of conceiving of the role of the critic and of literary criticism/interpretation: in this sense, comparative literature would be a way of reading texts that requires that boundaries be identified, emphasised, studied, undone; that puts under pressure such boundaries – boundaries, chosen by the critic, that are of a linguistic, or historical, or national, or ethnic, or more broadly cultural nature; that emerge through the comparison of how each work (author, period) configures the relationships between use of language, theme, sense of identity, artistic expression. We should make our students aware of the linguistic and formal differences that obtain in works that may not require translation, but require us to acquire an awareness of the translations we carry out in our own minds, and of the necessity *not to translate*, to recognise and respect language in its diversity and its specificity as expression of its own cultural context. The task of comparative literature would be to identify and show ways of studying and bridging boundaries that are inherent in any works and in the relationship between them; boundaries that are often implied and suggested by the writer (Césaire's *Une Tempête*, Coetzee's *Foe*), or that are, even more often, chosen by the critic as focal point and generative source of the comparative reading.

The tension between differences and similarities is constitutive of comparative literature's method of inquiry and of its nature. This necessary tension concerns *both* field and method; the comparative approach puts its object in tension (identifies tensions between its objects), makes it its business to study objects whose differences it seeks to bridge, in whose apparent similarities it seeks differences. At the same time, comparative criticism requires an approach that is itself in tension: if as comparatists we establish boundaries and their significance, if we are the ones who create, who impose, a certain type of tension over the object of examination, therefore, as comparatists, we always have to interrogate not only what boundaries exist, but how those boundaries are formed, historically and in our own practice, and what their implications are. What I am describing is a discipline that refuses to take itself for granted, that is constantly self-aware and constantly calls into question the premises on which it operates. And this is relevant to the discussion of both the UK and the European sides of the coin.

On the one side, the homogenizing effects of English dominating the linguistic and cultural scene must be countered through a

dissection of the linguistic unity of English and an insistence on the actual and constitutive foreignness of the languages and literatures the label of 'English' commonly subsumes. By alerting students (and scholars) to the necessity to read comparatively – that is, by focusing on readings that bring to light differences as well as similarities, placing the cultural, linguistic, historical specificities of texts in their contexts – the comparative approach can promote the awareness of plurality and difference within 'English' and will therefore support, not further debilitate, the understanding of literature as cultural expression and as definition and/or exploration of (national, ethnic, racial, communal, personal) identity. Though this issue is particularly acute for English, it is relevant for other languages too – French, for example, or Russian. This awareness may even encourage a return to the study of foreign languages as windows onto (or doors into) other cultures and their verbal and artistic expressions.

On the other side lies the necessary redefinition of a European comparative literature (a comparative literary re-thinking of what is Europe and what is European at the beginning of the twenty-first century): our role, the role of our discipline, at the present moment, is to rethink Europe, its internal and external boundaries, how we have historically selected and defined them and how we do so today.

And, on both sides, how we wish to understand the boundaries we have created and those we have elided, the equivalences we have assumed; how we wish to open Europe up to what constitutes it and what is outside it, opening it to new forces that would be meaningless, today, to call 'other'; and to confront the otherness of the languages that we have traditionally considered to be ours.

NOTES

- 1 *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming in 2006).
- 2 www.stanford.edu/~saussy/unpubs/ACLArpt1.pdf (consulted Spring 2005; no longer available).
- 3 Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 47.
- 4 See the final chapter of her book, 'From Comparative Literature to Translation Studies', pp. 138–161.
- 5 These are in fact not the origins of comparative literature in the US: a course in 'general or comparative literature' already existed at Cornell from 1871, and a chair was established at Harvard in 1890 (Bassnett, p. 22). Nevertheless, the post-

- WWII influx of European scholars is taken as the foundational moment of modern comparative literature in the United States: ‘*The early history of comparative literature* [...] The émigré *founding fathers* – Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, René Wellek, Wolfgang Kayser – arrived at American universities [...]’; ‘*the early comparatists*, concerned to forget the ideology-riven past [...]’. Emily Apter, ‘Comparative Exile: Competing Margins in the History of Comparative Literature’, in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, edited by Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 86–96, p. 87, my emphases.
- 6 The UK case is different, and many programmes of comparative literature here strongly recommend but do not require a second language.
 - 7 A first meeting was held in Paris, 2001. At the second meeting in Brussels in 2003 a charter was approved and officers were appointed; Mario Domenichelli was elected the first General Coordinator of the Network. The first conference was held in Florence in September 2005.
 - 8 Emily Apter, ‘Global *Translatio*: The ‘Invention’ of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933’, in *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), pp. 76–109.
 - 9 Linda Hutcheon, ‘Rethinking the National Model’, in Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3–49, p. 8.
 - 10 Mario J. Valdés, ‘Rethinking the History of Literary History’, in Hutcheon and Valdés, *Rethinking Literary History*, pp. 63–115, p. 104.
 - 11 This is a decision that goes against the spirit of the Lisbon strategy (2000), further defined by the 2002 Barcelona European Council which specified ‘the objective of improving language learning in the European Union, and in particular of encouraging all EU citizens to speak and understand at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue’. This document can be found on the European Union’s website, at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/langsynthesis_en.pdf.
 - 12 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
 - 13 Bertrand Westphal’s paper ‘Il ritorno del Moicano. Le minoranze dopo la caduta del Muro’ discussed several examples of minority literatures that are encountering a literary resurgence in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall.
 - 14 See for example the rather courageous volume 13 (1948–2000) of the Oxford English Literary History, by Bruce King, titled *The Internationalization of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), whose back cover asks, ‘In the future, what will ‘English Literary History’ mean? [...] Now that the literature of England includes Sri Lankans, Egyptians, and British Nigerians, does this mean that we can no longer talk of the English nation as a cultural unit?’ The reply, in the words of the online blurb, is that ‘it is wrong to assume that national cultures are finished [...] a large, accomplished, socially significant body of writing in England sits between and overlaps with an older British tradition and its various sub-divisions, new national literatures, a post-imperial Commonwealth tradition, and contemporary global literature.’