

The Current Role of Comparative Literature



Question 1: How do you perceive the current role of comparative literature in the humanities, or in the public sphere?

Question 2: What do you consider as the major changes in the themes and approaches of comparative literature over the last thirty years, and which of the current themes and approaches seem crucial to you?

Question 3: What role does the place where you live/teach and your cultural formation play in your approach and your view of comparative literature?

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1. The place of comparative literature within the humanities seems to me to have developed considerably since the beginning of the century: on the one hand, its international dimension corresponds to the contemporary vision of the world and allows reflection on the notion of “globalization”; on the other hand, it arouses the interest of an ever-increasing number of students, which is a sign of the times. At the same time, it remains little-known in the public sphere, and doesn’t seem to me to play the role it should, particularly in these times of war, since comparative literature, based on an exchange between peoples, seems to me to be, above all, a lesson in peace.

2. The history of comparative literature, which emerged in the Romantic era from a historicized vision of literature and the recognition of aesthetic relativism, is certainly complex. The first half of the twentieth century linked it exclusively to literary history, while the second was essentially based on the antagonism between literary history and literary theory. In my view, the last thirty years have seen the discipline emerge from this rather schematic conflict to diversify its approaches, in particular through interdisciplinarity: myth studies and geocriticism have emerged. Comparative literature has also provided an opportunity to reflect on the critical presuppositions of the very idea of literature, attached to Eurocentrism. But in recent years,



gender studies and ecocriticism seem to have developed more than the others, no doubt due to the return of a moral perspective to literary studies.

3. I live in Paris, considered, according to the title of an early comparative work, to be one of the “literary capitals of Europe”, along with London, Dublin, Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Prague, Heidelberg, Berlin, Munich, Warsaw, Krakow and many others. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this place, among many others, was the focus of a debate on European culture, undoubtedly one of the major themes of contemporary comparative thought. It seems to me that the debate has moved on from a European vision, transcending the compartmentalization of nations, to a critique of Eurocentrism, linked to a postcolonial vision of literature and denouncing the European foundation of literary canons. As for my training, it is international (France, Germany, USA, Spain, UK) and this seems to me inseparable from a comparative spirit, which places us in the situation that Socrates, and then Kant in particular, characterized as that of a citizen of the world.

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1. Comparative studies in any discipline, i.e. not only in literary studies, but also in linguistics, politics, philosophy and law, have always entertained certain expectations. However, as we look back at approximately two centuries of the academic pursuit of this kind of study, it is apparent that the expectations have been met only partially. The reason is that the comparative method suffers from its own problems. Comparing is part of human cognition. We cannot do without comparison. Nevertheless, the discipline of comparative literature has difficulties defining its object of study. In other words, we compare — often for good reasons — but we lack the understanding of what all the comparing is supposed to reveal. Besides that, both comparison and literature are concepts inseparable from the humanities. It seems to me, therefore, that comparative literature copies the role of the humanities, which are, unfortunately, in decline. Seeing that literature has lost the social importance it enjoyed in the previous centuries, my view about the role of comparative literature in the public sphere is rather pessimistic.

2. In the last thirty years, comparative literature has been particularly challenged by world literature studies, a discipline that has emerged from comparative literature itself. For some scholars there is no real conflict between the two, for others world literature studies are an unfortunate development that betrays comparative literature’s traditional commitment to the knowledge of literature in the original languages. Previously, postcolonial studies tried to co-opt the territory of comparative literature. However, despite these or maybe because of these attempts comparative literature is still very viable as a discipline. The fact that the discipline is in constant crisis gives it the energy to absorb the new developments and to rejuvenate again and again. However, I would like to see more focus on interculturality and comparative poetics (as

most famously suggested by Earl Miner) in comparative literature in the future. Interculturality, which refers to mutually respectful interaction and dialogue between people from different cultures, is in my opinion a better basis for literary research than the one offered by the current world literature studies founded on the world-system theory. I also believe that comparative poetics is a needful project, as it addresses the most fundamental presuppositions about literature.

3. I work at the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. It is also the institution associated with the well-known theoretician Dionýz Ďurišin. His work is a legacy that is both inspirational and subject to critical evaluation. It is especially so because in the past twenty years, Slovak comparative literary studies have gone beyond his theoretical model rooted in historical poetics. Another important factor influencing the discipline in Slovakia is that the universities do not offer a study programme in comparative literature. If at all, it is taught as part of the courses in literary theory or as a one-semester course for students of Slovak or other literatures. Consequently, comparative literature is mostly a research interest of a small group of scholars who have the ambition to contribute to the discipline on the local as well as the translocal scale.

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1. Openness to intellectual and societal challenges, conceptual boldness, and a wide scope of research combined with reflection on cultural and historical specificity are distinctive features of comparative literature as a discipline. Against the background of the nineteenth-century nation-based conceptions of literary study, comparative literature developed a transnational dimension by articulating heterogeneity and difference, fostering the exchange of texts and ideas, and attuning to the disciplinary, cultural, and linguistic Others. The field repeatedly reinvented itself by leaning towards translation studies, postcolonial studies, comparative media studies, geocriticism, environmental studies or digital humanities as paradigmatic research methodologies but also by exploring border zones and intersections between disciplines and cultures and retaining the sense of openness and discovery at its very core. Ultimately, comparative literature moved beyond comparatism with its binary coordinates, towards the exploration of complex, hybrid, and fluid cultural forms.

2. Recent decades witnessed an increase of interest in new forms of materiality and media, transformation of frameworks and contexts where works of literature spread and take unprecedented forms, as well as new ways of reader participation and response. As a result, comparative literary and cultural studies extended to new media ecologies, new forms of textuality, bio and eco-arts and literatures. At the same time, the development of technologies, quick social change, and the emergence of risk societies with their sharp conflicts, episodes of violence, warfare, and multiplying crises seem to put the very existence of literature at risk. In the current situation often





referred to as the end of modernity and dismantlement of the modern world order, the original transnational, conciliatory, humanistic message of comparative literature may look utopian and outdated. And yet, there is a potential for comparative literature, with its unique openness, context sensitivity, and resilience, to become a pivot in shaping new complex cultural formations and new paradigms in the humanities.

3. Openness and resilience are important also for the survival and sustainability of small societies and cultures, such as Estonia where I live and teach — a country at the crossroads between Eastern and Western regions of Europe. The history of my family, with its Estonian, Russian, and German roots, in a way, reflects the complicated history of the country. Apparently, both cultural and intellectual lineage impacted my professional preferences. I came to comparative literature from semiotics — the field called “a refuge for homeless ideas,” or rather for interesting (inter)disciplinary intersections and germinations, by one of its practitioners. Similarly, comparative literature fosters the intersections of disciplines and approaches and traces the transformations of cultural and linguistic forms. However, whereas semiotics is limited to the study of communication and signification processes and the relevant aspects of cultural phenomena, comparative literature combines a powerful conceptual impetus with context sensitivity and deep interest in the materiality and diversity of cultural forms. I see the combination of theoretical tools with a broad empirical study as an advantage and a possibility for comparative literature to take an integrating role in the fragmented field of humanities.

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1. Comparative literature remains as much an idea as a reality. The dream of comparing literatures on equal terms is inevitably illusory: we all have partial perspectives, and we are all limited by the languages that we can read. If it is in the nature of the discipline that comparative literature promises more than it can deliver — since internationalism will never be free of nationalism — its role is to (try to) make good on this promise, or at least to fail better in doing so. Whether conceived on a European or world scale, comparative literature pushes us to read more widely, to think more generously, and to learn more rigorously. In the words of Stendhal: « Pour acquérir beaucoup d’esprit, il faut beaucoup comparer ».

2. The obvious major development in the field over the last thirty years is the resurgence of World Literature as the dominant paradigm — understood this time not as the Eurocentric vision of the nineteenth century, but as the postcolonial recalibration of international relations. In methodological terms, this has brought with it a swing away from close reading towards more distant models of interpretation: as sociological analysis is driven by ever bigger data, context becomes as important as text. Whilst this is one important role for comparative literature, the paradox is that the

opposite is also true: in a world dominated by political context, comparatists are increasingly called upon to insist on the aesthetic particularity of given texts. Maintaining a balance between these two approaches will be the major challenge of the discipline over the coming years.

3. Having founded a Centre for Modern European Literature fifteen years ago, my perspective has inevitably been informed by the colleagues and students working within it. Editing a book series on behalf of this Centre has led to many a productive conversation, as has my role as an editor at the *Times Literary Supplement*. Such experiences both confirm and challenge my cultural formation, placing the practice of close reading with which I grew up under welcome scrutiny. In particular, I have learned to question my own assumptions about the importance of literature, both through reflecting on the history of the discipline and through writing for a broader audience on the purpose and value of reading. Comparison remains the most challenging, and the most rewarding, of methodologies.

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1. The answer depends on the particular socio-cultural and political circumstances of our discipline. While in many so-called developed countries comparative literature is increasingly marginalized and forced to merge institutionally with other humanities due to the hegemony of economic considerations, in some countries, for example on the occasion of the recent ICLA congress in Tbilisi, CompLit can play a prominent role as a protagonist of national cultural policy who can show that the socio-cultural and academic level of the state is up to international standards. I assume that CompLit's position in the public sphere generally lies somewhere between these extremes. CompLit has traditionally been closely intertwined with other humanities (from philosophy and history to linguistics and anthropology), but it has begun to lose its specific focus and comparative method.

2. Among the many changes our discipline has undergone in the last three decades, I consider the postcolonial, or rather decolonial, approach to literature and culture, translation studies, the study of entangled history and cultural transfer, and world literature studies — especially the application of world-systems theories — to be the most challenging and productive. The concept of the literary world-system allows me to analyze the unequal positioning and influence of particular (mostly national) literary systems in the global space by also taking into account extra-literary factors such as the unequal distribution of cultural, social and economic forms of capital. The controversial center-periphery dichotomy (which is wrongly accused of privileging the center as a measure of literary value and modernity) has recently been modified by the concept of uneven and combined development, which I am currently working on. Another fascinating initiative that I can only mention here is the use of computer-





assisted “distant reading” of transnational literary corpora to generate and test comparative hypotheses that do not rely on a narrow hyper-canon of world literature.

3. A skilful comparatist could give an answer to this question by drawing conclusions from my previous answers. As a scholar of a small and peripheral country, which until a few decades ago was at the crossroads between the Second (socialist or communist) and the Third World (non-aligned countries, with the exception of Yugoslavia, mostly of the Global South), I have tried to overcome the position in which my national literature and the scholarly tradition of my country are reduced to a mere object (a peripheral one at that) of metropolitan theory or a mere user/importer of global theories. To borrow the decolonial formulation of Walter D. Mignolo’s “border gnosis”, my struggle was to adopt the “locus of enunciation” that corresponds to that of the metropolitan critics. After experiencing how difficult, if not impossible, it is to achieve such a goal, I found world-systems theory even more appealing and relevant to my work.

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1. Comparative literature seems to me to have an essential place in the humanities today because it responds to the demands of the globalisation of thought: it is no longer a question of studying one literature, but of studying literatures to see what their encounters tell us about the world. Comparative literature is essential because it brings people together, because it invites them to think about and understand diversity. Comparative literature reflects the social, political and cultural changes in the contemporary world.

2. Here are the new developments and issues that have emerged in the last thirty years or so that seem important to me:

- Postcolonial and decolonial approaches
- Migrations and diasporas
- Globalisation and transculturality
- Ecology and environmental literature
- Digital and literature.

3. I am a specialist in French literature. But I also studied ancient languages, Latin and Greek, and modern languages, English, German and Italian. This training has opened up my mind enormously and I have been committed to a comparative perspective from the outset. I believe that the study of ancient languages is a remarkable vehicle for comparative culture and should be supported and encouraged. More generally, I believe that learning and practising languages opens people up to the world.

Finally, I have the good fortune to work at the Université de Picardie in a research team that brings together researchers from different disciplines and includes comparative studies in its project: Centre d’étude des relations et des contacts linguis-

tiques et littéraires (Centre for the study of linguistic and literary relations and contacts).



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1. Comparative Literature has been instrumental in challenging national histories of literature and taking into account the transnational circulation of literary models. Furthermore, comparative literature has played a significant role in introducing foreign literatures into the public sphere, along with the specialists in foreign languages. In the present conjuncture of re-nationalization and of the closure of borders, comparative literature teaches us to compare, that is to say, to relativize our point of view, and reminds us that culture is never homogenous and always enriched by cultural contacts.

2. After feminism and postcolonialism, a major change of paradigm came in the form of World Literature, which switched the discipline's focus from a Eurocentric canon of masterpieces to a broader interest in circulation and translation, including the so-called non-Western works and minor literatures. The paradigm of world literature also contributed to the challenge of the prevailing national histories of literature and drew attention to the process of canon-making. The disciplinary tradition of comparative literature, based on multilingualism, should, however, prevent the advent of world literature written in English. Attention needs also to be paid to the obstacles to the circulation of literary works and models. The methodology was also renewed by "distant reading" using large data sets, and by the sociology of translation. Finally, field theory can help rethink comparativism and combine it with a transnational approach.

3. I was trained in comparative literature and literary theory (especially Russian formalism and Polysystem Theory) at the University of Tel Aviv, and then switched to sociology for my PhD, working with Bourdieu at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in France. The research position I obtained at the CNRS in 1995 was in the sociology section. At the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), where I have held a professorship since 2011, I teach and advise students both in sociology and in arts and languages. Having been initiated into Translation Studies (TS) at Tel Aviv University, I developed, with others, a research program in the sociology of translation and the transnational circulation of literary works which supplemented extra-textual aspects that were not addressed in TS, asking what the social conditions that favor or impede their circulation are and who the intermediaries and mediators are. This led me to construct a sociology of world literature which has a resonance in world literature studies, as I have observed in my seminar at the EHESS, which gathers an international and interdisciplinary audience, and in my teaching at the Harvard Institute of World Literature.



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1. An old saying has it that “comparison is the thief of joy.” If someone takes joy in self-centeredness, especially national or cultural self-centeredness, then comparison absolutely should come and take that joy away. Every segmentation of the spectrum of living things is part of a continuum. Identitarian thinking denies the depth of our commonalities with other nations, other species, other selves. Identitarian ignorance makes it impossible even to perceive the others who are outside our range of vision and concern. The comparatist has the responsibility of showing, for any “we,” that our present categories are not the only map of reality, and of challenging us to learn to read, think, and empathize otherwise. Languages open one way of learning this lesson, and so multilingualism has always been intrinsic to the practice of comparative literature. “World literature” is for me an ambiguous rubric. Although it is nice to show, as efforts in World Literature usually do, how others are “like us,” it is a bigger ethical task to show how they are “unlike us” and yet not wrong, foolish, or immoral.

2. The past thirty years have seen a steady encroachment, as I would put it, of thematic reading and paraphrase onto the territory of theory and analysis. After selecting texts (usually fiction) that have some common thematic property, the author summarizes and digests them in order to show how they are similar to one another. I find that boring. Texts are taken to “represent” a community, a thesis, a topic. The kind of reading that asks how representation works (the question that inspired formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, and so on) becomes infrequent and atypical. Under these conditions, scholars who are satisfied with a mimetic account of literature stay with comparative literature; those who seek an analytic understanding go into law, medicine, economics, or philosophy.

3. I live in the USA—a big and powerful country where the dominant media encourage citizens to live a form of “Main Character Syndrome.” Other languages, other ways of envisioning community, other philosophical systems, other histories are easily treated as marginal or deficient. My job, as a scholar and translator working with French, Chinese, German, Italian, Greek, and the like is to insist that “tout moun se moun,” as the Haitian proverb has it: “everybody is somebody,” and our attention and empathy should be more widely distributed. The history of the last hundred years should suffice as a demonstration of what goes wrong when powerful, self-centered nations have the means to forget that they are not alone.

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1. Comparative literature has changed significantly in recent years: in the era of globalization, of the influence of digital media and the ever-faster development of tech-



nology. For a long time, the discipline had to defend its identity against criticism of the questionable bearing and validity of its practices and methods. This situation has changed considerably in the West since the late 1970s. Today, while comparative literature no longer has to justify and defend its status as a separate discipline, it is — like other literary disciplines — confronted vigorously with what René Wellek described in 1972 as “the Attack on Literature”. It is, first of all, a political and ideological attack (literature as “the very category of art has become one more instrument of making class distinctions”; Louis Kampf [1971], president of the Modern Language Association), but also an attack on literature as an eminently *verbal* art, and an attack on aesthetic quality and value, i.e. ignoring and erasing the distinction between art and non-art or anti-art. Wellek aptly characterizes this development as “the new barbarism, the know-nothingism, the mindless repudiation of the past in favor of so-called ‘relevance’”. In the half-century that has passed since the publication of Wellek’s essay, its relevance and urgency have not diminished at all, quite the contrary. The difference is that the political attack on literature (and art in general) and on sciences of mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*) is currently conducted with the help of more modern conceptual instruments within the framework of various “studies” of sociological-political provenance coming from the US. The ideological base remains essentially the same as half a century ago, only the concepts and the battle cries have changed.

It is a fatal development for sciences of mind, as Ernst Troeltsch pointed out as early as 1922 in his essay *Die Krisis des Historismus*, in which he warns against introducing a sociological perspective into historical research. It is a warning against the false opinion that cultural, spiritual formations of our lives stem from a social base. More recently, Christoph Menke (*Die Kraft der Kunst*, 2013, p. 14) states explicitly that “art is not a part of the society — it is no social practice” but “a force in which our freedom is concerned” (“Deshalb ist die Kunst kein Teil der Gesellschaft — keine soziale Praxis [...]. In der Kraft der Kunst geht es um unsere Freiheit”). This development is also fatal because, in the near future, it will lead — and it is already happening — to the dissolution of literary and art disciplines into various sociological and so-called cultural studies, in which anyone will be able to talk about anything but the questions and problems of art and aesthetics. The contemporary role of comparative literature in the public space? Just ask anyone in the “public space” what they imagine under the term comparative literature, and the immediate response will be: “What is that?”

2. Literature and art in general, as the *ens fictum* of a fantasizing consciousness, presents a unique field of the “sense of the possible,” a field that allows for the mirroring of what Wolfgang Iser (*Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*, 1991, pp. 505) calls the “immense human plasticity” (“ungeheure Plastizität des Menschen”). At the same time, literature is a medium through which not only man’s constant self-transcendence can be realised, but also — by a “fictionalizing act” — his liberation from the social and socio-political sphere, from its pressure and its constraints.

Which approaches can be seen as crucial? The range of literary theories is so broad and heterogeneous now that it has become hardly transparent, which also significantly limits the dialogue between different theoretical positions. On the one hand, comparative literature could seem a suitable space for confrontation (for confronta-



tion and selection rather than comparison and dialogue) between them; on the other hand, as mentioned above, it is under the threat of dissolving in these new theories. It is significant that today we hear about “the end of theory” and that there are international conferences and debates on the topic of “Theory after the end of theory”. Moreover, Paul de Man has shown that every theoretical formulation is by its very nature an allegorical figuration, an *allegory of reading*.

Perhaps the situation of a confused clutter of disparate theories will return to some form of hermeneutics that will lead — the more popular the talk of “posthumanism” gets today — back to the human: the author and the reader. The central questioning of Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben* (1874, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*) still remains valid and relevant here; that is that history must, instead of striving for “scientific objectivity”, put itself in the service of life: “History, conceived as pure knowledge, once it becomes sovereign, would be a kind of conclusion to living and a final reckoning for humanity.”

René Wellek says aptly at the end of his essay: “There will still be the voices of men of letters and poets, in verse or prose, who will speak (as they have done since hoary antiquity) for their society and for mankind. Mankind will always need a voice and a record of that voice in writing and print, in literature” (“The Attack on Literature”. *The American Scholar*, 1972–1973, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 27–42).