

INTRODUCTION
The Anxieties of Comparison

CHARLES BERNHEIMER

Comparative literature is anxiogenic. The eager graduate student—let's assume she's a woman, since today the majority of students in comparative literature programs and departments are women—begins her course of study with an excited sense of broad horizons opening before her. A year or two later, she discovers that she has no firm ground underfoot. More is expected of her than of her peers in the national literature departments—more knowledge of languages, more reading of literatures, more expertise in theory—but it is not clear that she will benefit professionally from all this extra work. She's told early on that there are very few jobs in comparative literature departments, so she will have to compete head-on with her friends whose studies have been less arduous but more specialized. Won't national literature departments prefer someone with her skills and training over a more narrowly educated scholar? she queries hopefully. Not necessarily, answers her advisor. It depends on the intellectual and political climate of the particular department and on how that department interprets its needs. Sometimes the comparatist's ability to wear different hats is just what is wanted—"hey, she can teach a film course for us . . . and that survey of eighteenth-century French lit . . . and she could even pinch-hit in twentieth-century!" At other times this multifacetedness is viewed as a sign of dilettantism.

Comparison of herself with her peers in the national literature departments makes the graduate student feel anxious about her calling to compare literatures. Or is that really her calling? Some of the most exciting courses on campus don't focus on literature at all. Professors assign readings in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history. The hottest debates are about theory rather than literature. So what's supposed to be compared to what and how? "The

most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology," declared René Wellek back in 1958 in a paper entitled "The Crisis of Comparative Literature."¹ Thirty-seven years later the same could still be said, reflects our anxious graduate student. So is this field constantly in crisis? she wonders. How does this jibe with comparative literature's being, by all accounts, an elite discipline? Is one of the qualifications of this elite the ability to sustain the anxiety of an academic field whose identity is perpetually precarious?

Peter Brooks' confession in his essay for this volume suggests an affirmative answer to this question: "Although I hold a Ph.D. in comparative literature," writes Brooks, "I have never been sure I deserved it, since I've never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is and never sure that I could really claim to be teaching it or working in it."² Had Brooks somehow become clear about his field and convinced of his right to practice it, he probably would not be chair today of Yale's Comparative Literature Department. Yet, according to his own account, he did not accommodate easily to his anxiety. He rid himself of some of it, he says, when he "managed to stop worrying about 'comparing the literature,' about that adjective *comparative*." Teaching in the Yale undergraduate program called, simply, The Literature Major, he could study and teach "literariness and the literary phenomenon" without having to worry about what to compare it to. But this "liberation" was short-lived, he remarks regretfully, for The Literature Major was combined with the graduate program, and he found himself once again identified with that anxiogenic, "still only vaguely defined enterprise," comparative literature.

Comparison is indeed the . . . what is it?—activity, function, practice? all of these?—that assures that our field will always be unstable, shifting, insecure, and self-critical. Ten years after Wellek spoke of the field's lack of specific subject matter and methodology, Harry Levin criticized his colleagues for spending too much time talking about comparative literature, its organization and methodology, and, as he put it, "not enough [energy] comparing the literature."³ But this is to assume that, if we were to stop dawdling and feeling anxious, we could just go ahead and staunchly compare, whereas comparison is just what makes us productively anxious, generates the interesting questions, probes thought beyond traditional boundaries, and, at its best, justifies our being considered an elite group. And these days it is not only comparison that is at issue. The very identity of literature as an object of study is no longer clear. Many scholars today would consider Brooks' conviction

that he can teach "literariness and the literary phenomenon" a questionable ideological position.

Changes in the discipline's focus since World War II can be viewed as a series of attempts to cure, contain, or exploit the anxiety of comparison. In the fifties and sixties, the possibility of cure seemed to be held out by the projection of a unifying, consolidating goal to the comparatist's endeavors. "The comparatist's effort and reward," writes François Jost, "is to perceive the literary world in its fundamental unity."⁴ This desire for totalization was a response to the violent rending of European cultures during the war and is the subject of comment by a number of contributors to this volume. During this period, definitions of the discipline were offered with relative confidence and always stressed supranationalism and cross-disciplinarity. Typical is the definition offered in 1969 by Owen Aldridge in his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*: "Briefly defined, comparative literature can be considered the study of any literary phenomenon from the perspective of more than one national literature or in conjunction with another intellectual discipline or even several."⁵ Aldridge then presents his collection under five headings, "literary criticism and theory," "literary movements," "literary themes," "literary forms," and "literary relations" (which include sources and influences). Generally speaking, these categories, widely accepted at the time, serve to highlight continuities and analogies in each insistently labeled "literary" category across national boundaries. Division promotes unity. "Method is less important than matter," Aldridge remarks in his introduction (5). His point is that the matter, literature itself, is a reassuring given, whereas methods are "at best ambiguous" (5)—hence anxiogenic, hence in need of cure.

In 1969 I was a graduate student finishing my studies at Harvard. Protest against the Vietnam War reached a high point that year and affected even Harvard's staid Comparative Literature Department. We had a meeting of faculty and students to talk about the structure and goals of the program. I recommended that the required proseminar not take as its textbook Warren and Wellek's *Theory of Literature* but read Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and other such seminal thinkers, in an effort to stimulate the students to ask fundamental questions and to disorient them from their received assumptions about literary study. In effect, I was recommending the anxiety of comparison. From the other side of the room, Harry Levin, in a kindly tone, corrected me: "Charlie, I am sure you mean orient, don't you?" and he spread his hands

apart to indicate the distance between the student, here, and "the body of knowledge," there. The proper orientation, he said, put one on a straight path on which, as one advanced, one gained ever more knowledge, ever more matter. The implication was that this advance would also make me less anxious and less upset about the war. But I wasn't buying.

In any case, Levin's orientation was about to be superseded by the epoch of theory, when method became more important than matter and anxiety was no longer considered a symptom to be cured but rather a textual function to be appreciated and analyzed. Across the country, comparative literature departments became known as hotbeds of theory, and theory became identified with what many took to be its most rigorous practice, deconstruction. In a certain sense, the goal of comparison did not change, "to perceive the literary world in its fundamental unity." "There is absolutely no reason why analyses of the kind suggested here for Proust," claimed Paul de Man in 1979, "would not be applicable, with proper modifications of technique, to Milton or to Dante or to Hölderlin."⁶ But, of course, the unity of literature meant something very different for de Man than it did for Jost, Aldridge, or Levin. They were humanists. Literature for them was a repository of values, in conflict and contestation to be sure, and all the more relevant to the moral education of men and women because of this dynamic interplay. In contrast, de Man, a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Harvard and only seven years Levin's junior, was an antihumanist. His technique of reading, to whatever text it is applied, always shows values to be delusive, cognition to be erroneous, agency to be illusory, and motivations to be aberrant. The social or psychological subject is revealed to be an equivocal effect of rhetorical displacements. Textuality itself is anxiogenic according to de Man, hence the unity of the literary world in its deconstruction and the centrality of comparative literature to the project of rhetorical reading.

The appeal of deconstruction can partially be understood, I think, in relation to the prevailing post-Vietnam mood of cynicism and distrust. Deconstruction as a technique of demystification requires systematic suspicion. One of the most frequently used phrases in its lexicon is the claim that such and such "is not innocent," a point of view whose appeal in the Nixon years is not hard to understand. Of course, this claim does not mean simply that guilt can be assumed but that the distinction between guilt and innocence is undecidable. Comparison in this high-theoretical practice collapses the distinctions on which the comparative process relies and demonstrates how each element is contaminated by the other. When applied in the political arena, for instance on the Cold War rhetoric of opposition, this strategy has a strong

subversive effect, undermining the moral claims of both sides, showing that the two opponents are both engaged in deceit masking violence. Deconstructors argue that this demonstration is itself a political intervention. But it is so, in my view, only in a very limited sense. The intervention is basically inert. It amounts to saying, "a plague on both your houses." Viewed from the deconstructive abyss, engagement on either side involves mystification and blindness. Abysmal wisdom resides in disengagement and reading.

Reading what? Nietzsche, Freud, Marx for starters, just those authors I had wanted to put on the comparative literature proseminar syllabus at Harvard. And Hegel, Heidegger, Rousseau, Plato, Proust, Mallarmé, Poe, Lacan—it was one of the great accomplishments of deconstruction's heyday that literary scholars and other intellectuals felt stimulated to read these difficult texts, and to study the languages in which they were originally written, so as to have a better understanding of the brilliant analyses de Man and Derrida had made of them. In those years, the study of comparative literature at some of the best graduate schools gave priority to theory over literature, to method over matter. The trend that Harry Levin had deplored in 1968 was intensifying: we weren't comparing the literatures so much as we were comparing theories about comparison. Anxiety was fashionable. Indeed, it was de rigueur, rigor being the fetish of theory.⁷

But, as the Reagan-Bush years gradually eroded the liberal social agenda, it became more and more painful for many professors in literature departments to continue in an attitude of skeptical detachment and sophisticated alienation. The inevitable aporia of deconstructive undecidability began to seem too much like the indecipherable double-talk of the politicians we detested. Even those, myself included, who had been deeply influenced by deconstruction were feeling tired of systematic, suspicious vigilance, tired and demoralized by the work of displacing the ground from under our own feet, tired of being mortally rigorous, tired of comparisons that always collapsed into indifference. This mood was no doubt in part responsible for what Hillis Miller calls "a massive shift of focus in literary study since 1979 [the publication date of de Man's *Allegories of Reading*] away from the 'intrinsic' rhetorical study of literature toward study of the 'extrinsic' relations of literature, its placements within psychological, historical or sociological contexts."⁸

The essay from which this sentence is taken, "The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time," published in 1989, is an interesting effort by an influential advocate of deconstruction to deal with its loss of influence in the academy. Miller adopts a mocking tone about the shift he discerns: "It is as if a great sigh of relief were rising from all across the land. The era of 'deconstruc-

tion' is over. It has had its day, and we can return with a clear conscience to the warmer, more human work of writing about power, history, ideology, the 'institution' of the study of literature, the class struggle, the oppression of women, and the real lives of men and women in society as they exist in themselves and as they are 'reflected' in literature" (103). Clarity of conscience, Miller suggests, derives from a naive trust in the mimetic transparency of words, in their capacity to reflect the world. The shift away from the rhetorical study of literature is motivated, he claims, by a refusal to live with the anxiety caused by "an indefinite delay or postponement of our desire to turn our attention to the relations of literature to history, to society, to the self" (103).

This sounds like a version of the objections made by the establishment to the students protesting the Vietnam War: you are impatient and irresponsible, you are grounding your dissent in the body rather than in reason, you are driven by desire where rigor is called for. Miller goes on to declare his admiration for the honorable motives underlying the shift in interest toward history and society, gender and power, but argues that these motives should not come into play until a text has been subjected to "a rhetorical analysis of the most vigilant and patient sort" (104). The task of criticism in the coming years, he declares, will be to mediate between this kind of analysis and the study of the extrinsic relations of literature. But no sooner has he used the word *mediation* than he qualifies it and explains that the specific literariness of a text cannot be understood "by historical, sociological, or psychological methods of interpretation" (105) and hence cannot enter into a comparative process such as *mediation*. When he declares in the next paragraph that the extrinsic relations with which the intrinsic ones were to be mediated are actually intrinsic themselves, Miller has offered a vivid demonstration of the kind of logic whose abandonment produced that "great sigh of relief" he evoked earlier in his essay.

That essay was written, Miller tells us in a note, before the discovery and publication of de Man's wartime collaborationist writings. As the essay attests, the tide had already turned against deconstruction before the de Man affair broke, but the affair—as much because of a widely felt aversion to the tortured exercises in "reading" used by Derrida and others to construct exculpatory scenarios as because of moral outrage at de Man's youthful sympathy with Nazi ideology—signaled for many the end of high theory's domination.⁹ Lack of innocence seemed discredited as a textual quality when it could be seen to apply referentially to its preeminent advocate. Anxiety no longer seemed containable in the space of comparison's collapse when the motive to

deny there being anything extrinsic to textuality could be thought to be strategically self-serving.

Now, to be sure, comparative literature departments had never been completely taken over by deconstructive theory, even at its apogee. Although many feminist critics integrated deconstructive insights into their work—indeed, no one working seriously in the literary field could ignore the powerful force of these insights—the major impact of feminist critique involved a renewal of moral analysis in the arena of social practices. In the seventies and eighties feminism presented an increasingly sophisticated, diverse, and energetic challenge to efforts to divorce textual analysis from the material conditions and contexts—social, historical, and political—of literature's production and reception. As more and more women entered the profession, their concerns with the marginalization or suppression of women's voices in such diverse contexts as narrative representations, social arrangements, publishing practices, and academic policies generated a complex of questions concerning the relations of literature to experience, of aesthetics to ideology, of gender to power, which challenged the poetics of rhetoricity propounded in high theory.

These questions intersected fruitfully with those being asked from a number of related points of view. Under the influence of Foucault, the analysis of discourse, associated with the regulatory mechanisms of power, displaced the study of rhetoric, felt to be too self-contained. Under the influence of Bakhtin, language came to be seen less as an autonomous structure à la Saussure and more as a highly variable set of discourses produced through, and productive of, social differentiation and conflictual interaction. Under the influence of the Frankfurt school, especially of Benjamin, material social practices were seen to express complex psychopoetic dynamics. And younger critics exercised significant influence by showing how literary forms are embedded in collective histories and ideological structures—to name only a prominent few, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak helped generate interest in the now rapidly developing field of colonial and postcolonial studies; Fredric Jameson showed that Marxist analysis could make productive use of post-structuralist insights for literary and cultural critique; Stephen Greenblatt sent students scouring the archives in search of materials that would offer startlingly new historical contexts for reading literary texts.

This extremely rapid survey brings us up to the present, when the critical field is fragmented into a multiplicity of diverse theoretical perspectives. Yet it

appears today that contextualization has become the watchword of the most influential approaches to literature. History, culture, politics, location, gender, sexual orientation, class, race—a reading in the new mode has to try to take as many of these factors as possible into account. The trick is to do so without becoming subject to Miller's criticism, without, that is, suggesting that a literary work can be explained as an unmediated reflection of these factors. The slipperiness of the evidentiary status of anecdotes in much new historicist writing testifies to the difficulty of successfully performing this trick of contextualizing without reifying.

The politics of multiculturalism have not facilitated the task. Advocates of multicultural canon revision wish to extend the ethical demand for recognition of marginalized cultural groups and expressive traditions, which began with the civil rights and women's movements, to include both minority ethnic cultures in this country and non-Western cultures globally. Fundamental to this demand is a liberal notion of representation, which operates on two levels. First, the canon should be representative not just of European high culture but also of the diversity of literary productions throughout the world. Second, the works chosen to be included in a revised canon should be representative of the cultures in which they were created. Both parts of this program assume a "reflectionist" view of literature's relation to the cultural site of its production. The work's value is perceived as residing primarily in the authenticity of the image it conveys of the culture it is taken to represent, politically and mimetically.

This program raises many problems. For instance, how is authenticity to be judged? How is one to avoid the mistake, to which Rey Chow draws attention in her contribution to this book, of substituting for a canon of European masterpieces another canon of non-European works? These works, moreover, may well be representative only of the dominant traditions in cultures that are themselves hegemonic in their geopolitical contexts. And isn't the entire multiculturalist model flawed by its tendency to essentialize those cultures, attributing to them far more unity, regularity, and stability than they actually have? And isn't the model of reflection, for all its good intentions, also flawed? A literary work can never authentically mirror a culture not only because that culture is not at one with itself but also because the work is a *literary* representation and hence not a transparent medium but a formal structure. Furthermore, the criterion of authenticity tends to equalize all cultures in a relativist haze and thereby destroys any possibility of differential judgment and comparison.

Comparison . . . I come back to that word and to the anxieties it raises in

our contemporary age of multiculturalism. On the face of things, it would appear that multiculturalism, inherently pluralistic, would have a natural propensity toward comparison. But this propensity has been checked by the mimetic imperatives of an essentialist politics. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., observes that "the culturalist model normally imagines its constituent elements as cultural bubbles that may collide but that could, in principle, exist in splendid isolation from one another."¹⁰ The anxiety of the comparatist who proposes to break down this isolation and bring some bubbles into collision is manifold. There is first of all the issue of entitlement. Do I have the right to speak about these cultures to which I don't belong? Even though I am fascinated by African literatures, do I have any chance of getting a job to teach them if my skin is white? Is it not desirable these days to be able to offer the construction of one's own subjectivity as a particularly telling context through which to perform a reading of so-called foreign or ethnic texts? It seems that it is no longer enough for comparatists to speak different tongues; now they have to put on different skins as well.

Identity politics are particularly anxiogenic for the comparatist who ventures beyond the European arena or gets involved with ethnic cultures at home. No matter how many years you may have given to the study of a culture, if it is not yours "in the blood," it will always be possible for you to be found lacking in some quality of authenticity. The more literatures you try to compare, the more like a colonizing imperialist you may seem. If you stress what these literatures have in common—thematically, morally, politically—you may be accused of imposing a universalist model that suppresses particular differences so as to foster the old humanist dream of man's worldwide similarity to man. If, on the other hand, you stress differences, then the basis of comparison becomes problematic, and your respect for the uniqueness of particular cultural formations may suggest the impossibility of any meaningful relation between cultures.

I am, of course, oversimplifying the dilemma. I do so in order to highlight the ethical and political contexts within which some of the most pressing questions facing comparative literature are currently being framed. These contexts reflect the vicissitudes of recent history. On the one hand, events such as the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the fall of communism in Russia and central Europe, and the democratic elections in South Africa have seemed to open the world to the processes of globalization, democratization, and decolonization which Mary Louise Pratt welcomes as creating for comparative literature "an especially hospitable space for the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation,

deep intercultural understanding, and genuinely global consciousness." On the other hand, as Marjorie Perloff reminds us, the nationalist aspirations of ethnic groups are producing fierce conflicts on just about every continent, making the world seem an ever more fractious and fragmented place. As to intercultural understanding, Tobin Siebers finds that, even after years of study, a culture as apparently familiar as that of France remains fundamentally alien (a perception that Peter Mayle has exploited for all its worth in his best-selling books about Provence).

Lo otro
Should the comparatist work to unify our sense of the essential nature and function of literature cross-culturally, or should he or she work to promote our understanding of the diverse constructions of the category of the literary in different cultures? The contributors to this volume seem to divide into two camps on this question. Jonathan Culler suggests that the national literature departments should become departments of national cultural studies, clearing the space for comparative literature to study and teach literature "as such." Just how this study should proceed Culler does not spell out, but presumably he would agree with Peter Brooks that its foundation should be the study of poetics. "To place the study of literature in the context of 'cultural studies,'" writes Brooks in a recent essay in *Critical Inquiry* which complements his piece in this volume, "will be a mistake if thereby the specificity of the aesthetic domain is lost."¹¹ Citing Schiller, Brooks associates that specificity with the *Spieltrieb*, the play-drive, which has the salutary function of promoting the illusion that one can be free from materiality. He castigates as moralistic wielders of a "rhetoric of virtue" (AI 514) those materialist critics who would associate such freedom with irresponsible elitism. "The realm of the aesthetic needs to be respected," Brooks insists, "by an imperative that is nearly ethical" (AI 522). This imperative is similar to the one that leads Michael Riffaterre to declare in this volume that a text becomes properly literary only when it is decontextualized and that it is the task of theory to assure that a text "survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which [it] responded."

These critics agree that the work of comparison involves first and foremost a reflection on the aesthetic phenomenon of literariness in a cross-national context. Despite significant differences, their arguments belong in the same tradition as those put forward in more explicitly rhetorical terms by de Man and Derrida. Literature can be taught "as literature" (Brooks), with its "invariant features" (Riffaterre), without worrying about the historical contingency of this category. That worry belongs with cultural studies, which for

these critics constitutes an approach to literature from without, not a theory of reading but an ideologization of aesthetic values for the purpose of political critique. Hence they see the 1993 ACLA report as an abandonment of the true forms of literary study. (Culler does not say as much, but his sweeping aside of cultural studies so that comparative literature can at last preside over the study of literature in itself is eloquent.)

2. On the other side of the spectrum of opinion are those critics who agree with the general thrust of the report. Precisely because this agreement involves the advocacy of a pluralized and expanded contextualization of literary study, it is less focused than the formalist advocacy of poetics. These critics accept the challenge of what Françoise Lionnet calls "the messiness of globalization and the risk of contamination that might result from the democratization of the idea of literature as an intersubjective practice." Part of what could be thought of as disorderly in this practice is its overt concern with values other than the aesthetic, or, put differently, with situating aesthetics in a broad spectrum of values. Brooks feels uneasy, not to say anxious, about literary criticism's engaging in acts of evaluation whose basis is, finally, the critic's moral and political convictions. Those convictions, he argues, referring to Keats and Eliot, need to be tempered by a depersonalizing appeal to tradition, so that the critic's voice echoes with those of his or her cultural inheritance. *

Brooks, of course, does not want to be seen as advocating the conservative notion of a traditional canon embodying transcendent values, so he is quick to stress that "traditions are really constructions" (AI 521), historically contingent and politically biased. But tradition in this sense cannot be appealed to, it can only be interpreted, and that interpretation entails an inquiry into particular historical, cultural, institutional, and political contexts. By allowing these contexts to echo in his or her own voice, I would say, contra Brooks, that the comparatist is not so much depersonalized as made aware of his or her subjectivity as a construction requiring interpretation, which is quite a different matter. *

I am suggesting that multiculturalist comparatism begins at home with a comparison of oneself to oneself. This process precludes the cultural essentialism of identity politics, while it sensitizes the comparatist to the extremely difficult issues involved in evaluating cultural differences. The "productive discomfort" that Lionnet describes as arising from being brought up on an island where French and English cultures intersect with African and Indian traditions vividly evokes the hybrid constitution of the comparatist subject. Here the cultural bubbles of which Gates speaks are not closed off from one

*empieza
en casa*

another. Rather, they are systems of knowledge and interpretation which coexist and interpenetrate within us, creating a mobile, fluid space of intersecting class and family allegiances, clan and religious traditions, historical and political pressures, inherited traits, unconscious drives, geopolitical locales, and so forth.

Interest in the subject's constitution as a hybrid, multicultural conjuncture has led certain critics toward autobiography. Although this move might be seen as narcissistic—which it may be, in part—it can be viewed more positively as complementary, rather than hostile, to a global broadening of perspective. The critic's autobiography—I think, for instance, of Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*—is typically the story of the traces of cultural otherness discovered within and of ambivalent interactions with otherness confronted without. Even when these traces and confrontations do not go beyond the purview of European cultures and histories, the critic's autobiography—especially if he or she is a comparatist—tends to describe a subject who “travels cultures,” in the sense recently expounded by James Clifford.¹² As Clifford remarks, for such a subject the question is not so much “where are you from?” as “where are you between?” (109). For instance, in my own case I could say that my origins are between my mother's father's birthplace, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, with its stern Calvinist traditions and repressed libido, and Munich, Germany, center of anti-Semitism, where my father's family were successfully assimilated Jewish antique dealers. I associate each of these sites with many others between which my intercultural itinerary has moved in dynamic—and sometimes traumatic—shifts, interferences, and translations: “a history of locations and a location of histories,” in Clifford's phrase (105).

As Emily Apter argues in her contribution to this volume, exilic consciousness, “the material and psychic legacy of dislocation,” is more definitively formative of the discipline of comparative literature than of any other field in the humanities. I agree with her that the voice of comparative literature is “unhomely” and that this very quality of dispossession—a kind of haunting by otherness—is that voice's great strength. To date, our haunting has been most often by culturally familiar ghosts, even if they originated in an imaginary Transylvania. The challenge facing us now is to increase the scope of our haunting, to broaden the space of those sites we are between. For many of us this entails a stretch beyond the European contexts of our cultural heritage and of our professional training. Such a stretch is at once exciting, in that it expands our horizons, and anxiogenic, in that it takes us outside the fields of our certified authority.

Certain pragmatic measures may help relieve this anxiety about exper-

1. Those of us trained in European languages and literatures could team-teach courses with colleagues trained in, for instance, Asian, African, Indian, or Near Eastern languages and literatures. This would enable works read in translation to be presented by teachers able to explain the specific linguistic qualities of the original texts. But collaboration could well reach beyond literary fields to include interested colleagues in such departments as history, anthropology, sociology, music, art history, folklore, media studies, philosophy, architecture, and political science. The search for more cosmopolitan, transcultural approaches is being actively pursued by innovative thinkers in all these domains, many of whom share a common set of theoretical readings. To encourage such collaborations is not to abandon literature as an object of study—which, pace Riffaterre, is not what the authors of the Bernheimer report intended to advocate—but rather to suggest a fundamentally relational and dynamic approach to cultural forms, including literary texts.

2. Another way of dealing with the issue of expertise is to subject it to pressing inquiry, asking just what constitutes expert knowledge, what authority qualifies an expert as such, what assumptions about authenticity sustain notions of local expertise, and so forth. Expertise, Kristin Ross has argued, is an ideology, and it often serves to dominate and silence rather than to teach and stimulate.¹³ If we are careful about positioning ourselves in relation to the cultural differences embedded in the works we are teaching, then that act of positioning can become an important part of what the student learns in a course. Our objects of study are in important ways creations of the terms we use to study them. To have some intellectual distance from those terms is not necessarily a bad thing. We don't need to be experts in everything we teach, as long as we don't pretend to be and our effort to understand is in good faith. But neither should we act as tourists, having read a few guidebooks to faraway places. The tourist regurgitates information about “native” cultures while ignoring his or her own nativeness. In contrast, the comparatist in the age of multiculturalism reads herself or himself as a site of contradiction and contamination, distrusts all guides that offer to decode the exotic other, and refuses to become a detached observer exercising a free-floating, disengaged intelligence.¹⁴ The comparatist's perspective cannot be mapped on a model of center and margin; rather, as David Damrosch proposes here, it is elliptical, generated from two foci, each engaging other overlapping ellipses. Such a dynamic model always puts centralizing authority in question and underlines the struggles between dominant and resisting social and ethnic groups.

Team-teaching offers an easily implemented way to promote a responsibility to global perspectives in pedagogical practice. Changes in institutional

3.

precisamente

I

formations are harder to realize, given the entrenched interests defending current departmental structures and disciplinary boundaries. Nevertheless, certain groupings already exist within the academy which could potentially serve as models for new disciplinary configurations with a multicultural comparative outlook. I will mention just two, period studies and area studies.

Faculty at many institutions have formed research groups in medieval studies, Renaissance studies, and eighteenth-century studies. These groups usually include professors from four or five literature departments, often joined by colleagues from history and art history. Founded on the study of the interconnections between European literary and cultural texts and their common classical heritage, these groups have a coherent *raison d'être* in the task of tracing what Anthony Appiah here calls the life of the Western *Geist*. But, as Appiah acknowledges, this coherence has a number of elliptical second foci that explode its autonomy—literally, with gunpowder brought in from China, figuratively with the influence of Islamic and African traditions, and economically with the growth of distant markets and the spread of empires. If the research groups were to explore the dynamics of the elliptical approach, their comparative work could intersect with that of scholars of non-Western cultures in the same or similar periods, and the result could be a broadened and revitalized conception of literary and cultural history, still centered in Europe but also crucially decentered. These transnational and transdisciplinary groups could eventually become degree-granting entities.

Because the interconnections between the West and the rest of the world become so multiple, complex, and conflicted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and because the fund of knowledges becomes so huge, the comparative period studies model is impracticable for this time frame. An area studies model may be more suitable, but only if the premises that have sustained such models in the past are reviewed and revised. In some cases, area studies programs—which typically bring historians, political scientists, and economists together with literary scholars and students of popular culture—were Cold War creations intended to help the government know its enemy. In other cases, the programs served to bunch together Third World countries so that they could be studied on the model of a colonial territory.¹⁵ In the case of a field like German studies, the problem, as Peter Hohendahl argued recently, was that there was no coherent basis to the program of study, students being encouraged to take courses in a variety of disciplines, literature being only one option among many.¹⁶ Still, the area studies model could be reconceptualized to foreground literature and to undo, via an elliptical bifocus, the notion of a stable geographical area. Here the experience of Ameri-

can studies programs may be instructive, both in terms of the conflicts in that field about the place of literary studies and in terms of the multicultural pluralization of its constituency (Native American, African American, Asian American, Chicano, Hispanic, and more).

Just how to foreground literature in the new contextualized modes of comparison is, of course, not evident. The fact that the 1993 ACLA report was read by many as an attack on literature is perhaps a sign of how vulnerable literary scholars feel in today's academic atmosphere. Although some of the phrases in the document may seem to imply otherwise, its authors, if I may speak for them, wanted to suggest not literature's diminished role in an evolution toward cultural studies but rather literature's expanded horizon in a multicultural, multimedia world. Peter Brooks notes the many "shoulds" in the report and wonders what kind of imperatives they express, whether they be "intellectual, pedagogical, institutional, ethical?" Speaking as one of the authors of the report, I would say that we felt that the work of comparison demonstrates that such distinctions maintain the separation of domains that actually interpenetrate. We wanted to suggest that literary study as a form of intellectual critique should be ethically motivated both in its pedagogical practice and in its institutional formation.

To claim, as we do, that literature is one discursive practice among many is not to attack literature's specificity but to historicize it.¹⁷ Literature's identity, its difference from the nonliterary, cannot be established according to absolute standards. If some kind of transcendental justification for literary value is desired, such as access to eternal verities or to the essence of human nature, then it is true that literature as we speak of it in the report fails to perform. But to say that literature is embedded in networks of material practices and that it is constructed differently in different contexts and at different historical moments is not to say that what is constructed in those contexts and at those moments is so relative that it can best be viewed as a deceptive illusion. *ni enclade ni ilusoria, transitio*

Literature is no more or less deceptive than other forms of cultural knowledge, but it constructs its knowledge otherwise, in a peculiar way. The report's statement that "the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study" has suggested to some colleagues that we were ready to abandon this cherished peculiarity. Admittedly, the statement is poorly phrased, for our goal was not to jettison "literature" in favor of "culture" but rather to shift the boundaries of what is construed as peculiarly literary in our culture. Insofar as that shift broadens what we call "the space of

comparison" to include many contexts in which literature is produced and consumed, certain colleagues have expressed apprehension lest the positivities of contexts be used to resolve the ambiguities of texts. But contexts can be just as ambiguous as texts, from which, given that contexts are to a large extent textually mediated, their difference is not clearcut.

That a context can, and should, be read and interpreted does not mean, however, that it has the same kind of highly wrought complexity as a literary work (though its degree of complexity may be comparable). Love of the text's dynamic complexity in its many modes of expression—rhetorical, narrative, moral, psychological, social—is what attracted most of us to the profession of teaching literature. Conviction that this complexity can only be fully appreciated and understood in the text's original articulation is what led us comparatists to immerse ourselves in the study of foreign languages. As the influence of social science models of gathering and reporting knowledge continues to grow, it becomes all the more important to defend the value of literature's peculiar ways of knowing and unknowing—such as indirection, paradox, fantasy, passion, irony, contradiction, extremity. One of the major tasks facing literary scholars today is a renewed articulation of the value of literature which respects both its individual, subjective aspects—among them, the sensual pleasure of verbal craftsmanship; the delightfully inconsequential play of reality and illusion; the temporary liberation from time and the entry into what Maurice Blanchot calls the space of one's own death—and its social and political implications and imbrications. Recent emphases on the latter modes have sometimes made the former seem almost suspect—too private, irresponsible, hedonistic. An effective defense of literature's value to the individual and to society will have to show that the two modes are inextricably and productively bound together.

Comparatists are best equipped to undertake this important task because of the breadth of their knowledge of literature's construction and function in different cultures. In the age of multiculturalism, the comparatist's anxiety has finally found a field adequate to the questions that generated it.¹⁸

Notes

1. René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," in *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen Nichols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 282.
2. Brooks is not alone among chairs unsure of just what they are chairing: Thomas Rosenmeyer, former chair of the Berkeley Comparative Literature Department, admits in a recent autobiographical essay that he is "not even sure what a comparatist is or does"

("Am I a Comparatist?" in *Building a Profession: Autobiographical Perspectives on the Beginnings of Comparative Literature in the United States*, ed. Lionel Grossman and Mihai I. Spariou (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 49).

3. Harry Levin, "Comparing the Literature," in *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 89.
4. François Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), xi.
5. A. Owen Aldridge, *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 1.
6. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 16.
7. In his provocative book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), John Guillory argues that, in the context of a decline in the market value of the cultural capital that the old bourgeoisie had invested in literature, a rigorous deconstructive reading was rewarded because it involved technical work analogous to that undertaken by the new professional-managerial class that was dominating bureaucracies at all levels of governance, including the university.
8. J. Hillis Miller, "The Function of Literary Theory at the Present Time," in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989), 102.
9. See *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Beyond the Culture Wars: Identities in Dialogue," in *Profession '93*, ed. Phyllis Franklin (New York: MLA, 1993), 6.
11. Peter Brooks, "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?" *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Spring 1994): 519. Hereafter abbreviated AI.
12. James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96–112.
13. Kristin Ross, "The World Literature and Cultural Studies Program," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 666–76.
14. A good description of such a point of view is offered by Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism," *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 168–86.
15. See Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 133–34.
16. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Germanistik Past, Present, and Future," talk given at the Stanford colloquium "Disciplining Literature," May 6, 1994.
17. A similar point of view toward literary study is eloquently articulated in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, introduction to *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: MLA, 1992), 1–11.
18. I would like to thank Charlie Altieri, Jonathan Arac, Howard Bloch, and Olga Matich for their helpful readings of this introduction in its first draft.

THE BERNHEIMER REPORT, 1993

Comparative Literature at the
Turn of the Century

From content to method to
process.

Of Standards and Disciplines

This is the third Report on Standards written for the ACLA and distributed in accordance with its bylaws. The first report, published in 1965, was prepared by a committee chaired by Harry Levin; the second, published in 1975, was the product of a committee chaired by Thomas Greene. The visions of comparative literature set out in these two documents are strikingly similar. Indeed, Greene's report does not so much articulate new goals and possibilities for comparative literature as it defends the standards proposed by Levin against perceived challenges. Together, the Levin and Greene reports strongly articulate the conception of the discipline which prevailed through much of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Many of the current members of the ACLA received their doctorates from departments that adhered to the standards defined in these reports. But the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which these same comparatists are now working, and the issues many of them are addressing, have changed so markedly from the time of their professional training that actual practices in the field have transformed it. Our report will address the issue of standards in the context of this profound transformation.

In order to clarify what we perceive to be the direction of this disciplinary evolution, we will begin with a brief analysis of the previous two reports. Both attribute the rapid growth of comparative literature in this country after World War II to a new internationalist perspective that sought, in Greene's phrase, "larger contexts in the tracking of motifs, themes, and types as well as larger understandings of genres and modes." This impulse to expand the

horizon of literary studies may well have derived from a desire to demonstrate the essential unity of European culture in the face of its recent violent disruption. The broadened perspective, in any case, did not often reach beyond Europe and Europe's high-cultural lineage going back to the civilizations of classical antiquity. Indeed, comparative literary studies tended to reinforce an identification of nation-states as imagined communities with national languages as their natural bases.

This focus on national and linguistic identities is apparent in the way both the Levin and Greene reports address the notion of standards. High standards are necessary, they argue, in order to defend the elite character of the discipline, which, says Levin, "ought to reserve it for the more highly qualified students" and restrict it to large research universities with excellent language departments and libraries. Noting that "this ideal which seemed so desirable and so feasible ten years ago has been challenged for better or worse by rapid historical change," Greene goes on to argue the case for resistance to change. "There is cause," he writes, "for serious concern lest the trends now transforming our discipline, taken in the aggregate, not debase those values on which it is founded. The slippage of standards, once allowed to accelerate, would be difficult to arrest."

The greatest perceived threat is to the very basis of comparative literature's elite image, the reading and teaching of foreign language works in the original. Greene criticizes the increasing use of translations by professors in world literature courses who do not know the original languages. The use of translations is condemned in both the Levin and Greene reports, though Levin admits that, as long as comparative literature courses "include a substantial proportion of work with the originals, it would be unduly puristic to exclude some reading from more remote languages in translation." This statement illustrates the extent to which the traditional internationalist notion of comparative literature paradoxically sustains the dominance of a few European national literatures. Europe is the home of the canonical originals, the proper object of comparative study; so-called remote cultures are peripheral to the discipline and thence can be studied in translation.

Another threat to comparative literature, according to Greene, is the growth of interdisciplinary programs. Although he says we should welcome this development, Greene's emphasis is cautionary: "We must also be alert," he writes, "lest the crossing of disciplines involve a relaxing of discipline." Crossing here plays the same role in respect to disciplinary rigor as does "translation" in respect to linguistic purity. There is an effort to restrict the work of comparison within the limits of a single discipline and to discourage

Amenazas
legua
traducción
9. admitir trad. no
interdisciplinario
vs. crossing
construir
las ident. disciplinarias
que amenazan la unidad prof. las nuevas ansiedades que hay que curar.

any potentially messy carrying over or transference from discipline to discipline. Just as comparative literature serves to define national entities even as it puts them in relation to one another, so it may also serve to reinforce disciplinary boundaries even as it transgresses them. | disciplinar

3. A third major threat to the founding values of comparative literature may be read between the lines of the Greene report: the increasing prominence in the seventies of comparative literature departments as the arenas for the study of (literary) theory. Although the theory boom was fostered in English and French departments as well, the comparatist's knowledge of foreign languages offered access not only to the original texts of influential European theoreticians but also to the original versions of the philosophical, historical, and literary works they analyzed. The problem in this development for the traditional view of comparative literature was that the diachronic study of literature threatened to become secondary to a largely synchronic study of theory. "Comparative Literature as a discipline rests unalterably on the knowledge of history," writes Greene in an implicit rebuke to the wave of theorizing overtaking the field. → tradicion - herencia (Wellek)

The anxieties about change articulated in the Greene report suggest that, already in 1975, the field was coming to look disturbingly foreign to some of its eminent authorities. Their reaction tended to treat the definition and enforcement of standards as constitutive of the discipline. But the dangers confronting the discipline thus constructed have only intensified in the seventeen years since the publication of the Greene report, to the point that, in the opinion of this committee, the construction no longer corresponds to the practices that currently define the field. We feel, therefore, that our articulation of standards can be undertaken responsibly only in the context of a redefinition of the discipline's goals and methods. We base this redefinition not on some abstract sense of the discipline's future but rather on directions already being followed by many departments and programs around the country.

Tesis
metas
y
medios

Renewing the Field

The apparent internationalism of the postwar years sustained a restrictive Eurocentrism that has recently been challenged from multiple perspectives. The notion that the promulgation of standards could serve to define a discipline has collapsed in the face of an increasingly apparent porosity of one discipline's practices to another's. Valuable studies using the traditional models of comparison are still being produced, of course, but these models belong to a discipline that by 1975 already felt defensive and beleaguered. The space of

porosidad disciplinaria

Focus on - TEXTO - cultural construction -) Praxis

comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and postcontact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study.

In this unstable and rapidly evolving sociocultural environment, many of the scholars involved in rethinking the field of comparison have an increasingly uneasy relation to the practices called "comparative literature." They feel alienated because of the continued association of these practices, intellectually and institutionally, with standards that construct a discipline almost unrecognizable in the light of their actual methods and interests. One sign of this disaffection is that many colleagues whose work would fit into an expanded definition of the field do not have an institutional affiliation with comparative literature and are not members of the ACLA. Another sign is the discussion that has occurred on some campuses about the possibility of adding a phrase such as "and Cultural Studies," "and Cultural Critique," or "and Cultural Theory" to the departmental or program title in order to suggest ways in which the old designation may be inadequate. But such name changes have not been widely adopted, largely, we feel, because of a general belief that these new ways of reading and contextualizing should be incorporated into the very fabric of the discipline. In the rest of this report we hope to give a sense of how this incorporation will enable comparative literature to position itself as a productive locus for advanced work in the humanities.

The Graduate Program

1. Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline. Rather, literary texts are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production. This field challenges the very notion of interdisciplinarity, to the extent that the disciplines were historically constructed

→ estrategias de lectura, no que leer, que os literarios, sino como leer
A discusión entre otros.

to parcel up the field of knowledge into manageable territories of professional expertise. Comparatists, known for their propensity to cross over between disciplines, now have expanded opportunities to theorize the nature of the boundaries to be crossed and to participate in their remapping. This suggests, among other fundamental adjustments, that comparative literature departments should moderate their focus on high-literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed. The production of "literature" as an object of study could thus be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems.

"que" "truncar" "que" "2. como"

Our recommendation to broaden the field of inquiry—already implemented by some programs and departments—does not mean that comparative study should abandon the close analysis of rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features but that textually precise readings should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced. Likewise, the more traditional forms of interdisciplinary work, such as comparisons between the sister arts, should occur in a context of reflection on the privileged strategies of meaning making in each discipline, including its internal theoretical debates and the materiality of the medium it addresses.

obj
trans
disciplin
medi

2. The knowledge of foreign languages remains fundamental to our *raison d'être*. Comparatists have always been people with an exceptional interest in foreign languages, an unusual ability to learn them, and a lively capacity to enjoy using them. These qualities should continue to be cultivated in our students. Moreover, they should be encouraged to broaden their linguistic horizons to encompass at least one non-European language.

Precise language requirements will vary from department to department. We feel that the minimum to be expected is the study of two literatures in the original language, a good reading knowledge of two foreign languages, and, for students of older fields of European, Arabic, or Asian cultures, the acquisition of an ancient "classical" language. Some departments still require as many as three foreign languages plus a classical language. Many require a knowledge of three literatures. In any case, the context for these requirements should extend beyond their value for the analysis of literary meaning to their value for understanding the role of a native tongue in creating subjectivity, in establishing epistemological patterns, in imagining communal structures, in forming notions of nationhood, and in articulating resistance and accommodation to political and cultural hegemony. Moreover, comparatists should be alert to the significant differences within any national culture, which

volg
lenguas
como
instr
sino
como
obj
de
estructura

Movimiento doble-mévil

provide a basis for comparison, research, and critical-theoretical inquiry. Among these are differences (and conflicts) according to region, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and colonial or postcolonial status. Comparatist research is ideally suited to pursue ways in which these differences are conjoined with differences in language, dialect, and usage (including jargon or slang) as well as with problems of dual- or multiple-language use and modes of hybridization. → des. de la lit. e lengua natural

3. While the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages must continue to be stressed, the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated. In fact, translation can well be seen as a paradigm for larger problems of understanding and interpretation across different discursive traditions. Comparative literature, it could be said, aims to explain both what is lost and what is gained in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines, and institutions. Moreover, the comparatist should accept the responsibility of locating the particular place and time at which he or she studies these practices: Where do I speak from, and from what tradition(s), or countertraditions? How do I translate Europe or South America or Africa into a North American cultural reality, or, indeed, North America into another cultural context?

4. Comparative literature should be actively engaged in the comparative study of canon formation and in reconceiving the canon. Attention should also be paid to the role of noncanonical readings of canonical texts, readings from various contestatory, marginal, or subaltern perspectives. The effort to produce such readings, given prominence recently in, for example, feminist and postcolonial theory, complements the critical investigation of the process of canon formation—how literary values are created and maintained in a particular culture—and vitalizes the attempt to expand canons.

5. Comparative literature departments should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives. This does not mean abandoning those perspectives but rather questioning and resisting their dominance. This task may necessitate a significant reevaluation both of our self-definition as scholars and of the usual standards for comparative work. It may be better, for instance, to teach a work in translation, even if you don't have access to the original language, than to neglect marginal voices because of their mediated transmission. Thus we not only endorse Levin's remark, quoted earlier, that it would be "unduly puristic" to require all reading in comparative literature courses to be done in the original, we would even condone certain courses on minority literatures in which the majority of the works were read in translation. (Here it should be

acknowledged that minority literatures also exist within Europe; Eurocentricity in practice entails a focus on English, French, German, and Spanish literatures. Even Italian literature, with the exception of Dante, is often marginalized.) Similarly, anthropological and ethnographic models for the comparative study of cultures may be found as suitable for certain courses of study as models derived from literary criticism and theory. Department and program chairs should actively recruit faculty from non-European literature departments and from allied disciplines to teach courses and to collaborate in broadening the cultural scope of comparative literature offerings. In all contexts of its practice, multiculturalism should be approached not as a politically correct way of acquiring more or less picturesque information about others whom we don't really want to know but as a tool to promote significant reflection on cultural relations, translations, dialogue, and debate.

Thus conceived, comparative literature has some affinities with work being done in the field of cultural studies. But we should be wary of identifying ourselves with that field, where most scholarship has tended to be monolingual and focused on issues in specific contemporary popular cultures.

6. Comparative literature should include comparisons between media, from early manuscripts to television, hypertext, and virtual realities. The material form that has constituted our object of study for centuries, the book, is in the process of being transformed through computer technology and the communications revolution. As a privileged locus for cross-cultural reflection, comparative literature should analyze the material possibilities of cultural expression, both phenomenal and discursive, in their different epistemological, economic, and political contexts. This wider focus involves studying not only the business of bookmaking but also the cultural place and function of reading and writing and the physical properties of newer communicative media.

7. The pedagogical implications of the points previously outlined should be explored in courses, colloquia, and other forums sponsored by departments and programs of comparative literature. Professors from different disciplines should be encouraged to join faculty in comparative literature to team-teach courses that explore the intersections of their fields and methodologies. Active support should be given to colloquia in which faculty and students discuss interdisciplinary and cross-cultural topics. In such contexts, the cultural diversity of both the student body and faculty can usefully become a subject of reflection and an agent promoting increased sensitivity to cultural differences.

obj. de estudio

des. de trad. lit. conio se forme.

avanc. politica

* dif. cult. s. ruc.

}

}

8. All of the above suggests the importance of theoretically informed thinking to comparative literature as a discipline. A comparatist's training should provide a historical basis for this thinking. Early in their careers, probably in their first year, graduate students should be required to take a course in the history of literary criticism and theory. This course should be designed to show how the major issues have developed and been modified through the centuries and to give students the background necessary to evaluate contemporary debates in their historical contexts.

The Undergraduate Program

1. As the discipline evolves at the graduate level, more undergraduate courses will naturally reflect these changes in perspective. For instance, comparative literature courses should teach not just "great books" but also how a book comes to be designated as "great" in a particular culture, that is, what interests have been and are invested in maintaining this label. More advanced courses might occasionally focus class discussion on current controversies about such matters as Eurocentrism, canon formation, essentialism, colonialism, and gender studies. The new multicultural composition of many of our classrooms should be actively engaged as a pedagogical stimulus for discussion of these matters.

2. Requirements for the major should offer a flexible set of options. One way of defining these, now adopted at many institutions, is: (a) two foreign literatures, with two languages required; (b) two literatures, one of which may be anglophone; and (c) a nonanglophone literature and another discipline. In order to move with some concrete preparation into issues of translation beyond the European cultural matrix, students should be encouraged to study languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, or Swahili. Comparative literature departments and programs will need to argue for courses in such languages and will have to find ways in which their literatures can be included in the undergraduate major.

3. Undergraduate programs should offer a range of courses that study relations between Western and non-Western cultures, and all majors should be required to take some of these. These and other comparative literature courses should engage students in theoretical reflection on the methods of accomplishing such study. There is also a need for undergraduate courses in contemporary literary theory.

4. Whenever they have knowledge of the original language, teachers in comparative literature courses should refer frequently to the original text of a

work they assign in translation. Moreover, they should make discussion of the theory and practice of translation an integral part of these courses.

5. Comparative literature faculty need to alert themselves and their students to related subject areas in their institutions outside the discipline—linguistics, philosophy, history, media studies, film studies, art history, cultural studies—and to encourage extradisciplinary migrations and crossovers.

Conclusion

We feel that comparative literature is at a critical juncture in its history. Given that our object of study has never had the kind of fixity which is determined by national boundaries and linguistic usage, comparative literature is no stranger to the need to redefine itself. The present moment is particularly propitious for such a review, since progressive tendencies in literary studies toward a multicultural, global, and interdisciplinary curriculum, are comparative in nature. Students of comparative literature, with their knowledge of foreign languages, training in cultural translations, expertise in dialogue across disciplines, and theoretical sophistication, are well positioned to take advantage of the broadened scope of contemporary literary studies. Our report puts forward some guiding ideas about the way curricula can be structured in order to expand students' perspectives and stimulate them to think in culturally pluralistic terms.

A word of caution is in order, however. Although we believe that "comparison" as defined here represents the wave of the future, the economic uncertainties of the present are currently holding that wave back at many universities and colleges. Budgetary restrictions have caused literature departments to define their needs in conservative ways, making it all the more important that comparative literature students be able to demonstrate solid training in their primary national literature. Given the unpredictable character of the current job market, it is more important than ever that students begin to think early in their graduate careers about the professional profile they will present and that professors offer them counsel at every stage of their studies about the shaping of their professional identity. This recommendation does not represent a cynical giving in to market forces but a recognition that we are in a transitional period and that comparatists need to be alert to the shifting economic and sociopolitical landscape in which they are operating.

This said, we feel that the new directions we have advocated for the field will keep it in the forefront of humanistic studies, and we look forward to the challenges future developments will bring.

area
of
and
swiss
zero

x

But

*

cul. -> x ha un caso de una monstruosidad,
esto es una anomalía
un abceso un acche

Respectfully submitted,
Charles Bernheimer, *Chair*; Jonathan Arac; Marianne Hirsch; Ann Rosalind
Jones; Ronald Judy; Arnold Krupat; Dominick LaCapra; Sylvia Molloy; Steve
Nichols; Sara Suleri
May 1993

PART TWO

Three Responses to the
Bernheimer Report at
the MLA Convention, 1993

ON THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

MICHAEL RIFFATERRE

Three positions put forward in the Bernheimer report deserve special scrutiny, less because of the importance of their separate objects than because of their common motivation, the same ideological frame of mind all these reflect in their own separate ways. Ranging as they do from advocating a specific technical procedure to defining a basic interpretive postulate to mapping out a new domain for comparatism, they in fact respond to the growing importance of cultural studies, to its encroachments in the field of comparative literature, and to alternate approaches and standards that seem to call for revisionist solutions.

The technical position, reversing a longstanding policy of the discipline, adopts a practice of cultural studies and calls for generalizing the use of translations for comparative purposes. Again following the example of cultural studies, contextualization is offered as the postulate that must underpin the new comparatism. The third position downgrades a so-called high literature to the advantage of popular literatures. The report's solution is clearly to bring comparative literature closer to the field of cultural studies by annexing some of its territory and most of its methods. It goes so far as to distance itself from the literature that gives its name to the discipline.

I shall limit my remarks to these positions not just because all these are so revealing of a trend and of a perhaps premature eagerness to jump on that bandwagon but because all these admit just as well of a very different solution to the problems they raise.

Indeed, I should like to suggest that it is counterproductive to assume that a very real ideological conflict will perpetuate itself. Notwithstanding the fact that comparative literature has to some extent institutionalized a supercilious

attitude toward cultural studies, these assumptions stem from a confusion between research and teaching, between the comparative approach and building a canonical aesthetics and a normative hermeneutic upon that approach. But the risk of such a confusion occurs only in the teaching of literature as a facet of a national or group identity, that is, in connection with a political agenda. There is no reason to fear such a confusion if comparative literature sticks to comparing, to defining general and constant rules, and cultural studies to focusing on identity and difference, the unique blend of a given social setup and the verbal forms expressing that difference.

I propose accordingly that the future of the discipline lies not in a partial or total merger with cultural studies but in a redistribution of their respective tasks and in defining the two approaches as complementary rather than as polar opposites.

The feasibility of this suggestion is immediately apparent at the technical level of research tools, in the specific instance of translation. Traditionally, it was held to be true that a comparatist should master two or more foreign languages, a belief or principle now suspected of elitism. While not forsaking this long uncontested standard, the report only pays lip service to it. Not only are we no longer told that studying literature in the original language is the only approach proven and true, but its pertinence is displaced from literary facts to their genesis: to be a polyglot enables one to understand intimately the culture from which a given text emanates. By contrast, the report praises translation both as useful and emblematic. Useful: translation is made necessary by the recent scholarly attention to a great many cultures that comparative literature has allegedly ignored in the past. As the report puts it, students should have the opportunity to go "beyond the European cultural matrix." Emblematic: "translation can well be seen as a paradigm for larger problems of understanding and interpretation across different discursive traditions. Comparative literature . . . aims to explain both what is lost and what is gained in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines, and institutions." Sounds good, but I doubt any literary translation can achieve that. As we know, however successful it may be, such a translation cannot reproduce stylistic features intrinsic to the original without wreaking havoc with the target language. Hence, we end up with gibberish if the original is translated verbatim, or erasure if the translation resorts to analogs. Erasure is the problem because it is invisible, and not even a comparatist could notice, let alone interpret, the gap between the two versions, unless he or she were versed in the original language—a vicious cycle if there ever was one.

At best, content alone is allowed to cross the divide, leaving us with the bare skeleton of the referential fallacy, surely not enough for the hapless reader to answer a basic question which, according to the report, should cast a light on cultural differences: "Where do I speak from, and from what tradition(s), and countertraditions?" The question is supposed to be asked in the voice of the translated text, if not quite in the voice of the author. This voice, it seems to me, must be analyzed in its two constituents, the author's style, and the sociolect against the background of which this style stands out in its difference (difference within difference therefore). Even if we were to assume that the translation succeeds in reflecting the first constituent, probably an impossible feat, analyses would still be stymied by the intentional fallacy, as they would if their object of study were in their own native tongue. Chances of success are higher in rebuilding the foreign sociolect, with its ideologemes and its stereotypes, but this can hardly be done from the translation itself: I submit that the solution would be a linear commentary that, first, points out the traits of the other tradition, for which the target language has no name and which the translation has therefore erased; and that, second, indicates the words on both sides of the border which are homonyms rather than synonyms. The commentary would also have to focus on cases where the plainest translation of such traits remains misleading. The translation may be plain and direct because the translated word and its correlation in the translation have the same referents. And yet it may fail, but invisibly so, because the referential identity does not extend to the connotations, associations, and symbolisms of the referents. The task of making these connotations accessible to the reader is left to the commentary. I propose, that is, not an interpretive or critical commentary but rather a compendium of allusions like the ones that used to be compiled for overcoded texts within our own code (consider, for instance, the case of *Finnegans Wake*) or like dictionaries of mythology for classical literatures. Happily, the fast-developing techniques of hypertextuality are multiplying much needed databases of the contextualizing type.

But how are we to distinguish pertinent from irrelevant associations? By shifting the burden from the translation to the commentary's glosses. Instead of transposing a crux in the original into a crux in the translation, which is the failure inherent in a literary translation, we can afford a minimal and therefore unfaithful translation, awkward though it may be, so long as we make up for its deficiencies by glossing them, through periphrasis or paraphrase.

I am not suggesting that literary translations should be ignored, since they constitute a genre, and as such an object for criticism and theory. But they are not a reliable index of cultural difference. By contrast, the nonliterary,

dumbly literal transpositions I advocate are not a genre, not an object of criticism, but an analytical tool, the index of culture difference we need. They would not claim to translate verbal art but to re-create its original cultural conditions, or to put it otherwise, to contextualize it.

Here theory has much to say. It has already much advanced our understanding of literariness. I am thinking of deconstruction, the interpretive communities model, and the like. It is now high time to determine what it can do for comparatism.

What, then, must be our surprise when we find that the report has given short shrift to literary theory. To be sure, theory is mentioned several times but without any specifics, as if the committee had just gone through its check list and made sure it had not forgotten anything. Theoretical contributions to our understanding of translation, as a research and teaching tool, only concern the comparatist's techniques. But theory would be just as powerful in redefining the discipline itself.

Theory, for instance, is much quicker at identifying and categorizing those invariant features that any comparison presupposes. This approach is central to comparative literature, and theory shows that it need not threaten or ignore the multiplicity of cultures. The multiple variables are logically and semiotically inseparable from invariants. Furthermore, these invariants are not just a smaller group of features, thus easier to grasp; they form a finite set of types without which variation could not make sense, let alone be perceived. Each type spells out the kind of difference that might issue from it.

Until now, comparative literature has chosen to rely on literary history for a definition of the invariant features of change, with the result that invariance and variation have been contaminated with values attached to the time dimension, depending on whether the observers' interests or ethical perceptions make them favor tradition or evolution, or sublimate evolution into revolution, and so on. I am thinking, for instance, of the scale of diminishing range which goes from topoi to themes to motifs but whose objective gradation is upset when the lure of the quest for roots causes scholars to invent an Ur level of reference before everything so that an archetype may shine forth. Or, in a different vein, concepts of the genealogical type are employed to produce a factual or counterfactual narrative, reducing imitation, for instance, to a two-faceted syllepsis, to a symbolic bridge that allows only for building or burning. Now, theory has the signal advantage over history that it starts from abstract models. These models reflect only the logical, minimal constituents of any combination of classes of factors. They remain valid at the class level, irrespective of the endless welter of actual tokens within such

classes; indeed, they approximate universals in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Needless to say, the vernacular sense of the term would sound a general alarm among the proponents of cultural studies. But this need not happen, since the first rule for a universal is that it should include all the variants of the invariant that justifies the theorist in hypothesizing a class.

I would even venture that theory renders the relationship between cultural studies and comparative literature more objective. The justified resentment against past hegemonies has left traces in the metalanguage of cultural studies. The distinction occasionally is blurred between ideological polarizations and legitimate semantic polarities basic to the definition of any sign. I am alluding to a rhetoric in presenting differences, a rhetoric left over from the struggles toward self-assertion. One senses the lingering petulance that transposes objective differences onto scales of value judgments. Thus we find that any departure from a norm interpreted as hegemonic becomes a positive marker. Yet this practice can be remedied through theory.

Contextualizing, for instance, is a positively valorized concept in cultural studies, and the report dutifully encourages comparatists to adopt it: a lack of emphasis on the concept would signal either an urge to secede from cultural studies or a poor understanding of the maxim that everything has a context and can be explained by it. And yet, if there is contextualizing, theory foresees that a decontextualizing must follow. The aptness of this concept can be verified easily in the case of literary texts, for a text can be said to be literary when it survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which that text responded.

A perfect example of decontextualization in the sense I am discussing can be found in the accession of nonliterary texts to literature. In its emphasis on demoting literary phenomena from their cultural importance, or, to put it more crudely, on expunging the very word *literature* from the name of the discipline, the report proposes that "the production of 'literature' as an object of study . . . be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems." This list omits a most significant aspect of discursive production: the literary production that occurs when readers eventually recognize the literariness of a work of history, of philosophy, or perhaps even of law. When this happens, which is quite often, the kind of reception and interpretation which initially focused on the text's cognitive telos becomes irrelevant. The text undergoes a change that remains external to it: its reception is now motivated by a twofold denial of its contextuality. This denial consists first in refusing to privilege the author's intention, which is commonly evinced to validate an object of learning or to explain and/or exemplify an

approach to that object. Second, denial manifests itself in a hermeneutic shift from a value judgment based on the text's efficacy as a cognitive argument to a value judgment based on the text's aesthetic features. The time comes when we no longer read Montesquieu, Macauley, and Michelet as historians but as poets of the past and as heirs to genres such as the epic or the moral essay. Their works are therefore decontextualized and will remain so except for specialists in the history of ideas. Such texts indeed will endure, despite the fact that their narratives about past civilizations, societies, and events are no longer found adequate as mimesis. We now read them as symbolic systems, on a par with drama or fiction.

Contextualization is inseparable from history (not history as a genre this time but as a discipline). I am not suggesting that history is not an appropriate approach to literature: I merely propose that it is pertinent only to the circumstances of literary production, that is, to the genesis of the work of art and to its reception. But literature proper must not be confused with its genesis, nor with its reception. Literature is the text, and once established, and once the author is gone and can no longer make alterations, the text is ahistorical and its significance lies above all contexts.

Hence the elitist aura about it, and a monumentality that makes it a symbol of authority. Hence, also, the behavior of the traditional teaching communities of yesteryear, namely the promulgation of a canon. I have no time to address the canon issue, but let me state briefly that the canon is a cultural outcrop of the text, a framework for a certain type of worship behavior in a given social context: the canon therefore should be the exclusive domain of cultural studies.

However, the committee's reactions or overreactions to pressure from the proponents of cultural studies seem due to an embarrassed awareness of this authority. They betray a willingness to forsake or trivialize the very concept of literature. Consider, for instance, the following statement: "Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline." As if this were not bad enough, an admonition follows to comparative literature departments to "moderate their focus on high-literary discourse." Even if the advice is well taken, I would like to know what is wrong with high literature or why it should be downgraded to make room for other forms. I am not reading too much into this, as becomes apparent when the report goes on to allude ironically to "such heights" as we have admired, and when it finally puts the word *literature*, whether high or low, in quotation marks.

I confess puzzlement, since we have plenty of evidence that high and low literature share in the complexity of conventional forms, the use of stereo-

types, the artifice of verse, the network of genres, and the like. The structure of the fable is recognizable equally in popular tales and in Emily Dickinson. But puzzlement and concern must be worse when we see the very concept of literature threatened.

Nothing in this report is more revealing than an obsessive preoccupation with the word *literature*. Let me analyze some of the points lined up against keeping the word *literature* in the name of the *discipline* whose future we are planning. The first argument is that the *space of comparison* has expanded way beyond literary objects, or even beyond artistic objects other than the literary, beyond the arts, beyond Western cultures, across borders separating genders, sexual orientations, ethnic groups, and so on. This accumulation of *crossings* is obviously meant to suggest that literature is the only concept that could not adjust to, let alone benefit from, the proclaimed "porosity of one discipline's practices to another's." The rationale for so strange an exclusion is spelled out as follows: "These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study."

Of course, the ways are new and different, but I cannot see why the "old models" should be incompatible with them. Why should a consideration of the *author* be inadequate, since the writer embodies or symbolically personifies discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender? I, for one, could line up a few arguments against the relevancy of the notion of *author* to literary studies, along such lines as intentional fallacy and affective fallacy (fallacies totally unaffected by the prevailing view that New Criticism is old hat). Along such lines, then, I am quite ready to do without the author, but then the *text* must replace this figurative agent with a literal reality, one that is the perfect testing ground for approaches based on discourse, culture, ideology, and so on. And the same is true of *nation*, an objectionable term here, since it is but another name for a form of ideology. There is perhaps no point in pursuing this refutation, for it is quite evident that only an unwillingness to grasp abstractions can explain this diatribe against the word *literature*. I would rather maintain that, if anything, literature per se (without even adding *comparative*, without specifying the discipline that might provide the best approach to it), literature as a sign system, as a semiotic network, is automatically pertinent to all the fields listed in that unfortunate statement, because of its essential function, because of its very nature. On one side, you have the universe, all its parts, all the viewpoints for looking at it. On the other side, facing the infinity

of objects, you have *literature*, which alone is pure representation, which alone among all discourses can contain and emulate everything else, including the other discourse. The very complementarity of being and representing makes it quite urgent that *literature* remain central to discourse, culture, ideology, and so on because literature encompasses all of them and raises questions about all of them by merely shifting its vantage points, namely, its genres and its conventions, another set of terms we are told are passé.

MUST WE APOLOGIZE?

PETER BROOKS

Although I hold a Ph.D. in comparative literature, I have never been sure I deserved it, since I've never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is and never sure that I could really claim to be teaching it or working in it. I was trained at a time when comparative literature was ceasing to be what the Sorbonne long believed it to be, the study of sources, influences, literary schools, and "movements"—the ideal Sorbonne Complit thesis was easily parodied as *Madame de Staël en Roumanie*: the definitive study of a French writer's export to a definable foreign market, though of course it allowed of such as *Goethe en France* as well. Comparative literature in America in the 1960s knew it was no longer that but didn't know quite what it was, other than a place of greater literary cosmopolitanism than departments of English or French or American studies: a place where faculty and students aspired to a certain cultural self-alienation, a wider contextualization, a poetic Euro-chic.

A persistent piece of graduate student lore at Harvard in the early 1960s concerned the dream of a student in comparative literature on the eve of his oral exams. The doorbell rang, the student stumbled from bed, opened the door, and found himself faced with Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli (the two professors in the department) dressed as plumbers, carrying pipe wrenches and acetylene torches, who announced: "We've come to compare the literature." The dream became proverbial no doubt because of the anxiety associated with that notion of "comparing the literature" and the problem of what it could possibly mean. I imagine that many young comparatists were asked, as I was, by well-meaning laypersons: "Well, what do you compare?" The answer, I recall, began with a mumbled admission that you didn't really

compare anything. You simply worked in more than one literature, studying literature without regard to national boundaries and definitions.¹

I think I began to rid myself of some of my own anxieties about the undisciplined discipline I had stumbled into only when I managed to stop worrying about "comparing the literature," about that adjective *comparative*. The name of the game seemed to have been formed on the model of other nineteenth-century usages such as "comparative anatomy" or "comparative linguistics," in a kind of pseudoscientific claim that there was a comparative method that could be universally applied, to the production of acceptable results. Surely this was the wrong model. We weren't "comparing literature." But what, then, were we doing?

Cure from anxiety continued with the founding, in the early 1970s at Yale, of The Literature Major, an undergraduate program created independently of the graduate program in comparative literature (which had no interest in taking on undergraduate instruction), somewhat under the impact of European structuralism. In proudly claiming the chaste, adjectiveless title of "Literature," we were staking a claim to study and teach literariness and the literary phenomenon, broadly conceived. The introductory course to the major, entitled (in pre-gender-unbiased usage) "Man and His Fictions," took its stand on the etymological sense of *fiction*, from *ingere*, both "to make," as in the verbal artifact, and "to make up," as in "to feign." We were interested both in the making of texts—in the way that the Russian Formalists had brought to our attention—and in the intentionality of fictions of all sorts, from daydreaming through riddles, folk tales, detective stories, advertising, to poetry. We allied ourselves with the quasi-anthropological spirit of early French structuralism: while analyzing instances of fictions, from both high art and popular culture, we wanted to ask what human purposes they served, how they defined the place of the human maker of sense-bearing sign systems, indeed how fiction making was an essential characteristic of the human.²

Ridding oneself of the adjective *comparative* was liberating and permitted me largely to ignore what was going on in the comparative literature establishment (and I confess that my membership in the ACLA was only brief, since it seemed to me a relatively misguided and futile organization). Yet the liberation was only temporary, since eventually I was invited to join the graduate program in comparative literature, and later it and The Literature Major combined into one department, with both graduate and undergraduate programs, and since in any event comparative literature remains the rubric that identifies, to students and deans, and in course catalogues, that still

only vaguely defined enterprise from which I earn a paycheck. I recall that when Paul de Man was chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and feeling some exasperation with the opposition of some colleagues to the kind of redefinition of the curriculum he favored, he once suggested that we might start a breakaway department, labeled "Poetics, Rhetoric, and the History of Literature." The unifying center of literary study for de Man was of course "theory," though this notion was for him complex because of the difficult relations it entertained to "reading."³ If the object of the discourse on literature was "literariness," this was by no means (as the Russian Formalists seemed to believe) inherent in the poetic "function" of language but rather something always to be defined in an act of reading which always both postulated and undid its subtending theory.

"Poetics, Rhetoric, and the History of Literature" seems about as good a characterization of what I think my own Department of Comparative Literature teaches as one is apt to come up with, though it leaves a number of questions in suspense. It does, though, provide some background to both my comfort and discomfort with the 1993 ACLA report, "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century." I welcome the report's call for opening up broader interpretive contexts for the study of literature, and for moving out from the traditional Eurocentric definition of the field. In fact, much of the recommended opening of the field has already occurred in many departments: languages other than European are welcomed; the crossings of borders into anthropology, social history, philosophy, psychoanalysis have become routine; feminism, film studies, queer theory have contested and broadened the canon. When I look at the dissertations currently under way in our department, it's clear that a broad eclecticism has taken the place of what at one point had become rather too narrow a commitment to rhetorical reading of the deconstructive variety.

Yet my unease with the report is real. I am distressed by its abjectly apologetic tone when discussing the teaching of literature. To be told that literature is only "one discursive practice among many others," that "comparative literature departments should moderate their focus on high-literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed," that the "production of 'literature' as an object of study could thus be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems" creates the impression that the study of literature is an outmoded mandarin practice that had better catch up with the hip world of cultural studies. The impression is confirmed in the

next paragraph of the report, where we are told that "textually precise readings should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced."⁴

One wonders, first of all, where all those "shoulds" come from (the report is full of them). In the name of what are we being asked to consider literature as "one discursive practice among many others" and to "moderate" our focus on "high" literature? Is it certain, on the one hand, that these recommendations are not already in effect—possibly excessively so in some programs—and, on the other hand, that one speaks from any convincing basis in making them? For what is above all lacking in the report is any theory of the practices recommended. If it wants comparative literature departments to give up whatever forms of the teaching of literature are currently practiced in favor of ideological and cultural contextualizations and the study of literary production, let us at least have some reference to how that can be done. The problem here may be that cultural studies has yet to produce a coherent body of theory.

This may be why the report contents itself with tired clichés where we want energizing definitions. When we learn that we "should" engage in "reflection on the privileged strategies of meaning making in each discipline," that we "should be actively engaged in the comparative study of canon formation and in reconceiving the canon," that our departments "should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives," all we've been given is a list of some of the common topics discussed at MLA conventions for the last decade. What does it all mean, in what construction of textuality, of the university, of the world should we be responding to these imperatives? What kind of imperatives are they: intellectual, pedagogical, institutional, ethical? And isn't the rhetoric of virtue implicit in such imperatives quite at odds with the cultural relativism, the situatedness of analytical perspective, preached in the report?

While the report eventually gets around to noting: "All of the above suggests the importance of theoretically informed thinking to comparative literature as a discipline," one senses that it really hasn't much use for theory, that it places its faith exclusively in a progressive ideology and in the cumulative outcomes of the practices it recommends. Now, to downgrade the study of literature and those forms of attention and knowledge which it has traditionally implicated—including rhetoric and poetics—in favor of something as undefined and unsupported as the cultural studies alluded to here strikes me as being borderline suicidal. It risks replacing the study of literature with amateur social history, amateur sociology, and personal ideology.

I have worked myself into the position of claiming that professors of

(comparative) literature *do* have something to teach. Northrop Frye, in his "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism*, argued that one should be able to write a primer of the elements of literary criticism and to demonstrate that the mental process involved in literary study "is as coherent and progressive as the study of science."⁵ The claim is no doubt exaggerated and, thirty-five years later, the primer still unwritten. But the point has a general validity. As teachers of literature, we do call on a body of lore by which we apprentice our students to more competent reading of literature. The study of literature is not in itself the acquisition of information, but it involves that: the information implied by poetics, rhetoric, and literary history. Poetics, especially—the understanding of genres, of conventions, of the way a sonnet makes its argument, for instance, or of the "rules" of neoclassical tragedy—represents an indispensable kind of lore for understanding, not the meanings of specific texts, but the processes by which meaning is made, the grounds for interpretation.

"Learning literature" still works, I think, according to the ancient, unscientific, time-consuming process of apprenticeship: learning one's trade at the bench of the master craftsman. But it is not merely learning to manufacture single items: there is a generalizability to the process, precisely in the lore of poetics. I have recently argued elsewhere that Anglo-American literary studies, from New Criticism to deconstruction, have perhaps been too exclusively concerned with exegesis, with the interpretation of individual texts.⁶ While exegesis can be contextualized in many different ways, the most imperative context is that of poetics. Students need to consider, for instance, that while *Madame Bovary* may be illuminated by comparison to Briquet's and Brachet's medical treatises on hysteria, a novel proceeds according to certain conventions, certain low-level rules of meaning creation, and that *reading* a novel is not quite the same as reading a medical treatise. The point is obvious, but one is aware of academic studies that put the difference of genres and discourses at naught.

In the call for contextualizing literature by way of "ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts," it is helpful to remember that literature itself is an institution.⁷ It has probably always been an institution; certainly it self-consciously became one in Renaissance Europe. And this means, among other things, that writers are always responding, not only to ideological and cultural contexts, but as well to the history and situation of the literature in which they want to claim to be participants. An aspiring poet becomes an aspiring poet because he or she has read some poetry by others, not simply because he or she wants to respond to the ideological and cultural *Zeitgeist*. I don't, in fact,

see that anyone could become a poet without having read prior poetry: the case simply doesn't make sense. And while the formal constraints of novel or essay may be looser, one still can't imagine the aspiration to write in a genre without some absorption of its previous examples. The origin of Montaigne's *Essais* in a selection of citations from classical authors remains exemplary of literary apprenticeship—as does parody, and imitation of all sorts.

The institutional history of literature is a real context for literary creation and susceptible of creative revision, as the powerful work of Harold Bloom, from the *Anxiety of Influence* onward, has so well demonstrated. To neglect the literary institution as context in exclusive favor of other contexts—often more overtly ideological and political—is to fail to perform a necessary act of mediation, one that recognizes that if “literariness” is not, as Jakobson and others claimed, in the nature of the literary usage of language, it is nonetheless part of the stance of literature in the world, part of its project, part of its institutional claim. Even the Supreme Court of the United States has understood this, in its recent decision that literary parody is not the same thing as the infringement of copyright.⁸

My argument, then, is that teaching literature as literature and not as something else—not as “one discursive practice among many others”—remains necessary if we are to apprentice our students to “learning literature.” And it remains what we, as a professional caste, know how to teach. This is not to say that we should not cross all the borders we find confining, into whatever domains we find potentially illuminating (in my own work with psychoanalysis, I have tried to do that). It is rather to say that studying literature, as a form of attention, as a reading competence, needs to remain in focus. Here, it is perhaps worth a polemical caveat against a bland “interdisciplinarity,” of the type so often touted by deans. Real interdisciplinarity doesn't come from mixing together a bit of this and that, putting philosophy and penology and literature into a Cuisinart. It comes when thought processes reach the point where the disciplinary boundary one comes up against no longer makes sense—when the internal logic of thinking impels a transgression of borderlines. And to the extent that this is teachable at all, it requires considerable apprenticeship in the discipline that is to be transcended.

So far, what I have said seems to apply to the teaching of any form of literary studies, in a French or English department, for instance. What is specific to comparative literature—or is it condemned to be a space of the undefinable? I think the answer to this question is implicit in what I have said so far: comparative literature might best conceive of itself as that place that provides the most probing and self-conscious reflection on what it means to

study literature. It could be—and it often is—the place where poetics, rhetoric, and the history of literature are most closely attended to. It could be—and often is—the department where (theory) receives the greatest attention. Theory is in this understanding both what comparative literature can do better than other departments because it is open to and competent in theoretical work produced in other languages and cultures, and what holds the diverse endeavors of comparatists together. Theory is the lingua franca of comparative literature departments, sometimes the only one as students pursue more and more diverse work in cultures that don't necessarily find their center of gravity in the Latin West. The argument for the centrality of theory is not an attempt to impose one central theory. It is rather an argument for self-consciousness and self-reflexivity about what literature may be and what it may mean to study it. The opportunity, and the burden, of comparative literature lies partly in the fact that it cannot take refuge in national traditions and their definitions of the features pertinent to construct literary theory and history, that it must always find them not good enough. The centrality of theory to comparative literature does not in itself argue against the “cultural studies” model implicitly favored in the ACLA report, and in fact the incorporation of the cultural studies impulse within comparative literature departments seems to be under way in many institutions. The question in some institutions at present appears to be whether comparative literature ingests cultural studies or rather gets swallowed by it. Devourment in either direction would seem to me a mistake. I would prefer to think of comparative literature as providing a viable interlocutor to cultural studies, one that insists that contextualizations of literature in ideological and cultural terms remain aware of literature's institutional definitions and of the uses of poetics and rhetoric in understanding the ways in which literature creates meanings that both resemble and differ from those produced in other discourses.

As Michael Riffaterre elegantly argues in his essay for this volume, if cultural studies urge us ever to contextualize, literary studies also of necessity include a moment of decontextualization, “for a text can be said to be literary when it survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which that text responded.” To say this need not entail the isolation of “high art” on a pedestal. It argues rather that the study of literature always involves a special form of attention to the structure and texture of the text which is often elided in other forms of cultural analysis. I have yet to be convinced that most practitioners of cultural studies are readers, in the strong sense inculcated by all the viable movements in literary study of our time, from New Criticism to poststructuralism.

antidote
subsid +
judicial

of Life
// *

argue

*
WTE
Cur.
Studies

structure
texture
text.

Far from believing with the ACLA report that "the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study," I would hence urge that literature must very much remain our focus, while by no means restricting its dialogic interaction with other discourses and its various contexts. When one thinks about the institutional future of comparative literature as a field of study, one feels that its strength is allied to its vulnerability. The extent to which it refuses definition, the extent to which it conceives itself as the center of intersecting discourses about literature, and the place of the theory of these discourses, makes it tempting for many, both inside and outside the field, to conceive it as a kind of omnium-gatherum of those humanities subjects and practices that have no other home. Thus university administrators have often found comparative literature a flag of convenience for small and homeless subjects, from marginalized languages to odd bits of theory. Or else they've wanted to submerge comparative literature in some larger interdisciplinary entity. It is not to retreat to older definitions of comparative literature to argue that our field needs to maintain some sense of identity, not perhaps as a discipline, but as a place for the very conceptualization of discipline as it is pertinent to literary study.

In more concrete terms, I believe that comparative literature at the moment finds its specificity and its *raison d'être* in an ever-renewed and multifaceted address to the question, What is literature, and what does it mean to study literature? This question cannot always be explicit in our teaching, to be sure, but I am convinced it ought never to be far away, always ready to resurface. Two years ago, I took on the teaching of the required introductory seminar for first-year graduate students in comparative literature in our department. This was a course inaugurated by René Wellek in the late 1940s (Wellek was the first professor of comparative literature at Yale, appointed in 1947) and for many years the crucial initiation of some of the most notable comparatists produced on native ground. Recently, the course had fallen into decadence, no doubt for the lack of someone with Wellek's range of knowledge and capacity for encyclopaedic organization, but also because the proliferation of critical schools and isms had made it difficult to perform any sort of magisterial *conspectus* of criticism and theory. I decided to reorganize the seminar under the title "Education and Cultural Transmission," focusing especially on the place of literature and its teaching in cultural debates and cultural institutions, including, in the final weeks of the seminar, the recent history of literary studies at Yale. The value of the seminar, for all its—and my own—limitations, came from the opportunity it gave students to think and talk about the strange enterprise of teaching literature.

For it is a strange enterprise, one that is never wholly comfortable in the university. We teachers of literature have little hard information to impart, we're not even sure what we teach, and we have something of a bad conscience about the whole business, which in part explains why some among us find a relieved refuge in the rhetoric of virtue which sometimes comes with cultural studies, in the conviction that one is demasking pernicious dominant ideologies and promoting a brave new multiculturalist millennium. I am not opposed to virtue, but I am convinced that the pedagogical practice of it must begin with our insistence that students learn to read, that they apprentice themselves to the difficult task of encountering textuality, that they try to understand that whatever contexts may be used to "explain" literature, they never entirely explain. Literature needs to remain a challenge to other forms of discourse with which it is in dialogue. And the teaching of literature needs to insist that it is a different form of attention from that practiced in any other field in the university.

I think there is much truth in Terry Eagleton's recent assertion—in his inaugural address as Wharton Professor of English at Oxford—that literary and cultural studies have become a battleground, within the university and without, in part because they have taken up vital questions that other disciplines, in their professionalization, have for the moment abandoned. Writes Eagleton: "For the great speculative questions of truth and justice, of freedom and happiness, have to find a home somewhere; and if an aridly technical philosophy, or a drearily positivist sociology, are no hospitable media for such explorations, then they will be displaced onto a criticism which is simply not intellectually equipped to take this strain."⁹ Ill equipped, to be sure, but as Eagleton also notes, great moments of literary criticism tend to be those when, speaking of literature, criticism is speaking of that and more, "mapping the deep structures and central directions of an entire culture." It is in my view a good thing that literary criticism be under strain, so long as it recognizes the limits of what it can do, so long as it continues to deal with that strain, those tensions, in strong acts of reading. The response to strain need not be the abandonment of its central enterprise but rather the affirmation of that centrality.

For the teacher of literature, I seem to have worked myself around to some form of the advice famously given by Benjamin Disraeli to aspiring statesmen: "Never apologize, never explain." This, of course, is not quite right. We need constantly to explain the strange fact that poetry gained a place in the academic republic (one it didn't always have, one that many still find unwarranted) and that studying literature is a fundamentally different experi-

ence from any other in the curriculum. It cannot be reduced to cultural studies because it is fundamentally other, resisting full contextualization in other discourses, demanding different forms of attention, even of knowing. But apologies are not in order.

Notes

1. Checking references for the notes to this essay, I discovered that the Dream of the Plumbers had been recorded by Harry Levin himself, in "Comparing the Literature," in *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 75-76. Levin's version attributes the dream to the wife of a graduate student, an interesting displacement of anxiety.
2. On the original conception of the program, see my article "Man and His Fictions: One Approach to the Teaching of Literature," *College English* 35, no. 1 (1973): 40-49.
3. See Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3-20.
4. I cite from *A Report to the ACLA: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1993).
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 10-11.
6. See Peter Brooks, "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?" *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Spring 1994): 509-23.
7. As Harry Levin noted many years ago: see Levin, "Literature as an Institution," *Accent* 6, no. 3 (1946): 159-68; revised and reprinted in *The Gates of Horn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).
8. See *Campell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.* 62 LW 4169. Justice Souter delivered the opinion of the Court, which clearly recognizes (though it does not use the word) the importance of "intertextuality" in the creation of a work that cites but transforms the original.
9. Terry Eagleton, *The Crisis of Contemporary Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 16.

IN THE NAME OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

REY CHOW

If "literature" alone constituted the discipline of comparative literature, then we would have to ask why there ought to be "comparative" literature at all—why don't we simply have national literature departments? It seems to me that the "comparative" in comparative literature is equally, if not more, crucial a factor in considering the future of comparative literature: exactly what constitutes "comparison"—what kinds of relations, critical formations, analytical perspectives are relevant? More than the word *literature*, it is the interest in "comparative" which has allowed the practitioners of comparative literature to distinguish their work from that done within strictly national and national-linguistic boundaries and to say, with some rigor, that comparative literature is not simply a matter of adding/juxtaposing one national literature to another so that its existence is simply—as many of comparative literature's hostile opponents in national literature departments would charge—redundant and superfluous.

I am entitling my response to the 1993 Report on Standards by the ACLA committee "In the Name of Comparative Literature" in order to highlight a couple of preliminary considerations. First is the fact that, in a manner beyond the control of those who have strong feelings about what comparative literature is and is not, all kinds of claims are being made and all kinds of practices flourish in its name. CompLit in this first instance signals prestige, cosmopolitanism, and power—besides having the respectability of a long-established discipline, it is also a kind of "classy" designer label, like Armani, Dior, Givenchy, St. Laurent, and so forth, which many want to display. Second, however, precisely because comparative literature is simply a name, it must be subject to change. As a name and as a discipline, comparative litera-

ture should insist on its own permanence only if that permanence is accompanied by continual self-criticism. The currently constitutive features of comparative literature can as easily be manipulated to consolidate repressive cultural interests as they can be used to open up new intellectual avenues. This fundamental ambivalence of the name and the discipline means that Comp-Lit will always remain institutionally controversial, appealing to astute administrators as an opportunity for fostering quality intellectual leadership in their organizations, but threatening those who lack such bureaucratic insight and courage. The following remarks are made in the light of these preliminary considerations.

Comparative Literature and "Eurocentrism"

I fully agree with the report's recommendation that languages and literatures other than the ones traditionally sponsored by comparative literature departments and programs—namely, English, French, and German—be more widely and routinely taught. At the same time, to someone like myself who has worked with non-European languages and literatures, this suggested "othering" of the curriculum is precisely the problem, not because it is difficult to initiate the teaching of these "other" languages and literatures, but because the teaching of, say, Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, and so forth already has an institutional history in this country which is fully mired in practices, habits, and biases and which is fully peopled with intentions. Instead of being a blank space ready to be adopted or assimilated by comparative literature, non-Western language and literature programs have been sites of production of knowledge which function alongside United States State Department policies vis-à-vis the particular nations and cultures concerned—such as the former Soviet Union, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa. The problems that exist in these "other" programs, which are at times organized under the rubric of area studies, are familiar to most who understand the basic arguments of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, first published nearly twenty years ago.

Even though many pedagogues of non-Western languages and literatures tend to make, with good justification, strong objections to the Eurocentrism of comparative literature, as far as I can tell their own practices and beliefs often fall strictly within the parameters of the same Eurocentrism. It is simply that they practice Eurocentrism in the name of the other, the local, and the culturally exceptional.

culture

The Nation-State - Darwinism - str
+
nation-language

Of all the prominent features of Eurocentrism, the one that stands out in the context of the university is the conception of culture as based on the modern European notion of the nation-state. In this light, comparative literature has been rightly criticized for having concentrated on the literatures of a few strong nation-states in modern Europe. But the problem does not go away if we simply substitute India, China, and Japan for England, France, and Germany. To this day we still witness publications that bear titles such as "comparative approaches to masterpieces of Asian literature" which adopt precisely this Eurocentric, nation-oriented model of literature *in the name of the other*. In such instances, the concept of literature is strictly subordinated to a social Darwinian understanding of the nation: "masterpieces" correspond to "master" nations and "master" cultures. With India, China, and Japan being held as representative of Asia, cultures of lesser prominence in Western reception such as Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Tibet, and others simply fall by the wayside—as marginalized "others" to the "other" that is the "great" Asian civilizations.

The critique of Eurocentrism, if it is to be thorough and fundamental, cannot take place at the level of replacing one set of texts with another set of texts—not even if the former are European and the latter are Asian, African, or Latin American. Rather, it must question the very assumption that nation-states with national languages are the only possible cultural formations that produce "literature" that is worth examining. Otherwise we will simply see, as we have already been seeing, the old Eurocentric models of language and literature study being reproduced ad infinitum in non-European language and literature pedagogy. The active disabling of such reproduction of Eurocentrism-in-the-name-of-the-other should, I think, be one of comparative literature's foremost tasks in the future.

Multilingualism and Multiculturalism

I very much agree with the merit of enforcing a multilingual discipline and especially with Mary Louise Pratt's suggestion in "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship" that we should desist from thinking of non-English languages as "foreign" languages. Once again, however, I do not think that the cultivation of multilingualism and multiculturalism alone would solve the problems faced by comparative literature simply because multilingualism and multiculturalism are already part of comparative literature's constitutive, disciplinary features.

Multil.
+
discipline

To begin with, I am not particularly worried about the "monolingualism" of our future world simply because multilingualism is clearly already part of the life of the elite classes across the globe today—and where there is power and money, there will be continuity. The children of these elite classes, whether they happen to be living in Geneva, Tokyo, New Delhi, Hong Kong, or Palo Alto, are being brought up in at least two or three languages. In the case of those growing up in Asian metropolises, the combination would usually involve English, French, or German, plus the so-called mother tongue, whatever it happens to be. Almost all such children would eventually find their way to privileged institutions of higher education, such as those in the United States.

In itself, multilingualism has always been part of a humanistic view of intellectual culture which can as easily serve the agenda of reactionary politics as it can serve progressive ones. Think, for instance, of the Jesuit and the Mormon establishments, the intelligence networks, and the diplomatic circles of the world, which, well before enlightened comparatists, knew of the need to master non-Western as well as Western languages in order to indoctrinate, to police information, and to conduct political exchange. Alternatively, multilingualism can also serve as an ally and accomplice to white liberalism. As Armani, Dior, Givenchy, St. Laurent, and their like are incorporating exotic fabrics and styles from non-European cultures into their prestigious fashion inventories, so the liberalist sectors of the North American academy, too, are advocating the need for other languages and literatures to appear in our curricula, our journals, our professional meetings. But in the liberalist instance, multilingualism is ultimately simply an alibi: the charitable "openness" to other languages and cultures often goes hand in hand with an utter ignorance of and indifference to the historical and political distinctions among ethnic cultures and "peoples of color." If reactionary politics uses multilingualism for purposes of indoctrination and surveillance, then white liberalism, in a more benign guise, uses multilingualism for embellishment and amusement, for a mere change of décors.

My point is that we should not let the euphoria of oppositional thinking lure us into assuming that, by positing a multilingual, other-culture-oriented approach to comparative literature and by making the gesture of welcoming non-Western cultures and civilizations into our curricula, we are going to make real changes—when, already, in myriad forms for an extended period of time, the very disciplinary structures that we seek to challenge have been firmly established in the pedagogical practices related to non-Western languages and literatures, when "qualifications" and "expertise" in so-called

other cultures have been used as the means to legitimate entirely conservative institutional practices in hiring, tenuring, promotion, reviewing, and publishing, as well as in teaching. We need to remember that there has been a complicated history in the West of the study of non-Western, non-European languages; our Eurocentric multilingual comparatists have always had their counterparts in the great Orientalists, Sinologists, Indologists, and so forth.

In brief, being multilingual does not necessarily free one from bigotry. A multilingualism that was "Eurocentric" before could easily incorporate within it the dimensions of non-European languages without coming to terms with the Eurocentrism of its notions of language and knowledge. Because of this, the sheer enforcement of multilingualism cannot ensure that we educate our students about the power structures, hierarchies, and discriminations that work as much in the "others" as in "us."

I belabor the rather obvious points about the nation-state and multilingualism/multiculturalism because I think they represent the most entrenched intersections between comparative literature and national literature programs. National language and literature programs represent "local" versions of the problems that are equally shared by comparative literature in the guise of internationalism and cosmopolitanism. The problems of comparative literature—its "Eurocentrism" and its false claim to "universalism"—can therefore not be solved simply by strengthening the local versions of the same problems, nor by simply adding emphases to the study of non-European languages and cultures as if such study did not already have a fully implicated and complicit role in the history of the teaching of the humanities in the West.

"Theory" and the Evolving Concept of "Media"

Comparative literature has traditionally been the place where "theory" is investigated. While the bashing of theory continues, it is certain that theory has won the battle even among those who malign it but who nonetheless use it to dress up their inquiries. It should be pointed out that when theory or "Western theory" is demonized and attacked, the real target (usually uncomprehended by those parroting theory-bashing banalities in order to be safely politically correct) is deconstruction and poststructuralist theory—namely, the kind of theory, officially dating from the France of the 1960s but traceable to elsewhere and earlier periods, which questions the logocentric bases of humanistic culture in the West—whereas the continual adoption of nineteenth-century European historiographic methods (in the form of intellectual histories, literary histories, or histories of ideas) or twentieth-century

Models ① d.r.p.c
② W.S.T
③ close readings

Anglo-American New Criticism (in the form of close readings of prose and poetry) is usually assumed to be natural rather than "Western." Against deconstruction and poststructuralism as such, deeply ingrained humanistic and historiographic versions of culture, themselves equally Western, are often mounted in the name of the other.

This is not the place to launch yet another full-fledged debate about deconstruction and poststructuralism, but it is worth arguing that one of the strongest justifications for studying the non-West has to do precisely with the fundamental questioning of the limits of Western discourse which is characteristic of deconstruction and poststructuralist theory. The questioning of the sign as such leads logically to the opening up of the study of other signs and other systems of signification, other disciplines, other sexualities, other ethnicities, other cultures. Thus, against the arguments of many, I would say that deconstruction and poststructuralist theory have very close ties with cultural studies, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and ethnic studies, in that the investigations of disciplines, class, race, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, however empirical, must always already contain within them the implicit *theoretical* understanding of the need to critique hegemonic signs and sign systems from without as well as from within. This kind of theoretical direction is the one in which I would like to see comparative literature continue.

Several aspects of this theoretical direction could be specified briefly as follows:

1. *How to approach the version of Eurocentrism that is the passion for the nation-state?* — *to question in crisis*

Instead of reconsolidating the boundaries of nations through the study of national languages and literatures, comparative literature should remain the place where theory is used to put the very concept of the nation in crisis, and with that, the concept of the nation as the origin of a particular literature. Let me cite here the recent work by Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), as an example of what I think an alternative kind of comparative literature might look like. Explicitly, Armstrong and Tennenhouse's book is about a particular European national literature—English—in its historical formation. The theoretically path-breaking achievement of the book, however, stems from the remarkable manner in which they demonstrate how the "origins" of this literature in fact lie outside the boundaries of the English nation, in the popular and debased literature produced about and in the North American

colonies. English literary "classics" and "masterpieces" such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, for instance, could now be said to have their "origins" in the captivity narratives such as that of Mary Rowlandson, a type of literary production which originated not in the fens but in the American "wilderness," among "savages."

Through a sophisticated use of poststructuralism's radical implications, Armstrong and Tennenhouse offer a kind of *comparative* reading between vastly different types of literature, a reading that (a) challenges the sacredness of nationhood by showing "nation" and "nationalism" to be products of imperialist, puritanic fantasies, (b) overturns the elitist, Eurocentric assumption that (print) "culture" flows only from Europe to its colonies but not vice versa, and (c) problematizes at once the hierarchical models of national language, masterpiece, and cultural "original"/translation which are crucial to the study of comparative literature. Most important of all, while working strictly from the perspective of one European literary tradition and one "national language," Armstrong and Tennenhouse nonetheless succeed in reinscribing the differences of English "national literature" from within, supplementing its glorious image as the depository of England's treasured intellectual culture—an image that to this day continues to be pedagogically disseminated around the world—with one that reveals it to be a product of England's own imperialism.

As a theoretical model, *The Imaginary Puritan* thus makes it possible for comparative literature to form significant connections with postcolonial studies by asking an entirely different kind of question about national literature: not "how is national literature, like class and gender, linked to the formation of subjectivity?" but "how does national literature participate in the histories of colonialism and imperialism precisely as widely distributed *habits of writing and reading*?" This kind of question would imply that not only the classics of the European canons, in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, and Greek, but also the "masterpieces" of China, Japan, India, Arabia, Persia, Russia, and so forth would have to be fundamentally rethought. Comparative literature would no longer be a mechanistic juxtaposition of different national literatures in the form of mutual admiration societies but would be actively engaged in the comparisons of imperialist designs, narratives, and print cultures.

2. *How to approach the issue of multilingualism?* *late response*

While the command of multiple languages should remain one of comparative literature's disciplinary concerns, it should also be possible for stu-

dents who do not necessarily have a deep knowledge of languages other than their native ones to be introduced to comparative literature through the study of poststructuralist theory, simply because one of the key pedagogical aims of poststructuralist theory is the scrutiny of language itself. In the case of North America, where many students have English as their first language, this is crucial because of the multiple languages and cultural enclaves that already exist *within* English—precisely owing to the “international” history of British and American imperialism. Instead of asking our students to learn Arabic or Chinese in place of the more traditionally revered French or German, what about asking them to study black English, English as used by writers in British India, or English as used by present-day Latin American and Asian American authors? The many different types of postcolonial writings which continue to be produced in the “single” language of English or French should require us to rethink comparative literature’s traditional language requirements, so that, in principle at least, it should be possible for some students to do work in comparative literature using one language (even though I very much doubt that that would ever be the case). Similarly, the issues involved in women’s literature, gay and lesbian literature, ethnic literature, and so forth so far exceed the boundaries of the nation and national language that they demand to be studied with newer conceptual methods.

In other words, just as multilingualism does not necessarily prevent one from becoming an intellectual bigot, so monolingualism does not have to mean that one’s mind is closed. Instead of having students add on languages without ever questioning the premise of language-as-power, we could also, within comparative literature, teach students how to be comparative within “single” languages. To this may be added the point that, as Mary Louise Pratt writes, often, precisely in multicultural contexts, (English) translations are the only possible texts to use, simply because many languages, even when they are from the same geographical area, do not share common linguistic bases in the manner typical of European languages.

3. What about comparative literature’s relation with “cultural studies”?

The increasing sense of annoyance, anxiety, and threat felt by some comparatists toward cultural studies is a sign that comparative literature’s own identity is a shifting one. This is not at all a bad thing. As Wlad Godzich argues in his essay “Emergent Literature and the Field of Comparative Literature,” the field of comparative literature—that is, what constitutes its “identity”—is the very problematic of “field” itself.¹ Rather than being the cause for worry, then, I think the at times blurry distinction between compar-

ative literature and cultural studies offers a good opportunity for comparative literature to rethink and re-strategize itself.

If one strong criticism of cultural studies from comparatists is that cultural studies tends to be empiricist and monolingual, then wouldn’t it be in comparative literature’s interest to confront this problem head on—not by denouncing cultural studies *tout court* but rather by seizing the opportunity and making the rich array of cultural objects currently investigated under the rubric of cultural studies part of comparative literature’s theoretical and multilingual inquiry?

To do this, comparative literature would need to extend its traditional attention to the materiality of verbal language into an equally meticulous examination of the notion of the “medium.” I use the word *medium* here in its basic sense of a means of storage, retrieval, and transmission (of cultural information) and not in the sense of “the media” as we find it in more contemporary popular usage. In the age of hypertext, when electronic virtuality and speed technologies mean that even rare, faraway inscriptions made in vastly different media can be made available at our fingertips, our notions of the medium (and consequently of research, knowledge, and knowledge dissemination) are undergoing such vast changes that it would be inconceivable simply to proceed with our study of word-based texts in a manner that is unengaged with such changes. At the same time, once we think in terms of the medium, we must ask anew the questions “what is literature?” and “what is writing?” As Friedrich Kittler argues in a recent essay, in the “postmodern Tower of Babel” where “ordinary” language encounters the programming languages of the microprocessor, “We simply do not know what our writing does.”²

In taking into consideration the evolving concept of the medium, we would be returning the word *literature* to an openness that was there before it became disciplined into the particular “body” that it has had in the past few hundred years in the West—to an alternative space and time when “literature” simply referred to materials relying on the medium of the printed word. This earlier notion of “literature” offers, in the postmodern age, the advantage of challenging the chronologically recent and much more narrow notion of “literature” which persists in many’s understanding of comparative literature today.

Instead of simply resisting or discrediting cultural studies, therefore, comparative literature could borrow from cultural studies by way of opening itself to the study of media other than the word-based literary or philosophical text. To bring literature into crisis through the concept of “media” does

Tesis
 como?
 el
 lenguaje
 media
 Foucault

...
 ...
 ...
 ...
 ...

}

not mean, necessarily, literature's demise. Perhaps, precisely in the name of comparative literature, a new discipline would emerge in which the study of literature is relativized not along lines of nations and national languages but, more rigorously, along lines of aesthetic media, sign systems, and discourse networks? Perhaps that name itself would eventually transform into an other, such as comparative media?

←
Turned
↓
Ambis

Notes

1. In *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 18-36.
2. Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," *Stanford Literature Review* 9, no. 1 (1992): 81-90.

Higonnet, Margaret R.

Comparative Literature
in the Age of Multiculturalism.

Prof. Malena Rodríguez Castro
Lita

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
ON THE FEMINIST EDGE

MARGARET R. HIGONNET

Humanity, Jean Paul Richter once suggested, is "the great dash in the book of nature."¹ Comparatists in turn play the role of a hyphen in the world of humanities. Shuttling between languages, cultures, arts, or discourses marks the condition of a comparatist. As indispensable as a suture in an operation, the comparatist works at the edge of the matter. The edge I want to address here is that where comparative literature meets feminist criticism. X

Like comparatists, feminist critics have stressed the reexamination of critical boundaries. To be sure, feminists tend to focus on the cultural construction of gender, whereas comparatists traditionally have focused on genre or period conventions and on the transnational movement of forms. While comparatists have identified fences that organize national literary study in order to leap over them, feminists have danced in the minefields of the margins.² D

Gender, feminist critics point out, is one of the categories that organize literary production and reception. This social variable draws lines within literary institutions; it encodes voices as masculine or feminine and separates generic spheres such as the male and female bildungsroman or diverging currents within modernism. At the same time, like racial or class demarcations, gender divisions cross national boundaries and assume new definition and value in each culture. Gender studies, in short, should be comparative. The affiliations and telling distances between the two modes of analysis seemed to me so rich that I undertook several years ago to edit a volume, *Borderwork*, which would explore the space of the hyphen in comparative-feminist, while acknowledging the contested identities of both modes.³ ↪

Of course, every analytical discipline engages some type of comparison.

Just what kind of comparison is the question. Without a category of inclusion, we cannot begin to locate historical change or cultural specificity. Each category of inclusion, however, implies the exclusions that characterize a discipline's strengths and weaknesses. There are many ways to slice a cake, but if you make a horizontal cut near the top, one person will get all the icing. Feminists have often focused exclusively on differences of gender, while comparatists have focused on national or linguistic identity as a primary locus of difference. As Diana Fuss argues, a problem arises at the point "when the central category of difference under consideration blinds us to other modes of difference and implicitly delegitimizes them."⁴

The issue of locating the defining categories of comparative literature has triggered much of the debate over the Bernheimer report. When we try to delimit our field, we run into difficulty because the kinds of tasks which comparatists set themselves involve precisely the testing of conceptual boundaries. In the context of genre theory, Derrida has argued that the particular member of a set always undoes the set: "With the inevitable dividing of the trait that marks membership, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole."⁵ Theory, insofar as it seeks out the border case, tends to undo its own generalizing goals. Further, because comparative literature crosses the boundaries set by other disciplines, skeptics outside the field find that a degree in comparative literature widens, as Veblen put it, "the candidate's field of ignorance."⁶

Part of the condition of a comparatist is productive anxiety, or what Ulrich Weisstein once suggested is the "permanent" sense of crisis in the field.⁷ The problem of self-definition has become all the more troubling in the nineties, as the construction of englobing theories has come under attack. The ideal of a universalist schema to encompass variations in periodization, maps of genres, and the definition of national literatures has come to seem a will-o'-the-wisp. A wide spectrum of comparatists, as the Bernheimer report points out, now use methods borrowed from cultural studies, new historicism, feminism, or subaltern studies as they gravitate to localized and historicized models of cultural production.

In recent years many feminist critics have likewise sought to move beyond theoretical and historical claims whose universalism masked particularist assumptions, whether national, class bound, or tacitly racial. The stimulus for self-criticism came from various quarters: from African American "womanist" work, from subaltern studies, and from Marxist-feminist critiques. These critiques have pushed feminists, first, from women's studies toward

cross-cultural gender studies, and second, from a generalizing but basically national literary study toward historically anchored comparative analyses.

The new directions in feminist criticism are by no means identical with the study of marginalized literatures or of the contact zones within multicultural societies. But these subjects have held a special place within feminist criticism as points of comparison and contrast in the development of theory. Thus the subversive strategies of American women's humor are in some ways analogous to those in the African American literary tradition; a juxtaposition of the two foregrounds elements that are specific to women's cross-class culture or specific to the African diaspora.

One of the primary tasks of feminist criticism has been to interrogate the problematic assumption of a "female" identity in literary representations. The construction of feminist theories on the inscription of the body, whether through paradigmatic scenes of rape, slavery, or excision, needs to be brought into perspective through cross-cultural analysis. Since language constructs the categories of sex, as Judith Butler argues, a comparative analysis of linguistically inscribed sexuality is in order.⁸

Covertly essentialist thinking infects even feminist critiques of essentialism, including attempts to acknowledge cultural differences. Trinh T. Minh-ha eloquently questions the postulate that difference is "uniqueness or special identity." Rather, she suggests, such "limiting and deceiving" concepts lead at best to a romantic exoticism, an ethnographic projection of a coherent cultural subject. Feminist theory, she proposes, should dismantle the very notion of identity.⁹ Similarly, Rey Chow has challenged the well-intentioned exoticizing of the voice of the other, the projection of a monolithically different Third World Woman. "To my mind, it is when the West's 'other women' are prescribed their 'own' national and ethnic identity in this way that they are most excluded from having a claim to the reality of their existence."¹⁰ To presume the primary import of national or ethnic difference both denies today's world economy in its cultural manifestations and shapes a reductive politics of identity. The import of these questions for comparative work is undeniable.

Nonetheless, we cannot yet celebrate a happy marriage between comparative literature as a discipline and feminist forms of critical practice. Historically, comparative literature took institutional shape in an age of formalist criticism; feminist theory flourished in the heat and politics of the civil rights movement. While feminist criticism has fused disciplines such as history, epistemology, linguistics, and anthropology, comparatists continue to debate the merits of interdisciplinary study as against "intrinsic" literary study. Lin-

3) guistic skills have been considered the sine qua non of comparative literature. By contrast, many feminists are either monolingual or make little use of their linguistic skills in their critical analyses.

Not only does their interdisciplinary work make many feminist critics today difficult to locate within comparative literature as an academic discipline, but earlier feminist writers who explicitly located themselves at the intersection of literary traditions have also failed to attract comparative study.

We have devoted a body of inquiry to Goethe and not to Mme de Staël, even though her *De la littérature* and *De l'Allemagne* are among the founding texts of comparative literature. Similarly, comparatists have been drawn to mediators among cultures, such as Kafka or Rilke, rather than to Isabelle de Charrière, an eighteenth-century Dutchwoman who lived in Switzerland, wrote in French, translated from English (like Jane Austen she gave a distinctively feminist twist to narrative conventions), and published not only fiction but operas.

The omission of broad ranges of literature from comparative consideration was a clear symptom that something was wrong with comparative paradigms. Already in 1975, the Greene report acknowledged that the older "comfortable European perspectives" were "parochial." What once seemed a blessing—the fact that readings and courses focused on recognized peaks of the literary landscape—has long since come to seem problematic. Whereas Wellek and Warren earlier argued on behalf of "intrinsically" literary rather than political norms of periodization, historians and critics alike are reexamining the politics of ostensibly neutral literary norms. They ask whether women indeed had a renaissance, a romantic movement, or a modernism of their own. Did they live the moment to another pulse and record it in a counterlanguage not taught in the schools of men?¹¹

Yet where national literature departments have been redrawing their reading lists in order to incorporate Charrière, George Sand, Aphra Behn, Fanny Burney, Harriet Jacobs, Hedwig Dohm, or Emilia Pardo Bazan, disciplinary requirements and professional journals in the comparative field have been driven by the goal of coverage toward the continuing mapping of "masterpieces."

In this context of misrecognitions and omissions, the Bernheimer report, with its endorsement of gender analysis, feminist and postcolonial theory, and cross-cultural topics, has found a warm welcome from many of my colleagues, especially those who have collaborated with me on *Borderwork*. One reaction was: "At last I recognized myself."

But what kind of self can one attribute to a comparative-feminist? Not

surprisingly, the problem of the critic's identity has generated vigorous feminist debate. Some have laid claim to the territory of gynocriticism, or the study of women's writing, on the basis of lived experience as women and have contested the intrusions of cross-dressing Tootsies. Others, today I think the majority, reject the imposition of a female ghetto defined by identity politics in the realm of critical imagination. They likewise reject the automatic assumption (latent in job advertisements) that a critic who comes from an ethnic minority would prefer to focus on the literature of that minority rather than other topics. They ask how the several hats worn by the critic as feminist, and at the same time as Arabist, deconstructionist, bisexual, or new historicist, can be turned to profit: how might self-conscious labeling, especially the splitting or multiplication of labels, serve critical analysis?

This affirmation of the multiple ideologically colored positions a critic occupies stands in sharp contrast to the goal of neutral formalism which once defined comparative literature. Gayatri Spivak, for example, writes about herself in the third person using a hyphenated label, Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist, and wittily subverts the reader's expectations as well as her own apparent argument by changing her implied position in mid-essay.¹² Her strategy of interruption opens a gap to force the reader into the metacritical work of comparative interpretation.

Like Spivak, one can script a critical role that plays feminist concerns against comparative ones in order to observe their mutual contest and shifting boundaries. Here, then, I would like to pick up a few of the renovations in the house of comparative literature proposed by the Bernheimer report and to ask how they look when viewed by one feminist. Nation, translation, and language are the most important of these changing concepts; indeed, all three concepts cast up questions of language for our consideration.

The report addresses the foundational concept of national identity indirectly, through questions of language and multiculturalism. Thus, it proposes shifting attention from international differences to differences within national cultures which are determined by factors such as gender, ethnicity, or political status which might be reflected in differences of language. It also proposes that we acknowledge the interest of many comparatists in interdisciplinary area studies.

Certainly, I would agree that the concept of nationality within comparative practice needs to be pressed for deeper insights about the intersection of nationalisms and sexualities. Homogenizing visions of national identity construct "horizontal" imagined communities that elide or ghettoize sexual, ethnic, and racial difference.¹³ While the nation and especially the land are

often symbolized by a female figure, citizenship has typically been represented as masculine. The "foundational fictions" that emerged in Latin American literature at the moment of independence, Doris Sommer has argued, marry these two figures of the representative citizen and the land. By eroticizing the traversal of racial lines, these fictions seek to symbolically transcend racial and regional conflicts over citizenship and political power which broke out at independence. The resulting romance plots allegorize the possibility of nation building by wedding the protagonist as a leader to a figurative representative of the land and its indigenous peoples.¹⁴

Such literary patterns demand ironic and contestatory responses from minority writers. In their efforts to represent World War I, for example, minority women writers confront a conception of national identity which excludes them, both by gender and by race, from national service. To write patriotically, then, can become a politically subversive act. The countertraditions that emerge within the frame of a national tradition call for comparative treatment.¹⁵

Some of the most innovative work by feminist critics today, however, lies not in national but in area studies. This type of department has been viewed with suspicion by comparatists because it takes political or social science as its center of gravity, apparently minimizing linguistic training. Yet language is the common thread in some of the best work of this kind. Gloria Anzaldúa and the contributors to *Criticism in the Borderlands* stress the importance of linguistic play in Chicana and Chicano literature. Debra Castillo wittily foregrounds women's kitchen talk in her study of Latin American women's writing. And Regina Harrison's prizewinning study of Quechua women's oral poetry brilliantly crosses disciplines as well as national boundaries to explicate connections between agriculture, spirituality, and verbal arts.¹⁶

The importance of language to comparatists' self-definition seems clear from the controversy elicited by the Bernheimer report's pragmatic comments on the utility of translation in the classroom. The limitations of our own linguistic training and the accidents of our students' diverse linguistic abilities push us toward work in translation; even a graduate seminar must often order books both in the original languages and in English.

Nonetheless, we should note that reliance upon translations ironically can have a conservative impact, since only translations of texts believed to have world rank and a wide audience remain in print. Genres directed to a male audience are sometimes assumed to have a broader readership than those directed to a female audience. Furthermore, patterns of translation which overlook the forms of intertextuality typical of women's culture flatten

out texts by women. Until this year, the only available translation of Charrière omitted her opening ironic commentary on Samuel de Constant's *Mari sentimental* and failed to exploit her echoes of Rousseau's *Emile*. Like bicultural texts, women's texts at times play with forms of humor and linguistic hybridization. Predictably, the force of much women's writing gets lost in translation.

Given the importance of linguistic difference as a founding concept of comparative literature, we must rethink the gender-neutral understanding of language which governs the field.¹⁷ Although Deborah Cameron argues that "there is little warrant for notions of a separate women's language, or even what used to be called a 'genderlect' (i.e., a distinctive dialect used by one gender)," she also argues that women historically in most cultures have suffered from social disadvantages that produce specific linguistic behaviors. Men have controlled literacy and certain elite linguistic registers.¹⁸ The latent preference in much comparative study for "high" and "resonant" literary forms that incorporate verbal allusions to extended written traditions, especially in dead classical languages, devalues not only dialectal forms but also the resonance of oral and demotic patterns of allusion in writings by women and minorities barred from education in elite literary traditions.

The usual organization of comparative study around national *Sprach-literaturen* privileges the linguistic purity of a "standard" language defined by dominant groups. The comparatist too often overlooks the linguistic riches to be found in the shared tropes and codes of a gay sociolect, the resistant hyphenated or parenthetical orthographic inventions of a feminist philosopher like Mary Daly, or the literary specificities of a local or racial dialect.

Where men and women have lived in highly segregated spheres, separate linguistic usages emerge which inflect literary production. Limit cases may be useful here, such as that of Elisabeth Martinengou, an Ionian writer of the mid-nineteenth century, an autodidact who taught herself Italian and French in order to read the literature of the Enlightenment at a time when most other women in her society were unlettered. Forging a demotic vocabulary in part borrowed from her literary readings and richly informed by oral culture, she created a clear, stripped, yet spontaneous and poetic style that made her one of the first important writers in modern Greek.¹⁹

Or one could adduce Nu Shu, an ancient Chinese women's language rediscovered by an anthropologist studying minorities in Hunan province.²⁰ Painted in a style called "mosquito-ant" onto fans and handmade books or embroidered onto silk, this language has been passed down for at least a thousand years from mothers to daughters. Nu Shu is thought to have origi-

nated in the Sung dynasty (about A.D. 900–1279) when a young woman from this province was sent to the imperial palace; she wrote home about her misery in her own local script, which was unknown at the court and had been abandoned by men at home, as they became involved in commerce and adopted the official Han script. Historically, the language was used to permit women to communicate with one another in secret; they used it to inscribe female friendship pacts, to record rituals of divination, and to express the loneliness and laments that only a mother or close friend might be permitted to know. Sung aloud by one woman to another, the poems use a local dialect known as "sitting singing" in a custom that is unique to women's language.

Encoded verbal practices can serve to shield and unite groups in the face of repression by dominant political, racial, or sexual cultures. These verbal strategies can be woven together in complex forms of *métissage*.²¹ Recent work on Chicana literature stresses the importance of linguistic hybridity and code switching to the formulation of ethnic and sexual identity at the border. A writer like Gloria Anzaldúa in fact firmly locates herself at the space of the slash, mixing languages in defiance of state-imposed monolingualism even in the title of her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

Code switching enables Anzaldúa to suggest the multiplicity of identities which she carries, like a turtle, on her back. As a lesbian poet, she is "half and half—both woman and man, neither—a new gender." For her as mestiza and cultural critic, "*es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*. She puts history through a sieve." "To live in the borderlands," she writes, "means you are neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps."²²

The solution Anzaldúa offers is one we can embrace here:

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads. (*Borderlands* 195)

Notes

1. "Der Mensch ist der große Gedankenstrich im Buche der Natur." Jean Paul Richter, *Die unsichtbare Loge*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Eduard Berend (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1927), 2: 2.

2. I borrow the phrase from Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1980): 1–25. One should distinguish feminist activists

who work to dismantle discriminatory social barriers from feminist theorists and critics who focus primarily on the social meanings conveyed by such boundaries and the literary forms that they shape.

3. Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), in press.

4. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 116.

5. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 59.

6. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), 207.

7. Ulrich Weisstein, "Lasciate Ogni Speranza: Comparative Literature in Search of Lost Definitions," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1989): 99–100.

8. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

9. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 95–96.

10. Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 163.

11. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949). See Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

13. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, introduction to *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–18.

14. Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

15. Hortense J. Spillers, ed., *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (Routledge: New York, 1991); Joyce W. Warren, ed., *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

16. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Héctor Calderon and José David Saldivar, eds., *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Debra A. Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Regina Harrison, *Signs, Songs, and Memory in the Andes: Translating Quechua Language and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). See also Mary Louise Pratt's provocative reflections on the many-faceted operations of cultural imperialism and the emergence of multicultural forms in what she calls the "contact zone." Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

17. Ulrich Weisstein, for example, proposes *Sprachliteratur* as the "most suitable" term to describe "the entities we use as counter in our comparatist game." "Linguistic

criteria," he writes, "govern our foremost activities" such as translation. Weisstein, "Lasciate Ogni Speranza," 103.

18. Deborah Cameron, "Introduction: Why Is Language a Feminist Issue?" in *The Feminist Critique of Language, A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990), 24.

19. I am indebted here to Eleni Varikas, "Ecrire derrière les jalousies: Le journal intime d'une recluse," unpublished paper.

20. Carolyn Lau, "Nu Shu: An Ancient, Secret, Women's Language," *Belles Lettres* 6 (1990): 32-34.

21. See Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

22. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 82, 194.

SPACES OF COMPARISON

FRANÇOISE LIONNET

One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time to the determined inhabitants of space. . . . Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.

—Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

Growing up on a small island, you become intensely aware of the rest of the world. When it is an island in the Indian Ocean whose history is completely contained within that of colonialism, your awareness of that world is the only canvas that you have, the only mirror into which you can look. To make sense of your insularity, you try to understand what this small place represents and how it has figured in the European languages that you speak. You know that your identity is marked by these languages; yet you do not feel circumscribed by them. Your sense of place is relational: you can understand who and where you are only when you begin to see that this place, the island on which you were born, played a role in Europe's construction of its own identity just as much as it helped shape the lives of the islanders.

In Mauritius, two European countries competed in different ways for the privilege of educating and civilizing us: France and England. This allowed for a healthy skepticism vis-à-vis the claims of universality which each culture made in its own way. France had the upper hand culturally, England politically. We learned both French and English perfectly. But the African and Indian bases of our Creole vernacular grounded us in a very different epistemology. Our identities, it seems now, were always "in process" before we knew the word and the concept. We were all "comparatists." Our location at the intersection of several systems of knowledge provided a certain kind of productive discomfort: Mauritius has a two-hundred-year literary history, more daily and weekly newspapers per capita than most countries, and several small publishing houses. But the school curriculum exposed us only to the classics