6

The Comparative Method and Literature[1] (1886)

Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett

A pioneering scholar of comparative literature—who claimed to have given the field its name in English—Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett was deeply interested in the relation of literature to social life. Trained as a barrister in his native Dublin, Posnett published studies of political economy before turning his attention to comparative literary studies. The fruit of ten years' labor, his book *Comparative Literature* was published in 1886, just after its author had sailed to New Zealand, where he had accepted a post as professor of Classics and English at the University of Auckland. This move from Ireland to New Zealand—from the inner to the outer margins of the British Empire—was appropriate for someone of Posnett's global perspective. In his book, he devotes substantial space not only to Western European literature and to the Greek and Roman classics in which he had been trained in school, but also to many other literatures, including Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Persian, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Eastern European literatures. He worked as needed in translation and read all the specialized scholarship he could get hold of for each area.

Posnett organized his globe-spanning discussion by the rigorous application of the social science methods of his day; his book was published, in fact, in a British "International Science Series," together with volumes on funguses, international law, volcanoes, socialism, and one titled *Jelly Fish, Star Fish and Sea Urchins*. Posnett derived his approach from the economist and political scientist Herbert Spencer, a social Darwinist who looked for evolutionary patterns in social life. Posnett argued that literary forms develop in tandem with the broader social evolution from the tribe to the city to the nation and beyond. He described this process as "the relativity of literature," challenging conceptions of literature as a transcendent aesthetic order. In his chapter "The Comparative Method and Literature," given here, Posnett stresses that comparative study should be a scientific enterprise focused on broad literary and social movements rather than on a Romantic-style appreciation for the outpourings of individual genius.

Posnett's evolutionary scheme can look somewhat mechanical today, but his emphasis on literary relativity enabled him to appreciate an exceptionally wide range of materials, from Sanskrit epics to Persian ghazals to gypsy folk songs to modern French novels, as he sought to determine the varied social settings to which each body of material responds. In "The Comparative Method and Literature" he makes an eloquent case for the importance of comparative study, both as an analytical tool and as a counter to narrow nationalism, even as he recognizes the nation as the fundamental basis of modern literary life.

The comparative method of acquiring or communicating knowledge is in one sense as old as thought itself, in another the peculiar glory of our nineteenth century. All reason, all imagination, operate subjectively, and pass from man to man objectively, by aid of comparisons and differences. The most colourless proposition of the logician is either the assertion of a comparison, A is B, or the denial of a comparison, A is not B; and any student of Greek thought will remember how the confusion of this simple process by mistakes about the nature of the copula (ἐστι) produced a flood of so-called "essences" (οὐσίαι) which have done more to mislead both ancient and modern philosophy than can be easily estimated. But not only the colourless propositions of logic, even the highest and most brilliant flights of oratorical eloquence or poetic fancy are sustained by this rudimentary structure of comparison and difference, this primary scaffolding, as we may call it, of human thought. If sober experience works out scientific truths in propositions affirming or denying comparison, imagination even in the richest colours works under the same elementary forms. Athenian intellect and Alexandrian reflection failed to perceive this fundamental truth, and the failure is attributable in the main to certain social characteristics of the Greeks. Groups, like individuals, need to project themselves beyond the

circle of their own associations if they wish to understand their own nature; but the great highway which has since led to comparative philosophy was closed against the Greek by his contempt for any language but his own. At the same time, his comparisons of his own social life, in widely different stages, were narrowed partially by want of monuments of his past, much more by contempt for the less civilised Greeks, such as the Macedonians, and especially by a mass of myth long too sacred to be touched by science, and then too tangled to be profitably loosed by the hands of impatient sceptics. Thus, deprived of the historical study of their own past and circumscribed within the comparisons and distinctions their own adult language permitted, it is not surprising that the Greeks made poor progress in comparative thinking, as a matter not merely of unconscious action but of conscious reflection. This conscious reflection has been the growth of European thought during the past five centuries, at first indeed a weakling, but, from causes of recent origin, now flourishing in healthy vigour.

When Dante wrote *De Eloquio Vulgari*[2] he marked the starting-point of our modern comparative science—the nature of language, a problem not to be lightly overlooked by the peoples of modern Europe inheriting, unlike Greek or Hebrew, a literature written in a tongue whose decomposition had plainly gone to make up the elements of their own living speech. The Latin, followed at an interval by the Greek, Renaissance laid the foundations of comparative reflection in the mind of modern Europe. Meanwhile the rise of European nationalities was creating new standpoints, new materials, for comparison in modern institutions and modes of thought or sentiment. The discovery of the New World brought this new European civilisation face to face with primitive life, and awakened men to contrasts with their own associations more striking than Byzantine or even Saracen could offer. Commerce, too, was now bringing the rising nations of Europe into rivalry with, and knowledge of, each other, and, more than this, giving a greater degree of personal freedom to the townsmen of the West than they had ever possessed before. Accompanying the increase of wealth and freedom came an awakening of individual opinion among men, even an uprising of it against authority which has since been called the Reformation, but an uprising which, in days of feudal, monarchical, and "popular" conflict, in days when education was the expensive luxury of the few, and even the communication of work-a-day ideas was as slow and irregular as bad roads and worse banditti could make it, was easily checked even in countries where it was supposed to have done great things. Individual inquiry, and with it comparative thinking, checked within the domain of social life by constant collisions with theological dogma, turned to the material world,

began to build up the vast stores of modern material knowledge, and only in later days of freedom began to construct from this physical side secular views of human origin and destiny which on the social side had been previously curbed by dogma. Meanwhile European knowledge of man's social life in its myriad varieties was attaining proportions such as neither Bacon nor Locke had contemplated. Christian missionaries were bringing home the life and literature of China so vividly to Europeans that neither the art nor the scepticism of Voltaire disdained to borrow from the Jesuit Prémare's translation of a Chinese drama published in 1735. Then Englishmen in India learned of that ancient language [Sanskrit] which Sir William Jones, toward the close of the eighteenth century, introduced to European scholars; and soon the points of resemblance between this language and the languages of Greeks and Italians, Teutons and Celts, were observed, and used like so many stepping-stones upon which men passed in imagination over the flood of time which separates the old Aryans from their modern offshoots in the West. Since those days the method of comparison has been applied to many subjects besides language; and many new influences have combined to make the mind of Europe more ready to compare and to contrast than it ever was before. The steam-engine, telegraph, daily press, now bring the local and central, the popular and the cultured, life of each European country and the general actions of the entire world face to face; and habits of comparison have arisen such as never before prevailed so widely and so vigorously. But, while we may call *consciously* comparative thinking the great glory of our nineteenth century, let us not forget that such thinking is largely due to mechanical improvements, and that long before our comparative philologists, jurists, economists, and the rest, scholars like Reuchlin[3] used the same method less consciously, less accurately, yet in a manner from the first foreshadowing a vast outlook instead of the exclusive views of Greek criticism. Here, then, is a rapid sketch of comparative thought in its European history. How is such thought, how is its method, connected with our subject, "Literature"?

It has been observed that imagination no less than experience works through the medium of comparisons; but it is too often forgotten that the range of these comparisons is far from being unlimited in space and time, in social life and physical environment. If scientific imagination, such as Professor Tyndall once explained and illustrated, is strictly bound by the laws of hypothesis, the magic of the literary artist which looks so free is as strictly bound within the range of ideas already marked out by the language of his group. Unlike the man of science, the man of literature cannot coin words for a currency of new ideas; for his verse or prose, unlike the

discoveries of the man of science, must reach average, not specialised, intelligence. Words must pass from special into general use before they can be used by him; and, just in proportion as special kinds of knowledge (legal, commercial, mechanical, and the like) are developed, the more striking is the difference between the language of literature and that of science, the language and ideas of the community contrasted with those of its specialised parts. If we trace the rise of any civilised community out of isolated clans or tribes, we may observe a twofold development closely connected with the language and ideas of literature—expansion of the group outwards, a process attended by expansions of thought and sentiment; and specialisation of activities within, a process upon which depends the rise of a leisure-enjoying literary class, priestly or secular. The latter is the process familiar to economists as division of labour, the former that familiar to antiquaries as the fusion of smaller into larger social groups. While the range of comparison widens from clan to national and even world-wide associations and sympathies, the specialising process separates ideas, words, and forms of writing from the proper domain of literature. Thus, in the Homeric age the speech in the Agora has nothing professional or specialised about it, and is a proper subject of poetry; but in the days of professional Athenian oratory the speech is out of keeping with the drama, and smacks too much of the rhêtor's school. Arabic poets of the "Ignorance"[4] sing of their clan life; Spenser glows with warmly national feelings; Goethe and Victor Hugo rise above thoughts of even national destiny. It is due to these two processes of expansion and specialisation that the language and ideas of literature gradually shade off from the special language and special ideas of certain classes in any highly developed community, and literature comes to differ from science not only by its imaginative character, but by the fact that its language and ideas belong to no special class. In fact, whenever literary language and ideas cease to be in a manner common property, literature tends either towards imitation work or to become specialised, to become science in a literary dress,—as not a little of our metaphysical poetry has been of late. Such facts as these bring out prominently the relation of comparative thinking and of the comparative method to literature. Is the circle of common speech and thought, the circle of the group's comparative thinking, as narrow as a tribal league? Or, have many such circles combined into a national group? Are the offices of priest and singer still combined in a kind of magic ritual? Or, have professions and trades been developed, each, so to speak, with its own technical dialect for practical purposes? Then we must remember that these external and internal evolutions of social life, take place often unconsciously, making comparisons and distinctions without

reflecting on their nature or limits; we must remember that it is the business of reflective comparison, of the comparative method, to retrace this development *consciously*, and to seek the causes which have produced it. Let us now look at the literary use of such comparison in a less abstract, a more lifelike form.

When Mr. Matthew Arnold defines the function of criticism as "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world,"[5] he is careful to add that much of this best knowledge and thought is not of English but foreign growth. The English critic in these times of international literature must deal largely with foreign fruit and flower, and thorn-pieces sometimes. He cannot rest content with the products of his own country's culture, though they may vary from the wild fruits of the Saxon wilderness to the rude plenty of the Elizabethan age, from the courtly neatness of Pope to the democratic tastes of to-day. M. Demogeot has lately published an interesting study[6] of the influences exerted by Italy, Spain, England, and Germany on the literature of France; our English critic must do likewise for the literature of his own country. At every stage in the progress of his country's literature he is, in fact, forced to look more or less beyond her sea-washed shores. Does he accompany Chaucer on his pilgrimage and listen to the pilgrims' tales? The scents of the lands of the South fill the atmosphere of the Tabard Inn, and on the road to Canterbury waft him in thought to the Italy of Dante and of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Does he watch the hardy crews of Drake and Frobisher unload in English port the wealth of Spanish prize, and listen to the talk of great sea-captains full of phrases learned from the gallant subjects of Philip II? The Spain of Cervantes and Lope de Vega rises before his eyes, and the new physical and mental wealth of Elizabethan England bears him on the wings of commerce or of fancy to the noisy port of Cadiz and the palaces of Spanish grandees. Through the narrow and dirty streets of Elizabethan London fine gentlemen with Spanish rapiers at their sides and Spanish phrases in their mouths, pass to and fro in the dress admired by Spanish taste. The rude theatres resound with Spanish allusions. And, were it not for the deadly strife of Englishman and Spaniard on the seas, and the English dread of Spain as the champion of Papal interference, England's Helicon[7] might forget the setting sun of the Italian republics to enjoy the full sunshine of Spanish influences. But now our critic stands in the Whitehall of Charles II., or lounges at Will's Coffee-House, or enters the theatres whose recent restoration cuts to the heart his Puritan friends. Everywhere it is the same. Spanish phrases and manners have been forgotten. At the court, Buckingham and the rest perfume their licentious wit with French *bouquet*. At Will's,

Dryden glorifies the rimed tragedies of Racine; and theatres, gaudy with scenic contrivances unknown to Shakespeare, are filled with audiences who in the intervals chatter French criticism, and applaud with equal fervour outrageous indecencies and formal symmetry. Soon the English Boileau will carry the culture of French exotics as far as the English hothouse will allow; soon that scepticism which the refined immorality of the court, the judges, and the Parliament renders fashionable among the few who as yet guide the destinies of the English nation, shall pass from Bolingbroke to Voltaire, and from Voltaire to the Revolutionists. We need not accompany our critic to Weimar, nor seek with him some sources of German influence on England in English antipathies to France and her revolution. He has proved that the history of our country's literature cannot be explained by English causes alone, any more than the origin of the English language or people can be so explained. He has proved that each national literature is a centre towards which not only national but also international forces gravitate. We thank him for this glimpse of a growth so wide, so varying, so full of intricate interaction; it is an aspect of literature studied comparatively, but, in spite of its apparent width, it is only one aspect. National literature has been developed from within as well as influenced from without; and the comparative study of this internal development is of far greater interest than that of the external, because the former is less a matter of imitation and more an evolution directly dependent on social and physical causes.

To the internal sources of national development, social or physical, and the effect of different phases of this development on literature, the student will therefore turn as the true field of scientific study. He will watch the expansion of social life from narrow circles of clans or tribal communities, possessed of such sentiments and thoughts as could live within such narrow spheres, and expressing in their rude poetry their intense feelings of brotherhood, their weak conceptions of personality. He will watch the deepening of personal sentiments in the isolated life of feudalism which ousts the communism of the clan, the reflection of such sentiments in songs of personal heroism, and the new aspects which the life of man, and of nature, and of animals—the horse, the hound, the hawk in feudal poetry, for example—assumes under this change in social organisation. Then he will mark the beginnings of a new kind of corporate life in the cities, in whose streets sentiments of clan exclusiveness are to perish, the prodigious importance of feudal personality is to disappear, new forms of individual and collective character are to make their appearance, and the drama is to take the place of the early communal chant or the song of the chieftain's hall. Next, the scene will change into the courts of monarchy. Here the feelings

of the cities and of the seigneurs are being focussed; here the imitation of classical models supplements the influences of growing national union; here literature, reflecting a more expanded society, a deeper sense of individuality, than it ever did before, produces its masterpieces under the patronage of an Elizabeth or a Louis Quatorze. Nor, in observing such effects of social evolution on literature, will the student by any means confine his view to this or that country. He will find that if England had her clan age, so also had Europe in general; that if France had her feudal poetry, so also had Germany, and Spain, and England; that though the rise of the towns affected literature in diverse ways throughout Europe, yet there are general features common to their influences; and that the same may be said of centralism in our European nations. Trace the influence of the Christian pulpit, or that of judicial institutions, or that of the popular assembly, on the growth of prose in different European countries, and you soon find how similarly internal social evolution has reflected itself in the word and thought of literature; how essential it is that any accurate study of literature should pass from language into the causes which allowed language and thought to reach conditions capable of supporting a literature; and how profoundly this study must be one of comparison and contrast. But we must not underrate our difficulties in tracing the effects of such internal evolution on a people's verse and prose. We must rather admit at the outset that such evolution is liable to be obscured or altogether concealed by the imitation of foreign models. To an example of such imitation we shall now turn.

The cases of Rome and Russia are enough to prove that external influences, carried beyond a certain point, may convert literature from the outgrowth of the group to which it belongs into a mere exotic, deserving of scientific study only as an artificial production indirectly dependent on social life. Let an instrument of speech be formed, a social centre established, an opportunity for the rise of a literary class able to depend upon its handiwork be given, and only a strong current of national ideas, or absolute ignorance of foreign and ancient models, can prevent the production of imitative work whose materials and arrangement, no matter how unlike those characteristic of the group, may be borrowed from climates the most diverse, social conditions the most opposite, and conceptions of personal character belonging to totally different epochs. Especially likely is something of this kind to occur when the cultured few of a people comparatively uncivilised become acquainted with the literary models of men who have already passed through many grades of civilisation, and who can, as it seems, save them the time and trouble of nationally repeating the same laborious ascent. The imitative literature of Rome is a familiar example of

such borrowing; and that of Russia looked for a time as if it were fated to follow French models almost as closely as Rome once followed the Greek. How certain this imitation of French models was to conceal the true national spirit of Russian life, to throw a veil of contemptuous ignorance over her barbarous past, and to displace in her literature the development of the nation by the caprice of a Russo-Gallic clique, none can fail to perceive. In a country whose social life was, and is, so largely based on the communal organisation of the *Mir*, or village community, the strongly-individualised literature of France became such a favourite source of imitation as to throw into the background altogether those folk-songs which the reviving spirit of national literature in Russia, and that of social study in Europe generally, are at length beginning to examine. This Russian imitation of France may be illustrated by the works of Prince Kantemir (1709–43), who has been called "the first writer of Russia," the friend of Montesquieu, and the imitator of Boileau and Horace in his epistles and satires; by those of Lomonossoff (1711–65), "the first classical writer of Russia," the pupil of Wolff, the founder of the University of Moscow, the reformer of the Russian language, who by academical *Panegyrics* on Peter the Great and Elizabeth sought to supply the want of that truly oratorical prose which only free assemblies can foster, attempted an epic *Petreid*, in honour of the great Tsar, and modelled his odes on the French lyric poets and Pindar;[8] or by those of Soumarokoff, who, for the theatre of St. Petersburg established by Elizabeth, adapted or translated Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, much as Plautus and Terence had introduced the Athenian drama at Rome. As in Rome there had set in a conflict between old Roman family sentiments and the individualising spirit of the Greeks, as in Rome nobles of light and leading had been delighted to exchange archaic sentiments of family life and archaic measures like the Saturnian for the cultured thought and harmonious metres of Greece, so in Russia there set in a conflict between French individualism, dear to the court and nobles, and the social feelings of the Russian commune and family. The most ancient monuments of Russian thought—the Chronicle of the monk Nestor (1056–1116) and the *Song of Igor*—were as unlikely to attract the attention of such imitators as the *Builinas* and the folk-songs; and among a people who had never experienced the Western feudalism with its chivalrous poetry, to whom the Renaissance and Reformation had been unknown, came an imitation of Western progress which threatened for a time to prove as fatal to national literature as the imitation of Greek ideas had proved in Rome. In this European China, as Russia, with her family sentiments and filial devotion to the Tsar, has been called, French, and afterwards German and English, influences clearly illustrate the difficulties to which a scientific student of literature is exposed by imitative work out of keeping with social life; but the growing triumph of Russian national life as the true spring of Russian literature marks the want of real vitality in any literature dependent upon such foreign imitation.

These internal and external aspects of literary growth are thus objects of comparative inquiry, because literatures are not Aladdin's palaces raised by unseen hands in the twinkling of an eye, but the substantial results of causes which can be specified and described. The theory that literature is the detached life-work of individuals who are to be worshipped like images fallen down from heaven, not known as workers in the language and ideas of their age and place, and the kindred theory that imagination transcends the associations of space and time, have done much to conceal the relation of science to literature and to injure the works of both. But the "great-man theory" is really suicidal; for, while breaking up history and literature into biographies and thus preventing the recognition of any lines of orderly development, it would logically reduce not only what is known as "exceptional genius," but all men and women, so far as they possess personality at all, to the unknown, the causeless—in fact, would issue in a sheer denial of human knowledge, limited or unlimited. On the other hand, the theory that imagination works out of space and time (Coleridge, for example, telling us that "Shakspere is as much out of time as Spenser out of space") must not be repelled by any equally dogmatic assertion that it is limited by human experience, but is only to be refuted or established by such comparative studies as those on which we are about to enter.

The central point of these studies is the relation of the individual to the group. In the orderly changes through which this relation has passed, as revealed by the comparison of literatures belonging to different social states, we find our main reasons for treating literature as capable of scientific explanation. There are, indeed, other standpoints, profoundly interesting, from which the art and criticism of literature may also be explained—that of physical nature, that of animal life. But from these alone we shall not see far into the secrets of literary workmanship. We therefore adopt, with a modification hereafter to be noticed, the gradual expansion of social life, from clan to city, from city to nation, from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity, as the proper order of our studies in comparative literature.

Notes

1. From Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1886), 73–86.