

Comparative Literature

Congenitally Contrarian

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Congenitally contrarian: neither a medical symptom nor a political affiliation; not even a description of departmental politics, though Haun Saussy has remarked above that "a comparative literature department without confrontations is a collection of inert elements." Although the word *contrarian* has "contrary" built into it, I do not even want to suggest that comparative literature as a discipline should only focus on the contestatory and the oppositional. What I do mean is that I believe comparative literature to be *inherently* contrarian—that is, by its very nature. Saussy deems comparatists fortunate to "inhabit a multipolar profession" in a unipolar, globalized world. But he notes that "the times" make this a "contrarian" model; it is this off-hand remark that I take up here in responding to the ACLA's latest reevaluation of the state of the discipline.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that to be contrarian is to oppose or reject popular opinion, something comparatists have done quite regularly—regarding everything from the singularity of national cultures to the fixity of what constitutes the "literary." The history of this academic discipline in North America offers plentiful evidence of this side of its contrarian nature. Closely related to this fact of identity is another obvious fact: that every decade or so, comparative literature on this continent has reexamined its own working assumptions in the light of changes in both the profession and the world at large in which it professes (e.g., in 1965, 1975, 1993, and again in 2004). I have not noticed that any of the national language and literature disciplines have undergone this kind of regular self-scrutiny, and so few others can lay claim to comparative literature's resulting institutional and intellectual, self-reflexive self-examination. I would argue that this "meta-disciplinarity" is the real reason why what we call "theory" took such firm root in comparative literature departments. It was not simply because they had faculty and students who could speak the languages

needed; it was because the ground was already prepared for what Terry Eagleton calls the "systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions" that constitutes "theory."¹

It is this habit of self-interrogation that makes the discipline perhaps uniquely responsive to change: comparative literature has always been open to rethinking; it is always aware of the state of the intellectual economy, if you will. I deliberately turn to an economic metaphor here because the dictionary definition of a "contrarian" is one who resists popular opinion, but does so specifically *in stock exchange dealing*. I am well aware that there are very different opinions of this discipline's success in the "marketplace of ideas," so to speak. Saussy's evaluation asserts that, despite comparative literature's *institutional* "wraithlikeness," comparatist *ideas* and *practices* are omnipresent now: "Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions," he claims. And he may be right, given the number of sessions, for example, at the 2004 convention of the Modern Language Association that dealt with globalization and comparativity (of everything from Queer to Early American literature). But this very same focus of scholarly attention can also be found in conferences of many different stripes around the world today. At the other extreme, however, is Gayatri Spivak's lament for the end of comparative literature, for the "death of a discipline."² If she is right, then I cannot be alone in noting the obvious irony of its demise at the very moment in history when its disciplinary focus on those mobile networks of ideas, connecting and circulating around the globe, can be most useful.

As George Steiner and others have explored, comparative literature's expansion in North America after World War II was the direct result of "marginalization, . . . [of] partial social and ethnic exclusion."³ What he meant, of course, is that this became the discipline of the (largely Eastern and Central) European polyglot exile. Therein lay its strength—and increasingly its limitation, in geographic and cultural terms. If, to use Steiner's image, comparatists are forever "jubilant at the intractable diversity of Babel,"⁴ that diversity has been a decidedly limited one. As Franco Moretti has reminded us, the discipline's rhetorical reach has decidedly exceeded its geographical grasp.⁵ I shall not rehearse here the many arguments, historical and other, mounted against the resolutely European focus of earlier comparative studies. For over a decade now, the discipline has been facing head-on the need to go beyond its roots and to broaden the linguistic and cultural scope of its work to include the rest of the world: the East as well as the West, the South as well as the North.

Yet, if comparative literature really is as "congenitally contrarian" as I hope it is, on the intellectual stock market, it will not abandon Europe completely, despite its current lack of fashionable appeal (and almost political correctness), especially among its younger scholars in North America. In an academic and intellectual environment like the current one, in which we are all grappling with the complex issues surround-

ing globalization, for many not only has the question of Europe not been answered, but Europe is now out of the question (as well as out of fashion). Yet the revival of ethnic and religious nationalisms after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia marked a major geopolitical realignment, and with that came great pain along with some gain. Our current preoccupation with Iraq, in other words, should not make us forget Kosovo. Comparatists have always attended to history and memory.

Why should we not forget Europe? In the ever-expanding economic grouping that is the European Union, there is more than ever a need to find cultural as well as economic commonalities amid manifest national and historical differences between East and West, North and South. To precisely this end, in 1986 the EU adopted an anthem: "Ode to Joy," the finale of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (in D minor, Op. 125),⁶ but *without* the famous choral text, the composer's shortened adaptation of "An die Freude," a 1785 ode by Friedrich Schiller. The official EU orchestral version was arranged and shortened to two minutes by the conductor Herbert von Karajan.⁷ When you think about it, this choice of anthem was intensely German in its music (and its silenced text). The music alone was deemed share-able, supranational, "representative of European genius and therefore capable of uniting the hearts and minds of all Europeans."⁸ It is hard not to make a connection here with the parallel aspirations of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, with its interweaving of literary traditions to combat isolationism and nationalist arrogance. But Steiner's evaluation of the *actual* situation of the union of the historically warring countries of Europe, though written now a decade ago, is still relevant: "The notion of a European concord, except on a commercial, fiscal, or mercantile basis . . . seems to recede from realistic expectations."⁹

Does this choice of a European anthem help the cause of a greater (ideological and cultural) unity in any real or, for that matter, any symbolic way? And is there a lesson to be learned from this choice? Schiller's original long ode had offered a message of utopian unity, through magic ("Zauber"), of what custom had once strongly divided ("Was die Mode streng geteilt"). One might be forgiven for thinking that, despite the obviously limiting feature of the words being in only one of the European languages, this would seem a good start for an anthem meant to provoke as well as symbolize pan-European unity. Beethoven, in his shortened version, had kept this message and its rousing conclusion that all men shall become brothers ("Alle Menschen werden Brüder"). Both versions celebrate friendship, marital love, and, more interestingly, the salvation of the good and the evil together ("Alle Guten, alle Bösen"). On both poem and lyrics, all the world's "brothers" are exhorted to run their race joyfully, just as a hero goes to victory ("Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn, / Freudig, wie ein Held zum

Siegen"). Presumably then, including the nonracing women, the world's millions are to be embraced ("Seid umschlungen, Millionen"); they are also to bow down ("ihr stürzt nieder") to the Creator ("den Schöpfer").

In shortening the long ode, Beethoven had deleted such things as Schiller's message of courageous endurance for a better world ("Duldet mutig, Millionen! / Duldet für die bess're Welt"), along with the poet's urging that anger and revenge be forgotten and enemies forgiven ("Groll und Rache sei vergessen, / Unserm Todfeind sei verziehn"). In the original version, the entire world would be reconciled ("Ausgesöhnt die ganze Welt") in the joy of divine forgiveness. But if the composer cut some of the stanzas of the ode, he arguably retained their general ideology, not to say, their sentiment. Even though he lived in a less politically correct age than our own, Beethoven was perhaps wise to cut the poem's line about cannibals drinking gentleness ("Trinken Sanftmut Kannibalen"), as all the reunited others imbibe the golden wine of joy. But he kept the general message of brotherhood and divinely assisted human unity.

The European Union's decision to use only the music of the "Ode to Joy" without any of the actual words of Schiller's utopian message of brotherhood has a number of interesting consequences. Yes, there are obviously other languages than German spoken in the Union, but it is also likely true that many people hearing the music will recall the sense, even if not the precise words, of the lyrics. More importantly, however, as the musicologist Caryl Clark has argued, the decision to omit the words ignores the complicating musicological fact that the instrumental music alone, with its "inner conflicts and irregularities" semiotically signals "disorder not harmony, deviance not complacency, difference not collectivity."¹⁰

Given this discrepancy, I would like to suggest that the European Union's symbolic, if ironic (and I suspect totally unintended), acceptance of discordant musical multiplicity instead of an articulated message of unity may suggest a model for comparatists to intervene in European (and even global) debates. The reason for my excursion into the ironies of European musical politics is that I believe these very ironies teach us, by analogy, that one kind of unity need not suppress or deny diversity and difference, or even discord. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has argued, in a postmodern world in which individual as well as national identity is "multi-laminated" and complex, difference is both constitutive of identity and something to be constantly negotiated. Difference cannot be denied or reduced to common denominators: that way—the way of modernity, she argues—lies the conflicts over Truth that have brought our world totalitarianism and genocide.¹¹

In the considerably less contentious field of comparative literature, certain ambitious embracings of unity-respectful-of-multiplicity-and-difference stand as exem-

plars, as both solo and collective models for the discipline as a whole. I am thinking of works like Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* or John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope's multiply authored collaborative mega-project, the multi-volume comparative *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctions and Disjunctions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.¹²

If comparative literature really is (and I believe it is) a discipline that "teaches us to adjust to multiple frames of reference and attend to relations rather than givens," as Saussy claims, then it is incumbent upon it to bring its insights and skills to the cultural redefining of Europe. That this should not be its only mission should by now go without saying. The literary, cultural, and historical relations among northern and southern, among eastern and western parts of the globe are crucial to its new identity in the twenty-first century. But I would like to think that this discipline's contrarian temperament means that it won't forget its roots, that it won't forget Europe. Congenitally contrarian, it should always be willing to "move the other way"—as in "contrary motion" in music.

I live in a country that shares a contrarian identity with the discipline I study. Like comparative literature, Canada is intensely self-reflective—another way of saying that it has a persistent identity crisis, or at least persistent doubts about how to talk about itself. It too is founded historically upon exile, immigration, and displacement. It too has worries about separation, that is, about its "intactness": Quebec, with its recurrent sovereignty-or-separation aspirations, may be to Canada what cultural studies (or area studies, or ethnic and postcolonial studies) are to comparative literature. Both my country and my discipline are deeply concerned about things they feel are central to their identity that are threatened today: health care policy, on the one hand, linguistic polyglottism, on the other. Both fear engulfment by economically and politically more powerful entities: for Canada, it is the United States; for comparative literature, it is the national literature departments. Each has experienced what Saussy calls "a discontinuous history in which it is not always the protagonist." Like Canadians, comparatists often have difficulty explaining themselves in other than negative terms—as what we are not.

This is not the place to attempt to solve problems of my *national* identity, but perhaps the moment is ripe for looking for more positive terms of self-definition for our discipline, paradoxically flourishing yet feeling beleaguered. Saussy uses the image of comparative literature as a "test bed for reconceiving the ordering of knowledge, inside and outside the humanities"—a strong and attractive image. I would like to suggest another image, more modest but, I think, apt: the humble but infinitely useful device without which few of us would travel these days to any other continent: the electrical converter. Like this compact, enabling device, comparative literature makes

energy (in its case, intellectual energy) *usable* in different places and in different contexts. This intellectual energy is contrarian, even counter-disciplinary as well as meta-disciplinary, as Saussy argues. And, if I may continue the electrical metaphor, another way to think about comparative literature's usable but not totally consumable energy—whether alternating or direct—is as *power*.

NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 2.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
3. George Steiner, "What Is Comparative Literature?" *An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54.
6. Premiered on May 7, 1824, in Vienna.
7. On January 19, 1972, the Council of Europe had earlier adopted it as its anthem at Strasbourg.
8. Caryl Clark, "Forging Identity: Beethoven's 'Ode' as European Anthem," *Critical Inquiry* 23(4) (1997): 789.
9. Steiner, "What Is Comparative Literature?" 18.
10. Clark, "Forging Identity," 806.
11. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Agency in the Discursive Condition," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 40 (December 2001): 52–54.
12. Respectively, London: Verso, 1998, and Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004, with more volumes forthcoming.