

Institutionalizing Comparative Literature

By Robert F. Barsky

This special issue of *AmeriQuests* offers a home for comparative literary analysis; indeed the journal itself, with its efforts to understand phenomena that somehow links different regions of the Americas together, is consistent with, and indeed inspired, by the Comparative Literature approach. This begs the question; what role does comparative literature play in today's academic setting, and does it need to have an institutionalized setting from which to do its work? Or has Comparative Literature won the day by demonstrating the inherent limitations and dangers of considering national literatures per se, but in so doing lost its *raison d'être* as a separate academic entity?

I was trained in comparative literature from teachers and mentors, -- not all from the domain but nevertheless each in his or her own way comparatists, -- such as Marc Angenot, Marike Finlay, Wlad Godzich, Michael Holquist, Wladimir Krysinski, Brian Massumi, Walter Moser, Michel Pierssens and George Szanto. What ties their work together, at least as I've experienced it along the way, is their open-ended and multi-faceted questioning, rather than any kind of (arbitrary) emphasis upon boundaries, national or otherwise. In looking at this pantheon, however, the institutional issues comes to the fore, if only because Angenot and Pierssens are in departments of French, George Szanto (now emeritus) was in Communications and English, Marike Finlay and Darko Suvin were both in English, Michael Holquist was also in Slavic Studies, Michel Meyer is in Philosophy, and Marike Finlay left the academy to pursue psychoanalysis. The department from which I took my degree at McGill is now closed, there never was a comparative literature degree at Université libre de Bruxelles, where I did my postdoc, and Vanderbilt has recently closed its program and dispersed its faculty (back) to a range of domains from which they were originally drawn. So again, has Comparative Literature outlived its always marginal purpose by infusing comparative, interdisciplinary, theoretical, self-reflexive and (often) literary approaches into the whole array of departments from which comparatists originally came?

It suffices to consider that comparative literature is described by foundational statements from the International Comparative Literature Association as being involved in the promotion of the study of intercultural relations that cross national boundaries, multicultural relations within a particular society, and the interactions between literature and other forms of human activity, including the arts, the sciences, philosophy, and cultural artifacts of all kinds. It also thrives in times of crisis, when disciplines turn self-reflexive, and it provokes crises, by bringing a humanistic approach to the "social sciences", a ludic literary gaze to undue seriousness, a "deep time" memory to research projects of all kinds, and a sometimes drunken gaze that challenges from the most profound roots of questioning our ability, in any domain, to answer the deepest and darkest questions about human existence. Comparative Literature has acted the fool, therefore, who defends the human scale by dragging us down to where we really are upon this earth, laughing at moralistic grandstanding and disproportionate claims that can lead to the imposition of ideologies under a guise of solutions to social ills.

Rejecting arbitrary or power-oriented limitations to literary or language research based upon (say) the production of work by a single nation or power necessarily entails work within several languages, traditionally centered (but by no means limited to) English, German, Romance languages and Slavic languages. Most work also emerges from thematic groupings, such as work on "the novel" as opposed to the English novel, or even "social discourse" as opposed to "literary language", which has necessarily led comparatists to work

in historical, hermeneutic, sometimes philosophical but certainly theory-inspired ways, which, when coupled with the anti-nationalist stance, has contributed at times to friction with colleagues in single language literature departments, while alienating or intimidating students who might feel inadequately prepared for the perceived esotericism of literary theory and the incredible challenge of speaking a half-dozen languages.

The newfound privileging of interdisciplinarity on university campuses, which was an unstated point of departure 50 years ago for the likes of Franz Boas, Zellig Harris, Irving Howe, Raymond Jakobson, or Edward Sapir, has been good to comparative literature, since it has empowered and revitalized their approaches while expanding the purview of the field to include sexy “new” fields like narrative medicine, literature and law, discourse analysis, or social discourse theory; comparatists now discuss the value of “reaching out” to cultural studies, critical theory, and cross-disciplinary approaches, even for the investigation of a single literature and culture. They also promote transdisciplinarity, across departments and also schools, integrating work and examples from religion, law, medicine, science and technology, or promoting new Center-oriented work on urban settings, the pan-Pacific rim, the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, privileged discourses in the “transnational” world of conquest, free trade, travel, globalization and widespread social ills not confined by national borders.

From one perspective, Comparative Literature comes to be cited by university officials as they look beyond the ghettoization of departments and even schools, providing their (often wildly productive) little groups of comparatists with an institutional boost. Or the contrary. As anthropologists promote linguistic work, medical faculties speak of narrative representation of disease, law faculties invoke literary themes, and Jewish Studies programs hire specialists in Yiddish and Hebrew poetry, the endless links to the marginal “program” of comparative literature, the little grouping that ties diverse scholars together, seems also an unnecessary appendage, another competitor for scarce college funds which apparently exists only to do what is already being done elsewhere, whether or not its members are the vanguard for such work. Comparative Literature is from this standpoint another little program, like cultural studies, area studies, or even women’s studies, whose guidance seems increasingly superfluous in an era when every department recognizes the importance of considering culture, regional and gender issues in their work.

And yet, maybe not. Comparative literature offers the power of literature to all domains which have forever been tempted to exceed the boundaries of their own abilities by proposing frameworks and approaches that are wildly ambitious in their claims and objectives. Philosophy has been tempted to offer answers in the place of questions, sociology to propose models for human behavior, actual or desirable, political science to imagine itself just that, a science. Literature doesn’t do anything in particular, but it keeps academics in line, by standing, as it were, askance, or, more likely, by wavering and occasionally plunging into its own body to discover its own mortality and beloved weakness. But contemporary comparative work needs to avoid the nostalgia for worlds in which its place was clearly-defined, such as the Cold War context, where it found its cross-wall abilities, and it might also benefit from expanding its own sense of corporeal self beyond, say, Auerbach – without, however, losing the power of his arguments, so nicely described by Laurence De Looze in his contribution to this collection.

There may as well be a purpose for some kind of Comparative Literary Studies apparatus that exceeds literature by proposing bridges, through language or narrative practices or particular literary tropes, between realms that might otherwise feel disconnected, such as literature and medicine, or literature and computer sciences, work for which it is well

equipped because it takes as its starting point a comparative perspective, a set of strong heuristic and methodological tools, but also a history of linking together disciplines and departments and encouraging movement across appropriate boundaries in the quest of useful knowledge, examples or tools. If it were to assume this role institutionally, comparative literary studies would likely be more of an ad hoc committee, employing a director, a group of advisors and consultants, and some auxiliary staff to discuss, promote and coordinate comparative work throughout the university.

In that form, comparative literary studies (CLS) could become a champion for newfound questioning beyond traditional boundaries, and as an official body to breach department and program barriers. There's ample intellectual work from which to draw for such discussions and activities, which could be the subject of an annual introductory seminar on critical approaches to comparative literary studies, staffed by different members of the CLS, and supported through speakers forums, social events, and ties to the American and International Comparative Literary Associations, and of course the MLA. Students in the program could be called upon to teach those wide-ranging courses, such as humanities, civilization, American studies, or others that fit the specific profile of the university program, and the individual course. In other words, CLS could equivalent and legitimate its own historical role as a facilitator of comparative work, while helping students complete work appropriate to this era in which hirees may be called upon to teach in several departments and units, perhaps even in different languages, to address those tricky questions of human existence, without the false pretensions of much of what is called "social science." Whether or not such a program can fulfill these objectives depends upon the setting within which it's situated or the institution within which it comes to be housed.

So perhaps the answer depends upon the setting, rather than the specific content of comparative literary studies; few people doubt the value of what comparative literary work has done, and the multidisciplinary approach it has taken is now, if nothing more, at least the theoretical *modus operandi* of most intellectual work. But for those institutions that have already surpassed these objectives, in ways similar to the sense in Canada that the society has outgrown its formal "multicultural" legislation, then we might at least keep it on standby for when units, fearful of extinction, move towards closing themselves down to outside worlds from which they so clearly could benefit.