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Quid CompLit?

In 2003 Gayatri Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* announced the demise of Comparative Literature. More correctly, she expressed her fears that the discipline as she had known it throughout her career was in danger of being extinguished by a host of new developments. First and foremost was the emergence of world literature. Or again more correct: the re-emergence of world literature. But that was not her only worry.

In the nineteenth century comparative and world literature had arisen as virtual twins. The Napoleonic era spreading the ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, combined with Herder's identifying literature in the vernacular as the expression of a people's soul – these days we would probably rather use the term "identity" – and as crystalized in Romanticism, gave a strong impetus to the rise of national literatures around Europe. To discuss these national literatures, the comparative method that around the turn of the nineteenth century had steadily gained ground in the natural sciences was introduced also in the field of literary studies. Concurrently, the term *Weltliteratur* was given currency by Goethe's use of it in a number of speeches and articles from the last years of his life, from 1827 to 1832, and in his conversations with his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann as published in the latter's *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (1836, Conversations with Goethe). Though Goethe is often credited with having coined the term, that honour should go to the Göttingen historian August Ludwig von Schlözer who already used it in his *1773 Isländische Literatur und Geschichte* (Icelandic Literature and History) (Schamoni 2008, Gossens 2010, Gossens 2011). Goethe's ideas on world literature – which he most probably saw as simply the increased circulation of works of literature among the literati of Europe (Strich 1957 [1946] and 1949, Schrimpf 1968, Lamping 2010) – were initially welcomed around Europe. In the German-language area, which at the time was divided into numerous small and some larger political units, his claim that German literature was to play a leading role in the coming into being of world literature because of what he deemed the German language's superior qualities for translation and hence for mediation of the world's literatures, was seen as a unifying factor in the creation of a *Kulturnation*, in anticipation of a political union then still seen as utopian. Soon, however, Goethe's cosmopolitan attitude came to be considered an impediment to cultural and political unification, and the very idea of world literature for the next one hundred years simmered almost unnoticed on the backburner of literary studies. Instead, the study of national literatures became the norm, and with them, comparative literature, although the

latter always remained the playground of a small and select group of scholars. In fact, although some of these explicitly advertised themselves as comparatists, such as the French Ferdinand Brunetière, Fernand Baldensperger, and Paul Hazard, other, slightly later scholars whom we now tend to think of as comparatists, such as the Germans Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, or Erich Auerbach, for most of their career saw themselves primarily as Romance philologists (see Gumbrecht 2002). Spitzer and Auerbach only came to be regarded as comparatists upon their move to the United States – after a stint in Istanbul, brief for Spitzer, longer for Auerbach – as Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

Spitzer and Auerbach had been preceded by other European scholars taking up positions in Comparative Literature in the United States. In fact, Baldensperger for the final years of his career (1935-1945) taught at Harvard and at UCLA, and Paul Hazard held a visiting professorship at Columbia University from 1932 to 1940. Another Frenchman, Albert Guérard, taught at Stanford during the middle years of the twentieth century, while the Swiss Werner Friederich and François Jost, and the Germans H.H. Remak and Ulrich Weisstein, all taught at prestigious universities, as did the Czech René Wellek. Common to the way these scholars conceived Comparative Literature was that it involved the study of several literatures in the original. Until the 1980s the literatures concerned were exclusively European, with a heavy emphasis on English, French, and German, next to Latin and Ancient Greek, if possible Spanish and Italian, less commonly Russian, and complemented by whatever smaller native literature the ambitious student not originating from a major language area happened to possess. Things changed with the advent of multiculturalism and postcolonialism as of the 1980s, fuelled by shifts in US demography and geopolitical changes bringing increased numbers of especially Latin American and Asian immigrants, among them numerous scholars, to the US. Even then the earliest of these scholars, such as Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* gave birth to postcolonialism, Homi K. Bhabha, and Spivak, still stuck to the same European languages that had for the longest time formed the main fare for Comparative Literature students. Only Spivak occasionally drew upon her native Bengali for comparative purposes. In many respects, though, the emerging overlap between Postcolonialism and Comparative Literature led to the minorization of the CompLit input with the Postcolonial component focusing exclusively on English-language literature.

In the meantime, in Europe Comparative Literature lingered in the shadow of the departments of Romance, Germanic, and Slavic Philology that traditionally dominated language and literature studies. In many ways these departments already functioned as equivalents, albeit within specific language families, of what in the US were Comparative Literature departments. In fact, in Europe only scholars that wanted to study literatures from more than one of these language families sought a home in – usually very small - Comparative Literature departments. Often, such study took a theoretical turn, with many such departments styling themselves departments of General and Comparative Literature. This trend manifested itself especially strongly as of the 1960s with the influence of French Structuralism and more German-inspired Text Grammar, Reception Studies, and Empirical Studies. All these also made

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it to the US, where they took on a life of their own, with, for instance, Structuralism shading into Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. Or, to stick to someone already mentioned, with Said drawing on Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan for the ideas underlying *Orientalism*, although Said, at difference with many of his contemporaries and followers, did so rather unobtrusively. The change in character of these theories, and the methods they gave rise to, largely happened under the influence of what until the 1960s and '70s had been the critical approach most "native" to the US: New Criticism with its emphasis on close reading grounded in didactic concerns to make literary texts accessible to students with little general knowledge of literary or any other history. Deconstruction, for instance, can be seen as reversing New Criticism's exclusive focus on the text and nothing but the text: instead of reading for what is there it reads for what is *not* there to uncover the text's submerged pointers to abusive structures or conditions, also historical, thus enabling shading into budding forms of multiculturalism and postcolonialism. In retrospect, the period from – roughly – the 1960s to the 1980s has come to be called the "Age of Theory" because theory dominated literary studies, sometimes to the detriment of the study of actual texts. It did so most conspicuously in the US, where it was all-pervasive not only in departments of Comparative Literature but also in departments of English. In fact, in the US, where Theory happened exclusively in English, it quickly assumed a general character, abstracted from the specific European contexts in which it had been conceived, such as the French 1960s. However, "Theory" also loomed large in European departments of Comparative Literature. By the 1980s, moreover, much of literary studies in Europe had started following the lead of what was happening in the US, sometimes to the point of using English translations of French, German, and other European theoretical works instead of the originals. When Multiculturalism and Postcolonialism took over from Theory, Europe followed suit.

In the years immediately preceding the publication of Spivak's 2003 *Death of a Discipline* volume, interest in world literature had resurfaced. The relationship between Comparative Literature and World Literature had always been a rather fraught one. During the nineteenth century there appeared, especially in Germany, several histories of world literature that in practice limited themselves to European literature with minor excursions into some ancient non-European literatures. These German histories served as examples for similar enterprises in other European languages – not seldom the latter were in fact translations of German originals modified according to national interests. If any thought went into where World Literature belonged in the academic pecking order, it was customarily assigned the role of a sub-branch of Comparative Literature. The earliest book on world literature in English was published in 1911 by Richard Moulton (1921 [1911]), an Englishman teaching at the University of Chicago (Lawall 1996 and 2012). However, it was only after 1918 that world literature gradually became a staple subject in American university education. The US had gone through a half-century of massive immigration, mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe, unlike what had been the case before the American Civil War, when immigrants came predominantly from the British Isles and North-Western Europe. Their descendants now started entering university.

They were joined by large numbers of soldiers returning from WW I - in fact, the two categories to a certain extent overlapped. As most of these students came from social and demographic backgrounds different from what before the war had been the case, it was thought that they needed some basic grounding in what the dominant US intellectual elite saw as the backbone of American civilization, that is to say European culture as mediated through European literature labelled "world literature." As foreign language teaching in the US was usually weak, most of these new students had only English, sometimes next to a different home language in the case of recent immigrants. Consequently, all so-called world literature was taught in English translation, mostly as a basic undergraduate course, often in the so-called freshman or first bachelor year. Indeed, most often courses in world literature were taught by junior staff in the English department. After WW II, when the G.I. Bill guaranteed returning soldiers a state-supported university education, the swelling numbers of students created a market for large-scale anthologies of world literature. Thus, the Norton Anthology saw the light in 1955. It continues to be the most widely used anthology of world literature. Originally the Norton featured only so-called world masterpieces, which were almost exclusively European or at least Western, and male. It has changed names various times though, and under the pressure of feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism it gradually incorporated more diversified materials. The major change occurred in the 1990s when Sarah Lawall took over the general editorship of the Norton. Lawall throughout her career as a Comparative Literature scholar had shown a keen interest in world literature. In the mid-1980s she organized a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar that marked the return of a more general interest in the subject and that resulted in a 1994 edited volume (Lawall 1994). In the same decade, David Damrosch, then teaching at Columbia, also developed an interest in world literature. This culminated in his *What is World Literature?* Published in 2003 this volume gave an enormous impetus to the consecration of World Literature as a new paradigm for Comparative Literature. Damrosch in many ways was taking up not only earlier theoreticians on world literature. He was also adapting the New Critical close reading approach to the study of literary works from around the globe and throughout history, from the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the testimonial works of the contemporary Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú. And he was also surfing on the stir created by the then recent publication of the more controversial, but highly influential and more theoretically and systemic-oriented works of Pascale Casanova (1999 in French, translated into English 2004) and Franco Moretti (2000). Damrosch's preponderance in the field was sealed by his 2004 general editorship of a major anthology rivalling the Norton and offering comprehensive coverage of the world's (major) literatures. The Norton quickly followed suit and under the general editorship of Martin Puchner, as of 2012, recovered its pre-eminent position in the US undergraduate market.

Summarizing things, what irked Spivak in her 2003 volume was what Jonathan Arac in 2022 had called "Anglo-Globalism." For Spivak the Anglo-monolingualism of Theory, postcolonialism, and world literature in translation, resulted in a blinkered vision of the world when compared to the more nuanced view characteristic of Comparative Literature's

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grounding in several languages and their literatures. Instead, she called for a New Comparative Literature grafted onto an equally new form of Area Studies. Area Studies originated after WW II when policy makers in the US, with the leadership of the so-called Free World thrust upon them, felt the need for greater knowledge of regions that until then they had largely left to the concern of European colonial powers. The result was the rise in the post-WW II period of political science in its modern guise focusing almost exclusively on contemporary political, economic, and military developments in areas deemed of importance to US diplomacy, while ignoring or downplaying the importance of historical and cultural factors, including of literature. Because of its servitude to policy makers and its by-passing of cultural givens, Area Studies had customarily been looked down upon by literary scholars. Now, Spivak envisaged the re-integration of history and culture, among which the study of languages and literatures, in Area Studies. Emily Apter (2006) picked up on Spivak's call for a New Comparative Literature, advocating upgrading the language skills of US students in order to better understand, or make understandable in translation, the world outside the US to American citizens and policy makers, in order to avoid in the future assaults such as those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 which she cited as the immediate cause for her concern.

In the meantime, World Literature gained increasing momentum, fuelled by numerous publications by Damrosch, Moretti, and soon many others. Soon too, however, those that feared that their own approaches were in danger of being displaced by what more and more seemed to shape up as the new dominant paradigm voiced sharp criticism. Postcolonial scholars denounced World Literature for its lack of emancipatory commitment (Young 2012, Boehmer 2014 and 2018). Orthodox Comparative Literature scholars followed Spivak's critique of World Literature's monolingualism. Standard bearer for the latter became Apter (2008 and 2013) who started arguing the importance of "untranslatables" and hence the need for dealing with literature in the original rather than in translation. Damrosch continued, and continues, a firm defender of translation as an indispensable tool for world literature, preceded in this by Guérard (1940) and Claudio Guillén (1993 [1985]). However, others also came to the defence, such as Zhang Longxi (2024), a Chinese scholar schooled in the US who for thirty years has been working on East-West comparisons, with continuing attention to issues of translation (Zhang 1992, 1999, 2005, 2015, 2021). In fact, the entry of Chinese scholars in the fields of Comparative and World Literature is one of the more notable developments of the last few decades. Of course, many of these scholars had already been, and continue to be, active in Chinese, but since the turn of the twenty-first century they have also started publishing in ever greater numbers in English, and some of them in German. Exemplary for the former development, next to Zhang, is Wang Ning, with numerous English-language publications since the mid-1990s (see D'haen 2022a). Fang Weigui publishes, next to in English, also in German (Fang 1991, 1992, 2006, 2013). Moreover, increasingly these scholars, who most often started out applying Western theories, have started reclaiming Chinese predecessors for their comparative approach – Zhang recalls the example of Qian Zhongshu, who in the mid-twentieth century compared Chinese and Western literatures. Wang Ning invokes the

fifth-century Chinese literary-theoretical classic 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) by Liu Hsieh. Conversely, Western comparative literature scholars, especially US-based ones, now regularly turn to East Asia. Notable examples are Karen Thornber (2009, 2012, 2014), Haun Saussy (2022), and Eric Hayot (2004). Saussy's training in both Chinese and Ancient Greek allows him to fruitfully compare two civilizations and their literatures usually thought of as incompatible, but he is not the only one, as proven by Alexander Beecroft (2010 and 2015) and Wiebe Denecke (2014). Of course, one of the pioneers of such East-West comparison was Earl Miner (1990). These interventions constitute a timely and welcome correction to the traditional Euro- or Western-centric orientation of the discipline (see also D'haen 2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

Given present-day geopolitical developments it is to be expected that East-West literary relations, but also those between other parts of the world, will receive increasing attention from future Comparative Literature scholars. This may take the form of South-South relations in the context of the so-called Global South. As examples we can point to Stefan Helgesson (2022) and Waïl Hassan (2019). But we can equally cite examples of comparisons between European literatures and non-Western literatures, such as May Hawas (2019). Such comparisons fall under what the German scholar Ottmar Ette in a series of publications (2005, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017, 2021, 2023) over the last two decades has labelled TransArea Studies. Like Spivak, these scholars insist upon studying literary works in the original, but they do not limit themselves to one specific geographical or linguistic area – instead, they look for what Ette (2023) calls the "relationality" between these areas. These relations may obtain between metropolitan and outlying areas, recalling Wallerstein's (1974-2011) world systems approach, or the approaches of Casanova (1999 and 2004) and Moretti (2000). They may also concern more directly relations between former colonial powers and their former colonies. Here we move close to postcolonialism. Interestingly, over the last decade or so the postcolonial tables have been turned in the sense that instead of studying colonial or postcolonial works as descriptive of past or present relations between (former) colonizers and (former) colonized, someone like Pheng Cheah (2014 and 2016) adopts what he himself calls a "normative" approach prescriptive of what a fairer world projected by postcolonial literature should be. Decoloniality as propagated by Walter Mignolo (2021) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011) allows for investigating literary conditions pertaining between colonial and postcolonial as well as neo-colonial realities. Perhaps the widest possible "transarea" reach is realized in studies that take into consideration the entire globe, or to use a term that in various meanings has been used by both René Étiemble (1988) and Spivak (2003), that embody a "planetary" vision. Such vision may be applied to literary matters, as in Susan Stanford Friedman (2015). However, it most particularly applies to approaches driven by wider migration, ecological, or global health concerns. Examples in question are Friedman (2018), Thornber (2012 and 2020), and Puchner (2022). A different form of planetarism or globalism is addressed in comparative studies grounded in economic and political theory such as the work of WReC or the Warwick Research Collective (2015). Finally, most recently some younger scholars such as Núria Codina

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Solà and Jesse van Amelsvoort (forthcoming), and Matylda Figlerowicz (forthcoming), have started arguing for a Comparative and World Literature approach that treats the literatures of the world not as inherently comparable in translation, but that focuses on the differences that inevitably remain and which they see as manifesting most clearly in multilingual works of literature. Adhira Mangalagiri (2023 and forthcoming) even explicitly calls for a "disconnect" movement in Comparative Literature focusing on texts that foreground incompatibilities between cultures as expressed in literary works.

Finally, a word on translation. Translation is a bone of contention between Damrosch, Spivak, and Apter, but it is also an important issue for Zhang, Saussy, and Hayot, as for Codina Solà and Van Amelsvoort, Figlerowicz, and Mangalagiri. Translation has more generally emerged as one of the more important foci of attention and reflection within Comparative Literature. Until the 1970s translation was primarily thought of in terms of equivalence, or in other words of how faithful a translation is to the original. Things changed with a 1972 article by James Holmes (2000) [1972]) that signalled the beginnings of DTS or Descriptive Translation Studies. Instead of looking for equivalence between source and target text, DTS looks for the differences between the two and tries to provide an explanation for them. Perhaps the most famous early example of DTS is a 1982 article by André Lefevere (2000 [1982]). Such was the success of DTS that Susan Bassnett, along with André Lefevere and Theo Hermans (1985) one of the pioneers in the field (Bassnett 1980), in 1993 confidently declared that now Translation Studies was no longer a branch of Comparative Literature but rather the other way around. Though in retrospective this was too bold a claim, Translation Studies has certainly established itself over the last four decades as one of the more productive branches of Comparative Literature with the work of, amongst many others, and next to Bassnett (Bassnett and Lefevere 1992, Bassnett 2006), Antoine Berman (1984) and Lawrence Venuti (1995, 2000, 2008, 2022).

As to the immediate future of Comparative Literature, it seems safe to bet on, next to the carrying-on of the traditional variant of the discipline, a continuation of interest in World Literature, Translation Studies, and Trans/Area Studies as the "hottest" sub-branches of the discipline. Next to this, Postcolonialism, Decoloniality, Migration Studies, Ecological Criticism, and Health Studies (from Disability to Epi/Pandemics) increasingly lend themselves to a comparative approach, even to the point of meshing. Of late, geopolitical concerns, whether seen from a more traditional historical and political science perspective (D'haen 2021a) or a more neo-Marxist angle (WRec 2015), have also entered into the equation. An issue of personal concern to me is the role Comparative Literature may play in a fast-changing world where Europe is losing geopolitical weight. This loss is reflected in a shrinking interest in the study of European languages and literatures as separate entities, in the US, but also in Europe itself, and beyond. As I have argued elsewhere (D'haen 2021b), at least some form of remedy might lie in the comparative study of European literature not as an amalgam of national literatures but as a cultural "area" united by a common literary culture, at whichever level of aggregation (perhaps along the interliterary communities approach developed by Dionýsz Ďurišin – see Ďurišin

and Gnisci 2000), and which could then become the subject of an Ettean TransArea Studies approach in conjunction with other world areas sharing similar interliterary commonalities. By fostering in Europe's future citizens the kind of shared civic attitude Martha Nussbaum (1997) sees as eminently enabled by literature and its study, such an approach would begin to provide an answer to the often-touted deficit of public interest in things European while at the same time revitalizing literary studies.

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