

Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century

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I have been struggling with Comparative Literature all my academic life. I use the word 'struggle' advisedly; engaging with the idea of comparative literature has not been easy nor, as we move forward in this new century, is it at all clear where the discipline will move to next. True, on the one hand there is a flourishing international comparative literature association, with daughter branches in dozens of different countries, there are journals and conferences and graduate programmes and all the panoply of academic organisations that testify to the existence of a solid field of study. But on the other hand, the concerns that were expressed in the latter decades of the twentieth century remain unresolved. Recently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has published a collection of essays entitled *Death of a Discipline*, in which she argues that the way forward for a discipline that she perceives to be in decline is to move beyond its eurocentric origins, and 'to acknowledge a definitive future anteriority, a 'to-comeness', a 'will have happened' quality'.¹

A new comparative literature will need to 'undermine and undo' the tendency of dominant cultures to appropriate emergent ones (Spivak, *Death*, p. 100), in other words it will need to move beyond the parameters of Western literatures and societies and reposition itself within a planetary context. The original enterprise of comparative literature, which sought to read literature trans-nationally in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, *zeitgeist*, history of ideas is out-dated and needs to be rethought in the light of writing being produced in emergent cultures. There is therefore a politicised dimension to comparative literature; Spivak proposes the idea of planetarity in opposition to globalisation, which she argues involves the imposition of the same values and system of exchange everywhere. Planetarity in contrast can be imagined, as Spivak puts in, from within the precapitalist

cultures of planet, outside the global exchange flows determined by international business.

Spivak's view is idiosyncratic and radical, a logical development of her notion of the subaltern and subaltern studies. It is a theory deriving from her own particular history and from the perspective which that history invites. In a sense, it is another version of the cannibalistic theory of some Brazilian writers and theorists, which derives from the anthropophagist movement of the 1920s, when Oswald de Andrade tried to devise a manifesto that would make sense of his own society, one where modernity and prehistoricity appeared to be coexisting within the same national boundaries while seeking to re-evaluate Brazil's relationship with Europe. Elsa Vieira aptly summarizes the significance of de Andrade's theory of cannibalisation, whereby the relationship of writers to a source, particularly a Western source, is compared to that of a cannibal about to devour only the noblest and most highly prized captives in order to ingest some of the knowledge and virtues those victims are deemed to possess:

The devouring of Shakespeare and the revitalisation of Hamlet's dilemma in the *Manifesto* points to the assimilative perspective of cannibalism both as a programme and as a praxis: foreign input, far from being denied, is absorbed and transformed, which brings cannibalism and the dialogic principle close together. However, it stands to reason that Oswald de Andrade's dialogism has political imports for Brazil, because the denial of univocality means assertion of the Brazilian polyphonic and pluricultural space and, ultimately, liberation from mental colonialism.²

Crucial here is the idea of polyphony or plurivocality, as opposed to an earlier model, promoted by the colonial powers, of univocality. Other voices can now be heard, rather than one single dominant voice. Plurivocality is at the heart of post-colonial thinking.

This notion is, of course, all well and good within a post-colonial context, particularly for Brazilian comparatists, just as Spivak's proposition works for anyone approaching the great literary traditions of the Northern hemisphere from elsewhere. However, neither paradigm is particularly helpful for those of us who have as a starting point one or other of those great traditions. The question remains as to what new directions in comparative literature there can be for the European scholar whose intellectual formation has been shaped by classical Greek and Latin, by the Bible, by the Germanic epic, by Dante and Petrarch, by Shakespeare and Cervantes, by Rousseau, Voltaire and the Enlightenment, by Romanticism and post-Romanticism, by

the European novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by generations of writers who have borrowed, translated, plagiarised and plundered, but whose works run inexorably to some degree through the consciousness of anyone writing today.

The origins of comparative literature in the early nineteenth century show an uneasy relationship between broad-ranging ideas of literature, for example Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*, and emerging national literatures. Attempts to define comparative literature tended to concentrate on questions of national or linguistic boundaries. For the subject to be authentic, it was felt, the activity of comparing had to be based on an idea of difference: texts or writers or movements should ideally be compared across linguistic boundaries, and this view lasted a very long time. As late as the 1970s I was being told by my supervisor that I could not engage in comparative literature if I were studying writers working in the same language; literature written in English was deemed to be all of a piece, the different cultural contexts completely ignored. At the same time, also in the 1970s, Wole Soyinka was unable to give lectures in the English Faculty at Cambridge where he was Visiting Fellow, since African literature was not recognised, and was compelled to lecture under the aegis of Social Anthropology. The stifling weight of the Great European Tradition was such that it is not surprising that there should have been such a violent reaction by post-colonial scholars.

Nevertheless, we have come a long way in three decades, and the impact of post-colonial scholarship, along with other theories that have challenged the canonical status quo has been considerable. However, there is a need now to look again at the idea of the canon, not least because of the way in which Western foundation texts have found their way into other literatures – think of the impact of naturalism on southern Indian literatures, of the extraordinarily creative use of Homer and the epic tradition by the St. Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, of the current translation boom in China, as Western writing is translated, imitated and rewritten in exciting new ways. A fundamental question that comparative literature now needs to address concerns the role and status of the canonical and foundation texts that appear to be more highly valued outside Europe and North America than by a generation of scholars uneasy about their own history of colonialism and imperialism.

For Spivak and Southern hemisphere scholars, the crucial issues of comparative literature are indeed politicised. In contrast, however, I believe that the crucial issues for European scholars are as much

aesthetic as political. For we are undergoing a radical reassessment of what constitutes literary knowledge, as across Europe the academic curriculum is rewritten to accommodate a generation of students who can no longer access texts written before the Early Modern age. The disappearance of classical languages has been followed by the disappearance of medieval languages, so that emphasis increasingly falls on literature produced from the sixteenth century onwards. This will inevitably affect how we think about literary history, how we trace the emergence (and disappearance) of different themes, forms and genres over time. Significantly, there seems to be a revival of interest in the ancient world, most notably in the theatre of classical Greece among contemporary writers, an indication of a literary phenomenon that involves rewriting and translation.

In 1993 I published a book on comparative literature in which I argued that the subject was in its death throes. The basis of my case was that debates about a so-called crisis in comparative literature stemmed from a legacy of nineteenth-century positivism and a failure to consider the political implications of intercultural transfer processes. This had led, in the West, to a sense of the subject being in decline, though elsewhere in the world comparative literature, albeit under other labels, was flourishing. I argued that perhaps the time had come for a more self-confident discipline, the emergent discipline of translation studies to take centre stage: 'Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross-cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial theory, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies generally. We should look upon translation studies as the principle discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area'.³

This was a deliberately provocative statement, and was as much about trying to raise the profile of translation studies as it was about declaring comparative literature to be defunct. Today, looking back at that proposition, it appears fundamentally flawed: translation studies has not developed very far at all over three decades and comparison remains at the heart of much translation studies scholarship. What I would say were I writing the book today is that neither comparative literature nor translation studies should be seen as a discipline: rather both are methods of approaching literature, ways of reading that are mutually beneficial. The crisis in comparative literature derived from excessive prescriptivism combined with distinctive culturally specific methodologies that could not be universally applicable or relevant.

Spivak rejects the notion of globalisation in favour of an imagined planetarity, but the discourse of global flows can be helpful for comparatists. The patterns of exchange and transfer that happen in literary and philosophical movements can be compared to the shifting patterns of global information flows, which means that theories of cultural capital and its transmission can be a productive comparative method. Significantly, the celebration of particular events which brings together scholars working across a broad range of diverse disciplines can also be very productive, and indeed represents the best of comparative scholarship. The conference held in Lisbon in November 2005 to commemorate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the earthquake that destroyed the city on All Saints Day in 1755 was a model of interdisciplinarity and comparativism. The Lisbon earthquake had a massive impact on European thought, inspiring literary works such as Voltaire's *Candide*, a host of theological debates from diverse perspectives in many countries, a plethora of paintings mainly by Dutch and German artists, scientific research that was to lead to the development of the science of tectonics and raising profound existential questions about the existence of God. The small Goethe, still only a child, later remembered the terror inspired by stories of what had happened in Lisbon. The book *O grande terramoto de Lisboa: ficar diferente*,⁴ timed to be published for the conference, contains chapters by scholars from different countries and different disciplines and though it does not claim to be such, is arguably a model for twenty-first century comparative literature. For here there is also plurivocality, but the voices are assembled in a kind of chorus all referring back to one particular historical moment. The act of comparing thus takes place both in terms of the ways in which individual scholars approach the same topic and then, most significantly, in the reading process. Individual essays may make comparative points, but the actual comparison comes through the juxtaposition of the diverse contributions and through the response of readers to that juxtaposition.

When comparative literature lost its way was in trying to determine how comparison should take place, hence the drawing up of artificial boundaries and the prescriptiveness of some of the theories. This was particularly true of the so-called French school of comparative literature in the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, other comparatists, notably in the United States, opted for an 'anything goes' approach, where comparative literature was loosely identified as any comparison happening between any kind of text, written, filmic,

musical, visual or whatever. Both these approaches struggled with the idea of comparison itself, getting caught up in definitions of boundaries.

Where the subject starts to make sense and where it offers a genuinely innovative way of approaching literature is when the role of the reader is foregrounded, when the act of comparing happens during the reading process itself, rather than being set up a priori by the delimitation of the selection of specific texts. It is also important that the texts in question be considered in an historical context, for this can radically change the reading and alter the whole notion of comparison.

So, for example the significance of Ezra Pound's translations, if they can be called such, of Chinese poetry that resulted in his *Cathay* lies in how the poems were read when they appeared and in the precise historical moment when they were published. As Hugh Kenner points out in his book *The Pound Era*, the *Cathay* poems may have started out as translations of ancient Chinese verse, which is what Pound intended them to be, but in the way they were received they were transformed into war poems that spoke to the generation coping with the horrors of the trenches in Flanders. Pound used Fenellosa's work, Kenner argues, much as Pope used Horace and Dr Johnson used Juvenal in the eighteenth century, 'to supply a system of parallels and a structure of discourse'.⁵ The result was a sequence of extraordinary poems which, rather than being read primarily as exotic translations, were read as powerfully imagistic words resonant with the pain and loss of the Great War. The impact of these poems was such that on the one hand they could serve as models for a new generation of poets struggling to make the horrors of war a proper subject for poetry, while on the other hand they established a benchmark for future translators because they set the parameters in the minds of English-language readers of what Chinese poetry could do. The object of the comparative literature scholar is therefore to see these poems in a context and to compare them with other kinds of war poetry being produced at the same time.

Cathay is interesting because it highlights the way in which translation can serve as a force for literary renewal and innovation. This is one of the ways in which translation studies research has served comparative literature well; whereas once translation was regarded as a marginal area within comparative literature, now it is acknowledged that translation has played a vital role in literary history and that great periods of literary innovation tend to be preceded by periods of intense translation activity. The importance of translation during the Renaissance and Reformation cannot be underestimated and it is significant that

today, as China opens itself to the West and engages with the rest of the world in new ways economically, so also is translation playing a huge role. Similarly, when Kemal Ataturk led the Turkish modernisation programme in the 1920s, central to his thinking was the systematic translation of what were perceived to be key foundation texts of Western culture. Through translation come new ideas, new genres and new forms, so it is extraordinary that for so long comparative literature as a field of study did not acknowledge the importance of research into the history of translation.

I have referred to comparative literature as a subject, as a discipline, as a field of study, uncertain which terminology to choose. This uncertainty reflects the uncertainty of comparative literature itself, and I find myself going back to the great Italian critic Benedetto Croce who was highly sceptical about comparative literature, believing it to be an obfuscatory term disguising the obvious: that the proper object of study was literary history: 'The comparative history of literature is history understood in its true sense as a complete explanation of the literary work, encompassed in all its relationships, disposed in the composite whole of universal literary history (where else could it ever be placed?), seen in those connections and preparations that are its *raison d'être*'.⁶ Croce is surely right that the proper object of study is literary history, but understood not only as the history of the moment of actual textual production but also as the history of the reception of texts across time. So the recent production of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* at the Old Vic in London that cut scenes which might be offensive to an Islamic audience offers a fascinating example of rereading that takes into account the socio-political context in which a text is read. Any comparatist studying that play would need to consider the historical moment in which Marlowe was writing it along with the problems it poses to a contemporary British director in the wake of the July bombings in London in 2005 and would need to weigh the aesthetic compromises of the Old Vic production against the desire to preserve the integrity of a by-now classic English play.

Spivak is concerned with the idea of a 'to-comeness' which she sees as the way forward for comparative literature. I am more concerned with a 'has-happenedness', but both of us, in different ways, appear to be suggesting that rather than seeing comparative literature as a discipline, it should be seen simply as a method of approaching literature, one that foregrounds the role of the reader but which is always mindful of the historical context in which the act of writing and

the act of reading take place. The term 'comparative literature' only started to emerge early in the nineteenth century when the discourse of national literatures came to the fore; there was no sense of comparative literature in the eighteenth century and previously, when scholars read across languages and disciplines were loosely defined and interconnected.

The future of comparative literature lies in jettisoning attempts to define the object of study in any prescriptive way and in focussing instead on the idea of literature, understood in the broadest possible sense, and in recognising the inevitable interconnectedness that comes from literary transfer. No single European literature can be studied in isolation, nor should European scholars shrink from reassessing the legacy they have inherited. There is a great deal to learn from the perspectives of Southern hemisphere scholars, principle of which is the shift in perspective that their views inevitably incite, but it is important not to lose sight of where we, as Europeans, stand in relation to our own literary history. That history involves translation as a crucial means of enabling information flow, hence the need to position the history of translation centrally within any comparative literary study. Significantly, since writers are always a good twenty or so years ahead of literary critics, more and more contemporary writers across Europe are looking back to literature of previous ages, engaging with it, rewriting it, using it as a way of interrogating the world in which they move. Hopefully, literary scholars will follow where they lead, and will abandon pointless debates about terminology and definition, to focus more productively on the study of texts themselves, mapping the history of writing and reading across cultural and temporal boundaries.

NOTES

- 1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 6.
- 2 Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, 'Liberating Calibans: Readings of *Antropofagia* and Haroldo de Campos' poetics of transcreation', in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 95–113, p. 98.
- 3 Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 161.
- 4 *O grande terramoto de Lisboa: ficar diferente*, edited by Helena Carvalho Buescu and Goncalo Cordeiro (Lisbon: Gradiva, 2005).
- 5 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber, 1972), p. 202.

- 6 Benedetto Croce, 'Comparative Literature', in *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, edited by Hans-Joachim Schultz and Phillip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), p. 222.