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I met a very competent ex-student the other day, now a lecturer in a well respected ‘new’ university, who said that he and his cohort were very excited by the new idea of teaching not national literature, nor comparative literature, but *World Literature*! I was obliged to laugh, however sympathetically, at this *déjà-vu* experience. As comparatists know, the term *Weltliteratur* is hardly ‘new’; it was of course coined by Goethe in the early nineteenth century and referred then, as it still refers today, to literature that has survived the ordeal of translation and is hence able to speak to audiences across the barriers of language and even culture.

Like such illuminating rediscoveries, the ‘crisis in comp lit’ is endemic and recurrent. It may be a sign of health as much as of threatened decay; for whatever its successes, because of its inability (by its very nature) to achieve complete independence, any successes are claimed or siphoned off by its own constituent parts. It could only achieve independence at the cost of its essential parts, the national and regional languages and literatures. To attain independence – by, for example, becoming the translated substance of a series of abandoned local habitations and names – would spell disaster. The ‘natural’ hegemony of English and English departments today poses a powerful threat; yet as it becomes more all-encompassing, abandons its own sacred nooks and crannies, and embraces ‘world’ literature, it at the same time reopens the door to enterprising explorers of the actual languages and cultures behind the translated pabulum. An Indian student from Calcutta came to see me recently; she was a specialist in Canadian aboriginal languages. Soon the once familiar European languages may become as rare and enticing.

If the verities, and the endemic crises, of comparative literary studies have merely shifted gear into ‘world’ mode, what has become of the intellectual structures known as ‘theory’ that dominated all literary studies for a time? These were hardly unique to comparative

literature, though because of their various national sources it was much more natural to comparatists to seek out the originals, grasp the movements of thought that had brought them to the fore, and disentangle their historical meshing. Although they arrived approximately at the same time in English (and American), in the late 1950's and 1960's (and thereafter), owing to the false historical perspective imposed by translation in fact we were simply receiving the succession of theoretical moments of European literary thought since 1900 all at once and in no particular order, so giving the appearance of a bewildering variety of demanding options: Russian formalism and narrative theory; linguistic structuralism (Prague and Vienna styles); German phenomenology and the aesthetics built upon it; Austrian and Swiss psychoanalysis of art and artists; French versions of all of these, often associated with particular critics (Sartre, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault), reaching Britain via translated anthologies and Continental or global immigrants to the U.S. None of these approaches is a thing of the past only, despite the now ubiquitous slogan 'the end of theory'; for all such systems, modes, and models, as well as a range of discourses from neighbouring disciplines, remain available to scholars in the humanities, which, unlike the 'hard-core' natural sciences, tend not to replace one theory with another but rather allow multiple paradigms to exist simultaneously. (See Wolfgang Iser's recent *How to Do Theory*¹ for an instructive and immensely readable conspectus of the productive diversity of theory as it stands now in the humanities.)

My own practical answer to the question of what we think is vital to comparative literature today is and must be, of course, our Research Project on reading and reception studies, and specifically the resulting series of volumes on *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe*. Ten volumes have so far been published (Continuum 2002–), including Woolf, Joyce, Sterne, Byron, and Hume,² and the projected series represents a wide range of figures (including literary, political, philosophical and scientific writers) who have been influential on the cultural life of Europe. The project is based on the urgency of recognizing and analyzing the intellectual history of the UK as part of the wider European cultural heritage.

Still perhaps the most fruitful theoretical approach to literature developed over the past thirty years (in our view) is the reception studies – both reception aesthetics and reception history – of the Constance School, in particular as encapsulated in the seminal works of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, which succeeded in combining

the reading of texts with an active awareness of the role of readers in the context of their times in bringing texts to life in successive interpretations or concretizations. The narrow national literary history of Britain (as of every other nation), which so often has stopped at the Channel, must be extended to the unfamiliar, often unexpected and illuminating responses abroad to the works of British writers. A nation's knowledge of its writers – its own literary, intellectual and cultural history – is simply incomplete and inadequate without these kinds of studies.³ Moreover, it needs to be underpinned by the developing study of the History of the Book on the production, publication and distribution of manuscripts and printed books throughout Europe. Copyright law, new technologies, changing publishing and distribution modalities, and censorship play a role not always fully recognized and appreciated, often cutting across period designations which are all too frequently based on purely political designations or later literary considerations (see William St Clair's engaging and challenging book, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*).⁴ As part of the project, we have established a British Academy 'network' group across Europe that is inquiring into the state of the theory and practice of reception studies today.

Some may look with suspicion on our Project, taking the view that 'Europe' is somehow out of bounds because now we must do 'world literature'. But it is precisely as part of doing 'world literature' that we must grasp the scope and the complexity of the interactions of European literature, which have formed at the very least a major paradigm for the development of contemporary literary history – and maybe our series can serve as a blueprint for future regional and even inter-regional reception projects.

But there are also other projects that are equally comparative in nature and might also serve as prototypes for future research in this area. There is Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, studying the impact and circulation of European novels across Europe in the nineteenth century (which, however, is rejected by historians of the book as merely impressionistic).⁵ There is Pascale Casanova's excellent *The World Republic of Letters*,⁶ in which the formation of a literary sphere of value and influence is examined through the model of France, itself built upon Roman and Italian Renaissance forerunners, as it was challenged in the late eighteenth-century by the Herderian model of a variety of 'folk' cultures, which in their European forms nevertheless required validation as national literary

cultures during the nineteenth century, and now by post-colonial nations still enacting the struggle for cosmopolitan recognition at the 'centre' while seeking to gain or regain an independent indigenous culture. These and related considerations were at the foundations of comparative literature in the immediate postwar period; many of the founding works of comparative literature had a similar scope and mission: Ernst Robert Curtius wrote his powerful study of a common tradition, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*,⁷ Erich Auerbach returned to the Bible, Greeks and Romans as a starting point in *Mimesis and the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*,⁸ René Wellek's multi-volume work on the history of critical theory rebuilt the structures of twentieth-century thinking.⁹

The recent reappearance of 'universalism' and 'cosmopolitanism' as positive terms of analysis is also noted by Amanda Anderson in her interesting essay 'Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity'.¹⁰ It is important for us that, in Britain, there was little of the US conflict between 'comparative literature' and 'cultural studies'; rather they reinforced each other, suggesting new modes of organization of studies and of teaching that combined them, thereby in part stretching and shifting the old departmental alliances and divisions.

The shared heritage (and the history of conflict) we are only now fully realizing in our current period of post-imperial devolution of European nations is helping to deflate nationalist aspirations. At the same time as the face of Europe is changing, with its countries and populations drawing ever closer geographically, economically, demographically, educationally, and institutionally, we are seeing an opening of archives and the emergence of new fields of study. As the United States has become the dominant imperialist power in the world, Europe must look to the preservation of its own interests and attend to its common culture. The history of Europe and the European Union has shown that the stress on the shared background of Europeans also brings forward the individual, the regional, the small nation, and the minority language or dialect. This has been one of the most vivifying and perhaps unexpected effects of the EU. In our volume on the European reception of Ossian (the most extensive British literary reception apart from Shakespeare's), Great Britain's evolution, and indeed its devolution, had to be brought into play, for the English, Welsh, Irish Gaelic, and Scots Gaelic factions were in active controversy over Macpherson's Ossianic writings; with contributions

from Brittany, France, Germany and a variety of Eastern European nations past and present, a local discussion of 'Celticism' later plays into the rediscovery and invention of national epic and folk poetry across Europe. The spread of a work or an author or a language (and the presses that print its texts, in the original or in translation) is often the work of a group of emigrés or exiles (the British Jacobites, the French Huguenots, the Spanish exiles from Franco). It is thus only through the detailed examination of the process of dissemination of writings across Europe over time that we can determine the exact contours of this complex and changing entity. Establishing this record is all the more urgent in the face of the possibility that we already have 'world literature' in a very different sense, an easily circulating, crudely commercial product whose concern is not at all with literary value.

The 'republic of letters' by contrast is explicitly opposed to globalization.¹¹ Despite its historical identification with certain cities as ideas (Rome, Florence, Paris) it is a moveable banquet. London and New York may be hosting it for now, but a variety of smaller feasts or at least box lunches are going on in multiple centres around the globe. The creation of literary value is in analogy with economic competition in that city-states or nations compete for authority, and indeed literary value, however established, creates economic value. As Paul Valéry asked in 'La liberté de l'esprit' (1939), 'What is this capital called culture?'¹² Nevertheless, literary and artistic authority and value have not coincided fully with economic power and constitute a realm with their own history and trajectory. It is these realms, histories, and trajectories that comparative literature needs to explore more fully than we have done in the past. But while the exploration of the interactions of writerly value in Europe in our current research project is one possible model for future larger-scale comparative research dealing with such issues as value and the transfer not just of economic but also intellectual capital, it is only a beginning. As has always been clear to the founders of comparative literature, many of whom were also pioneers of Oriental literary studies, world literature requires extending beyond the confines of European literature, not as 'post-colonial', but as setting forth from a different set of originating 'centres' and shifting 'peripheries'. Yet it is part of our aim that the methods of research applied to European literature and world literature may be comparable.

NOTES

- 1 Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- 2 *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe*, edited by Mary Ann Caws and Nicola Luckhurst (London and New York: Continuum 2002); *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*, 2 vols., edited by Geert Lernout and Wim van Mierlo (London and New York: Continuum 2004); *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, edited by Howard Gaskill (London and New York: Continuum 2004); *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe*, edited by John Neubauer and Peter de Voogd (London and New York: Continuum 2004); *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, edited by Richard Cardwell (London and New York: Continuum 2005).
- 3 See the Series Editor's Prefaces to *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* volumes (especially *Swift* (2005), *Yeats* (2006)).
- 4 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- 5 London and New York: Verso, 1998 (originally *Atlante del romanzo europeo, 1800–1900*, Torino: G. Einaudi, 1997).
- 6 Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004 (originally *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris: Seuil, 1999).
- 7 London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979 (originally *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern: Francke, 1948).
- 8 Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953 (originally *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern: Francke Verlag, 1946).
- 9 *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950*, 8 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955–1992).
- 10 In *The Way We Argue Now* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 69–92).
- 11 See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. This catchy title is, of course, a misnomer.
- 12 In *Regards sur le monde actuel* (Paris: Librairie Stock, 1934); this theme was carried out by Ferdinand Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism 15th–18th Centuries*, 3 vols, trans. S. Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).