When Comparative Literature Ceases to Compare

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Since our first program of comparative literature was launched at National Taiwan University in 1970, development in that field of study has been conspicuous in this country. National or international comparative literature conferences have been held year after year on this island; an increasing number of comparative literary studies written in English or Chinese have been published in our chief organs for them (*Tamkang Review* and *Chung Wai Literary Monthly*) or elsewhere; and more and more of our literary scholars have become comparatists doing their own research or teaching their learnings to the younger generations. This conspicuous development, however, has not rendered the nature of this new academic discipline conspicuous in our literary circles. It seems that the confusion which goes with the unhappy choice of name for the discipline has spread from the West to the Far East. And I find this confusion has raised a special problem worthy of our special attention here.

I have often heard it rumored, from the mouths of our comparatists, that comparative literature actually does not compare at all. I say *rumored* because I know it is not a verifiable fact. But there are people, indeed, who take the rumor for a truth and are so daunted by its implied attitude that they no longer dare to couple two pieces of literature for comparison when they mean to make a comparative study of them.

A rumor is never without its source. I think our comparatists' rumor has very much to do with their attempt to set up a Chinese School of comparative literature here in Taiwan. This School, as clearly declared in Professor John J. Deeney's *Pi-chiao wen-hsüeh yen-chiu chih hsin fang-hsiang* (*A New Orientation of Comparative Literary Studies*),[1] is based on the Chinese Doctrine of Mean, being an eclectic school between the French

School of influence studies and the American School of affinity studies. Our comparatists, in other words, try to avoid making comparative literature a mere positivist science of establishing literary sources and influences or making it a mere subjective revealing of literary parallels by the method of *rapprochement*. This aim of theirs is indeed a noble one. However, in trying to achieve this aim, our comparatists have in fact channeled their attention mainly towards one restricted subject of study, that is, the adaptability of Western literary theories and methods to the study of our national literature. This tendency is testified by the statement in the "Preface" to an edition of our earlier comparative literary studies: "We may well declare boldly that this adoption of Western literary theories and methods for them to be tested and adjusted and finally used in the study of Chinese literature is characteristic of the Chinese School of comparative literature."[2] And this tendency is further testified by the fact that currently our most active comparatists are in actuality literary theorists or, more accurately, followers of Western literary theories (since they seldom, if ever, postulate theories of their own). They devote most of their time and effort to the study and introduction of Western theories of literature, especially the "new" ones (e.g., structuralist theories or post-structuralist theories).

Now, there is no reason why we should not establish a Chinese School of comparative literature. And there is no denying that the application of Western theories to our studies of native literature can yield unexpected fruitful results. But the question is, to what extent can we call such an application a comparative study of literature?

To be sure, such an application involves Chinese literature and Western theories of literature. If Western literary theories are undoubtedly derived from Western literatures (Greek, Roman, Italian, Spanish, French, English, German, Russian, American, etc.), then such an application is certainly, in a sense, an indirect study of two or more than two national literatures. If Western literary theories, on the other hand, are partly derived from other areas of human knowledge than literature (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, philosophy, history, politics, economics, sociology, religion, psychology, philology, natural sciences, etc.), as some of them obviously *are* (e.g., mimetic theories draw a lot on ideas of painting, and structuralist theories are closely related to linguistic ideas), then such an application is again, in a sense, an indirect study of literature in connection with other branches of knowledge. Thus, such an application does not fail our

comparatists' definition of comparative literature: "a study of two or more than two national literatures, or of literature in connection with other areas of human knowledge."[3]

Our comparatists' definition is in fact a very close version of Henry Remak's: "In brief it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression."[4] One notices here, however, that our comparatists have played down the idea of comparison by substituting the word *study* for Remak's *comparison*. They do so, I believe, because they feel they cannot very well emphasize the application of Western literary theories to the study of Chinese literature and call it comparative literature at once. For to compare (if we stick to the ordinary sense of the word) is "to bring or place together [actually or mentally] for the purpose of noting the similarities and differences," to quote an O.E.D. definition of the word. In their applying Western theories to studies of Chinese literature, our comparatists have indeed brought together our literature and Western theories (or indirectly, our literature and Western literatures or other areas of knowledge). But they do so not for the purpose of noting similarities and differences between our literature and Western theories, but for the purpose of testing whether Western theory can suit Chinese practice and for the purpose of adjusting Western theory to Chinese practice in case of unsuitability.

This testing and adjusting work, nevertheless, does have an implied sense of comparison. If Western theory suits Chinese practice perfectly well, Western literatures (which beget the theory) can naturally be said to be like Chinese literature. If Western theory somehow has to be adjusted before its application to Chinese practice, then Western literatures must somehow be different from Chinese literature. However, our comparatists' work of testing and adjusting can hardly be called comparative if Western theory is understood as a body of knowledge other than the knowledge of literature. For instance, when Roman Jokobson's ideas of "metaphor" and "metonymy" are applied to the reading of T'ang Poetry, can we say T'ang Poetry is being compared with anything at all in the course of the application? Are we assuming that T'ang Poetry is like children's language in having the two basic types of "aphasia"? This sense may indeed exist, though ever so unnoticeably. But I do not think our comparatists are ever quite aware of this "deep comparison."

Facing a case like this, a comparatist has always two easy ways to escape trouble arising from the question: Is it comparative literature? One way is

simply to say No. The other way is to try to tell people that the word *comparative* means more than pairing together to see similarities and dissimilarities; it covers in fact all yoking together of two or more things; and so a linguistic study of literature is a comparative study, as it involves two things: linguistics and literature.[5] (In this broad sense, then, all literary studies are comparative studies.)

Yet, facing a case like this, our comparatists seem not to take either easy way out. Instead, they prefer to hazard the dangerous path of proclaiming that comparative literature actually does not compare at all. And since unfortunately this proclamation is often not accompanied by any satisfactory explanation, it has become a very queer "theory" to those who hear it and cannot guess what it really means. But even such a queer "theory" is not without a seeming precursor in the West. (Please do not accuse me of being sarcastic if I say I think it a pity that we are often more bad followers of Western theories than good inventors of our own theories.) In the "General Introduction" to his *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*, A. Owen Aldridge thus begins his second paragraph:

> It is now generally agreed that comparative literature does not compare national literatures in the sense of setting one against another. Instead it provides a method of broadening one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature — a way of looking beyond the narrow boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various national cultures and to see the relation between literature and other spheres of human activity.[6]

I quote this passage, however, not so much to prove that our comparatists are influenced by an American comparatist or vice versa,[7] as to point out that before our first comparative literature program was launched here in Taiwan, there was already such opinion in the West as to say that "comparative literature does not compare national literatures in the sense of setting one against another." And I presume to question this statement and thereby the aforesaid rumor of our comparatists.

I have no idea how "generally agreed" upon Aldridge's statement now is. But as far as I am concerned, I just cannot agree with that statement. I admit that comparative literature is not just setting one literature against another. But I just cannot conceive there is any comparative literature without using the comparative method, and in case of two national literatures

there is not any comparative literature without "setting one against another." It is well to say that comparative literature "provides a method of broadening one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature – a way of looking beyond the narrow boundaries of national frontiers. . . ." But what is the method, after all? And what is the way? Is it other than "setting one thing against another" and then see them at once for a better understanding?

In Aldridge's book, five categories of comparative literature are edited: Literary Criticism and Theory, Literary Movements, Literary Themes, Literary Forms, and Literary Relations. Is there any one of them, we may ask, that does not compare by setting one literature against another? Is not literary criticism or theory, for instance, the result of reading this author and that author and then comparing them in mind (if not on paper) by setting one against another or against something else? Likewise, how can a literary movement, or theme, or form, or relation be better understood without comparing the elements that make up the movement, theme, form, or relation, or without comparing this movement with that movement, this theme with that theme, etc.? It is often not necessary, of course, to show one's comparing process (which is essentially a process in mind) on paper or anywhere else. But the task of "setting one thing against another" is almost indispensable to any serious study of things.

But, of course, when Aldridge says that "comparative literature does not compare national literatures in the sense of setting one against another," he is not trying to negate the value of the comparative method, but trying perhaps to discourage a sort of comparative practice: namely, the mere setting one thing against another without further work for a meaningful result. And I believe our comparatists are also merely trying to discourage that sort of comparison when they say that comparative literature actually does not compare at all. The question, then, becomes: Do we need to discourage that sort of comparison?

It has been my notion that literature, like anything else, is but a body of facts, and serious readers of literature are interpreters of those facts. But before any work of interpretation can be done, the facts have to be selected and set forth for special attention. Now, one way to select and set forth literary facts is to set one group of facts against another, that is, to do the preparatory work for further comparison. This preparatory work may indeed provide only some collated data, showing at best an arid erudition or at worst a laughable shallowness. However, such work with such

data is the basis for further analysis and therefore is indispensable. One may laugh, for instance, at a person who calls his paper a comparative study of *Ching Hua Yüan* 鏡花緣 and *Erewhon*, when we find in it nothing but a compilation of facts found in both books. But still that compilation is not without its effort and value. Another person with enough critical insight, maybe the very one who is laughing, can always make use of the data and come up with some meaningful interpretation.

At this point, it occurs to me that comparatists may be of two types: one more suitable for the initial stage, the other for the final stage, of the work, the two stages being the gathering of comparable material (setting one thing against another, or comparison in its mechanical sense) and the interpretation of the phenomena manifested by the material (critical analysis for a new finding, or comparison in its organic sense). It is clear that such critics as Benedetto Croce and René Wellek[8] will have a higher opinion of the second type of comparatists, and so will many of us who favor aesthetic criticism. But let us not forget that the first type of comparatists can also render good service. In his conclusion of a perceptive essay, John Fletcher quotes T. S. Eliot's often-quoted statement that "comparison and analysis are the chief tools of the critic," and adds as his own last word for the essay: "In giving proper weight to the second, we should not allow ourselves to neglect the first."[9] I think Fletcher has fully expressed what I mean to say here.

But what makes the first type of comparatists so contemptible is often not the fact that he only provides comparable material, but the fact that he often tries beyond his ability, attempting to interpret as the second type of comparatists do but ending up with a wrong interpretation. This is the case mentioned by Professor Yüan Ho-hsiang 袁鶴翔 of those who, upon seeing that T'ao Yüan-ming 陶淵明 and Wordsworth are both poets of nature, jump quickly to the conclusion that both are romantic poets.[10] Yet, this is the fault of the man, not the fault of the method. I cannot see why the two nature poets should not be compared. Professor Yüan points out that T'ao's nature is Taoist nature (the natural, effortless way) while Wordsworth's nature is Great Nature with its simple beauty. But will this great difference, then, prevent us from comparing the two great poets? Besides, how can Professor Yüan know the difference without comparing them?

H. M. Posnett, the New Zealand scholar who is often claimed to have first used the name Comparative Literature for a book title, has rightly

said, "The comparative method of acquiring or communicating knowledge is in one sense as old as thought itself."[11] For what thought is there that does not cover a view of something associated with something else? If we understand this, we may go on to assert that all Western literary studies, from Plato's *Dialogues* and Aristotle's *Poetics* onwards, are nothing but comparative studies, and so are all literary studies ever made in the East. However, when we wish to establish comparative literature as a formal discipline, we naturally cannot make it cover all literary studies. In order to distinguish it from other literary studies, we naturally have to define its scope of study workably, that is, to make its scope neither too meaninglessly comprehensive nor too meanly restricted.

Now, as we know, the scope of comparative literature is often defined in terms of nationality or geographical area. The most popular notion is that comparative literature studies literatures of two or more nations. Under this notion, a comparison of Hsü Chih-mo 徐志摩 and Hardy (or of Kamban and Milton, to use an Indian scholar's example) is comparative literature; but, regrettably, a comparison of Li Po 李白 and Tu Fu 杜甫 (or Kamban and Ilango) is not.[12] Another popular notion is that comparative literature compares literatures of two or more languages.[13] But this notion also has its difficulty. For example, India is a nation with many languages. Can we then call it comparative literature to compare two writers of the same nation who write in two different languages (e.g., Tagore and Bharathi)? Or conversely, can we compare Dickens and Mark Twain and call it comparative literature when we know they speak the same language but belong to two different countries?[14] Regardless of such trouble, however, the scope of comparative literature can really start from a clan within a small area or a city commonwealth and then enlarge it through a nation or country towards the whole world – a process Posnett has plainly adopted. And what Robert J. Clements calls the three major "dimensions" of American or European comparative literary studies – Western Heritage (or Western Literature), East-West, and World Literature – are in fact scopes in this sense.

The various scopes of comparative literature are further complicated by its concerns. The French School, as often pointed out, is primarily concerned with "modes of transmission," "reception, success and influence," "sources," "foreign travel," and "the image of a country in the literature of another country," etc.[15] The American School, on the other hand, is mostly concerned with "analogies without contact," or "typological

affinities."[16] The different concerns have then made scholars focus their attention on various literary problems: themes or motifs, movements or schools, genres, stylistics, forms, techniques, traditions, and other literary "relations," which in fact are part and parcel of literary theory or criticism. Yet all concerns and all focuses are governed by the aims of study. The aim may tend towards a chauvinistic glorification of one's national literature as an "influential" literature or as a genetic headspring of other literatures. The aim may also tend towards an idea of "General Literature" or "World Literature," though the two terms have raised very much controversy as to what they really mean and are still to be debated for their use.[17]

But no matter what scope, concern, focus, or aim it has, comparative literature, as its name suggests, cannot but take literature as its main object of study and cannot do without the comparative method. It has been my belief that there are always three basic ways to study an object: first, to study it in isolation; second, to study it in relation to something else; third, to study it in comparison with some other object. For instance, if we want to study a person, we can first study him in isolation by focusing our attention on his hair, eyes, complexion, body build, mentality, personality, etc. – all those elements we think intrinsic to the man. Secondly, we can study him by relating him to his birth (date, place, ancestral lineage, etc.), his educational background, his family or social circle, and all other circumstances in which he lives. Thirdly, we can also study him by comparing him with somebody else (his wife, his friend, his boss, etc.) or even with something (a dog, a wooden statue, a bottle of wine, or an unseen ghost, if you like). The relational study and the comparative study are both studies involving two or more things at once. But the relational study concentrates on factors of contiguity involved in the objects studied. Time contiguity, for instance, results in historical relationship; place contiguity, geographical relationship; blood contiguity, genetic relationship, etc. Since there is no contiguity without some sort of contact between the objects considered contiguous, all contiguous relationships are contactual relationships, too. On the other hand, the comparative study concentrates on factors of similarity involved in the objects studied. The factors of similarity may exist among things with contiguous relationship (e.g., complexion between parents and children); they may also exist among things without such relationship (e.g., the golden color between a girl's hair and a piece of gold). But all the same, the comparative study is as useful to our understanding of objects as the relational study or the isolationist study. By looking at

a girl's hair, by relating her hair to her parents', and by comparing her hair with a piece of gold, we can all come to a better understanding of the fact that her hair is golden in color.

It follows then that as literature is an object of study, it can also be studied in isolation or in connection with something else by the relational or comparative method. When we study Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," for instance, we can treat it as an isolated text and analyze its rhythm, diction, imagery, tone, etc., without connecting it with anything outside the text. But we can also relate the poem to the tradition of "conversation piece," thus bringing the poem in contact with Horace's *Epistles* and *Satires* and with Coleridge's "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison" and other similar poems, or even with Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron."[18] Or we can also compare it with Wang Wei's 王維 "Niao Ming Chien" ("鳥鳴磵"), as Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉 has done,[19] in order that we may gain some insight into the difference in developing aesthetic consciousness between Chinese and Western poetry.

In fact, the French School of comparative literature is a school using primarily the relational method, as it is devoted to the tracing of genetic or historical relationships among literary works. Nevertheless, their method is never purely relational. For in tracing how a work influences another, the relational scholar cannot but compare the two works and make his conclusion on the basis of similarities and dissimilarities found between both works. In other words, the French School in fact uses the comparative method and the relational method at once. Or to put it even more accurately, the French School in fact uses the comparative method for a relational purpose. So it can legitimately call itself a school of comparative literature.

How about the American School, then? "Of course, it is a real school of comparative literature, too," one may reply. One may even be tempted to say, "It is the most really comparative of all schools of comparative literature." For, as we know, it compares all literatures on the same level, without caring whether they have contactual relationship or not. But does this School, then, have no relational purpose of any kind? The answer is Yes. One seldom compares two things without a purpose. In comparing two literatures, a serious scholar often hopes to see the reason lurking behind his analogical findings. In comparing Chinese and Western knights, for instance, James J. Y. Liu can always see the source of dissimilarities in the difference of cultural backgrounds and see the cause of similarities in mankind's universal aspirations.[20] Thus, this type of comparative literature

has also a final relational purpose. So both the French and the American Schools of comparative literature are similarly searching unity in variety, though the latter with its location in a continent of more cosmopolitan culture naturally tends more towards the idea of World Literature.

Then what can we say about our professed school of comparative literature? As I have discussed it above, to apply Western theories to the study of Chinese literature is "comparative" only in a remote sense. Such an application, I may add here, is "relational" all right, but relational not so much in the sense of relating one literature to another or relating literature to other spheres of human knowledge as in the sense of relating literary theory to literary practice. (In establishing a psychological approach to literature, one is relating psychology to literature. But in applying such an approach to a literary work, one is relating a theory to a particular piece of literature.) When Western comparatists go one step forward to include literary theory and criticism within the sphere of comparative literature, they are still seeking unity in variety directly in their connecting literature with other arts or with various social and natural sciences, thus working towards an idea of "General Knowledge," so to speak. But when our comparatists try to test or adjust Western literary theories for the use of studying our national literature, they are not seeking directly any unity in variety; they are working at most only very indirectly towards an idea of either "World Literature" or "General Knowledge." So our School is in effect neither "comparative" nor "relational" in an obvious manner.

This fact, however, should not be used to doubt the value of our School. No matter whether our School is obviously comparative and relational or not, our comparatists still have the right to carry on their proposed studies and make contributions to our better understanding of Western literary theories and our national literature. What can be disparaged is perhaps their awkward or incompetent use of Western theories and methods (using Freudian terms everywhere, seeing Carnival Literature everywhere, reading archetypes or myths into everything, writing nonsensical papers based on inadequate knowledge of semiotics, phenomenology, feminist criticism, deconstruction theories, etc.). But this weakness, as I have said of the incompetent comparatists who make wrong interpretations on the basis of their comparable material, is to be blamed on the man, not on the method. In my opinion, if we want to blame our School of comparatists, we can only blame them for their inadvertent spreading of the rumor I have mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

After referring to Wellek's "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" to explain the difficulty of defining the new discipline's subject matter and methodology, John Fletcher once remarks: "Comparative literature, of course, *compares*; but what?"[21] The "what," I believe, is never to be answered for certain and for all. Every literary comparatist, I further believe, should be allowed the freedom to choose his "what," so long as he is comparing and is dealing with literature. He may choose, if he likes, to compare two authors or two works (or even only parts of two works), two literary schools or movements, two versions of translation or two pieces of criticism; he may concern himself with a special genre, style, form, theme, motif, tradition, or any other topic; he may study literature in connection with another art, with sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, religion, philology, or with any other branch of human expression; he may cross the frontier of his clan, his nation, his continent, or his hemisphere; and he may also cross the boundary of one period, one dynasty, one age, one century or one bigger section of time. And if some scholars should choose to establish another school of comparative literature anywhere in the world, they, too, must be given this freedom to choose their "what." But once they have chosen their subject matter, let them be prepared to *compare*, directly or indirectly, what they think is comparable if they want earnestly to become comparatists. In their course of comparison, they may be deplorable for their failure to achieve their aim of comparison (to solve a critical problem thereby, for instance) or for the unworthiness of their aim. Yet they will thus leave us no occasion to blame them for lying, for not doing what they have professed to do. However, since no comparatist can really do without comparing,[22] let no scholar and no school of comparative literature dare to rumor again that comparative literature actually does not compare at all, if it so happens that their methodology is obviously not "comparative" enough. For, when comparative literature ceases to compare, literary comparatists cease, too, to exist, and with that, alas, is gone an innate and important faculty of man for acquiring knowledge!

Notes

1. John J. Deeney, 比較文學研究之新方向 (Taipei: Lien Ching Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 265-6.
2. *Pi-chiao wen-hsüeh te k'en-t'uo tsai T'ai-wan* 比較文學的墾拓在台灣, ed. Ku T'ien-hung 古添洪 & Ch'en Huei-hua 陳慧樺 (Taipei: Tung Tah Book Co., 1976), p. 2. The English translation is mine.

3. Deeney, p. 201. The English translation is mine.
4. "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function" in Newton P. Stallknecht & Horst Frenz, eds., *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, revised ed. (Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971), p. 1.
5. This is the argument implied in many etymological studies of the word. See, for instance, Robert J. Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1978), pp. 10-11.
6. A. Owen Aldridge, *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* (Urbana, Chicago, & London: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 1.
7. Yet one can suspect that Aldridge may have some sympathy with the Chinese School of comparative literature, as he has several times been to Taiwan to attend international comparative literature conferences there.
8. See Croce's "Comparative Literature," translated from *La Critica*, I (1903), 77-80, rpt. in H. J. Schulz & P. H. Rhein, eds., *Comparative Literature: The Early Years* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 219-23. Also see Wellek's "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature" in his *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 1-36.
9. "The Criticism of Comparison: The Approach through Comparative Literature and Intellectual History," in Malcolm Bradbury & David Palmer, eds., *Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Edward Arnold, 1970), p. 129.
10. "Lüeh-t'an pi-chiao wen-hsüeh" "略談比較文學" in Ku & Ch'en, p. 14.
11. *Comparative Literature* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1886), p. 73. This statement is often quoted not very accurately.
12. See S. Ramakrishnan, "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature," in G. John Samuel & R. Shanmugham, eds., *Comparative Literature*, Vol. I, (Madras: Academy of Comparative Literature, 1980), p. 14. Also see Deeney, p. 202.
13. S. S. Prawer thinks this is a better definition. See his *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 3.
14. These examples are also Ramakrishnan's.
15. Naresh Gula, "Comparative Literature: Meaning and Scope," in Nagendra, ed., *Comparative Literature* (Delhi: Delhi University Extension Service, 1977), p. 33.
16. A clear chart showing the study concerns is made in Dionýz Ďurišin, *The Theory of Literary Comparatistics* (Bratislava: Veda Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1984), p. 334.
17. Personally, however, I would refer to "General Literature" as a body of universal phenomena and laws of literature, and make "World Literature" stand for mankind's literary expression of cultural commonalties.
18. See J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977), p. 154.
19. See Ku & Chen, p. 21 ff.
20. *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 195-208. A book of similar nature is T'ien Yü-ying's (田毓英) *Spanish Ch'i-shih and Chinese Hsia* (西班牙騎士與中國俠) (Taipei: Sang Wu, 1980).
21. "The Criticism of Comparison," in Bradbury & Palmer, p. 108.
22. In the book in which they declare the Chinese School of comparative literature, Mr. Ku and Mr. Chen themselves each present a paper involving real comparison between Chinese and Western theories of literature, not just applying Western theory to Chinese practice. See *Pi-chiao wen-hsüeh te k'en-t'uo tsai T'ai-wan*, pp. 61-118.