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BOOK REVIEW

Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization. Edited by Haun Saussy. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Pp. v+261.

In 1993 Charles Bernheimer issued the decennial American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) report on the state of the discipline, as Thomas Greene had previously done in 1975 and Harry Levin in 1965. Published, along with sixteen responses, as *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1995), the Bernheimer Report expressed the sense of definitional crisis that René Wellek had forty years earlier deemed characteristic of the discipline.¹ Yet, the Bernheimer Report was also a distinctive product of its moment, ardently committing its unstable, uncertain disciplinary object to a rigorous redefinition that integrated cultural studies, identity politics, transnational flows, global hegemonies, and colonial and postcolonial critique. Haun Saussy's edited volume, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, returns to the scene of disciplinary definition with a more measured tone and a pluralist sentiment, signs that comparative literature has been, as Jonathan Culler puts it, "going global and going cultural" (239), but not without reservations. No gauntlets are laid down in this "multivocal report" (viii), consisting of a dozen field statements followed by seven responses. Nothing approaches Franco Moretti's field-reshaping call for world-literature-size methods and 2000 pronouncement, "if comparative literature is not this, it's nothing," or the apocalyptic tone of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's diagnosis of field paraly-

1. René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" (1958), in his *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 282–95; Charles Bernheimer, "The Bernheimer Report, 1993: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 39–50.

sis in *Death of a Discipline* (2004) and endorsement of local area knowledge, close reading, and planetary consciousness over protoimperialist world-scale ambitions.² Instead, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* modestly agrees to disagree. It is a big tent, after all.

Saussy's comprehensive lead essay casts the passage from the Bernheimer Report to the present one as a shift from the politics of recognition (other cultures, other identities, other languages, other literatures, others *tout court*) to a generalized condition of global information culture and political unilateralism. If comparative literature's internationalist sensibility, border-crossing methods, linguistic polyglotism, and theoretical orientation find little reflection in American-style globalization, in knowledge work they have triumphed. As Saussy bittersweetly notes, "Our ways of thinking, writing, and teaching have spread like a gospel and have not been followed (despite what our friends in beleaguered language-and-literature departments may say) by an empire. . . . We are universal and anonymous donors" (4). The volume that follows is a chronicle of the disciplinary gift, an account of distinctive contributions and of precarious situations in an economy of ownership, disavowal, and exchange. Through the latter, a veritable network of disciplinary definitions, as complex as any kin structure, emerges.

Saussy himself specifies language and literariness as something like the totem sign of comparative literature, now under siege by the turn to world literature, the necessary evil of reading in translation, and the looming reification of the object status of what is read over the method of reading itself. Comparative literature, by contrast, "is best known, not as the reading of *literature* but as reading *literarily* (with intensive textual scrutiny, defiance, and metatheoretical awareness) whatever there may be to read" (23). Saussy's literariness is certainly broad, encompassing a set of practices and effects that are irreducible to theme, independent of the ways in which other cultural texts make their meanings, and inclusive of nonwritten and nonimaginative expressions. Despite this diversity, literariness remains an oppositional category, what secures literature as "a kind of resistance to information's charm" (33). The late Richard Rorty's essay questions the autonomy and centrality of literariness and diagnoses a congenital "mutability" in academic disciplines that is itself a good (66). Rorty's exhortation that comparative literature and philosophy departments should give students suggestions of what to read but leave them "free to follow their noses" is a pragmatic legacy worth remembering (65). Did world literature, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, feminism, and queer theory enter the gates promising expansion only to

2. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 67; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

make the discipline smaller, less literary, more instrumental, and ultimately no longer itself? Whatever the “it” of comparative literature is, it is large and varied enough in this heterodox report to withstand, and even profit from, repeated redefinition.

When the volume turns to field critique, it does so with a sharp geopolitical sensibility. Alain Badiou’s notion of an ethics of recognition predicated on sameness, not difference,³ is referenced by both Djelal Kadir and Emily Apter as a perilously indifferent basis for comparative critiques of hegemony, be it the post-9/11 U.S. security state (for Kadir) or the anglophone lock on postcolonial difference (for Apter). Apter’s brief for a “translational transnationalism” (57) that foregrounds the linguistic struggles, minority politics, and new identities that have succeeded the old imperial maps, in the context of her discussion of Peter Hallward’s Badiou-inspired *Absolutely Postcolonial* (2001),⁴ and Steven Ungar’s survey of translation theory, with particular reference to the North African Arabic-Berber-French-Spanish Maghreb, bring a materiality, historicity, and flexibility to the “language” espoused by all contributors as an abiding concern of comparative literature. Françoise Lionnet similarly explores the linguistic differences and varied geographies of *francophonie* as inviting a “transversal comparative approach that allows us to link the cultures of decolonization, immigration, and globalization within a conceptual framework that seeks common denominators—while remaining suspicious of simplistic generalizations” (105). Surveying the ways in which gender studies and queer theory uncouple the category of identity from the claims of universalism, Gail Finney reminds us that feminism still, again, and always needs to be placed within the disciplinary orbit. These accounts of a comparative literature that engages identity, language, nation, and region, and forges new approaches to them, capture what is new and what is left to do, as good markers as any of what the discipline can bring to contemporary theory. Historical length and interdisciplinary breadth are further sketched by Caroline Eckhardt’s commanding discussion of comparative medieval studies from 500 to 1500, Christopher Braider’s stimulating essay on the visual arts and early modern studies, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s engaging recollection of her own forays from twentieth-century comparative literary studies into law, graphic novels and comics, and now science and medicine.

In a survey of that perennial marker of disciplinary life and death, the question of what gets taught, David Damrosch shows how the emerging

3. Alain Badiou, *Petit manuel d’investhétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), and *An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002).

4. Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester University Press, 2001).

world literature syllabus elevates some subaltern writers (Salman Rushdie) to hypercanonical status, others (Nadine Gordimer, Naguib Mahfouz) to the midlevel countercanonical, and still others (Lu Xun, Amos Tutuola) to the shadow canon, the postcolonial Hazlitts to Rushdie's Johnson, thus effectively reproducing the uneven development of the original European-based canon. Katie Trumpener's response, "World Music, World Literature: A Geopolitical View," goes back to Johann Gottfried Herder's early ethnomusicology ("from Greece to Greenland" [185]) to trace a Central Europe quite different from that centralized as power and sameness. In the apprehension of such difference, Trumpener finds, contra Spivak, comparative literature's revitalization of area studies and the beneficial task of world literature teaching. Caryl Emerson's response proposes a similarly nonbinaristic map from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, especially in its postcommunist period, while Linda Hutcheon's response begs that comparative literature "will not abandon Europe correctly" (225) and unpacks the European Union's unity-in-diversity as a model to rival Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. Marshall Brown offers a delightful local discussion of Theodor Fontane's nineteenth-century Prussian novel *Effi Briest* in a response essay whose linguistic precision and global concerns model what comparative literary method can achieve within a national tradition. Jonathan Culler's response takes the long view, briskly surveying the changes of the past decade and concluding that the consolidation of cultural studies approaches might remake the national literature departments while freeing comparative literature to become "the site for the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon" (241). Roland Greene makes a strong case for colonial and postcolonial studies as the operative model of a new comparative literature that privileges the exchanges out of which literatures are made—"not works but networks" (214). Zhang Longxi's response returns to literariness, and Badiou, for models of comparative literature that "go beyond the European and Western horizon" while avoiding "a simplistic application of Western theory to the non-West" (234). These practitioners' accounts of European literature, world literature, and comparative literature on an East-West axis, like the field statements that preface them, describe a discipline almost happily heterogeneous.

Disciplinary definition, as David Ferris's elegant overview of some four decades' worth of the practice reminds us, is articulated at the aporia of a necessary impossibility: I can't say what I am, I'll say what I am. In fulfilling this Beckettian task, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* marks both a progression and a retrenchment: the acknowledgment by several who are doing it that literatures and languages beyond Europe will be taught, and the cautionary reminder that comparative literature

should not let go of its philological discipline, the close and careful, measured and meticulous study of both language and literature. Had it been written in a more official register, the 2004 ACLA report might have pushed harder to integrate the newer paradigms whose arrival it confirms but whose welcome it at least partially withholds. But by speaking in many voices, the volume ultimately does effect the hospitality through which the future, already here, will continue to happen.

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