Bernheimer Report, 1993

AMERICAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

REPORT ON PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

A Report to the ACLA:
Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century

1. Of Standards and Disciplines

This is the third "Report on Standards" written for the ACLA and distributed in accordance with its By-Laws. The first report, published in 1965, was prepared by a committee chaired by Harry Levin; the second, published in 1976, was the product of a committee chaired by Tom Greene. The visions of Comparative Literature set out in these two documents are strikingly similar.

Indeed, Greene's report does not so much articulate new goals and possibilities for Comparative Literature as it defends the standards proposed by Levin against perceived challenges. Together, the Levin and Greene reports strongly articulate the conception of the discipline that prevailed through much of the 50's, 60's, and 70's. Many of the current members of the ACLA received their doctorates from departments that adhered to the standards defined in these reports. But the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which these same comparatists are now working, and the issues many of them are addressing, have changed so markedly from the time of their professional training that actual practices in the field have transformed it. Our report will address the issue of standards in the context of this profound transformation.

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In order to clarify what we perceive to be the direction of this disciplinary evolution, we will begin with a brief analysis of the previous two reports. Both attribute the rapid growth of Comparative Literature in this country after World War II to a new internationalist perspective that sought, in Greene's phrase, "larger contexts in the tracking of motifs, themes, and types as well as larger understandings of genres and modes." This impulse to expand the horizon of literary studies may well have derived from a desire to demonstrate the essential unity of European culture in the face of its recent violent disruption. The broadened perspective, in any case, did not often reach beyond Europe and Europe's high-cultural lineage going back to the civilizations of classical antiquity. Indeed, comparative literary studies tended to reinforce an identification of nation states as imagined communities with national languages as their natural bases.

This focus on national and linguistic identities is apparent in the way both the Levin and Greene reports address the notion of standards. High standards are necessary, they argue, in order to defend the elite character of the discipline which, says Levin, "ought to reserve it for the more highly qualified students" and restrict it to large research universities with excellent language departments and libraries. Noting that "this ideal which seemed so desirable and so feasible ten years ago has been challenged for better or worse by rapid historical change," Greene goes on to argue the case for resistance to change. "There is cause," he writes, "for serious concern lest the trends now transforming our discipline, taken in the aggregate, not debase those values on which it is founded. The slippage of standards, once allowed to accelerate, would be difficult to arrest."

The greatest perceived threat is to the very basis of Comparative Literature's elite image, the reading and teaching of foreign language works in the original. Greene criticizes the increasing use of translations by professors in World Literature courses who do not know the original languages. The use of translations is condemned in both the Levin and Greene reports, though Levin admits that, as long as Comparative Literature courses "include a substantial proportion of work with the originals, it would be unduly puristic to exclude some reading from more remote languages in translation." This statement illustrates the extent to which the traditional internationalist notion of Comparative Literature paradoxically sustains the dominance of a few European national literatures. Europe is the home of the canonical originals, the proper object of comparative study; so-called "remote" cultures are peripheral to the discipline and thence can be studied in translation.

Another threat to Comparative Literature, according to Greene, is the growth of interdisciplinary programs. Although he says we should welcome this development, Greene's emphasis is cautionary: "we must be alert," he writes, "lest the crossing of the disciplines involve a relaxing of discipline." "Crossing" here plays the same role in respect to disciplinary rigor as does "translation" in respect to linguistic purity. There is an effort to restrict the work of comparison within the limits of a single discipline and to discourage any potentially messy carrying-over or transference from discipline to discipline. Just as Comparative Literature serves to define national entities even as it puts them in relation to one another, so it may also serve to reinforce disciplinary boundaries even as it transgresses them.

A third major threat to the founding values of Comparative Literature may be read between the lines of the Greene report: the increasing prominence in the seventies of Comparative Literature departments as the arenas for the study of (literary) theory. Although the theory boom was fostered in English and French departments as well, the comparatist's knowledge of foreign languages offered access not only to the original texts of influential European theoreticians but also to the original versions of

the philosophical, historical, and literary works they analyzed. The problem in this development for the traditional view of Comparative Literature was that the diachronic study of literature threatened to become secondary to a largely synchronic study of theory. "Comparative Literature as a discipline rests unalterably on the knowledge of history," writes Greene in an implicit rebuke to the wave of theorizing overtaking the field.

The anxieties about change articulated in the Greene report suggest that, already in 1976, the field was coming to look disturbingly foreign to some of its eminent authorities. Their reaction tended to treat the definition and enforcement of standards as constitutive of the discipline. But the dangers confronting the discipline thus constructed have only intensified in the seventeen years since the publication of the Greene report, to the point that, in the opinion of this committee, the construction no longer corresponds to the practices that currently define the field. We feel, therefore, that our articulation of standards can be undertaken responsibly only in the context of a redefinition of the discipline's goals and methods. We base this redefinition not on some abstract sense of the discipline's future but rather on directions already being followed by many departments and programs around the country.

2. Renewing the Field

The apparent internationalism of the post-war years sustained a restrictive Eurocentrism that has recently been challenged from multiple perspectives. The notion that the promulgation of standards could serve to define a discipline has collapsed in the face of an increasingly apparent porosity of one discipline's practices to another's. Valuable studies using the traditional models of comparison are still being produced, of course, but these models belong to a discipline that by 1976 already felt defensive and beleaguered. The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and post-contact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study.

In this unstable and rapidly evolving socio-cultural environment, many of the scholars involved in rethinking the field of comparison have an increasingly uneasy relation to the practices called "Comparative Literature." They feel alienated because of the continued association of these practices, intellectually and institutionally, with standards that construct a discipline almost unrecognizable in the light of their actual methods and interests.

One sign of this disaffection is that many colleagues whose work would fit into an expanded definition of the field do not have an institutional affiliation with Comparative Literature and are not members of the ACLA. Another sign is the discussion that has occurred on some campuses about the possibility of adding a phrase such as "and Cultural Studies," "and Cultural Critique" or "and Cultural Theory," to the departmental or program title in order to suggest ways in which the old designation may be inadequate. But such name changes have not been widely adopted, largely, we feel, because of a general belief that these new ways of reading and contextualizing should be incorporated into the very fabric of the discipline. In the rest of this report we hope to give a sense of how this incorporation will enable Comparative Literature to position itself as a productive locus for advanced work in the Humanities.

A. The Graduate Program

1. Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline. Rather, literary texts are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production. This field challenges the very notion of interdisciplinarity, to the extent that the disciplines were historically constructed to parcel up the field of knowledge into manageable territories of professional expertise. Comparatists, known for their propensity to cross over between disciplines, now have expanded opportunities to theorize the nature of the boundaries to be crossed and to participate in their remapping. This suggests, among other fundamental adjustments, that Comparative Literature departments should moderate their focus on high literary discourse and examine the entire discursive context in which texts are created and such heights are constructed. The production of "literature" as an object of study could thus be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems.

Our recommendation to broaden the field of inquiry--already implemented by some programs and departments--does not mean that comparative study should abandon the close analysis of rhetorical, prosodic, and other formal features, but that textually precise readings should take account as well of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced.

Likewise, the more traditional forms of interdisciplinary work, such as comparisons between the sister arts, should occur in a context of reflection on the privileged strategies of meaning-making in each discipline, including its internal theoretical debates and the materiality of the medium it addresses.

2. The knowledge of foreign languages remains fundamental to our raison d'etre. Comparatists have always been people with an exceptional interest in foreign languages, an unusual ability to learn them, and a lively capacity to enjoy using them. These qualities should continue to be cultivated in our students.

Moreover, they should be encouraged to broaden their linguistic horizons to encompass at least one non-European language. Precise language requirements will vary from department to department. We feel that the minimum to be expected is the study of two literatures in the original language, a good reading knowledge of two foreign languages, and, for students of older fields of European, Arabic, or Asian cultures, the acquisition of an ancient "classical" language. Some departments still require as many as three foreign languages plus a classical language. Many require a knowledge of three literatures. In any case, the context for these requirements should extend beyond their value for the analysis of literary meaning to their value for understanding the role of a native tongue in creating subjectivity, in establishing epistemological patterns, in imagining communal structures, in forming notions of nationhood, and in articulating resistance and accommodation to political and cultural hegemony. Moreover, comparatists should be alert to the significant differences within any national culture, which provide a basis for comparison, research, and critical-theoretical inquiry. Among these are differences (and conflicts) according to region, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and colonial or postcolonial status.

Comparatist research is ideally suited to pursue ways in which these differences are conjoined with differences in language, dialect, and usage (including jargon or slang) as well as with problems of dual or multiple language-use and modes of hybridization.

3. While the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages must continue to be stressed, the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated. In fact, translation can well be seen as a paradigm for larger problems of understanding and interpretation across different discursive traditions. Comparative Literature, it could be said, aims to explain both what is lost and what is gained in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines, and institutions. Moreover, the comparatist should accept the responsibility of locating the particular place and time at which he or she studies these practices: Where do I speak from, and from what tradition(s), or counter-traditions? How do I translate Europe or South America or Africa into a North American cultural reality, or, indeed, North America into another cultural context?

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4. Comparative Literature should be actively engaged in the comparative study of canon formation and in reconceiving the canon. Attention should also be paid to the role of non-canonical readings of canonical texts, readings from various contestatory, marginal, or subaltern perspectives. The effort to produce such readings, given prominence recently in, for example, feminist and postcolonial theory, complements the critical investigation of the process of canon formation--how literary values are created and maintained in a particular culture--and vitalizes the attempt to expand canons.

5. Comparative Literature departments should play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives. This does not mean abandoning those perspectives but rather questioning and resisting their dominance. This task may necessitate a significant re-evaluation both of our self-definition as scholars and of the usual standards for comparative work. It may be better, for instance, to teach a work in translation, even if you don't have access to the original language, than to neglect marginal voices because of their mediated transmission. Thus we not only endorse Levin's remark, quoted earlier, that it would be "unduly puristic" to require all reading in Comparative Literature courses to be done in the original, we would even condone certain courses on minority literatures in which the majority of the works were read in translation. (Here it should be acknowledged that minority literatures also exist within Europe; Eurocentricity in practice entails a focus on English, French, German, and Spanish literatures. Even Italian literature, with the exception of Dante, is often marginalized.) Similarly, anthropological and ethnographic models for the comparative study of cultures may be found as suitable for certain courses of study as models derived from literary criticism and theory. Department and program Chairs should actively recruit faculty from non-European literature departments and from allied disciplines to teach courses and to collaborate in broadening the cultural scope of Comparative Literature offerings. In all contexts of its practice, multiculturalism should be approached not as a politically correct way of acquiring more or less picturesque information about others whom we don't really want to know, but as a tool to promote significant reflection on cultural relations, translations, dialogue, and debate.

Thus conceived, Comparative Literature has some affinities with work being done in the field of Cultural Studies. But we should be wary of identifying ourselves with that field, where most scholarship has tended to be monolingual and focussed on issues in specific contemporary popular cultures.

6. Comparative Literature should include comparisons between media, from early manuscripts to TV, Hypertext and VirtuaI Realities. The material form that has constituted our object of study for centuries, the book, is in the process of being transformed through computer technology and the communications revolution. As a

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privileged locus for cross-cultural reflection, Comparative Literature should analyze the material possibilities of cultural expression, both phenomenal and discursive, in their different epistemological, economic, and political contexts. This wider focus involves studying not only the business of book-making but also the cultural space and function of reading and writing and the physical properties of newer communative media.

7. The pedagogical implications of the points previously outlined should be explored in courses, colloquia, and other forums sponsored by departments and programs of Comparative Literature.

Professors from different disciplines should be encouraged to join faculty in Comparative Literature to team teach courses that explore the intersections of their fields and methodologies. Active support should be given to colloquia in which faculty and students discuss interdisciplinary and crosscultural topics. In such contexts, the cultural diversity of both the student body and faculty can usefully become a subject of reflection and an agent promoting increased sensitivity to cultural differences.

8. All of the above suggests the importance of theoretically informed thinking to Comparative Literature as a discipline. A comparatist's training should provide an historical basis for this thinking. Early in their careers, probably in their first year, graduate students should be required to take a course in the history of literary criticism and theory. This course should be designed to show how the major issues have developed and been modified through the centuries and to give students the background necessary to evaluate contemporary debates in their historical contexts.

B. The Undergraduate Program

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1. As the discipline evolves at the graduate level, more undergraduate courses will naturally reflect these changes in perspective. For instance, Comparative Literature courses should teach not just Great Books but also how a book comes to be designated as "great" in a particular culture, that is, what interests have been and are invested in maintaining this label.

More advanced courses might occasionally focus class discussion on current controversies about such matters as Eurocentrism, canon formation, essentialism, colonialism, and gender studies. The new multicultural composition of many of our classrooms should be actively engaged as a pedagogical stimulus for discussion of these matters.

2. Requirements for the major should offer a flexible set of options. One way of defining these, now adopted at many institutions, is: A. two foreign literatures, with two languages required; B. two literatures, one of which may be anglophone; and C. a non-anglophone literature and another discipline. In order to move with some concrete preparation into issues of translation beyond the European cultural matrix, students should be encouraged to study languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, or Swahili. Comparative Literature departments and programs will need to argue for courses in such languages and will have to find ways in which their literatures can be included in the undergraduate major.

3. Undergraduate programs should offer a range of courses that study relations between Western and non-Western cultures and all majors should be required to take some of these. These and other Comparative Literature courses should engage students in theoretical reflection on the methods of accomplishing such study. There is also a need for undergraduate courses in contemporary literary theory.

4. Whenever they have knowledge of the original language, teachers in Comparative Literature courses should refer frequently to the original text of a work they assign in translation. Moreover, they should make discussion of the theory and practice of translation an integral part of these courses.

5. Comparative Literature faculty need to alert themselves and their students to subject areas in their institutions outside the discipline--linguistics, philosophy, history, media studies, film studies, art history, cultural studies--and to encourage extradisciplinary migrations and cross-overs.

3. Conclusion

We feel that Comparative Literature is at a critical juncture in its history. Given that our object of study has never had the kind of fixity that is determined by national boundaries and linguistic usage, Comparative Literature is no stranger to the need to redefine itself. The present moment is particularly propitious for such a review since progressive tendencies in literary studies, toward a multicultural, global, and interdisciplinary curriculum, are comparative in nature. Students of Comparative Literature, with their knowledge of foreign languages, training in cultural translations, expertise in dialogue across disciplines, and theoretical sophistication, are well positioned to take advantage of the broadened scope of contemporary literary studies. Our report puts forward some guiding ideas about the way curricula can be structured in order to expand students' perspectives and stimulate them to think in culturally pluralistic terms.

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A word of caution is in order, however. Although we believe that "comparison" as defined here represents the wave of the future, the economic uncertainties of the present are currently holding that wave back at many universities and colleges. Budgetary restrictions have caused literature departments to define their needs in conservative ways, making it all the more important that Comparative Literature students be able to demonstrate solid training in their primary national literature. Given the unpredictable character of the current job market, it is more important than ever that students begin to think early in their graduate careers about the professional profile they will present and that professors offer them counsel at every stage of their studies about the shaping of their professional identity. This recommendation does not represent a cynical giving-in to market forces but a recognition that we are in a transitional period and that comparatists need to be alert to the shifting economic and socio-political landscape in which they are operating.

This said, we feel that the new directions we have advocated for the field will keep it in the forefront of humanistic studies, and we look forward to the challenges future developments will bring.

Respectfully submitted,

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