

‘QUOIQU’ELLE NE POUSSE NI GRANDS GESTES NI GRANDS CRIS . . . ‘:

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN GREAT BRITAIN

Glyn Hambrook

1. Origins and Development¹

No-one speaks of a ‘British School’ of comparative literature. Yet the origins of comparative literature in Great Britain go back to at least the nineteenth century, from the middle of which reflections on and studies in comparative literature positively flourished.²

Milestones in comparative literature’s institutional presence in British academia include Friedrich Max Mueller’s appointment to the new Chair of Comparative Philology at Oxford in 1867; the creation of the first British journal in the field, *Comparative Literature Studies*, in 1940; the first lectureship in Comparative Literature in 1953 at Manchester (Littau 2014), and the establishment of departments of Literature at Essex and European Studies at Sussex and East Anglia in 1963/64.³

Custodians of comparative literature’s emergence in Great Britain have comprised scholars of diverse provenance, many of whom were not *a priori* comparatists but issue from a range of philological and literary backgrounds. Examples include **Henry Hallam** (1777-

¹ As regards the history of comparative literature in Britain, I defer to Joep Leerssen’s and Elinor Shaffer’s forthcoming *Comparative Literature in Britain: National Identities, Transnational Dynamics 1800-2000*. See also Leerssen, *Komparistik in Grossbritannien 1800-1950* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1984). Recent reflections on comparative literature in the UK were shared at the September 2013 conference *Comparative Criticism: Histories and Methods* (<http://oxfordcomparativeliterature.com/conference/>), organised by the recently created ‘New Grounds for Comparative Criticism’ interdisciplinary research network at the University of Oxford, a selection of papers from which will appear in 2015 in the British Comparative Literature Association’s journal *Comparative Critical Studies*.

I am indebted to Professor Shaffer and Professor Lucia Boldrini for their invaluable comments on drafts of this essay.

² E. S. Shaffer, ‘Editor’s Note: Comparative literature in Britain’, *Comparative Criticism* 1 (1979), pp. xv-xxi (p. xx).

³ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

1859), whose *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1837-1839), is one of the first comparative literary treatises published in Britain)⁴; **H. M. Posnett** (1855-1927), whose *Comparative Literature* (1866) and ‘The Science of Comparative Literature’ (1901),⁵ offer some of the earliest systematic elaborations in Britain of comparative literary methodology; **G. Gregory Smith** (1865-1932), author of ‘Some notes on the Comparative Study of Literature’⁶; Frederick C. Roe, author of ‘Comparative Literature in the United Kingdom’⁷; **Henry Gifford** (1913-2003), whose *Comparative Literature* (1969) was one of the first home-grown manuals on the discipline⁸; **Sigbert Praver** (1925-2012), whose *Comparative Literary Studies. An Introduction* (1973)⁹ and *Breeches and Metaphysics: Thackeray’s German Discourse* (1997), the first book in the British Comparative Literature Association’s (BCLA) ‘Studies in Comparative Literature’ series published by Legenda are landmarks in British comparatism; **Winfried Georg Sebald** (1944-2001), founding director of the University of East Anglia’s British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) in 1989, whose endeavour accounts in no small measure for the close relationship between comparative literature and translation studies; and former BCLA presidents **Arthur Terry** (1927-2004) and **Malcolm Bowie** (1943-2007), whose contributions to the field have been acknowledged in the form of an annual postgraduate essay prize and memorial lecture respectively.

Current pillars of British comparatism include **Elinor Shaffer**, founder of the BCLA (1975, in the wake of a conference on comparative studies at the University of East Anglia) and the journal *Comparative Criticism* (1979), editor of the aforementioned Legenda

⁴ Shaffer (1979) surveys the contribution of Hallam and others mentioned above to the early development of comparative literature in Britain.

⁵ *Contemporary Review*, 79 (June 1901).

⁶ *Modern Language Review*, 1 (1906).

⁷ *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* (1954), pp. 1-12, in Shaffer 1979, p.ii.

⁸ See Peter France, ‘Henry Gifford and the “Mind of Europe”’, *Comparative Critical Studies ‘Legacies’*, 7.2-3 (2010), pp. 193-201.

⁹ (London: Duckworth).

Comparative Literature series and of *Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* (Continuum), and UK director of the British Academy Network on Reception Studies. An unstinting advocate of and ambassador for comparative literature in the UK, Professor Shaffer spoke for the discipline when, in the 1970s, '[t]he traditional syllabus of literary studies – confined primarily to one national literature, or to two studied for the most part in isolation from one another [...] was] clearly in the process of transformation'.¹⁰

Another stalwart of British comparatism is **Susan Bassnett**, Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick (a long-established centre of comparatism), author of the internationally acclaimed *Translation Studies* (1980 [First edition]) and whose *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993)¹¹ explores the relationship between comparative literature and translation studies. Professor Bassnett has participated actively in debates on the state of comparative literary studies in Britain, as her response to Spivak's controversial *Death of a Discipline* demonstrates¹²; and Professor **Marina Warner**, successor in 2010 to Professor Dame Gillian Beer as President of the BCLA, and who exemplifies British comparatism's links to the world of creative writing.

2. Publications and dissemination

'Legenda' books, which includes the BCLA's Series 'Studies in Comparative Literature', has since 1997 been a major vehicle for comparative literary scholarship in the UK.¹³ The field is expanding: in 2013, for example, Palgrave Macmillan launched Studies in Contemporary Comparative Literatures, inviting submissions in English 'on the cutting edge contemporary

¹⁰ Shaffer 1979 p. xv.

¹¹ *Comparative Literature. A Critical Introduction* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

¹² 'Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), pp. 3-11.

¹³ (<http://www.legendabooks.com/?catalogue=search&S=SICL>).

and the globally comparatist' that draw on at least three literatures.. These requirements sum up UK comparative literature's current ambitions: pertinence, transnational scope and awareness of the hegemony of English as an actuality but also a challenge.

Also worthy of mention are the *Oxford History of Literary Translation* (from 2000) and the forthcoming book series 'Edinburgh Critical Studies in Literary Translation', from 2015.

As regards journals, *Comparative Criticism*, founded in 1974, merged in 2004 with the BCLA's *New Comparison* to form the Association's current journal, *Comparative Critical Studies*, a tri-annual publication with an annual electronic supplement, e-CCS. The first issue of each year publishes excerpts from the prizewinning and commended entries to the BCLT's Dryden literary translation competition.

Since 2012 there has been a marked increase in submissions referring to non-European literatures, mostly by non-European authors, a trend augmented by a simultaneous increase in the number of submissions by European or European-based scholars dealing with non-European literatures or involving East-West comparison.

Editorial policy encourages engagement with the theory and methodology of comparative literature to sustain the journal's role as a monitor and promoter of the field's evolution and orientation in the UK. Consequently, recent issues have covered 'Translation, Transformation and Reception' (2.1[2005]), the state of the discipline ('Comparative Literature at a Crossroads?', 3.1-2 [2006]), reception studies ('Comparative Reception Studies Today', 3.3[2006]), 'Cinematicity' (6.3 [2009]), appraisals of the legacies of eminent comparatists (7.2-3 [2010]), 'Media of Translation' (8.1 [2011]) and current issues in comparative literature (12.2 [2014]).

Translation and Literature, founded in 1992 and described as 'now the preeminent scholarly periodical in the field of literary translation',¹⁴ focuses on the translation into

¹⁴ <<http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/staff/stuartgillespie/>>.

English. Other journals, such as the Modern Humanities Research Association's *Modern Language Review*, invite submissions on comparative topics and have a designated editor for this purpose. UK-published nation- or language-specific journals are also increasingly predisposed to accept submissions of a comparative nature.

3. Communities and Presence

3.1. Hubs of Comparatism

The aforementioned BCLA is the principal organisation promoting the cause of comparative literature in the UK and representing the interests of its practitioners. The Association promotes 'the scholarly study of literature without confinement to national or linguistic boundaries, and in relation to other disciplines' and 'research along comparative, intercultural and interdisciplinary lines'.¹⁵ The BCLA disseminates comparative research through triennial conferences, occasional workshop conferences and its journal *Comparative Critical Studies*. The BCLA's multinational membership embraces staff, postgraduate students, independent researchers and specialists in cognate academic areas such as translation studies, travel writing, and cultural and media studies. The Association's active postgraduate section, with representation on the Executive Committee, organises seminars, conferences and workshops and coordinates publications.

Recently, the Association's public advocacy role has come to the fore through support for the British Academy's campaign, from 2009, to redress the UK's foreign language 'deficit', of which more below, and its opposition to the closure of university foreign language departments as well as to a perceived rise of instrumentalism in UK higher education that weakens the position of the Humanities.

¹⁵ <<http://bcla.org/about/>>.

A recent initiative worthy of mention is the aforementioned Oxford-based, pan-faculty, interdisciplinary group ‘New Grounds for Comparative Criticism’, created in response to recent developments and debates, particularly World Literature’s challenge (the group claims) to Eurocentrism and the emergence of new forms of media and artistic production in the context of the crisis of the Humanities. It posits ‘comparative criticism’ as an alternative to ‘comparative literature’ and focuses

on the role of translation in a global comparative literature; the elements and aspects of texts that support comparison; the location of the critic as determining what counts as comparison and how it is done; the interplay between the foreignness of foreign languages and the alterity which is sometimes taken to constitute the aesthetic; the challenges of comparative thinking across literature and the other arts.¹⁶

3.2. Comparative Literature in UK Higher Education

The number of undergraduate courses in or including comparative literature has increased noticeably in recent years. The course guide of the University Central Admissions Service (UCAS), which oversees recruitment to undergraduate courses, for 2014-2015 entry, lists seventeen universities offering comparative literature on a total of 180 single- or combined subject degree programmes. Of these, however, only six institutions have courses called ‘Comparative Literature’ or something similar; two others, both established academic homes of comparative literature, offered ‘Literature’ or ‘European Literature’. Nine other institutions offer comparative literature under the auspices of English Studies, possibly an indication of this subject’s ambition – anxiety? – to be regarded in a more appealingly ‘internationalist’ guise in a global age.

¹⁶ <<http://oxfordcomparativeliterature.com/about/>> [Accessed 23/07/2013]

This apparently ad-hoc approach to curricular development is explained by British universities' comparatively high degree of autonomy in matters of curriculum development, whence the influence of (perceived student) demand or timeliness, response to which is as likely to be welcomed by institutional authorities as it is to be opposed by them. This also accounts in part for the institutional particularization of comparative literature: variations often derive from contextual considerations as well as institutions' recruitment or marketing strategies, such as the extent to which under-recruiting modern languages departments perceive the possibility of teaching literature in translation as a threat or an opportunity,¹⁷ or to which English departments sensitive to accusations of curricular Anglocentrism perceive the incorporation of non-Anglophone curriculum content and expertise to be advantageous.

As regards Masters in comparative literature, the website www.mastersportal.eu lists twenty-one MA or Postgraduate Diploma courses in the UK that have comparative literature in the title, and www.findamasters.com lists nineteen.

The increase in the subject's presence at undergraduate and Master levels since the new millennium and the growth of postgraduate research in comparative literature was attributed recently to demand for interdisciplinary and less discipline-prescribed study; an increasing convergence of comparative literature, World Literature and translation studies; and growing interest in non-European literatures.¹⁸ To these reasons might be added collaboration between university departments of Foreign Languages and English prompted by merger and/or rationalisation.

3.3. National Evaluation of Quality of Research

¹⁷ Laura Martin, 'The Ethics of Narration in the Works of W. G. Sebald as an Example for Comparative Literature', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11.1 (2014), pp. 29-47 (pp. 30, 32).

¹⁸ Rebecca Jones and Marlies G. Prinzl, 'Comparative Literature in British Higher Education since the Millennium'. Essay commissioned for inclusion in Shaffer and Leerssen's forthcoming *Comparative Literature in Britain: National Identities, Transnational Dynamics 1800-2000*.

Following a pilot exercise in 1986, the quality of university research has since 1992 been subject to a funding-linked evaluation initially called the Research Assessment Exercise (1992, 1996, 2001, 2008) and recast as the Research Excellence Framework for the 2008-2013 cycle, during which the impact of research beyond academic as well as outputs and environment was assessed. Institutional submissions are by Unit of Assessment (UoA) comprising a subject or group of cognate subjects, or to multi- or trans-disciplinary hubs of research activity. Research in comparative literature is eligible for submission under the UoAs Modern Languages, English Language and Literature or the multidisciplinary Area Studies, of which the first two are the most common hosts.¹⁹

3.4. Senior Academic Positions in Comparative Literature

A number of comparatively younger scholars who have gained appropriately designated professorial appointments, some new, have helped to consolidate comparative literature's position in British academia. The Chair of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths College (University of London); the George Steiner Chair of Comparative Literature, Queen Mary College (University of London); and the Chair of Comparative Literature, University of Kent, are but three examples.

4. International Connections

The BCLA's aim to provide 'a forum for personal institutional contacts [...] with associations and individuals in other countries'²⁰ is enacted through affiliation to the International Comparative Literature Association and the European Network of Comparative Literary Studies (ENCLS), which has over 60 UK-based members and of which the BCLA's

¹⁹ < <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/unitsofassessment/>.

²⁰ < www.bcla.org >.

Lucia Boldrini was elected General Coordinator in 2005, and inter-associational collaborations such as the BCLA's and Spain's SELGYC's 'Xenographies' project, initiated in 2009, on the representation of the foreign(er) in literature and cognate discourses.²¹

5. The Nature and Mission of Comparative Literature: Current Debates

Until well into the 1970s, comparative literature in Britain remained wedded substantially to 'influence studies'; but at the same time, 'continental' theory was making inroads into literary studies, transforming comparative literature but also questioning its foundations. One corollary of the 1980s' New Paradigm's move towards critical pluralism was the belief that comparative literature must *rinnoarsi o morire*. As regards the British context, one in which comparatists have engaged since the nineteenth century in a sustained and systematic reflection on methodology often unacknowledged outside the UK,²² the early 1990s saw Susan Bassnett's pessimistic verdict a decade before Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003)²³ and Elinor Shaffer's assessment of British comparative literature's place within the European field.²⁴ Subsequently, the search for solutions to the 'crisis' of comparative literature have reflected a response to national circumstances that we will now proceed to review.

5.1. Language Matters

²¹ This collaboration has yielded two conferences ('Xenographies', University of Wolverhampton, UK, 2009; 'Xenographies II', Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 2011, from which three publications have emerged: Javier Pardo, Glyn Hambrook and Benjamin Colbert (eds), *1616. Anuario de literatura comparada*, 1 (2011). ; Hambrook, Pardo and Colbert, *Comparative Critical Studies. 'Xenographies'*, 9.2 (2012); Montserrat Cots, Pere Gifra Adroher and Glyn Hambrook (eds), *Interrogating Gazes. Comparative Critical Views on the Representation of Foreignness and Otherness* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).

²² Shaffer 1980.

²³ Bassnett 2006, p. 6.

²⁴ Elinor Shaffer, 'Comparative Literature in Britain and Europe', *Comparative Criticism*, 15 (1993), pp. xv-xxiv. 1993.

Accelerating decline since the mid-1990s in the number of university applications to study foreign languages has led to the rationalisation and even the closure of foreign language departments. Reasons given for this decline include the ‘growing xenophobia of British society and media, and the mainstreaming of Euroscepticism [which] have turned many [...] back to determined monolingualism’; and the ‘adoption of English as a global *lingua franca* [...] that] has provided the instrumentally-motivated with a good excuse not to bother’ to learn foreign languages or to promote their acquisition, ‘however absurd the myth that English is a single language spoken by everyone in the UK and learnt by the rest of the world’.²⁵ Responses to this situation include the British Academy’s aforementioned 2009 position paper ‘Language Matters’,²⁶ ‘Language Matters More and More’(2011)²⁷ and ‘Lost for Words’ (2013),²⁸ addressing negative consequences of waning foreign language competence and its corollary, intercultural myopia. The 2009 report argued that Anglophone monoglossia hampered significantly the personal and professional opportunity of UK Humanities researchers. In short, knowing English is advantageous, but knowing *only* English already means quite the opposite.

This situation, however, has had unexpected if somewhat ironic compensations for the champions of intercultural awareness and competence. Redeployment of languages staff in English departments following rationalisation or closure has internationalized the literary studies curriculum in a way that English Studies alone would have been insufficiently equipped to achieve. The corresponding expansion of comparative literature²⁹ has helped English Studies to counter accusations of endemic reactionary Anglo-centrism.

²⁵ James A. Coleman, ‘French Studies in the United Kingdom: How Did We Get Here and Where Are We Going?’, *French Studies Bulletin*, 130 (2014), pp. 1-6 (p. 2)

²⁶ <<http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/language-matters.cfm>>.

²⁷ <<http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Language-matters-more-and-more.cfm>>.

²⁸ <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Lost_For_Words.cfm>.

²⁹ Lucia Boldrini, ‘Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A View from Europe and the UK’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), pp. 13-23 (p. 14).

However, although this silver lining in the cloud of foreign language ‘deficit’ has mitigated the sense of comparative literature’s ‘crisis’, the problems surrounding languages – foreign and English – still have repercussions for comparative literature’s situation in the UK. Comparative literature in Britain, with its relatively modest number of departments, has traditionally recruited from two communities: Modern Languages; and English, which although traditionally monoglot and Anglocentric, is prone to see itself as the national custodian of literary studies. In its most positive and effective guise a dual regency in which each participant exercises power on the basis of equal but distinct merits, this marriage of convenience between Modern Languages and English has been unsettled, although by no means sundered, by simultaneous crises in credibility in both camps: the former perceived as irrelevant in a linguistically powerful monoglot (62%, according the EU) national community and the latter as still tainted by a obliviousness or indifference to its own internal cultural and linguistic diversity, not to mention to the non-Anglophone world.

One issue is whether knowledge of foreign languages should remain a prerequisite for practising comparative literature irrespective of the former’s fragile position. Certainly, competence to study ‘across linguistic boundaries’³⁰ was a founding principle, subsequently reaffirmed,³¹ of UK comparative literature and remains for some ‘philosophically and structurally fundamental and intrinsic to the discipline’,³² particularly in an environment and at a time when hegemony is attributed by reflex to English. Arguably, any student of literature, comparative or not, benefits from the enhanced scope for reading that knowing foreign languages brings. The requirement of foreign language competence, however, – ironically – poses certain theoretical problems because of the traditional and persistent association of language with nation and, by extension, the national paradigm that comparative

³⁰ Bassnett 2006, p. 5.

³¹ Thomas Doherty, ‘Without and Beyond Compare’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), pp. 25-35 (p. 28).

³² Doherty, p. 28.

literature still struggles to transcend.³³ Even if this favours a pragmatic accommodation to circumstance – foreign languages’ decline – British comparatists remain loathe to resign themselves to the hegemony of English, which although ‘routinely recognised as a world language’³⁴ and ‘the most studied second language in Europe, and hence [...] part of the comparative syllabus throughout the continent’.³⁵ remains ‘at best [...] a series of languages spoken and written in diverse ways in diverse parts of the globe. It may globalise our work *in principle*, but in fact globalisation of our domain [comparative literature] remains essentially a matter for the economic and publishing markets’.³⁶ Failure to acknowledge this may derive from the assumption that ‘all linguistic difference can be rendered a matter of commensurability’ and consequently ‘that the tacit translation of all difference into an unspoken English is the end of translation’.³⁷ Comparative literature can counter these assumptions by demonstrating that ‘English is grounded in a variety of Englishes’.³⁸ Correspondingly, English-first-language users’ realisation of English’s ‘actual and constitutive foreignness [...] may even encourage a return to the study of foreign languages as windows onto (or doors into) other cultures’.³⁹ Equally, a comparative literature thus informed could awaken British English scholars to the ‘reach’ of English literature by extending national literary history ‘to the unfamiliar, often unexpected and illuminating responses abroad to the works of British writers’, without which such a history ‘is simply incomplete’.⁴⁰

In conclusion, it is worth noting that policymakers too seem far from oblivious to comparative literature’s potential role in this situation: a University of London proposal in

³³ Boldrini, pp. 18-19.

³⁴ Docherty, p. 30.

³⁵ Boldrini, p. 15.

³⁶ Docherty, p. 30

³⁷ Docherty, p. 29

³⁸ Docherty, p. 30.

³⁹ Boldrini, pp. 20-22.

⁴⁰ E. Shaffer, ‘World Literature Tomorrow’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), pp. 77-82 (p. 79).

spring 2014 to craft from part of a dismantled Institute of English Studies a Centre for Comparative Literature within the Institute for Modern Languages Research, although arguably infelicitous and expedient in its motivation, was possibly prophetic in envisaging a *rapprochement* between Modern Languages and English effected through comparative literature.

5.2. *World Literature*

When Monika Albrecht observed recently that ‘questions remain such as “how comparative literature should deal with “world literature”’,⁴¹ she exposed the ambivalence of British comparatism’s response to this recent incarnation of literary globalisation. Concerns remain that the new World Literature is a fundamentally Western project that although ‘able to speak to audiences across the barriers of language and even culture’, needs to extend its corpus ‘beyond the confines of European literature, not as “post-colonial”, but as setting forth from a different set of originating “centres” and shifting “peripheries”’.⁴² However, even if World Literature’s revival of the literary canon in principle facilitates extension of canonical status to literatures from cultural milieus to which such status was hitherto denied, English’s predominance as a language of dissemination restricts non-European writers’ canonization through translation into other languages with global reach.⁴³ Translation’s share of the UK publishing market is, moreover, very modest because of ‘the global diversity of Anglophone fiction itself; the fact that (usually monolingual) UK publishers perceive translation as a problem in terms of both cost and process [...]; British anti-intellectualism and suspicion of non-Anglophone cultures; critical reception that either ignores the question of translation or

⁴¹ Monika Albrecht, ‘Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Studies Revisited’. Reflections in Light of Recent Transitions in the Fields of Postcolonial Studies’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10.1 (2013), 47-65 (p. 47).

⁴² Shaffer 2006, pp. 77, 81.

⁴³ Robert Wening, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), pp. xi-xix (p. xv).

focuses only on its problems'.⁴⁴ The idea that World Literature not only serves the needs but possibly feeds the appetite of an Anglophone community only too willing to remain in its linguistic-cultural comfort zone, not to mention other communities in thrall or resigned to English's hold over cultural production and diffusion, is not lost on British comparatists. It is hard to counter the claim that 'Britain holds on to its links with the Anglophone world, its ex-colonies and dominions, and [...], with its lack of interest in foreign languages, [...] looks towards the postcolonial field and a "world literature" that can be read in English translation rather than to the comparative literature that relies on multilingual expertise'.⁴⁵ What is more, World Literature's disguised re-affirmation of (Western) Anglophone cultural hegemony, if such it is, is reinforced by the programmatic dissemination of Western means of *understanding* literature,⁴⁶ as some non-British European Anglicists have observed: '[i]n English Departments and beyond, "theory" and its aftermaths have arguably been over-influenced by US- and UK-based institutions, publishers, journals and academics'.⁴⁷

These circumstances are not of recent origin: 'Although English literature has absorbed many foreign influences in the course of its long history,' observed Elinor Shaffer in 1979, 'the emphasis on native tradition in the most extensive and powerful literature in the world has sometimes seemed to impede the recognition of foreign literature'.⁴⁸

Comparative literature, it has been suggested, can redress this situation through a relativizing repositioning of Anglophone dominant culture that foregrounds, for example, 'the way in which Western foundation texts have found their way into other literatures [and] appear to be more highly valued outside Europe than by a generation of scholars uneasy

⁴⁴ Diana Holmes and Michael Syrotinski, 'Translation and Reception. Twenty-First Century French Fiction in the UK', *French Studies Bulletin*, 128 (2013), pp. 62-65 (p. 63).

⁴⁵ Boldrini, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Weninger, p. xvi.

⁴⁷ Stefan Herbrechter, Ivan Callus, and Manuela Rossini, 'European Posthumanism', *The European Literary Messenger*, 21.1 (2012), pp. 10-11 (p. 10).

⁴⁸ Shaffer 1979, p. xv.

about their own history of colonialism and imperialism'.⁴⁹ This may temper the perception of World Literature as a Western neo-colonial enterprise and challenge the culturally proprietorial belief that literature emanating from a particular environment 'belongs' to that environment rather than to the literary systems that consecrates it.

5.3. Postcolonial Studies

Susan Bassnett was among the first UK-based comparatists to proclaim the significance of Postcolonial Studies (hereafter PCS) for comparative literature⁵⁰ following its irradiation from a US eager to assert a brand of comparative literature grounded in a rejection of European cultural colonialism. PCS's potential to redress Eurocentrism together with a certain instrumental convenience led it to flourish in a variety of disciplines. English Studies embraced PCS as a means to extend the study of literature in English beyond the traditional metropoli without crossing linguistic boundaries.⁵¹ This may explain postcolonial theory's predominance in English Studies scholarship in Britain as a means of exploring Otherness, in contrast to PCS's coexistence with other approaches, such as imagology, in non-Anglophone Europe.

However, doubts have emerged that PCS has met the expectations implicit in Bassnett's proclamation. Monika Albrecht argued recently that PCS has, in the wrong – unreflecting or vogue-driven – hands, become a rather crude stick with which to belabour a European culture cast all too conveniently as irredeemably colonialist and imperialist – 'the prevalent practice of negligent discrimination against the majority which, surprisingly, rarely faces a demand for justification – let alone the kind of objection it deserves'⁵² – and which Bassnett herself had earlier admitted to be not 'particularly helpful for those of us who have

⁴⁹ Bassnett 2006, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Bassnett 1993, p. 76.

⁵¹ Boldrini, p. 15.

⁵² Albrecht, p. 47.

as a starting point one or more of those great [European Literary] traditions'.⁵³ By way of a remedy, Albrecht refers to recent calls for a 'rethinking and revising' from a comparative perspective suspect core tenets that PCS has developed, such as striving 'to prove canonical inherent and inevitable complicity with the colonial project of its writers' colonial mentality'.⁵⁴

Albrecht also questions PCS's assumption 'that comparisons [...] necessarily reproduce the well-known hegemony of the West'.⁵⁵ This, she argues, leads to a critical practice that is 'not only highly predictable in its results but also [...] remarkably superficial in its literary analysis'⁵⁶ – one that comparative literature might be well equipped to redeem.⁵⁷

Repudiation of this punitive attitude towards European/Western culture (see also Weninger⁵⁸) together with a persistent trans-generational interest in European, including British, culture, bears witness to acceptance of European culture's place, albeit duly reconfigured, in the comparative spectrum. European-focused British comparatists, including emergent scholars who 'find themselves unfairly associated [with] the Eurocentrism of yore [and] express some resistance to the tendency to see the new Comparative Literature purely as a discipline that requires us to [... sacrifice] the regional for the global',⁵⁹ feel their place to be justified even if the future orientation of their work remains unclear.⁶⁰ Thus, to relocate national literatures such as Britain's in a European context through, for example, reception projects 'based on [...] recognizing and analysing the intellectual history of the UK as part of the wider European cultural heritage'⁶¹ would be applicable across Europe because 'only

⁵³ Bassnett 2006, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Albrecht, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 53

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵⁷ W. S. Hassad and R. Saunders (eds), 'Introduction', *Comparative (Post) Colonialisms, 'Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East'*, 23.1-2 (2003), pp. 18-31 (p. 21).

⁵⁸ Weninger, p. xvii.

⁵⁹ Weninger, p. xvii.

⁶⁰ Bassnett 2006, pp. 4-5.

⁶¹ Shaffer 2006, p. 78.

through the detailed examination of the process of dissemination of writings across Europe over time that [... can we] determine the exact contours of this complex and changing entity [that is Europe]'.⁶²

In other respects, however, PCS has already moved beyond the antagonistic dialectic of the West versus the Rest or of a canon predicated on a hegemonic European culture, into the realms of post-post-colonialism.

5.4. Translation Studies

S. S. Prawer, who traced the link between the study of comparative literary study and of translation to Dryden,⁶³ endorsed this partnership because '[translation] provides the most important channel through which international influences can flow'.⁶⁴ Prawer affirmed that '[t]he activities of the translator and adaptor [...] lead naturally to those of the comparatist critic and historian of literature'.⁶⁵ Susan Bassett's review (1993) of the contract between comparative literature and Translation Studies during the former's 'critical' phase considered their interdependence in terms of which discipline belongs within which. A decade or so later they converged again in her affirmation that '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,⁶⁶ not least because translation is often a symptom of literary innovation and renovation.⁶⁷ Finally, the conviction that 'a philosophy of translation is required for any and every act of comparative reading'⁶⁸ offers another instance of British comparatism's endorsement of their partnership.

⁶² Ibid., p. 81.

⁶³ Prawer, p. 97.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

⁶⁶ Bassnett 2006, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁸ Docherty, p. 28.

5.5. *The national paradigm*

A vexed question: how to transcend the national paradigm persistent in comparative scholarship? Solutions proposed include shifting the focus from national literatures to significant events – Bassnett’s example is the 1755 Lisbon earthquake – to facilitate an interdisciplinary plurivocality with ‘voices assembled [...] in a kind of chorus referring back to one particular historical moment’⁶⁹; or through ‘nodal points’,⁷⁰ ‘where different cultures come into contact, and from which different historical, artistic, cultural forces irradiate’⁷¹; or to *sidestep* national identity by uncoupling *nativity* from *nationality*,⁷² while rejecting the homogenising fallacy of English as a world language.⁷³ Embracing redeemed internationalisms offers another way out of the cloying concept of nation. ‘The recent reappearance of “universalism” and “cosmopolitanism” as positive terms of analysis’,⁷⁴ and the potential recuperation of ‘globalization’, because ‘[t]he 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 the theories of cultural capital and its transmission can be a productive comparative method’⁷⁵ are cases in point. Finally, the de-centring of national cultural production through its systematic displacement to an inter-or trans-national context of reception, laying the foundations for ‘large-scale comparative research dealing with such issues as value and the transfer not just of economic but also intellectual capital’,⁷⁶ offers another way out and forward.

5.5. *What is comparison?*

⁶⁹ Bassnett, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷¹ Boldrini, p. 7.

⁷² Docherty, p. 30, after Giorgio Agamben.

⁷³ Idem.

⁷⁴ Shaffer 2006, p. 80.

⁷⁵ Bassnett 2006, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Shaffer 2006, p. 81.

PCS's suspicion of comparison may rest partly on questionable premises, but the critical light it shone on comparison has brought this concept into timely focus. The very name of Oxford University's recently convened group 'New Grounds for Comparative Criticism' advocates critical reassessment of how comparison can take place in a theoretically legitimate way. Catherine Brown identified recently diverse practices subsumed within comparative analysis for which the designation 'comparison' is not necessarily appropriate. Brown proposes a more nuanced re-designation of these operations to make explicit the kind of activity each entails and to determine if, indeed, each can justifiably be termed 'comparison'. Brown's premise that '[c]omparison is intrinsic to thought and willed action' places an onus on honing 'one's skills at comparison, and consciousness of comparison's attractions and dangers, in the intellectually but practically sheltered environment of literary criticism'.⁷⁷

Comparison's aspiration to *rapprochement* has also been challenged. To reject the principle of transcultural commensurability's 'demand to lessen difference')⁷⁸ that much comparison assumes would allow 'two separate literatures [to ...] encounter each other without one "containing" the other [and] both [to] resist containment under the general sign of a totalising 'English'.⁷⁹ Acceptance of difference and diversity and rejection of 'that fallacious and potentially fantasy-governed demand of "commensurability"'⁸⁰ finds an echo in two recent British-authored articles⁸¹ that consider whether the approximation of Self to Other - the identitarian equivalent of commensurability - can ever/really/actually be achieved – an indication that acts of comparison are inseparable from the entities that they seek to approximate or juxtapose.

⁷⁷ Catherine Brown, 'What is "Comparative" Literature?', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10.1 (2013) pp. 67-88 (p. 83).

⁷⁸ Docherty, p. 31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸¹ Martin, *op. cit.* and Stuart Taberner, 'Memory, Cosmopolitanism and Nation: Christa Wolf's *Stadt der Engel* (2010) and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999)', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11.1 (2014), pp. 49-67.

6. *Point final*: Challenges, Futures

Does Susan Bassnett's declaration that 'the concerns that were expressed in the latter decades of the twentieth century remain unresolved'⁸² mean that initiatives from the New Paradigm onwards have failed to dispel British comparatists' anxieties regarding the mission and identity of their subject? New and redefined alliances with other fields, as we have seen, have raised as many new concerns as they have allayed old ones. Certainly, by around 2005 comparative literature in the UK was 'at yet another crossroads – except that the crossroads would not seem to be the same in every part of the world'.⁸³ Yet what if the *real* crisis is the willingness to accept that comparative literature *was* in crisis?⁸⁴ What if the 'crisis' derived less from any actual epistemological collapse than from misrecognition of the field's inherent heterogeneity? As Robert Wenginger says, 'what keeps this discipline so alive and vibrant is its continual search for new remedies for our exegetical headaches and new antidotes for our many disciplinary disorders'.⁸⁵ For Susan Bassnett, the sense of crisis has been exacerbated by comparatists' subscription to different but over-prescriptive, and therefore incompatible, formulations of what comparative literature 'is'.⁸⁶ Should then comparative literature cast off the mantle of discipline as arguably it is *not* one but rather 'an inter-discipline or a trans-discipline, if not a meta-discipline – or is it all three packaged into one' (Wenginger 2006: xi)?⁸⁷

To see comparative literature as an *approach* rather than a discipline allows a position, its advocates claim, 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

⁸² Bassnett 2006, p. 3.

⁸³ Wenginger, p. xiv.

⁸⁴ Docherty, p. 25.

⁸⁵ Wenginger, p. xviii.

⁸⁶ Bassnett 2006, p. 7.

⁸⁷ Wenginger, p. xi.

place’,⁸⁸ and which is validated ‘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’.⁸⁹ Accordingly, the new comparatist-reader ‘does not place an understanding at the centre of our work, but replaces that with the experience of an “encounter” [which] like love, is what is without and beyond compare’.⁹⁰

In conclusion, then, comparative literature in the UK has been a buoyant, strategically compelling and expanding presence in higher education since the mid-noughties, building on foundations laid in the mid-twentieth century in which there converge responses to the international ‘crisis’ in the field and certain national political and intellectual circumstances.

As regards the former, even if speculation regarding the demise of comparative literature proved ultimately to be more controversial than diagnostic, it prompted opportunely British comparatists to reassess approaches to European and non-European literary traditions, opening the way to formulation of a theoretically and methodologically rigorous yet flexible, reader-centred, geo-culturally and generico-discursively inclusive approach to reading literature and its cultural context(s); in short, a systematically heterogeneous way of thinking – and being – in relation to literature.

As regards the latter, British comparatism has engaged perforce with the ways in which cultural, linguistic and political forces shape academia organisationally and epistemologically in a given national environment; yet there can be no doubt that insofar as a national variant exists, it does not consider itself to be disconnected from the international community that is comparative literature.

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⁸⁸ Bassnett, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰ Docherty, p. 34.

