

Introduction: Europe, in Comparison

Ever since the beginnings of the discipline of comparative literature in the 19th century, the relation between comparative literature and the idea of Europe has been an intricate one. It is because, for reasons that we will come to explain, this connection no longer seems so self-evident today that it becomes an open question, a question that the contributions to this volume will approach in their different ways. When the first projects for comparative literature emerged in 19th century Europe – foremost in Germany and France, but, as David Damrosch and Herbert Grabes remind us in their contributions to this book, also in Britain and in culturally less dominant countries – the term “comparative” was to be understood in contrast to the term “national”: while the latter term held connotations of partiality and parochialism, “comparative literature,” as Susan Bassnett explains, “carried with it a sense of transcendence of the narrowly nationalistic” (21). Comparative literature, then, was always more than a value-neutral research project, as its vocation to overcome bias and opposition also carried the political and ethical promise of peace and cooperation beyond national and ethnic lines. In practice, however, and in spite of such lofty vocational claims, early comparative studies all too often tended to conclude their comparisons of their own literature with the literature(s) of other nations by declaring the superiority of the masterpieces of their own literary history. Also, in the rare instances in which they ventured beyond the small set of major nation-states, they generally ended up reinforcing the privilege of these major players. Not only were early comparative practices Eurocentric, then, by their negligence of non-(central-)European literatures, they also tended to reinforce the division of Europe in different nation-states that they set out to transcend. Indeed, because it insisted on comparing literatures along national lines, the Eurocentrism of early comparative literature was not only due to the fact that it almost exclusively limited itself to the study of European literatures, but also to the fact that it studied these literatures as *national* literatures, and therefore reproduced the 19th- and early 20th century European political status quo, which further effectively blinded it to the rest of the world (Appiah 54).

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It is no surprise, then, that when American comparative literature really took off after the Second World War, it motivated its claim to offer a more genuinely *comparative* kind of comparison by underlining the distinction between the characteristically European picture of a multiplicity of different nations opposing each other and the uniquely American success of an all-embracing national unit that had managed to integrate ethnically and culturally very different groups of immigrants (Reese-Schäfer 261). The American melting pot seemed to provide a more promising model to realize the comparative ideals of interdisciplinarity and universalism than the multidirectional oppositions between the different parts of Europe (Bassnett 33). It is on the strength of this alleged American impartiality that Werner Friederich, one of the pioneers and untiring missionaries of the American comparative creed, in an address to the Australasian Language and Literature Congress in 1964, could declare the superiority of the American approach to comparative literature. Friederich took to task “[t]he most unworthy among the European comparatists” who “ignore the fact that comparatism [...] constitutes a political creed, an abjuring of all forms of racism,” by publishing “so-called comparative books only to underscore all the more bigotedly the alleged superiority of their own national literature” (48). Friederich voiced a basic conviction of his field when he claimed that the American situation lent itself particularly well to the promotion of “cosmopolitan cross-fertilization” (37). Already in 1948, when Europe still found itself in the midst of its self-perpetrated ruins, Friederich declared in an address in Paris that “[a]way from the national rivalries of strife-torn Europe, [Americans] have no special axe to grind and can weigh the debits and the credits of the various national literatures justly and with detachment” (9).

What this proclamation of a blissful removal from the constraints of a partial national viewpoint should not be allowed to obscure is the realization that the very ideals of universality and cosmopolitanism that Friederich promotes reflect decidedly European ideas (Aseguiolaza 423; Bassnett 1-5). Friederich seems to admit as much in the sentence following the one just quoted from the Paris address: “Furthermore,” we read, “with the blood of most European nations flowing through their veins, [Americans] have a possibility of achieving a tolerance and a level-headedness in their outlook which at times is missing among militant European scholars” (9). American

comparatism thus paradoxically seems to derive its capacity to supersede Europe’s residual provincialism from the fact that it belongs to the very lineage that it at the same time claims to correct. By filling in what “at times is missing” in European comparatism, American comparative literature did not so much offer an alternative to European comparatism, but rather saw itself as the completion of what remained unfulfilled in Europe. The impulse animating postwar American comparative literature was still recognizably the European dream of cosmopolitanism that had migrated across the Atlantic in order to come to fruition in that more welcoming climate. In this respect, it is useful to remember that many of the early sponsors of American comparatism were displaced Europeans – we can think of such giants as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek, and indeed of Werner Friederich himself. At the very end of his Paris address, Friederich underlined this conception of the United States as the furthest province of Europe by inviting his (European) audience to think of “what we are doing” as “part of the deeper meaning of the Marshall Plan,” as part of an effort to restore and perpetuate Europe’s grandeur in order to save, in the words of Friederich’s closing call, “the great cultural heritage that belongs to us, the Western World” (10). The idea of Europe here served as the invisible border of the imaginary realm in which the dream of even-handed comparison could be acted out. Because the idea of Europe remained invisible as a limit, it was mainly considered as a benevolent supranational principle that allowed the study of the traffic of a limited set of literary devices, themes, and topoi between a limited set of European literatures to be perceived as a model of global cooperation and universal tolerance.

If we want to appreciate how Europe only gradually became visible as also a *limit* to the cosmopolitan hopes of comparatism, a good place to look is in the successive “reports on standards” that the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) has solicited from a committee made up of some of its most distinguished members at different times in its development (in 1965, 1975, 1993, and 2004). When read in sequence, these documents offer us a clear narrative of the discipline’s changing self-image, and specifically of the changing place of Europe in this image. The first report from 1965 contains an emphatic call to reaffirm the “belief in the internationalism of [the] field.” This internationalism, however, will be sufficiently established, or so

this committee believes, if American comparatists only honor "what has been validly established by our predecessors and colleagues across the sea" – a sea that, as the rest of the document makes clear, is most definitely the North Atlantic, and most definitely not the Gulf of Mexico or the Pacific ("The Levin Report" 25). The 1975 report, at least, begins to acknowledge the existence of these waters, without therefore abandoning the priorities of the earlier report. The report states that "[t]he growth of interest in the non-European literatures is another development we can welcome, while cautiously searching for ways to accommodate this interest to our own traditions." The reasons for this caution are assumed to be obvious, as "[i]t goes without saying that we cannot begin to absorb the wealth of exotic literatures before firmly possessing our own" ("The Greene Report" 36).

It is only in the 1993 report, written by a committee chaired by Charles Bernheimer, that we find a frank acknowledgement that the "impulse to extend the horizon of literary studies" that had motivated postwar comparatism "did not often reach beyond Europe and Europe's high-cultural lineage going back to the civilizations of classical antiquity" ("The Bernheimer Report" 40). Indeed, "[t]he apparent internationalism of the postwar years sustained a restrictive Eurocentrism that has recently been challenged from multiple perspectives" (41). The Bernheimer report testifies to a shift in the idea of Europe that goes together with the fact that, in the age of multiculturalism, Europe is no longer just considered in opposition to "narrow, warring nationalisms," but increasingly also from the perspective of its non-European others (Suleiman 268). While from the former perspective, the idea of Europe recalls a venerable tradition of peace and tolerance, it now increasingly refers to an imperialist force propelled by claims of racial and cultural superiority. The report acknowledges that the idea of Europe no longer only functions as the implicit *horizon* of comparative thinking, but that it also serves as the explicit *target* of many attempts to move beyond this horizon and to render the world lying beyond that horizon visible. The multicultural correction of the tradition of comparison consists in the double gesture of, on the one hand, a critique of the inherent link between comparison and Europe that earlier attempts at comparison often took for granted and, on the other, the affirmation of particular identities that had found no place within the European horizon that had circumscribed the interests of these earlier versions of comparative studies (Chow).

While this revisionist picture has certainly informed much identity-political and multicultural work, it is important to realize that the 1993 report's acknowledgement of the validity of the contributions of non-European and non-Eurocentrist perspectives does not lead to an outright dismissal of the tradition of comparative literature that such perspectives critique. Such a condemnation would simply repeat the binarist thinking of Europe that these perspectives object to in that tradition. In its conclusion, the 1993 report states that it has attempted to put forward some proposals "in order to expand students' perspectives and stimulate them to think in culturally pluralistic terms" (47). This ambition can easily be recognized as a continuation of the pluralist agenda that already motivated both the early European versions of comparatism and the later American uptake of these attempts. The report's recognition of the validity of the challenges to comparative literature's Eurocentrism does not signify a call for the wholesale abandonment of the dream of universalism that informs comparative studies, but is rather an indication of its hope to be more true to the promise of tolerance by transforming the tradition from within. The danger that the report is only too aware of is that, if we simply condemn the very ambition to transcend ethnic and national particularities, the different localities that are clamoring for recognition in the multiculturalist wake of Eurocentrism will remain separated as so many stable, closed-off, sectarian particularities. If we refuse to even attempt to strategically engage the "European" temptation to transcend boundaries in order to open these boundaries to the rest of the world, this may well result in a disabling opposition between distinct cultures that exist fully-formed in splendid isolation from each other. In order to avoid such an impasse, it is necessary not only to explode the alleged self-sufficiency of projects that are explicitly or implicitly Eurocentric, but also to underline the mobility and the fluidity of the multiple perspectives that perform a critique of Europe – not only for commendable political and moral reasons, but also because such a flexible and dynamic picture is much more adequate to describe cultural movement. It is here that the comparatist's commitment to transcending the constraints of his or her culture becomes an advantage. As the 1993 ACLA report notes, "[c]omparatists, 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" (43).

In one of the documents that Haun Saussy assembled to function as the multivoical 2004 ACLA report on the state of the discipline, Djelal Kadir expresses his fear that such a fruitful multiplicity of perspectives no longer exists, and that comparative literature is now fatally co-opted by what he refers to as “an age of terrorism.” Having moved from Friederich’s Marshall Plan-conception of comparative literature to “the era of the Martial Plan,” we now find ourselves “beyond the need to domesticate dissensus,” as in the United States today “[t]he actual possibility of dissensus itself may be an illusion” (69). While this reign of terror is of course first of all an effect of the United States’ National Defense Strategy, Kadir also underlines the close affinity between this terror and the insistence on incomparable difference that the Bernheimer report resisted. Kadir notes that “[i]ncomparability is the dynamic, not of criticism or of comparative counterpoint, but a handmaiden of terror. Terror thrives on unbreachable difference, on exceptionalism, on the cultural and political monads that lie beyond the plausibility of dissensus and outside the possibility of the negotiable consensus.” Terror, for Kadir, feeds on “the eradication of difference through the hyperbole of self-differentiation into Self-Same” (74). Comparative literature, for Kadir, finds itself immobilized in a globalized world marked by an all-pervasive opposition between those who are “with us” and those who are “against us.” Because of the 2004 report’s emphasis on the closely connected phenomena of globalization and U.S. militarization, the idea of Europe no longer figures prominently in it, except as a missed opportunity: when David Ferris returns to the 1993 report, he recognizes that Bernheimer’s attempt to think a comparative literature beyond Eurocentrism still relied on a right that Europe has traditionally claimed for itself, “the right to compare without restriction” (83). For Ferris, it is not a question of renouncing that right, but rather of understanding the archive of comparative literature as “a constant struggle between the project of comparison and what continues to evade that project, namely, the world” (86). Comparative literature, then, exists in the attempt to negotiate the impossibility of the ambition of boundless comparison. As such, the Eurocentric temptation still holds out the hope for a future comparative literature that will finally be able to “take up the question that the project of comparison has historically been unable to confront, the question of an incomparable impossibility” (94). For Ferris, it is through such contra-

dictions and contaminations that a way beyond the terror of selfsameness can be envisioned.

It is the contention of the present volume that what warrants reflection on the role of Europe in literary studies today, apart from the history which we have told here, is the fact that Europe is readable as such a site of contradiction and self-differentiation, and that it therefore offers a promising place from which to address the challenges facing the study of culture today. That Europe is not as self-identical and as unified as it might once have thought itself – and as its critics who conceive of it as a well-circumscribed target may think – is today perhaps clearer than ever. If we only look at such issues as the concerns about the inclusion of Turkey in the European Union, the social inequality that the enlargement of the Union only seems to make more rampant, and the crisis following the Dutch and French rejection of the European Union draft constitution, it becomes very hard to recognize this reality of division and self-doubt as the powerful, self-contained monolith that Europe is often taken to be. And while this discrepancy may at first seem like the harsh reality check that the postwar dream of European integration was bound to encounter sooner or later, we may well remember that already in 1919 Paul Valéry noted a distinction between what Europe is “in reality” and what it “seems.” In reality, Valéry writes, Europe is merely “a little promontory on the continent of Asia”; yet what it *seems* is “the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body” (31). For Valéry, the appearance of Europe’s pre-eminence was slowly giving way to the harsh reality of Europe’s limited geographical size, but because this opening up of a quantitative perspective was a European achievement, Europe’s decline was, for Valéry, paradoxically still a consequence of Europe’s “seeming” superiority. The tension between reality and ideality is thus inherent to Valéry’s idea of Europe. The current situation, in which the cultural and social unification of Europe lags behind the purely economic achievement of a common European market (Segers and Viehoff 16–17), is then not so much the inversion as the continuation of a tension that already marked the idea of Europe for Valéry.

European unity remains today an “un-actualized” possibility. Without a constitution, uncertain about its borders, deeply divided about its relation to religion, and without an army to defend it, Europe today consists in

the tension between simultaneous tendencies toward the local and toward the supranational (Segers and Viehoff 13–15). To the extent that its present make-up differs significantly from that of the United States – where the constitution does serve as a constant touchstone of political practice, where the borders are natural (give or take a crystal frontier), and where talk of one nation under God is made to support pre-emptive attacks on “rogue states” as an appropriate form of defense – and to the extent that it persists in an uneasy tension between centralization and dispersal, the idea of Europe can serve as a figure for the problems that are central to comparative literary studies today. In a commentary from 1990 on Valéry’s declaration of Europe’s constitutive self-division, Jacques Derrida translated this condition into a double and contradictory injunction. On the one hand, Derrida writes, European cultural identity “cannot and must not be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable”; yet, on the other hand, neither must it accept a centralization that would “control and standardize, subjecting artistic discourses and practices to a grid of intelligibility, to philosophical or aesthetic norms, to channels of immediate and efficient communication, to the pursuit of ratings and commercial profitability” (38–39). For Derrida, it is a question of “renouncing neither of these two contradictory imperatives” (44) and of moving beyond a binarist thinking of Europe.

Literature offers a privileged domain where we can test possibilities to respond to Derrida’s double injunction. While the study of literature in the last two decades has convincingly demonstrated how literature aids the construction of cultural identities, it has at the same time not forgotten that literature is also often (and perhaps even constitutively) subversive of such attempts to enlist it in the service of the articulation of a distinct identity. Indeed, if it is the constitutive tension the term Europe implies that makes Europe a privileged term through which to approach the question of comparison, it is literature, and the work of reading that it calls for, that can bring out the affinity between Europe’s self-difference and the oscillations between universality and locality that define comparative literature. As Gethard Richter has observed, it is “once we begin to read closely the rhetorical strategies that have been mobilised to engage ‘Europe’ [that] the concept becomes visible as a site of self-differentiation upon which key questions concerning the shifting

relations among power, politics, culture and figurative language converge” (55). Literature’s multifarious responses to Europe’s double injunction demonstrate in an exemplary way that, as Klaus Eder has remarked, the attempt to realize a European identity simultaneously disenchant the very idea of constructing a collective identity (176).

In this volume, three sets of essays engage the double injunction to rethink Europe. These essays do not assume that Europe is a pre-given essence, nor that abandoning such essentialist thinking means that we can simply dispense with the work of thinking altogether. A first group of contributions opens up the archive of European literature and investigates a number of critical concepts and methodologies that have been coined in order to give shape to the ambition to transcend national borders. These essays show how these transnational ambitions must always be understood in relation to the locality or context from which they hope to depart, but which they never completely succeed in leaving behind. These essays show how the idea of Europe mediates (without resolving) the tension between universalist ambition and irremediable particularity – between cosmopolitanism and national stereotypes in the case of the 18th century genre of the *histoire anglaise* (Vanacker), between the global and the regional in the project of world literature (Damrosch and Boyden), and between Europe and the subnational in the case of Flemish literary history (de Ridder and van Humbeek). Lieven D’Hulst’s contribution shows how the concept of translation and the field of translation studies currently present an important new version of the attempt to affirm and to describe the dynamic and fluid relations that hold between different cultural formations.

A second set of essays reminds us that the dialectic between the national and the international that the first group of essays focuses on has itself often served thoroughly Eurocentric ambitions, as our overview of the place of Europe in the history of comparative literature has shown. These essays disturb Europe’s comfortable conviction that it has successfully transcended every constraining particularity by confronting it with one or more of its non-European others. By bringing the idea of Europe in a constellation in which it must negotiate its residual particularity, these essays show how non-European critiques and mobilizations of the idea of Europe challenge its exclusionary logic while receiving (and returning) the critical potential that the

idea also contains. The essays of Reindert Dhondt and Silvana Mandolessi present Latin American mobilizations of the concept of Europe in the works of Carpentier, Borges, and Gombrowicz, while Mary Stevens and Nagihan Haliloğlu show how Islamic engagements with Europe in their turn manage to contribute to the work of re-thinking the meaning of Europe. Kari van Dijk's essay shows how the work of Yoka Tawada stages a confrontation between Europe and Asia that ends up producing an enriched model of European identity. These essays thus test the capacity of literature to forge models for transnational identity, and of the notion of Europe to contribute to the imagination of such identities.

A third and final group of essays returns from the non-European re-thinking of Europe to cases in which Europe, as it were, re-thinks itself and addresses aspects of its own past in order to retrieve opportunities for future renewal. As such, they take on the task of what Emily Apter, when she characterizes Edward Said's generous return to the avowedly Eurocentric work of Erich Auerbach, has called "[m]ining the humanist tradition for a utopian politics – despite the association of humanism with Eurocentrism and Orientalism" (81). In this "activist" return to Europe's past (80), literature's constitutive self-difference appears not as a failure, but rather as an opportunity to keep the question of cultural identity resolutely open. The essays of Julius Hondrila and Bart Keunen investigate the logic of literature's contribution to the formation of cultural identity, while the essays of Iannis Goerlandt and Ortwijn de Graef more dramatically show how the *reading* of literature reveals literature to be subversive of the dream of coercive identity formation for which it is enlisted. Herbert Grabes' impassioned return to the history of European comparison argues for a renewed engagement with the notion of literary pleasure as an occasion to move beyond the constraints imposed by this history. This is not all that different from Jeppe Ilkjær's explanation in his essay on the work of Elias Canetti of how Europe's constitutive lateness opens up unexpected literary resources. Both Grabes and Ilkjær find in Europe's difference from itself a remainder that holds the promise for a future that demands to be re-thought. It is to this work of re-thinking Europe that this volume hopes to contribute.

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PART I

Beyond the Nation? Inter-, Trans-, and Hypernational Identities