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Literature and Comparative Studies: Theories, Paradigms, Models

Literatura e Estudos Comparatistas: Teorias, Paradigmas, Modelos

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(Eds.)

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Contents | Índice

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The Vitality of Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT:

This essay deals with both the crisis of Comparative Literature and the aspects that should be considered in a renewed version of the discipline. In recent years, Comparative Literature has been struggling with newer disciplines, like Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, World Literature, each of them with their new research interests and methodologies. But Comparative Literature has also been quite successful in the integration of these new topics, questions and insights, even if it sometimes did so by abandoning elements that should remain at the core of its business, like multilingualism, a strong historical perspective, and a persistent focus on textual objects and close reading. This article addresses the importance of these three elements, illustrating them with, first, a literary example (Éric Vuillard's novel *14 juillet*) and, second, a literary-historical example that might serve as a possible model of what Comparative Literature may stand for in the coming years (Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter*).

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RESUMO:

Este ensaio aborda simultaneamente a crise da Literatura Comparada e os aspectos a ter em consideração numa versão renovada da disciplina. Nos últimos anos, a Literatura Comparada tem sido confrontada por disciplinas mais recentes, como Estudos Culturais, Estudos de Género, Estudos Pós-Coloniais, ou Literatura-Mundo, cada uma com os seus novos interesses de investigação e a sua metodologia. No entanto, a Literatura Comparada tem sido também muito bem-sucedida na integração desses novos tópicos, questões e olhares, embora o faça, por vezes, abandonando elementos que deveriam permanecer no centro da sua actividade, como o multilinguismo, uma perspectiva histórica forte e uma incidência persistente em objetos textuais e no *close reading*. Este artigo examina a importância desses três elementos, ilustrando-os, primeiramente, com um exemplo literário (o romance *14 juillet*, de Éric Vuillard) e, em segundo lugar, com um exemplo literário-histórico que pode servir como possível modelo do que a Literatura Comparada poderá representar e defender nos próximos anos (Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter*).

KEYWORDS:

multilingualism; close reading; history; Éric Vuillard; Nicholas Dames

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

multilinguismo; *close reading*; história; Éric Vuillard; Nicholas Dames

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IN SOME WESTERN universities (and exemplarily at the University of Lisbon), the field of Comparative Literature has developed into the broader field of "comparative studies", and this evolution is of course far from being anecdotal. It can be seen as one more symptom of the problematic status of the field. As we all know, comparative literature is a discipline that is under strong institutional pressure: declining student numbers, erosion of new research initiatives, even closing down of programs (in Flanders, for instance, all Comparative Literature programs have been "dissolved" into Literary Theory and Cultural Studies programs). For some, the discipline can only survive when morphing into other approaches, with new theoretical and methodological tools and horizons, like, for instance, literary theory, cultural studies or, more recently, intermediality[1]. The very existence of a research line in "comparative studies" is undoubtedly a variation on the same theme: since we no longer do Comparative Literature as it used to be, we can only try to continue or resume it in a different way.

In the observations that follow, we would like to make a contribution to this debate, not by proposing another radical move away from Comparative Literature, but, more modestly, by sketching some possible perspectives on how to do Comparative Literature today, and why not tomorrow, while trying to maintain what makes the discipline a vital part of literary studies. We will do so in three steps, each of them representing a specific angle on the field: first as a discipline, second as an interdiscipline, third as an institution.

1. Discipline

As a discipline, Comparative Literature is not only in crisis. Even its very future seems to be in danger. However, Comparative Literature relies upon a certain number of defining features that are not always creatively appropriated or repurposed by the newer disciplines and which deserve to be vehemently defended. Three aspects are key in this regard: multilingualism, history, and textuality.

Multilingualism

Comparative Literature is by definition multilingual and it presupposes an in-depth knowledge of the three dimensions of the languages one is using (linguistics, literature, culture). Everybody pays lip-service to this basic principle, yet in practice the only language that is being used when doing for instance World Literature (for some a new branch of Comparative Literature; for others, it is one that has been taking its place) is English. Such multilingual dimension is so crucial to the definition of the discipline that in 2003 Gayatri Spivak published a thought-provoking book titled *Death of a Discipline*, where she reversed the usual power

[1] On the notion of intermediality, see Rippl (2015) and Bruhn, López-Varela Azcárate and Vieira (2023).

relationships between the main western languages and the so-called "minor" languages (especially non-Western, that often are anything but "minor", spoken as they are by millions of people[2]) and argued that without an active safeguard of the multiplicity of languages – and traditions – within the academia, the discipline of Comparative Literature was bound to die[3]. There is of course nothing wrong with English per se, certainly not when one realizes that English is a language with many usages, but its exclusive use involves a dramatic impoverishment, certainly at a time of "diversity" and claims in favor of "decolonizing". It is also unfair to nonnative speakers less familiar with the language and the cultural context (everybody is supposed to be knowledgeable in English/American language, literature and civilization, while Anglo-Saxon scholars are perfectly allowed to remain monolingual and monocultural). Comparative Literature can be a bulwark against this form of cultural neo-colonialism.

History

Comparative Literature is also radically open to history, which has become even more problematic in many current approaches and studies of literature and culture. Here as well, we all pay lip-service to the Jamesonian invitation to "always historicize" (Jameson 1981: 9). In practice, however, literary and cultural studies are acutely suffering from presentism and in serious danger of being narrowed down to the non-history of the *hic et nunc*. More and more students only seem interested in (and know) contemporary literature, film or culture in general, and everything non contemporary – if tackled at all – becomes the object of hyper-specialized and hyper-confined fields of study. Historical amnesia has become a reality, just like the growing lack of interest in all things other than what happens here and now. Comparative Literature can be an inspiring example of what literary and cultural studies can discover and achieve with the help of a historical lens. The subdiscipline of book history, longtime separated from the broader field of Comparative Literature and cultural studies but dramatically reinvented by scholars such as Roger Darnton and Roger Chartier[4], who both dismantle the opposition between writing, making (printing, publishing, selling etc.), and reading of books, is a wonderful proof of the added value of a strong historical and cultural perspective in comparative literary studies, which also clears new ground for both the analysis and the actual use of books in literature in the digital age[5].

[2] On a more technical approach of the notion of minor language, as both a literary and a political subversion of some major language within itself, see Deleuze and Guattari (1975).

[3] Spivak's book is, of course, more complex than our short resume might suggest; in fact, she welcomed the death of "traditional" comparative literature and advocated one of the many re-births of the discipline, a new comparative literature, closely linked to postcolonial and area studies.

[4] See, for instance, Darnton (1982) and Chartier (2004). In current scholarship, the notion of "book" has been opened to other types of host medium as well, such as magazines and newspapers; see the notion of *mediapoetics* as coined by Thérenty (2008).

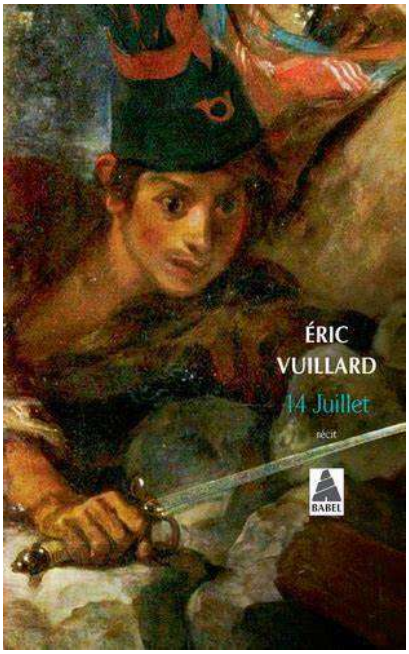
[5] For a good introduction to the "book" as a material and cultural object, in paper or not, see Borsuk (2018).

Textuality

Finally, Comparative Literature remained strongly corpus-oriented. It may have been derided for being insufficiently theoretical, for good or bad reasons, as it is the case even with Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, that while being considered one of the founding references of the discipline, has often been accused of presenting a poor theoretical framework, e.g. lacking a strong definition of realism, of literary history, of literary form and style, just because it is – so wonderfully and proudly, one might add – focused on a close reading of the corpus. This focus has its drawbacks, of course: is there a specific "methodology" in Comparative Literature that we can practice, teach, and transmit? However, one should stress the absolute necessity, in any approach or method whatsoever, of maintaining the tradition of close-reading actual texts as texts, and not simply as a reservoir of short examples meant to illustrate theoretical insights or hypotheses. Comparative Literature is solidly related with stylistics and thus well situated to display the benefits of corpus-oriented analysis, and also the need of disclosing new corpuses, to shape new objects of study[6]. Even strongly theoretically oriented scholars such as Marjorie Perloff ceaselessly return to close reading, not just as an exercise or an application of some general toolkit, but as a crucial hermeneutical and historical tool[7].

All three of these aspects, which Comparative Literature unites and practices daily, should not be lost, not just out of nostalgia, but because they prove capable of offering insights which monolingual, presentist and overtheorized approaches will probably never produce. A first example of how to do Comparative Literature in this perspective could be given by a recent novel by Éric Vuillard, *14 Juillet* (2016), a fictional rewriting of the first days and hours of the French Revolution:

[6] For this, see below the third section, on Institution.
[7] See, for instance, the wonderful collection of close readings of "difficult" poems in Perloff (2021).



Although written in French, this book can usefully be compared to similar texts in other languages, one may think for instance of Tacitus's description of the "Four Emperors Year" (69 AD) in his *Histories* (Tacitus 2009). There exist of course countless examples of the literary description of revolutionary days and events, but given the importance of Roman history (and the concept of "virtue") for the self-representation of those who have overthrown the *Ancien Régime* in 1789, it makes sense to choose Tacitus as a point of reference, ideologically as well as stylistically.

Vuillard's novel can also be compared with the different ways in which French literature as well as historiography (the two genres tend to overlap here) have addressed this key turning point: Michelet of course (how could one read a text on the French Revolution without taking into account this author and his *Histoire de la Révolution française*, published between 1847 and 1853 and still widely read?), but also quite different voices such as, among many others, Tocqueville (not only the author of the famous book on American democracy but the moderated social and cultural historian of the emergence of democracy in France [see Tocqueville 1985]), or Furet (an historian very critical of the ideological reuse and heritage of the Revolution [see Furet 1978]). Here too this can be done from a historical as well as a literary perspective, which will enable readers to ask questions on the role of fiction and imagination in the writing of history.

Finally, and this may already be a way to anticipate the second point, on interdisciplinarity, one can also approach the novel by close-reading it, within the discipline and across disciplines. An interesting aspect here is the possible tension between the "popular" (Vuillard's take on the historical event is clearly left-wing) and the "sophisticated" (despite its interest in the language of the "people", the style of the book, a powerful mix of colloquial expressions and a firework of rhetorical figures, is light-years away from what we associate with "popular literature"). This tension between form and content, to put it very naively, is something that may remind readers of the ethical debates on the use of stylistic and rhetorical devices in the representation of historical tragedies such as the World War Two concentration

camps, where the artistic tools are not easily compatible with the documentary ethos. Long before Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and its tabooing of all things fictional, various authors had already criticized the hypocrite aestheticization of this subject as an insult to the victims[8].

2. Interdiscipline

Today, interdisciplinarity is not an option, but an institutional constraint (and more on institutions in section 3). Yet interdisciplinarity is a hard thing to do – and perhaps as hard to find as a good man. All disciplines are the result of three specific dimensions: a theory, a method, and a corpus. And the same applies to interdisciplinarity: without their convergence, interdisciplinarity is not "complete" but "partial" (could we say "weak"?); if only one or two of the three basic components is concerned by the shift from discipline to interdisciplinarity, something may be missing. Examples of such partial interdisciplinarity abound, such as the use of literary tools to analyze nonverbal objects (is one really doing interdisciplinarity when applying narratology to cinema?) or the use of statistical analysis to analyze literary texts (is this big data approach really interdisciplinary?[9]).

One should ask two sets of questions here.

One: when doing interdisciplinary research, do we really need the proper competence and expertise in more than one field or not? In practice, that is perhaps putting the stakes too high. And what about the respective status of the disciplines that are combined: are all disciplines truly equal? It seems for instance possible to do "law and literature" studies as a law scholar with no special training in literature (and the results can be occasionally convincing), while the opposite seems a little weird (and would not be taken seriously by law scholars). Literary studies, including Comparative Literature, seem to have a very weak position in this regard. More generally speaking, the issue of power relationships between disciplines is too often overlooked in the average conversation about interdisciplinarity, even if the consequences can be radical: why maintain a discipline like Comparative Literature if anybody can discuss literary texts without any form of disciplinary training in literature?

Two: is there actually something wrong with weak or partial interdisciplinarity? After all, many disciplines have been working with "auxiliary sciences", which represent the old school of interdisciplinarity, before interdisciplinarity became an institutional concern. It is perfectly possible that there exist specific tools which allow for this kind of weak interdisciplinarity in a satisfying way (think of the so-called "travelling theory" or "travelling concepts", as popularized by respectively Edward Said, 1983, and Mieke Bal, 2002). Perhaps we need to revise our false and unrealistic ideas on interdisciplinarity and make room for more *tactic*

[8] See the polemic around *Kapo*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, and the famous article by Jacques Rivette, "De l'abjection", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1961.

[9] Given the actuality of this topic, it may be useful to mention the recent polemic statements and critical survey of this question: see Bode (2023).

than *strategic* forms of interdisciplinarity, to use the terminology as coined by Michel de Certeau (1984)? Such a change might be helpful to Comparative Literature and save it from deceiving or disappointing attempts to certain types of interdisciplinarity (yes, we can be interdisciplinary in literary studies without relying on statistical analysis). Many investigations that are labelled "comparative studies" may fail the test of "hard", that is "complete", interdisciplinarity and nevertheless produce useful insights, while an inconsiderate application of "hard" interdisciplinarity may be in danger of producing only an appearance of knowledge, the interdisciplinary equivalent of namedropping within a discipline[10].

3. Institution

Comparative Literature is an academic discipline (outside academia, nobody cares?). This situation has many consequences, for an academic discipline is not only the interweaving of a theory, a method, and a corpus, but also the combination of the three pillars of any form of academic practice: teaching, research, and public service.

At first sight, teaching and research are not a problem, while public service ("what is it good for"?) definitely is. For Comparative Literature, it is not easy to "valorize" its outcomes, and it is well known that valorization is increasingly important in funding of research and thus, in the long run, of a discipline: without external funding, any center or research program can be closed at any moment; this is for instance what is happening this very year, 2024, with the well-known FIGURA center at UQAM-Montreal. Yet valorization is far from impossible in Comparative Literature. It is, however, necessary to link it as closely as possible to teaching and research (which is a truism), but also to a broader reflection on the issues of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

As a Discipline: it seems necessary for Comparative Literature to disclose new objects of study as well as new ways of working with them. It is important to stress here the intimate dialectic relation that always grows between objects and methodologies or ways of inquiry. A methodology is not an aseptic set of tools that can be "applied" to any object whatsoever. The corpus shapes our methods and vice versa. Comparative Literature, with its "weak" theoretical dimension, its corpus-oriented tradition is perhaps one of the best fields for measuring (and practicing) the interdependence between corpuses and methods.

As an Interdiscipline: Comparative Literature needs new tactic alliances with other disciplines, not just for opportunistic reasons, but to develop these new objects and new methodologies. This need is also related to the dramatic changes that have impacted the literary field and the very notion (and pragmatic definition) of literature in the last decades: changes that often project themselves backward, so to

[10] See Da (2019) for a critical discussion of the limits of big data analysis in literary studies, and the response in Bode (2023). To these critical voices, it may make sense to add the skeptical voice of Fish (1999), who challenges the blurring of boundaries between literary studies and political action, a flaw he considers typical of certain forms of cultural studies, which in certain academic departments have taken the place of comparative literature.

speak, and push us to see even old objects in a new light. Here as well, examples are not rare. The notion of "archive" (an object as well as an approach) has recently been developed in the field of Comparative Literature with the help of disciplines such as:

- archival studies, not from a theoretical point of view alone, but also bottom up, with new questions on how to build, for instance, the archive of something that does no longer exist, such as the photonovel and film photonovel;
- curation studies, with a strong focus on the development of new methods to exhibit archives;
- book history, already mentioned above, with a special emphasis on the relationships between texts and the material changes of their host medium;
- law studies, foregrounding fundamental questions concerning ownership of texts and archives;
- creative writing, a discipline that promotes the invention of new techniques of interacting (appropriating, rewriting) with archives;
- art history, which may propose innovative perspectives on the very role of images in archives;
- documentation sciences, a key player in the elaboration of new forms of metadata description;
- and why not… literary studies?[11]

Last but not least, putting together an object as well as a practice (the archive) and a discipline (Comparative Literature) may also be the starting point of developing teamwork, which is also imperative in today's teaching, research, and outreach, within and outside the academia (e.g. crowdsourcing, collective intelligence, participative culture). It can be seen as part of the necessary transformation from "hard" interdisciplinarity into what some call transdisciplinarity, a discipline often defined, among other things, by the inclusion of nonacademic stakeholders, whose needs and demands are taken into account at the moment of defining practice-oriented research programs involving a broad range of disciplinary insights.[12]

4. An example which is also a model

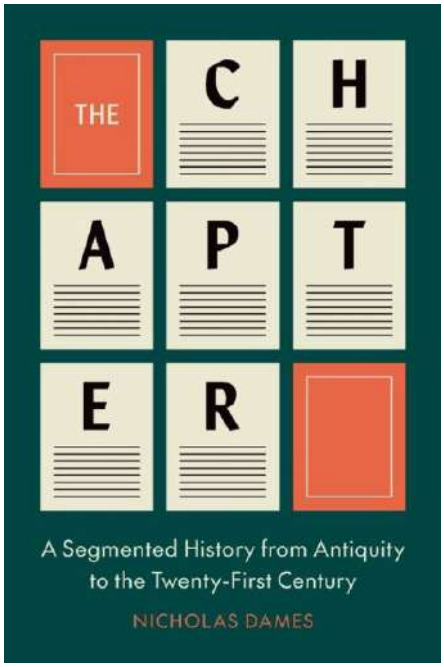
A book like no other, a book for all of us

Comparative Literature is a double-faced Janus. Concrete texts, objects, people, networks, institutions are one thing. Methodological and theoretical reflection, another. The impossibility of separating these two aspects was already

[11] See for example the "Littératures modes d'emploi" network: Littératures mode d'emploi (litteraturesmodesdemploi.org)
[12] See for instance the Swiss td-Network: Network for Transdisciplinary Research | td-net (transdisciplinarity.ch)

clear in our short discussion of how to read the novel by Éric Vuillard. A new and more scholarly example will drive this point further home.

The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century by Stanford professor Nicholas Dames (2023) offers an impressive overview of a compositional device that is so ubiquitous and naturalized that it has become nearly invisible. Apart from its own merits, Dames's book is also important for the field of Comparative Literature in general. Not only because it demonstrates the vitality of a type of research that more fashionable ways of reading such as postcolonial studies, queer studies, or digital humanities, tend to ignore, but also because it brings together a certain number of theoretical and methodological tenets and insights that may prove capable of putting Comparative Literature once again at the center of literary studies – and literary studies at the center of humanities.



In this book, the author defends a strong thesis. He claims indeed that it is not possible to define the notion of chapter in a single way or provide a unified definition, while he also argues that this openness – that of the object as well as of the scholarly take on it – should not prevent us from elaborating a general history and interpretation of the question under scrutiny.

On the one hand, Nicholas Dames prefers to offer an interpretive matrix rather than a fixed characterization, thus providing a multifarious set of properties that take the form of creative tensions. Here is an example: chapters play a role in fictional as well as nonfictional texts, but their respective functions (narrative and sequence- or time-oriented in the case of fiction, nonnarrative and information-oriented in the case of nonfiction) cannot be studied separately (in fiction as well, chapters can be determined by the concern for the easy access to information, while in nonfiction issues of sequential arrangement may be no less important). Besides, the chapter itself cannot be considered a transhistorical phenomenon: chapters have not always existed (think of the impact of the shift from roll to codex) and today they

may be on the verge of disappearing (in digital publication, we are returning to a kind of roll publication and the consequences on capitulation have immediately become visible), while the status of the chapter has varied widely over time. Dame also emphasizes the need to distinguish between function and meaning as well as the need to acknowledge the dissemination of the chapter function to a wide range of "strategic textual places" such as, for instance, a prefatory abstract of the table of contents; the question: "where is the chapter?" is far from a silly one. As the author himself rather poetically explains in the first of his "ten premises":

> The chapter is stylistically distinct; it is not fully explicable to units in other media or to psychological models. It is only loosely like a musical phrase, a dramatic scene, or what cognitive scientists call "even perception," however tempting the analogy becomes. It is its own practice, peculiar and peculiarly useful. (Dames 2023: 17-18)

On the other hand, Dames equally stresses the possibility of using some of these tensions, mainly the ones that lie between "dividing" (the continuous text) and "gathering" (the elements that are part of the same chapter) as key components of a more encompassing approach that insists on the relationship between chapter and Time, with a capital T: for Dames, the chapter both reveals and shapes the history of ideas on Time in Western literature.

In the field of Comparative Literature today, *The Chapter* can be compared to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1948). Obviously, it would be absurd to argue that Dames's book will achieve the same classic status and universal prestige of Auerbach's study. However, the methodological principles of both works are very similar: first, the decision to examine Western literature as a whole, i.e., as a body of works in different languages whose history stretches over more than two millennia; second, the choice to study Western literature via a selection of privileged creations, i.e., the "canon", whose methodological and theoretical advantages are now being rediscovered by a new generation of "post cultural wars" scholars[13]; and, third, the performative power of a general question that helps organize the whole field (the question of the growth of realism in the case of Auerbach; the relationship between techniques of capitulation and the conceptualization and organization of time in the case of Dames).

A typical CompLit study

It is of course a pleasure to notice that the major Comparative Literature features as presented in the beginning of this essay appear to be fully integrated in the work by Nicholas Dames: the triple concern for history, multilingualism, and text-oriented criticism.

Let us start with history. The author of *The Chapter* is not afraid of covering the (almost) complete history of Western writing, superseding the obnoxious

[13] For a meticulous scientific demonstration of the advantages of using canonical rather than noncanonical sources in literary studies focusing on writing and style, see for instance Philippe (2021).

specialization – think of the infamous French divide between "centuries" – that hampers the blossoming of Comparative Literature research, as if a broad historical view were a synonym of superficiality and incompatible with an-depth analysis. Granted, Nicholas Dames is not a "specialist" of all the periods that he treats, but there is no shame in confessing one's debts to other colleagues, as the author honestly does in this book. Moreover, Nicholas Dames has the courage to tackle periods and works that are not necessarily very "hot" in today's academic approaches. Leaving his comfort zone, that of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British novel, the author courageously enters seemingly esoteric legal and religious texts of less studied periods, which he manages to disclose as essential milestones in a historical process most modern readers refuse to even consider. Finally, and this is also not very trendy today when historical change is primarily seen as a chain of mutually exclusive paradigms (each "turn" is supposed to get rid of the errors of the previous one), Nicholas Dames lays bare the profound continuity of Western literature and culture. Things permanently change, the author agrees, but these changes are not arbitrary, and they always build upon each other. On the one hand, literary changes are connected with culture and society at large. On the other hand, they are transformations rather than substitutions of already existing structures, before being themselves transformed into something (once again relatively) new. Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling",[14] with their dynamic interplay between residual, dominant and emerging affective attitudes toward cultural phenomena, are a vital intellectual framework in this regard, which *The Chapter* smartly instrumentalizes.

And let's continue with multilingualism. Here as well, Nicholas Dames is simultaneously modest and ambitious. He actively reads and quotes material in various languages (generally the major European ones: English French, German, Italian, Spanish, and of course also Latin; the only exception being the Hungarian examples, read in English translation), but refrains from making universalizing claims going beyond the well acknowledged limits of the Western canon. At the same time, this multilingualism is not only used in a synchronic perspective (as people are conventionally doing in Comparative Literature), but also diachronically, a much more stimulating and innovative practice which ties in with Nicholas Dames's conviction on historical continuity. Not all periods are analyzed with the help of examples from more than one linguistic tradition – a methodical a priori or utopia that would have exceeded the limits of a single-authored study. Instead, the global take on Western literature and history as "unity in diversity" allows the book to shift from one language to another when moving from one period to another (by the way, this is also a very elegant manner to put aside any nationalist temptation). As Dames puts it:

> My examples are drawn from Western languages and locales only, already just a portion of the chapter's wild global proliferation, and is also literary scholar's book, oriented toward the highly self-conscious presence of chapters in novels. (…) But the route this book sketches is not just a matter of disciplinary training or eccentric preferences. Certain inarguably pivotal examples loom large, among them the Bible itself, in its long history toward becoming one major paradigm

[14] As theorized, among other places, in Williams's bibliography, in *The Long Revolution* (1961).

> for a chaptered text. At other examples I have choses examples because archival evidence permits us to glimpse chapters in the presence of formation (…). Whether my landmarks were chosen for their cross-cultural influence or the fact that they bear useful traces of their construction, the goal has been to extract from these stopping places a list of stylistic and local traits of the chapter that endured over long stretches of time and find their way into very different historical occasion. (Dames 2023, 8-9)

Last but not least, Nicholas Dames's analyses are thoroughly text-oriented, with a systematic reliance on close reading. Throughout the whole book, the author patiently explores his general hypotheses, as triggered by his initial matrix, by testing them on specific examples – and vice versa, for full priority is given to the texts. Theoretically speaking, *The Chapter* is so modest that it may seem "weak" to contemporary readers, who tend to sketch one single theoretical perspective which is then applied to the reading of four examples (as the current norm of heavily streamlined academic books is prescribing, one of the many implicit rules that powerfully rationalize the output of most university presses). In practice the more hermeneutical attitude of the author, who goes back and forth between text and theory, is an extremely strong and rewarding one, which both enlarges the theoretical framing and respects the stubborn complexity of the corpus.

A wonderful example of this approach is given in the opening chapter of the book, the one before the historical inquiry as such, where Nicholas Dames merges the two sides of his work. First, his elaboration of the theoretical and methodological matrix is a way of mapping those possible tensions that might structure our thinking on the chapter, such as the already mentioned pseudo-dichotomies of narrative versus informational or dividing versus gathering, etc. He then continues with a superb close reading of an apparently unremarkable chapter of an equally seemingly ordinary story by Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women* (1952). The analysis is brilliant, as well written as the text it analyzes, proclaiming from the start of Nicholas Dames's book which kind of interaction between theory and practice one may be expecting: a permanent back and forth between general hypothesis and close reading, but also a strong concern to underscore the social as well as existential impact of the chapter, which for Dames is one the privileged ways of shaping time (and why not also Time with a capital T). As the author resumes his reading of postmodern fiction:

> In all of these examples (…) the self-conscious adaptation of an earlier model of novelistic chaptering bears a wry, detached relation to the meliorist optimism that had previously inflected the chapter's shape: that making of stages on life's ay which promised a partial cancellation of the past, a space to assess and settle, and an equally partial new beginning, often enough in fact a new dawn. Adapted to a different kin d of modernity (…) chaptering became more of a temporary bulwark against sharper dislocations, something defensive and not wholly satisfying, minor transitions to guard against both desired and feared major ones. (Dames 2023, 283).

Theory's voice will be all-pervading but nevertheless modest and always at the service of a better understanding of the text. Particularly illuminating and symptomatic in this regard is the use of non-close-reading methods, some of them

qualitative (genetic studies), some of them quantitative (Moretti-like distant reading calculations of length, frequency, word count and the like). In all these cases, however, the use of these methods is highly limited and exclusively related to what close reading has already touched upon or what it is still struggling with. The sober and (perhaps therefore) convincing results of genetic and quantitative input prove that it is possible to close the gap between quantitative and qualitative approaches.

This essay started with a very simple question: does Comparative Literature have a future? We hope the various examples are a good and optimistic answer to what is often seen more as a frightening issue than as a vigorous challenge. As we have stressed, the most workable solution is not to rebuild the discipline from the ground, but to rethink some of its major characteristics, increasingly overlooked by other literary and cultural approaches, such as the importance of historical reflection, multilingualism and the need to return to the texts and the works themselves, and to start reading them oneself, rather than relying on second-hand and frequently biased descriptions that avoid both literature and comparison.

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