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Comparative Literature in Europe

A Short Prognosis (as presented at the ACLA meeting in Utrecht on 6 July, 2017)

The first prerequisite for a prognosis regarding the future of European comparatism would logically be to give a full overview of CompLit, or, in order to avoid problems of terminology, General and/or Comparative Literature, as it is in Europe today. Now this would entail a major effort, not only because Europe is such a difficult geographical, political, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic entity and is hard to define for our purpose, but also because there is no such thing as a general European logic behind the development of sciences and scholarly work, even though the European Council and the European Union as well as other political unities would perhaps nurture expectations and develop programmes along that line. Even worse: At this moment, we are tempted to quote Chinua Achebe: Things fall apart. Which means that we can only sum up some facts as they are, and some impressions, which need not be correct in each and every detail.

Europe comprises some 47 countries – counting the very small ones like San Marino and the very distant ones (from here) like Kazakhstan, or contested ones like Cyprus or Kosovo. To make it easier, let us count 40 larger states, seven of which are successors of former Yugoslavia, with a total of $\frac{3}{4}$ billion people. Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxemburg, Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, the UK, and Germany together with Austria have national organisations, some quite small, some with several hundreds of members. There is also a European Network for Comparative Literary Studies (ENCLS), which is holding its bi-annual congress in August (23.–26.8.2017, Helsinki) on „Fear and safety“. And then there is the global ICLA, whose last two congresses took place in Europe (Paris and Vienna), showing that there is a great potential for quantity, and hopefully for quality, too.

Most of the states just mentioned are trying to keep up an autonomous system of higher education, are running between zero and more than a hundred universities each (Germany, UK, Italy), and therefore are responsible for the range of studies and study programmes existing or flourishing in these countries. Larger states like Germany or France each offer CompLit in some 30 places; smaller countries like Austria or Switzerland in three or four universities. This means that CompLit is well or very well represented within the range of academic disciplines, but is not ubiquitous. This creates a particular dilemma for our discipline in most academic

surroundings; that is, wherever it is part of the official canon of eligible subjects. As president of the German CompLit association (DGAVL), I had the opportunity to describe our situation in a newspaper as being caught in the middle: We are too small to be unsinkable, but too large to benefit from a political guarantee of existence, we are not English or German or French studies, nor are we Egyptian studies or some other small unit with high renown and an almost 1:1 ratio of professors and students. Whenever academia booms, we are well off, and even during a crisis we will not go down, but we are not in for any minority protection. As long as we do not train school teachers, which is not likely, I do not believe this will ever change. Furthermore, the conflict with the respective leading national philologies silently increases whenever the latter are accused of not doing enough for national education. This will remain the case as long as we do not explain publicly that what we are doing has, after all, in the meantime become the ordinary, average way of dealing with literature! Let us also note that colleagues often strive to obtain double qualifications; i.e. CompLit plus a national philology, in order to improve their chances to get tenure. CompLit is present and active in most countries, albeit to differing extents; sometimes in the form of departments with full professorships and with a complete line of qualification steps, but sometimes also only as particular points of interest pursued by scholars who officially bear other denominations or serve different functions at the same time.

In the meantime, European study programmes of CompLit come as BA, MA, or PhD tracks. The accumulation of degrees as originally designed by the creators of the universal European study model is currently becoming a reality with an increasing number of students taking degrees not only from different universities, but also in different disciplines. As CompLit is constantly turning into one *amongst* several subjects, it can profit more than other specialisations from its amalgamated nature; CompLit can be studied along with single languages, in addition to a national philology, or as a summary of knowledge and skill acquired in diverse BAs whose combination engenders, so to speak, the ideal condition for a comparatist MA. This applies, perhaps with a higher probability, also to the PhD, which is now the case in most of Europe. All of this appears to be a substantial advantage, freeing students of the necessity to choose between the practical and the ideal, even more so, as literature „as such“ corresponds to the concept of CompLit as the study of literature „tout court“. Most readers nowadays do not select their reading according to the country of origin, nor the original language, let alone the authors' passports. In countries like the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries, living and reading with an eye towards the UK has been a reality for some decades and is an increasing phenomenon in other countries, too. This means that CompLit tends to, in a growing degree, factor in the actual way of handling literature, a change, which is more dramatic in Europe, because the national

culture policies simultaneously continue nurturing their national heritage and an intensified translation activity.

When I wrote a handbook on comparatism together with Rüdiger Zymner four years ago (2013), we tried to treat Europe according to regions defined by their idioms – and language and language families are, strangely enough, still the most important denominator when it comes to subdividing our continent, because this mirrors the logic that prevailed at the time when many European universities were established; still, it is of no importance for the place of comparatism. And yet, in most countries, CompLit is located near or within the respective national philology.

Europe is a continent of about 30 languages and many more varieties (about 200). The overall linguistic situation will be, in the future, more paradoxical than ever. After Brexit, English will merely be a minority language within the European Union (except Ireland), but we can be sure that this will change nothing about the ever-growing predominance of the English language in teaching and publishing. CompLit is particularly concerned with this development, inasmuch as it is one of the genuine interests and tasks of our discipline to investigate the epiphenomena of linguistic diversity, which is one of the features of European identity – whilst it is a demand of modernisation and globalisation to be visible within a scientific community and, which is equally important, to communicate in a high-level, standardised, scientifically adaptable idiom, that is not necessarily, but effectively English. Neither Brexit nor the dissatisfaction of native speakers of German, French, Spanish and so on, nor the still heterogeneous position of English in diverse cultures will stop that tendency. Although this phenomenon is far from being typical of Europe, the coexistence of a necessarily strong native language and culture with the growing average proficiency in English will be a significant quality of European comparatists, even if their origin is in the East of the continent. What will derive from that situation will perhaps not be the superfluity of translation. Nor, for that matter, the loss of translation studies, but rather a new perspective on translation as an option available everywhere. I'm thinking of highly professionalised scholars with native or next to native proficiency in three or more modern languages plus possibly the standard ancient ones.

In an increasingly globalised world, it would be naive to expect a particular European development concerning interests or methods of our discipline. What one can foresee, without being a prophet, is that being European will remain a major issue, more rarely in the key of self-affirmative reflexions, more frequently as a critical examination of former or current European positions as factors or results of colonialism. Europeans often blame themselves of being Eurocentric: but even the trial to get rid of Eurocentric attitudes will not be able to free itself of compromising gestures – the patronising pat on the shoulders of the formerly

colonised. Still, a sceptical view towards the Western canon will paradoxically dismantle this canon and help it to persist. This is why I personally believe that the investigation of all forms of literary historiography and of the techniques of canonisation is an important task.

One thing we have to mention is that CompLit in the West, in the South, and in the North of Europe as well as in the German speaking countries is in close contact to the US CompLit, which creates a growing similarity. And this might be a problem, too. We have to state that our continent is currently, or still, divided in a way, linguistically, between those who practice English and those who are thereby hampered or excluded; however, the division is also ideological. There is a dividing line according to approaches and themes, or rather: There are blurred fields of disagreement. Topics like diversity, gender, or queer studies are becoming more and more important and commonplace in the Western part of Europe, whilst other colleagues have to put up with difficulties, but – this has to be acknowledged, too – often do not see a necessity to work their way into this field. Some mutual respect is a minimal demand. This immense issue is certainly nothing that comparatism could solve, but we have to state that there is disagreement, in part not expressed verbally, but rather by the tacit absence of scholars. And, to keep talking about sore points: When it comes to the future of the broad field of sensitive language, I would state a certain backlog, or in any case expect a tendency to make up for a non-discussion, e.g. concerning the designation of traditional motifs or ethnic types. A further complication of language will unavoidably be involved; imagology or the investigation of cultural stereotypes as well as up-to-date thematics are a promising minefield.

The origin of CompLit lies in the investigation of constant factors, thematic and formal. Therefore, we are a perfect mirror of the world's or of Europe's problems. Whatever happens, or is a current topic, in society and in the media, ecology or human rights or whatever, is also discussed immediately in CompLit, or in publications with a certain, ever dwindling delay.

Our problem has always been the lack of a unique selling point. But when it comes to publishing, this may even be an advantage. Many European publishers have dedicated themselves to CompLit, or rather, *also* to CompLit. We still have a stronghold here, which applies, as formerly, to numerous European journals, too. Yet there is a noticeable shift towards digital journals. At the moment, these prove fertile ground, which implies faster and better dissemination, but also a quality problem ahead.

One important prediction would refer to digital humanities. There are huge possibilities for thematic research, for the definition of genres, for dealing with metaphors and symbols, in distant reading and big data processing. Everything is developing fast there, but to be honest, there is nothing particularly European in

it. Personally, I would advocate for, and am expecting, a turn towards the history of our discipline, particularly with two twists: towards an epistemological self-enlightenment, and towards a praxeological self-description. The library situation will change and perhaps improve dramatically by abandoning the restriction to physical space. For the book lovers among us, this is, in the long run, of course, bad news (but no *news* at all). At the same time, it is obvious that no discipline in the humanities can profit as much as CompLit from the universal availability of documents. I would like to name three fields from my personal experience: 1. We are missing typically comparative collections of translations into third languages (no library in the world is systematically collecting translations other than from the respective languages of origin into the language or languages of the respective country). 2. There is no international collection of literary histories. I should add here that there are some books trying to sketch a history of European literature, or a European history of the literary, which is not the same. And 3. there is no complete collection (although we are trying our best in Vienna) of all terminological dictionaries that exist – to your astonishment perhaps – in 50 languages of the world, many of which European. But let us not neglect that terminology, at least specialised terminology, is, like many other items, being taken care of by Wikipedia, which plays an important role here. Further, the keyword ‘world literature’ is not yet fully exploited. It is still very much alive, but there is more in it than the American East-coast version. Russia has its own tradition of *mirovaja literatura* with a completely different idea as its basis. The laboratory of theories, as I would put it, is also still going strong, alongside the Anglo-Saxon region, in France, but also in German, Italian, and Spanish. Once more, Slavonic (and neighbouring) scholars are less connected; with one clear ratio: The largest non-western languages are relatively isolated (viewed from Anglo-Saxon/European academia) or self-sufficient, whereas Lithuanian or Hungarian scholars, and, traditionally with much conviction, Swedish or Dutch scholars have turned to English without complaint.

To sum it up, CompLit can, in Europe, be the first-choice model of dealing with literature, if the large register of languages is not ignored, but rather put to use. To read, but also discuss in as many European languages as possible is, after all, our real European unique selling point.

