



Project
MUSE[®]

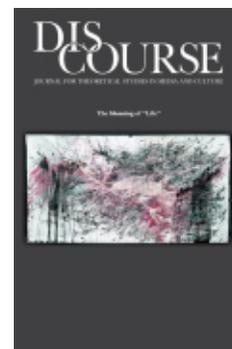
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation

Jacques Derrida
Eric Prenowitz

Discourse, Volume 30, Numbers 1 & 2, Winter & Spring 2008, pp.
22-53 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/dis.0.0045



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dis/summary/v030/30.1-2.derrida.html>

Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation¹

Jacques Derrida
Translated by Eric Prenowitz

I. What Can Be Compared? What Compares Itself? Gulliver's or Pangloss's Wake²

Let us suppose that a seminar occurs {takes place}³ in a department of comparative literature.

Which is apparently the case.

This is a department of comparative literature; I just arrived [*j'y arrive*]. Like many institutions, comparative literature did not wait for me, it did not wait for *us*, in order to exist. Nor did departments of literature in the West and elsewhere. To exist, for an institution, is to affirm its right to existence; it is to constantly refer, more or less virtually, to a legitimacy, but to a certain type of particular legitimacy, a historical legitimacy, an entitlement that has its origin in a historical act or in historical acts of foundation. When the day comes that this act of foundation—that founds the law upon nonlaw, upon an ajudicial situation—the day this act of foundation is contested by another claim to legitimacy, or simply the day when no one feels the necessity or the possibility of referring to the foundation of the law, when no one draws authority from it any longer, then the institution dies. It can outlive [*survivre à*] its own death, continue to *translate*

itself in rituals, objective behaviors, reproductive procedures, and give all the exterior signs of vitality, all the apparent guarantees of its smooth functioning, of its continuity, of its legitimacy. It can continue to pretend to have a determined, rigorously identifiable object and to relate to it in a living, renewed, effective, productive way. Even if it no longer has an object around which a living consensus can be established and can bring together a community of researchers, teachers, and students, a department in a university can long outlive the disappearance of its object and of the living consensus relating to it. It is true that, in these cases, the *survival* [*survie*], the time and the economy of survival (for example, the budget, the demographics of the institution, its region of influence, etc.) are always ruled by its inscription in a larger sociopolitical space, of which we must never lose sight.

You have already recognized the facile, worn-out, conventional schema I have been using in this preamble. It opposes not only life to death as two terms, it also exploits a reassuring belief: that an institution has a living and authentic origin, its living source of legitimacy, its intentional purpose [*finalité*], its grand design, its project, its telos, or its soul, and when this living purpose ceases to animate the community of subjects (here, researchers, professors, students), then there only remains, and not for long, a facade, a desiccated body, a sterile and mechanical reproduction.

Now if I proposed to call this seminar “The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation,” it was not in order to play the role of the latest arrival in a department, {latest arrival} whose first preoccupation—and with a taste for provocation—would be to put into question the institution that welcomes him, to ask his hosts how long they have lived here, what their ownership or rental rights are, under what conditions they occupy the premises, where their funding comes from, etc. As you can imagine, it is not at all in this spirit that I am asking my questions. Nor is it in my intentions, in my tastes {or within my means}, to organize a general and radical problematic (as my title could nonetheless lead one to believe) in order to begin with a tabula rasa and establish the basis of a new foundation, of another legitimacy.

Above all, I do not intend to inaugurate, or to criticize or to initiate.

What, then, is my intention? And why have I begun with this alternative between the living soul and the dead body of an institution, between its living source of legitimacy and the mechanical reproduction of its legality? First of all to put in place and in the spotlight (of the microscope or the telescope) a conceptual opposition that we will find wherever we go (at least this is my hypothesis),

that we will find in the most diverse forms, in the richest translations, transformations, figures, and tropes, but always ruled by this powerful logic—which is perhaps logic itself, the logic of logic.

Now if I had to choose three or four nouns to designate what resists this opposition, what is *instituted* precisely to defeat this opposition, to disqualify it, to make it lose its entitlements, its rights, and its conditions of existence, if I had to choose three or four nouns to designate what contravenes and defies this law, I would say (1) Institution, (2) Literature, (3) Translation, and consequently, among other consequences, (4) Department of Comparative Literature.

What does this mean?

The three things I just named—institution, literature, translation—have for condition, I ought rather to say they are in the condition of language [*de langue*], of written language, of language [*langage*] and/or writing, these being words that are crawling with problems but that I leave for the moment in their commonsense state—if such a thing exists. Who would contest that without languages, acts and events of language, no institution, no literature, no translation could have the least chance of appearing or of even being imagined? As concerns writing, even if it is understood in a narrow or traditional sense, that is, as the translation, precisely, of a prior verbality, one could still say that an institution, a literature, and a translation without writing would at least be rare phenomena and difficult ones to conserve, if not to conceive of. Now if there is a characteristic [*trait*] that is difficult to disregard with respect to language—written or not, written in the classical sense or not—it is the possibility of “functioning,” of having effects, of producing events, of maintaining life *by means of repetitions* that are *at one and the same time* living and dead, that mimic the dead as much as the living, and that ensure the *traditio*, the translation or the tradition, of meaning beyond and independently of the living intentionality that aims at it [*le vise*], contains or bears it. The so-called living, producing, instituting subject no longer needs to be there for the text to function (text is what I am now calling the texture of an oral utterance as much as, still in the ordinary sense, the written support or document). And a text is made for this, structured for this; it makes possible this traditioning [*traditionnante*] iterability, being its element and its condition. I need only recall these axioms—which are commonplaces today—to make you aware of this necessity: one can no longer oppose, with regard to institution, to literature, or to translation (and, for example, to department of comparative literature), the living origin of the institution, which would be associated with an intentional purpose orienting [*tendant*] a community of living

subjects toward the same ideal object, and, on the other hand, a dead or moribund repetition, the facade of a survival [*survivance*], a mechanized comedy. {This concept of survival [*survie*] (*fortleben, überleben*, living on⁴) will come, perhaps, to be at the center of these sessions.} These two terms, these two values, can never be opposed to each other, nor even dissociated in a text (the text of an institution, a literary text, a translation text), anymore than a living and authentic original on the one hand, and a double, a copy, or a simulacrum on the other can be separated—we will come to this.

Never forget, even if it is not a problem for you, that I am speaking here in French, in what passes for French, and that, as we will see very quickly, this fact can never be simply discounted from the very thing I am trying to get across to you. I am a foreign “visiting professor,”⁵ speaking in his own language, but within the enclosure of an American university department dominated linguistically by English and whose title is not “compared literature” [*littérature comparée*], but, and I translate, “comparative literature” [*littérature comparative*]. Depending on the language, as you know, the concept that I name in French “*littérature comparée*” receives titles or names, in the Western universities that have such a department {or such a “program”⁶}, which translate into each other but which we would be mistaken to consider as strict equivalents. I am speaking only about names and titles in saying this; I am not yet speaking of differences in style, in method, in tradition from one university to another, from one culture (national or otherwise) to another, from one politics to another. Already in the name, in the name that gives its title, comparative literature⁷ is not strictly the same thing, does not mean rigorously the same thing as “*littérature comparée*,” which is used sometimes in the plural, sometimes in the singular (which is not without importance; we will return to this). And if *littérature comparée* (or in Italian *letterature comparate*) is considered to translate (or to be translated by) *vergleichende Literatur*; this discrepancy, which can be annulled in daily practice, which can be neutralized in the course of exchange (and we must take this neutralization and its conditions into account; we will return to this problem), nonetheless this slight deviation of translation must translate something. And, in any case, the example that concerns us has to do with the translation of the very concept of comparative literature, *littérature comparée*, *vergleichende Literatur*; etc., which is to say, of instituted disciplines and rule-governed practices in which the theme of translation or of the plurality of languages occupies a central, organizing position. The word and the concept of translation {*Übersetzung, traduction, traductio*} will also present problems of translation that we shall not fail to

encounter when the time comes, and we must attend to the paradox of the fold that is thereby created. I will close here these parentheses concerning the dominant language in which this seminar is taking place and the necessity of problematizing this phenomenon and of taking it into account as rigorously as possible. Allow me to say briefly the same thing about the fact that in addition to my situation as a foreign visiting professor⁸ coming from a university world that is to a certain extent foreign, there is a supplementary complication: the fact that I have never been trained in comparative literature⁹ {as such} would simply be the sign of an individual incompetence (and this is indeed the case)—but I am not insisting on this to touch you or shock you (assuming that incompetence, even when it is confessed, could still shock anybody in the university)—if it were possible today to know what should constitute a specific training, a verifiable competence in comparative literature.

Such is the horizon of some of the questions I would like to ask. Because if my initial intention was not to undertake a radical critique of the degeneracy of an institution compared, precisely, to its living, authentic, originary purpose (I have already told you why this gesture seemed to me to be charged with too many dogmatic presuppositions), nor to construct the plans of a comparative literature to come, I nonetheless believe that we must not forbid ourselves from asking questions about the historical and structural conditions of what is called “comparative literature.” In this regard, I shall propose a preliminary distinction to clarify things a little. I do not take this distinction, either, to be absolutely rigorous and above all suspicion—and I shall explain why throughout this seminar—but it seems convenient to me to begin with. It is a broad distinction between {the study or the theory called C.L.,} comparative literature *itself*, if you will,¹⁰ which is to say the practice of establishing relations in all forms (comparison, citation, translation, inheritance, contamination, graft, misappropriation [*détournement*], etc.) in all figures and in all tropics between different literatures (different in their language, be it national or not, but also in their genres, their periods, etc.).¹¹ In this sense literatures, let us say literary practices, have *perhaps* not waited, at all, for the project of a systematic study, a critical and historical theorization of these phenomena of comparison or competition in the broad and diverse sense. I say *perhaps* because we should admit that such a practice, among writers, if you like, cannot take place without the beginning of a study, of an analysis, of theoretical knowledge, of theorization of practice, thus without a certain comparative science. Each time a “work” [*œuvre*] includes a “borrowed” structure [*dispositif*], there is always, at least

in a virtual sense, but often explicitly, a sort of literary theorem—it is easier to speak of comparative literature if this borrowing concerns a literature that is foreign from a linguistic or national point of view, but since many comparatists have taken the theory of literary genres or types as their own proper object, it is not illegitimate to speak of comparative literature and of practical theorems when a work borrows, utilizes [*met en œuvre*], transforms, grafts, translates, or transfers an element coming from another genre or another type of work belonging to the same linguistic sphere and the same cultural sphere, *assuming that these things have a rigorous identity*. In the end, every relation between one work and another, between one corpus and another, can in all rigor come under the heading of literature compared [*littérature comparée*: comparative literature]—compared to itself. Because later on we will come to problematize the ultimate terms of what is called here comparison or comparativity, all the more so in that the most common presupposition of the expressions “*littérature comparée*,” “comparative literature,” “*vergleichende Literatur*,” is that in the end it is with itself that literature is compared or compares itself [*se compare*], with itself as other, and “*se compare*” here can take a reflexive sense (literature itself, identical to itself compares itself [*se compare*] to itself, being at once the subject and the object of the act of comparison, the comparer (*vergleichende*) and the compared; or else *se compare*, as one can say with just as much grammatical justification in French, can mean that literature is compared, that a nonliterary activity compares literature, compares literatures but again with itself or themselves [*elle-même(s)*], in the singular or in the plural; but in the two cases the unity of literature, the essence of literature, {literariness¹²}, the self-identity of the comparable is presupposed). I said that *perhaps* literary comparison in the broadest sense did not await the establishment of a discipline entitled (accredited¹³) “comparative literature” and that this discipline was perhaps at work in literary writing itself, as soon as it related to itself as other. It is not necessary to be so prudent and to say “perhaps” when we understand the term “discipline” of comparative literature (as {“study,”¹⁴} theoretical project, as nonliterary research and activity) to refer to a “university institution” in the Western and modern sense of the term, according to the encyclopedic model and politics that we began to identify last year in the seminar on the right to literature [*le droit à la littérature*]. Because in this sense the institution of comparative literature, as you know, has a history, a recent and relatively short history in sum, a history and a geography, a juridical or legitimizing process, a politics, a set of conditions that articulate this history with those of all the other disciplines. How

should we decipher this history? How should we define its specificity? According to what procedures and with what hypotheses should we interrogate the university institution that bears the name “comparative literature” in the world, in Europe first and then beyond Europe? This is a very open set of questions into which you will, I hope, venture with me along the most diverse paths in the course of these sessions and beyond them. I hope that through discussions and contributions prepared by some of you, we will be able to organize our work in a truly collective manner around this array of questions (we will discuss this at the end of class and during the discussion session tomorrow). For my part, in this introduction {for several sessions}, I shall limit myself on the one hand to a few principal generalities and on the other hand to what could seem at first glance—but a very innocent first glance—to be a particular question inside this field, that is, the question of translation.

In the first place, with the most ingenuous surprise and the most naive attention, I would like to note how singular the word “compared,” “comparing,” or “comparative” is when it comes to qualify a science, a research project, an object of study. It is an attribute that is either self-evident, self-evident enough to go unmentioned, insofar as every episteme is comparative (it has a unity of its object and it compares examples, cases, kinds, or types: zoology is comparative, anthropology is comparative, chemistry is comparative; this is why they are not called “comparative,” it is too self-evident); either it is self-evident, I was saying, and it is not mentioned in the name of the empirico-inductive discipline, or else it is ruled out by the structure of the object: one does not speak of comparative mathematics, of comparative pure physics. It would be interesting to pursue this inquiry systematically, asking to which disciplines it is impossible to affix the predicate “comparative,” and for what reason, whether it is because it would be tautological or because it would be absurd, and what tautological and absurd mean here. In this way we could compare and classify sciences, disciplines, or departments, compare them from the point of view of their respective comparativity, and of the type of comparativity to which they lay claim. From the point of view of the relation between generality and comparativity: because if there is paradox therein, it has to do with a certain conjunction of generality and comparativity. Compare comparative literature with other disciplines that incontestably practice comparison. Take history or sociology, if they exist: they practice all sorts of comparisons, but (and I say this at the risk of being very imprudent again) one would never dream of instituting an entire discipline as “comparative history.” One does the comparative history of this or of that, of

regimes of such and such a type, of wars or of nationalisms, of this or that community, of this or that practice, of religions, etc. But one would never dream of instituting a general comparative history; it would make no sense. Comparative histories are part of a general history, at least as principal project. Whereas with comparative literature, something else seems to be happening—I am speaking here of the very project of this discipline. Of course, departments of comparative literature function in fact like more or less dependent divisions [*sections*] [{"programs"}¹⁵] or intersections dependent on departments of linguistically specified national literatures (English, Italian, French, German, etc.). But as it is rather rare, and even to my knowledge practically exceptional, that general literature (I am not saying universal literature) be studied in a department specially designed for such research, it happens that the project of comparative literature, in its most ambitious and interesting aspects, is a project of general literature.¹⁶ And this is a hapax, I believe: a general science, a science that wants to be general is not rare, by definition, nor is a science that, in its very generality, must appeal to comparison in conditions where this is so self-evident that it is not even mentioned, but a discipline that wants to be general and wants to keep the title "comparative" presents a very singular and very critical problem. Are these things compatible? And what does it imply? From the point of view of the most classical epistemologies, a comparative method by itself (I stress that I am saying by itself and in its own proper moment) can aspire only to an inductive, empirical generality, with impure laws and a descriptive form. To begin comparing, no doubt one must presuppose an essential knowledge of the general essence of the comparables. Thus one must presuppose knowledge about the essence of the literary in general, and the existence of a literary element that is one and identical to itself in general, an element upon which all national literatures would depend, as would all literary phenomena and types in any language or culture; one must presuppose the horizon of this general literariness in order then to be able to highlight, recognize, select, classify, sort, and *compare* comparable phenomena, perhaps establishing laws by induction, etc. But, in principle, this essential generality that forms the a priori of comparativity should not itself depend on any comparative procedure [*démarche*]. There must be a general literariness, a general essence of literature, out of which the comparative project could gain consistency and have some chance of becoming effective. This is a requisite of classical epistemology or philosophy. In order to compare literatures or literary phenomena, I must first know, at least by way of precomprehension, what the literary is, lacking which I risk comparing anything with

anything in the name of comparative literature. I would compare for example a painting and a real plant, a cookbook and a constitutional text, a novel and a bank check, a speech by Carter and the *Iliad*. Far-fetched as these examples appear to you, you are well aware that for want of a rigorous a priori, of an essence rigorously protected by its apriority, one can always argue that such comparisons belong to the field of comparative literature. Since the existence of a pure literariness is and remains today more problematic than ever, the study of general literature concerns an object that is more problematic than ever and thus comparative literature can also become a wandering discipline, as delirious as it is bulimic in an unbridled encyclopedia: nothing that has to do with language is foreign to me, nothing that has to do with the work of art is foreign to me, it says; not only do all languages interest me but so do all artifices, all artistic or artisanal practices; they all have to do with language and thus with literature, etc. At this point, the examples I chose apparently at random will seem less far-fetched to you than they did at first. So long as the history of painting is difficult to dissociate in all rigor from the history of the cultural, linguistic, and even literary text, it is enough to ask literature and painting, comparatively, the question of mimesis or of the referent, etc., for the question of the relation between a still-life and a so-called real plant (a vegetable or a game animal) to no longer be simply foreign, a priori exterior, to the domain of comparative literature, no more so than any text that is written or oral, discursive, or plastic, etc. And what I have just said about the painting/plant example would be even easier to develop for the comparison between a cookbook and a constitutional text (no lack of literature there), a novel and a bank check, a speech by Jefferson and a dialogue of Plato. We must understand the structural temptation of this encyclopedic opening; we must try to understand why it cannot avoid *opening*, in a way, the alleged field of the aforementioned comparative literature. I am going to read a few lines extracted precisely from an encyclopedia, from the *Encyclopedia Universalis*, at the heading *Littérature comparée*. {I have deliberately chosen to refer to an encyclopedia.} This encyclopedia article is itself an encyclopedist article, which is to say that it describes the concept of comparative literature, the essential vocation or the destination of this magnificent discipline, to be an encyclopedic, encyclopedistic destination. The author is delighted with this, and this does not seem to present any problem to him other than the time each specialist in comparative literature would need to acquire sufficient training, the funds that the departments should receive if political decision makers would only take cognizance of the necessity of comparative liter-

ature, and all the technical means it should put to use. All the questions concern the modalities of the implementation of this encyclopedia and not the essence or the structure of the project. The author of this article, whom I fear may be seen in the French comparative literature milieu as one of its leading lights [*têtes pensantes*], is Etiemble. His article is very interesting because it is very reasonable and because the very exposition he develops of the rationality of the discipline he wants to defend leads him to such extremities that it makes one think about the ultimately paranoid structure of this encyclopedic rationality. If we were to follow the imperturbable logic of this article and of its declared project, the entire world would become an immense department of comparative literature administered by the International Association of Comparative Literature (which exists and which, according to E., deserves its name today, since Yugoslavian sits next to Hungarian, Russian near American, Japanese near Dutch), a world administered by the International Association of Comparative Literature, giving directives to UNESCO for the attribution of funding and thus the levying of taxes, with a seat on the UN Security Council in case of disputes between national departments, and even—why not, if we are to be logical—disposing of an international police contingent. Not only will you see that I am not joking (neither is Etiemble, and I consider that he is right, that he is developing here a rationality that is immanent to the thing itself), but even that this is not the product of a simply utopian project: I claim that these structures [*dispositifs*] exist, in a form that is visible or not (there is such an association, there are international funds producing complex decisions, allocations, complex disputes that are not very visible but verifiable, there is even a police force, as there is in each discipline moreover, a way of regulating relations of cohabitation or cooperation by force, on the national and international levels). Here then is a passage from the encyclopedist article that Etiemble devotes to Comparative Literature in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*. In two pages he has just presented what he modestly calls an appraisal of comparative literature up to the present, as well as its program, and he starts a new paragraph:

This appraisal and this program cannot be carefully established so long as we do not have a methodical bibliography of published works and an exhaustive inventory of work in progress (many too many of which repeat each other already). [!!! Describe Ayatollah Etiemble's centralized factory, the metropolis with panoramic screen and dispatching keyboard: what academic, what researcher has not dreamed of such an empire?] Yet however rich it may seem to be, no nation can expect by itself to produce the bibliography without which there cannot be general literature, this supreme

end of comparative literature. Since the purpose of this discipline is not to poison drinking water, to defoliate plantations [are we so sure?], to break people's heads [are we so sure? (Cf. Wellek on nationalisms)], to organize regressive mutations, in short to annihilate the vegetable and animal species, as well as man's civilization, since it only proposes to combat all the forms of cultural chauvinism and to teach the respect or the admiration of others, no country grants it a thousandth of the funds it lavishes on laboratories where chemical, atomic, or biological weapons are fabricated. Who, other than UNESCO, will stand in for the faulty nations? Who will have the financial means? The national commissions of the member states would be charged with collecting materials in each country that would be CENTRALIZED [my emphasis, J.D.], treated [?], diffused by this organization. In this way the wish expressed in 1956 by Marcel Bataillon in the *Revue de Littérature Comparée* would be realized: "for an international bibliography of comparative literature."

Let us not hide this fact: the task is formidable. In all written languages [?], it will be necessary to identify, sort, criticize *all* the articles and all the books dealing directly or indirectly [?] with comparative literature, and to do this IN THE ORDER OF THE ARTS AS WELL AS IN THAT OF LETTERS [?]. More than thirty years ago, Paul Paury noted (*Arts et littérature comparée*) that the specialist in comparative literature cannot harmlessly separate the study of the arts from that of literatures. Panofsky's *Iconology* confirms that literature very often sheds light on paintings or statues that, in the absence of any reference to the texts that found them [?], remain unintelligible. Half a century earlier, Émile Mâle had already shown all that the imagery of cathedrals owes to Vincent de Beauvais, to various theological or encyclopedic texts of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, try to explain the *Voyage en Orient*¹⁷ without knowing the engravings from which so many of its pages were drawn. Without being familiar with Wagnerism and music, how will you be able to discuss in a fully conversant manner the Symbolists' claim to be composing "symphonies" in prose? Works like those of C. S. Brown (*Music and Literature*), Léon Guichard (*La Musique et les lettres au temps du romantisme*), Thérèse Marix Spire (*Les Romantiques et la musique*), and many others still, prove that the relations between music and literature are no less important than those between literature and the plastic arts. No one will be able to seriously study the Turkish troubadours without knowing Arab music and Arabo-Andalusian poems in *zadjal*; but translated into German and English, the Turkish troubadours certainly shed light on our own. And without a good knowledge of the origins of nonliturgical monody, who will speak fittingly of the *trouvères*? The mediaeval lay depends, as much as the *chanson de geste*, on music. Similarly, in China, the history of the *ts'eu*, a type of poem freed from strict forms, remains¹⁸ inseparable from that of the musical airs that tell the poet and the reader what type of versification it is in each instance. . . . In other words, since the history of literature and of the arts are inseparable from the evolution of the sciences, technology, religion, the bibliography of comparative literature practically [*quasiment!* Admire the adverb!] coincides with the universal bibliography. Such that, for better or worse, in our time of mind-numbing specialization, it is possible that the comparatist, as a *specialist of the general*, could be one of the last advocates and upholders of what was formerly called without condescension "*culture*."¹⁹

This expression, “specialist of the general,” which is a title traditionally reserved for philosophers, is quite a sure sign that the aim here is indeed to restore or to maintain, for the best and for the worst, this project, at once foundational (the figures of founding and of the foundation appear in the text) and encyclopedic, which characterizes the philosophical ambition for absolute knowledge, totalizing or finalizing the history of meaning or of culture, the history of spirit in all its manifestations. Go try to create a department with that. In effect, the comparatist who is also a generalist does not want to define in this way one field or department among others, but rather Universitas itself, the unified, centralized, state-controlled organization on the global level (the reference to UNESCO is very significant in this respect) of all possible culture in general. Universitas as rational realization of the universal state and decline of the state: this is a political problematic at the center (not at the margins) of this great comparative literature dream. Although it is commensurate with a certain modern techno-politics (UNESCO, telecommunications, gigantic memories of computerized libraries, a certain state of inter-state information transfer, etc., etc.), the spirit of the philosophico-encyclopedic project is obviously in synchrony with the great speculative systems of the nineteenth century on the Hegelian model (but of which the Hegelian example is itself only a particularly powerful and spectacular phenomenon). I have not chosen this manifest by Etiemble, this encyclopedic text published in an *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, in order to abuse or deride it. I believe that it expresses directly and without detours the broad outline of the spirit that governs, that necessarily governs the original [*principielle*] foundation, the very constitution of every department of “complit.” (To be complete or not to be.²⁰) I am less interested in underlining the character at once utopian and totalitarian, generous and paranoiac, of this text than in attempting to recognize in it, in its very principle, in its simple pretension to legitimacy, a sort of *critical fold*. I persist in saying a legitimate pretension to legitimacy, because who can contest that Etiemble is right to call at once for such a bibliography, such funds, such universal competence, such connections with all knowledge and all practice, such panculturalism, etc.? There is nothing to be said against that ambition and those demands. He is correct through and through, by right, by principle [*en droit, en principe*]. So where is the critical fold? Where will we locate it in the project itself—I mean independently of all the empirical difficulties that could be encountered in realizing it, in convincing UNESCO and all states to give up arms, politics, war so as to serve an Ayatollah full of wisdom who will put everyone to work in an immense department of complit?

Where will we locate this critical fold? Precisely in this value of generality, in the concept of general literature, that organizes *and* disorganizes this entire discourse.

You have seen that the very thing which, under the heading of general literature, was most reasonable, most legitimate in the deployment of the required competencies, in what extended them to all languages, all forms of art, whether discursive or not, plastic and musical, and ultimately to all culture, necessarily came to blur [*dissoudre*] the very concept or essence of literature that was supposed to organize the deployment of the object and of the competence. What is literature and what is not literature in all of this? There is nothing fortuitous in the fact that Etiemble does not even ask the question. Either he should say that all of this belongs to what he calls comparative literature as general literature, in which case it is not clear why the name of literature would dominate [*serait prévalent*], why this would not be called general philosophy, general history, general culture, {general anthropology}, general aesthetics at least; or else we insist on maintaining the irreducible specificity of literature, in which case, among all the formidable problems of the “literariness” of literature, we are faced with those of its breakdown in an encyclopedic field it no longer dominates or covers, the problem of its articulation with other fields, not only all the other fields in general but more narrowly the one that in the West is called art and within art, between the nondiscursive and the discursive arts, and more narrowly still between the discursive arts of which it is not certain from the outset that they belong to literature (poetry, philosophical dialogue, song, theater, etc.). Within this problematic and historical sphere, the formidable questions of the history of literature [*de la littérature*] also appear—not only the history of its works but of its concept and of its name: at what moment, under what conditions, in what sense did people begin to speak of literature, to no longer confuse it with poetry and *belles-lettres*? By what right can one call the Chinese *ts’eu* or the Arabo-Andalusian poems in *zadjal*, to use those examples, literature? We addressed these questions—in particular the question of the formation of the narrow concept of “literature” in the eighteenth century—last year, under the title of *droit à la littérature*.²¹ Is literature in the narrow sense, if there is such a thing, compatible with the encyclopedic project of general and comparative literature? Because comparative literature, if these words have the meaning that the consensus has always attributed to them, compares literature with itself, some literature [*de la littérature*] with itself, literatures, or literary phenomena amongst themselves. Whether we speak of comparative lit-

erature as a work or as a discipline, it always claims to be at once on the side of the comparing and of the compared. Comparative, compared, or comparing literature should, in the final analysis, only have to do with literature or with literatures as its specific object or subject. And one can identify literatures or literary phenomena, literary products or productions, only if one knows, if one at least has a precomprehension, of what “literature” or the “literariness” of literature means. Is this a “critical” question and in what way? Does it inaugurate [*ouvre*] a crisis? Does it put the concept and the institution of “comparative literature” in crisis? And what relation does it have with the problem of translation? These are questions we will address in our next session.

II. Anatomies of Comparative Criticism

Why did I give our last session the title “Pangloss”? It was a literary reference, of course, and we are speaking of literature here. {We claim to be, in any case.} Pangloss exists only in literature, he is a fictive being, as we say, who never takes place outside the enigmatic element called literature. He appears, in literature, at about the time when literature was constituted, or at least, if you find that statement too brutal and imprudent, at a time when the word “literature” became attached to a certain content that is neither poetry, nor *belles-lettres*, nor fine arts (in any case, this is what we tried to show last time {last year})—and a content upon which we continue to live today, upon which the comparativist project in literature was formulated, no doubt in the nineteenth century, with its share of overflowing optimism and already something critical, something threatened inside itself. Furthermore, Pangloss is a proper name. I wanted to announce in this way that the problem of the proper name will be very near the center of what we will be talking about this year—in the vicinity of comparative literature and translation. {What is a proper name?²²} Can a proper name be translated? And what are we to do with proper names in literary translation? As a rule, in the consortium (I cannot simply say the family) of the so-called great European languages within which departments of *complit* are most often confined (German, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin-Greek, and more rarely the Slavic languages), personal proper names (I insist on the personal, because, as we will see, logicians also speak of proper names beyond personal names, civil patronymic or matronymic names, and here we will also have an entire dimension [*portée*] for our problem of

translation) personal proper names cannot be translated. They are sometimes adapted, in pronunciation or transcription (like the proper names of cities: Londres, London, Venezia, Venice, Venise; but Londres is not a translation of London), but they cannot be translated. They are taken to be untranslatable because they have no meaning, no conceptualizable and common meaning; they only have a referent, as one says, a unique referent, and when they are pronounced one can designate [*viser*] only a single, singular individual, one unique thing. {Whence a contamination of the untranslatable, an expansion of the untranslatable to all that *touches*, all that is *contiguous* with, the proper name in a text or in a language.} There is only one Washington in the universe, one city or one man named Washington, and according to the determining context, each time, Washington designates a single individual, whether it be a great statesman, Washington, DC, or the other one or the other one, or whoever bears this proper name. All these names, all these occurrences of the name Washington, are related to each other through pure homonymy; each time, to all appearances, they designate individuals who do not refer to any common concept. We will come back to this. In any case, proper names cannot in theory be translated. And Pangloss is a proper name, the problem made more acute by the fact that the singular referent meant by this proper name is a fictive referent, one that was invented, if you will, by Voltaire. This distinguishes it, for example, from London or Washington, which are supposed to be real, not to be contained, in their substance, within a book, a so-called work of literature or of the imagination. You will say to me that London, the unity of London or of Washington, is also a fiction, no one has ever seen anything, no one has ever seen or beheld before their eyes an individual named London (London is an entity defined [*découpée*] by symbolic, legal, political conventions; it is even a modifiable entity that can be stretched out by adding suburbs or even erased from the map without removing any part of its physical reality). The same can be said of Washington, and even of the individual Washington. Admittedly. But, having said this, the fictionality of London or of Washington is not of the same type as that of Pangloss, of this literary character baptized by his presumed author, Voltaire. The conventional fiction named London does not in theory belong to literature and—let us make do with this remark for the moment—it was not produced, invented, according to the same procedures of nomination. In the case of Pangloss, I shall only be concerned with what has to do with comparative literature and translation in this procedure of nomination.

The problem I wanted to bring to your attention right away is the following: when a so-called proper name is not simply proper, when it maintains meaningful relations [*rappports signifians*] with common nouns and the meaning meant [*le sens visé*] by common nouns, its resistance to translation carries with it entire regions of untranslatability [*des pans entiers d'intraduisible*]. Since what I am saying is perhaps not very clear in this form, I shall take a few examples, preferably examples we have worked on in previous years. Think, for example, about the proper names Francis Ponge or Maurice Blanchot. There are entire strata of Ponge's oeuvre (in fact difficult to dissociate from the rest) that play, in French, with the name Ponge according to all sorts of figures of displacement, of contamination, of breaking down, etc. This goes for the sponge [*éponge*], the pumice stone [*Pierre-ponce*], for all the logic and semantics of the spongy even when the signifier *éponge* is not readable as such. The same is true of the name Francis (*francité* [Frenchness], *franchise* [frankness], with play on the H that we studied a few years ago). Same thing with *blanche-eau* [white water], *blanchâtre* [whitish], etc. What happens to these possibilities (which always exist in all languages, and which produce effects even if they are not the occasion of deliberate conscious literary operations) in the wake of translation, which leaves the proper name intact, but necessarily has to alter the entire network of common nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, syncategorems that form a necessary, tightly woven fabric with the proper name into which one cannot cut, slice, sacrifice without destroying the texture of the text?²³ I do not believe that one must conclude that translation is impossible [*à l'intraduisible*], but that this brings us to transform the concept of translation and what, later on, I shall call the *economic* problematics of translation. These are some of the reasons that made me give our last session the proper name Pangloss. Note that even as it visibly made reference to the character in Voltaire's novel, Pangloss became the proper name of something else, according to a figure of displacement that I am unable to name. A title is a proper name, and Pangloss became the proper name (an inherited one, but proper) of the session to which I gave this title. But there were still other reasons for this baptismal choice. Already, the fact that there are reasons for the choice of a proper name makes it meaningful, gives it meaning and semanticizes it, conceptualizes it, if you will. And thenceforth the reference to a singular individual, real or fictive, is contaminated, enriched, deflected [*déportée*] according to an entire semantic network, an entire web within which one cannot easily situate it or find it a fixed location.

Take the name Pangloss. It is a very rich phenomenon of comparative literature.

1. It is the proper name of a character who has no existence outside of a literary work.²⁴

2. It is a unique proper name—as a signifier. Pierre is a proper name, as is Washington, in that each time they are supposed to designate only a single individual, but the same name can be given to more than one individual (whence an additional difficulty for translation). Whereas Pangloss is not only a proper name, designating an individual who has no existence outside of the book, but moreover it has never (to my knowledge, at least, and pending further information) been given to anyone else in “real” or literary history.²⁵ This is not the case of Cunégonde or of Martin in the same novel, of Jacques Le Fataliste, or of Marcel in the *Recherche du temps perdu*. Pangloss is a proper name that was forged to be used only once.

3. It is a name that was forged and formed from a language, Greek, that is foreign to the language of the novel. In this sense, it is in itself a product of practical comparative literature.

4. It is a name loaded with meaning, with conceptualizable meaning. It functions doubly insofar as it refers to a singular individual on the one hand (the character of the novel), but at exactly the same time, as soon as the reader can translate the meaning of pan-gloss, it designates a semantic figure to which I shall come in a moment. You will say that, at least virtually, this is true of every name. Admittedly, but the functioning of this semanticization is different each time. The first relay is the reference to another individual with the same name. If Miller means *meunier* in French, in the first place one will not call Hillis Miller “Hillis *meunier*” in France, and above all when hearing “Miller” one will look in the first place to a singular individual who is real and inscribed in the family or the lineage of other individuals with the same name, and in our context first of all his father. He received the name of his father, an individual presumed to be real. In the same way, if a first name like Pierre has meaning outside of the immediate family genealogy, it will be, for example, in reference to another individual in history who bore the name Pierre and marked it with meaning (although the relation between Petrus and the rock [*la pierre*] is loaded with a rather idiomatic history). But there is nothing of the sort in the case of Pangloss, which not only does not refer to any real individual outside of the novel, but not even to any other individual in history who might have had the same name. As a unique proper name, having come from a language foreign to the (French) novelistic corpus in which it appears, a name naming an individual who is not real but fictive,

Pangloss ought to be untranslatable, more untranslatable than ever; to tell the truth, Voltaire himself baptized him without translating it, in another language. It is a foreign body in the language, as perhaps, paradoxically, every proper name is in the end. We could venture the following paradox: a proper name, unlike any other noun, is perhaps that without which there is no language, but also that which does not belong to the language, which not only is not translatable [*traductible*] from one language to another but is not translatable [*traduisible*] in the very language “in” which it seems to function normally. With what does one replace a proper name; how can one find an equivalent for it in any language at all? This is one of the forms of our problem.

5.²⁶ And yet, as singular, proper, and untranslatable as it seems, Pangloss is a proper name as close as possible to a common noun; it is loaded with meaning and visibly reaches (in a figural or allegorical fashion, as you wish) well beyond its individual bearer, its novelistic character. In this regard, it is not only translatable [*traductible*] but a pure product of translation, it is nothing but translated [*un traduit*], it exists only in translation, it is a translation without an original version, a translating without translated [*un traduisant sans traduit*]; and, better yet, this is where I wanted to lead you, it is the figure of a thesis on translation and comparative literature. This proper name is an entire sentence, an entire discourse; it is articulated, it has several parts. Pangloss means “all languages,” “every language,” suggesting a person who speaks or knows all languages, or again “universal language.” Panglottism is moreover a word that exists and that was forged at a given time. Panglottism can refer to someone who “speaks all languages,” but panglossia tends rather to designate the universal language, or even universal writing, for which projects proliferated after Descartes and above all Leibniz from the end of the seventeenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Now you know that Dr. Pangloss (because he is a Dr., a scholar or a sage; he is also the author or the defender of a thesis, a PhD, he is a doctor in philosophy), Dr. Pangloss is the representative in a satirical mode of Leibniz, of Leibnizian optimism in its caricatural form; Pangloss is the one who prides himself with rationally evaluating “effects and causes, the best of possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul and pre-established harmony,” the one who says, like Leibniz but naturally caricaturing him, “all is for the best in the best of possible worlds.”²⁷ In fact his name points in the direction of the encyclopedism that marks Leibnizian philosophy and above all in the direction of Leibniz’s project for a universal language and writing system. In this way, not only does he

have a proper name that is very common, that is translatable [*traductible*] and in advance translated, but with it he carries, he transports, a philosophy of universal translatability [*traductibilité*] and an ethics of comparative literature. Which is why Pangloss will be

7. the nickname of Dr. Etiemble. And this is the journey I wished to make in the company of Dr. Pangloss and Candide in order to circle back to what we were saying last time. You will recall what seemed to be an encyclopedic project animating a certain discourse on complit and the ambiguity [*equivoque*] that this encyclopedism's most reasonable and most incontestable legitimacy inherently carried with regard to this concept of "general literature," a concept about which we cannot say whether it should include all earth's cultures and knowledge or be restricted to literarity in the strict sense. If there is such a thing—and the entire question comes down to this. It goes without saying that this question is inseparable from that of languages and translation, and this is what I would like to clarify now. Having posited the "encyclopedic" imperative with an optimism as touching and irrefutable as Pangloss, Etiemble cannot avoid drawing the following conclusion: universal language, and, if it is inaccessible: train comparativists as translators "which is to say as artists of language, and greater even than writers"²⁸ (I am quoting, and we will return in a moment to this formulation). "One is not born a comparativist," E. says,

[O]ne becomes a comparativist through the insatiable desire for encyclopedism, through daily labor. One must patiently await old age to produce the best fruits [note this metaphor: it seems trivial and cursory; in fact, more than once in this seminar we will encounter a bio-organicist rhetoric that does not haunt these regions of complit and translation by accident].²⁹

Further on, E. continues:

This is enough to discourage many an enthusiastic novice. The comparativist will indeed always be bound by the impossible. This is why he is not trusted, as much in the capitalist world as in the socialist countries. Yet if man still has a future, the comparativist, whose vocation is to understand everything, if not to forgive everything, could contribute to its reconstruction [this is Pangloss before Lisbon; he has just proved that the roadstead of Lisbon was made on purpose for the Anabaptist Jacques to be drowned there, and in the face of the Lisbon earthquake, he calmly asks himself in the code of Leibniz, whose spokesman or translator-interpreter he is, "what can the sufficient reason of this phenomenon be?"³⁰], if only because he condemns all nationalisms [so a good comparativist should condemn nationalism: one can only approve, but not without being a bit anxious all the same, especially if he condemns it in favor of what Etiemble does not hesitate to call "a true international of great minds"] in favor of a true inter-

national of great minds. . . . Unfortunately the nations' rulers do not often have a comparativist mind. Everything suggests that for a long time hence they will ferociously resist its ecumenism and its tolerance. They repeat after Claudel, "Tolerance? There are houses for that." [And here is the properly pasiglottic or panglottic project which is the inevitable result of this encyclopedism:] For example, an international agreement must be established concerning a few working languages and, if possible, a universal language.³¹

Naturally, I am not citing E. here simply to have a laugh or to spend a moment with a pleasant Pangloss (a bit one-eyed, it is true—do not forget that Pangloss had only one eye, he had lost an eye to sickness, but that had only given him more vigor and optimism; he only saw the good side of things {A single eye: a single universal language.³²}). It is because the demand for a universal language is as consistent with any complit project as it seems to me to be in contradiction with the essence of literature, if there is such a thing. The dream of a universal language (even as a dream, and, as you will see, Etiemble does not hide the theoretico-utopic character of this dream)—naturally this dream even as a dream cannot inhabit literary practice on the production side, if you will, comparative literature in action [*en acte*], which seems to be irreducibly tied to natural, or even national, languages and which would lose everything if it were to lose language. What is at issue is thus a universal language of scholars, of scientific specialists, of researchers in the so-called domain of Complit. What is at issue is thus a universal metalanguage into which the very object of research, that is to say, the works, could be transcribed with no remainder [*sans reste*]. {Hjelmslev defines language: "A language is a semiotics into which all the other semiotics can be translated: all the other languages as well as all the other semiotic structures concerned" (*Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*)}. You see here all the problems that will occupy our seminar. Beyond the translation of one literary language into another, it is a question in this case of the translation of all literatures, considered as the object of comparative general literature, into one single and unique universal language. Etiemble never puts the pure legitimacy of the project into doubt; he does not problematize the ideal finality of this grand design of universal language and writing. The only thing he hesitates and wonders about is the fact, the realization, the practical implementation of this magnificent ideal. Ideally, it ought to be possible to transcribe all literatures and the totality of culture in general, to tell the truth, into a universal code, as if they themselves were only a more or less perfect, diverse, approximate, shimmering network of meanings, of contents, of themes, of ideas belonging to a universal reserve [*fonds*]

of humanity, of human society, or of general logic, and which this universal language ought in principle to be able to reconstitute, having in fact made it possible a priori. This ideal is not put into question, and it is indeed possible that it is an ideal shared by the world community of comparativists—even if it is translated here by Etienne into a somewhat caricaturally voluntarist and direct form in the style of a comparativist scout movement. The question that will preoccupy us is whether or not literature gets anything out of it [*ly trouve son compte*]. In any case, Pangloss does not doubt the ideal, but since the de facto obstacles are very evident to him—as empirical obstacles to the constitution of this universal language—he falls back on translation, the polyvalence of comparativists as translators, as artist-translators, and in more than ten languages (*dekaglottismus* is the name given by a Hungarian comparativist who was a disciple of Goethe to the ideal competence of the comparativist: to know and practice ten languages). Since the universal language (pasigraphy or pasigraphy) does not exist and cannot be expected any time soon, let our comparativists be incomparable translators, incomparable in the keyboard of languages at their disposition and in their talent, which should not only equal but—and here we will have to seriously question this hyperbole that they must be “artists of language, and greater even than writers.” I must read you another passage from the same text:

For example, an international agreement must be established concerning a few working languages and, if possible, a universal language. . . . In the human sciences, it would obviously be most wise to adopt as working language the only one that corresponds to what Descartes imagined about the best universal language possible: the one whose signs could be pronounced by each person in his or her own dialect [comment, explain: the idea of simple³³ as condition of this translatability [*tractabilité*], the “economic” motif, etc.]. But since these are Chinese ideograms [Why????? Etienne is a Sinologist . . .], neither the Russians nor the Americans will accept this reasonable solution. Should we therefore choose the language of a nation that offends no one and cannot aspire to universal domination: Swedish, Dutch? The great powers will not agree [This problem is necessary if not well formulated. Develop: politics of comparative literature, etc. {Computing [*informatique*] and database. Who makes computers?}]: each of them insists on imposing its own language, if possible, because today it is the most efficient means of colonization. However, for lack of a working language, we will lose a great deal of time reading articles in twenty languages, and when at last we will be ready to become comparativists, we will be close to death. For lack of a universal language to facilitate their work, comparativists must grant translation the important role it has in their discipline, and which cannot be avoided, on the other hand, in the contemporary world. It is possible that the translating machine will one day give us the raw information [????] we will need; the day is not near when trans-

lating machines will enable us to read works of poetry (and even prose) in translations worthy of this name [????]. Comparativists must therefore help to *train* [my emphasis] not interpreters (that is the business of the Cook agency [!!! Comment on the evaluation]) but translators, which is to say artists of language and greater even than writers; it is necessary to train [!!!] many of them, which is difficult in itself, and to pay them well, which seems more or less impossible today (serious translators earning a bit less than a cleaning woman. [!!!!])³⁴

A translator “greater than a writer”: this interesting idea, to which we will of course have to return, is sufficient—I shall limit myself to this motif for the moment—to transform comparative literature as a discipline of study, as research or theory, into literature, into literary practice. What will happen to the very idea of the university the day it will be accepted that what is done there is not simply study, teaching, reading, interpretation but literary production? The best or the worst, I shall not decide for the moment. It seems to me that one of the images of the worst would be that the Panglosses of the institution should claim, having centralized everything according to their wishes (and this centralizing wish, in what is most legitimate about it—every body of knowledge and every research should gain in efficiency by being centralized—is amply developed by Etiemble, after a few usual precautions about the risks of bureaucratization and tyranny, in a book entitled *Comparaison n’est pas raison*,³⁵ about the crisis in complit, in a chapter whose title is “The Teaching of Comparative Literature Must Be Centralized” and where he gives a number of instructions—which are as legitimate as they are terrifying—about what the rationality of this community of research should be), I was saying that one of the images of the worst would be that the Pangloss-in-chief of this centralized complit should tell the researchers-translators-writers (one could no longer make the distinction) what good literature is or ought to be, in other words that he should produce norms of production, an axiomatics of evaluation, a taste in some sense—not only a taste for the evaluating judgment but a taste for production.³⁶ What would literature become if its only ambition was to submit to the taste of Pangloss II? If all those who wrote wanted to please Etiemble or receive a prize from him (or from a jury that he would preside over or inspire more or less directly)? Or worse, a literature that would want to imitate him, because, suiting his action to his word, Etiemble also writes novels. I am not exaggerating at all, I am not pushing the suspicion too far by speaking of the normative and prescriptive desire [*volonté*] that can be read through this imperialist, Panglossical, encyclopedic project. I quote:

As much as the translations, and almost as much as a universal language, a meticulously critical and prudently normative historical dictionary of the entire vocabulary of comparativism must be completed as soon as possible. [!!!!] . . . Thanks to which men will perhaps be helped [because he does not only want to help comparativists, researchers, or students interested in literatures but “men”] to give up vague linguistic approximations, and all the words that no longer mean anything by dint of signifying so much.³⁷

And here is this normative comment [*propos*] in its most ambitious and I must say its most disturbing form: the production of a poetics that would lay down the law, that would be the law in terms of evaluation:

Once they have elaborated their poetics, the comparativists will be able to help man [we have gone from “men,” which was already quite something, to “man,” and it is indeed comparativism as humanism that is at stake] choose the least adulterated [*frelatées*] values [morality and the police could not have held off much longer] for want of the surest values. When everything around us is in decomposition; when the refusal of all form, of every norm, claims to be the panacea, we would do well to ask ourselves why the Egyptian offering table, the 16th-century Dutch still-life, the 18th-century French painting [what categories!] all bring together a number of given objects in a certain way, MORE OR LESS THE SAME WAY [!!!! my emphasis], to produce BEAUTY, or why the Chinese playwright who wrote his own *Avare* under the Mongol dynasty [!!!], comes up with scenes and words that Plautus had imagined, that Molière in turn will invent in his play on THE SAME SUBJECT [!!!].

By succeeding in this project, comparativism would help 20th-century man to resolve the conflict that pits certain revolutionaries and even certain champions of anthropology against all humanism. By specifying, if possible, the notion of aesthetic invariants [comment on each word]—invariants that would be obtained by induction from a general investigation and no longer deduced from theologies, metaphysics, or ideologies—comparativism would contribute to the reconstruction, upon the ruins of a reviled and at times effectively reprehensible humanism, of the humanism that is today in gestation, and all the more problematic in that people pretend they no longer know what this word means [!!!].³⁸

Conclusion:

And what if the fruits of the humanism of the future were, as comparativism already suggests, the equitable sharing and distribution of all the goods of this world?³⁹

If I have seemed to be obstinately attacking the Etienne case, it is not at all in order to enter into a polemic or even because of any interest at all in the person thus named or his work. It is to save time [*par économie*], because this case and the discourse that goes under

this name happens to be at the symptomatic intersection of an entire historico-theoretical network that it seems to me necessary to situate.

As a point of reference for this comparative literature situation, let us take the date 1958. Paris, 1958, Sorbonne, Jean-Marie Carré, who held the Chair in comparative literatures (plural), dies. The succession is open; Etiemble is a candidate. He is elected, but in an atmosphere that is suggested by the fact that he is called the “*enfant terrible*” and the “rebel” of comparative literature. Before his election, he himself announces that, if the Sorbonne accepts him, he will make a wind of innovation sweep through that old institution (of which you have just had an aftertaste). The same year, at the invitation of the rector of the University of Paris, he publishes an article in which he outlines his conceptions—those that you have just glimpsed—under the title “*Littérature comparée ou comparaison n’est pas raison*”⁴⁰ (the title was reused, as well as the bulk of the contents, in the book published twenty years later⁴¹). The article is reprinted in a collection with a significant title, *Hygiène des lettres* [Hygiene of letters], vol. 3: *Savoir et goût* [Knowledge and taste].⁴² In the same year that this event took place, the gravity of which has not escaped Etiemble, who regularly reminds us of it as a revolutionary date, just as he reminds us of the “epithets” “*enfant terrible*” and “rebel” of comparative literature, in the same year that the Sorbonne elected this man who concluded his book by invoking his “inseparable experiences as professor and writer” (I must read you this juicy conclusion to the book:

What will perhaps seem encouraging, or convincing, to me is that I came to these ideas all by myself, and that on the strength of a principle of the oldest rhetoric—*nullius addictus jurare in verba magistri* (Horace, Ep. 1, L 14)—I only accepted to read the theoreticians of our discipline after having elaborated a few ideas out of my inseparable experiences as professor and writer.⁴³

It is true that this same chapter of conclusions began in this manner: “On rereading what I have written, I wonder how I dare collecting and putting forward so many banalities. Is this the ‘*enfant terrible*’ of comparative literature? Is this all? Banalities, yes, but which the ‘French school’ long considered to be revolting and revolutionary”⁴⁴)—I close these parentheses in order to say that this very year, 1958, was the year of a congress that marked the world history of comparative literature after the war: the famous Congress of Chapel Hill, whose name resonates like the name of a battlefield, and where, after the no less famous report by René Wellek, pitched

battles broke out on the subject of what was called at that time the Crisis of Comparative Literature, *Krise der Komparatistik*, *Crise de la littérature comparée*. In the course of this congress (all the political conditions of which ought to be studied, after the war, at the end of the cold war, at a very precise moment in the development of comparative literatures), a confrontation took place between, let us say, a more historicistic and factualistic trend, represented by France and the USSR (note that, for want of a visa, Etiemble did not participate in the congress⁴⁵), and a more critical trend, in the more axiological, evaluational meaning of the term, notably represented by Wellek. Now, after the fact, Etiemble took Wellek's side in this debate,⁴⁶ not only because he considered Wellek's career itinerary and training and expertise to be exemplary ("From time to time," he says, "a man appears in comparative literature who has been admirably endowed by the fortunes of history: René Wellek, for example, who, being of Czech origin, raised in central Europe, then emigrated to the Anglo-Saxon countries, is equally at ease in the Slavic, Germanic, and Romance domains"⁴⁷), but also because he judges the historical and factualist tradition of the French school to be insufficient, and he thinks that the evaluating judgment, the distinction between the good and the bad, is a duty for the comparatist and in a general way for the generalist, the literary critic in general. Although the crisis of comparative literature in those years also involved all sorts of methodological problems concerning literary criticism in general, it often and regularly opposed on the one hand a historicist and factualist trend (having a tendency to exclude both the study of literary forms as such and the evaluation of works, notably aesthetic evaluation) and on the other hand a more formalist and evaluationist trend—even while the two could get on more or less well together from time to time. The first trend was represented at Chapel Hill by French and Soviet participants, the second mainly by Americans situated between New Criticism and René Wellek. We can formulate what might be called the positivist-historicist tendency "*à la française sorbonicole*"⁴⁸ of the time in precise terms by citing Etiemble's predecessor, Jean-Marie Carré, when he says,

Comparative literature is a branch of literary history: it is the study of international spiritual relations, of the factual relations that existed between Byron and Pushkin, Goethe and Carlyle, Walter Scott and Vigny, between the works, the inspirations, or even the lives of writers belonging to several literatures. It does not consider works essentially for their original value, but is concerned above all with the transformations that each nation, each

author, imposes on their borrowings . . . finally, comparative literature is not that general literature that is taught in the United States.⁴⁹

This general literature—one speaks also of Goethe's *Wellliteratur*—is thus one of the stakes of this debate. And, even if he agrees, saying that comparative literature is not general literature or *Wellliteratur*, Etiemble, Carré's successor, states that the one ought to prepare us for the other. And here again he evokes the authority of René Wellek, whom he sides with on this point:

With René Wellek, I consider that comparative literature is condemned to never come into itself if historical study, which the French and Soviet schools are correct to value, does not take as its supreme goal to make us capable of finally speaking of particular *literatures* [by italicizing "literatures," Etiemble seems concerned not to forget that what is at issue must always be literature, which seems to me to contradict the logic of many of his propositions elsewhere and which, in a nonhistoricist mode, it is true, implied or led to the dissolution of the literary], or even of general literature, of aesthetics and rhetoric.⁵⁰

And, further on, it is precisely with regard to the category of evaluation and taste that he appeals to [*rappelle à*] this interest for literature. What he reproaches the positivist-historicist-factualists for is not being ignorant or very unconcerned about what constitutes literature, the literariness [*littérarité*] of literature (the only thing, we must admit, that can ensure the unity of a general literature). No, no one in those circles was very concerned with literariness at that time {except Wellek}. The literature Etiemble wants to impose on the positivist-historicists is on the one hand a source of aesthetic pleasure that gives rise to taste judgments (in which the positivists have lost interest) and on the other hand what Etiemble himself calls invariants—invariants that always appeal in the last instance to a human nature and that at times take a thematic form, a form of contents, which is practically the exclusive focus of interest in certain German comparativists' *Stoffgeschichte*, and at other times take a formal form (typology of modes, of genres, etc.). These two motifs (pleasure and aesthetic judgment on the one hand, study of thematic or formal invariants on the other) are supposed to assist in rescuing the specificity of general comparative literature from historicist positivism. On the first point, here is another citation from Etiemble (I promise that these are the last ones). You will see that it is again a question of offering René Wellek his arm, but this is clearly Etiemble's gesture, which I consider to be symptomatic at a certain moment, but which I do not consider as such to commit or

compromise Wellek *himself*; I do not know what he would have thought of this companionship:

I would like our comparatist to be equally a man of taste and of pleasure. I would like all his previous studies to be only the means for him to read texts with greater intelligence and consequently with greater joy, greater voluptuousness, than those who know nothing or little. I would like him to be a *lover* of poems, of theater, or of novels, as Lanson wanted his historian of literature. We must also consider the Congress of Chapel Hill in 1958 to be auspicious, where several scholars of the American school, repeating ideas amply expressed in *Comparative Literature*, vigorously rehabilitated criticism, too often neglected by our comparatists. Mr. René Wellek does not forget any more than I do that in comparative literature there is 'comparative,' but he does not accept any more than I do that 'literature' should be forgotten.⁵¹

That is the critical-aesthetic motif (let us not forget literature, which is to say, pleasure and evaluation, the value judgment). Here is the "invariants" motif. Etiemble has just been bragging about how in Montpellier he taught what was apparently the most conformist and irreproachable class on European pre-Romanticism, at the end of which he added, "I must inform you that all my citations about the birth of pre-Romanticism in Europe come from Chinese poets, between K'iu Yuan, who lived before the Christian era, and the era of the Song." And he concludes his story in this manner:

Because if I can clarify all the *themes* [my italics] of eighteenth-century European pre-Romanticism with citations borrowed from Chinese poetry from before Christianity and the first twelve centuries of the Christian era, this is clearly because *forms, genres*, invariants exist; in short, because man exists, and literature. [!!!! Passing from invariant themes to invariant forms, then to invariant genres, the whole thing embedded [*noyé*] in man, with a leap placing the existence of man and of literature in apposition!!!! Comment. (Elsewhere, with regard to the feeling of love and its diverse literary manifestations, he speaks of "what must be called human nature."⁵²)]⁵³

Everything in this book is not on the same level (for example, what he says about the necessity of a comparative study of translations and of a theory of translation, of the study of works in several languages simultaneously), but if I have spent a long time, too much time, reading it today, it is because the reference point of 1958 (and of a situation that I can only describe summarily while inviting you to analyze it in an infinitely more differentiated fashion than I will here) leads us to wonder what has aged so terribly over the past twenty years in the university, a certain zone of the university, and in

what way and why. I do not believe that in their essential lines, and beyond the somewhat caricatured and ostentatious {and showy}⁵⁴ form they take in Etienne, the problematics of that time have been extinguished and do not continue to program, more or less directly, the academic work done in the name of *complit*. Nonetheless, the landscape has changed, and it is not easy to evaluate the real nature of the changes. It can certainly not be said that comparative literature has now attained a status of scientificity or of autonomy, of auto-foundation, of rigorous unity that it did not yet have at that time and for which people (naively) believe it was obscurely searching. I believe that the university institution that bears this name, this title, this ambition, is less assured than ever of its legitimacy. And that it survives, that it is living in the aftermath of a great dream whose historical and structural conditions remain to be analyzed. And yet the very position of the problem, the very evaluation of the project of comparative literature, the analysis of its possibilities, of its successes, and of its limits or its failures, has changed in twenty years. Why? In what way? Returning to these questions next week, I will orient and accelerate our study in the direction of the problems of translation.

III. Babel⁵⁵

All of this would not have happened if we knew what literature is. None of this would have happened if we knew what the word “literature” means.

It must be said that everything we situated schematically last time concerning a crisis in comparative literature would have had no meaning and no chance of arising if a fundamental indeterminacy did not remain at the center of the concept of literature. The minimal contract, the poorest consensus capable of bringing researchers together in comparative literature, is that the element of the comparable or of the compared, of the comparable or compared terms—whether they be understood in the singular or the plural—is called literature, literary phenomena, works, productions, and that literature is a proper name, properly linked to a unique meaning or content or corpus. At a certain moment, literature must be a proper name, must function as a proper name, not only because what it names should tolerate no substitution and no operation of metaphorizing translation, but because literature, which is neither nature nor a group of ideal objects like mathematics, names something that is constituted by what are called works that are unique each time (irrespective of the repetitions, the

resemblances, the thematic affinities, the grouping by types and genres, each work—and there are only works in literature—is unique, and the literary corpus in its ensemble, if there is such a thing, is an open yet unique ensemble of {unique} individuals that exist according to a certain mode but that, as such, are unique). Literature would therefore be the proper name of an ensemble of proper names, and if there was a crisis in comparative literature at a particular moment—and no doubt permanently—it is because in the end we do not know who and what are designated by this proper name of proper names. And because we have known since A. that the science of proper names and of the individual is not without problems.

Above all when one claims to compare proper names and individuals, and above all when, in a logical paradox with which we have only just begun to struggle, the comparison intends to compare the comparable with the comparable, the comparable with itself, but with itself as other or as different. The minimal consensus, the charter of the comparativists, is that one must compare literatures among themselves, literary phenomena among themselves, or in any case phenomena having an essential relation with literature among themselves. One must compare literature with literature.

Do not forget that this idea is at once very trivial and very strange, and the conditions of its appearance are far from being clear today. It will take time, I presume, and many protocols for our work before we can seriously approach such a question. What does it mean, what could it mean, to compare literature with literature? Whoever has had even the most elementary experience of what is called the logic of the vicious circle or the hermeneutic circle will quickly recognize a type of theoretical difficulty here: in order to compare literatures or literature with itself, one must already have a precomprehension of what literature means, and thus of the origin of the literature, if only so as to choose the objects of investigation. . . .

Notes

¹ *Le concept de littérature comparée et les problèmes théoriques de la traduction* [The concept of comparative literature and the theoretical problems of translation], a series of six lectures delivered by Jacques Derrida in French at Yale University in 1979–80 (typed with some handwritten additions and modifications [Jacques Derrida Archive, University of California–Irvine, box 15, folder 1]). The first two lectures, and the beginning of the third, are reproduced here with a modified title. Excerpts taken from the openings of the first three lectures were read by Hélène Cixous (in French)

and Geoffrey Bennington (in English) at the University of Florida conference in Gainesville in the fall of 2006. The present version includes a number of modifications proposed by Geoffrey Bennington, for which I am grateful. Needless to say, I take responsibility for any remaining or subsequent mistakes. With the exception of the lecture titles, Derrida's handwritten additions are placed in {curly brackets}; untranslatable bits of French are in [square brackets]. Square brackets also set off comments placed by Derrida within a number of longer citations. Derrida's syntax and punctuation have been maintained as much as possible, although some systematic modifications have been made. All notes are by the translator. Financial support for this translation from the International Center for Writing and Translation at UC Irvine is gratefully acknowledged. © Succession Derrida 2009.

² The two questions in this heading translate the reflexive construction *Qu'est-ce qui se compare?* in an attempt to reflect the gloss Derrida himself effectively offers of this expression in what follows. This phrase could also be translated as "What (or Who) is Compared?" or "is being Compared?" The rest of the heading is in English in the original.

³ In English in the original.

⁴ In English in the original.

⁵ In English in the original.

⁶ In English in the original.

⁷ In English in the original.

⁸ In English in the original.

⁹ The noun used here, *comparatiste* (*je n'ai jamais reçu de formation de comparatiste*), means "a specialist in comparative literature." The same word can serve as an adjective. In both cases, it will generally be translated hereafter by the neologism "comparativist." On the other hand, *comparatisme* will be translated as "comparative literature."

¹⁰ The translation does not perhaps make as clear as it should that the distinction in question here is not between comparative literature and something else, but between "comparative literature itself"; that is, between comparative literature and itself, in itself. This does become clearer in what follows.

¹¹ Manuscript annotation: "There is an interesting ellipsis here. Cite Wellek, p. 290."

¹² In English in the original.

¹³ This "entitled" translates two related words, "*intitulée (attribuée)*," the second of which means "accredited" or "authorized."

¹⁴ In English in the original.

¹⁵ In English in the original.

¹⁶ Manuscript annotation: "Recall Wellek, p. 290."

¹⁷ Etiemble's article adds "by Gérard de Nerval" here.

¹⁸ Here, after the word *demeure*, Derrida typed "/dumbo,r/," which he then crossed out.

¹⁹ René Etiemble, "Littérature Comparée," in *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1977), 7:140–46, quotation on 143 (Derrida's emphasis, except for the last word).

²⁰ In English in the original.

²¹ "The right to literature," but also "straight to literature."

²² This annotation continues: "In the two senses," with an arrow that seems to suggest that these "two senses" of the proper name refer to the distinction mentioned a few lines below between "personal names (*des noms de personne*)" and proper names that are "beyond" personal names.

²³ Manuscript annotation: "Onomatopoeia and 100-letter word in Joyce."

²⁴ Manuscript annotation that seems to say "It names literature laterally. I am literature."

²⁵ Manuscript annotation: "You could always do it, call your dog Pangloss or your cat Abelard, but . . ."

²⁶ This 5 seems to have been modified into a 6; the next paragraph is numbered 7.

²⁷ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Romances*, trans. Richard Aldington (London: Routledge, 1996), 8.

²⁸ Etiemble, "Littérature Comparée," 144.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁰ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Romances*, 38.

³¹ Etiemble, "Littérature Comparée," 143

³² There are several partly illegible words here.

³³ A word is apparently missing here.

³⁴ Etiemble, "Littérature Comparée," 143–44.

³⁵ René Etiemble, *Comparaison n'est pas raison, la crise de la littérature comparée* [Comparison is not reason: the crisis in comparative literature] (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). At this point in the typescript, Derrida wrote "Gallimard 1977"; this is presumably a confusion with the publication date of Etiemble's "Littérature Comparée" entry in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (see note 19).

³⁶ Here Derrida typed and then x-ed out "This normative imperialism."

³⁷ Etiemble, "Littérature Comparée," 144.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "Comparative literature or comparison is not reason."

⁴¹ Presumably this is a reference to Etiemble's book *Comparaison n'est pas raison* (see note 35), which was published only five years after the article of the same title Derrida has just mentioned. The "twenty years later" probably comes from a confusion with the 1977 publication date of the "Littérature Comparée" entry in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (see note 19). It is true that in this latter entry Etiemble reproduces much of the "Littérature Comparée" chapter from his *Hygiène des lettres*,

vol. 3: *Savoir et goût* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), but not the title *Comparaison n'est pas raison*.

⁴² Etiemble, *Hygiène des lettres*, vol. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 324

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 323

⁴⁵ René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," in *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, vol. 1: *Comparative Literature*, ed. Werner Friederich, University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature 23 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

⁴⁶ Here Derrida typed, and then x-ed out, "whom he considers, by the way, to be a product of good luck and an exemplary exception in the history of *litté*," this last fragment presumably being the first part of *littérature comparée*.

⁴⁷ Etiemble, *Hygiène des lettres*, 3:71.

⁴⁸ That is, "in Sorbonneified French manner."

⁴⁹ Jean-Marie Carré, preface to *Littérature Comparée*, by Marius-François Guyard (Paris: Sorbonne, 1958), 7.

⁵⁰ Etiemble, *Hygiène des lettres*, 3:72

⁵¹ *Ibid.* In a note reproduced by Derrida, Etiemble refers here to his *Hygiène des lettres*, vol. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 95

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 71. Manuscript annotation: "Cite Wellek, p. 295."

⁵⁴ Derrida has crossed out "somewhat journalistic" and added in the margin "m'as tu vu."

⁵⁵ This lecture has a typewritten title, "The Task of the Translator," which has been crossed out and replaced with the handwritten "Babel."