The Futures of Comparative Literature: North America and Beyond

Predicting the future is a hazardous occupation. The prolepsis or projection of utopian or dystopian scenes for the study of Comparative Literature is not something I wish to emphasize here. Instead, I would like to discuss changes in the discipline and its value. Whatever the changes in literary studies, it is important to stress the value of literature and its interpretation.

There have been many discussions of the crisis of Comparative Literature over time and many futures predicted for it. Some have said it has no future. After mapping out some of the recent debate on Comparative Literature, I will set out a modest proposal, as one among many possible worlds for our discipline. Comparative Literature has its origins at least as early as the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, as Armando Gnisci has noted, "Dès son origine, . . . elle est toujours définie comme une discipline en crise." Gnisci sees Comparative Literature as "une discipline véritablement mondiale" and looks to translation as a key factor in this mode of education and dialogue. This interest in Comparative Literature, even as it is under some fire in parts of Europe and North America—often squeezed by departments of literature in the "langues nationales" or national languages—is spreading rapidly in Asia and Latin America. For instance, in Brazil, as Sandra Nitrini has observed, from about 1950, Comparative Literature has been part of the curriculum, and the publication of Tania

1. Armando Gnisci, "La Littérature comparée comme discipline de décolonisation." Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée [CRCL/RCLC] 23 [1996], p. 67. I would like to thank Wladimir Krysinski, Amaryll Chanady and their colleagues in Littérature Comparée at l’Université de Montréal for their invitation and hospitality in 2005 and for the bilingual session that surrounded my original paper. It was good to be back in one of the cities of my youth. My thanks also to Wladimir Krysinski and to Jean Bessière of the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III) for reading and encouraging this article and to the editors and readers of Revue de littérature comparée for their suggestions, interest and support.

2. Ibid., p. 77. See also Letteratura comparata: Storia e testi, ed. Armando Gnisci and Franca Sinopoli, Roma, Sovera, 1995.
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Franco Carvalhal’s *Literatura Comparada*, in 1986, helped to spur interest and the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature was formed. Despite this growing interest in Comparative Literature in Brazil, it would be a mistake to ignore older and more complex beginnings. As Nitrini says, “la littérature comparée existe au Brésil depuis longtemps: en réalité, dès le temps où on a commencé à réfléchir sur la formation de la littérature brésilienne et sur la création d’un projet de littérature nationale.” The mobility and resilience of Comparative Literature are reasons for optimism. Comparative Literature changes and adapts, and in a world on the move, this is a positive attribute. Walter Moser has called Comparative Literature, “une discipline nomade.” He asserts that comparatists may be able to take advantage of their situation: “la précarité du statut de leur discipline peut même se tourner en avantage.” This context suggests that Comparative Literature is both in a state of precarious advantage and advantageous precariousness. The international status and growth of Comparative Literature is encouraging even if there are some locally discouraging predicaments.

So who is proclaiming the death of literature and Comparative Literature? Two well-known examples during the 1990s were Alvin Kernan’s *The Death of Literature* (1990) and Susan Bassnett’s *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993). Gayatri Spivak gave the Wellek Library Lectures in May 2000 at University of California at Irvine, which were published as a volume in 2003 entitled *Death of a Discipline*. In the Acknowledgments, Spivak writes provocatively: “I hope the book will be read as the last gasp of a dying discipline.” It comes as no surprise that Spivak continues to call for “a new comparative literature.” She sees Comparative Literature as something in need of renovation “in response to the rising tide of multiculturalism and cultural studies.” Spivak, like Edward Said, has a point that the movement of people does affect institutions like Comparative Literature and the university. I also agree with Spivak’s sense that Comparative Literature

11. Spivak, p. 3.
can “include the open-ended possibility of studying all literatures, with linguistic rigor and historical savvy.” Spivak also admits that the best of traditional Comparative Literature was “the skill of reading closely in the original.” She also proposes that close attention to language as in Area Studies would reveal the hybridity of all languages in the northern and southern hemispheres. Spivak thinks that Cultural Studies is given to a kind of personal and presentist vantage that does not include rigour in language study. This strategy will, in Spivak’s view, lead to an act of imagination that involves othering, a kind of translation. Teaching reading is, for me as much as for Spivak, the central part of what we do as teachers of Comparative Literature. To this, I would add that reading is the centre of our research and interpretation. Spivak’s utopian urge in her reimagining of Comparative Literature is based on working together and friendship and tries to imagine how to see through the eyes of others.

Another aspect of Spivak’s desire to revivify Comparative Literature is how she champions literature as something that “escapes the system” and that “contains the element of surprising the historical.” She also stresses literature as a means of achieving difference in collectivity. Further, Spivak encourages “careful reading” as a way of seeing difference with respect for texts from the so-called Third World, to find in them themes of tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivity. This is Spivak’s new Comparative Literature. Spivak answers Marx’s privileging of city over the country by saying that he could not see the future spectralization of the rural, and perhaps with her own pastoral yearning and nostalgia, she offers precapitalist cultures as an imagined world to counterbalance the “global capital triumphant.” The reading of the textual becomes a way, according to Spivak, to be “responsible, responsive, answerable.” While I have selected what I find most appealing and suggestive in Spivak’s brief volume, I am interested here in providing a wider context, that is in including other voices on the topic of Comparative Literature and in setting out a few short suggestions myself.

As with the death of the novel and the author, the demise of Comparative Literature is premature or a turn of phrase, a kind of important half-truth.
Literature and Comparative Literature are changing: reading in an age of electronic media, as Marshall McLuhan and Roland Barthes saw during the 1950s and 1960s, does change. So have writing and knowing, but this change is not so radical that there are not continuities with the past. Revolutions are never clean breaks. In this age of business and applied science, the uselessness of literature is an affront. In fact, Plato found the illusion of knowledge in Homer a challenge to be challenged. Philosophy was—in his possible world of the Republic—to displace Homer’s poetry in Athenian education. For the Platonic Socrates, poets were to sing hymns in praise of the republic or would suffer exile. Even during the Renaissance, Philip Sidney, had to find a moral compass for poetry. He reversed Plato’s new hierarchy that moved from the universal of philosophy to the particulars of history, with poetry wedged between them. For Sidney, poetry was more universal than philosophy because it moved people to moral action. The marginalizing of poetry is not new: in a world given to useful arts, it will continue to be under pressure. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unacknowledged legislators of the world are unacknowledged. Literature, as I will later argue, is no longer at the centre of education in the schools and especially in colleges and universities. It is, however, important, even if its utility is not always readily apparent. If sometimes Programmes and Departments of Comparative Literature are on the ropes, they are hanging in there. Poetry, literature and their study have survived Plato’s attacks and all those who have followed in his wake. Plato was a great poetic philosopher, so that then, as now, the hardest blows come from those who speak the language of poetry and turn it against poetry. Poetry is the core of literature, and I use it as a synecdoche for literature and the literary.

II

A suggestive approach to Comparative Literature is one that Douwe Fokkema outlines. He draws on Karl Popper’s view that a field of study is


limited to a cluster of questions and tentative solutions and argues that “Disciplines are not distinguished by the object they study but by the questions they ask.” For Fokkema, the literary and literariness are ways of reading—the intentions, semiotics and effects of literary texts—because others read and interpret literary texts but for different purposes—political, theological, sociological and so on. The aesthetic dimension, as Fokkema reminds us, can be readily overlooked in discussions of the changes to Comparative Literature. That is not an evasion I will consciously make here. Although sociologists, psychologists and philosophers, art historians and others can discuss the aesthetic, literary scholars bring their own perspective to this area and can contribute, as Fokkema suggests, to interdisciplinary work in this quadrant of value. How the object of study is studied is a dance or interplay that defines the discipline.

In 1958, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, René Wellek wrote an essay, “The Crisis in Comparative Literature,” in which he focused on the subject and method of the discipline. Like Spivak, Hutcheon finds strength in the role of otherness in Comparative Literature. Hutcheon also sees frustration and attraction in Comparative Literature because of the “continual self-criticism” and inability “to fix its self-definition.” Debate has surrounded Comparative Literature for so long. The Levin report to the American Comparative Literature Association in 1965, the Greene Report in 1975, the Bernheimer Report in 1993 and the Saussy Report (draft in 2003) have all expressed the double movement of frustration and attraction, of definition and criticism that Hutcheon suggests.

31. Ibid., p. 39.
32. Ibid., p. 40.
Rather than go over the ground of the Bernheimer Report that has invoked many responses over the past twelve or so years, including Spivak’s lecture and book, I will move on to some of the most recent views as expressed in the Saussy draft report. Haun Saussy begins in a most optimistic mode: “Comparative Literature has, in a sense, won its battles. It has never been better received in the American university. The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion.” After setting out the rigorous requirements in graduate programs of Comparative Literature in the United States and the influence of its practitioners on other disciplines like English and History, Saussy notes the lack of institutional power of, and the investment of resources in, Comparative Literature: “The omniscience of Comparative Literature ideas does not by any means betoken a large and powerful university department in that discipline; in fact, it might be used as an argument against the necessity of founding one. Comparative literature programs in most universities are thinly-funded patchworks of committee representation, cross-listed courses, fractional job lines and volunteer service.” Saussy suggests that we encourage students with training in law, history, architecture or another discipline to learn two languages and literatures well instead of three languages and literatures, and he suggests that Comparative Literature take advantage of the gaps in the university and that it should knock on the doors of the disciplines that have borrowed from Comparative Literature.

The untranslatability of literature, especially of poetry, at once defines the literary and calls Comparative Literature into question. This has been a persistent theme in literary studies and a constant challenge to Comparative Literature. In *Petit Manuel d’inesthétique* (1998), Alain Badiou embodies the contradiction. On the one hand, he makes the subject of his book a comparison between Labîd ben Rabi’a and Mallarmé, the one a nomad before Islam writing in classical Arabic and the other a poet of the salon in the bourgeois realm of France of the Second Empire. On the other hand, Badiou begins this comparison with the assertion—“Je ne crois pas beaucoup à la littérature comparée.” This lack of belief is not absolute as Badiou inserts the
“beaucoup” as a qualifier, so that he does not believe much in Comparative Literature. But he believes enough to write a book on Comparative Literature and to perform a tour de force in which he takes disparate authors in the wide gap of time in languages from radically different cultures and finds a common or universal truth in them. As Emily Apter has said in her discussion of Badiou’s book, “it would seem that the greater the arc of radical dissimilitude and incomparability, the truer the proof of poetic universalism.” Apter, who is examining universal poetics and postcolonial comparison, explores, as Saussy did, the untranslatability of translating literature. Perhaps, as Said and Spivak seemed to hope and as Apter argues, there are available the possibilities of comparisons beyond imperialism, that this renewed Comparative Literature can be open to cultures across the world in a transformative way.

The controversy over dissenting and contradictory voices was so great in the ACLA’s report in the 1980s that, according to Bernheimer in his report, as Djelal Kadir says in his essay, “Comparative Literature in An Age of Terrorism,” the chair of the Committee “was so dissatisfied with the document that he exercised a pocket veto and never submitted it.” Kadir teases out the tensions and contradictions in “État présent” of Comparative Literature:

One would be hard-pressed to find a comparatist who would argue against the supersession of monolingualism, presentism, and narcissism. The difficulty in the historical moment of 2004 is to differentiate between multilingualism and forked tongues, historical scope and self-serving historicism, non-narcissistic self-effacement and self-critique as cloak of invisibility.

Kadir sees language as a central part of the debate. And the spectre of translation and its relation to reading never goes away in these debates on Comparative Literature. As Walter Benjamin asserts, “all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of language.” Steven Ungar’s contribution to the Saussy report provides thoughts on translation. Like William H. Gass, Ungar sees the importance of close reading. For Ungar, “Close reading will continue to be grounded in efforts

40. Ibid., p. 6-7.
41. Bernheimer, p. ix, in Djelal Kadir, “Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism,” in the “Saussy Report” (in draft), p. 1; this is also noted in the Saussy report itself.
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to understand linguistic specificity as well as how broader factors of difference bear on linguistic choices made by the writer.\textsuperscript{45} Difference and otherness, as Derrida and Spivak have asserted, are central to translation: literature in translation and World Literature in translation, as outlined in David Damrosch’s \textit{What is World Literature?} (2003), make the debate on translation even more crucial because in many places such a World Literature will be translated or edited in Europe and North America.\textsuperscript{46}

The canon of translation might well continue the colonial narrative in the realm of culture. In his contribution to the Saussy report, Damrosch opens with a declaration: “World literature has exploded in scope during the past decade. No shift in modern comparative study has been greater than the accelerating attention to literatures beyond masterworks by the great men of the European great powers.”\textsuperscript{47} While this might be slight hyperbole and is expressed in the context of the United States academy, the changes have been rapid. In his discussion of anthologies and who is written about and who is not, at least relatively speaking, Damrosch hopes for a way forward that would include “lines of connection across the conflicted boundaries of nations and of cultures, and new lines of comparison across the persisting divisions between the hypercanon and the counter-canon of world literature.”\textsuperscript{48}

There are other potential problems of exclusion and erasure in Comparative Literature. Two such examples are early modern or Renaissance studies and feminism. In his essay on Comparative Literature and Early Modern Studies, which is part of the Saussy report, Christopher Braider answers Damrosch’s observation in his presidential address at the ACLA meetings in 2003 that studies before 1800 have been pushed to the margins and that most colleagues concentrate on work since the turn of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{49} Braider appeals to early modern studies as a way to fuse formalism and historicism. For instance, a painting of Lucretia, like all images from a differing past, tells us that we have to understand and criticize ourselves, our language and our framework before trying to recover the past, something that Michael Baxandall discussed twenty years ago in \textit{Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures} (1985).\textsuperscript{50} If early modern studies

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 9.
has experienced a displacement or erasure, feminism has been appropri-
ated and assimilated. In her contribution to the draft Saussy report, “What’s
Happened to Feminism?” Gail Finney suggests that “If we don’t encounter
the word ‘feminism’ as much as we used to, I would suggest that this is not
because the ideology has vanished but rather because it has proliferated
and been assimilated by other theoretical approaches.” 51 I would argue that
Braider might follow a similar line of argument in saying that new histori-
cism in the United States and cultural materialism in the United Kingdom
migrated from Renaissance or early modern studies to, and were assimili-
ated by, other periods and disciplines. Finney says that in the United States,
English, language departments and Comparative Literature have become
feminized in practice. For instance, the three executive officers of the ACLA
this year (2005) are women as are six of the ten advisory board members,
and University of California now has a maternity leave that stops the tenure
clock for women. 52 Perhaps then, as Finney suggests, the very success of
feminism has led to less mention of it and to metafeminism. Metafeminist
practice occurs in Lynne Pearce’s The Rhetorics of Feminism: Readings in
a rhetorical and stylistic analysis of contemporary feminist journalism and
theory. 54 Feminism has not disappeared from Comparative Literature but has
been an agent of transformation that has apparently erased or changed its
previous surface.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas recalls in her contribution to the draft version of
the Saussy report, “Beyond Comparison Shopping: This is Not Your Father’s
Comp. Lit.,” how at Cornell, Pennsylvania and UCLA, she was taught by male
professors only, and that female professors in 1977, when she had her first
tenure-track job, were an oddity at University of Virginia. She gives a lyrical
call to a new Comparative Literature, although one different from that Spivak
calls for:

Comparative Literature for me must be a world without limits, assuming
that one can navigate several languages. It is almost a domain of fan-
tasy in which high art can be analyzed alongside the cinema which can be
analyzed along the comic strip which can be analyzed alongside a verbal
world. It is like a wonderful kaleidoscope that allows comparatists a mul-
tifaceted view into the world that we intellectually inhabit. Certainly, many
nay-sayer will not be quite ready yet to take the plunge into these rapids,
carrying on his or her shoulder the aging body of the old Comparative
Literature. So be it. It is precisely because it is not our father’s Comparative
Literature that we can infuse fresh life into the field. 55

52. Ibid., 8.
53. Lynne Pearce’s The Rhetorics of Feminism: Readings in Contemporary Cultural Theory
54. See Finney, op cit., 8.
55. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Beyond Comparison Shopping: This is Not Your Father’s Comp.
Lit.,” in the “Saussy Report” (in draft), p. 11.
This image of a portage and a crossing of the rapids might stir those of us who grew up or live in the land of the voyageurs and coureurs de bois, whether crossing the rapids at Lachine or the dozens of portages on the way to the land of the Ouendat or Hurons from Québec to Sainte-Marie on La Mer Douce, now less sweetly called Georgian Bay. The image is also epic, like the great hero carrying his father on his back, but here the hero is also a heroine. It is, as Finney and Malti-Douglas remind us, important not to forget the social changes in the university and in Comparative Literature. One has been that the interests of women and people of diverse backgrounds and languages are better served.

None the less, in the responses to the draft Saussy report, which will probably find their way into the published version, there is not always a sense that all what should be included in Comparative Literature is. Caryl Emerson advocates for close attention to Central and Eastern Europe as they “have been through every abomination” and their “outsideness to all things” means that “We could begin learning from them.”\(^56\) Marián Gálik and Richard Teleky addressed some of these issues in Central and Eastern Europe in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* (1996).\(^57\)

Katie Trumpener’s response begins with a history of the discipline that includes Franco Moretti’s view in “Conjectures of World Literature,” that Comparative Literature was an “intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more.”\(^58\) Like Saussy, Trumpener thinks that Johann Gottfried Herder’s comparative analysis allowed for the relations among Eastern, Central and Western European powers that included “the problems of empire, political domination, and forced bilingualism raised by that geography.”\(^59\) Trumpener ends with the study of World Literature, something much more than Moretti’s Rhine and perhaps an outgrowth of Herder’s comparative analysis. How do Comparative Literature and World Literature relate? Trumpener says that most teachers of World Literature would admit that “our own limitations of training make us largely unable to model such culturally alternative modes of reading,

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however much we might theorize their existence or try to reconstruct them in and from the texts under discussion.” 60 The practical problems of teaching face professors and students of Comparative Literature. Trumpener sets out the pragmatic pitfalls: “In some respects, World Literature remains a daunting, perhaps impossible project. But if not us, who? And if not now, when?” 61 This practical approach reminds me of what Harry Levin used to say and write, “let us begin to compare literatures,” because if we wait for the perfect union of literary sensibility and skill in languages, then we will never get started.

Richard Rorty’s response, “Looking Back at ‘Literary Theory’,” observes that in retrospect literary theory was a fashion in literature departments in the United States and that, as a philosopher, it would now be harder, as he did, to move from being a professor of philosophy to a professor of the humanities to a professor of Comparative Literature while teaching straight philosophy and by writing much the same philosophical works he would have written in a Department of Philosophy. In literature departments, the philosophical period of Derrida has moved to the historical and cultural world of Michel Foucault. While being grateful for his opportunities, Rorty does not think that students of literature have to read philosophy or any other disciplines or be multilingual. In short, he asserts that ”Good criticism is a matter of bouncing some of the books you have read off the rest of the books you have read.” 62 Rorty has some refreshing ideas about disciplines, interdisciplinarity and Comparative Literature. He says that “Derrida and Foucault are brilliantly original thinkers who can easily survive misuse, just as Marx and Freud are.” 63 Looking into the future, Rorty says that ”Literary theory will be seen to be optional for the practice of literary criticism as legal theory is for the practice of law.” 64 Rorty also has some advice for philosophers and comparatists who worry about their fields: “both comparative literature and philosophy departments should be places in which students receive plenty of suggestions about what sorts of books they might like to read, and are then left free to follow their noses. Members of these departments should not worry about the nature of their discipline, not about what makes it distinctive.” 65 What should these professors of Comparative Literature and Philosophy concern themselves with? According to Rorty, “They should just worry about finding intellectually curious students to admit to graduate study, and about how to help such students satisfy their curiosity.” 66

61. Ibid., p. 10.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
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is the curiosity-driven research and teaching that I personally favour, and while I emphasize the literary more than Rorty does, perhaps because of the marginalization of literature in the university in state or public universities in English-speaking North America, I can, as someone trained in intellectual and cultural history, also see that literariness can be too much stressed. Rorty doubts "Haun Saussy’s suggestion that literariness is central to the discipline of comparative literature."67 Rorty’s scepticism is interesting, provocative and productive:

I doubt that anything can ever be identified as central to an academic discipline, any more than anything can ever be identified as the "core" of a human self. A self, Daniel Dennett has said, is best thought of as a center of narrative gravity. Like selves, academic disciplines have histories, but no essences. They constantly up-date their self-image by rewriting their own histories. So-called "crises" move the apparently peripheral to the center, and the apparently central to outer darkness.68

For Rorty, then, the centre of gravity in Comparative Literature and other disciplines outside of science, in which facts make corrections, shifts according to curiosity, interest and the need for change. Disciplines should not wear themselves out with a kind of scholastic repetition. Comparative Literature, Rorty implies, is no different from History or Philosophy in changing identities and updating their histories to accommodate these alterations and shifts. Rorty actually finds disciplines and interdisciplinarity dubious because there can be as much difference between analytic philosophy and non-analytic philosophy as there is between philosophy and Comparative Literature. In Rorty’s view, a discipline is already interdisciplinary if a person can read in radically different parts of it.69 Finally, according to Rorty, "no healthy humanistic discipline ever looks the same for more than a generation or two."70 Change, therefore, is to be expected and embraced. A crisis in Comparative Literature is a sign of one paradigm shift in a series of many shifts. We teach and write ourselves into obsolescence.

III

Although what follows is just one strand I could present and does largely grow out of the European tradition, I am aware of and embrace multilateral comparisons between disparate languages, cultures and disciplines, or a word I prefer for the scope of play, reach and horizon—fields. So while I do not discuss the need for East-West dialogue as scholars who have published in our journal, Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée has published, like

67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. See ibid., p. 3
70. Ibid., p. 3.
Wang Ning from China, I am doing so for this occasion as something that the limitations of one article impose on the writer. Beyond a few examples from Brazil, France, Francophone Canada and elsewhere, I have largely used the Anglophone context in North America as an example of the crisis as it has been expressed in the past couple of years as a means for us to discuss further. Modernization or change is a matter of constant reinvention. Modern literary studies grew out of the study of rhetoric, philology and classics. The literary in English-speaking America, for instance, is under threat. In Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and many of the research universities that depend on it largely for funding in the humanities and social sciences have come to emphasize computers, databases and group endeavours so much that individual work based on close reading of literary texts seems to be less valued. Research in the humanities and in Comparative Literature appears to be headed in the direction of bringing in money, partly as a means of making up budget shortfalls. Collaboration and bringing in funds mime this model in social sciences, which imitates that in science.

As someone who has taken courses in Roman law and political philosophy and who has studied intellectual and cultural history as much as literature and literary theory, I have great respect for many fields. In school, I enjoyed the study of mathematics and physics. To argue for the value of literature is not to advocate against any other field. The significance of literature has long been evident to me, but I think that, in the universities, literary studies are receiving less support than they once did. Perhaps this has been a slow decline since the Renaissance in conjunction with the rise of science or at least since the study of classics and literature declined in the last century as the chief training for leaders in government. The Sputnik crisis and the Cold War were even more intensely driven by science and technology than the arms race between Britain and Germany in the years leading up to the First World War. The scientific and industrial revolutions are central facts in modernization and, despite their excesses and abuses, it would be a kind of intense pastoralism and nostalgia that would wish away all the changes that the advent of modernity has wrought. To value literature is not to be a Luddite.

72. King or Captain Ludd were imaginary names or nicknames for the leader of the rioters (Luddites), mainly mechanics and their friends, in the Midlands of England in a critical time during the Industrial Revolution (1811-16) who destroyed manufacturing machines. At critical moments, it is easy to turn on the tools or instruments of change. Kicking in a television set or trashing a computer will not stem the tide of change. Literature will find itself in new relations in new configurations as media for words and images change. The Oxford English Dictionary notes the following story about the etymology of "Luddite": "According to Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth (1847) III. 80, Ned
We need all the imagination we can get. We require diverse tools to understand language, symbols and the world. Mathematics and literature are key means in coming to terms with the world. These constructs of language are in and of the world but are not the world: they are possible worlds. Through analogy and contrast, comparisons define the two parts being brought together. The same is true of disciplines. By comparing literature with history—although they share rhetoric, analysis and narrative—interpreters see that these fields show their differences. As Aristotle knew, history has to follow events as they happened, whereas poetry can invent them and reorder them. Literature, then, can be compared with visual arts and film and other disciplines like history, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy and profit from that comparison. This comparative method can sharpen definition.

Literature shares much with other discourses, but it is not those discourses. To chase what is strange from literature, to flatten out its own symbolic, to make it something else the world admires or needs most for utility—politics, economics, sociology, or business—is to turn against the literary in hopes that its value as a commodity or utilitarian object might salvage it and the jobs of those of us who write and profess literature. Literature must sell or be sold out. Literary criticism and theory dwindle in the marketplace.

But this need not be the case. If we reduce human life to being bought and sold, then we are nothing but breathing commodities. Yes, we and the literature we write, read and interpret are products of a society with economic and political tendencies and laws, but that does not mean that literature can be reduced to them, that the text can be identified with the context. Given utilitarian tendencies in a range of governments and businesses, it is tempting for those who make policy in a global marketplace or competitive world [chose the metaphor most used], to flatten out literature and the humanities or to caricature them as a quixotic approach to the world, productivity and the future. Literature and literary studies may be part of the arts, education, culture and government, but they are not simply a financial, cultural or educational instrument made for edification and profit. Neither completely useful nor entirely useless, literature is a possible world, an imaginary place, with intricate relations to the actual world, past, present and future. Moreover, the study of literature has many dimensions, and comparing the literatures makes the literary all the more complex.

Lud was a person of weak intellect who lived in a Leicestershire village about 1779, and who in a fit of insane rage rushed into a ‘stockinger’s’ house, and destroyed two frames so completely that the saying ‘Lud must have been here’ came to be used throughout the hosiery districts when a stocking-frame had undergone extraordinary damage. The story lacks confirmation.” For the most accessible form (and something Luddites might not want access to themselves), see http://dictionary.oed.com/73.

Literary study can include literary history and readings that involve a recognition of social, political, cultural and economic forces in the production of the text and its meaning, but I think that close reading or interpretation of literary texts should be at the heart of literary and comparative literary studies. When discussing various fields and other arts in relation to literature, the careful attention to literature is crucial. Otherwise, literature is subordinated. Literature need not be raised above other disciplines, but as those trained in literature, we should not diminish or marginalize it.

Even as we interpret various signs—in art, film, law, and culture generally—we are literary scholars trained in literary practice and theory, and that can involve writing and reading literature. We need a point of departure. Our training and the way we train our students point to literature. What skills do we have? We are students and professors of literature, so that anything we examine comes from our ability to read texts.

Part of that history of reading and training comes from the tropes and schemes of rhetoric. Although rhetoric in the West began as a means of advocating in the courts in the Greek colonies in Sicily, it soon came to be associated with oratory and drew on literary examples as a means of educating young men in Athens. The work of Quintilian and Cicero helped to spread the study of rhetoric to Rome. With the *translatio studii* or translation of study, the study of rhetoric was disseminated through Europe and—with empire in the fifteenth century—beyond the ancient boundaries of the Greek and Roman empires. Education in the European empires involved rhetoric.

The commentary on Homer, Virgil and other poets is another stream in the growth of literary studies. The medieval and Renaissance commentaries on classical texts, for instance, can reveal a few lines of text with masses of commentary. Modern variorum editions of Shakespeare continue this tradition. This commentary can include explication and allegory. In this interpretation, the reading can move into the text, looking into the tropes and schemes and their relation to intrinsic signification, and away from the text by extrapolating an allegorical relation to the world or a structure of ideas other than those apparently present in the text or the literal signification. The pull between language and the world has been there in reading and interpretation from the beginning.

Biblical exegesis, translation and hermeneutics, as well as philology, also underpin literary studies in European vernacular languages. Exegesis, like the commentary on the classics, contained the tension between literal and allegorical readings. It began early and was also displaced into secular texts, such as literary works. Translations, whether Jerome’s Latin Bible or Erasmus’ Greek New Testament, also involved a translation of culture and readings as well as of language. Hermeneutics and Biblical studies continued and became intense in nineteenth-century Germany. The text of the Bible was demystified and in many ways dissolved in terms of authorship.
and history, so that this was a further displacement of the sacred into the secular. Philological studies also concentrated on language, which provided a historical context for language, so that language and the world also read each other. The tension between internal and external remained then.

The construction and destruction of the text, long before Heidegger’s essay in 1927 (“Destruktion”), were in play. Even before we got into the twentieth century, it was no surprise to find pressure in and on literature and its study. Textual integrity and disintegration occur simultaneously. Writing, editing and reading texts are attempts to find identity and meaning as well as problems with them. The exile from knowledge, the asymptotic realm of making and interpretation, is one of the main concerns of literature and literary studies. Literature is the making and unmaking of ground, a representation of the world that asserts and calls itself into question.

To say that literature needs to be the centre of what we do as literary scholars and that we need it in intraliterary comparisons and in comparative methodology involving other arts and disciplines, does not mean that Western and European literatures need be the sole or main focus of Comparative Literature. Close understanding and interpretation of aesthetic texts and images differs from culture to culture, but is found in the Middle East, South and East Asia and elsewhere. By comparing literary texts and contexts, as well as literature in relation to other arts and disciplines, a clearer sense of each text, tradition and innovation emerges. Such a Comparative Literature, which is happening now, should become more intense and exciting in the near future.

IV

What I am advocating is perhaps obvious. While some literary disciplines are not as interested in literature, Comparative Literature can concentrate all the more on the literary. As the pressure of expensive commercial scientific periodicals is helping to squeeze the humanities and monograph budget in libraries, the very life-blood of scholarship in Comparative Literature, we need to inform funding agencies and university administrations about the importance of our fields and the necessity to fund them well and to back journals, university presses, libraries and young scholars in areas of the humanities like Comparative Literature. In a shrinking globe in which trade, health and peace depend on international cooperation, a multicultural, international and open field like Comparative Literature can help to create more cultural understanding. Paying close attention to literary texts, probably the hardest works to translate in any language, scholars in Comparative Literature not only define one text or culture through a comparison with another, but they also show an appreciation of the most complex verbal, textual artifacts in that culture. There is no skating over these difficulties, and they can be a point of departure for the study of related cultural materials and the context in which they are produced.
So what I am proposing is not an either/or proposition, but a both/and proposal in which close reading or attentive interpretation is a ground in which to discuss context and other cultural affinities. The dramatic tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces within a literary text and the enriching theatre of comparisons with other literary texts and other arts or fields create so many amazing vistas that there is too much life in Comparative Literature to proclaim or accept the proclamation of its death.

Jonathan HART