

New Orientations of Comparative Literature in Germany Sieghild Bogumil¹

1. A Century of Comparison

It is always difficult to identify by date the beginnings and the end as well, of great intellectual and cultural movements. If we think of the modern age Bernard Groethuysen, for instance, has furnished evidence of its very early traces dating back to the Renaissance. Generally however, one agrees that the modern epoch begins with the Enlightenment when men – not yet women, by the way – became intellectually autonomous. One remembers Kant's celebrated definition of the enlightenment: "*Enlightenment* is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage" (1784). Yet a third hypothesis pleads for the beginnings of the modern times since the early 20th century. In short, what happens is that at every threshold era when men emancipate themselves from a certain restraint, one speaks of modernity.

The same uncertainty can be found regarding Comparative Literature. The question since when we can speak of comparatisme is difficult to answer. Of course, we could trace it back to the Greek era. But those contrasting juxtapositions are single phenomena and cannot be considered scientific, or to put it differently they cannot assume systematic validity. It is only since the 19th century that comparison becomes a scientific method. Comparison as a method of understanding was first elaborated in the field of natural science. It rapidly expanded into all other disciplines so that the 19th century can be considered the century of comparison. It was also taken up by the literary criticism, especially by the early Romantics who turned their epoch into a highlight in the history of comparison. Yet the method could be considered really scientific only on one condition which is of paramount importance: the equality of all literatures had to be acknowledged which implied that the idea of the hegemony of the Greco-Roman literature had to be dismissed, and this again meant that the domination of the rationalism had to be contested. Herder² had paved the way in this regard inspired as he was by the ideas of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, the English poet Edward Young, and in particular by the

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² See for the following: Victor Klemperer: *Littérature universelle et littérature européenne* (Essai) (1929). Traduit de l'allemand par Julie Stroz. For the French translation: s.l., Circe & Oxyron. 2011, pp.25 sq.

Genevan writer and philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau who all were fervent critiques of the rational philosophy and esthetics of the Enlightenment. Herder had further developed the critical ideas and summed them up in a new poetics. He holds that real poetry finds its appropriate expression in the remote, primitive and non rational voices. Hence he claimed to have access to a corpus of works of art of all times and nations as big as possible and to take it into account, for he states: the bigger it is the better one can value the quality of a single work of art.³

That means that at the very beginnings of comparative literature as a method, it is rooted in the concept of World Literature, as conceived mainly by Goethe. A worldwide field of literatures was opened for comparative studies without any temporal, geographical or generic restriction. But still there was a reservation. It consisted in the definition of the notion of the ‘world’ itself which referred to all ‘civilized’ nations. Hence the western world and the ancient oriental and far eastern cultures were taken into account.

It was Herder again who laid the foundation for a methodology with the intention to prevent all literatures to fall to pieces. He conceived the genetic method based on the mutual relationship of literary works and cultures as well as the external conditions of each literature, such as climate, landscape and different historical conditions.⁴ Further on developed under the influence of Taine’s three items of the race, the milieu, and the moment it became the foundation of the academic discipline throughout the Western World. In this light the study of sources, dependencies, influences, and effects sustained by the dominating positivism had one goal which was to evidence and promote the idea that all literatures are connected and form “one big whole”.⁵

Hence the field of the new discipline was delineated and a method elaborated whose purpose it was to provide evidence of a universal causal relationship among all literatures thus constituting a system of world literature which was embedded in a cultural universalism. These foundations of comparative literature studies were even not put at risk when, in 1948, the Russian theorist Zhirmunsky, influenced by his elder compatriot Veselovsky, introduced the “historical-

³“Je mehr Kunstwerke aus verschiedenen Völkern und Zeiten uns zur Verfügung stehen, desto heller sehen wir, was jenem mangelt, worin dies oder jenes vorzüglich glänzet.” In: Herder: *Adrastea* (1801). Quoted in: Konstantinović, *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*. Bestandsaufnahme und Ausblicke (Comparative Literature. Survey and Outlook). Bern e.a., Peter Lang, 1988, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴Hence many consider Herder as the father of literary comparison, see: Konstantinović, *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁵Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in: Konstantinović, *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 23.

typological” theory as opposed to the genetic method. The theory was developed based on the materialistic Marxist literary criticism according to which similarities arise not from genetic influence but rather from a similarity of social and cultural institutions. Subsequently, sociological literary studies appeared, but Comparative Literature was reluctant.⁶

Yet let me return for a short moment to the beginnings of the discipline at the end of the 19th century. The openness of the notion of comparison even in its above mentioned limitation was soon perverted by the emergence and rapid development of the bourgeoisie with its profound commercial spirit and narrow minded ethnographical acceptance or rather exclusions. The dominating class succeeded in imposing a Eurocentric perspective, and on this background, Comparative Literature was founded as an academic discipline.⁷ Yet, it was not until the ends of the 19th century that the first chairs were founded, to begin with chairs in France, Italy and Switzerland; however the two latter ones disappeared rapidly. In Germany, some scholars had the university teaching credentials at the universities of Hamburg, for instance, or Leipzig and Tübingen, but the growing nationalism was so strong that literary comparison could not reach the status of an academic discipline. During the regime of National Socialism, it was not even allowed to compare as such. Thus, it was only after World War II that, in Germany, Comparative Literature under the denomination of General and Comparative Literature succeeded in asserting itself as an academic discipline, though only in the Western part of Germany at that time. The first Chair of Comparative Literature was created in Mainz in 1946, under the French occupation. Another chair followed in the Saarland, in 1951, whereas lectures were already delivered since 1949. In 1962 a chair was created in Bonn. Another chair followed in Berlin, in 1965, hold by Peter Szondi, an eminent comparatist, under whose direction the institute became the biggest one in Germany. At Bochum, a chair of Comparative Literature has been created in 1975 where I have taught the discipline and cooperated to build it up since that time.

During the second half of the 20th century, a wave of chair and institute founding occurred in Germany, in the Eastern part as well after the fall of the wall. However, lately, independent institutes had to suffer from the governmental financial restrictions and they were integrated into

⁶In particular Peter Zima (University of Klagenfurt, Austria) has integrated the socio-historical perspective into Comparative Literature.

⁷First, there were only comparative lectures that had been delivered, the first one probably in Warszawa, in 1821, see Konstantinović, *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 25, n. 14. Lectures in France followed, at Sorbonne (1827) and Collège de France (1830). In England, Matthew Arnold spoke of Comparative Literature in 1848.

other literary institutes, mainly into the German and French ones. Berlin, Bochum, Munich are among the rare independent chairs or institutes. It is, in Germany at present, possible to study Comparative Literature at more than 20 universities, and if we consider all German speaking countries, there are even more than 30 universities. That is our actual institutional situation of comparative literature studies.

2. Methodological and Conceptual Considerations

A comparative outlook which carried the spirit of the time of its emergence in the 19th century came to be accepted in Germany by the middle of the twentieth century. The central constitutive characteristics of the newly established discipline were as follows:

1. The concept of comparison
2. The idea of Universalism and World Literature
3. An organic, i.e. genetic, i.e. historical understanding of the relationships among literatures
4. The predominance of facts

I will shortly comment these four items.

The concept of comparison

As mentioned above, the 19th century was the century of comparison. The method in the literary studies was possible only under the condition of the forthcoming of national identities that occurred in the 19th century. The revolutions in America and in France, the liberation movements in Greece, in Poland, and in Italy played a decisive role in this process. Obviously, it was beyond doubt that every people had its own specific form of expression. The concepts of Herder revisited by Taine constituted the foundation of comparison insofar as nations were now to be considered as individual identities that can be compared with one another.

Universalism and World Literature

Though Herder recognized the presence of a literary universalism, the idea of World Literature was brought into circulation by Goethe who, from 1825 to 1831 kept mentioning it and attempted to define it in its diverse aspects. As many comments exist about it⁸, in particular in the last decade, I would not insist on the notion here. However one aspect should be mentioned. Goethe conceived World Literature as produced by a new speed experience. Analogous to the newly discovered steam engine the surge of daily, weekly and monthly journals connected nations quickly and constituted World literature as a communicative process. For Goethe the

⁸See for instance Hendrik Birus: "Goethes Idee der Weltliteratur". Eine historische Vergegenwärtigung. (Goethe's Idea of World Literature). In: *Weltliteratur heute*. Konzepte und Perspektiven. (World Literature Today. Concepts and Perspectives). Ed. by Manfred Schmeling. Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1995, p. 5-28,

technical progress called for and facilitated a new conception of literature. He considered the new communicative experience a mode to accelerate the process of getting closer. As one becomes aware of the convergences and pervading interests of various literatures, one would be able to go beyond the limited nationalist conception of literature. The view of ‘the Other’ would help to minimize one’s own difference, and consequently, the particularities would give way to a general humanity. Translation, obviously, is of first priority here.

Genetic Understanding of Literary Relationships

The Schlegel brothers are among the most important theorists to develop a comparative methodology founded on the studies of ‘influence’ and ‘effect’ (“Wirkung”). Friedrich Schlegel writes in his *Study Concerning Greek Poetry (Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie)*: “If the national parts of modern poetry are taken out of their context and are considered as individual totalities existing on their own, they become inexplicable”⁹, since, for Schlegel, European literatures do not only have a common origin, but they also depend on each other because of the reciprocal influence and common development of European societies. Yet, this utopian concept that was also defended by Goethe and the Early Romantics in general did not last long. The late Romantics themselves closed their minds to it and supported the nationalist movement.

The Predominance of Facts

The historical-genetic literary critics were influenced by the new scholarly principles of positivism based on factual tokens and establishing causality between them. In this context, the theory of Taine stressing the race, the milieu, and the moment was of utmost importance. At what historical moment, on which geographical ground or in which social context, and between which nations a work of art has appeared, determined its aesthetic quality. But it happened that the positivist comparative investigations resulted in a mechanical enumeration, and still worse, in an evaluation of dependencies. However instead of claiming the abolition of comparative studies as Croce did considering the positivist studies being external to the real understanding of literature, the exact location and function of such knowledge in comparative research have to be reconsidered.

3. A period of methodological mutations and reorientations

⁹ „Wenn die nationellen Teile der modernen Poesie aus ihrem Zusammenhang gerissen und als einzelne für sich bestehende Ganze betrachtet werden, so sind sie unerklärlich”. In: *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Ed. by Ernst Behler in cooperation with Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner. T. I: *Studien des klassischen Altertums*. Introduced and ed. by Ernst Behler. Paderborn e.a., Schöningh, 1979, p. 21-367, here: p. 228. (Transl. by S.B.)

Before shaping the recent perspectives Comparative Literature focuses on, it is necessary to survey the traditional conceptions, which means considering the foundations of comparative studies until about the seventies of the 20th century if not later because they are in some form or the other still alive and in practice.

Besides the study of influences following the positivist example, a great part of the comparatist's interest focused on the one hand on the historical filiations of themes and motives and on the other hand on the mediators, i.e. translators, travel books or journals. The fields of interest were increasing as the first chairs of Comparative Literature were created. One major interest focused on the reception of ancient texts. But beyond that, no topic was omitted: stylistic, generic, metrical, mythic, morphological aspects of literary texts, metaphorical comparison, social backgrounds of literature, movements and epochs, folklore, the poet's disposition. Another comparative item was the theory of the images nations had of one another, called *imagology*, the "study of national illusions, of fixed ideas"¹⁰, as Wellek criticized. Yet, in order to transgress typological categories, scholars working in this field claimed to take into account the horizon of expectations (Erwartungshorizont) of the reader. A further topic since the very beginning of Comparative Literature was the comparison of literature and the other arts. One of the eminent representatives of this field of comparative studies was Henry Remak teaching in the second half of the 20th century at the Indiana University. Yet, instead of pointing to him the German scholar Oskar Walzel was referred to whose book "The Reciprocal Elucidation of the Arts" (1917) (*Die wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste*) gave the name to this field.

With regard to the diversity of the research fields, the German discipline generally followed the path of the international orientation of Comparative Literature. However German scholars developed a special method which became a model for Comparative Literature studies in other countries. Instead of referring to van Thieghem's transnational literary conception of general literature they introduced the perspective of the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*). The purpose was to propose general literature as the "science of the nature, the origin, the manifestations, and the life contexts (*Lebenszusammenhänge*) of the literary art" thus leading it to become "in a

¹⁰René Wellek: "The Crisis of Comparative Literature". In: *Proceedings of the 2nd Congress of the ICLA*. Chapel Hill, 1959, p. 149-159. Also in: id.: *Concepts of Criticism*. Ed. and with an Introduction by Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1963, p. 284.

narrower sense, especially science of the principles and methods of the scientific literary study.”¹¹

It can be stated that all the diverse orientations mentioned above have since been profoundly elaborated and solidly established not without taking into account, however, the diverse criticisms. When comparatists were accused of being undifferentiated – meaning by it unhistorical – they slowly shifted to a historical view underlining the differences. Peter Szondi criticized comparative studies in this sense. When they were accused of insisting too much on concrete relationships between literatures or on a coincidental assemblage of literatures as implied in Van Tieghem’s concept of General Literature, the Russian theorists, especially Zirmunski referring to Veselovskij, motivated them to reconsider the concept of influence. The Russian comparatists did not abandon the binary studies, but they supplemented them by introducing the typological concept. It was the Marxist alternative of Van Tieghem’s General Literature, for they understood ‘typological’ as a comparative study elaborating the similarities of literary works which were not connected by factual relationships, but by the supposition of a common type of social background; hence, for instance, the comparison of the French classical tragedy and the Japanese nô-theatre. Both are brought together for the reason of a similar socio-historical situation, namely the feudal system. Since then, the model of an organic conception of World Literature has had a mighty rival which presents a more modern conception of time insofar as it implies the idea of simultaneity; automatically, it provokes a new dynamic dimension of World Literature. Obviously, the concept is reminiscent of Goethe’s insistence on velocity. However, in German Comparative Literature as in the whole Western sphere, these ideas were, for a long time, a hindrance to the spread of the typological concept. To ignore any genetic dependency was reason enough to doubt the methodological purity of such a kind of comparison. If, in principle, it was finally accepted, the reason was it overlapped with Van Tieghem’s still canonical concept of General Literature in some ways; yet, as late as 1980, the German comparatist Gerhard Kaiser saw himself prompted to call for more studies based on the socio-historical conditions that underlie the similarities existing in genetically independent works.

¹¹Literaturwissenschaft ist die “Wissenschaft von Wesen, Ursprung, Erscheinungsformen und Lebenszusammenhängen der literarischen Kunst; [...] sie ist daher in einem engeren Sinn speziell die Wissenschaft von den Prinzipien und Methoden der wissenschaftlichen Literaturbetrachtung“ (Max Wehrli: *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft* (1951). Bern ²1969, p.4) quoted in: *Handbuch der Komparatistik*. Theorien, Arbeitsfelder, Wissenspraxis, eds. Rüdiger Zymner and Achim Hölter. Stuttgart, Weimar, Metzler, 2013, p.5.

Literary theory also had difficulties to join hands with Comparative Literature, and this was because the theorists rejected comparison as lacking in foundation. They focused on the linguistic laws of literary texts that were transnational. However, comparative studies did not resist the linguistic turn. The discipline even got a new conception of its general part, then. One became accustomed to the idea that Comparative Literature had also to deal with linguistics. Comparison was not at stake, but it was enriched by knowing in what way words and texts worked on a structural level. In a very normal manner and without any discussion, these theoretical questions were subsumed under the label of ‘general literature’.

During the theoretical period, another attack arose against Comparative Literature which was as radical as the linguistic one. It was articulated by one of the leaders of the theory of reception, the German Hans Robert Jauss.¹² He asked to abandon the studies of influences, dependencies, and fortunes, which were considered as the “French School” in the tradition of Van Tieghem and the younger comparatist Carré, in order to introduce a methodological turn. He preceded from the presupposition that literature had to be considered with regard to a framework of historical processes beyond the individual works, authors and nations all shaped by them. At first glance, the claim of Jauss does not seem to differ much from the typological approach. Yet Zirmunski’s methodology is exclusively based on a sociological interest whereas Jauss insisted on a transnational historic-cultural view. Instead of comparing, he claimed, it was necessary to find a general topic as the starting-point that can demonstrate, beyond national and linguistic frontiers, a moment of this process which induced authors to look for new forms of writing. Therefore, it was preferable to choose a threshold period in literary history. Setting an example, Jauss made a synchronic break and drew a parallel between the writings of the German poet Heinrich Heine, the French poet Victor Hugo and the French novelist Henri Stendhal in order to furnish evidence of a moment in the process of literary history which he entitled “the end of the period of art”. Obviously, even though he refused the idea of comparison, he could not help but comparing the different texts and, before doing so, making a choice of texts by means of comparison.¹³

¹²See: Hans Robert Jauss: “Das Ende der Kunstperiode. Aspekte der literarischen Revolution bei Heine, Hugo und Stendhal“. In: *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 107-143. (translation by Timothy Bahti: *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception*. Introduction by Paul de Man. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹³Jauss has provoked many critical reactions. For one of the last critiques see: Christian Moser: „Comparison – Method or Ethos?“ In: *Komparatistik*. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft 2012. Heidelberg, Synchron, 2013, pp. 11-16. In the following referred to as Moser 2012 followed by page numbers.

However unjustified the critiques may seem, in general, comparative studies had often been too slow in responding to the challenges induced by epistemological or methodological changes in other fields of knowledge.¹⁴ Yet, by and by, these critiques helped in causing an internal change in the discipline, thereby removing most shortcomings. Until the end of the 20th century and beyond, it is possible to distinguish among four¹⁵ types of comparative methods bearing witness to the openness and the great capacity of adaptation of the discipline. At the same time, this typology may be seen as presenting the most advanced forms of the traditional methodology being, as mentioned, still in practice:

1. The *mono-causal* type pointing out the *genetic relationship* of two or more literatures, as practiced by the “French School”. It is the well known type of research of factual influences and dependencies.
2. The type similar to the above but *integrated into the external historical process* which is explored in order to come to know why a work shows a certain influence. That means the perspective has changed from simply pinpointing its sources as static tokens to questioning its ‘productive reception’, i.e. the reasons why a work responds to another work. Obviously, this method particularly takes into consideration the theory of reception.
3. Comparison can also be founded on external contextual analogies, for instance, the same sociological context. This type focuses on the methodological approach based on the *typological comparison* as introduced by Zirmunski and Veselovskij.
4. Another type is the systematic a-historical parallel which examines the structural, linguistic, poetic and other *theoretical* aspects of two or more texts.

4. Recent Methodological Orientations of Comparative Literature

From about the eighties on, the enthusiasm for literary theory declined and hermeneutics, the theory of understanding, which had been rejected for nearly twenty years, has returned to the

¹⁴Gerhardt R. Kaiser: *Einführung in die vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*. Forschungsstand – Kritik – Aufgaben (Introduction to Comparative Literature. State of Research – Critic – Objects). Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980, p. 3.

¹⁵Manfred Schmeling enumerates one more type which is the comparison of literary critics to one another. See his introduction to *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*. Theorie und Praxis (Comparative Literature. Theory and Practice). Ed. by Manfred Schmeling. Wiesbaden, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1981, p. 1-23, here: p. 12 sq. - In 1972, the Slovak comparatist Dionyz Durisin presented a similar, more detailed systematization based on the genetic and the typological relationship of literatures. See: id.: *Vergleichende Literaturforschung* (Comparative Literary research). Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, ²1976, p. 113-120.

fore. Today, it is more dominant than ever, for it can adapt itself to nearly all critical positions. Perhaps one should say, on the contrary, that hermeneutics succeeded in impressing its stamp on every critical viewpoint and method. Thus, it imposed its way of understanding on comparative studies, too, even though against all logic, as it will be pointed out further on.

What is it that makes hermeneutics so attractive? The reason may be that it is a reassurance of sorts. In a world that falls apart and confronts human beings with incongruities and heterogeneities, hermeneutics underscores continuity and tradition which can be found in the creative individual as well as in the society surrounding her. Hans Georg Gadamer¹⁶, who has developed the contemporary conception of hermeneutics, insisted on the fact that tradition left its imprint on our consciousness, thus determining it, whereas our consciousness determines our understanding. The same is true of the society surrounding the individual. Society is determined by tradition. The result is a presupposed circle of understanding: from the creating individual to the reader via the context and from the reader to the creative individual via the text. Thus the circle of hermeneutic understanding presupposes an irreducible involvement in the own history. Our “finite-historical consciousness [...] always stays entangled in the historical causal relationship”.¹⁷ Hence the process of understanding a text is not subject to a method but it is an “application” and that means an application of the text to one’s own specific historic situation. In other words the meaning of the text changes with and in every concrete situation: “corresponding to the claim of the text this one has to be understood in a new and different manner at every moment, i.e. in every concrete situation. Understanding is [...] always application.”¹⁸ Hermeneutic understanding is not only a way to cope with history in present times; rather it is the revival of tradition in order to come to know oneself on the ground of one’s own history: “Historic consciousness is a manner of self-knowledge.”¹⁹

These short comments may suffice to provide evidence of at least three major consequences which are contradictory to the goals of comparative studies. On the one hand, to be obliged to

¹⁶Hans Georg Gadamer: *Wahrheit und Methode*. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik. Tübingen, Mohr, 1960. (*Truth and Method*. 2nd rev. edition. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. New York, Crossroad, 1989). In the following referred to as Gadamer 1989 followed by page numbers. (Translations by S.B.)

¹⁷ “Immer bleibt es [das endlich-geschichtliche Bewußtsein – SBN.] in den geschichtlichen Wirkungszusammenhang verstrickt.“ (Gadamer 1989, 238).

¹⁸ „dass[...] der Text [...] dem Anspruch, den der Text erhebt, entsprechend, in jedem Augenblick, d.h. in jeder konkreten Situation neu und anders verstanden werden muß. Verstehen ist [...] immer schon anwenden.“ (Gadamer 1989, 314). The historic mobility is for Gadamer the very centre of the hermeneutic understanding (l.c).

¹⁹ „Historisches Bewusstsein ist eine Weise der Selbsterkenntnis.“ (Gadamer 1989, 239).

remain thus firmly tied to the own history entails an exclusively Eurocentric way of understanding in that it is based on a conception of history which has been developed from the end of the 18th century on and specifically shaped in the 19th century with regard to the ‘civilized’, i.e. European nations.²⁰ On the other hand – and Gadamer unceasingly insists on it – hermeneutic understanding cannot be considered a method; rather it is a practice of a text, and even an extremely subjective practice comparable for instance to the staging of a play. In contrast, method, Gadamer holds, disrupts the hermeneutic circle, it replaces the intrinsic understanding by an approach from outside. Hence method “arbitrarily imposes a reading.”²¹ These considerations lead him immediately to the third consequence which concerns comparatists directly, because Gadamer highlights comparison as a paramount example which furnishes evidence of the methodic deficits. Indeed, while criticizing Dilthey, who has introduced the comparative method into the humanities, considering it a possibility to transgress the limits of the own historical experience in order to arrive at a more universal “truth”²² Gadamer categorically rejects comparison as a way to get nearer to “the idea of historic knowledge”.²³ Christian Moser underscores the principal arguments of the philosopher: “In Gadamer’s view the subject of comparison assumes a position of detachment with regard to the objects that are to be correlated and disposed of at her will.²⁴ [...] Comparison removes the objects from their historical contexts, detaches them from tradition and arranges them on an artificial plane of ‘simultaneity’.”²⁵ However, Gadamer points out, “human consciousness is not an infinite intellect which is aware of all at the same time and in the same presence.”²⁶ Hence, for Gadamer the result of comparison will not be an objective “truth”, but a mere artificial product. Thus, to sum up the line of argument, Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutics does not only

²⁰ See above the first chapter.

²¹ See Moser 2012, 13.

²² Gadamer 1989, 237.

²³ “Man muß deshalb bezweifeln, ob die Methode des Vergleichens der Idee der historischen Erkenntnis wirklich genügt.” Gadamer 1989, 238.

²⁴ He quotes Gadamer: „Das Wesen des Vergleichens setzt die Ungebundenheit der erkennenden Subjektivität, die über das eine wie über das andere verfügt, bereits voraus.“ (Gadamer 1989, 237sq.) (“The essence of comparison always presupposes the detachment of the subjectivity looking for knowledge and disposing of one object as well as the other”).

²⁵ Moser 2012, 13. He again quotes Gadamer: „Es [sc. Das Vergleichen] macht auf eine erklärte Weise gleichzeitig.“ (Gadamer 1989, 238). (“It [Comparison] makes in a declared manner simultaneous”).

²⁶ „dass das menschliche Bewusstsein kein unendlicher Intellekt ist, für den alles gleich-zeitig und gleich-gewärtig ist.“ (Gadamer 1989, 238).

condemn the reader to stay imprisoned in her own history in the moment when the world opens to globality, but it relegates her to the remote times of non-scientific literary studies.

Taking the philosopher's powerful contestation of comparison into consideration, the mutism of the comparatists is quite surprising.²⁷ The reasons have to be examined on other occasions. One of them has been suggested above. Hermeneutics is indeed a way – in that comparable to all methods – to dam the fragmentation of reality which destroys the coherence of the text. Hence it is obvious that hermeneutics does not get along with the apparent textual disorder prevalent in postmodern novels for instance, or in contemporary poetry. It does not cope with the endless flow of words in the most recent novels of David Foster Wallace such as *Infinite Jest*, for instance. Hermeneutics is also ineffective when confronted with textual forms taking advantage of media techniques, with forms of the global communication or with the textual virtuality of the internet.

However, all the mentioned kinds of texts are at present in the centre of interest of the readers, not in the sense that they are looking to identify themselves with any of these fictional or virtual worlds in the hermeneutic way. They consider them more as platforms to take off into the new unlimited world of discourse — of gender, race, foreignness etc. – i.e. into the imagination of different cultures, and of difference and imagination, as such. Hence since the nineties, one began to speak of a cultural turn. Later on, a changing perspective induced to claim a geographical turn. After that, a visual turn was suggested. Criticism had become a waltz of turns. Here, one must say, Comparative Literature accepted immediately the challenge, especially the challenge of the cultural turn. As it integrates different fields of culture, over a time, Comparative Literature became so widely open that it was nearly submerged by Cultural Studies. Voices even arose asking to change its name into 'Cultural Studies'. However, comparatists opposed – and still strongly oppose – and defend the focus of the discipline which is the *text*. This does not mean that Comparative Literature is finally supposed to exclude Cultural Studies from its range of inquiry, on the contrary. But it is necessary to examine the representation of culture in the text in order to establish a critical dialogue with the cultural context, its discourse and rhetoric. A recent example of such a self-conscious integration of a new field of research into comparative literary studies is the dialogue with Ecocriticism. Even though the subject is

²⁷Hans Robert Jauss was one to react, partly in the sense of Gadamer yet without referring to the philosopher. (See above the second chapter). Christian Moser has recently noted Gadamer's refusal but he did not take up the challenge. Moser 2012, 13.

discussed in English speaking countries since about forty years, the dialogue with our discipline begins only now to be instituted. Hannes Bergthaller has for the first time highlighted the relationship between “Ecocriticism and Comparative Literature” (“Ecocriticism und Komparatistik”) editing a cluster of seven contributions in the Yearbook of the German Comparative Society (DGAVL), “Komparatistik”, of 2013. In his introduction²⁸ he stresses the necessity of this dialogue since Comparative Literature is able to make a non-substitutable contribution to the understanding of the global environmental crisis and Ecocriticism can provide Comparative Studies with new research perspectives.

The challenges on the methodological level have immediately been accepted by the comparatists, as well. Faced with certain emptiness, in this regard, the series of methods which appeared were taken over especially by the young generation of comparatists. This is the case particularly in Germany where the discipline can be considered one of the most progressive disciplines. The new methods include Discourse Analysis based on Michel Foucault’s work, the dialogical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin, the systemic theory conceived by the German theorist Niklas Luhmann, the method of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida, the model of the rhizome elaborated as a methodological concept by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari or a revised social analysis of the text as presented by the Austrian comparatist Peter V. Zima. Even the reciprocal elucidation of the arts which comparatists did not consider a subject of the first importance has been revisited. About the end of the 1960ies, the American influence caused its transformation into the field of Comparative Arts where literature was considered an art, too. Since that moment the mutation of that field went on and from the end of the 1990ies on, it has turned to be intermedial studies (Intermedialitätsforschung). Immediately, this field has become one of the most attractive orientations in Comparative Literature, not only because of its theoretical claim to elaborate a general theory of arts, but also because of the indispensable cultural contextualization of the relationship of the arts and media.

Thus, from at least the end of the 20th century, the discipline developed to such a degree that all the evidence points to the fact that it has become a discipline of reference.

²⁸Hannes Bergthaller: Einleitung. Ecocriticism und Komparatistik. In: Komparatistik. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft 2013. Heidelberg, Synchron, 2014, pp.11-17, here: p.13 and 16.

But how do we see comparison vis-à-vis these new theories? They deal with literature in general; they do not offer a foundation for comparison as such.²⁹This is exactly the reason which has caused another turn, more important for the discipline itself: all the new questions which arise are discussed in the framework of general literature. Comparison, on the contrary, is kept in the background. That means a relief of the guard after 200 years. There are actually even tendencies to annihilate both denominations and to choose the designation of literary science.³⁰

Indeed, the raising questions are of a general, yet not less important, interest. On the one hand, they concern the self-understanding of the discipline faced with the overwhelming abundance of subject matters external to literature as a text and on the other hand, they deal with what could be called ethical problems, as for instance questions of the relationship between the Self and the Other, between identity and difference; or they deal with problems of limits, of the margin, or with the definition of the concept of comparison itself.

It would exceed the limits of this contribution to resume all the different methods resulting from the theories mentioned above. However, in order to conclude, one can say that they have all one intention in common: they try to limit the chaos; they are all characterized by the desire for order or at least for getting along with the disorder of the texts. That is to say their intention is to dominate the text. It seems that none is conceived on the basis of the text as such which is the condition sine qua non of a real dialogue between the text and the reader. One may object that the concept of dialogue is an integral element of all these methods, yet in them it figures on the meta-critical, conceptual level and not on the practical one. But that is what a method should provide – or provoke, more than ever in these times of simultaneousness, of virtuality, of fundamentalist isolation. A dialogue in the sense mentioned above: starting from the cultural background which, since the cultural turn, cannot be passed over any more, - but from the cultural background as it is represented by the textual strategies. For, through the mode of representation, literature reflects on the conditions underlying the perception of the world, the reality, the Other, and the Self. Comparison is thus conceived as a critical dialogue between the text, the reader and the world surrounding her in a more or less conscious manner where the reader has the responsibility to analyze the text and the context in all their polyphony – and one

²⁹Christian Moser: „Comparison – Method or Ethos?“ In: *Komparatistik*. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft 2013. Heidelberg, Synchron, 2014, pp. 11-16 considers comparison the „great Unthought Known of Comparative Literature“ (p.11 and 15).

³⁰ See: *Handbuch der Komparatistik*, op. cit., p. 6 and chap. E 4.

may remember Mikhail Bakhtin here. Yet, the reader's objective is not any more to state and compare positions and oppositions, but to come to know the differences, to live along with the strangeness and accept the Other in its otherness – and here, one may think of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas for whom the understanding of the Other is impossible; as one may also think of Michel Foucault's epistemic discontinuities which are characteristic marks of our present historical space. Thus, being subject to a daily rush of differences and discrepancies one is unable to cope with, the readers cannot help but leaving the hermeneutic way of understanding and follow a different goal. Their purpose would be to construct the network of relationships the text refers to in the form of a rhizome and to show the transnational and even global dimension of the text.³¹The presupposition of this methodological claim is the idea that the text would be badly damaged or even gets lost if it would be reduced to any order; on the contrary, it would be profitable to realize the multitude of new insights the diversity and even fragmentation in relationship to its external connections offers to the readers. Thus, Comparative Literature gives them the opportunity to orient them in our dismembered world and to live in it in community and in communication with the Other.

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³¹The idea of Comparative Literature as a “science of relationships” (Beziehungswissenschaft”) as conceived by the comparatist Dieter Lamping: *Internationale Literatur. Eine Einführung in das Arbeitsgebiet der Komparatistik*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2013, p.22 seems to be near to this claim, but still he proceeds by comparison and aims at coherence and order.

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