Comparative literature as a scholarly discipline and educational platform is said to be in constant crisis. Moreover, twice in the course of the past twenty-five years—by Susan Bassnett in 1993 and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 2003—comparative literature was proclaimed to be dead.[1] In the spirit of its perpetual recuperation, Linda Hutcheon, one of the first Canadian PhDs in comparative literature, suggested in 2006 that “perhaps the moment is ripe for looking for more positive terms of self-definition for our discipline, paradoxically flourishing yet feeling beleaguered.”[2] It is not a coincidence, then, that Comparative Literature for the New Century, which is the object of the current review, is prefaced by Hutcheon’s foreword, in which she diagnoses the discipline with a masochistic “penchant for self-conscious self-interrogation”—“the kind of conscious questioning of disciplinary limits” (p. vii). By constantly asking this self-directed “overwhelming question,” as T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock would phrase it, comparative literature might indeed appear to many as “a patient etherised upon a table,” or at least as that evasive Western self-reflexive subject, which—from Paul Ricoeur’s “school of suspicion” (Karl Marx-Friedrich Nietzsche-Sigmund Freud) to French poststructuralism and deconstruction (Michel Foucault-Roland Barthes-Jacques Derrida)—decisively announces its own death and bars its initial capital “S” (Jacques Lacan) yet always reemerges—die-hard or undead.[3]

Unlike the decennial reports on “the state of the discipline” periodically issued by the American Comparative Literature Association, Comparative Literature for the New Century does not boast an institutional affiliation and is a product of enthusiasm and hard work of its editors—Giulia De Gasperi and Joseph Pivato. In her introduction titled “The State of the Art” (an obvious pun that redefines comparative literature as “art,” juxtaposed with its American appellation as “discipline”), De Gasperi sets the aim of the volume as “threelfold: to present some of the most recent work carried out by,” mostly Canadian, comparatists; “to promote the value of the field of Comparative Literature as an area of interdisciplinary study; and to assess the future directions it might take” (p. 3). As a graduate of a Canadian comparative literature program myself, I find the book's aims noble and unobjectionable. At least the first two goals have been accomplished in the volume quite successfully, and, naturally, only the future will show if the projected directions of the “art's” development will keep comparative literature afloat in “the new century.” The book has also a fourth, unannounced, dimension, which I find the most appealing: it traces back the Canadian histo-

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Reviewed by Sergiy Yakovenko

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ry of the discipline to date in two very personal and therefore ingenuous accounts of Pivato and E. D. Blodgett—scholars who assisted at the birth of comparative literature in Canada as both a field of study and an academic institution.

The volume consists of four sections, mutually intersecting among each other and across the particular essays that comprise the sections’ content: “Comparative Arguments,” “Future Direction in Comparative Literature,” “International Comparative Studies,” and “Looking Back at Traditions.” As though in reference to one of the most recent and most widely discussed American “report[s] on the state of the discipline,” Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization (2006), edited by Haun Saussy, the “comparative arguments” start with Sneja Gunew’s versatile account of the so-called neo-cosmopolitanism, which shifts the focus to what will prove to be promoted in the volume as a whole as the main object of comparative literature “for the new century”—diasporic and ethnic minority writing: “unlike the old elitist cosmopolitanism that dealt with a type of privileged mobility, the new cosmopolitanism deals with the perspectives of those left out of triumphalist globalization” (p. 21). In this insightful text, Gunew proposes that English studies should use the post-nationalist aspect of cosmopolitanism, which shifts the focus to what will prove to be promoted in the volume as a whole as the main object of comparative literature “for the new century”—diasporic and ethnic minority writing: “unlike the old elitist cosmopolitanism that dealt with a type of privileged mobility, the new cosmopolitanism deals with the perspectives of those left out of triumphalist globalization” (p. 21). In this insightful text, Gunew proposes that English studies should use the post-nationalist aspect of cosmopolitanism, where “post” is Jean-François Lyotard’s future-anterior tense of “postmodernism” that subsists in the “elements not taken up by Modernism” (p. 23). In this view, the left-outs of the cosmopolitan globalization coalesce into the “subject-in-process”—marginalized, relocated in space and lost in time, oscillating “between presence and absence” (pp. 26, 34). An important consequence of this anti-subject is mapping out new directions for a world literature—the most visible product of comparative literature as a discipline that delivers on its educational vocation rather than just playing its own hermetic intertextual games. In her own scholarship, Gunew has “reconceptualised so-called multicultural writers as mediators between national literatures and a world literature” (p. 34). Indeed, recent American anthologies of world literature have made some initial steps toward abandoning the literary-historical model of the nation-state, inherited from German Romanticism, but Comparative Literature for the New Century as a whole seems to be advocating not so much for the democratized inclusiveness of David Damrosch’s accessibility model of translated (into English as a lingua franca) literatures but rather for a true recognition of unique cultural-linguistic experiences of post-national, crossing-the-border communities and individuals. To many contributors of the volume, who bring their post-national, as it were, complex Canadian identities to revise “our sense of Canadian literature,” other languages that haunt English, including the so-called colonial tongues, and singular experiences that they carry, constitute a preponderant portion of what is implied by the art of comparative literature (p. 28).

In the last essay of the book, Mark A. McCutcheon ascribes this “hauntological” (after Derrida) linguistic aspect to Pivato’s scholarly and educational practice of literary studies, mainly his research on Italian-Canadian writing, as “hating” or “haunting tradition properly” (p. 304)—first of all the orthodox tradition of Canadian studies. Pivato’s own contribution to the collection is expressively titled “The Languages of Comparative Literature.” He coins the term “Comparative Canadian Literature,” which in his view should reflect not only that Canadian bilingualism is often taken for granted but also that “cultural backgrounds” of “one-third of Canadians now” “are neither English nor French” (p. 48). Echoing to some extent Blodgett’s essay “Comparative Literature in Canada” (also in the volume), Pivato expresses sober skepticism regarding the “long-term directions” of European (mainly French) theory in its anglicized and American-appropriated version in studies of literature. Instead, he shows the benefits of the practice of close reading of those critical and theoretical works as primary texts in their original languages—as part of comparative literary stud-
ies. Similarly, Blodgett laments the abuse of translation in comparative studies and “the thoughtless ease in which the English canon is expanded”: “it leaves the impression that once in English the text is English, and its past in another language is quietly erased” (p. 296).

On the other hand, but not in contradiction with Pivato and Blodgett, Maria Cristina Seccia, a contributor to the section “Future Directions in Comparative Literature,” successfully demonstrates that “translation as practice can be a form of literary criticism” and a translator’s role and interstitial position between two different cultures and languages presents the comparatist with invaluable opportunities for analysis and research (p. 153). Ndeye Fatou Ba’s essay, “Dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone Literatures in Africa,” is a vivid example of how comparative literary studies can thrive on the ground of language differences in bilingual and multilingual societies. George Elliott Clarke, in his turn, in “Why Not an ‘African-Canadian’ Epic? Lessons from Pratt and Walcott, Etc.,” explores the genre implications of the epic from the postcolonial perspective. In his essay—a productive conglomerate of literary scholarship and creative writing—he keenly ironizes over Ezra Pound’s and Northrop Frye’s definitions of the epic form and, generally agreeing that the epic attempts to answer the question of who we are, dismantles various suggested examples of Canadian epic poems (such as Louis Dudek’s Europe [1955] or E. J. Pratt’s Brébeuf and His Brethren [1940]), which he convincingly and astutely shows to be colonial, “too racially European, too exclamatory toward imperialism, too triumphalist Christian, and too encased in an Anglo-imperial imperative” (p. 129). Borrowing a few recipes from Walcott’s Omeros, Clarke provocatively offers his own “epic-in-progress” “Canticles”—an overt parody of Pound’s Cantos (1925) (p. 138). In the spirit of comparative literature’s widening horizons, Monique Tschofen (“Exile, Media, Capital: Interpreting Calendar’s Systems of Exchange”) analyzes the challenge of “cross-cultural encounters” as staged in film (Atom Egoyan), while Dominique Hétu offers a reading of “fiction with care ethics and with a critical posthumanist approach” in her comparative study of Margaret Atwood’s and Karoline George’s post-apocalyptic novels (“What a Caring Act”: Geographies of Care and the Posthuman in Canadian Dystopian Fiction”) (pp. 175, 112).

The volume’s main emphasis, however, is ethnic minority writing—as an underlying methodological implication both in specific comparative analyses and in theoretical approaches to the “art” of comparative literature. In this respect, Deborah Saidero’s essay, “A Many-Tongued Babel: Translingualism in Canadian Multicultural Writing,” has an overarching quality of an account of Canadian polyglot writers who by incorporating their heritage languages challenge the “literary hegemony of English and French in Canadian literature” (p. 200). Gaetano Rando, on the other hand, examines “Italian migrant working class experiences” in Australia and Canada, as depicted by two novelists of Italian working-class origin—Pietro Tedeschi and Franc Paci (p. 229). In their respective close readings of other ethnic minority writers in Canada, F. Elizabeth Dahab, Anna Pia De Luca, and Jolene Armstrong explore cross-ethnic cultural transformations and nomadic experiences that problematize and even satirize the orthodox image of Canadian multiculturalism.

In “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (1958), René Wellek asserted that neither inter-literary relationships as the object of study nor the comparative method itself was discipline specific. [4] This diagnosis, later confirmed and broadened by René Étiemble, ushered, especially in French comparative studies, an era of the discipline’s “commitment to theory,” which seems to have exhausted itself in the reductionist deconstructive readings in both Europe and North America. [5] Cultural studies, in its various modifications and implications, which largely took the place of deconstruction and other theory-driven approaches,
or merged with them, creating on its way such interesting constructs as Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, was coldly received by some leading Canadian comparatists who feared its Marxist roots (as seen in Blodgett’s memoirs of Milan Dimić in “Comparative Literature in Canada”). But in the wake of those major transformations, at the end of the twentieth century, D. W. Fokkema proposed a “new paradigm,” which, by inclusion of cultural aspects, shifted the focus from a literary work to the broader text/context of literary phenomena as complex networks that produce and sustain literature in its social milieu.[6] It seems that the ascendancy of ethnic minority writing places Comparative Literature for the New Century within this general trend, which seeks positive and ethical examination of literature that reflects neo-cosmopolitan, post-national, transcultural, nomadic, multilingual, and trans-lingual individuals and communities as “subjects-in-progress” that challenge and problematize official monolingual or bilingual social spaces (p. 26).

Notes


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