

ABHANDLUNGEN

CHRISTIAN MOSER

Comparison - Method or Ethos?*

Comparatists have always had misgivings about the concept of comparison. The status accorded to comparison within Comparative Literature is far from clear. Although the discipline's very name derives from the concept, we are not quite sure what comparison refers to. Does it define what we do? Does it delineate a field of study, a range of objects? Most of us would concede that our practice of analyzing texts and cultural artifacts somehow involves the activity of comparing, but when confronted with the need to specify its procedural value, we tend to be evasive. Thus, bewilderingly, comparatists have systematically neglected one of their key concepts. In a way, comparison is the great Unthought Known of Comparative Literature.¹

Rarely do comparatists reflect explicitly on the significance of comparison for the discipline. When such reflection does occur, there is a remarkable reluctance to characterize comparison as a method.² In a recent study that inquires into the idea of comparison in a postcolonial world, Natalie Melas points to the fact that there is a consensus within the discipline not to solidify the comparative approach into a formal method: »Comparison makes its comeback not as a method but as a space, where it signifies inclusiveness and a non-hierarchical transversality« (Melas 2007, 41). As a space, comparison does not refer to a formal procedure that is based on clear theoretical tenets; rather, it relates to some kind of pre-procedural and metaphorical ground, to a guiding principle of transcultural openness. Thus, the space of comparison marks the figure of an ethical stance, »an ethos of inclusiveness« (Melas 2007, 3). This tendency to transform method into ethos seems to be pervasive. It can also be observed in neighboring disciplines such as transnational historiography. According to Jürgen Osterhammel, an eminent representative of comparative global

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1 On the concept of the Unthought Known see Bollas 1987.

2 »Selten sind in der Fachdiskussion konkrete Überlegungen darüber angestellt worden, worin die Methodik des Vergleichens bestehe; von einer Methodologie kann *a fortiori* noch weniger die Rede sein.« (Corbineau-Hoffmann 2000, 76.) - A typical way of evading the question of method in standard introductions to Comparative Literature is to talk about the *history* of literary comparison instead of engaging in methodological reflection. The latest generation of introductions, however, seems to be prepared to face the methodological challenge of comparison. Thus, the editors of the most up-to-date introduction available on the German market advocate the rehabilitation of comparison as a »heuristische[] Leitmethode« (Zemanek/Nebbrig 2012, 18). For an appraisal of this new introduction, see my review in the present volume, 182-190; for a survey of methodological reflection on comparison within the discipline of Comparative Literature, see Zelle 2004/2005.

history studies, transcultural comparativism constitutes »a mental attitude rather than a method« (»eher eine Einstellung als eine Methode«; Osterhammel 1996, 295).³ He then proceeds to define this attitude more specifically as a sort of »pre-methodological cosmopolitanism« (»vormethodische [...] Weltbürgerlichkeit«; *ibid.*, 295). But what does it mean when we designate comparison as an attitude or an ethos? Ethos is an Aristotelian term.⁴ It signifies a habit of thought, an intellectual activity that has been turned into a routine and has thus acquired the status of second nature. Could it be that by putting ethos in place of method we have naturalized the practice of comparison? Is this just another ruse we employ to evade serious methodological reflection, to prevent us from asking what we really do when we compare?

In order to elucidate this point, I would like to draw attention to an episode in the history of German Comparative Literature that can illuminate an important question: to what extent does comparison constitute a blind spot of literary analysis? This episode not only exemplifies the methodological blindness of a certain type of interpretation, but also exposes the theoretical insight that lies hidden within the practice of comparison. In 1970, the well-known scholar of Romance literature Hans Robert Jauß published his book *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*. This work is one of the founding documents of reception theory and of the so-called School of Constance. In one chapter, Jauß launches a severe attack against the discipline of Comparative Literature (Jauß 1970, 107–143). Jauß's critique of Comparative Literature and the harshness of its tone came as quite a surprise. To begin with, the ties between Romance studies and Comparative Literature have always been very strong in Germany, with many eminent comparatists proceeding from the ranks of Romance scholars. Two famous representatives, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, have even been credited with »exporting« Comparative Literature to America.⁵ Moreover, Jauß himself always strived to abolish the compartmentalization of literary studies into national philologies and to put them on a transnational footing. In many of his studies, he goes beyond the confines of Romance literature and draws comparisons between French, Italian, German, English and Russian texts. The chapter that contains his attack on Comparative Literature, »Das Ende der Kunstperiode – Aspekte der literarischen Revolution bei Heine, Hugo und Stendhal,« is a case in point (*ibid.*, 107–143). Here, Jauß correlates the works of the French writers Victor Hugo and Stendhal with the German literary movement *Junges Deutschland*, thereby sketching the transnational phenomenon of a »literary revolution« (»literarische[] Revolution«; *ibid.*, 107). Consequently, Jauß does not object to comparison *per se* or to literary cosmopolitanism – far from it. He directs his critique against a specific mode of comparison, which he associates with the discipline of Comparative Literature. To be precise, Jauß identifies Comparative Literature with comparison, in so far as it is practiced as a *method*. His own analysis is offered as a non-methodical alternative to methodic comparison. Jauß takes Comparative Literature to task for »turning comparison into an autonomous method and a metahistoric category« (»aus dem Vergleich eine autonome Methode und metahistorische Kategorie zu machen«; *ibid.*, 141). As a method, Jauß contends, comparison contributes to the

3 All German to English translations are done by the author.

4 See Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.

5 On the influence of Auerbach and Spitzer on American Comparative Literature see Levin 1967. Rey Chow considers Auerbach's *Mimesis* to be »an authoritative founding text of our postwar (and largely North American) academic discipline« (Chow 2011, 17).

national compartmentalization of literature in that it presupposes the existence of independent national literary histories that follow their own inherently determined trajectories of evolution. By contrast, Jauß claims that his mode of non-methodic comparison may lead the way to a truly transnational form of literary historiography.

Jauß's aversion to method in general and to comparison in particular can be traced back to his major theoretical source, the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer posits a rigid opposition between hermeneutic understanding and method. One of his basic tenets implies that the hermeneutic process of extracting meaning cannot be taught and formalized as a method. According to Gadamer, reception, the understanding of a text, is not a reproductive but a productive activity. Therefore, he attributes pivotal significance to the hermeneutic category of ›application‹ – the creative act of making use of a text in a specific historic situation, of refreshing an element of tradition by bringing it to bear on a current problem.⁶ However, Gadamer goes out of his way to make sure that application preserves a non-methodic character. In his view, application is not a distinct procedure that supplements the cognitive act of understanding in order to make it fit to a particular situation; rather, it forms an integral part of this act: Whenever we manage to understand a text, we have always already applied it to our specific position (›Verstehen ist [...] immer schon Anwenden‹; Gadamer 1990, 314). The text and the instances of its application are constituents of an overarching and continuous historical process, an exegetical tradition that progressively unfolds its many layers of meaning. Method, by contrast, disrupts this historic continuity. Method marks a technical and constructive intervention, which approaches a text not from within a tradition but from outside, thus forcing an understanding upon it, instead of unfolding its potential meaning. According to Gadamer, method subdues its object and arbitrarily imposes a reading. In the humanities, the method *par excellence* which displays all these defects is comparison. Gadamer taxes the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey for having introduced the comparative method into the humanities. 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: ›Das Wesen des Vergleichens setzt die Ungebundenheit der erkennenden Subjektivität, die über das eine wie über das andere verfügt, bereits voraus‹ (ibid., 237–238). Comparison removes the objects from their historical contexts, detaches them from tradition, and arranges them on an artificial plane of ›simultaneity‹: ›Es [sc. das Vergleichen] macht auf eine erklärte Weise gleichzeitig‹ (ibid., 238). It spatializes and ›flattens‹ history for the sake of producing an ›objective‹ truth, which, however, is no more than an arbitrary construct.

In his critique of Comparative Literature, Jauß moves along the lines of Gadamer's condemnation of method. He accuses Comparative Literature of negating the historicity of its objects: ›Solche Beziehungen des reinen Vergleichs sind aber primär zeitlos‹ (Jauß 1970, 142). Jauß declares his intention to retemporalize comparison and to reimmerse its objects in the flux of history. He wants to achieve this goal by employing the transnational ›overruling historical process of literary evolution‹ as a ›tertium comparationis,‹ a yardstick by which to measure the particular literary phenomena (ibid., 121). Furthermore, he claims that he, as an interpreter of the phenomena, speaks from within this historical process: he is able to identify Hugo, Stendhal

6 On Gadamer's concept of application see Moser 2006.

and Heinrich Heine as protagonists of a literary revolution because he himself, as a member of post-1968 academia, is part of a revolutionary environment.

So much for the theoretical program that Jauß advertises as an antidote to the method of Comparative Literature. Significantly, however, Jauß deviates from this theory in his practice of comparison. When comparing the works of Hugo, Stendhal and Heine, Jauß proceeds methodically in Gadamer's (negatively evaluated) sense of the term. First, he observes that the poetic principles upheld by these three writers betray far-reaching similarities, which cannot be reduced to mutual influence, but which are instead the result of a common structural predicament. Thus, instead of reinserting these works into the diachrony of history, Jauß isolates a single moment in time. He constructs a situation of simultaneity, explicitly labeling his procedure »the inception of a synchronic analysis of literature« (»Anfang einer synchronischen Literaturbetrachtung«), which depends on the choice of an appropriate »point of intersection« (»Wahl eines Schnittpunkts«; *ibid.*, 143). Jauß arrests the process of history so that he can make visible a significant »spatial« constellation. Second, he characterizes the three writers as heralds of a literary revolution. They represent the principle of historic rupture, so to speak, of radical temporal discontinuity. Thus, Jauß engages in a double comparison. On the one hand, he correlates the three writers in order to identify an epochal break, on the other hand, this discontinuity allows him to identify and contrast two radically different orders of writing: the new, modern order initiated by Hugo, Stendhal and Heine, which obliges the poet to grapple with the problems of contemporary reality; and the old order (»Kunstperiode«), which conceives of poetry as an art form, located in an ideal sphere high above »the real.« Jauß is not interested in reconstructing the evolutionary process by which the new order developed out of the old. Rather, he pits the two orders against each other to highlight their differences.

To conclude, Jauß's practice of comparison thrives on the construction of discontinuities and simultaneities. He does not relate his objects of comparison to an overarching historical process, to a comprehensive continuity, on the contrary, he disrupts this process, thereby effecting a spatialization of history. By arresting the flow of time, he gains insight into underlying structures. Judging from his technique of comparison, Jauß is closer to Michel Foucault and his concept of epistemic rifts than to his averred model Gadamer. What this means, however, is that Jauß practices the very *method* of comparison that he rejects in his theoretical program. He turns out to be a comparatist in spite of himself. Ironically, Jauß is a typical comparatist not only by virtue of his procedure, but also by virtue of his methodological blindness. The insight he gains into the objects of comparison is linked to a blindness concerning the way he achieves it. Whereas he criticizes Comparative Literature for its naiveté concerning methodological reflection, he himself reproduces this naiveté, while at the same time attesting to the sophistication of the method that he (openly) condemns and (surreptitiously) applies.

What do we learn from this case study of methodological aberrancy? The episode illustrates to what extent comparison constitutes the blind spot of the discipline's self-understanding. It is not only that Jauß is strangely unaware of what he actually does when he compares. In their reactions to his attack against the discipline, representatives of Comparative Literature defended its right to exist and argued for its ab-

solite necessity.⁷ None of them, however, accepted Jauß's methodological challenge; nobody felt provoked to reflect on the vicissitudes of comparison.⁸ After Jauß, comparison has remained the Unthought Known of Comparative Literature. But there is more to be gleaned from this episode. It admonishes us, I think, to be careful not to underrate the methodical aspect of comparison. Whenever we denigrate comparison as a mere method, we stand in danger of perpetuating the methodological blindness we criticize. If, as Natalie Melas observes, comparatists today prefer to see comparison as a space rather than as a method, they risk succumbing to this danger. For it is the *method* of comparison that spatializes history, that opens up a space of comparison in the first place. The spatialization effected by comparison *qua* method should not be considered as a defect, but as a productive act. Insofar as it is a method, comparison reveals itself to be a constructive intervention. It reminds us that the objects of comparison are not simply given; rather, they are generated by the analyst, just as the space is that which makes it possible to correlate them. There is no opposition between the space and the method of comparison. One is the product of the other; both are irreducible elements of a constructive operation.

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7 For reactions to Jauß's provocation of the discipline see Gsteiger 1972; Dyserinck 1977, 73-76; Schulz-Buschhaus 1979; Kaiser 1980, 2-3; and Rinner/Zerinschek 1981.

8 The one exception, perhaps, being Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus 1979, who makes some shrewd observations concerning Jauß's technique of comparison.

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