

Foreword

Three years ago, we learned that René Wellek was in poor health and confined to bed much of the time, but that he continued to work on the last volume of his *History of Criticism*. In the strangely becalmed conditions that seem to have followed decades of theoretical storming, Wellek's steadfast dedication to his monumental project and to his entire conception of the study of literature was impressive. We wondered what might have inspired it, what life experiences, if any, motivate scholars to pursue the disciplines they pursue, what intellectual and ethical passions had moved the older generation of literary scholars in particular. The idea occurred to both of us that it would be instructive to put together some testimonies from notable scholars of Wellek's generation and of the generation he and others like him had trained, and in this way to discover the broader human dimension of their professional careers.

One of us had in mind scholars whose careers have been dedicated to the study of foreign literatures. As he is a comparatist neither by training nor by profession, it did not occur to him to focus on Comparative Literature. The other teaches in a Comparative Literature department and assumed that, as our plan had been inspired by Wellek, we should be thinking primarily of Comparative Literature. It is certainly true that in Comparative Literature—since its beginnings as an academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century—there is a long tradition of reflection on the objects and methods of the study of literature and on what distinguishes Comparative Literature from the study of the various national literatures or from “World Literature” or “General Literature.” Wellek himself has often addressed such questions, most memorably perhaps in his provocative attack on the positivist French tradition of Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Carré, and Guyard at the Second Congress of the ICLA at Chapel Hill in 1958.

At that meeting Wellek took a resolutely internationalist and cosmopolitan stand, denouncing the traditional conception of Comparative Literature as the “foreign relations” of the national literatures, deploring the deep-seated chauvinism even of its most liberal practitioners, and expressing his own wish that “we could simply speak of the study of Literature or of literary scholarship.” It would be preferable, he held, if “there were, as M. Thibaudet proposed,

Professors of Literature just as there are Professors of Philosophy and of History and not Professors of the History of English Philosophy, even though the individual may very well specialize in this or that particular period or country or even in a particular author." Wellek went on to reject the diplomatic compromise by which academic departments of Comparative Literature had undertaken, as the price of admission to departmental status, not to "encroach upon other territories" (namely, the study of the national literatures). "There are no proprietary rights and no recognized 'vested interests' in literary scholarship," Wellek asserted.

Everybody has the right to study any question even if it is confined to a single work in a single language, and everybody has the right to study even history or philosophy or any other topic. He runs of course the risk of criticism by the specialists, but it is a risk he has to take. We comparatists surely would not want to prevent English professors from studying the French sources of Chaucer or French professors from studying the Spanish sources of Corneille, etc., since we comparatists would not want to be forbidden to publish on topics confined to specific national literatures. . . . The whole conception of fenced off reservations, with signs of "no trespassing," must be distasteful to a free mind.¹

Wellek's words made eminent sense to both of us. Even though one of us has spent his career as a teacher of French literature in a Department of Romance Languages, neither of us has felt his scholarly interests must be limited to the particular field he is expected to teach in, be it 17th- and 18th-century French Literature or Modern European Literature. With little discussion or disagreement, therefore, our objective defined itself as a collection of essays, loosely autobiographical in nature, in which some distinguished senior scholars—not all of them necessarily teaching in a Comparative Literature department, but all sharing Wellek's cosmopolitan and internationalist position—would describe what they think Comparative Literature is, how they came to be associated with it, what the field seemed like to them when they first started out, how it has evolved in the last three or four decades, and finally what they think of it now that they have retired or are well advanced in their careers.

We invited a large number of scholars to contribute. Not all could accept. Many, understandably, were loath to take time out from other projects that meant a great deal to them. To those who accepted, the editors express their gratitude. Indeed, we were moved by their generosity to lay ourselves on the line along with them, and our own statements will be found at the end of the volume. Obviously, it is our hope that readers too will be thankful for these testimonial documents from a generation that contributed greatly to the present prosperity and popularity of Comparative Literature in the university. All of them shed light on the history of the field in this country, on the changing character of

the American university in the last sixty or seventy years, and more broadly still on the vast social and cultural transformation undergone by the United States since World War II; but in addition, many will be enjoyed as lively, witty narratives of human experience and ingenuity, each of them carrying the imprint of its author's personality. We wish therefore to emphasize that we conceived the volume as a collection of personal testimonies contributing to the history of scholars and scholarship, rather than to the theory of literary study.

Because of their personal character, the essays will largely present themselves and do not need an extensive introduction. One may, however, briefly point out several general features that they have in common. Most of the essays illustrate a close intertwining of lived experience, theoretical reflection, and institutional and communal concerns. Several of the contributors have been German or East European nationals seeking refuge from Nazi persecution or from World War II and its devastating consequences, with all the emotional and intellectual turmoil that such exile entailed. Others were sons and daughters of immigrants and had a first-hand experience of exile and uprootedness in their homes. There are also those who made the reverse trip to Europe with a victorious American army either during or shortly after the war. It is therefore fair to say that an experience of uprootedness and exile occasioned by war lies at the basis of the very being of many of the contributors. They were "born to compare," as Lilian Furst suggests, and some of them had no other choice. They came or returned to America and founded or refounded a discipline to match their cosmopolitan, international experiences, their familiarity with boundary crossings, and at the same time their desire for a new kind of community, arising out of the experience of uprootedness and estrangement itself. Comparative Literature became for them the place where colleagues of diverse backgrounds and interests were united by deep-seated opposition to the "fenced off reservations" with their "no trespassing" signs, from which many of them had had to endure so much suffering, and by the conviction that greater understanding and—dare one say it?—a higher degree of humanity would be the prize for venturing into a world where frontiers were crossed rather than respected.

Their experience illustrates the ambiguous nature of any foundational act. On the one hand, as young men and women these scholars experienced America anew, as a land of unlimited possibilities and with an exhilarating sense of freedom, allowing for the creation of a novel self and novel institutions. On the other hand, they experienced the deep-rooted, often unconscious fear of constant change and ceaseless upset that inevitably accompanies exile, and that fear was eventually mediated in personal and institutional terms as a need for continuity, for upholding a humanistic tradition that had nourished them and their predecessors. In this sense, the most prominent of them were in their own modest way like the Byzantine scholars who after the fall of Constantinople took refuge upon the shores of Italy and were instrumental in bringing about the cultural Renaissance.

From this perspective, one can also understand the ambiguous feelings most of these scholars share in regard to theory, understood as will to order, on the one hand, and as ceaseless reflexivity, questioning, and self-questioning, on the other. In his 1958 ICLA address, for example, Wellek employed theory in order to challenge the traditional, positivist conception of Comparative Literature and the dominance of national language and literature departments. It is clear, then, that from early on Comparative Literature in the United States went hand in hand with theory, even though several accounts in this volume and elsewhere consider the association of the two a later development dating only from the end of the sixties and the importation of French structuralism and post-structuralism. In fact, ironically, it was to no small extent the avant-garde action of Wellek and his students that prepared the terrain for the later massive infiltration of postwar French and German theory into Comparative Literature. To some extent, therefore, the original theorists became victims of their own success.

Several contributors express disappointment and occasionally even bitterness over the ideological divisions that have lately plagued the field without pausing, perhaps, to consider that spirited controversy has been a built-in component of Comparative Literature virtually from the outset and that the very nature of theory is agonistic, since it is closely related to questioning and debate about the nature and boundaries of literature and literary study. Other contributors display the same wise tolerance toward the most recent theoretical "excesses" that some of their open-minded teachers had displayed toward their own when they first started out; they view these excesses simply as part of the continuing challenge of any vigorous field of intellectual inquiry.

Having said this, however, we also ought to point out that the older generation of theorists by and large preserved intact their ties to the literary work and its historical contexts and, therefore, kept in check theory's *esprit de système* or will to order, which is not only potentially tyrannical and oppressive, but also ultimately the mirror of the will to disorder or chaos. From Wellek's delightful reminiscences, in this volume, of Princeton in the late 1920s, it seems that the only professor at Princeton at that time who had a theoretical interest—Morris Croll—was also the most intolerant of strong positions other than his own. When theory is not mediated by literary history and literary texts, it can easily turn into a pure power mechanism—a disturbing development that Stanley Corngold, among others, addresses eloquently in the present collection.

Another feature of the old comparatist school that appears to have lost ground among their successors is its free-spirited cosmopolitanism. The danger of turning Comparative Literature into a pure political agenda for special interest groups may be overdramatized in some of the essays, but is nevertheless real. Comparative Literature, as a number of the essayists point out, is naturally sympathetic to cultural and ethnic diversity and pluralism. Comparatists should not lose sight, however, either of their own scholarly and human limits (*ars*

longa, vita brevis), or of the conflictive and exclusive nature of difference, including difference of the ethnic, cultural, and sexual kind, when it is no longer contained by a larger transcendent category, such as reason, humanity, or literature. What is needed, several contributors suggest, is greater generosity, openness, and tolerance all around. That, in the end, had been the objective of the founders, even at their most combative and provocative.

NOTES

1. René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 155–56.