

Comparative literature and translation, historical breaks and continuing debates:

Can the past teach us something about the future?

Lucia Boldrini, Goldsmiths University of London

When in 1993 Susan Bassnett declared that “Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead” (Bassnett, 1993: 47), she saw it destined to be subsumed within translation studies (*Idem*, 138-161). More recently, Bassnett has acknowledged that her earlier, deliberately provocative prediction has shown itself to have been flawed: “translation studies has not developed very far at all over the last three decades and comparison remains at the heart of much translation studies scholarship” (Bassnett, 2006: 6). Bassnett’s death knell for comparative literature 16 years ago, like Spivak’s more recent one (Spivak 2003), are the consequences of the perceived Eurocentrism and Western bias of the discipline, and the strong sense that the practices and ideologies which sustain it require to be radically revised – if not even rejected – in the contemporary, more fluid, post-colonial, globalised world. Haun Saussy’s recent diagnosis, in his ten-yearly report to the American Comparative Literature Association, that comparative literature “has, in a sense, won its battles” (Saussy, 2006: 3) may sound rather more positive, but it also contains a stark warning about the discipline’s institutional low status and its risk of dispersion among other more established subjects to which it has contributed methods, theoretical approaches, and an openness of the syllabus that was unthinkable until not very long ago.

Even before Bassnett had time to revise her earlier prediction, Stanley Corngold

had queried the notion of the close relationship between comparative literature and translation studies, remarking instead on their essential difference: while translation means carrying over a piece of foreign language into one's own, "comparison" means being momentarily without one's language, not needing to translate precisely because of one's ability to translate, to step into the other's language without carrying it across, and thus respecting the otherness of languages and cultures (Corngold, 2005: 141). Emily Apter's *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006) proposes a mediation of these positions. In this comprehensive, enlightening and thought-provoking study, translation emerges as the fulcrum of a new vision of comparative literature that seeks to achieve a genuine planetary (to use Spivak's terminology) criticism by pursuing unexpected links between as disparate issues as philology, globalization, war and peace, the web, the genetic code. Apter's argument tries to mediate two opposite theses: nothing is translatable, and everything is translatable; at one end, the radical incommensurability of different languages and of cultural, political, aesthetic systems; at the other, the human(ist) will to find common roots and values, and the search for codes that can translate one language into another. As Apter argues responding to Alain Badiou's suspicion of the universalism of comparative literature and to his emphasis on poetic singularity, the challenge of comparative literature in the contemporary world is to find a way to reconcile untranslatable alterity with the need to translate nevertheless, rejecting both the false pieties of not wanting to mistranslate the other, which result in monolingualism, and the opposite globalism that "translates everything without ever traveling anywhere" (Apter, 2006: 91).

It is these lively debates over the relationship between comparative literature and translation on the one hand, and over the present and future of comparative literature in the global world on the other, that will form the context and the background of the

following reflections. A number of questions have arisen for me in reading some of these interventions, sometimes prompted by slightly puzzling details in larger, thoroughly absorbing arguments. I shall explain forthwith what some of these “details” are, and how they have led to further, broader considerations; the main guiding questions, however, may be framed thus: what can the consideration of a historical perspective contribute to our understanding of the relationship and the status of comparative literature and translation in their present condition, what forms can or should this perspective take, and what are the implications of choosing one historical perspective over another?

One of the “puzzling details” which combined to prompt these reflections is what I perceive as a tendency to curtail the history of comparative literature in some accounts that identify its “founding” moment in the arrival of European émigré scholars, such as Auerbach, Spitzer, Wellek, in the United States on the ashes of the disaster of European nationalisms (see for example Apter, 2006: 10, 41; Spivak 2003: 3). Of course the study of comparative and general literature was deeply transformed by these events, though the depoliticised Eurocentrism it continued to place at the heart of the discipline could only postpone the moment in which this Eurocentrism – inevitably seen as political from outside the West – would have to be confronted. But comparative literature studies did after all already exist in the USA before the war: a chair of comparative literature was established at Harvard in 1890, while general and comparative literature had been taught at Cornell since 1871 (Bassnett, 1993: 22), and the subject had achieved institutional status in Europe well before the Second World War.¹ Promoting an idea of the discipline as being founded on the ruins of nationalism risks obscuring the very

¹ Claudio Guillén’s short chapter “The American Hour” (in Guillén, 1993: 60-62) is a balanced and illuminating account of this moment of development of the discipline.

close link between the evolution of a Romantic idea of national literatures and the concept of comparative literature in the early nineteenth century, its role within Empire – but also the history of an explicit notion of *Weltliteratur*. Obscuring this history risks skewing our understanding of how these mutually implicated aspects have informed the concept of humanism, how they continue to underwrite postcolonial “language wars”, how they have contributed to shaping the concept and the “translation zone” of Europe itself. It is precisely because Apter discusses, in very insightful and enlightening ways, the tradition of humanism in comparative literature, and Spivak critiques the Western bias of it, that this foreshortening of history appears to slightly puzzling. It is almost as if there were a submerged desire to distance ourselves (our discipline) from that nationalist history of which we are at the same time unable to ignore the consequences and implications – which, in fact, we want and need to study and criticise.

Another historical break and point of origin, in another recent book, quite impressive in the comprehensive and detailed quality of its forceful arguments, prompted for me some comparable questions. Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) places the origins of what the author calls “the world literary system” – a system of tension and mutual implication between nationalism and internationalism – in the sixteenth century: “International literary space was formed in the sixteenth century at the very moment when literature began to figure as a source of contention in Europe” (Casanova, 2004: 11). “The specifically literary defense of vernaculars by the great figures of the world of letters during the Renaissance, which very quickly assumed the form of a rivalry among these ‘new’ languages [...] was to be advanced equally by literary and political means.” This anticipates what would happen again prominently in the Romantic period: “Similarly, with the spread of nationalist ideas in the nineteenth century and the creation of new nations, political authority served as a foundation for

emergent literary spaces” (*Idem*, 2004: 35). Joachim du Bellay’s *The Defense and Illustration of the French Language* (1549) is the text that inaugurates this world literary space (*Idem*, 2004: 46). Casanova chooses this date over, for example, the much earlier one of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, because the Renaissance Humanists’ definition of linguistic and literary prestige was explicitly established in antagonistic relation not only with Latin but also with other languages, so that the value of one’s national language is asserted in the context of an *international* literary space; this supremacy clearly resided with Italy at the time, thanks to the work of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca, and it is in relation to this that du Bellay “defends and illustrates” the French language. I fully recognise the force of Casanova’s argument about the links between the modern state and its national language and literature, but I am left with some doubts about this founding moment. It is precisely this linguistic awareness of the link between nation and language that move Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, to the point that, for him, the language would become the foundation of the unified nation, and its superiority as an *Italian* language is demonstrated through comparisons with French and Provençal. At the other end of the fourteenth century, in *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, dating to the 1390s, Chaucer, after pointing out how each people expresses (or translates) knowledge in their language (“Grekes [...] in Grek; [...] Arabiens in Arabik; [...] Jewes in Ebrew, and [...] Latyn folk in Latyn; whiche Latyn folk had hem first out of othere dyverse langages, and writen hem in her own tunge, that is to seyn, in Latyn”), and thus establishing the right of vernacular English to similarly express (translate) such knowledge, then proceeds to point out the link between language, king and country: “And preie God save the king, that is lord of this langage” (Chaucer, 1987: 662, ll. 30-36, 56-57). That the Renaissance represented a critical moment of evolution and transformation of European political

structures and thought (and this includes of course thought about language and literature) is undeniable; at the same time, insisting on a particular moment as an *originating* event carries with it the risk of missing other links of continuity with the past, maybe even the risk of buying into the implicit assumption, not only of a sharp break between the medieval and early modern periods (an assumption introduced by the Renaissance in its self-definition and perpetuated ever since, and indeed still widespread despite the many recent critical interventions that suggest otherwise), but also that the Middle Ages lacked an advanced, sophisticated literary-theoretical interest that informed much of the thought of later centuries, in effect making invisible the preoccupations that already existed in the Middle Ages with issues that still concern us today. We tend to forget for example that the European Middle Ages mediated all human knowledge through the linguistic sciences of the *artes sermocinales* (grammar, rhetoric, logic: the arts of the *trivium*), and these ensured a form of universal translatability of the known, something which, as encapsulated in the phrase “the linguistic turn”, seems to be a crucial aspect of the contemporary theoretical reflection on knowledge too. More specifically, as European languages evolved in the Middle Ages, through complex changes and exchanges, towards “national” tongues (though never quite as monologic as the concept of “national” would imply), linguistic choices always required selection between different possibilities, all of them charged with social and political as well as poetic and literary value; the theoretical reflection on language and translation was thus extremely lively. The linguistic alternative was rarely a simple one of Latin or vernacular. In Italy for example writers could choose between Latin and several different vernacular forms of Italian, but some turned to the more polished French (Brunetto Latini wrote his rhetorical treatise *Tresor* in French, and a shorter version in Italian, the *Tesoretto*); while in England – or in London, to be more precise –

the choice was between Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Anglo-Saxon English. The examples of tightrope walking are many, one of the most striking perhaps being Dante's championing of the vernacular in his Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*, and praising of Latin in his vernacular treatise *Convivio*. Bi- or multi-lingual texts also abound, such as compilations from many sources, Latin texts glossed in vernacular, or texts predominantly written in one language with interpolations in another; Gower, who also wrote in French (*Mirour de l'homme*, 1378) and in Latin (*Vox Clamantis*, c. 1386), justifies his choice of English in *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390-93) for the sake of England herself – “And for that fewe men endite / In oure Englissh, I thence make / a bok for Engelondes sake, / the yer sextenthe of kyng Richard.” (Wogan-Browne *et al*, 175) – but includes passages in Latin at the beginning of the Prologue and of chapters. The majority of medieval writers was indeed bilingual or polyglot, and a large body of medieval writing exists that explicitly addresses such questions of multi- or inter-lingualism, and vernacular writers often defined their language of choice in relation to other languages. The medieval context is also useful to consider the role of translation in what Even-Zohar has called the “literary polysystem” (Even-Zohar, 1990). When the literary tradition was for the most part Latin, and vernaculars were still languages “in progress”, open to various influences and able to appropriate materials for their own expansion, writing in the vernacular was in effect an inter- or trans-linguistic practice based on programmatic translation and *inventio(n)*, on hybridisation and neologism. Medieval vernacular literatures might thus be said to be experimental and avant-gardist by definition. All this should suggest that the medieval literary, linguistic and translative condition should offer a rather tantalising field for the comparatist, the translator, and the literary theorist, allowing us to go further back than the “original”, “founding moments” of comparative literature or international systems identified above.

A related issue that has been impossible to avoid in recent discussions of comparative literature, translation and world literature is that of linguistic globalisation – significantly, the latest ACLA report and related responses are published under the title *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Saussy, 2006). Because of the power and extent of the British Empire since the seventeenth century, and later of American cultural and economic imperialism, English has in effect become the language of globalisation, positing itself as the universal means of translation and communication. Correspondingly, English is seen as a language that, precisely because of its power, reduces or crushes diversity, at best absorbing, in a kind of touristy exoticism, words and expressions that give it “local colour”; Apter calls this “CNN Creole”, the language of international tourism and journalism (Apter, 2006: 161); Michael Cronin refers to the English of boardrooms and instruction manuals, global while “localised” for marketing purposes (Cronin, 2003).

All this leads me to other questions that deserve further consideration. How can the assumptions of (un)translatability, the relationships between culture/knowledge and power, between translation and imperialism be illuminated by a renewed awareness of the link between *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* as it was formulated in the Middle Ages to describe the transferral of culture and of power from east to west? Eric Cheyfitz’s *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (1997 [1991]) is probably the first book that consistently examines the impact of translation in the project of modern imperialism, describing the ways in which the imperialist drive relies on classical-to-early modern tropes such as that of *translatio studii et imperii* in order to translate the “savages” into the more civilized language and values of the conqueror. Cheyfitz’s analysis is acute, detailed and persuasive – and, as I shall indicate below, it does trace the *topos* of *translatio studii et imperii* back through

its pre-modern developments. I would however like to consider it again from the perspective offered by the cluster of issues outlined above, and in particular in relation to the global power of English – which leads to the next question.

How can the position of Latin as the *lingua franca* of the Western medieval world, in its various relationships with the local, vernacular languages, help us reconsider the question of the reductive, flattening effect of a global form of English?

But, also crucially, and to avoid a too easy identification of the medieval as a model and another point of origin (which would only call for yet another regression into the classical, and so forth), how have various recoveries of these medieval perspectives, such as Eliot's rather debatable statement on the easy translatability, and thus the superiority, of a Dante who writes in a recognisable common language because of its proximity to Latin, continued to inform, and to an extent deform, our sense of the human values at the heart of the enterprise of comparing and translating? The Romantics had also turned to the Middle Ages in search for their own national(ist) origins – and the romantic period is generally given as the point of origin of comparative literature (see e.g. Guillén, 1993: 24-32; Bassnett, 1993: 13-17). How do we negotiate these historical regressions and repeated (re)assertions of origins?

These questions are far too complex to be followed through in all their implications and ramifications, especially in a paper of this length. My aim here is rather to suggest the widening of the debate on these issues to a broader historical and conceptual framework, and trace some possible directions that this opening up of historical horizons may take.

Comparatists and literary historians know full well that boundaries are convenient to delimit and define our field of study, and indeed necessary if we do not want each time to retrace the roots and development of any phenomenon back to the earliest

archaeological traces. We also know that most human boundaries are artificial, and some healthy scepticism is required in their deployment. If we accept that the break between the middle ages and modernity is a myth – a convenient and useful one, but nevertheless a myth – insofar as the period preceding “modernity” was already much richer than the myth of modernity allows, equally we need to accept that the time that follows is not quite as unified as the myth implies, and in particular, quite as linguistically and literarily stable. Alessandro Manzoni still felt, in the nineteenth century, that a literary Italian, able to appeal and be comprehended by all Italians, had yet to be established, and in revising his masterpiece *I promessi sposi* for the 1840-42 edition, he decided that this Italian should be the Tuscan variety, the language that had been raised to illustriousness by the *Trecento* masters Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca.² Manzoni’s decision reignited the controversy about the feasibility, advisability and choice of an Italian unitarian language, and the “questione della lingua” was again renewed by political unification (1861), and continued well into the twentieth century. Italy did not achieve national unification until the second half of the nineteenth century, and it may thus be objected that the ongoing debate over the national language is directly dependent on this political circumstance. But in Britain too – certainly a much more stable and successful political entity than Italy in the centuries that follow the Middle Ages – debates around the language continued for centuries. In 1712 Jonathan Swift published his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, much preoccupied with the decline of the language. To address this, Swift – along with others such as Dryden, Addison and Defoe – advocated the establishing of an Academy. Samuel Johnson also worried about linguistic decline, and in his 1755

² The expression Manzoni used was that he was “rinsing” the “sheets” of his manuscript in Florence in the waters of the river Arno (Manzoni, 1970: I, 438).

Preface to the Dictionary claimed that “tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language” (Crowley, 1996: 55-56; 60); but he opposed the idea of an Academy. The French had the Académie Française (founded in 1635 following the establishment of the Italian Accademia della Crusca in 1582-83), and establishing one in Britain smacked too much of Francophilia: the French might like to be told what to do and how to speak by law, but the English are more free thinking and independent than that, objected Thomas Sheridan (*Idem*, 62). The language needs protection from decay, but what duties should members of the Academy have, if one were established at all? “Let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavour, with all their influence, to stop the licence of translators, whose influence and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of France”, wrote Johnson in the *Preface* (*Idem*, 63). The language must be protected, but must not be stabilised through dictionaries and grammars (and this from the author of a dictionary), and translation and contamination from the outside must be rejected. The relationship between language and nationalism is complex and variable; its discussion continues well beyond the late medieval emergence of a hegemonic national language – a language produced precisely by that translative effort that Johnson now rebuffs – and it engages intellectuals from well before the Romantic period. What appears from the above debate is that the national (sometimes nationalist) thinking about the language repeatedly returns to confronting the language’s perceived instability, threatened or enriched by its historical evolution and its encounters with other languages, and it thus needs constantly to re-negotiate both the fruitfulness and the anxieties that this instability creates.

Let us stay for a moment longer with the question of the stability of language, or lack thereof, but this time let us fast forward to the future – say Britain in the year 2809.

Let's imagine ourselves as language students: will we be learning American and New Zealander as foreign languages? In our Anglic philology class (what would it be called?) would we learn that modern languages such as Canadian, Australian, British, Irish, etc. (let's us call them this, and not worry about other varieties, evolved names, or further subdivisions) all branched off the tree of that old language, English, of which numerous documents exist and record the quaintness of its structures and pronunciation, such as the televised coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953? (Would such antiquated technology have survived?)

If we think of how Francesco Petrarca and the early Humanists defined medieval Latin as barbarous (i.e. the barbarians are not the foreigners but those who have let the language "rot"), and took Cicero and classical Latin as their model, we can easily imagine how international English will soon likewise be called barbarous – it is already seen as basic, simplified, less elegant, less expressive. One can already hear the purist inviting us to go back to studying classical, proper English – meaning perhaps the English of Pope, or perhaps that of Queen Elizabeth II – while English dies on the internet, in boardrooms, in airports and guidebooks, while it "rots" in Nigeria, in India, in the Caribbean (the reference is of course to Ken Saro Wiwa's 1985 *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*). Just as it happened for Latin, the assumption of the language as a lingua franca, due to its extent and prestige but inevitably requiring a simplification, goes hand in hand with its increasing differentiation; as it is superimposed on previous and resistant linguistic strata and is subjected to further superimpositions and contaminations through invasions, colonisation and exchanges, the unitary, hegemonic language is increasingly transformed into local and evolving vernaculars whose number and variety is directly proportional to the extent of the language's global reach. The dismay at the decadence of the language as it encounters its moment of maximum

expansion – which ultimately spells its imminent demise – may therefore provide us with another quite intriguing parallel with the later Middle Ages and with the standing of Latin as it is challenged by the ferment of new languages acquiring their own higher status.

This brings me back to the *topos* of *translatio studii et imperii*. Curtius explains that the concept is founded on the belief in the universality of Empire and is associated with the civilising mission of the Greeks first, the Romans later, the Holy Roman Empire thereafter (Curtius, 1953: 29). Eric Cheyfitz shows how the same idea was then exploited in modern Western Empires through a conflation of the *topos* with the construction of the legitimacy of empire through its civilizing mission:

The *translatio*, then, is inseparably connected with a “civilizing” mission, the bearing of Christianity and Western letters to the barbarians, literally, as we have noted, those who do not speak the language of the empire. From its beginnings the imperialist mission is, in short, one of translation: the translation of the “other” into the terms of the empire, the prime term of which is “barbarian”, or one of its variations such as “savage”, which, ironically, but not without a precise politics, also alienates the other from the empire. (Cheyfitz, 1997: 112)

Cheyfitz convincingly shows how this ideological use of translation has its roots in the medieval expressions of the concept. Charlemagne’s construction of the notion already involved “transporting” (trans-lating) Alcuin from England to France in order to build a Carolingian empire that founds its Christian re-construction of the now decayed Roman Empire on the acquisition and fostering of knowledge and culture. In showing how the imperial project was thus already inscribed in this establishment of a seat of learning, Cheyfitz follows this process further back: rhetoric is the main form of

instruction and the basis of knowledge, and Alcuin's rhetoric, written to instruct Charlemagne, is a thoroughly Ciceronian project that starts "by telling Charlemagne the story of the orator who translates a savage humanity into civilization through the power of his eloquence" (Cheyfitz, 1997: 112-13). Translation thus appears as an integral part of any imperial project, and the notion of *translatio studii* already carries with it that of *translatio imperii*. Given what I have argued above about the dangers implicit in establishing historical boundaries and moments of origin, I especially appreciate the way Cheyfitz traces the use of the *topos* beyond its adoption by modern imperialism. I would suggest nevertheless that there may also be another way of reading the *topos*, one which, I believe, has the potential for disrupting the self-legitimizing rhetoric of empire that Cheyfitz is right to highlight. The transferral of power and knowledge from east to west, from empire to empire, is deployed in the Middle Ages not only in order to justify the conquest of a territory or a people, but to claim power for oneself at the moment when a stronger but by now declining power is breaking up (or has already broken up), so that it is the previously "barbaric", "savage", "inferior" people who can now claim for themselves the authority of that power. (Similarly, the Romans had claimed power for themselves from the culturally superior Greeks.) Adopting the *topos* of *translatio studii et imperii* requires that the claimants prove that they are worthy of their newly acquired power. This is achieved, amongst other things, through the activity of imitation and translation, *transformative* activities that, while suggesting fidelity to an original, are at the same time underpinned by an agonistic structure, a relationship of rivalry from which the claimant emerges victor (on this, see Copeland, 1991).

This pattern of a challenge to the established power (cultural and/or political) and the claim of superiority through acts of self-creation that rely on the activity of translation (the complement and counterpart to the pattern of translation of the inferior

into one's superior system identified by Cheyfitz) can thus offer quite a different model in the context of decolonization and of a global power deriving from a long-established but now disgregating empire, whose cultural imperialism still continues, like that of Latin continued well beyond the end of the Roman Empire, but whose eventual collapse can be seen as just as inevitable, and is brought about, as I have pointed out above, by that same translative process that would attest to the language's superiority. In other words, the structure of the *topos* involves not only the acquisition of hegemony, but its subsequent loss. The empowering potential for the (previously) colonised can be quite strong, and it is in this potential that the linguistic hybridity of a Rushdie, or the "rotten" English of a Ken Saro-Wiwa, invest in.

There is of course a danger implicit in simple identifications and appropriations of models from the past in order to propose a solution for the present. We can find examples of such dangers in Eliot's and Pound's turning to the Middle Ages in order to find a ready-made, healing model for the ills of the present. In his essay "Dante" (1929), Eliot presented Dante's idiom as a universal "common language" of easy imitability and translatability because of its proximity to Latin and its pre-modern integrity (Eliot, 1951: 239-40, 252), the clearest expression of what in the 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (*Idem*, 13-22) he had called the unified "mind of Europe". This united medieval system of thought came to an end with the nefarious "dissociation of sensibility" that, as he explains in "The Metaphysical Poets", occurred in the seventeenth century (*Idem*, 281-291). In making such claims, Eliot ignores the widespread and vivacious medieval debates on the nature of language and on linguistic relationships, overlooking the existence of linguistic alternatives (whose different cultural, intellectual and political purchase writers were well and often explicitly aware of), and reversing the more traditional association of "common speech" with the

vernacular – an association developed by Dante himself in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. The construction of medieval language as a homogeneous, coherent whole that can be carried over (trans-lated) into modernity with little or no adaptation is one of the foundations of Eliot's desire for a transcendent universality that can redress the collapse of European civilization, and that originated especially in the twin ills of the seventeenth-century “dissociation of sensibility” and of Romantic nationalisms, of which the First World War was the culmination. In various writings and especially in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), Pound, unlike Eliot, seemed to champion the vivacity and originality of vernacular and popular languages; underneath, however, his aim is similar to Eliot's: the *renovatio* of modernity takes the form of a cure, and the medicine is not the unity of Latin but the heteroglossia of the medieval vernaculars, interpreted through a Pentecostal reading which thus re-introduces universality and transcends difference (see esp. Pound, 1952: 7). Ultimately, both Eliot and Pound construct “the medieval” as a coherent intellectual unity to be adopted as a healing model for our divided modernity.³ Perhaps what is most ironic in both Eliot's and Pound's cases is their declared anti-Romanticism – I call it ironic because of the Romantic craze for the Middle Ages, to a large extent based on the desire to find a founding origin for the modern nation, and to recover an organic sense of society from before the “fall” of modernity and of the scientific and industrial revolutions. In a lecture delivered in 1949 in the U.S. for the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation, Ernst Robert Curtius indicates that Eliot's view of Dante, typical of the American cult of the medieval poet, is essentially a romantic one:

If the story of the American conquest of the Middle Ages were told, it would have

³ I have discussed at more length these and other questions raised by modernist “translations” of the Middle Ages in Boldrini, 2003.

to dwell on the study and the cult of Dante which flowered in New England and which again flowered in T. S. Eliot. To the mind of the Bostonians in the 1880's, Dante was not merely one of the world greatest poets. They were of the opinion [...] that the world had been going to the dogs ever since the time of Dante. Dante, to them, appeared as the perfect expression of a perfect state of society. It was a romantic vision of the same kind as that which set the German romantic poets of 1800 dreaming about the ideal Middle Ages. (Curtius, 1953: 587-8)

Curtius' view avoids such romanticising, but in his seminal *Europäische Literature und lateinisches Mittelalter*, published in 1948 in the aftermath of Nazism and the Second World War (though elaborated through these times), Curtius' concern emerges as similar to Eliot's in many ways, in that it also looks to a unified European tradition that disowns the nationalism that brought the twentieth century to its catastrophe, and which was rooted in the nineteenth century. Both Eliot's and Curtius' interest is in the continuity of the Middle Ages with classical Latinity, found in the rhetorical tradition of *topoi* for Curtius, in the notion of "tradition" itself for Eliot; both look to vernacular poets and writers as heir to that tradition, and in asserting this emphasis, they downplay (neglect, in Eliot's case) the assertiveness of vernacular writers in the creation of new *rival* languages and cultures. The temporality is different, but the underlying point is comparable: for Eliot decline is sanctioned by the seventeenth century, for Curtius the "last European" is Goethe, who is thus not seen, as he often is today, as the first comparatist but as the last exponent of the sense of an undivided civilization: "The founding hero [...] of European literature is Homer. Its last universal author is Goethe" (Curtius, 1953: 16); "To see European literature as a whole is possible only when one has acquired citizenship in every period from Homer to

Goethe” (*Idem*, 12).

To close a circle, we may finally point out that the spirit of Curtius’ *philological* reconstruction of the roots of European civilization, like that of Eliot’s “tradition” (inspired to a good extent by Irving Babbitt’s comparative literary teachings at Harvard, and as Curtius points out, by the “cult” of Dante in New England), is, in many ways, also the philological impulse that motivates the European émigré scholars who, in the accounts of many contemporary American commentators, (re?)“founded” comparative literature in the U.S. (“Leo Spitzer’s philological credo of linguistics and literary history was crucial to defining the discipline of comparative literature in the postwar period” (Apter, 2003: 10).)

Every search for continuity finds – naturally – its moments of historical break too. In choosing a historical moment of origin or end for any particular phenomenon, we neglect the continuities that stretch before and after. This is inevitable. In expanding to the Middle Ages the historical span of the considerations made above, I have myself inevitably neglected the many and obvious differences between medieval and modern theories and practices, I have largely treated the Middle Ages as a definite period different from the classical, I have glossed over the differences between, for example, German and English Romanticism. It is thus not to criticise anyone’s readings that I write this, but to make two larger points. The first is that the debates about comparative literature and its (recurrent) crises are healthy: by forcing us to constantly re-interrogate our critical readings it keeps our vigilance over our own practices high, and our complacent sense of having “the” answer low(er). Comparative literature is *critical*, in all senses of the word. The second point is that if history teaches us anything, it is that we always use the past in order to justify our present perspectives. Thus I am not calling for easy adoptions of the past as a model, which is always the result of an interested

construction, but for a use of the past which is aware, or trying to be aware of its own agendas and its own moves; a historical awareness that accepts the need for historical and cultural boundaries, studies their construction, but is able constantly to undo them; that looks for continuities, but is aware of transformations and departures. Looking for boundaries and transcending them, mediating between continuity and difference: what comparatists as well as translators are good at.

Works Cited

- Apter, Emily (2006), *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- Bassnett, Susan (1993), *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- (2006), “Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century”, *Comparative Critical Studies* vol. 3, n° 1, *Comparative Literature at a Crossroads?*, Robert Weninger (ed.), pp. 3-11.
- Boldrini, Lucia (2003), “Translating the Middle Ages: Modernism and the Ideal of the Common Language”, *Translation and Literature*, vol. 12, n° 1, *Translation and Modernism*, Adam Piette (ed.), pp. 41-68.

- Casanova, Pascale (2004), *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. B. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press [1999].
- Chaucer, Geoffrey (1987), *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson (ed.), third ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Cheyfitz, Eric (1997), *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from the Tempest to Tarzan*, Expanded ed., Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1991].
- Copeland, Rita (1991), *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Corngold, Stanley (2005), “Comparative Literature: The Delay in Translation”, in Sandra Berman and Michael Wood (eds.) (2005), *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, pp. 139-145.
- Cronin, Michael (2003), *Translation and Globalization*, London, Routledge.
- Crowley, Tony (1996), *Language in History: Theories and Texts*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Curtius, Ernst Robert (1953), *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul [1948].
- Eliot, T.S., (1951), *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed., London: Faber.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar (1990), “The Position of Translated Literature Within the Literary Polysystem”, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) (2000), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., New York and London, Routledge, pp. 199-204.
- Guillén, Claudio (1993), *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, trans. Cola Franzen, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press [1985].
- Manzoni, Alessandro (1970), *Lettere*, Cesare Arieti (ed.), 3 vols., Milan, Mondadori.

- Pound, Ezra (1925), *The Spirit of Romance*, Revised ed., London, Peter Owen [1910].
- Saussy, Haun (ed.) (2006a), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- (2006b), ‘Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes’, in Saussy, 2006a, pp. 3-42.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2003), *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans (eds.) (1998), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press.