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Retiring President's Address

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- 1 I am going to talk to you today about comparative literature. To this audience, that will seem a very commonplace topic. I am going to do so using what I heard discussed at this meeting of the ICLA as points of departure. I am not going to try to advance a definition of comparative literature or to offer any prescriptions. To request definitions and prescriptions is ultimately a trap set for us by others-the representatives of other disciplines. Nor will I try to enter into the debate concerning the crisis of comparative literature and literary studies because the diagnoses of these crises are too varied. I am going to try to indicate what the role of comparative literature might be in today's world. I am only going to offer a few opinions.

I

- 2 From what I heard discussed in various ICLA sessions, it seems to me that four topics stand out :
- Identities and literary-cultural transfers,
 - Synchronic readings across various literary periods, across various linguistic regions, and across various cultures,
 - Cultural and literary histories of various regions, and
 - Metacriticism.
- 3 I am going to situate each of these topics in order to define the characteristics I believe I observed.
- 4 With regard to the topic, "Identities and Literary-Cultural Transfers", the question is not one of doubt about identities, but rather is an interrogation of the relationship among identities. In this sense, hybridity within a given culture is nothing but an actual identity and not a refusal to accept identity as is said so often today. Literatures can thus be the

representation of identity relationships. Hybridity appears as that which embodies and illustrates in itself relationships of identity. (Cf. Literary and Cultural Identity Committee)

- 5 With regard to the topic, "Synchronic Readings across Various Literary Periods, Various Linguistic Regions, and Various Cultures", the question is not one of arriving at conclusions of a positivist or empirical sort, but rather of establishing the categories and facilitating collaborative readings of these periods and cultures. Virtual models are developed that are the means of these collaborative readings. (Cf. Modernism Committee)
- 6 With regard to the theme, "Cultural and Literary Histories of Various Regions", the question concerns going beyond the strict division of regions along national lines in order to understand literary histories of regional groups. These regional groups define the contours of new critical, sociological, and cultural paradigms. These literary histories are indispensable because regional conditions and our perception of these regions change. A comparative literary history offers the best introduction to a literary reflection truly appropriate to these regions. (Cf. Coordinating Committee)
- 7 With regard to metacriticism, as we all know, this day and age is no longer necessarily particularly prone to develop the central aspects of literary theory. This recognition does not lead to the conclusion that we should give up all metacriticism. The question here is bipartite: Is there a literary theory that in point of fact traverses various literatures? Is it possible in that same theory to account for the literary artifact and its perception? These two questions extend throughout the field of contemporary aesthetics, but aesthetics do not offer any clear answers. We can watch for the responses to these questions in various literatures and cultures in order to outline the common knowledge subsumed within these questions: the knowledge that allows us to deal with their various answers.
- 8 What I have just said leads to an initial observation. We construe crisscrossing, cultural, historical, and meta-critical models of literature and of literatures. We know that these models are subject to revision to the degree that they must account for the diversity of literatures and of cultures, to the degree that they must allow us to pass from one difference to another. To study difference for its own sake does not make sense. That would be to deal with it outside any context and consequently annul the recognition of difference itself. There is nothing more difficult than travel literature to schematize without reducing its characteristics to a tautology-travel literature is literature about travel-or to discursive banalities about the encounter with the Other. It is possible, however, to avoid these tautologies and banalities if we consider travel literature to be the representation of the mutual knowledge travelers need to elicit from their encounter with the Other. (Cf. Travel Literature Committee)
- 9 If we remain on the path that I have just mentioned, we avoid three false generalizations, which are common these days, of which I offer three examples.
 1. The construction of critical models and the reflection on these models when taken as an end in its own right becomes a reflexive movement that ultimately does not portray anything but itself. This is illustrated by the propositions of the deconstructionists. These propositions do not articulate any generalizations except by means of their own infinite demonstration.
 2. The construction of a critical model can lead to the reification of that model. I should mention the critical models that implement the ideas of power and alienation and lead to a reification of these ideas. In this regard, many more examples could be cited. I offer just one. The identification of modernity uniquely with the power of reason makes us the

cognitive heirs and slaves of the eighteenth century. This is a reification that makes it difficult today to conceive of cognitive, aesthetic, and literary rationality. Such a criticism of rationality, when it supports literary criticism, is in fact a false generalization.

3. It is difficult to deny the interest in and importance of various forms of literary formalism, of approaches to literature per se. But it must be noted that these formalisms, to the extent that they have been reified, lead either to positivism - what I call, for example, the positivism of literary narratology - or to subjectivism: once the formal structure has been determined, literature is understood subjectively. Gérard Genette is a good illustration of this bifurcated movement that ultimately leads to the impasse of subjectivism. This reification and this paradox of an approach to literature per se have a single origin: the difficulty of conceiving of literature while we must make a simple observation: we no longer write, read, or study literature from within homogeneous, given, and established traditions. We must decide what a literary object is and on the method we use to read it. The reification and false generalization are consequences of the fact that this contradiction within formalist literary criticism and its causes have not been examined.

II

- 10 This reminder of what I witnessed at this meeting of the ICLA and this brief challenge to some of the dominant contemporary literary-critical currents have as their goal to show us the construction of models in comparative literature might be.
- 11 One of the characteristics of the four research topics that I described is that they base their study of literatures on the limits of literature, of identities on the limits of the identities, and of critical arguments on their limits. A limit is understood to be the boundary between two objects and a limitation in the logical sense; a limitation because we cannot complete an analysis of our object of study that only fully accounts for itself.
- 12 This play of limits of literatures, of cultures, and of critical arguments is not to be confused with various interliterary, intercultural, or intercritical concerns. The practices that are related to these "inter-" frequently correspond to a kind of critical syncretism. In many works, the references to Bakhtin devolve into the endless quotation of inter-discursive and inter-cultural terms.
- 13 In our construction based on the limits already mentioned, we depart from the presumption of the pertinence of our model, and we exert ourselves to find the context that validates it. The context that validates it is that of the limits of literature, of culture and that of the reconstitution of those limits.
- 14 Comparative literature outlines in fact the cognitive environments that include intersections and that - by means of these intersections - indicate the possibility of mutual knowledge about literature. This mutual knowledge is in sum the cognitive context that permits the simultaneous accounting for diverse literatures. This cognitive context can be modified for new intersections of cognitive environments as they characterize new approaches to literatures and cultures.
- 15 The construction of interliterary, intercultural, and interlinguistic critical models has no other purpose than to indicate the limits of our knowledge, the intersections of our cognitive environment, and to propose the outline of our mutual knowledge that will enable us to return toward the various literatures in specific terms. The validity of our

model is in the scale of its applications and its contextual effects. The context is at once the various literary and cultural objects and the various researchers.

- 16 I am in the process of abandoning the idea of comparison. I prefer to say that comparative literature is the method that constructs models that provide the greatest number of contextual implications based of course on contextual limits.
- 17 The idea of common knowledge can, thus, be defined: the knowledge that we share; the knowledge that enables us to share contexts epistemologically; the knowledge that leaves these contexts to their differences.
- 18 Certainly this mutual knowledge is constantly open to revision for two reasons: the first that has already been mentioned-new limits of objects, new intersections of cognitive environments can always be observed-the second I will explain: this mutual knowledge cannot be reflexively validated. To undertake such a validation will lead us back to false generalizations, which I have already rejected. This mutual knowledge is limited to its own use and its own reform. I propose, in fact, a very sensible solution to the validation of comparative literary studies. It does not involve validating comparative literature by means of positivism nor of rejecting it because it cannot return to the objects of study in as strict a sense as more local literary study. It involves validating it by means of its own contextualizing power and by the most expansive coordination of the implicated literary studies.
- 19 I offer a very broad formulation of what I have just said: allow that every critical model permits the reading of the greatest number of literary contexts ; allow that the various contexts constitute an interrogation of mutual knowledge. Allow that our critical models, which result from this movement, permit us, by inference, to draw new contexts-the most extensive possible.

III

- 20 What I have proposed can be understood as part of a methodological reflection. It can also be understood as a means by which comparative literature can deal with some contemporary cultural and literary issues.
- 21 Thus even today the literary play of limits does not cease to change and broadly reconfigure itself.
- 22 Suffice it to mention globalization and its converse, which is as real as globalization - i.e. the multiplication of nation-states and the multiplication of the affirmation of identities often inseparable from geographic and cultural spaces. It is here simply a matter of acknowledging that the hypothesis of a possible cultural homogeneity is inconceivable without the multiplicity of cultural and literary limits.
- 23 There is a literary translation of all this. One need only consider Africa and ask oneself what is-under these conditions - African comparative literature. Numerous other examples could be mentioned. I will only mention a second one. It is obvious that comparative literature dealing with the European literatures should be reconceptualized since Europe is organized as a community and will possibly organize itself as a federation. Here geo-politics may suggest another outline of the mutual limits of literatures.
- 24 Whether it is a question of Africa or Europe, this reorganization of our knowledge is a reorganization that does not abolish prior knowledge. This reorganization is first of all

the search for new contextual possibilities for reading. These new possibilities suppose this mutual knowledge that excludes the reification of knowledge and the delineations of cognitive contexts.

- 25 I am in fact in the process of describing a function of comparative literature: the articulation of contemporary literary contexts within the paradox that I mentioned-globalization and the multiplication of nation-states, nation-states and the multiplication of the recognition of regions within nation-states-in such a way that these limits are mutually comprehensible and without a reification of either the globalization or the difference. This is the function of comparative literary criticism-deriving from the mutual knowledge of which I have spoken. I will conclude these points with a brief commentary based on Derrida. Derrida has said that comparative literature is an uncertain discipline. This was, to be sure, a condemnation of comparative literature. The condemnation is strange coming from someone who has developed a philosophy of the undecidable. But perhaps he criticized comparative literature for making bad decisions-for example, for establishing quasi-essences of literature. We must recognize that comparative literature has never hesitated to reify its objects of study, be it in terms of thematic studies or of the misuse of references to nations, which has often turned into a kind of nationalistic criticism.
- 26 It is, however, worth the effort to reconsider the idea of the uncertain and the undecidable. Comparative literature is uncertain if it sets out to reify its objects, its methods, because it then overlooks the play of literary limits and the intersection of cognitive contexts. Comparative literature is undecidable, not in the sense in which deconstruction understands the term but in the sense that comparative literature knows that it cannot construct verifiable models of literature and culture. Its efficacy then is completely in its undecidability, which is a dynamic undecidability. That is to say an undecidability that continually ceases to renew the observation of the intersection of cognitive contexts and thereby the cooperation that mutual knowledge supposes. We need neither radical undecidability nor the reification of knowledge and cultural-literary objects. I will offer these explanations in order finally to make two points. The one relates to the way one can study literary diversity. The other relates to the way in which one can situate comparative literature, literary studies, and the humanities.
- 27 My first point: Against the various positivisms and against the various reifications that I mentioned, against a hierarchical vision of literatures-be it that of domination or that of the resistance to domination-against the reflexive movement that corresponds to approaches to literature per se that finally ends the reflexive play and leads to paradoxes, and against the infinite reflexivity of deconstruction that dismantles the pertinence of all contextualization of an analysis, I must say that every literature, every culture, every literary object, every cultural object constitutes a fixed point and based upon the fixed points, the critical models can be varied. The expression "fixed point" refers to "non-monotonal reasoning", which is a part of logic. A fixed point is a value that logical and cognitive operations cannot alter whatever the norms of the operation may be. In considering the literary and cultural objects as fixed points, the diversification of critical models neither ignores nor alters these objects. It refers to these objects and the relationship to the cognitive environment that we are outlining. This type of designation and the inconclusive character of the critical models are the essence of cognitively open approaches.

- 28 My second point: Thus redefining the undecidable affords other benefits: to be able to give comparative literature a place in the current critical debates. That which in many places is called the crisis of literary studies or the crisis of the humanities is nothing other than the progressive erasure of the model of literary study established during the nineteenth century in Europe. This model was symbolically and ideologically a mixture of tradition, universalism, nationalism, and positivism. Most of the contemporary critical schools work from within this heritage. In order to modify it, in order to get rid of it—thus deconstruction. The step beyond all of that belongs, perhaps, to comparative literature. The crisis of the humanities corresponds to the fact that they can no longer establish their own coherence since the organization of their ideological, symbolic, and cognitive components is no longer functional. Deconstruction's choice of undecidability is nothing other than a response to this. A way of escaping from the crisis and of preserving our numerous and varied objects of study is to promote the idea of a dynamic undecidability: this dynamic undecidability that knows it is inseparable from mutual knowledge, from research, and—by inference—from the broadest literary contexts; this undecidability that knows that it is inseparable from the way in which comparative literature considers literatures and cultures—by retaining the limits of literatures and cultures. You understand why I began this address by characterizing the research topics of the ICLA committees.