

AMERICAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

REPORT ON PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

(Second or Greene Report)

(Submitted to the American Comparative Literature Association
by The Committee on Professional Standards)

September, 1975

I. When the Comparative Literature movement gathered strength in the U.S. during the two decades following World War II, it was dedicated to high goals. It wanted to stand, and in large part did stand, for a new internationalism: for broader perspectives on works and authors, for a European grasp of historical movements, for larger contexts in the tracking of motifs, themes, and types as well as larger understandings of genres and modes. It aimed also at the clarification of the great theoretical issues of literary criticism from a cosmopolitan vantage point. Within the academy, it wanted to bring together the respective European language departments in a new cooperation, reawakening them to the unity of their common endeavor, and embodying that unity in various ways, both customary and creative, which could mingle faculty and students across discipline boundaries. Beyond even these boundaries, the Comparative Literature movement wanted to explore the relationships of literature with the other arts and humanities: with philosophy, history, history of ideas, linguistics, music, art, and folklore among others. It did not of course minimize the strenuous sweep of its aspirations, and it did not perceive itself to be available to all students or even all universities. It defined itself as a discipline appropriate only to institutions endowed with excellent libraries, with consistently strong foreign language departments, and with gifted students combining linguistic depth with literary aptitude. This vision of a fresh and central academic discipline was ambitious in the noblest sense. It remains our common inheritance.

This seminal conception of Comparative Literature received a classic expression in a "Report on Professional Standards" written in 1965 and submitted to the ACLA by a committee of scholars chaired by Professor Harry Levin. The Levin Report is notable for its balance, its judgement, and its elegance, yet its authors did not hesitate to defend a certain elitism which they perceived to be inherent in the nature of their subject. The Comparative Literature undergraduate major, they wrote, "should be relatively tough, admitting fit company even if few." They counselled against too rapid or too broad an expansion:

"A preliminary question arises as to whether it is necessarily desirable or practical that Comparative Literature be represented in every institution; whether it does not make special demands, in the way of linguistic preparation and intellectual perspective, which ought to reserve it for the more highly qualified students; and whether it does not presuppose an existing strength in language departments and libraries to which not very many colleges, and indeed not every university, can be fairly expected to measure up. At this point we venture to suggest that, where it is not yet represented in a curriculum it should not be introduced without a good deal of institutional heart-searching and a careful scrutiny of the facilities and requirements elsewhere."

Significantly for the seventies, the report also distinguished between courses in Comparative Literature and courses in translation:

"We need not be too much concerned with the problem of foreign literature in translation, if we distinguish clearly between such courses and courses in Comparative Literature; and, if the latter courses include a substantial proportion of work with the originals, it would be unduly puristic to exclude some reading from more remote languages in translation. A further distinction might conceivably be drawn between Humanities or World Literature or Great Books at the undergraduate level and Comparative Literature as a graduate discipline."

The report called for competence in teaching of a foreign language on the part of each Ph.D. It called for doctoral programs requiring harder work and longer study than those of neighboring departments, and it foresaw for us "a more and more centralizing role" within the university. It reflected, of course, a discipline which had found its feet in the graduate schools of a few large universities and expected essentially to remain there. This has not in fact been the case. The "elitism," the pursuit of the highest standards within a few small departments--this ideal which seemed so desirable and so feasible ten years ago has been challenged for better or worse by rapid historical change. The Comparative Literature movement must now ask itself how much of its original vision it wants to preserve, how much change it wants to resist, how restrictive it should try to remain. These questions and others have prompted the present Report on Standards.

II. It may be worthwhile to survey a few determining facts. First, the fact of rapid growth. There are now "entities" (departments, programs, committees) administering Comparative Literature at 150 institutions in this country, a figure twice that when the Levin Report was submitted and rising every year. A second fact is the heavy swing toward undergraduate teaching and indeed toward colleges with no graduate training. A third fact is the growth of Comparative Literature programs whose staff contains no Ph.D. trained in the subject, programs depending on libraries whose holdings are modest, and supported by language departments not fully equipped for Comparative purposes. A fourth fact is the growth of the large lecture course teaching literature in translation which makes no linguistic demands upon its undergraduate audiences but seems to establish an equation between "World Literature" and "Comparative Literature." A fifth fact is the admission into graduate school of larger numbers of matriculants than ever before, a fact that remains valid, so far as we can judge, despite the deteriorating job market. At least a few institutions number over a hundred students in residence. A sixth fact is the erosion, if not the withering, of the strength of foreign language departments in the wake of abolished requirements, an erosion which in some places may actually stem in part from the growing popularity of Comparative Literature courses. This trend is deeply ironic, since in fact Comparative Literature can only exist if it enjoys the support of neighboring disciplines and depends upon a continuing intimate relationship with them.

A final fact of a somewhat different order is the growth of interdisciplinary programs (American Studies, Medieval Studies, and so on) which like Comparative Literature attempt to bring together several traditional subjects but from a single dominant perspective. There has also arisen widespread and growing interest in the non-European literatures--Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and many others less familiar, as well as those oral "literatures" of illiterate communities which are not properly described by our most basic term but for which we have no alternative. A new vision of global literature is emerging, embracing all the verbal creativity during the history of our planet, a vision which will soon begin to make our comfortable European perspectives parochial. Few Comparatists, few scholars anywhere, are prepared for the dizzying implications of this widening of horizons, but they cannot be ignored.

Against the challenging or disturbing signs of change can be set of course those trends and those continuities in which most Comparatists would rightfully take pride. Gifted young scholars have been trained, and well trained; valuable books have been written; first-rate departments flourish; the literary outlook of the American academy has become far more cosmopolitan. The Comparative Literature movement has not shamefully betrayed its origins. Yet there is cause, we believe, for serious concern lest the trends now transforming our discipline, taken in the aggregate, not debase those values on which it is founded. The slipping of standards, once allowed to accelerate, would be difficult to arrest. The causes of this transformation are not all of our own making. But we have reached a juncture which behooves us, singly and collectively, to take cognizance of a threat and to search our consciences.

The forthcoming "Nichols Report" on undergraduate programs refers to the extremely wide gap "in almost all instances" between the number of majors and the number of students enrolled in Comparative Literature courses. (In the examples there cited, the ratios, range from 1-10 to 1-90.) This state of affairs is probably a given fact for the near future, and it allows many interpretations. It may testify first of all to the rigor of the Comparative Literature major. But it may possibly also testify to a compromise with that rigor in the education of the less committed student. Reflecting on programs like that which reports six majors and 500 enrollments, we are tempted to discern there two faces of contemporary Comparative Literature—the one demanding and severe, the other accommodating, searching for its own place in the sun at its own institution. Apparently many comparatists throughout the country have tacitly accepted a trade-off in which large scale popularization with minimal requirements is accepted in exchange for the right to provide rigorous training for a small number of students. Much of the recent expansion of Comparative Literature, especially at the undergraduate level, seems to be based on an uneasy compromise between qualitative and quantitative norms, with the balance shifting more and more toward the rationale of large enrollments and relatively low instructional costs. In at least some colleges and universities Comparative Literature seems to be purveyed in the style of a smorgasbord at bargain rates.

The burgeoning of Comparative Literature in the colleges is potentially a development to give us satisfaction; it also mitigates the problem of placing our students. But the growth of undergraduate programs imposes responsibilities which are not always being met. Courses in translation are potentially of great value to the student, but if no one in the classroom, including the instructor, is in touch with the original language, then something precious has been lost to the learning experience, and something also of our Comparatist integrity. An examination of several college catalogues suggests that, at more than one institution, the titles of Comparative Literature course offerings do not exclude the dilettantish, the modish, even the frivolous.

The shift in our discipline's center of gravity was doubtless inherent from its beginnings in the logic of our academic and economic worlds. Our effort now is to absorb this shift without slackening our dedication to the best of our heritage. All of the changes we face raise questions about standards in the broadest sense; about the value of what we are doing and should be doing, about our function in the academic community and the larger intellectual community, about our responsibilities to our students, our colleagues, and ourselves. Standards are admittedly difficult to define; they permit finally no quantification; they depend ultimately on the judgement of each scholar. The scholar, in turn, sets the level of his standards primarily during his graduate training. By definition, any crisis of undergraduate training would be a crisis of graduate training. The authors of the present report cannot of course hope to resolve any of

the issues facing our discipline. But they can hope to alert their colleagues to what they see as dangers; they can recommend academic norms and goals for the present which in their judgement perpetuate the best of the past; and they can suggest means by which the American Comparative Literature Association might affect the direction of standards in the future.

III. The first requisite for a healthy department or program in Comparative Literature is an adequate staff, and the second, following close upon it, is the department's relationship to other literature departments. Every department or program ought to include at least one and preferably two trained Comparatists on its staff normally in positions of responsibility. Normally, the staff is enlarged by recourse to the strength of neighboring departments. One useful means of promoting collegiality between departments is the joint appointment, an arrangement which commonly promotes communications and properly supplies a structural basis for a spirit of cooperation.

Such a spirit is indeed crucial. Any Comparative Literature program must depend heavily on its neighboring departments of national literatures, indeed on all the Humanities departments at its institution. Without a strong English department and strong foreign language teaching, Comparative Literature cannot itself be strong. The present deterioration of support encountered by many graduate programs in the languages threatens our discipline with grave consequences. It is by no means certain that the enlargement of Comparative Literature programs can offset the decline of departments of foreign languages and literatures even when serious efforts are made to assume their specific functions. The decay of programs in foreign languages and literatures is bound to affect standards in Comparative Literature. Our relationships with our colleagues in these programs must in fact be symbiotic. Co-operation should occur at almost every level of departmental activity, both major and minor, central and modest, and it should occur in two directions. It goes without saying that cross-departmental freedom of enrollment is a necessary guarantee of vitality. Other examples include: the cross-listing of course offerings; the exchange of instructors to teach courses in neighboring departments; the borrowing of instructors for oral examinations; their use as codirectors of dissertations; their assistance in administering language examinations; their participation in colloquia, panel discussions, conferences, and similar activities. These are a few examples, but only examples; the crucial element is that spirit of collegiality which is implicit in the very term university as well as college. Without this spirit of fraternal participation in a common humane endeavor, Comparative Literature cannot thrive; indeed it cannot exist as a dynamic enterprise.

A major responsibility of a graduate program in Comparative Literature is to admit only that number of capable students it can truly educate as they deserve, as the discipline requires, and as available fellowship funds permit. Wholesale admission of students by institutions with little or no fellowship support is, we believe, reprehensible. Few universities in the seventies can offer blanket four-year support, as some did in the sixties, but some assistance toward the most needy and most gifted abbreviates the long test of stamina which graduate study can become. It is wiser to admit a realistic number of students among whom available support can be meaningfully distributed, than a number so large that a sense of community is lost and study becomes associated with penury.

Overpopulation in our graduate schools will be reduced if we weight scrupulously the credentials of each applicant for admission. A critical criterion of each applicant's preparation is his acquaintance with foreign languages. Normally, he or she should bring to graduate study considerable knowledge of at least two languages; after one or two years, this number should rise to three. Of these,

one should be an ancient language. Thus, by the time the student begins his dissertation, he should be capable of dealing with texts in at least four literatures, including English. In addition to these linguistic requirements, which should be stringently maintained, some philological training is highly desirable. Most graduate programs, moreover, continue to require a single major language and literature, and in view of the present job market this requirement seems to rest on solid logic. Since it tends to direct students toward positions in single language departments and thus toward the teaching of elementary language courses, it further increases the need for strong linguistic training.

To be admitted into an adequate program, a candidate ought to be able to offer two other acquisitions in addition to linguistic proficiency. He or she must have had extensive undergraduate instruction in at least one literature, and preferably in two. Such instruction should include training in the analysis of texts, as well as in the forms, meters, traditions, genres,—the idiom and particularity of the literature and literatures he has chosen to learn. This acquisition already implies a second; a lively awareness of the past itself. Despite some tendencies to permit students a nearly exclusive engagement with the present century, comparative literature as a discipline rests unalterably on the knowledge of history. The student who wants to specialize in Twentieth Century literature needs to know just as much about the past as his fellow students, if he is truly to understand his chosen period. Arguably, he needs to know more, since the cultural inheritance of our century is in the nature of things richer than any earlier period's.

These strictures also apply of course to the actual list of courses offered by the department itself. Any such list will inevitably depend on the interests and competences of those instructors who are available. But gifted students do deserve certain minimal elements in their graduate study: a course or series of courses in methodology and theory; a range of period courses which includes the remote as well as recent past; the opportunity to encounter various critical and scholarly approaches; the opportunity to work with various literary genres and sub-genres; the opportunity to study linguistics, philology, and esthetics. No single student will be able to pursue all his options, especially if he is encouraged to select courses in other literature departments, but a judiciously rich sampling of available courses will facilitate his preparation for his oral examination during the third year and for his dissertation that follows.

At some point during his graduate career, the student's performance needs to be evaluated, not only for its mere adequacy but also for its real promise. It is unfair to the student, to the department, and to a profession afflicted with unemployment, to retain in the academy the weak and the mediocre. We urge the directors and staff of graduate programs to give this question of retention serious periodic scrutiny. Mediocrity in our student population is clearly bound to affect in time the quality of undergraduate as well as graduate study. If the requirement of the dissertation keeps its appropriate stringency—that is, if the dissertation is held to firm standards of scope, substance, and originality—then the weak student is likely to discover too late that the degree is beyond him. The risk, all too often, once the mediocre student has reached this stage, is to tailor the project to his abilities. Editions of texts are acceptable as dissertations, in our view, only when accompanied by introductions of substantial length and substance: a minimum might be seventy-five pages. We perform no favor either to the student, the institution, or the profession if we allow work of questionable quality to be rewarded with a doctorate. Here is an area where the judgement of colleagues in neighboring departments is especially useful.

At the undergraduate level, the most disturbing recent trend is the association

of Comparative Literature with literature in translation. Many courses taught today under the rubric of Comparative Literature are not in fact properly labeled. The college lecturer who is truly a Comparatist should at the very least have read the text he is teaching in the original, and should use this experience to advantage in the classroom. He should also draw on the insights of those members of the class who are able to dispense with translations. Indeed, by his frequent references to the original, he should make the remaining students aware of the incompleteness of their own reading experience. Beyond the individual classroom, however, a larger problem lies in the narrowing assumptions about undergraduate Comparative Literature increasingly shared by dean, chairman, instructor, and student alike. No response to this situation would be more effective, in our judgement, than to reaffirm our support for the Appendix to the Levin report on "The Undergraduate Major." This important document, never more pertinent than today, makes the crucial distinctions:

"Whenever possible, majors in Comparative Literature should be separated for instructional purposes from students who read exclusively in translation. When such separation is not possible, measures should be taken to insure reading in original texts by majors in Comparative Literature."

We would recommend the dissemination of this Appendix by whatever means are available, including publication in the Newsletters of the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association. It should be of particular use to institutions which are now organizing or re-organizing their programs. Not all directors of doctoral programs are convinced that the undergraduate major is the best preparation for graduate study in Comparative Literature, however admirable it may be for general and liberal education.

As for the burgeoning of cross-disciplinary programs, we believe that Comparatists should welcome them. They have a salutary role to play in re-organizing our patterns of knowledge; we should be able to learn from them as well as contribute our own perspectives. But we must also be alert lest the crossing of disciplines involve a relaxing of discipline. Misty formulations, invisible comparisons, useless ingenuities, wobbly historiography plague all fields in the Humanities, including our own: cross-disciplinary programs are not immune from them. As participants, we need to muster the theoretical sophistication, the methodological rigor, the peculiar awareness of historical complexities our special training affords us.

The growth of interest in the non-European literatures is another development we can welcome, while cautiously searching for ways to accommodate this interest to our own traditions. In the cases of literatures produced by peoples in contact with Europe, this accommodation is easy. Many departments allow the substitution of Hebrew for Latin or Greek as a required foreign language; the acquisition of Arabic is logical for those with Hispanic interests. But for the study of those literatures further-flung from Europe and the Americas, perhaps all that can reasonably be said today is that methodological prudence must be tempered with flexibility. We are still lacking the concepts and tools that will permit us truly to study literature at the global level. These concepts and tools will gradually materialize. While waiting and searching for them, we must beware of ever again confusing "world literature" with the literature of our inherited culture, however rich; conversely, while working toward global perspectives, we will still need the virtues of precision and integrity our inherited culture has taught us. It goes without saying that we cannot begin to absorb the wealth of exotic literatures before firmly possessing our own.

IV. Because Comparative Literature is inherently an arduous discipline, because

some of the trends threatening to alter it will probably continue to gather strength, and because we believe the American Comparative Literature Association cannot ignore the danger of diluted excellence, we recommend the creation of a permanent Evaluation Committee. Such a committee should be chaired by a senior scholar of outstanding reputation, and it should include as many as fifteen Comparatists chosen for their distinction, their judgment, their fairness, and their geographical distribution about the country. Each member might be asked to serve for a renewable term of three years. The existence of this committee would be publicized by the ACLA Newsletter, by the MLA Newsletter, by letters from the ACLA Secretariat to chairmen and deans, and possibly by other means. A small number—perhaps two—of the committee's members could be delegated to visit a given department or program of Comparative Literature, when and only when the committee was invited by the institution in question. The delegation would normally spend two days at the host institution, considering such matters as curriculum, staffing, the design of the undergraduate major (if one exists) and of the graduate program, enrollments, relations with other literature departments, and other relevant matters. After deliberating, the visitors would submit a thorough report to the appropriate chairman and dean, a second copy would be retained by the Chairman of the Evaluation Committee, who would be expected to submit periodic reports of the activity of the Committee to the Secretariat for publication in the Newsletter. There is reason to believe that funding for this committee might be available from the National Endowment for the Humanities. If not, the expenses of the evaluators would be paid by the host institution. Many public and private universities seek out such authoritative evaluations periodically as a matter of course. The creation of the standing Evaluation Committee we recommend might increase the number of such invitations; it would ensure the solid professional calibre of the visitors; and it would provide the ACLA Secretariat with information about specific programs. It ought to be particularly useful in assisting those institutions which want to initiate new programs, not a few of which come to the Secretary's attention every year.

Other means of preserving standards will occur to members of the ACLA. However subtle or however stringent they may be, we venture to suggest they ought to be understood as assisting institutions and departments and individual scholars, toward an excellence whose vision is shared almost everywhere if seldom achieved anywhere. For the individual teacher-scholar, the hard requirement is to be responsible in so many directions: to his profession, to the institution and department that hired him, to his students, to the past, to the texts he is entrusted with, and to himself. In the face of so many various and sometimes counter obligations, it is difficult to stay humane. The professional society can perhaps hope to help that individual scholar and his chairman toward a more humane pedagogy despite assorted barbarisms; ultimately the society will have to depend on the scholar's respect for the men and ideals that preceded him and that he himself re-evaluates, continuously and creatively.

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APPENDIX

In addition to the Ph.D. degree, some institutions may find it appropriate to offer a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature. Such a degree would serve two purposes: (1) It would function as a qualifying procedure for the Ph.D. Students passing the MA but falling below the level required for the doctorate would be denied admission to the Ph.D. program while still being granted the MA. (2) It would serve as a degree program in its own right. At this time there is an ample supply of Ph.D.'s to fill teaching needs at any level; the MA in our field would not be a teaching degree but would lead to careers in research, library work (usually in conjunction with a degree in library science), translation, etc. A combination of both these functions may indeed make such a degree useful in many institutions. It could attract a larger number of graduate students than the Ph.D. program would allow and it would permit departments and programs in Comparative Literature to offer career options outside the teaching profession in a declining job market.

1. An MA in Comparative Literature would include the following prerequisites:

(a) a BA in a literature, comparative literature, or a related discipline;

(b) a high level of competence in one foreign language (to the point of being able to take literature courses in that language) on admission;

(c) an equally high level of competence in a second foreign language by the beginning of the second year of study.

2. A typical curriculum for the MA in Comparative Literature would be as follows:

(a) A two-year program (or its equivalent if previous graduate work in a related discipline is offered).

(b) On a semester basis (i.e., four terms of three courses each), the following distribution would be recommended: three courses in one literature; two courses in a second literature; four courses in comparative literature and methodology; three electives.

3. A comprehensive examination. 4. Final written work would be required. This could take the form of a Master's Essay, but it could also consist of two or three briefer essays, written independently of courses.