

# AMERICAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

## REPORT ON PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

(First or Levin Report, 1965)

The recent proliferation of Comparative Literature, in colleges and universities throughout the country, could hardly have materialized without the support of the National Defense Education Act; but it marks the coming-of-age of a movement which has been spurred for some time by the revival of interest in language teaching, the introduction of programs and courses in great books, and the international crosscurrents and exchanges of postwar years. It appears that our subject is now represented in the catalogues of about eighty academic institutions within the United States, according to the canvass of our Secretary, which continues to enlarge from term to term. More than half of these manifestations seem to have emerged within the last five to ten years, and may therefore still be considered as in a formative stage, though it is obvious that whatever trend they take will have great influence over the field as a whole. Members of the ACLA profess, broadly speaking, a set of common objectives. What is needed with some urgency, before our subject gets too thinly spread, is a set of minimal standards. 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.

This brings us to a second question, instrumental in character and multiform in its possible answers: whether the representation of Comparative Literature within a faculty ought to take the form of a department, a subdepartment, or a committee. So far as these distinctions are merely nominal, they do not much matter; and there are many differences in local organization or specific personnel which justify a variety of approaches. What matters is to recognize that courses and programs in Comparative Literature are not designed to compete with those in the other departments of languages and literatures, but rather to augment and bridge them, and that there must consequently be a certain amount of departmental interdependence. In this sense, Comparative Literature must always be embodied in a kind of interdepartment, since it must draw upon the cooperation of specialists in adjacent fields. In certain situations it has functioned as a subdepartment, generally through a member of members of a department of English, or modern languages, especially concerned with interrelationships; but this would seem to be a transitional pattern, leading toward some less ancillary arrangement. The interdepartmental committee would seem to be the most practical arrangement in the early years of a new program. There are at present very few professorial chairs which are wholly in Comparative Literature, and it may well be mutually helpful for the holder of such a chair—or for other appointees—to retain some footing in another department. However, an autonomous department may bring with it budgetary advantages, while administrative convenience may profit from the pattern of a central professor flanked by a number of cooperating colleagues. Perhaps we also need to consider here the relevance of other than literary disciplines: notably linguistics, folklore, art, music, history, philosophy, and possibly psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Our rigor in defining our own position should help us to clarify our interdisciplinary relationships.

Further clarification would also be helpful with regard to the course-offering. It is evident that, in many institutions where our official rubric is not used, courses that might otherwise be so designated are in the curriculum nonetheless—courses which cross the usual boundaries interposed by language, in dealing with such genres as the novel or such movements as the Renaissance. Now, where the approach is by way of a technique, such as the drama, or through the history of ideas, as in a course on the Enlightenment, there may be good excuse for studying works from a number of languages in translation. It is an exceptional undergraduate who can be expected to read works from more than one or two foreign languages in the original, albeit we should do as much as we can to cultivate such exceptions. Yet is it too much to expect that the teacher of literature, while not professing to be an expert in everything he teaches, should have some access to all the original languages involved? 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.

On the graduate level, it seems clear that much of the course-work in programs toward advanced degrees would have to be taken under the cooperating departments, where the sequences of literary history and the explication of individual texts can most relevantly be pursued. Far from seeking to replace such courses, we need them to build upon. On the other hand, these studies need to be integrated at some point by a series of seminars which bring together our students working in different literatures and focus on literary problems transcending national limits. For example, the history of criticism can help the student to define his terms and organize his knowledge, while exercise in translation, comparative metrics, and stylistic analysis could give him the most concrete experience in the relation of one language to another. Given the spread of our graduate students through differing courses and departments, according to their combination of interests in each case, it may be advisable to provide them all with one or two basic courses—let us say, proseminars in theory of literature and in textual methods or technical problems. Such courses often seem to attract, and profit from the presence of, the more adventurous students in other graduate fields. Comparative Literature performs a service for the other literary departments, and repays its incidental obligations to them, by widening the critical orientation of their students.

As to the desirability of an undergraduate major, there would seem to be more disparity here than anywhere else. The fact that the option is now available at about twenty places would seem to suggest that it is here to stay. There would seem to be general agreement that it should be relatively tough, admitting fit company even if few. The principal objection has been the language limitation for undergraduates; but even where the title of Comparative Literature is reserved for work at a more professional level, majors are sometimes open which involve a combination of languages—e.g., the Classics—or of an extra language with other relevant disciplines. More graduate programs in Comparative Literature would prefer that their candidates have solid training in a few languages, rather than that they have skimmed through a great many works in translation or literary history at second hand. One or two universities still require the M.A. in a single field as a prerequisite to the Ph.D. in Comparative Literature; this implies an even dimmer view of the undergraduate major, and makes it rather difficult for the candidate to progress from the one-or-two languages stage to the three-or-four. At the other extreme, it is noteworthy that a number of

institutions have thus far been concentrating their efforts on a meaningful master's degree in the field of Comparative Literature itself.

At the doctoral level, most of us seem to agree that every candidate ought to have a strong major field around which to develop his comparative interests. Since there are not many posts in Comparative Literature, he should be competent enough to teach Spanish or Russian or whatever is taught in the particular department of his specialization. In other words, he should know one literature as a chronological whole and have some acquaintance with its philological background—i.e., the history of the language and a reading knowledge of its earlier texts. Then he should likewise know, within the limits of his special period or chosen concern, at least one and probably two minor fields. And, of course, we count on his curiosity regarding additional fields which he cannot be asked to master so fully, plus an informed concern with the methodology of criticism and scholarship. The value of a critical approach and the attractions of the modern period should not obscure the importance of sound historical training; a truly comparative method, after all, finds many points of reference in the past as well as among contemporaries. Certain auxiliary languages—notably French and German—will be important to the student, even if he does not specialize in their literatures; Greek and Latin are still of unique value to all exponents of Western culture, though Sanskrit or some other classical language has been relevantly substituted in the increasing number of programs where a span is attempted between Occidental and Oriental literature.

In a subject which thrives upon the diversity of the minds it attracts, no single canon ought to be laid down as to the qualifications of candidates. Ideally speaking, they ought to possess both linguistic competence and critical aptitude to a high degree; in practice they often tend to be weighted somewhat more on one side or the other. We should seek for balance in this respect, just as we balance the counterclaims of coverage and depth. It should be frankly recognized that a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature may take longer to acquire than one in most of the separate areas of language and literature; and if a candidate has any hesitations between the straight degree and ours, he may well be encouraged to make the more traditional choice. If we profess to cover more ground than our sister departments we should honestly acknowledge that we must work harder, nor should we incur their suspicion by offering short-cuts. It almost goes without saying that our students should also be encouraged to take advantage of whatever opportunities come their way for study abroad. Still further, we may look forward to a time of development when they find it advantageous to move about more freely among the Comparative Literature programs in various American universities.

Since there has been some talk about an American school of Comparative Literature, we should like to reaffirm our belief in the internationalism of our field. For historic reasons which must be respected, certain countries have figured prominently in its pioneering investigations, as indeed have certain periods and types of relationship. In attempting to extend its scope and to utilize newer methods of interpretation, there is no reason why we should neglect what has been validly established by our predecessors and colleagues across the sea. On the contrary, it is largely because of America's cultural pluralism, above all its receptivity to Europeans and European ideas, that we have been enabled to develop centers for the study of Comparative Literature since the last war. A generation ago, this would have been looked upon as at best a supplement to the national literary histories, and as such a luxury for most academic communities. However, as the literary and linguistic disciplines have reconsidered their criteria and reorganized their curricula, it has been moving from the periphery toward a more and more centralizing role. We can

scarcely overemphasize that our relationship with the sister departments should be one of close collaboration, rather than rivalry; that we should not be living up to our standards unless we are also fulfilling theirs; and that, if we succeed, we shall be realizing together the richest potential of the humanities.

#### **APPENDIX: THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR**

While recognizing that Comparative Literature is primarily a graduate discipline, we cannot help observing the steady growth of undergraduate programs in a variety of institutions across the country. The need for minimal standards in undergraduate programs in Comparative Literature is no less urgent than in the graduate area, but the circumstances and problems are basically different and warrant separate consideration.

We believe that, properly conceived and directed, undergraduate programs in Comparative Literature can make a useful contribution to the educational experience and growth of the student and can also serve as a sound basis for graduate study in Comparative Literature. It should be recognized, however, that not all institutions may or should wish to offer such programs, just as not every institution may wish to offer graduate training in Comparative Literature. A number of institutions may prefer, as at present, to represent the subject in the curriculum without making it available as a field of concentration. Where undergraduate programs in Comparative Literature are contemplated or already exist, we believe that certain minimal standards should be met:

##### **I. The Institution**

1. It should have strong departments in both classical and modern languages and literatures. Variety and balance of specialization are particularly important.
2. It should have at least one staff member with the doctorate in Comparative Literature or with equivalent training, who is directly connected with the program.
3. It should have substantial library holdings in several languages and literatures.

##### **II. The Program**

1. An undergraduate program in Comparative Literature should meet the needs of students preparing for graduate work in Comparative Literature, as well of other students interested in literary study.
2. A sound program of offerings should include courses in the major periods, movements, and genres, and in special topics. For the latter, independent study is recommended.

##### **III. Minimum Requirements for the Undergraduate Major in Comparative Literature**

1. Work of upper division caliber in at least two literatures, ancient or modern (one of which may be English), studied in the original languages.
2. Study in depth of at least one literature.

3. Where one of the literatures studied is English, students who plan to continue in graduate will be expected to acquire a reading knowledge of a second language.

4. Advanced undergraduate courses in Comparative Literature demanding considerable reading in original texts. These courses should provide training in the study of literature from an international perspective, and should be offered by a staff member trained in Comparative Literature.

5. Some acquaintance with the major writings of western literature from classical antiquity to the present.

#### **IV. Comparative Literature for the Non-Major**

1. As service courses, undergraduate courses in Comparative Literature are a legitimate and valuable part of liberal education.

2. The instructor should have the doctorate in Comparative Literature or a comparable background, and should be able to deal with all of the readings in their original text. Frequent recourse to the original text in class is strongly recommended.

3. The courses should be genuinely comparative. Courses exclusively in a single national literature should not be designated as courses in Comparative Literature.

4. 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. It is particularly important for the instructor to make special provisions so that the presence of majors and of students without any foreign language ability in the same classroom will not affect standards of instruction.

We believe that, under proper circumstances, the undergraduate major in Comparative Literature can provide a solid foundation for graduate study. Its special advantage lies in its early inculcation of a comparative outlook and its emphasis on both breadth and depth as part of the student's undergraduate training. Students often come to Comparative Literature relatively late in their career; a strong undergraduate program can reinforce and support graduate training in comparative studies. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized, however, that study in Comparative Literature must proceed hand in hand with intensive work in the individual national literatures, at undergraduate as well as graduate levels.

A.O. Aldridge  
Chandler B. Beall  
Haskell Block    Ralph Freedman  
Horst Frenz  
J.C. La Driere  
Alain Renoir  
Rene Wellek

Harry Levin, Chairman