

Comparative Literature 3

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The American School of Comparative Literature

- ▶ Henry Remak defined what can be called the American School of Comparative Literature:
- ▶ “Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music)”, philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other.

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- ▶ In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression.
- ▶ This definition stands in opposition to the French school of comparative literature. The definition has become the manifesto of the American school of comparative literature. Remak justifies himself by explaining that his approach is not historic nor generic but descriptive and synchronic.

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- ▶ According to Remak, the French school was too narrow, and relied too heavily on factual evidence. In influence studies in the French tradition, he argued, were unimaginative, deriving from a positivistic approach, presenting:
- ▶ “In a good many influence studies, the location of sources has been given too much attention rather than such questions as: what was retained and what was rejected, and why and how was the material absorbed and integrated, and with what success?

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- ▶ “If conducted in this fashion, influence studies contribute not only to our knowledge of literary history but to our understanding of the creative process and of the literary work of art”. The French tried to confine the boundaries of comparative literature, limiting what could be and could not be included in the proper study of the subject, whereas in Remak and the American school of comparative literature anything can be compared with anything else, even if it is not literature.

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- ▶ Crucial to Remak's argument is the idea that comparative literature should not be regarded as a separate discipline with its own laws. Rather, it should be seen as a bridge between subject areas. Remak's approach focuses on the concept of "process", while the French school focuses on the concept of "product". Remak refuses to lay down the laws and rules shifting the responsibility onto the comparatist who lays down or determines what should be studied in this field.

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- ▶ In Remak's definition, he uses the word "country", and he stresses probably the idea of nationalism, so his definition is depoliticized. This process of depoliticization of comparative literature is a hallmark of the American school.
- ▶ According to Charles Mills Gayley, comparative literature should be seen as "nothing more or less", than literary philology, and focuses on the importance of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, social science, religion and art in the study of literature.

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- ▶ The American school focuses on a model that involved interdisciplinary work. It focuses on the network of related subjects, when it comes to the study of comparative literature. This idea stresses the relation between comparative literature and the wider concept of Culture with a capital C. Universalism can be applied here. Questions related to nationhood, political boundaries, and language differences were not important or set aside. The focus, however, is on comparative literature as a melting pot.

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- ▶ Gayley, moreover, proposed another problem: comparative literature is too slippery and misleading a term, but could not suggest an alternative term. He tried to set some principles for the term. He challenges one of the premises set by the French school which is that comparative literature involves the study of two or more literatures. He argues that international relations is only part of the subject of the study of the field.

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- ▶ The American School of comparative literature stresses the non-nationalistic model. According to Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, comparative literature is synonymous with “historical”, and focuses on the evolutionary model, and the individual evolution and the influence of environment on the social and individual life of man.

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- ▶ Posnett's evolutionary model and Gayley's melting pot theory stand against the European versions of comparative literature.
- ▶ Arthur Marsh, professor of comparative literature at Harvard, defined the subject in the following terms:
"To examine ... the phenomena of literature as a whole, to compare them, to group them, to classify them, to enquire into the causes of them, to determine the results of them – this is the true task of comparative literature."

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- ▶ Many critics focused on the New Criticism school in the study of comparative literature. This school focuses on the work per se, regardless of anything outside it. Frederic Jameson keeps comparing between Russian Formalism and American version. He focused on the formalist model of comparative literature.
- ▶ Next time, we will focus on René Wellek and his definition of comparative literature and its object of study.