

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998. Pp. 297. \$50.00.

Was there a time when Comparative Literature was not a self-critical and embattled discipline? As early as 1963, René Wellek, who objected to the prevalent emphasis on comparative literary history and influence studies, attributed the precarious state of Comparative Literature in the academy to its inability "to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (282). More recently, Charles Bernheimer concluded (not unhappily), in his report for the American Comparative Literature Association on the state of the discipline, that the "field will always be unstable, shifting, insecure and self-critical" (2). Given the preeminence of theory in the study of all national literatures, the increased philosophical awareness of the lures of ideology, and the inroads made by interdisciplinary approaches such as cultural studies, Comparative Literature would seem to be struggling once again to regain its distinctiveness in and relevance for the North American academy. In *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek presents his proposal for a *new* Comparative Literature based on the "Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture" (SEALC). Unfortunately, the character of this new discipline is not evident in his "Manifesto," a written declaration formulated as "Ten General Principles of Comparative Literature" (15-18), in which Tötösy reformulates and selectively emphasizes the long-standing principles of the discipline.

Like Wellek, Tötösy takes Comparative Literature to task for its failure to adopt a specific and "scientific" methodology. In response to current concerns about the marginalization of the humanities by science and technology, he proposes an approach that will bring "social relevance" and "legitimation" to literary and cultural study, an approach based on observation and verification rather than "intuition, speculation and metaphorical description" (29). Derived from a number of existing frameworks related to systems and communication theories — the sociology of literature, polysystem theory, and semiotics, to name just three — the "Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture" attributes considerable importance to communicative interaction, emphasizing creation, mediation, reception and post-production processing (27). These interactions, according to Tötösy, can be more readily verified and quantified than hermeneutical studies. Tötösy demonstrates the "SEALC" in the chapters which follow, although, as Tötösy himself remarks, the synthetic nature of the book precludes an exhaustively conducted empirical study.

A theory that depends on several fairly complex theoretical frameworks requires a detailed and clearly argued introduction. Despite the claim that the book was designed partly as a manual for students, the introductory first chapter, entitled "A New Comparative Literature as

Theory and Method," is too densely written and heavily dependent on theories not widely practiced in North American scholarship (such as Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and S. J. Schmidt's *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*) to serve that purpose. The reader is repeatedly referred to Tötösy de Zepetnek's numerous prior publications (which fill two pages in the bibliography) for theoretical and methodological amplification.

Although Tötösy's account of "cultural studies" in the introduction is cursory and narrow (is difference determined only by text?), this renegade discipline determines and informs the aspects of comparative literary study chosen for discussion in subsequent chapters. Ever attentive to the critical orientations and theoretical directions which have radically changed literary critique, Tötösy applies his method to an impressive range of areas — literary reception, interdisciplinarity, cultural diversity and ethnicity, gender, translation, and the electronic age. Each chapter articulates the core issues and provides ample references. Many passages are bold and thought-provoking, although, by necessity, too embryonic. Tötösy's preference for Canadian and Central European (mostly Hungarian) texts to illustrate his critical approach is particularly refreshing.

Chapter Two, "Literature and Cultural Participation," considers canon formation from the perspective of readers' participation in culture (43). Comparative Literature has traditionally privileged a Eurocentric canon regarded as transcendent and universal in its concerns. Tötösy, in contrast, speculates on "the situation of cultural participation as a dialogue between majority and minority culture" (60). His examination of ethnic minority readership of literary journals and magazines in a contemporary Canadian context is particularly suggestive. However, a manual purporting to advance the cause of empirical inquiry should provide a more scientific basis for data gathering than the one described in this chapter.

Tötösy regards interdisciplinarity, defined as the application in literary analysis of theoretical frameworks and methodologies borrowed from other disciplines (79), as an integral part of the new Comparative Literature. In a conceptually uninspired chapter, Tötösy illustrates the continued relevance of interdisciplinarity by analysing the use of realism in literary (Döblin) and filmic (Fassbinder) narrative. Although he fails to interrogate the concept of "realism," his incisive and informed comparisons of meaning production in film and literature do prove useful. In his multi-disciplinary study of the Hungarian interwar novel *Édes Ana* by Dezső Kosztolányi, Tötösy shows how a knowledge of pharmacology can lead to a new reading of the text. This example of multi-disciplinarity is stimulating, but too heavily empirical. Chapter Four, entitled "Culture, Peripherality and Comparative Literature," develops a rich and complex (although too

ambitious) discussion of immigration, ethnicity and cultural diversity. Tötösy examines the problematics of cultural homogeneity, a concept historically essential to Comparative Literature, by applying the paradigm of the centre and periphery to lesser known literatures, such as Canadian, characterized by "positive diversity" (124) and to East Central European literatures, such as Hungarian, characterized by "in-between peripherality." Tötösy looks for the "systemic properties and relationships of literature and culture" which, when documented, can restore relevancy to previously formulated theoretical concepts. In the process of taking to task the "border" theorists, he challenges trendy paradigms by examining them in light of lesser-studied literatures such as those of Central Europe. This provocative but imperfect chapter deserves book-length development.

Each of the last three chapters in the volume examine extra-literary factors. Sensitive to the discipline's resistance to feminist theorizing, Tötösy urges scholars in the Humanities to practice gender responsibility, which he demonstrates in the chapter, "Women's Literature and Men Writing About Women." His discussion of writing by women (Margit Kaffka and Dorothy Richardson) is less innovative than his discussion of writing by men about women (Robert Musil and Hermann Hesse), which convincingly applies the systemic approach and invites a revision of literary history (193). Unfortunately, the two concluding chapters, on "The Study of Translation and Comparative Literature" and "The Study of Literature and the Electronic Age," are not as well integrated into Tötösy's project. The chapter on translation consists essentially of a taxonomy, reproduced from Tötösy's previous publications. In the concluding chapter, Tötösy discusses, somewhat polemically, the impact of techno-culture on cultural participation, literature and communication. These are important issues, but it is not clear to me why the electronic revolution merits an entire chapter in this particular book.

Addressing an academic culture which prefers close textual study and hermeneutical analysis to the approach that he advocates, Tötösy alternates between defensive and aggressive modes of argument. He is right to challenge the discipline's historical commitment to aestheticism and canonicity, but the "Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture" is not the only guarantor of scholarly rigour and integrity. Margaret Higonnet has shown that Comparative Literature can "renew continually the questions it raises about the boundaries of its subject and its practice" (284). Tötösy's book responds to Higonnet's call for a multiplication of theoretical and methodological models in the study of Comparative Literature. However, the book's dogmatic tone, frequent typographical and syntactic errors, and uneven development detract from its often stimulating argument.

## WORKS CITED

- Bernheimer, Charles (ed.). *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Higonnet, Margaret R. (ed.). *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Wellek, René. "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

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Nicholas B. Dirks, ed. *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Pp. vii, 308. \$49.95, \$19.95 pb.

This volume of eleven essays evolved from the last of a triptych of University of Michigan conferences conceived, in the late 1980's, as interdisciplinary interventions into the definition of three pervasive and slippery terms: history, power, and culture. *In Near Ruins* collects writing from the fields of history, anthropology, literary criticism, and communication that, according to editor Nicholas B. Dirks, "present a set of allied but different approaches to problems in cultural analysis that work to demonstrate, rather than explicitly advocate, an engaged, interdisciplinary, political, theoretically self-aware position on the state of culture" (ix).

Dirks's introductory essay, which shares the volume's title, sketches a kind of history of cultural theory through an exploration of the ruined Villa San Girolamo in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Dirks draws upon Burke's notions of the sublime and picturesque, Benjamin's conception of "horror," and Adorno's conception of "despair," to interpret the ruin as a trope for culture itself. In some ways, Dirks's history-of-culture, like his forwarding of the trope of the ruin, is the type of totalizing gesture that cultural theory "at the end of the century" has come to challenge. At his essay's conclusion, Dirks describes our compulsion to return "to the ruins of culture": "We stroll across the dilapidated ramparts, we climb the devastated staircase, we sift through the sandy pieces of shard, we back up on a grassy knoll until we can see the grandeur and beauty of the prospect" (16). Dirks's privileging of the individual, the critic, the "we" who somehow exists outside of culture, regarding "culture" as something merely to "stroll through" and observe, is ultimately, like Ondaatje's novel, romantic, and even disturbingly nostalgic. Although most of the essays in this diverse volume do not specifically address the dilemma of the theoretical position of the cultural critic, they do attempt to engage with, figure, and problematise "culture" more productively, as construction and process.

This more complex vision of culture is evident, for example, in Michael Taussig's suggestive essay, "Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism: