

CHAPTER V

General, Comparative, and National Literature

Within literary studies, we have distinguished between theory, history, and criticism. Using another basis of division, we shall now attempt a systematic definition of comparative, general, and national literature. The term "comparative" literature is troublesome and doubtless, indeed, one of the reasons why this important mode of literary study has had less than the expected academic success. Matthew Arnold, translating Ampère's use of "*histoire comparative*," was apparently the first to use the term in English (1848). The French have preferred the term used earlier by Villemain, who had spoken of "*littérature comparée*" (1829), after the analogy of Cuvier's *Anatomie comparée* (1800). The Germans speak of "*vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*."¹ Yet neither of these differently formed adjectives is very illuminating, since comparison is a method used by all criticism and sciences, and does not, in any way, adequately describe the specific procedures of literary study. The formal comparison between literatures—or even movements, figures, and works—is rarely a central theme in literary history, though such a book as F. C. Green's *Minuet*,² comparing aspects of French and English eighteenth-century literature, may be illuminating in defining not only parallels and affinities but also divergences between the literary development of one nation and that of another.

In practice, the term "comparative" literature has covered and still covers rather distinct fields of study and groups of problems. It may mean, first, the study of oral literature, especially of folk-tale themes and their migration; of how and when they have entered "higher," "artistic" literature. This type of problem can be relegated to folklore, an important branch of learning which is only in part occupied with aesthetic facts, since it studies the total civilization of a "folk," its costumes and customs,

superstitions and tools as well as its arts. We must, however, endorse the view that the study of oral literature is an integral part of literary scholarship, for it cannot be divorced from the study of written works, and there has been and still is a continuous interaction between oral and written literature. Without going to the extreme of folklorists such as Hans Naumann³ who consider all oral literature as "*gesunkenes Kulturgut*," we can recognize that written upper-class literature has profoundly affected oral literature. The incorporation into folklore of chivalric romance and troubadour lyric is an indubitable fact. Though this is a view which would have shocked the Romantic believers in the creativity of the folk and the remote antiquity of folk art, nevertheless popular ballads, fairy tales, and legends as we know them are frequently of late origin and upper-class derivation. Yet the study of oral literature must be an important concern of every literary scholar who wants to understand the processes of literary development, the origins and the rise of our literary genres and devices. It is unfortunate that the study of oral literature has thus far been so exclusively preoccupied with the study of themes and their migrations from country to country, i.e., with the raw materials of modern literatures.⁴ Of late, however, folklorists have increasingly turned their attention to the study of patterns, forms, and devices, to a morphology of literary forms, to the problems of the teller and narrator and the audience of a tale, and have thus prepared the way for a close integration of their studies into a general conception of literary scholarship.⁵ Though the study of oral literature has its own peculiar problems, those of transmission and social setting,⁶ its fundamental problems, without doubt, are shared with written literature; and there is a continuity between oral and written literature which has never been interrupted. Scholars in the modern European literatures have neglected these questions to their own disadvantage, while literary historians in the Slavic and Scandinavian countries, where folklore is still—or was till recently—alive, have been in much closer touch with these studies. But "comparative literature" is hardly the term by which to designate the study of oral literature.

Another sense of "comparative" literature confines it to the study of relationships between two or more literatures. This is

the use established by the flourishing school of French *comparatistes* headed by Fernand Baldensperger and gathered around the *Revue de littérature comparée*.⁷ The school has especially given attention, sometimes mechanically but sometimes with considerable finesse, to such questions as the reputation and penetration, the influence and fame, of Goethe in France and England, of Ossian and Carlyle and Schiller in France. It has developed a methodology which, going beyond the collection of information concerning reviews, translations, and influences, considers carefully the image, the concept of a particular author at a particular time, such diverse factors of transmission as periodicals, translators, salons, and travelers, and the "receiving factor," the special atmosphere and literary situation into which the foreign author is imported. In total, much evidence for the close unity, especially of the Western European literatures, has been accumulated; and our knowledge of the "foreign trade" of literatures has been immeasurably increased.

But this conception of "comparative literature" has also, one recognizes, its peculiar difficulties.⁸ No distinct system can, it seems, emerge from the accumulation of such studies. There is no methodological distinction between a study of "Shakespeare in France" and a study of "Shakespeare in eighteenth-century England," or between a study of Poe's influence on Baudelaire and one of Dryden's influence on Pope. Comparisons between literatures, if isolated from concern with the total national literatures, tend to restrict themselves to external problems of sources and influences, reputation and fame. Such studies do not permit us to analyze and judge an individual work of art, or even to consider the complicated whole of its genesis; instead, they are mainly devoted either to such echoes of a masterpiece as translations and imitations, frequently by second-rate authors, or to the prehistory of a masterpiece, the migrations and the spread of its themes and forms. The emphasis of "comparative literature" thus conceived is on externals; and the decline of "comparative literature" in recent decades reflects the general turning away from stress on mere "facts," on sources and influences.

A third conception obviates, however, all these criticisms, by identifying "comparative literature" with the study of literature

in its totality, with "world-literature," with "general" or "universal" literature. There are certain difficulties with these suggested equations. The term "world literature," a translation of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*,⁹ is perhaps needlessly grandiose, implying that literature should be studied on all five continents, from New Zealand to Iceland. Existing courses in world literature, like the textbooks and handbooks written for them, often supply us with snippets from famous authors and great books ranging from the *Rig-Veda* to Oscar Wilde and encourage an indiscriminate smattering, a vague, sentimental cosmopolitanism. The possibly preferable term "general literature" has the disadvantage that Paul Van Tieghem¹⁰ has tried to capture it for a rather narrow conception in specific contrast to "comparative literature." According to him, "general literature" studies those movements and fashions of literature which transcend national lines. In practice, however, it would be difficult to determine beforehand which movements are general and thus to draw a line of distinction between the purely national and the general. Most of Van Tieghem's own books are rather conventional investigations of a comparative sort, studying Ossian in France or the international vogue of "graveyard poetry," or are handbooks of external facts and interrelationships.¹¹

Whatever the difficulties into which a conception of universal literary history may run, it is important to think of literature as a totality and to trace the growth and development of literature without regard to linguistic distinctions. The practical result of such thinking will be a general history, especially of the Western tradition. One cannot doubt the continuity between Greek and Roman literatures, the Western medieval world, and the main modern literatures; and, without minimizing the importance of Oriental influences, especially that of the Bible, one must recognize a close unity which includes all Europe, Russia, the United States, and the South American literatures. This ideal was envisaged and, within their limited means, fulfilled, by the founders of literary history in the early nineteenth century, such men as the Schlegels, Sismondi, Bouterwek, and Hallam.¹² During the later nineteenth century, this ideal was more closely defined and brought nearer to a coherent view through the influence of evolutionism. The first theories of comparative litera-

ture, the books by Karayev and Posnett,¹³ were largely under the influence of the sociological conceptions of Herbert Spencer and drew far too close a parallelism between the growth of institutions and that of literature. But a return to the ideals and ambitions of the great masters of general literary historiography is overdue, whatever modifications we may make today in the details of their methods and however ampler our sources of information may be. Literary history as a synthesis, literary history on a supernational scale, will have to be written again. The study of comparative literature in this sense will make high demands on the linguistic proficiencies of our scholars. It asks for a widening of perspectives, a suppression of local and provincial sentiments, not easy to achieve. Yet literature is one, as art and humanity are one; and in this conception lies the future of historical literary studies.

Within this enormous area—in practice, identical with all literary history—there are, no doubt, subdivisions sometimes running along linguistic lines. There are, first of all, the groups of the three main linguistic families in Europe—the Germanic, the Romance, and the Slavic literatures. The Romance literatures have particularly frequently been studied in close interconnection, from the days of Bouterwek up to Leonardo Olschki's partially successful attempt to write a history of them all for the medieval period.¹⁴ The Germanic literatures have been comparably studied, usually, only for the early Middle Ages, when the nearness of a general Teutonic civilization can be still strongly felt.¹⁵ Despite the customary opposition of Polish scholars, it would appear that the close linguistic affinities of the Slavic languages, in combination with shared popular traditions extending even to metrical forms, make up a basis for a common Slavic literature.¹⁶

The history of themes and forms, devices and genres, is obviously an international history. While most of our genres descend from the literature of Greece and Rome, they were very considerably modified and augmented during the Middle Ages. Even the history of metrics, though closely bound up with the individual linguistic systems, is international. Furthermore, the great literary movements and styles of modern Europe (the Renaissance, the Baroque, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Real-

ism, Symbolism) far exceed the boundaries of one nation, even though there are significant national differences between the workings out of these styles.¹⁷ On the whole, the importance of linguistic barriers was quite unduly magnified during the nineteenth century.

This emphasis was due to the very close association between Romantic (mostly linguistic) nationalism and the rise of modern organized literary history. It continues today through such practical influences as the virtual identification, especially in this country, of the teaching of literature and the teaching of a language. The result, in this country, has been an extraordinary lack of contact between the students of English, German, and French literature. Each of these groups bears a completely different imprint and uses different methods. These disjunctions are in part, doubtless, unavoidable, simply because most men live in but a single linguistic medium; and yet they lead to grotesque consequences when literary problems are discussed only with regard to views expressed in the particular language and only with reference to texts and documents in that language. Though in certain problems of artistic style, meter, and even genre, the linguistic differences between the European literatures will be important, it is clear that for many problems of the history of ideas, including critical ideas, such distinctions are untenable; artificial cross sections are drawn through homogeneous materials, and histories are written concerning ideological echoes by chance expressed in English or German or French. The excessive attention to one vernacular is especially detrimental to the study of medieval literature, since in the Middle Ages Latin was the foremost literary language, and Europe formed a very close intellectual unity. A history of literature during the Middle Ages in England which neglects the vast amount of writings in Latin and Anglo-Norman gives a false picture of England's literary situation and general culture.

This recommendation of comparative literature does not, of course, imply neglecting the study of individual national literatures. Indeed, it is just the problem of "nationality" and of the distinct contributions of the individual nations to this general literary process which should be realized as central. Instead of being studied with theoretical clarity, the problem has been

blurred by nationalistic sentiment and racial theories. To isolate the exact contributions of English literature to general literature, a fascinating problem, might lead to a shift of perspective and an altered evaluation, even of the major figures. Within each national literature there arise similar problems of the exact shares of regions and cities. Such an exaggerated theory as that of Josef Nadler,¹⁸ who professes to be able to discern the traits and characteristics of each German tribe and region and its reflections in literature, should not deter us from the consideration of these problems, rarely investigated with any command of facts and any coherent method. Much that has been written on the role of New England, the Middle West, and the South in the history of American literature, and most of the writings on regionalism, amounts to no more than the expression of pious hopes, local pride, and resentment of centralizing powers. Any objective analysis will have to distinguish questions concerning the racial descent of authors and sociological questions concerning provenience and setting from questions concerning the actual influence of the landscape and questions of literary tradition and fashion.

Problems of "nationality" become especially complicated if we have to decide that literatures in the same language are distinct national literatures, as American and modern Irish assuredly are. Such a question as why Goldsmith, Sterne, and Sheridan do not belong to Irish literature, while Yeats and Joyce do, needs an answer. Are there independent Belgian, Swiss, and Austrian literatures? It is not very easy to determine the point at which literature written in America ceased to be "colonial English" and became an independent national literature. Is it the mere fact of political independence? Is it the national consciousness of the authors themselves? Is it the use of national subject matter and "local color"? Or is it the rise of a definite national literary style?

Only when we have reached decisions on these problems shall we be able to write histories of national literature which are not simply geographical or linguistic categories, shall we be able to analyze the exact way in which each national literature enters into European tradition. Universal and national literatures implicate each other. A pervading European convention is modified

in each country: there are also centers of radiation in the individual countries, and eccentric and individually great figures who set off one national tradition from the other. To be able to describe the exact share of the one and the other would amount to knowing much that is worth knowing in the whole of literary history.