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La comparaison dans les sciences

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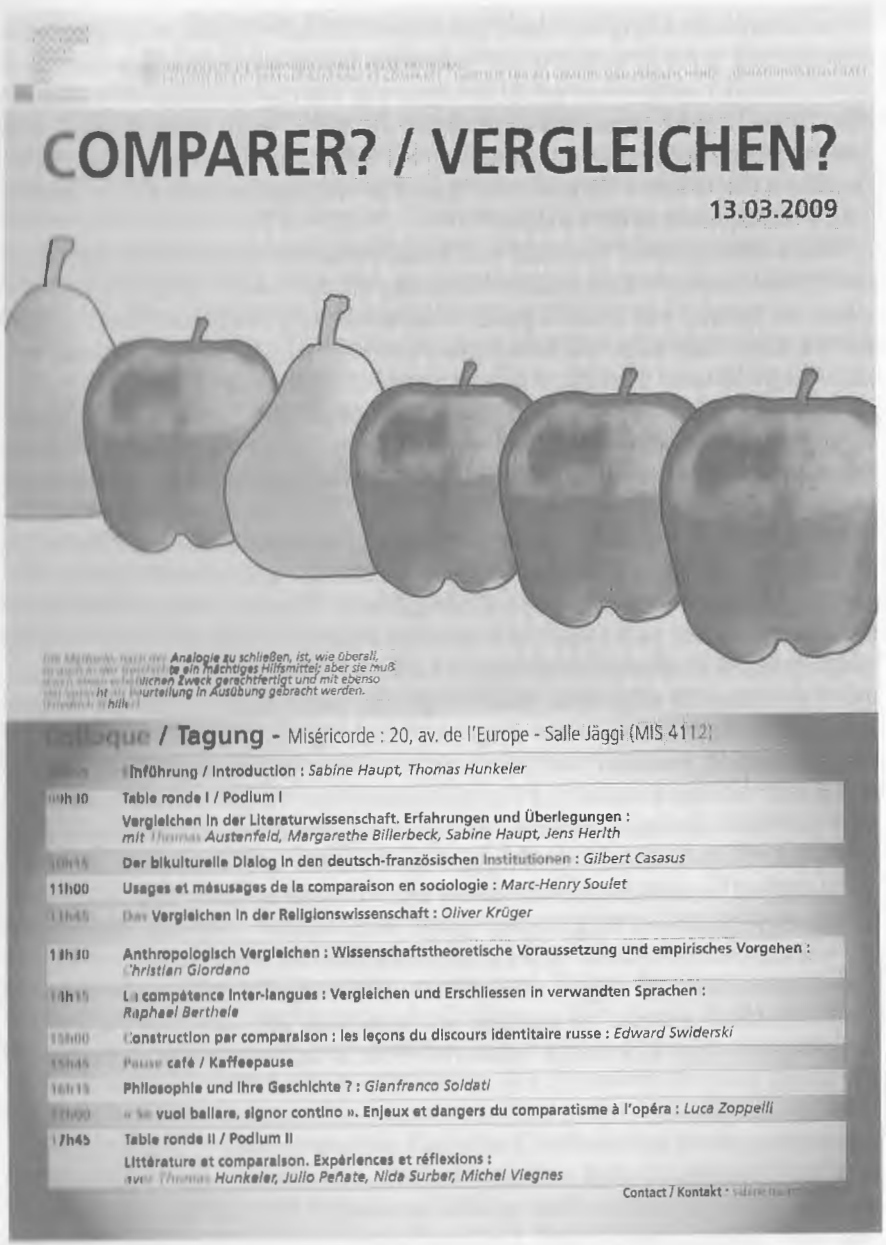

Comparison and Contrast: Discovering Family Relations

Thomas Austenfeld

What do we look for when we compare: the similarities or the differences? The graphic design of the poster announcing our conference calls attention to the many well-known sayings about the impossibility of comparing different kinds of fruit. Such sayings appear to be common to many languages and cultures. German speakers aver that someone who sets two incompatible categories into relation is in fact comparing "Äpfel und Birnen". South American speakers of Spanish echo the sentiment with "comparar peras con manzanas". The implied objection here is based on logic: since the two are different, a comparison is illegitimate. If I were to ask my friend how long it takes him to drive from Munich to Berlin, he might say "five hours". If I object and say that it takes me eight, he will protest that his sports car and my station wagon cannot be legitimately compared. In essence, because the difference in our cars went unmentioned, we have constructed a defective syllogism; one that omits a crucial premise and hence produces false conclusions. Although both of us are talking about automobiles, or varieties of fruit – and we know, even as we speak, that our objects partake of these shared categories – we subtly accuse our conversation partners of sloppy thinking. By refusing to acknowledge the commonality of the objects, we insinuate that we are capable of finer powers of distinction than our conversation partners.

Americans are more likely to say that you *cannot* compare apples and oranges. Even if we disregard for the moment that apples and oranges actually have similar shapes, unlike apples and pears, the important part of the phrase is the "not". The negation, the denial of comparability, is always part of the sentence. It calls attention to the fact that English speakers commonly make a distinction between "comparing" and "contrasting". The former activity looks for similarities, the latter for differences, always assuming, of course, that the two objects submitted to such scrutiny share a sufficient number of features to be comparable yet also differ sufficiently to make both the comparison and the contrast useful exercises. The "comparison/contrast" essay is a staple feature of American educational culture from primary school right up to college. The two activities are considered inseparable. Together, they form a complete epistemology. The title of our conference, "Vergleichen/Comparer" does not explicitly reference contrasting but relies instead on the German and French terms for comparing customarily employed in literary studies.

"Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft" and "Littérature générale et comparée" obviously do not limit themselves to looking for similari-

ties because, in doing their comparative work, they naturally discover the constitutive differences among their objects of study as well. Their commonly accepted English counterpart, "General and comparative literature", also elides the notion of contrast in its name, though not perhaps in its practice. The eagerness of discovering commonalities that rise to the level of generalities seems to take existing differences for granted yet seeks to surmount them quickly in order to arrive at abstractions. "Fear not the new generalization", says Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay "Circles", as he illustrates the forward-moving impetus of civilization by way of a constant replacement and absorption of the old by the new.[1] Yet not so quick: at the outset of this conference, I want to urge the value of contrasting, of appreciating difference that does not resolve into a greater whole, of celebrating the incommensurable, the particular, the resistant residue that refuses categorization. I want to suggest that comparison without contrast is incomplete. Contrast alone would merely show the gulf between two things; comparison alone establishes facile harmonies. Together, they enact the creative tension between disparateness and identity.

If we write "comparison" on our banners, our program is clear and our direction one-dimensional: we accept the differences as temporary, as "accidental" (the Scholastics would have said) and we go straight for the "essentials" in seeking to overcome with mental constructs the messiness of the physical world. The result of this operation may be intellectual mastery but not necessarily intellectual honesty. For in seeking to abstract, we must neglect. Looking for the forest, we disregard the trees ... as well as the bushes, grasses, mushrooms, beetles, and insects without which the forest would not be a forest. The distinctions we discover in contrasting may well be more fascinating than the supposed shared features. I hazard a hypothesis: "comparing" allows us to discover the familiar in the seemingly unfamiliar. Once we have attained some familiarity with the formerly unfamiliar, we yearn to investigate that which is different and as yet unknown within the now familiar. "Contrasting" now takes over. The search for the unknown necessarily proceeds by contrast.

In turning from botanical to literary examples, I ask an apparently simple question: Who is the greater poet, William Shakespeare or John Bunyan? The answer is not as obvious as it appears. After all, for about two hundred years John Bunyan's 1678 allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was the best-selling book in England and North America after the Bible. The importance of *The Pilgrim's Progress* for North American settlement, religious sentiment, and daily life cannot be overestimated and handily supersedes Shakespeare's significance. Still, most of us would hand the crown of achievement to the Bard. Implicitly, then, we have contrasted poetic quality with missionary fervor, drama and poetry with allegorical prose, a large oeuvre with a smaller one, contemporary standards of

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson: *„Circles". Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America 1983, 405.

taste with those of the early nineteenth century, and have in all cases preferred the former and found the latter wanting. The contrasting helps us see that comparison does not get us very far. Though both are English writers, Bunyan and Shakespeare inhabit two different worlds. It's a case of apples and oranges.

How remote, then, may objects of comparison be so as not to appear ridiculously incomparable? In his 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, without doubt a work firmly in the canon of world literature, Herman Melville resorts to a comparison of unlikely things in familiarizing his reader with the leviathan. Setting himself the task of writing a novel that is large enough to contain American ambition, the world's oceans, and the largest creature living on this planet, the whale, Melville wrote a book to rival *Paradise Lost* as well as *Faust I and II*. In approaching his vast subject, what does he do? He uses comparison as his first instinct of orientation. From the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the tame to the wild, from the visible to the invisible – this is the necessary direction of the thinking of his narrator, Ishmael. Says Ishmael in the chapter entitled "Cetology": "I have swam [sic] through libraries and sailed through oceans."[2] The conceit yoking swimming and libraries allows us to see that libraries are filled with books and oceans with whales. Ergo, if oceans are vast libraries, then whales are books. Yet, having once made this somewhat forced comparison by which to establish familiarity, the narrator turns at once to contrast for greater specificity. Not content with whales as such, he moves to classify them into distinctive categories. He proceeds to classify whales by size as if they were books on shelves. A good portion of the "Cetology" chapters of *Moby-Dick* is thus taken up by investigations into the FOLIO whale, the OCTAVO whale, and the DUODECIMO whale.[3]

The comparison is absurd, but it is not preposterous. Quite to the contrary: in addition to performing the familiar act of concluding from the known to the unknown, this comparison opens up the possibilities of symbol and metaphor. Books can be read, and thus whales can be "read". The reader who reads the books about a whale reads about more than whales. The whale itself is symptomatic. Comparing whales with books allows Melville a mise-en-abyme of his own text. Contrasting whales with each other allows him to play with his metaphor. The scientific question, "how are whales like books?" is misplaced. They are not at all like books, of course, and the comparison considered as a statement of essentiality is doomed from the start. The contrast, paradoxically, reveals points of contact between whales and books. In literary study, contrasts within comparisons establish relationships that are relational; relationships that look for family resemblance.

The notion of (biological) family resemblance has been invoked at various times as a category that allows for a certain "fuzziness" while getting across the

[2] Hermann Melville: *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale. 1851*. New York: Norton Critical Editions 2001, 116.

[3] Compare Hermann Melville: *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale. 1851*. New York: Norton Critical Editions 2001, 118.

important point. A strictly Platonist, or idealist, approach to a definitional question, "what is x?" presumes that the answer to this question is both essential and qualitative.[4] Thus, the more a fruit can be described to share the features we know makes up an apple, the more likely it is to approach the essential quality of "appleness" and the higher its apple quality is likely to be. But American pragmatists at and immediately after the time of Melville, C. S. Peirce and William James, for example, were more interested in the family relation metaphor that would also soon engage Wittgenstein: not identity in features, but shared features that suffice to make the relationship visible, allow us to make comparisons. In a family, for example, the daughter has inherited the father's eyes, the mother's mouth, and the grandmother's hair color, but the class membership, family, is not dependent on a single one of these features. Only their unique appearance in her person identifies her as a member. Yet this same daughter, though visibly a member of a biological family, is just as visibly an individual. In her particular combination, the features she shares with others are at the same time our indicators for her distinction from these others. She contrasts with others. She is an individual.

How are whales like books? They come in all sizes. What legitimizes comparison among texts, literatures, and arguments? The pleasure of discovering not just what unites them, but what distinguishes them from each other. Comparison and contrast are as surely two sides of a coin as the two asymmetrical halves of a human face. Only together do they make sense. Only together do they advance our understanding.

[4] In this sentence, I paraphrase Hagberg's first paragraph. Garry L. Hagberg: *Imagined Identities: Autobiography at One Remove*. In: *New Literary History* 38, 1 (2007) 163–181.