Where is Comparative Literature Going: An Interview with Professor Susan Bassnett

Zhang Cha and Susan Bassnett

Abstract:

In this interview, Susan Bassnett describes how her views about comparative literature has undergone changes over time, expounds what the cultural turn was, explains why she is dismissive of influence study, responds to accusations of Eurocentrism, analyses where comparative literature is going, and gives advice to the scholars of comparative literature.

Keywords: comparative literature, discipline, open-minded

Zhang Cha: How have your views about comparative literature changed over time?

Susan Bassnett: The advice I always give to new doctoral students is that research is an organic process, it grows and develops. Students arrive with certain ideas, but if those ideas have not changed by the end of the first year, then they have not developed sufficiently. By the second year, many students are confused, and this too is a necessary stage for growth, because change is always confusing and can sometimes also be painful. But there can be no growth, no forward movement without change.

I believe that comparison is a natural process, since human beings tend to compare x with y all the time. As soon as one begins to study literature, patterns and connections appear. Having been educated in different countries, being taught different languages, literatures and histories, comparing literatures was inevitable.

I wrote my book, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) because I was interested in how the field had developed in the nineteenth century, from its French origins and why there seemed to be so much controversy about it. When appointed to the University of Warwick as The Lecturer in Comparative Literature in the late 1970s I discovered some absurd regulations, such as a ban on comparing texts written in the same language, regardless of cultural context. So an English and an American author were not deemed fit subjects for comparative literature because comparison had to take place across 2 languages. At the same time, in the USA, comparative literature appeared to mean that anything could be compared with anything—a painting with a poem, an opera with a novel, and this also seemed bizarre.

In that book I traced the 2 strands of comparative literature—the French and the American schools and found them both wanting. I noted how many scholars complained about a "crisis" in the subject, how little was being published of any value in the field and I introduced 2 new ideas: 1) that postcolonialism, which was only just starting to have an impact, should be seen as a part of comparative literature and 2) that the emerging field of Translation Studies was more exciting and potentially

more valuable than a moribund comparative literature. Research in Translation Studies in the 1980s and early 1990s was very much concerned with revising literary histories, a task that comparative literature appeared to have abandoned.

1993 is a long time ago and a lot has changed since then. Translation Studies has become a respectable and very diverse field, comparative literature has become revitalized, thanks to such scholars as Haun Saussy, Theo D'Haen, Cesar Dominguez, Harish Trivedi, Bella Brodzki, Emily Apter and many others around the world including Chinese scholars such as Wang Ning. But in my view it has become revitalized by acknowledging both the impact of translation studies and postcolonialism. Right now the issue for comparative literature is its relationship with the expanding field of World Literature, where the impact of translation studies has also been experienced.

However, I do not believe that comparative literature or translation studies are disciplines in their own right; they are methods of approaching literature. There is no point in wasting time trying to argue that these huge, baggy fields of research are distinct disciplines, since they are very diverse and derive from a combination of other disciplines such as linguistics, literary study, history, politics, film, theatre, etc. I don't see this as a problem: we might well ask whether memory studies, another huge field, is a discipline, and again I would say no, for it too draws upon a whole range of established disciplines in the arts, social sciences and medical sciences. I like the idea of fields of study that cannot be fitted into disciplinary boxes. This is the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth.

Zhang Cha: What was the cultural turn?

Susan Bassnett: The cultural turn was invented by myself and Andre Lefevere back in the early 1990s. Translation studies was establishing itself in a small way, and we felt that it was important to stress the cultural dimensions of producing and receiving translations. We urged that more attention be paid to cultural factors such as the role of editors, publishers, patrons, censors etc. who play a part in the production of translations, alongside the attention to changing aesthetic norms which had been a major focus of attention in the 1980s, thanks to Gideon Toury's important work. The cultural turn was received enthusiastically and further served to build bridges with post-colonialism, leading on to a postcolonial translation studies pathway and a translation and gender pathway. More recently, our work has been taken forward through what has been described as "the sociological turn" in translation studies. We also broadened the scope of research, suggesting that alongside translations as one of the shaping forces in literary history, other practices such as editing, anthologizing, literary criticism and theory, commentaries, historiography should also be considered as significant.

What the cultural turn did was to consolidate the points raised back in 1978 by Itamar Even-Zohar that the study of literary history must take into account the role played by translations and that we need to think about why it is that cultures translate more or less at different stages in their development.

It is also important to remember that when we first founded translation studies, we were doing so in a climate of great excitement when new trends in the humanities were coming into existence and challenging canonical ideas. Alongside translation studies came cultural studies and media studies, then women and gender studies, then postcolonial studies, all of which were to a certain extent fields of study born out of protest that sought to challenge established hierarchies.

Later translation researchers, notably Lawrence Venuti, Michael Cronin, Edwin Gentzler, Sherry Simon and Anthony Pym to name 5 of the best-known all continued to challenge establishment ideas about translation. Venuti stressed the need for translation to be made more visible, Gentzler raised important questions about power relations, Cronin similarly questioned the unequal power relations between majority and minority languages, Pym raised the question of power and ethics, Simon drew attention to gender bias in translation history and more recently has been developing ideas about the multilingual city. I am proud to note that Venuti, Gentzler, Simon and Cronin were all published in the

series I co-edited with the late Andre Lefevere.

Zhang Cha: Why are you dismissive of influence study?

Susan Bassnett: My undergraduate dissertation was on the influence of James Joyce on Italo Svevo. The more I read, the more tenuous that influence seemed to be. Instead, what emerged was the influence of Svevo on Joyce, though Joyce denied this. So the conundrum I faced was: how to prove influence, especially when the supposedly influenced writer lies about the relationship he had with the other writer?

What I learned is that writers' statements cannot be trusted, they are expressions of opinion and sometimes of deliberate deception. Influence is improvable; what remains is the perception of the reader who discerns similarities. Instead of wasting time trying to prove the improvable, it is surely better to focus on the role of the reader who effectively "creates" a text with each new reading.

Zhang Cha: How do you respond to accusations of Eurocentrism?

Susan Bassnett: I wrote *Translation Studies* before the term "Eurocentric" existed. Members of the original group came from Israel (Even-Zohar and Toury), Belgium (Lefevere and Lambert), Slovakia (Popovic) and the Netherlands/US (James Holmes). Holmes had expert knowledge of Indonesian, but otherwise our languages were all European. Of course our focus was on Europe—how could it be otherwise given our knowledge base?

Eurocentrism in the 1980s came to be used as an ideological term to condemn research that did not take sufficiently into account non-European cultures, and so was a key term in early postcolonial thought. However, as postcolonial studies and translation studies expanded and developed, the term began to lose much of its strength. Postcolonial models could not be effectively applied everywhere: Brazilian scholars, for example, were far more interested in postmodernist theory and Brazilian translation studies developed the cannibalistic theory which effectively overrode ideas about Eurocentrism. Nor could postcolonialism be very useful for former Eastern European cultures, who were living through post-communism, and it has not seemed to be very useful for Chinese, Korean or Japanese scholarship too which are not cultures living through a postcolonial phase.

In the book I co-edited with the Indian scholar, Harish Trivedi, *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) we included essays by scholars from around the world and it became apparent that there were major differences of perspective. This is not to say, of course, that postcolonialism is not an extremely valuable field of study, only to say that there have been shifts of emphasis over the last 25 years. Today, Trauma studies is a big area, and a lot of work deals with post-Holocaust memory in Europe. Moreover, as I firmly believe that all socio-political events have major epistemological consequences, it has become essential today that European scholars address European issues such as the impact of mass migration, which has led to the emergence of some fascinating literature, written by first or second generation migrants with subsequent linguistic implications. Moreover, in Europe there is a rise of nationalism which appears to contradict trends towards globalization. In the UK, for example, we have seen since 1999 the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and a referendum for independence, and the establishment of an Assembly for Wales. For comparative literature scholars, the point to note here is the rise of bilingual education in both those countries, and its concomitant impact on literature. The same can be said of Northern Ireland, where although there is no bilingual policy, as in Wales and Scotland, a lot of writers work in both English and Irish.

So although I remain committed to the ideals and ethics of postcolonial thought, I am also aware that different areas around the world need also to look more deeply into their own local contexts.

Zhang Cha: Where is comparative literature going?

Susan Bassnett: In the light of the above, I believe that comparative literature is gaining importance because it offers a means of building bridges between cultures. It also offers the opportunity for us all to engage with different points of view. For example, lecturing recently on Coetzee, Buzzati and Cavafy, I used an essay by Wang Jinghui in a volume edited by Kailash Baral and published in Delhi in 2008 that shed fascinating insight into the reception of Coetzee in China. I had simply not been aware of many of the issues that Wang Jihui discusses.

Comparative literature in India, aided by translation studies methods is increasingly concerned with pan-India, that is with discussing the inter-relationship between the many Indian languages and literatures of the sub-continent. This marks a step change from the endless debates about the relationship between India and the West, which is still ongoing but is no longer dominant. Similarly in Europe, while due consideration must be given to the legacy of colonialism, it is important to engage with the massive changes that the continent is undergoing, physically and culturally.

I note, for example, with fascination, that recent archaeological discoveries in the North of Scotland are changing our knowledge of the early movement of peoples across Europe in the Neolithic period, challenging all our established assumptions.

With regard to Chinese comparative literature surely the same is applicable? On the one hand, the relationship between China and the West and between China and her neighbors is a rich area for further investigation, but one would hope that Chinese comparative literature is also engaging with the multiple languages and traditions within China too.

In terms of the debates around aphasia, I agree that there is a need for China to develop her own literary theories, and am also mindful of the work by the Indian scholar Ganesh Devy who has talked about amnesia in the Indian context, a double amnesia—first the forgetting of Indian traditions with the coming of the British, then an attempt to try and forget the Anglo-Indian era. Obviously China has had an extraordinary series of historical changes and one need only think about the importance of socialist realism, followed by the cultural revolution, followed by the opening up to Western influences — and all in a barely 60 / 70 years. But China has a rich history of literary theory stretching back to the days when we in the West were little more than barbarians, and China also, as I understand it, is not so obsessed with positivism as we have been since the 18th century.

And this is where we have to turn to the developing area known as World Literature, which has been transformed by theorists such as Pascale Casanova who offers a very French perspective on the field, Franco Moretti who focuses more on prose than on poetry and theatre and David Damrosch. As I see it, what is happening today in World Literature, is an extension of what we were proposing with the invention of translation studies: to explore how texts move across cultures, to understand some of the complex aesthetic and socio-political implications of that movement, to see how textual practice differs according to different norms and conventions at different times.

In short, a combination of close reading of texts within contexts and mindful of linguistic and cultural constraints and differences, also taking into account movement through time.

Literary study of any kind, in my view, must involve investigating how a text works, almost like a piece of machinery and, crucially, investigating the historical conditions in which a text was composed and equally crucially, investigating the reception of a text, hence the role of the reader.

Zhang Cha: As a world-famous scholar, what advice would you like to give to scholars of comparative literature?

Susan Bassnett: Never stop reading as widely as possible, but come to terms with the fact that as a comparative literature scholar you are doomed always feel too ignorant. I have come to terms with feeling perpetually ignorant, because there is so much in the world that I have never read and cannot read.

Be open-minded about texts. If you can understand the context in which a text was written, this

will enable you to come to terms with aspects of a text that you may find unpleasant or even wrong-headed.

But just because you do not like something in a text does not mean that you should reject it. I am thinking here of the debates in the US about a work like *Huckleberry Finn*, which contains language that today we view as racist and unacceptable. Yet Mark Twain deliberately engages readers with distasteful attitudes so that we will think more deeply about the ambiguities of his protagonist and the world from which Huck derives.

Do not only read "great" works, read everything you can: children's books, popular romances, detective fiction, travel books …… The resurgence of interest in the West in Anglo-Saxon and the Vikings is linked to computer games and TV series such as *Game of Thrones*. Icelandic sagas appear in Japanese manga. Often popular culture touches the heart of what is happening in a society before intellectuals can grasp what is going on.

My project on global news translation opened up vistas of what is happening across the world in terms of the power of electronic media. Look at blogs, look at internet networking sites.

Above all, be fearless. No great art ever came from people who were timid. Change does not come from the centre, it comes from the margins. Revolutions, social and artistic do not come from within the establishment.

Finally, you have been generous enough to describe me as "a world-famous scholar". I do not see myself in that way. I see myself as someone who has had the great privilege of being able to work with brilliant young people and to learn from them, just as I have also learned from my 4 children and their friends, and now also from my grandchildren. That my work is useful around the world gives great satisfaction and pride, but what I have always sought to do is to explore patterns across literatures and cultures with no sense of wanting to pursue a predetermined path.

I conclude with two translated quotes from Confucius, and oh, how I wish I could read the Chinese!

1) A youth is to be regarded with respect / How do we know that his future will not be equal to our present?

2) To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous.

Zhang Cha, Doctoral student majoring in Comparative Literature and World Literature, School of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University. Professor of English Literature, School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University. Direction of research: English and American literature; comparative literature. Email: zhangchasc@163.com

Susan Bassnett, Professor of Comparative Literature, Special Advisor in Translation Studies, School of Modern Languages, The University of Warwick and Professor of Comparative Literature, School of Modern Languages, University of Glasgow, Scotland. She has published over 20 books, including monographs, collections, and translations.