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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN SWEDEN

Anders Pettersson¹

RESUMO: O artigo oferece um panorama dos estudos literários comparativos na Suécia desde o século XIX até hoje

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Literatura Comparada; Suécia

ABSTRACT: The article offers an overview of comparative literary studies in Sweden from the nineteenth century till now

KEY WORDS: Comparative Literature; Suécia

Swedish is a small language, and the study of foreign languages – traditionally, mostly English, German, and French – long held an important position in the Swedish educational system. Sweden is also one of the countries in which the originally German tradition of publishing world histories of literature has been strong and played a role for the general educated public. Both those features of Swedish intellectual culture have no doubt facilitated a relatively international outlook on literature. The fact that the Swedish Academy awards the Nobel Prize for Literature may also have created some extra interest in world literature and some extra demand for literature people with a broad international horizon.

Still, comparative literature is not really an academic subject in Sweden. This has to do, at least in part, with the special institutional tradition surrounding the academic study of literature in the country. Literary studies have first and foremost been conducted within a subject which encompasses, in principle at least, the history and theory of the literature of all cultures and ages: *litteraturvetenskap* (literally translated: Literary Science; compare the German term *Literaturwissenschaft*). A brief historical sketch of the institutional background will be required in order to make the situation of comparative literature in Sweden comprehensible.

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Academic literary studies in Sweden began in the first half of the nineteenth century within the newly introduced academic subject of *estetik* (Aesthetics).² Aesthetics, taught at the universities of both Uppsala and Lund – long the only two universities in Sweden – was supposed to cover the theory and history of all the arts. Aesthetics was thus not a philosophical discipline, even if Swedish aesthetics, during its first decades, was heavily influenced by the philosophy of art of German Idealism. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the concrete history of literature and art began to play a constantly larger role within the discipline, soon making the ambitious and unwieldy subject unviable in its traditional form.

In 1918, aesthetics was divided into two academic disciplines, the one concerned with art and the other with literature, and both these disciplines have survived. The literary subject, originally called *litteraturhistoria med poetik* (literary history with poetics), had its name changed, around 1970, to *litteraturvetenskap*, but it still comprises the literary part of the original subject of aesthetics. Thus *litteraturvetenskap* can be said to cover, at least in principle, the history and theory of literature, globally and in all periods. Against this background, the introduction of comparative literature as a subject of its own would perhaps make little sense.

Yet this is only part of the story. At Swedish universities, literature is naturally also studied and researched within the language departments: in the departments of English, German, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and so forth. It is worth noting, however, that Swedish does not exist as a separate philology in the same sense at Swedish universities. Swedish as a language is taught and researched within *Nordiska språk* (Scandinavian languages) or *Svenska* (Swedish), but the study of Swedish literature forms part of *litteraturvetenskap*. Not surprisingly, then, Swedish literature occupies a very strong position within *litteraturvetenskap*. Overviews of literary history play an important role in the undergraduate curriculum, and in these historical courses international literary history and Swedish literary history are accorded roughly equal space. But the research carried out within the discipline mostly concerns Swedish topics.

What should *litteraturvetenskap* be called in English? Some Swedish universities prefer to translate the name as “Comparative Literature” (so in a certain sense comparative

² For the historical facts given below, see the following two sources and the literature cited there: Harald Elovson, “Litteraturhistoria” [Literary History], in *Svenskt litteraturllexikon* [The Swedish Dictionary of Literature], ed. Louise Vinge, 2nd, enlarged ed. (Lund: C W K Gleerup Bokförlag, 1970), pp. 336–338; Claes Ahlund, “Litteraturämnets etableringsfas: Från 1890 till 1919” [The Foundational Period of the Subject of Literature: From 1890 to 1919], in Claes Ahlund and Bengt Landgren, *Från etableringsfas till konsolidering: Svensk akademisk litteraturundervisning 1890–1946* [From the Foundational Period to the Consolidation: The Academic Teaching of Literature in Sweden 1890–1946] (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2003), pp. 15–116, esp. pp. 31–38.

literature *does* exist as an academic subject in Sweden), while others employ the designation “Literature”. Neither solution appears entirely satisfactory to me. “Comparative literature” is arguably misleading, since only a minor part of the activities within the discipline can rightfully be characterized as comparative. “Literature” is a better and more faithful translation, but just like “Comparative Literature” it does not reflect the fact that the discipline is principally occupied with Swedish literature. In the rest of this essay I will refer to the subject as “Swedish and general literature”. (“Swedish and comparative literature” would sound more idiomatic, but would give a less adequate idea of the nature of the discipline.)

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That comparative literature never existed as a separate academic discipline in Sweden has not prevented Swedish scholars from sometimes engaging in work in comparative literature, if by “comparative literature” one means – as I will do here – the study of literature from an international point of view, a study not confined to a specific nation, people, or language.³ In the following I will offer a sketch of *de facto* comparative literature in Sweden.

International literary history has a strong and firmly rooted presence in the undergraduate programmes of Swedish and general literature, and normally also in its PhD programmes. It can be questioned, however, how truly international that international portion of the discipline can be said to be. Today, foreign literary texts are almost without exception read in Swedish translation at the undergraduate level, English now being the only foreign language that every Swedish student is certain to have learned. One can add that the Western literary tradition was, until quite recently, allowed to dominate the picture of international literary history in the subject’s curriculum more or less completely. The 1990 edition of the leading textbook in international literary history, *Litteraturens historia i världen* (The History of Literature in the World), offered a main text comprising 584 pages. Only between 30 and 40 pages were devoted to literature in non-European languages, and the literatures of Western

³ That is a kind of characterization often met with in institutional contexts in international comparative literature. Thus the Statutes of The International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) implicitly understand comparative literature as “the study of literature undertaken from an international point of view”. See <http://www.aile-icla.org/site/?page_id=20>, accessed 23 August 2016. Similarly, ICLA’s Coordinating Committee for the Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages Series (CHLEL) describes the comparative history of literature as “literary history that coordinates related or comparable phenomena from an international point of view”, contrasting such comparative literary history with “the writing of literary histories confined to specific nations, peoples, or languages”. See <<http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=.CHLEL>>, accessed 23 August 2016.

Europe occupied centre stage.⁴ It is true that the proportions and viewpoints are decisively different in a recent (2011) competitor, *Världens litteraturer: En gränsöverskridande historia* (The Literatures of the World: A History Going beyond Borders). The volume, written by a collective of authors, surveys the literary history of the world in 322 pages. Between 80 and 90 pages deal specifically with literatures in non-European languages, and Europe is treated as one of the world's five major literary regions.⁵

International literary history also plays a significant role in doctoral programmes of Swedish and general literature, but the research projects of the doctoral students mainly concern Swedish literature, very often modern or contemporary Swedish literature. In January 2014 I toured the homepages of the Swedish universities offering doctoral programmes in Swedish and general literature. Of the 70 doctoral dissertation projects in the subject that I was able to localize, 10 appeared to belong to comparative literature, such as I define the concept here. Apparently, seven of the 70 prospective dissertations were intended for publication in other languages than Swedish, which practically always meant English.

Moving now from education to research, I would first like to illustrate the fact that there exists, after all, a body of comparatist work *de facto* in Sweden. Before describing the contemporary situation I will mention a few earlier book-length Swedish studies of a comparative kind. I will concentrate on works with a larger comparative span and leave aside books that are comparative only in as far as they treat more than one Nordic literature⁶ or deal with phenomena in both Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman literature.⁷

Because of the subject's history and definition, there was always an international strain in Swedish and general literature. However, before the Second World War studies on non-Nordic subjects were typically confined to a single language area. On the whole, works of a broad comparative character only began to appear in the 1950s.

Some major Swedish comparative studies have been published in Swedish, for example, Carl Fehrman's *Diktaren och döden* (The Poet and Death, 1952), and Kjell Espmark's *Att översätta själen* (Translating the Soul, 1975).⁸ As the subtitle of Fehrman's book indicates

⁴ Bernt Olsson and Ingemar Algulin, *Litteraturens historia i världen* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1990). The situation is basically unchanged in the fifth edition of the work (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2014): circa 45 pages out of 616 concern literature in non-European languages.

⁵ *Världens litteraturer: En gränsöverskridande historia*, ed. Margareta Petersson (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2011).

⁶ Like Gunnar Ahlström's influential study *Det moderna genombrottet i Nordens litteratur* [The Modern Breakthrough in Nordic Literature] (Stockholm: Kooperativa Förbundets förlag, 1947).

⁷ Like E.N. Tigerstedt's magisterial three-volume work *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1965–1978).

⁸ Carl Fehrman, *Diktaren och döden: dödsbild och förgängelsetanke i litteraturen från antiken till 1700-talet* [The Poet and Death: The Image of Death and the Idea of the Transitoriness of Life in Literature from Antiquity to the 18th Century] (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1952); Kjell Espmark, *Att översätta själen: en huvudlinje i modern*

(see note 7), Fehrman's theme is the representation of death and transitoriness in literature across well above two thousand years (in European literature, that is – this fact is not reflected in Fehrman's title but treated as a matter of course). Seven of Fehrman's thirteen chapters concern Swedish material, but Greek, Latin, Italian, French, English, and German authors come in for consideration in other chapters: Homer, Lucian, Petrarch, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Gryphius, and many others. Much interest is devoted to the visual portrayal of death and phenomena related to death.

Espmark, for his part, looks at the poetry of a number of lyrical modernists (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Maeterlinck, Eliot, Trakl, Breton), exploring the lyrical techniques with the help of which these authors negotiate “a problem that pervades all modern poetry from *Les Fleurs du mal* up to our day – the problem how to materialize the reality of the soul, how to give sensuous shape to thought and feeling”.⁹ Baudelaire's formulation “le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle / sur l'esprit gemissant en proie aux longs ennuis” or Eliot's “nerves in patterns on a screen” exemplify the kind of complex metaphor that particularly interests Espmark.¹⁰

Increasingly, however, works in Swedish and general literature that are of more obvious international interest have been published in foreign languages, mainly in English. Quite a few of the more important studies were doctoral dissertations, which was long a very ambitious genre in Sweden. Bertil Romberg's *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (1962),¹¹ offers not only a comprehensive theoretical reflection on the narrative problems and techniques of novels “told in the first person by a fictive ‘I’”,¹² a discussion which draws on a large material of international examples, but also special chapters studying several European first-person novels from different periods in more depth: Grimmelshausen's *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus*, Richardson's *Clarissa*, Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich*, and Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

The title of Louise Vinge's *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century* (1967)¹³ speaks for itself. Vinge's book is a learned but also imaginative and perceptive study of a changing tradition that, according to Vinge, finally

poesi – från Baudelaire till surrealismen [Translating the Soul: A Main Tendency in Modern Poetry – from Baudelaire to Surrealism] (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners förlag, 1975).

⁹ Espmark, p. 263. I am quoting from Espmark's English summary of his book.

¹⁰ Cf. Espmark, pp. 15 and 7.

¹¹ Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* [trans. Michael Taylor and Harold. H. Borland] (Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1962).

¹² Romberg, p. XI

¹³ Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century* (Lund: Gleerups, 1967).

disintegrates in the early nineteenth century. The reader is led from Ovid's foundational narrative in his *Metamorphoses* via medieval moralizations and appropriations into the role of the myth in the intellectual worlds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Literature in Latin, French, German, English, Swedish, Spanish, and Italian figures in Vinge's account.

A more recent example of a relevant dissertation is Sara Danius's *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Modernist Aesthetics* (1998).¹⁴ Discussing the period from 1880 to 1930, Danius argues for the thesis that such technological innovations as cinema, telephone, trains, automobiles, et cetera have affected the senses and sensibilities of writers in ways that help explain the emergence of high modernism. At the centre of her book are extensive analyses of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Special interest is devoted to the representation of sight and hearing in those works.

Speaking of comparatist work in Sweden, it would appear unnatural not to mention the world histories of literature produced in the language. These are not only textbooks. The genre, originating in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, has had a number of comprehensive and important exponents in Sweden over the years. A good example is *Bonniers allmänna litteraturhistoria* (Bonnie's General History of Literature), a nine-volume work published 1959–1966 containing contributions by specialists from Swedish and general literature but also from a number of other disciplines.¹⁵ Despite the broad teams of contributors with different specialties and the ostensible wish for a truly global coverage, the concentration on Western literature still makes itself strongly felt in such works.

Works like *Bonniers allmänna litteraturhistoria* were the products of cooperation between, principally, scholars from various language departments and scholars from Swedish and general literature. Today, such cooperation has become more frequent and often also deeper. Many of the main comparative initiatives in Sweden in the present century have this background, for example the work behind the four-volume *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* (2006).¹⁶ In the four collections of articles, the editors set themselves the goal to

¹⁴ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Modernist Aesthetics* (No publisher: Uppsala, 1998). Later published as Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ *Bonniers allmänna litteraturhistoria*, general ed. E.N. Tigerstedt and (1966) Daniel Andræ, 9 vols. (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1959–1966). A later exponent of the genre is the seven-volume *Litteraturens historia* [The History of Literature], ed. Hans Hertel (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1985–1994), but that work is a Scandinavian co-production published simultaneously in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. The mainly Danish work should not be counted as a Swedish achievement in comparative literature, but it is of interest as proof of the continued importance of general literary history in Swedish culture.

¹⁶ *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, general ed. Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, 4 vols. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

pave the way for the writing of a world history of literature that is more theoretically disciplined and more international in outlook. The four volumes concentrate on special cruxes: the notion of literature, the conceptions of genre, and (the last two volumes) the understanding and representation of the interactions between literatures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The project led to the formation of a very international group of researchers now engaged in the writing of a world history on new principles, *Literature: A World History*.

The work behind *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* was led from Stockholm University, arguably the most important Swedish research environment for comparative literature at present. (To some extent, there is a longer historical tradition behind this dominance – the only Swedish literature chair with the word “comparative” in its designation was established at Stockholm University in 1956, a professorship in Swedish and general literature with a special focus on general and comparative literary history.¹⁷) Stockholm University has made literary research one of its leading research areas. For comparative literature – and there is special cooperation taking place under this very rubric – this means that extra funding is available for research within, particularly, literary theory, older literature, and world literature. The main researchers associated with the comparative-literature initiative come from language departments and from Swedish and general literature.¹⁸

There is indeed much evidence of an interest in comparative literature in the literary studies milieu in Stockholm. Four Swedish and Danish scholars from Swedish and general literature and from classical studies work on a project called “Fiction and Figuration. Studies in High Medieval Literature”.¹⁹ Some scholars are specially occupied with authors in exile.²⁰ And at the time of writing, in 2016, a new big project in comparative literature is just being launched at Stockholm University: “World Literatures: Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics”. The project aims to “explore, across numerous languages, how aesthetic values, genres, forms, literary communities and individual authorships are shaped in trade-offs between the local and the global, the national and the transnational, and between hegemonic and dominated languages in Asian, African, European and (Latin) American contexts.”²¹ The

¹⁷ In Swedish: “litteraturvetenskap, med särskild inriktning mot allmän och jämförande litteraturhistoria”. See Bengt Landgren, “Universitetsämne i brytningstid: Svensk akademisk litteraturundervisning 1947–1956” [An Academic Discipline in a Time of Transition: The Academic Teaching of Literature in Sweden 1947–1956], in *Universitetsämne i brytningstider: Studier i svensk akademisk litteraturundervisning 1947–1995* [An Academic Discipline in Times of Transition: Studies in the Academic Teaching of Literature in Sweden 1947–1995], ed. Bengt Landgren (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2005), pp. 17–304 (at pp. 257–263).

¹⁸ See <<http://www.su.se/english/research/2.26373/comparative-literature>>. Accessed 30 August 2016.

¹⁹ See <fictionandfiguration.com>. Accessed 24 August 2016.

²⁰ As evidenced, e.g., by the collection of articles *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Axel Englund and Anders Olsson (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

²¹ See <<http://worldlit.se>>. Accessed 24 August 2016.

members of the project's steering group come from English, French, Swedish and comparative literature, and social anthropology.

Yet some other Swedish universities could also be mentioned in this context. At Uppsala University, research on the role of Swedish literature in the world is the theme of one of the specially designated areas of specialization within Swedish and general literature. This research is focused on the spread and impact of Swedish literature abroad, particularly during the last half-century. More general questions concerning the world literary system will also be studied, as well as patterns and asymmetries in transnational cultural exchange.²² And at the time of writing, a postdoctoral position in comparative literature (*komparativ litteraturvetenskap*) is just about to be filled at Lund University.

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In my essay, I have concentrated on comparative literature in Sweden as far as it has been conducted within, or related to, the academic subject of Swedish and general literature. If research within the country's various language departments had also been brought in, the picture would no doubt have become richer. However, comparative literature would probably still have come across as playing only a minor part in literary studies in Sweden.

The glimpses I have given of the present state of affairs do not give reason to predict any dramatic change in the status of comparative literature in Sweden, but they do seem to indicate a slow but steady rise in its importance. Such a development would seem natural, given the global reach of much contemporary literature and the global character of intellectual exchange today.

²²See

<http://www.litvet.uu.se/research/section_for_sociology_of_literature/Profilomraden/Svensk_skonlitteratur_i_varden/?languageId=1>. Accessed 23 August 2016.