

# By Way of Introduction to the Comparative Literature Survey



In the following pages, we present the results of a survey organized by the editors of the journal *Svět literatury / World of Literature* on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the renewal of the study of comparative literature at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. The reason for this commemoration was not so much the celebration of the anniversary as the need to look back at the changes in the field both in our local conditions and especially in the international context, and to reflect on its current situation. As some of the responses point out, comparative literature is not a well-known discipline, and this is especially true in the Czech Republic.

In the postwar Czechoslovakia, comparative literature had its place at the university in the two brief periods from 1945 to 1950 and from 1968 to 1970. In both cases, the career of Václav Černý, the professor of comparative literature at the Faculty of Arts, was stopped by the authorities for political reasons. Comparative literature was not restored as a university discipline until a few years after the fall of the communist regime, in 1993. This does not mean that comparative research disappeared in the meantime, but it did not take place at the universities. It persisted only in the seclusion of scientific institutions, such as the Institute of Czech and World Literature of the Academy of Science. In 1993 the Department of World Literature was closed down for economic reasons, (only the Czech literature part remained), which was one of the reasons for the re-establishment of comparative literature department at Charles University. This renewal was mainly thanks to the sinologist and prominent translator Oldřich Král (1930–2018), who materialized his long-standing idea and need. He brought an emphasis on literariness in the revived discipline, following the Russian formalist school; his own motivation, stemming from his sinological orientation, was the search for a concept of “comparative interpretation of literariness” that would represent an alternative to the concepts of literary history and the history of national literatures. The emphasis on translation was an essential part of his approach. Along with Oldřich Král, Vladimír Svatoň (1931–2018), a Russian studies scholar and founder of this journal, Anna Housková, Miroslav Petříček, Zdeněk Hrbata, Martin Procházka, Jiří Pechar, Jiří Stromšík and Jiří Pelán participated in the work of the emerging Centre of Comparative Literature. They all brought in the impulses of their respective disciplines, especially the focus on the European cultural tradition and a philosophical approach to literature.



The present time brings a framework completely different from the early 1990s, which was marked by the enthusiasm for a renewed and uncensored study of literature and the influx of theories and approaches that had been displaced from the Czech scholarly space. The questions we ask stem from the awareness of the changeability of the discipline, its international dimension, but also, in the case of the third question, on the fact that despite its essentially international character, comparative literature is also localised, and the local is a living and open topic in it.

We would like to thank all the colleagues who responded to the survey. The interest they showed is all the more gratifying because we were preparing it at a time when a tragic event occurred at our faculty, in which fourteen of our students and colleagues lost their lives and which has marked and transformed everything we do.

Editors

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