
Comparative Literature in Ireland and Worldwide An Interview with Professor Declan Kiberd

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Professor Declan Kiberd is Chair of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at University College Dublin, where he has taught for many years after having taught at the University of Kent at Canterbury and Trinity College Dublin. He is a director of the Abbey Theatre. He has been Parnell Fellow at Magdalene College Cambridge, and a visiting professor at Duke University and the Sorbonne. He has also been Director of the Yeats International Summer School (1985-7), Patron of the Dublin Shaw Society (1995-2000), a columnist with *The Irish Times* (1985-7) and *The Irish Press* (1987-93), the presenter of the RTÉ Arts programme, *Exhibit A* (1984-6), and a regular essayist and reviewer in *The Irish Times*, *TLS*, *London Review of Books* and *The New York Times*. Professor Kiberd is the author of many books including his seminal *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), *Irish Classics* (2000), and *The Irish Writer and the World* (2005), as well as *Ulysses and Us*, published just this year, and he was also the editor of the Penguin edition of the *Annotated Students' Ulysses* (1992). He is one of the most important voices in Irish Studies. Beyond that, he is also a prominent public intellectual, and he continues to be an inspirational figure for generations of students. In this interview, we discussed the relevance of the comparative approach to Irish Studies and the future of Comparative Literature in Ireland and worldwide.

Key Words. Declan Kiberd, Comparative Literature (also Comp. Lit.), world literature, exile, children's literature, postcolonial literature, Irish literature, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

El profesor Declan Kiberd es desde hace años catedrático de literatura angloirlandesa y teatro en University College Dublin, y antes había enseñado en las universidades de Kent en Canterbury y Trinity College Dublin. Es uno de los directores del Abbey Theatre. Ha sido Parnell Fellow de Magdalene College Cambridge, y profesor visitante en Duke University y la Sorbona. Asimismo ha sido director de la Yeats International Summer School (1985-7), socio numerario de la Dublin Shaw Society (1995-2000), columnista del *Irish Times* (1985-7) y *The Irish Press* (1987-93), presentador del programa de arte *Exhibit A* (RTÉ 1984-6) y ensayista y crítico habitual del *Irish Times*, *TLS*, *London Review of Books* y *The New York Times*. Es autor de numerosos libros desde el influyente *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995) a *Irish Classics* (2000), *The Irish Writer and the World* (2005), y el reciente *Ulysses and Us*. Fue también editor de *Annotated Students' Ulysses* (Penguin 1992). Es una de las voces más destacadas en el campo de los Estudios Irlandeses. Es además una prominente figura pública, y continúa ejerciendo su influyente magisterio con nuevas generaciones de estudiantes. En esta entrevista, conversamos en torno a la relevancia del enfoque comparativo en los Estudios Irlandeses y el futuro de la literatura comparada en Irlanda y en el mundo.

Palabras clave: Declan Kiberd, literatura comparada (también Lit. Comp.), literatura universal, exilio, literatura infantil, literatura postcolonial, literatura irlandesa, el *Ulysses* de James Joyce.

Q: I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about Comparative Literature generally. Comparative Literature has been called an ‘indiscipline’ rather than a discipline *per se*. It’s a very loose area. So my first question to you is: what are the attractions of this ‘indiscipline’ to you as a scholar and as a writer?

A: Well, all literary study is inherently comparative. The book you are reading now is, in your own mind, in constant comparison with lots of earlier books you’ve read. And that’s true within a language (you might be reading a book written at the present moment which deals with pain or laughter, and you’d compare it with the book written six hundred years ago). In a wider sense than that, of course, what we mean strictly by Comp. Lit. is a comparison and contrast between literatures of different languages. But actually, I think, across time, and even within language, the practice of Comparative Literature is just as vital, and it’s something we all do anyway, though we don’t call it that. Comp. Lit. as practiced by great exponents like Spitzer and Auerbach often involved the study by way of comparison of texts from two or three cognate languages. Say, a Germanist like Auerbach was very, very interested in French and in Italian (part of this has to do with his formation in World War I, the sense he had of not really wanting to go along with the anti-French jingoism of his childhood and youth), and if you look at his book *Mimesis*, he focuses more on French than on any other authors. So, one of the great attractions of Comp. Lit. in that sense is the way in which it repairs the damaging effects of political conflict and opens people out to multiple narratives. But of course, then you have to say, it’s also rather confined. They are usually dealing with cognate languages and literatures, and they are usually dealing with genres whose basic forms they already understand in terms of their own source literature. I mean, one of the fascinations is the realisation that all identity is dialogic, that even the emergence of the Irish Literary Revival is based on sustained acts of comparison. For instance, the Cuchulainn and Red Branch Knight stories are really a kind of Irish equivalent to the Arthuriad in England, or the emphasis on the sense of place in Gaelic poetry in some ways is comparable to the sense of place in Romantics like Wordsworth and

Coleridge. The very way in which Ireland was ‘invented’ as a culture a hundred years ago is a sustained act of comparison with England, but it’s also, of course, an act of homage to a culture whose political representatives those Revivalists are fighting. You know, someone like Pearse loved Wordsworth, modelled himself on Matthew Arnold, yet he leads a military action against the British presence. The fascination for me is that Pearse himself was a comparatist, as well as being a nationalist – one because he was the other. Acton said that exile is the ‘cradle of nationality’ and that Irish people discovered they were Irish by making constant acts of comparison. But this is true, of say, Goethe: he said that he couldn’t hate the adjoining peoples, because so much of his culture depended on reading their books. And Wilde used that quote in explaining his own love of English literature. So, I think, in a way, all writers are comparatists. They sometimes feel a deeper sense of affinity with writers from other languages and nations than with previous writers in their own tradition, and they will always go where the magnetism dictates.

As you said, “all writers are comparatists”. Would you consider Joyce as particularly representative of comparatist writing? You speak, for example, of the multiculturalist strand in *Ulysses*, with its, as you say in your latest book, “infusions from many national and spiritual traditions”. Do you think that Ireland is perhaps a particularly apt place for exploring Comp. Lit.?

Well, the tradition of migration and exile is so strong in Irish writing, and that is the tradition that underpins Comparative Literature as a practice. You know, Auerbach had to go to Istanbul where he wrote *Mimesis* and then on to the United States. Spitzer ended up in exile. And they were very able to formulate European culture by being removed from it on another continent. The note of banishment, which Joyce talks about in the middle of *Ulysses*, is one of the keys to the practice of Comparative Literature, and Joyce certainly was in some ways the superprofessor of Comp. Lit. in the Irish tradition. I mean, the texts which Comp. Lit. people were particularly interested in were texts like the *Odyssey* of Homer, which is about travelling beyond the edges of the known world and bringing back

an unprecedented knowledge which requires the reading and paradigm of all culture. And part of the attraction of Comp. Lit. is that it makes your own culture strange to you all over again by way of the comparison. But those people like Auerbach and Spitzer were also interested in the Bible, because it's a narrative of exile as well. It's all about a people going out of their true kingdom and then coming back to it – and that's a model for Comp. Lit., because people like Joyce were acclaimed in the wide world before they were rediscovered back here in Ireland. In the same way, Whitman was understood as a national poet in England before he was embraced as such in America. So, the whole idea of exile and return, which is a sort of Biblical narrative, is also connected to Comp. Lit. If you look then at someone like Dante, who writes in exile from Florence but recalls all the sights and smells and sounds of the city, what he is really afraid of is that the culture that enabled him, that he grew up in, will vaporise and disappear, so he tries to keep it real in an extended work of literature. That's exactly what Joyce was doing in *Ulysses* with the Dublin of his childhood and youth, or what Günter Grass would later do with the Danzig he grew up in when he wrote *The Tin Drum*. So, I think Joyce is a central figure in all of these narratives, and Joyce was the one, perhaps before anyone, who saw Shakespeare also as a kind of exilic writer. Shakespeare's removal from Stratford to London is in some way recreated by Joyce's move from Dublin to Trieste, Zurich, and Paris. And the ideas of "banishment from the heart, banishment from home", as he says, "sound uninterruptedly from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* onward till Prospero breaks his staff". So, the key texts that feed into *Ulysses* are in many ways the texts around which the discipline of Comp. Lit. would be built, mainly on American campuses after World War II. But it's almost as if Joyce, even before Spitzer and Auerbach, had found a way of narrating them in those terms, and it's because he himself was afraid his own country would disappear and he was trying to keep it real.

Yes. It's interesting, actually, that the texts and the writers that you mention all belong to the canon of World Literature. So, in a way, I think, it's ironic that Comparative Literature tries to break away from the

national canon to bring together different cultures and different texts, but at the same time, more often than not, it stays within the canon of World Literature. Do you think there is a reason for this?

Well, what I think happens, to be honest with you, is that in initial intention, most of these great works of wisdom literature, civilisational books, are actually aimed at a very specific audience. I mean, Dante refused Latin, he wrote in Tuscan, and part of the revolutionary nature of his project is that he, in fact, invented the idea of modern literature being in the vernacular. So, in one sense, the text is only 'worlded' afterwards. And in the same way, the Bible is a story of the people of Israel; and the *Odyssey* is a very specific story about the Greeks and the kind of gods and forces they would admire. So my attitude is really that many of these texts – which ultimately achieve a claim as works of World Literature through the circuits of comparison – were almost all initially intended for a much more specific audience, which often actually didn't embrace them straight away, because they were difficult, challenging, they went against so many understandings of their own people. I mean, Yeats said that whenever a country produced a man or a woman of genius they were never like the country's official version of itself at the time. I think Yeats was thinking immediately of Synge and his rejection and the riot against *The Playboy*, but also about Whitman. And yet he said about Whitman that he wrote out of so deep a phase of American life that he was accepted there in the end – in the end! What happens, I think, is that writers like Joyce, a book like Joyce's *Ulysses*, is written about a specific culture. Joyce is far more interested about what Dubliners are making of his book than about what they are saying in Paris or Rome, but in the end, it is really Paris that is the despatch point, and particularly when he is translated very rapidly into French – and I've often suspected that probably in the first decade of *Ulysses* at least as many people read it in French, if not more, as read it in English. But then it gets returned to its culture of origin decades later when, for instance, the Penguin Joyces were published in the early nineties and were edited by Irish scholars, who suddenly are alerting people all over again to the more local, Irish meanings of the text. And I think that would have happened

with so many of these texts, that they go through a 'worlding' process, which often involves, you know, being published in Paris or somewhere like that or translated into major languages, such as French, but they end up going back to their own country. Harold Rosenberg said that Paris was like a kind of cultural version of the United Nations, through which texts had to pass before they were used to augment their own national literatures all over again. And you see, all these texts that I really admire ultimately have a national designation or a source of origin. There are other kinds of texts that are written from the beginning with a more international, transnational audience in mind. A lot of them are airport novels, you know, Arthur Hailey, Sidney Sheldon – books that most of us would be pretty bored by. They are a bit like international music. There can be rather interesting exercises in the form. I mean, Rushdie's novels often have an intercontinental setting. And even contemporary Irish writing by people like Colm McCann or Colm Tóibín would often be divided between the American and the European continents in terms of setting, but I think in the end, say, a book by Colm McCann or Colm Tóibín is Irish writing or is written by an Irish artist, whereas these texts that are avowedly international from start to finish and have no national point of despatch seem still to be rather invertebrate and dull.

I suppose, in a way, all the texts you mentioned earlier – texts that were pretty radical for their time and that were estranged from the culture out of which they were written – in time return this culture to itself, as you said. I am just thinking of a novel by a Russian émigré writer, Gaito Gazdanov, *An Evening with Claire*. He talks about the sense of distance that precipitated exile, the sense of distance that he experienced in his motherland, and the sense that he had to go into exile precisely because he felt that estrangement. But he also always had to write about his homeland, about Russia. So, estrangement in a way is about bringing something home.

Yes. Well, I think that there is a sense in which, just as all reading is a form of comparative literary study, all writing in its own way is a kind of exile, it's a metaphor for going into exile. Sitting down to write, block-

ing out the world as you do so, that's a kind of exile. So is getting lost in a book as a reader. What Shaw said is very true. He has a character called Keegan say in *John Bull's Other Island*: "I did not know what my own country was like, because I've never been outside of it." Until you do travel and have a basis for comparison, you don't really fully understand your own culture. And the beauty of Comp. Lit. is that it allows exactly that mixture of intimacy and distance that you are talking about, which I think is the best way, the best position from which to read or interpret any culture. If you are so up-close, so immersed in it, you won't see its basic outlines or its shapes; if you are too removed, you will lose a fundamental feeling for it. But it's the blend of both approaches which constant acts of comparison make possible. You know, there is a kind of paradox coiled in the whole notion of internationalism and, of course, it's this: that it presupposed the word 'nationalism' or 'nation'. If you look at the United Nations, when it was founded in the 1940s, it was founded partly as a result of a terrible war, the kind of nationalisms that have created intolerance and violence, and it was based on the idea that there must be an international order that will be more secure. And all that was absolutely right and noble, but what has one of the main functions of the United Nations been ever since? It ratifies the constant claims of more and more nation-states. When it was set up, there were only about forty something – I think forty-five or -six, now there are more than two hundred ratified. So this is a very strange situation where, I am saying by analogy, you have all these writers like Beckett and Joyce and Danilo Kiš and Marquez going to somewhere like Paris in order to achieve a kind of wider international cultural perspective. And yet each of them is ultimately returned to be part of Irish, Serbian, Colombian literature. That's okay, I think, I don't have a problem with it, but I think that, you know, the idea that one could create an international order is still way ahead. It's not something we are doing or getting all that much closer to. And the people who've had an interest in Comp. Lit. – beginning with Goethe and the famous *Weltliteratur* in 1827 – they were gifted, cultured people with maybe a kind of Enlightenment view of the world in some ways, but they were also people who were often coming out of an indigenous culture that

wasn't all that strong, and therefore they were more open. Germanic culture was not as rooted, say, as one might argue Irish or French culture was. It was perhaps easier for Goethe to think about World Literature – or for Marx after him – because of their Germanic background. I find it fascinating, for instance, that nowadays someone like Pascal Casanova and a number of French critics are very interested in, you know, *littérature mondiale* and the whole idea of a global literary system. But I think that's partly a result of French culture and French theory having become weaker in the last two or three decades than it was in the sixties and seventies when I was young. And it's almost like the practice of Comp. Lit. is more possible for peoples whose own indigenous sense of culture has become a bit weaker. America obviously did not have a native language, so it was a good place maybe in which to practice Comp. Lit.

Since you mentioned America, I wanted to ask you this question. Do you feel that the Celtic Tiger (or post-Celtic Tiger) generation has chosen the United States above Europe as a source that enriches Irish culture – that because of economic, educational, and political ties with the US, there is an orientation towards that side of the Atlantic?

I think that young people in Ireland even before my time were besotted by American popular culture, but also by literary culture; and I revered people like Henry James, Scott Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton, you know, so many of those superb writers. And I remember my mother saying to me that when she was a girl they read about twins called the Bobbsey Twins, children's books. They weren't encouraged to read books set in British schools, because it was the early days of the independent state, but it was okay to read American ones because they came from a republic. There's always been a kind of cultural prestige attached to America. It's because of the number of Irish people who are part of that project anyway, but I think it became particularly strong after the visit of Kennedy in 1963. (He was after all a kind of 'Irish' president.) Ireland had always been a bit critical, say, of the American policy at the UN before that, but then it got brought in under the American umbrella. The unleashing of a kind of market force type economy, then, in the late

eighties and nineties was really further Americanisation. And it is true – you then get a lot of the younger novelists using America as well as Ireland as a setting for their stories. I remember, actually, one of these novelists – funny enough, who's a former student of mine – coming into the Arts building here in UCD a few months ago and being utterly shocked at the appearance of the students: "My God, Declan, you could be in Nevada!"

The homogeneity is striking, isn't it?

Not even homogeneity – a kind of bad imitation, as he added, of Nevada. At the same time, Ireland is a part of Europe, it has always been so, and so many of our superwriters – I am talking about Synge, Beckett, Joyce – have had French and European connections; and I think we have perhaps lost sight of these a bit in recent years, but they continue to be there and to be important. After all, we are considered to be very enthusiastic participants in the European project (apart from one or two recent blips in terms of referenda). And I think in terms of a cultural project, we have always been participant. Joyce saw himself in a way as part of the tradition of the Wild Geese: men who entered the Catholic armies of Europe but with the idea maybe in the end of bringing what they learned back to the home base, and there is a very strong element of that all through Irish writing. And I think it will probably emerge more strongly now that market forces have once again proven unreliable. The Irish should have known all this because that's what the lesson of the Famine was: if you trust the markets, they will bite you. That's what happening now. And I think, you know, neither America nor England is as obvious a place to go to as they used to be. This will subtly but definitely increase a sense of affinity with places like France, Germany, Canada, Japan – all the other global networks which were always there – will become even clearer.

But perhaps the reason why the Irish feel affinity with North America is because of the whole myth of self-creation and the myth of 'making it new' perpetually. In *Inventing Ireland*, you talk about Ireland as "produced by nothing but its own desire", a "self-creating Ireland". So, maybe there is this kind of desire to move away from the past. As Brodsky said, there is only one kind

of movement – ‘move from’. Does Ireland exemplify this to a certain extent?

Well, there is something attractive about the way in which Americans can remake themselves at every turn in the road and not feel the baggage of the past dragging out of them, but to be truthful, that notion of self-invention, as I developed it in that book, was much more indebted to Jean-Paul Sartre and the French existentialists than to any notion of American culture. I got it in particular out of a specific book, Jean-Paul Sartre’s autobiography *Les Mots*, where he is talking about how, when he did something wrong, he preferred to take the blame himself, rather than lay it at the door of his father or his grandfather – and of course, he lost his father early on – because he wished, he said, to derive only from himself. And to me, it’s a universal myth. It’s the myth of Gatsby and Scott Fitzgerald. He sprang from an extraordinary platonic conception of himself, so Jimmy Gatz is remade as Jay Gatsby. But it’s also in D.H. Lawrence’s heroines, when they are walking away from their homes. Ursula says that she wants only to derive from herself – exactly what Sartre bases his whole narrative of autobiography on. So I don’t think of it purely in American terms. I think what it has to do with is Freud’s ideas about the quest-romance and the fear of being overindebted to parents, and you have this fantasy that you will commit some great act of rescue that will leave you quits with your parents and free of all further indebtedness to them, so that you can literally self-invent. I mean, it’s in Nietzsche, and I’ve often quoted him in that context: you know, if you haven’t had a good father, go and invent one, i.e. father or mother yourself - and that is obviously a central element in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It’s right across modernist European culture, as much as the American one.

Are you still interested in the ideas of existentialism?

Well, you see, I think people carry forward what is valuable from what we have to say now are ‘past philosophies’, and I think that notion of self-invention or even self-authentication is very precious. I notice how even Bernard-Henri Lévy, in his most recent book, is saying that Sartre was *the* major philosopher of the twentieth century. Lévy is one of the more conservative, neocon recent French

philosophers. If he is saying that, it means that the legacy of existentialism is not by any means totally dead.

Not really, I think this is the one theory that all of my students are always interested in, and whatever we talk about, we always go back to Sartre. There is something fundamental about it, about this idea of the freedom to create yourself, which is very attractive – and which is kind of scary as well.

It is scary, but it is actually a way of understanding the literature that was produced long before Sartre ever formulated it. I mean, I was fascinated, reading Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography, to discover that Jean-Paul Sartre, when he was, so to speak, ‘going out’ with her, insisted on her having multiple viewings of Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* - precisely because he thought it was all about this: about a young man who creates an image of himself purely out of his own imagination, and eventually chooses to live in that world he has created, rather than in the one he inherited. And Sartre clearly saw Synge as a kind of pre-existentialist. Now, I just find that so helpful, not just as a way of revisiting a great Irish play, but of linking it to people like Joyce, linking it to Wilde, who suppressed all the links with his own father and reinvented himself in England as ‘Oscar Wilde’, just like Shaw removed names George and Shaw, which were a degraded link back to his father, and becomes G.B.S. – as his biographer Holroyd said, the self-invented child of his own writing. You know, somebody like Sartre cannot just help people in the immediate moment of their living and afterwards – he can actually help them to understand the meaning of movements that occurred decades before he wrote his essays and his books. And you know, maybe he is actually, as Bernard-Henri Lévy says, a very central figure.

In many of these cases, we are talking about confluences rather than influences. It’s interesting, I think, that when we talk about Comparative Literature, we often don’t talk about linking ideas and writers very explicitly, but rather about ideas having their relevance in different moments in time. Maybe it has something to do with this.

I am quite sure that Synge, for instance, influenced Sartre – there are definite cases of

influence at times, as well as more general confluences. But you are right, I think what it shows is that there is a kind of a transnational element to literature. I mean, Flaubert said, “Bohemia is my native country”, and writers aren’t all that bothered about the national traditions to which, nonetheless, in the end they contribute. But they will look wherever they wish for inspiration, for affinity, for that kind of elective fellowship. And I think that one of the problems of teaching literature with a kind of national typology, which of course I do – everyone in the end does because still we are members of English, German, Italian departments – but one of the problems of that is that it is not actually the way most writers are inspired, and you have to have a method that’s very loose and flexible and open and recognises that any really great author is bound to have sources in quite a large number of traditions. And even go further and say, one of the problems, apart altogether from the problem of defining literature in solely national terms, there’s also the problem of defining it in purely literary terms. Writing, if you do the whole history of culture, is just the five minutes before midnight. You know, the bulk of culture was oral for so long before it, and when we think about Comparative Literature, we’d really need to start thinking in terms of comparisons with oral narrative, and whether, in fact, we may be returning in some way in a postliterate world to those energies.

Yes, exactly. George Steiner once called modern writers “poets unhoused and wanderers across language”, precisely because we now have to be aware of so many discourses – we have to move between different registers, ideas, modes in language. In other words, language is comparative in its very nature.

Yes, the thing about affinity or confluence is interesting, but there is a problem. Anyone, say, working within English language culture will understand drama, the novel, the short story, the lyric. You can take elements from Italian, German, Russian that look pretty familiar and renarrate them in terms you already understand. But there is always a danger that there are other forms or genres, half-emergent in those cultures that are not so easily recoded in terms of what you bring, that you may miss out on completely. I’ve been trying to argue for years that there is an

extended prose produced by Ireland from the time of Swift and Edgeworth down to Joyce, Flann O’Brien, Beckett, and beyond, which is neither a collection of separate short stories nor a fully connected novel but some weird hybrid for which there is still no generic name. But most critics outside, if they read *Malone Dies* or *Castle Rackrent*, file them as novels, and yet I don’t think they are! But equally, this problem works the other way. There are probably all kinds of mutant forms in Russian or Italian that I am not noticing, or that aren’t even being translated into English, because of course, English is, in some ways, a very provincial language. Far more goes into other languages than comes into English, I think. So someone like me, who is very reliant on what is available in the English language is probably getting point naught naught one percent of what might be got, even in the second language. So how do I then call that Comparative Literature? I am just hitting the other cultures in very small spots.

I suppose the choices are limited, and maybe Irish literature occupies a privileged position within this “provincial”, as you said, market, by virtue of its bilingual nature. English makes Irish literature immediately accessible, in contrast to literatures written in other major languages (Arabic, Chinese, Russian). There are amazing texts produced in these languages, but they are not immediately available on the international market – and they might never become available.

Yes, English makes it immediately available, that’s true, but Irish also reminds us constantly of how much might not be available, despite all that. I mean, a thing that has struck me, for instance, is when I visited Estonia in the 1980s – this is a country of maybe three million, three and a half million speakers – that the novels of people like McGahern and Banville or the poems of someone like Paula Meehan were translated into Estonian within a year or two of publication. Then, when I was in the Czech Republic, shortly after it emerged in the nineties, at Charles University in Prague, I met a woman called Daniela Furtherova, who had actually translated short stories in Irish by Ó Conaire straight into Czech. And I suddenly realised, these people are so anxious to know what’s going on in other cultures, and are actually much less provincial than professors

of English in Oxford or in Dublin who, because they're at the centre of the complex global network, have no real idea how the network works.

And especially how it functions at its 'periphery'.

I mean, it is George Eliot's image of the web that she used in *Middlemarch* and in so many of her writings: that the ultimate provincial is the one who has no sense of his or her own presence. They might be at the nodal point of a complex spider web network, but if they don't really know how the whole network functions, they don't know much at all. This is the problem: that people in Estonia are so, almost painfully, up-to-speed with Irish writing, but how much do we know about Estonian writing? I've got about five books given to me by friends from Tallinn, but that's my entire Estonian library.

If I may ask you a more specific question about your ongoing projects in this area, do you think your interest in Comparative Literature will retain an emphasis on postcoloniality? You talk, for example, in *The Irish Writer and the World* about the viability of a "comparative cross-cultural study of the Irish experience and that of other emerging postcolonial nations", with a particular emphasis on the postcolonial countries of Africa, India, and the West Indies...

Postcolonial theory and practice is an outgrowth of Comp. Lit. There is no doubt about it. People like Said and Spivak were following in the wake of Spitzer and Auerbach. And in fact, Said wrote a wonderful article quite late on about Auerbach. There is a problem though, and Said himself has often referred to it: that many postcolonialists don't know multiple languages, they just know English or French or whatever. They are very reliant on translation, which itself is a kind of screen, and that has made me wonder sometimes about the validity of the comparison, or whether the points of affinity – even those that I have found myself between African and Irish writing – are sometimes a little glib, a little lacking in more rigorous analysis. But I suppose, having sounded these warnings, the only thing to do is to persist. And what particularly interests me at the moment is the extent to which some of the great

postcolonial 'classic texts', as we've now called them, are actually a result of something that hasn't been much factored into postcolonial theory up to now, which is Children's Literature. In other words, our own early experiences of literature, which are deeply imprinted, are often of childhood texts which then maybe mutate in work produced by an adult. Within English tradition, for instance, Juliet Dusinberre has shown that Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books were a major influence on Virginia Woolf, but also more generally on surrealism. What I have found is that a lot of great postcolonial texts are heavily indebted to childhood classics. For example, *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie is probably one of the keynote texts in the last thirty or forty years. And most people by now have written extensively, say, about the way in which it doesn't just use ancient oral Indian traditions, but also is indebted to *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, which is one of those exilic Comp. Lit. postcolonial novels. What has – as far as I know – never been studied or mentioned up to now is the extent of its indebtedness to Erich Kästner's book *Emil and the Detectives*, which is set in Berlin, I think, in the twenties, and it's about a boy who is going to visit his granny and has been given money which his single mum has earned with great difficulty to give to her mother, but he is robbed in the train, and he is afraid therefore to visit the granny. But he eventually forms a gang of youths, boys of his own age, in Berlin, who help him steal the money back. It's like the group of children in the ghetto in Rushdie's Indian novel, and I am sure Kästner's novel was a major childhood experience for Rushdie as a reader. And I think that's an interesting place to go now – to look at the ways in which some of these texts may interact with Children's Literature. The other point to make is perhaps more obvious: that the phenomenon called magic realism, which is so often identified with people like Marquez and Rushdie, is probably anticipated in Children's Literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, partly because children are more open to the newness, the magical, the spiritual. Maybe also because children are the future, and where literature will ultimately go. So I do think that we need a more flexible definition of the postcolonial, and one that's open to more forms of writing than merely adult literature – one that's open to the oral, one that's open to childhood texts, and so on.

You mentioned the future of literature. One of the questions that I wanted to ask you was about the future of the novel. Philip Roth recently predicted that the novel will become a minority cult in twenty-five years. He said: ‘I think it's going to be cultic. I think always people will be reading them but it will be a small group of people. Maybe more people than now read Latin poetry, but somewhere in that range.’ Do you share Roth’s pessimism about the future of the novel?

No, I don’t. I think, as it says in *King Lear*, “the worst is not, so long as we can say, ‘this is the worst’”. People have been announcing the death of the novel for at least a century, but look at all the bookshops: ‘three for the price of two’, all those reading groups out in the suburbs, all the people who make lists of their favourite novels and fight to the death about it! I am amazed that Roth has said that, because he is such a wonderful novelist himself, and the novel is used by him in a powerful way.

Maybe it’s just a way of making it elitist in a way. You know, this reference to Latin poetry, and implicitly juxtaposing it with the whole way of marketing books, with chick lit, with multimedia books, and so on, and maybe trying to return the novel to something ‘deep’ and ‘educational’...

Yes, there could be an element of that about it, and it is interesting he mentions Latin, which after all was kind of got rid of by Dante. He is really going back! But there is another conceit behind his comment, which I think is interesting and which even flows out of the practice of Comp. Lit., and I am sure Roth as a good Jewish boy, who knew so many of those wonderful New York intellectuals, would understand what I mean. And it’s this. When Auerbach wrote *Mimesis*, he thought that European culture was doomed, basically because the Nazis were about to destroy it, but subsequently, even after the Nazis had failed to do so, he felt that consumerism, capitalism, commodification might do it anyway. That is a kind of conceit though. The idea that you can study a culture from its beginning to its end and that you have this privileged point of vantage from which you can narrate its rise, its flowering, and its decline – it’s a notion of positional superiority that I think critics should guard against. At the same time, it’s tempting.

I mean, there was a great Irish writer called Seathrún Céitinn (Geoffrey Keating), who actually is a Comp. Lit. exponent in the year 1610! He writes *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (*The Basis of Knowledge about Ireland*), because he thinks after the defeat of Kinsale and the Flight of the Earls, the whole of Gaelic culture is finished, when of course it isn’t. It’s just an upper-class version of it that he was attached to as a bard. But he writes as if the whole thing is gone, as if he is Auerbach three hundred years *avant la lettre* and he can survey the whole thing from its start to finish – including defending the ancient Irish against various calumnies by foreign historians in a very kind of pre-Saidian way. I think this is dangerous, because after every announcement that some cultural form or tradition would die, most of them haven’t. *Mimesis* is a great book, and maybe the sense of panic that gave rise to it is responsible for its wonderful lucidity, but in the end, European culture did not go down. The European Union emerged, which more and more peoples of the East want to join, and in the same way I have a funny feeling that, you know, if Roth has a great-grandchild, they might be writing novels.

I agree with what you said about this kind of conceit – and it is ubiquitous in cultural theory, which proclaims, over and over again, that ‘this is the critical moment in culture or in history’, as if we are ‘now’ at the end of something very important and at the point from which we can look back. But the same could be said about any moment. It is slightly irritating, I think.

It is also something that, for very good and understandable reasons, intellectuals of Jewish backgrounds are particularly likely to do – Roth would be one of those, wouldn’t he? – in the sense of the whole idea of the end of days, of you know, some time of conclusion during which a whole tradition can be reviewed and summed up. That is certainly a melancholy aspect of Jewish tradition. It’s also a feature of Irish tradition: as I said, Keating began it in the year 1610. John McGahern was still doing it in the year 2002 in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. He saw himself as the elegist of the rural Irish way of life that was all but erased, and he certainly thought of himself as writing a lament for that. McGahern had the same conceit in a sense, that he could narrate the decline of rural Ireland, which had begun

before the Act of Union and which was reaching its conclusion as he wrote. But I've always thought that the account of the collapse of any culture can actually itself become the next narrative, the next genre even. And I think John McGahern was shrewd enough to know that and to realise it, that as long as he could write about rural Ireland, the narrative wasn't really over – it was just being translated into some new form. And the same would be true about Roth. You know, the novel is practised at so many levels, as I said at the beginning. You've got these airport novels, but you've also got Rushdie and Roth, and the question really is, will they all continue? Everything from thrillers to chick lit, out to the literary novel. And at the moment it seems to me that they will.

Yes, it's such a mongrel that it should definitely survive. It has so many directions in which it could develop, as you said.

And it's also astonishing when you walk into a shop, just how many new ones there constantly are, when you think of the extraordinary labour of writing any one of them – even a rather bad one! And how many people there are out there who want to do it? And only a fraction of them end up being published, but there are still an awful lot.

Yes. And maybe the attraction of the novel is in fact reinforced rather than undercut by globalisation and the invasion of pop culture. The novel is a form of travelling; it's a way of going into a voluntary exile. And we are, in this day and age, more and more curious about the world beyond borders, the world beyond the narrow field of our vision. So in a way, maybe the novel will only become stronger and stronger because of that.

Bakhtin said that the full play of voices is captured maybe in the novel more than in any other form. D.H. Lawrence called the novel the "bright book of life". You *could* run an argument that the defining form of the last six decades has been cinema, but when you think about it, how many films that are successful are then turned into novels? How many novels that are successful – it seems almost axiomatic – have to become a film? I think it shows that prestige still lies with the novel, and people are culturally quite conservative in some ways. I mean, the novel was once considered mere

entertainment. I remember reading one of the Trinity College student magazines for the year 1904. I was just trying to see if anything had happened that was connected with elements of the narrative in *Ulysses*, but I happened on an article, which was written in the weeks before summer exams by a student, saying that, you know, it would be trivial to be reading novels for relaxation, novels by people like Jane Austen, in the lead-up to the college exams – for that student, this would be like people now watching, for example, *Father Ted* or something on television to relax before their exams. But now Jane Austen is on the Trinity College exam syllabus. People are not distracting themselves with the entertainment of reading her – they are actually revising her for the exams. So what I suggest to you is that the prestige of the novel has just grown and grown in the intervening period.

And do you think that people will still turn to the novel as a source of moral wisdom – an idea you develop in your latest book, *Ulysses and Us*?

Well, I think that literature is designed to entertain, and I'd be the first to say that, and if it doesn't do that, it's not doing its basic job. But it does seem to me that the great works of any genre – poetry, epic, drama, the novel – always do have civilisational wisdom in them, if only proverbs which are repeated by the central characters: you know, Bloom saying "the Irishman's home is his coffin", or something like that. So yes, I do. I think that the really great examples of a form carry so much of life within them that they have to teach us more about the world we are in. And I'd even go further, I think the novel is a very good – you hinted at it a minute ago – instrument through which to negotiate all the multimedia challenges of the contemporary world. It's one of those devices that still has integrity as way of measuring everything else, because it's not too beholden to markets, to nationalisms, to any isms – it is about as neutral as a recording device can be. And I think that, for instance, if you think about the way in which advertisements work: they have often been deconstructed best by novelists – the way they invade the subconscious, the way they are superficially attractive, the way they may have a kind of Utopian longing even behind them. But so many novelists like Fay Weldon and Salman Rushdie worked in ad

agencies and are able to function as cultural critics when they write novels about the workings of modern advertising. But then you go back to *Ulysses* and you think of Bloom looking at the communicants in All Hallows: “Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first.” And this is an adman thinking of the Latin as a kind of jingle, Bloom being an anthropologist also thinking of the way in which culture works. I mean, these are all examples of the novel as a kind of decoding device, which helps us fully to deconstruct the media world that’s built all around us.

That’s a very interesting question – the novel as a way of decoding the multimedia world. Another example would be Frédéric Beigbeder, who produced an outraged critique of French society through his attack on the advertising world in *99 Francs...* But since we are back to Joyce, I was just wondering about the cover of your new book *Ulysses and Us – Marilyn Monroe reading Ulysses*. Is there an irony there, and how do you think this picture reflects the purpose of your book?

Well, Marilyn Monroe was reading what looks like the last episode of *Ulysses*, the Molly Bloom soliloquy – that itself is an interesting juxtaposition. The woman – and it was a woman – who took the photograph, Eve Arnold from the Magnum agency (she was the only woman in the agency at the time) said that Marilyn was reading *Ulysses* off and on, trying to understand it. I presume this was around the time her ‘other half’ was Arthur Miller, the playwright, and she always struck me as a highly intelligent woman – in the way that many supersensitive people are – who would have regarded the challenge of that book as an interesting one. Now, the reason I chose it for the cover, and I did choose it, was thinking about her sad ending and how she didn’t make it through. Somehow life got too much for her. And my belief is that the book is about depression, sadness, how to transcend them, how to feel more at home in the world, which I would say also about Dante and the Bible and the other classics Joyce used. But yes, to me there is an incredible poignancy about a woman who ended as she did, reading a book that might have been able to save her but didn’t. And that was why I chose it. I had no idea when I did, that many feminists, with what I consider really kind of 1980s attitudes,

regard this cover as in some ways scandalous. I was ambushed on BBC 3 Radio at an interview by some of these feminists, who seem to think that, you know, her mouth is half-open, and it’s sort of suggesting that dumb, dim blondes can read *Ulysses*. But, you see, that’s an insult to her. I don’t think of her as a dumb, dim blonde. I think she was a highly intelligent, brilliantly alert actor who probably understood a lot more things in the book than many of the official critics.

Yes, it’s just that there is an immediate irony there, not because she is ‘dumb’, but because she is famous and glamorous, and it’s ironic that her photograph illustrates a book entitled *Ulysses and Us – ‘us’, you know, the common people, everyman and everywoman*. So I thought that was actually a very good choice – I like the irony of it!

Well, actually, on that point there is a wonderful review of my book just recently in a magazine called *The Drouth*, by Owen Dudley-Edwards. And he says, “Marilyn is you and she is me”. In other words, she is *us*! And I think that there is a sense in which the heavy weight of modern world is one of the reasons she haunts us and many people who find it very hard. And you see, one of my arguments is that Joyce’s writing is actually in the end religious. He is obsessed with the mass of Holy Saturday, when the church is completely darkened and the candle is lit, and the candle is an image of the human soul coming out of depression, just on the verge of Easter Sunday. But that’s an ancient motif in Irish culture – it goes right back to Newgrange and the idea of the darkened inner sanctum, and how suddenly on the 21st of December, the solstice, the light gets through. This whole idea of light scattering darkness is a very ancient one – not just in Christianity but in pagan art and in Celtic art. And I think it has to do with a soul in depression coming back into the light. I think even Marilyn Monroe’s blondness, her brightness, is connected with all this in my mind, and I think it’s a beautiful photograph, and somehow, I feel, it speaks about something I wanted to say. I could not fully explain it, but I feel it.

And maybe the fact that she is a melancholy figure says something about writing as well, especially writing something as complex as *Ulysses*, that perhaps writing requires a

melancholy predisposition, which she had.

She was a good person to read *Ulysses* as well, because she was androgynous, really. She understood gender as masquerade and was in that film, *Some Like It Hot*, where men try and master the code of wearing the narrow skirts and the high heels and trip over themselves and fail dismally to do what she is so superb at doing, but which by the end of the film you realise is only a masquerade. Joyce understood that gender, just like nation, is in some ways a fiction that people are better or worse at impersonating. It seems to me that she had the kind of intelligence that understood all that – that's latent in that movie and in her performance in it. What better person to read a book about androgyny, about the new womanly man, about a Molly who imagines what it would be like to be a man and get up on a woman's thighs, about a man who is trying to have babies? I think she is – if, you know, Madame Bovary *c'est moi* – there is a sense in which Marilyn is Leopold.

That's very paradoxical, I suppose, because she remains an icon of femininity.

But she should also be a feminist icon, and I think it incredible that feminists would use phrases like 'dumb blonde' about her, or even about me implying it, that blondes can read *Ulysses*. I never said that *Ulysses* was easy, anywhere in my book – I don't think that. I think that Joyce was challenging the reader, but I do think that it's a book that people of ordinary intelligence can read.

Once again – the eternal return! – we are back to *Ulysses*. In connection with that great book, my next question is about Dublin. Do you think that Dublin has become a truly modern urban space, in the sense in which Joyce wanted it to be – cosmopolitan and open? Or is it still peopled by Leopold Blooms wandering its streets, forever reminded of their strangeness?

Well, Dublin is filled with people from other parts of the world, so in one way, it should be much easier to bump into your own strangeness around the next corner. The problem is, though, that it has become itself homogenised in the intervening period. And this is not just true about, say, Eastern Europeans or Nigerians tending to congregate with one another – it's also true, say, about

recent UCD graduates tending to hang out with each other. There are lots and lots of subgroups engaged in what sociologists would call 'horizontal bonding'. But there isn't that sense of all of them constantly interacting and circulating in the way that Joyce really celebrates and wants in *Ulysses*. Because the whole point is that Stephen and Bloom have an unlikely meeting: a thirty-eight-year-old man invites a drunken postgrad back home with him, and the invitee says "yes". I always ask my students: "What would you say?" And they say: "Never do it – not in the month of Sundays!" That's a sign in a way that Dublin is perhaps less open to the Other, even though it's filled with others. And that seems to be the current problem – even in terms of literature. There are lots and lots of novels about subgroups, but nobody is writing a "Wandering Rocks", let alone a *Ulysses*. Nobody is talking about how. Maybe some genius will emerge to do it, but at the moment people are writing very specialised novels about the groups they know. And in the same way people are living in particular suburbs and not circulating fully in the way one would like. I think this does all connect with the idea of Comp. Lit., because my model of Comparative Literature would be *circulation*. Just as blood has to course through the human body for it to remain healthy or bodies have to move through the streets in order to encounter the Other – to live with the 'stranger in themselves', as Kristeva would say – in the same way, that's what happens with texts. They have to circulate constantly, they have to get translated, they have to be made strange over and over again by new couplings and juxtapositions. And that's what a real practice of Comparative Literature would be about. But I am worried, because it seems to me that even if Irish culture has become more 'multi' in one sense, it's become more 'mono' in most cultural senses. There are fewer and fewer students every year taking French, German or Italian in the Leaving Cert; there are fewer studying these languages at an advanced level in university. In other words, there are fewer people able to read novels and plays in those languages in Ireland. And in the same way, you know, it may be that people are actually less good at living with the foreign than they were when there were fewer foreigners around.

So Dublin must become more Bakhtinian – there is a need for more dialogue, more ‘random encounters’, more “circulation”, as you said...

You do need to accept accident and chance, and stop choreographing all meetings, stop the development of these gated communities in suburbs. There has to be the idea of a civic place in which the unexpected can still happen and people can deal with the unexpected, rather than constantly insuring themselves against it by staying in the same shopping mall or the same suburb.

Or “moving from one private experience to another”, as you say in *Ulysses and Us*...

Exactly. That’s what happened in the years of Celtic Tiger culture: everything was privatised – not just businesses, but consciousness itself. And the Irish people themselves lost their ability – which they had been very good at – of using public space. I mean, I mention in my *Ulysses* book about my father and my aunts and uncles and grandparents walking all the time in Dublin, the way that characters do in Joyce’s book, but by the time my children were young, they were being brought by car from one private experience to another, to a music lesson or whatever, and the streets were no longer felt to be safe and hospitable. But when I was eight or nine, I could go to my swimming lesson in the middle of Dublin on my own and then go down to Eason’s bookshop and look at the books and the records, and my mother and father did not think for a moment that I was unsafe. There is a reason why things get privatised, but people should be slow to surrender public space and I think we have surrendered too much of it too easily. Now, *there* is an interesting point – I think a lot of the immigrants are much better at using that space. Partly because they probably live in crowded conditions themselves and don’t have as much access to private space, but also because many of them come from cultures where the use of public space is still enthusiastic and widely practised: you know, Nigeria, countries in Eastern Europe, and so on, where there is the promenade and a whole idea of walking in the evening. And I walk most evenings along the seafront of Clontarf – I hear so many languages now on an hour-long walk. In one way, it’s encouraging, but in

another way it’s not, because if Irish people are to really benefit from all this, they’ve got to get out there and be one of those voices.

So, in this way, a simple act of walking would illustrate this whole idea of circulation, including literary circulation.

The stroller, the flaneur – I mean, exactly, all those things that we know about from Benjamin and from Baudelaire and from reading classic texts of modernism. I think it will come back, by the way – one of the effects of the recession will be that there will be more people walking for entertainment, because they can’t afford to do something more expensive! They may rediscover the pleasures of Joycean culture out of a certain deprivation.

There is a blessing in it, then...

I would hope so. I mean, one wouldn’t wish recession on anyone, but it may well be that there are corrections of a cultural as well as an economic nature needed.

Looking back at your outstanding and very prolific academic career, how do you think the academy has changed since you started?

Well, in one way, it’s more democratic: there are more and more people getting access to higher education, and that’s a good thing. On the other hand, a lot of those who study literature now are not, if you like, ‘vocations’ to literature: they are simply going through, and some of them find reading quite challenging. I worry about the general trend. I think that the arts are much more marginal in most universities than they were when I began. When I began, of course, F.R. Leavis was the fashionable critic, and he said that English was the humanistic centre of the arts faculty, which was itself the humanistic centre of the university. This was hubris, but it was a kind of pleasant hubris – we thought what we were doing was important. For the last fifteen years, there has been nothing but business models, and we’ve begun to realise that the business school is more likely to fit Leavis’s paradigm of a single discipline that sets the tone for all other activities in the university. That’s equally wrong, of course. It was wrong to think of literature as the be-all and end-all and the ultimate flagship of the university, but it’s just as wrong that the business model would be imposed or accepted as pervasive.

And especially so when it's imposed on the humanities...

Yes. The humanities are definitely far more marginal than they were in my early years. So I look on all this with a kind of sadness and worry about the way in which universities have allowed even the idea that things can be measured take over. In the end, none of this can be measured. You can give opinion – some opinions are more valid than others – but the notion that you can define transferable skills that somehow are communicable by teaching *King Lear* or *Anthony and Cleopatra* is nonsense. And I remember a friend of mine, who's dead now, John Devitt. Just before he retired he had to fill out one of those forms, quantifying and measuring the effect of one such course on *King Lear* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and he was asked to fill in the final box, “estimated time needed to understand the subject – three, five, or eight weeks?”, and he crossed them all out and wrote “about thirty years!” I've been teaching for about that long and I still don't ‘understand’ a lot of the books I'm teaching, so I think he was right.

I suppose it is actually quite painful – this idea of measuring everything, tying the humanities to the budget, encouraging academics to attract more money by attracting more students to study literature, for example, which is ridiculous.

No, it cannot and it should not be done. Yet, it is astonishing how many intelligent – super-intelligent – people have allowed this to happen. I think the reason they allowed it to

happen is that most academics live in bubbles and they like getting on with their own world and doing their own research and if they can keep doing it, they'll put up with almost anything else. But actually, we need to have a battle with the people who are trying to impose business models on a university that could never sustain them. And if we're not careful, an institution that goes back to Paris in the Middle Ages will be destroyed. And it's irrecoverable. And it may happen in our time, so we'll bear a heavy responsibility, if we allow it to.

‘We are responsible’, as Sartre would say...

We are not the cutting edge of history, but we could unintentionally become academic vandals.

That's a very optimistic note to end on!

Well, it does suggest that we still have the power to redress the situation. I wouldn't want to be one of those Auerbachians, saying that I can tell the story of the university from its rise to its fall. I'd much rather feel that when I die the narrative is still going on.

And that you are part of a living thing, rather than a witness to its end.

Yes.

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