

# EPILOGUE

## Reflections on Historical Comparativism Prompted by the Case of Sophonisba



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### I

In the introduction to his lecture series *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* (*Hovedstrømninger i det 19. Aarhundredes litteratur*, 1872-1890) the founding father of Danish comparative literature, Georg Brandes (1842-1927), provocatively described comparativism as an antidote to the myopia allegedly characterising contemporaneous Danish literary studies and cultural life. A highly significant but also controversial figure on Denmark's intellectual scene, Brandes was deeply engaged in the modernisation of national culture, and the immediate agenda of his lecture series was to provoke local aesthetic and academic change. Nevertheless, his theoretical and methodological underpinning of this project reaches beyond the Danish context and may therefore serve as a starting point for the subsequent reflection on comparativism in literary studies broadly and historical such in particular.

In assessing Brandes's sketch for a comparative methodology it is useful to distinguish provisionally between its synchronic and diachronic aspects as two intertwined yet separate moments. While the latter covers the relation between literatures across time and the phenomenon of literary evolution, the former concerns the relation between literatures *sub specie aeternitatis* or the 'idea' of comparativism. If we begin by looking at the synchronic aspect, the *Main Currents'* opening lecture plainly establishes that the plurality of national perspectives summoned in the comparative approach per se produces a superior understanding because the various perspectives are made to mutually illuminate, nuance and correct each other. Following this, comparing is essentially—ideally—a matter of securing objectivity and balance: We compare one thing to the other in order to get the proportions right, compensating for any prejudice or partiality resulting from better acquaintance or physical or chronological proximity. Thus, inaugurating the attack on bourgeois culture that eventually led to Brandes's exit from the University of Copenhagen, the opening of the *Main Currents* candidly

presents the author's comparativist approach as a movement away from "the illusions of unassisted eyesight" allegedly marring contemporaneous Danish literary studies toward seeing national literature in "its true perspective":

The comparative view possesses the double advantage of bringing foreign literature so near to us that we can assimilate it, and of removing our own until we are enabled to see it in its true perspective. We neither see what is too near the eye nor what is too far away from it. The scientific view of literature provides us with a telescope of which the one end magnifies and the other diminishes; it must be so focussed as to remedy the illusions of unassisted eyesight.<sup>1</sup>

With his telescope metaphor, Brandes makes an eloquent if slightly truistic case for comparativism: Who would not want to see things in their "true perspective", especially if the alternative is cultural shortsightedness? Against this truism, it could reasonably be argued that Danish literature deserves to be understood on its own terms, in its own context, and not be bulldozed through comparison with the major European literatures which would inevitably make it appear provincial and inferior. However, the implicit argument of the *Main Currents* is a bit more intricate than the polemic contrasting of comparativism and cultural myopia suggests. If we pursue the full meaning of the telescope metaphor, it becomes clear that the plurality of perspectives summoned in the comparative approach produces more than just nuanced, relational understanding of individual literatures. It adds something extra to the bargain, an epistemological surplus: The "true perspective". The scrutiny of continuities and discontinuities between various national literatures not only improves understanding of these literatures in themselves and in relation to each other. It simultaneously proposes what may provisionally be termed their virtual 'sum total' as a more complex object of investigation.

Thus, Brandes's study of contemporaneous literature is emphatically concerned both with Danish literature in its particularity, its relation to other literatures and the virtual synthesis suggested by the juxtaposition of various national literatures. Although he takes a special interest in the particular case of Danish letters which, according to his view, remains caught in Romanticist reaction unable to take the final step into modernity that other European literatures have consummated, Brandes also and in equal measure aims for the bigger picture. As he expresses it in Danish, the comparative approach—the perfectly adjusted telescope—enables one to *overskue*, "overview", the totality.<sup>2</sup> Brandes's idea of comparativism is thus holistic in essence or, as he

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<sup>1</sup> Brandes 1906, vii-viii.

<sup>2</sup> Brandes 1906, viii.

terms it, “scientific”, characterised by the interdependence of parts and whole.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, “the reaction in the first decades of the nineteenth century against the literature of the eighteenth, and the vanquishment of that reaction” that Brandes’s study concerns, and which Danish literature has purportedly not consummated, “can only be understood by a comparative study of European literature”.<sup>4</sup> As an outlier or extreme, backward Danish literature illuminates the more progressive nature of contemporaneous English, French and German literatures *ex contrariis*. At the same time, all the different European literatures together suggest a more comprehensive image: That of nineteenth-century literature considered as a whole.

While these thoughts are certainly provocative and thought-provoking in themselves, stimulating reflection on why we would want to compare anything to something else in the first place, Brandes’s sketch for a comparative methodology also has a significant diachronic or literary historical dimension. This dimension on one hand represents a separate moment of his thinking about comparativism, specifically concerned with the literary historical development from Realism to Romanticism and finally to what the Danish critic influentially labelled the Modern Breakthrough. On the other hand, however, the diachronic aspect of the *Main Currents* is also intricately intertwined with his idea of comparativism as an approach which sees the emergence of an epistemological surplus from the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives. Indeed, as the following passage makes clear, the comprehensive vision—the intellectual add-on—which materialises in the comparatist approach is, precisely, of a historical nature. It is the contour of the “one great leading movement” which puts the movements of all the individual nineteenth-century literatures into their “true perspective”, the spirit of the Age of Revolution:

It is my intention in the present work to trace the outlines of a psychology of the first half of the nineteenth century by means of the study of certain main groups and movements in European literature. The stormy year 1848, a historical turning-point, and hence a break, is the limit to which I purpose following the process of development. The period between the beginning and the middle of the century presents the spectacle of many scattered and apparently disconnected literary efforts and phenomena. But he who carefully observes the main currents of literature perceives that their movements are all conditioned by one great leading movement with its ebb and flow, namely, the gradual fading away and disappearance of the ideas and feelings of the

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<sup>3</sup> Brandes 1906, viii.

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preceding century, and the return of the idea of progress in new, ever higher-mounting waves.<sup>5</sup>

As can be gleaned from the subsequent characterisation of literary history as “psychology, the study, the history of the soul”, Brandes’s literary historiography is steeped in Hegelian philosophy of history:<sup>6</sup> The *Main Currents* lectures are in many respects classic *Geistesgeschichte*, exploring “what was really happening in men’s minds in a given country at a given period”.<sup>7</sup> For, as Brandes formulates it, “a book, even though it may be a perfect, complete work of art, is only a piece cut out of an endlessly continuous web” involving the life of the author as well as “the spiritual atmosphere which he breathed”.<sup>8</sup> A work of literature is a window into the mind of its author and his or her particular national context but also into the spirit of the time: The *Zeitgeist*. This is, then, what Brandes’s terms the “scientific view of literature”: An approach focused not on individual literatures in their own right or in relation to other individual literatures but on the larger historical pattern revealed by their juxtaposition.

As such a laying bare of larger historical patterns, the *Main Currents* lectures in many respects epitomise the thrust of historical comparativism in its most classical form. Yet do Brandes’s lectures present a viable ground for modern-day historical comparativism to build on? The answer to that question would have to be both negative and affirmative. While the historico-philosophical framework of Brandes’s comparativism would seem to be definitively obsolete, the idea that the comparatist juxtaposition of national perspectives procures an epistemological surplus and the identification of this surplus as cognition of a complex historical development could offer a viable twin point of departure for modern historical comparativists. It just needs an update. How can Brandes’s *Geistesgeschichte* be made to meet the horizon of twenty-first-century literary historians?

## II.

One place to look for inspiration in this regard is in Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, 1925)*. A sophisticated modernist example of *Geistesgeschichte* and a perceptive study of seventeenth-century European drama, Benjamin’s famous work not only takes us in the direction of this special issue’s topic. It also refines the comparative methodology applied in the *Main Currents*, among other late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literary histories, making it

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<sup>5</sup> Brandes 1906, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Brandes 1906, viii.

<sup>7</sup> Brandes 1906, viii.

<sup>8</sup> Brandes 1906, viii-ix.

,more palatable to twenty-first-century literary historians (but also decisively more intricate). The following discussion highlights similarities and differences between the two examples of historical comparativism, going into some detail with Benjamin's argument in order to demonstrate the latent and generally unacknowledged comparatist design of *Origin*—but also because of its immediate bearing on the topic of the present volume.

First of all, like Brandes, Benjamin aims to grasp the spirit of a historical epoch through its literature. More specifically, Benjamin studies the so-called Baroque—the 'long' seventeenth century or *early* Early Modernity, overlapping roughly with the period covered by the contributions in the present volume—through its most significant literary form: The new secular drama depicting the characters and events of a recognisable historical world (rather than Scriptural figures and moral allegories) and employing varying mixtures of pessimism and playfulness in the representation of this world. Also like Brandes, Benjamin starts from the literary production of his native country juxtaposing the allegedly inferior German specimens of this emerging dramatic genre with major contemporaneous variants from other European countries: Principally the theatre of the acclaimed Spanish playwrights Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca,<sup>9</sup> the latter famously specified as the "virtual object" of the study in a letter written by Benjamin to his friend Gershom Scholem in December 1924;<sup>10</sup> but also, inevitably, Shakespearean drama which is addressed in the subchapter "Hamlet"<sup>11</sup> and again at the end of the book where it is stated that "for *Richard III*, for *Hamlet*, as indeed for all Shakespearean 'tragedies', the theory of the *Trauerspiel* is predestined to contain the prolegomena of interpretation".<sup>12</sup> The fact that the title of his study mentions only the German mourning play should, thus, not obscure the fact that Benjamin's study, just like Brandes's lectures, concerns a broad European trend. It merely takes the German variant of this trend as its centre of gravity, in a tongue-in-cheek revisionist gesture seeking to amend centuries of "neglect and misinterpretation" of this "amorphous fragment".<sup>13</sup>

However, there are other important methodological points of contact between *Origin* and *Main Currents*. For just as Brandes contended that nineteenth-century literature revealed "what was really happening in men's minds in a given country at a given period", Benjamin's comparative study of seventeenth-century secular drama everywhere implies that the

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin 1996, 80-88; 91-95.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin 1991, 881.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin 1996, 157-158.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin 1996, 228.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin 1996, 48-51; 176.

simultaneous upsurge and predominance of this type of drama on an array of European stages reveals something essential about the “spiritual atmosphere” that the dramatists breathed: About the *Zeitgeist*. An epochal spirit can be many things, of course. To Brandes, the nineteenth-century spirit was mainly political. In *Origin*, the different variants of the mourning play first of all convey different aspects of seventeenth-century religious sensibility. Viewed through Benjamin’s comparative telescope, the various German, Spanish and English forms of the mourning play examined in his study together suggest the complex image of an epoch which grappled differently with the problem of a historical world perceived as devoid of metaphysical meaning and urging meaningful interpretation.

Thus, while the Spanish dramatists exploited a theatrical logic akin to the Counter-Reformation doctrine of transubstantiation, endowing the historical world with a blaze of transcendental significance or a suggestive mystical glow (an endeavour viewed by Benjamin with considerable suspicion), their German colleagues Andreas Gryphius, Daniel Casper von Lohenstein and Johann Christian Hallmann opted for the *via negativa* of apophatic theology which allowed them to at the same time insist on the gloominess and vanity of the historical world and to preserve a however miniscule, utopian idea of redemption. Shakespearean drama, for its part, with its Hamletian dialectic of melancholy and hope, mediated between Spanish levity and German gravity by showing the overcoming of sorrow through self-awareness.<sup>14</sup> Though the latter appeared to thereby epitomise the tragicomic epochal spirit suggested by the term ‘mourning play’, a play (*Spiel*) with mourning, Benjamin’s study essentially proposes that the different national variants of seventeenth-century secular-historical drama each found their way to cope with historical meaninglessness. Indeed, in several passages, Benjamin tends to favour the German variant over the artistically superior drama of Calderón and Shakespeare because of its “ethical superiority”: Its insistence on the ruinous nature of history and the remoteness of grace.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, to each nation their own mourning play, his point appears to be. What worked in Madrid would not have worked in Silesia and vice versa. Still, together the different variants convey the inner tensions of seventeenth-century religious sensibility. Like the *Main Currents* lectures, *Origin* thus also aims to present a nuanced and relational or perspectivic image of the literary materials and the epoch studied, putting together a grand, complex puzzle.

Finally, like Brandes, who compared nineteenth-century literature to what came before and after it, studying “the reaction in the first decades of the

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin 1996, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin 1996, 84; 235.

nineteenth century against the literature of the eighteenth, and the vanquishment of that reaction”, Benjamin pursues the seventeenth-century spirit encrypted, as it were, in the mourning play backward and forward in time, suggesting the outline of a comprehensive transhistorical and transnational development: The development of an historical ethics, or an ethics defining the meaning of the historical world in strictly secular terms, through the medium of theatre. His study thus posits the seventeenth-century mourning play as the authentic heir to Greek tragedy and as the cradle of a modern historical drama that was, however, never fully realised but instead marginalised as an aesthetic abomination by less hard-headed or more comfort-seeking dramatic schools, notably of classicist pedigree but also of the anti-realist Romanticist kind criticised by Brandes. In Benjamin’s book on the seventeenth century, as in Brandes’s lectures on the nineteenth century—and as in all interesting works of historical comparativism—literary history becomes a space for communicative exchange across time and space as continuities and discontinuities are contemplated and “the true perspective”, the synthesis, is suggested: In the case of *Origin*, the long-winded *via dolorosa* to an illusionless but precisely not disillusioned view of historical existence.

However, notwithstanding the notable coincidences between the two types of *Geistesgeschichte* highlighted here, *Origin* also in important methodological aspects departs from the historical comparativism of *Main Currents*. In establishing his epochal synthesis Benjamin is, first of all, extremely cautious. Second, his comparative methodology is anything but vague, as Brandes’s arguably was. The “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” lays a solid methodological foundation indeed, conscientiously addressing scepticisms about synthetic epochal concepts and emphasising the responsibility informing the scientific coining of such concepts. Indeed, as Benjamin’s striking adoption of the Platonic imperative “to save phenomena”,<sup>16</sup> *τὰ φαινόμενα σώζειν*, indicates, the objective of *Origin* is less to convey a unitary picture of the mourning play and its historical epoch than to immerse the reader in all the dissonances, incongruences and discontinuities that, indirectly or negatively, together suggest a greater and much more complex picture, an incoherent picture even, full of tensions and contradictions. Thus, what Brandes called the “scientific view of literature”—the comparatist piecing together of different perspectives—Benjamin terms the “philosophical contemplation” and its paragon is not the telescope but, perhaps more appropriately, the mosaic:

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin 1996, 33.

Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite the fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste.<sup>17</sup>

The elaborate aesthetic and intellectual-historical analysis of the mourning play which makes up the rest of *Origin* certainly follows this methodological ideal. The particular is not sacrificed on the altar of the universal, phenomena are not squeezed into conceptual straightjackets, but the two are balanced against each other in a historical understanding which oscillates between the bold suggestion of overarching evolutionary patterns and the necessary immersion in empirical detail to support the argument. Indeed, much as his epochal construction may superficially resemble the purer idealism of Brandes's Hegelian aesthetics, one cannot accuse Benjamin of disregarding the complexity of the historical material in his hunt for the epochal spirit that it conveys. His philological engagement with the seventeenth-century texts in their singularity and complexity escapes the empirical anaemia of traditional *Geistesgeschichte* while still retaining the holistic outlook that was the strength of that approach. Furthermore, in rather sharp contrast to Brandes's historical narrative which described a one-way street to Modernity, Benjamin's study is characterised by a dynamic or dialectic relation between past and present. The seventeenth century is not something that is over and done with, as was Realism or, especially, Romanticism in Brandes's literary history. On the contrary, with the prologue's much-noted juxtaposition of "Baroque and expressionism",<sup>18</sup> rather unfavourable to the latter, *Origin* actually appears to recommend a return to the Baroque as a reservoir of untapped possibilities, a road not taken, an open path to a better—more truly enlightened—form of historical awareness: The understanding of the historical world through the medium of theatre.

### III.

On the backdrop of the above reflection on historical comparativism we can now return to this volume's theme: The Carthaginian noblewoman Sophonisba. Why did this particular figure, a minor character in ancient

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin 1996, 28-29

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin 1996, 53-56.



historical sources on the Second Punic War, become a major star on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European stages? What does her simultaneous or near- simultaneous appearance in plays written in the Netherlands, England, France, Greece, Germany and Italy convey about the individual cultures of these countries? Why was Sophonisba, for example, the preferred heroine of the French theatre, rivalled only by Cleopatra? How should her popularity in the Netherlands, where she triumphed all through the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth century, be construed? Why does she not appear in the otherwise prolific Spanish historical drama until the late eighteenth century? How should this Spanish exception be understood? What does Sophonisba's simultaneous or near-simultaneous emergence in an array of early modern (or early early modern) European contexts reveal about that period? And what should be made of the figure's disappearance roughly after 1800? Did she finally exhaust her potential or why else was she slighted by modern dramatists? The case of the Sophonisba figure virtually craves comparatist scrutiny.

The intriguing situation, where Sophonisbas appear all over Europe within a rather short period of time, would seem to be comparable to when archaeologists discover that a specific object—say a certain type of vessel or a metallic receptacle—was produced in a range of independent geographical contexts roughly at the same time. First, they surely begin to look for the concrete, practical connections which could have brought either specimens of the object itself or knowledge of the object from one location to the next: Merchant routes, itinerant theatre troupes, diplomats and other travellers. However they also, supposedly, begin to investigate the cultural function and meaning of this type of object: What was it there for? Which contemporaneous need or needs did it meet? What does the object convey about the epoch that saw its proliferation? Does its simultaneous appearance in an array of contexts reveal a larger historical pattern?

A collection of articles by scholars from different scholarly backgrounds approaching their subjects in different ways, the present volume does not attempt to lay out any unitary design. Instead it presents so many pieces of a large puzzle for the reader to assemble. In this sense, it makes manifest how comparative literary studies and historical in particular can constructively be conceived—and indeed often materialize—as teamwork. For if Benjamin's mosaic metaphor is to be taken seriously, comparatists should preferably work together. No single scholar can cover everything by themselves and the “brilliance of the representation” of a given theme, figure or epoch inevitably depends on the individual “value of fragments of thought”: Every single element of the grand mosaic must be thoroughly and impeccably researched, knowledgeable and informed, for only thus will the—always only suggested,

composite, indistinct—whole be able to emerge and take shape as a convincing narrative about the past. Assembling the work of an array of specialists as so many mosaic stones, this volume aims to suggest, if not “the truth itself”, then at least a significant pattern informing early modern European imagination.

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