

Fundamentals of Comparative Literature II: Modes of Engagement



1. Course Description

CL 9502B may be considered the sequel to CL 9501A in two senses--chronologically and dialectically. The set of assigned readings for *Fundamentals II* begins in the intellectual turbulence of the 1960s, the period in which the set of assigned readings for *Fundamentals I* left off. Critical questions raised by the key notion of “comparison”-- What literatures are worth comparing? Who determines the grounds of comparison? Why should national literatures be compared? How interdisciplinary should comparative literature be? Where does the unifying ideal of “World Literature” (as originally generated by the comparative project) lead in an increasingly fragmented world?-- will be dialectically addressed in relation to the key notion of “engagement” by critics and theorists who have directed the attention of Comparatists towards the great divides in postwar culture.

Instead of contemplating what makes one literature similar to, or influential on, another, the authors studied in *Fundamentals II* engage with the major binary oppositions fracturing the modern/postmodern world. New contexts of social or political engagement will produce new justifications for comparative literary study. A radical rethinking of the familiar semiotic binary (Signifier/Signified) will give rise to the subversive interpretive strategies of Deconstruction and Discourse Analysis. Feminist critiques of the modernist binaries of gender (Male/Female) and sexuality (Hetero/Homo) will stimulate exciting new readings of canonical authors. Translation, once considered a humble rendering of a prestigious original text in a “foreign” language, will be reconceived as a subversive “foreignizing” of the original text. The fundamental notion of “comparison” will bend under the intense pressure of postcolonial critiques of imperialist discourse until new notions such as “comparativity” and “incommensurability” will be proposed as more in tune with contemporary social justice projects.

Certain organizational and bibliographical aspects of the first half-course are carried over into the sequel. Dante plays an inaugurating role in both courses. In *Fundamentals I*, a prophetic canto from the middle of the *Commedia* (the comparative literary text *par excellence* in the Western Canon) served to kick off the study of comparison. Similarly, the first class in *Fundamentals II* will be a free-wheeling exploration of the theme of “engagement with discontinuity” prompted by an extempore discussion of a shocking canto from the *Inferno*. Just as *Fundamentals I* drew many of its readings from Parts One and Two of *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, *Fundamentals II* will draw many of its readings from Parts Three and Four of the same anthology. In each course, one major work in Comparative Literature, a recognized “classic” in the field, is studied in its entirety. Balancing Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* in the first course is Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* in the sequel. In each course, a provocative head-spinning theoretical text is read in its entirety. Balancing Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* is Slavoj Žižek’s *The Metastases of Desire* in the sequel.

NOTE: CL 9502B is a required course for MA students in Comparative Literature.

2. Assignments / Grade Breakdown

1. Midterm [take-home question, 10pp. essay].....	30%
2. Presentation [scheduled in weeks 4-14].....	20%
3. Major Essay [approx. 20 pp.].....	50%

