

Remarks by Hent de Vries at the Inaugural Dedication for the Russ Family Chair in the Humanities, April 28, 2008.

Thank you very much, Dean Falk, for this generous introduction, for the faith you have put in me during these last years, as well as for your continued strong support of the special operation that we call The Humanities Center. Thank you, Vice Provost Gallagher, for your kind words on behalf of the University. Thanks to Dean Sylvia Eggleston-Wehr, Andrea Jones, and Alexis Rapkin for wisely shepherding me through the process leading up to this afternoon's event.

It is a rare privilege for me to be in this position today, among esteemed colleagues, great students, good friends, and dearly loved ones. It fills me with pride and gratefulness, first of all to the tremendous generosity and vision with which Philip and Melissa Russ and their children Benjamin and Johanna Murray honor this great university and, more specifically, honor the Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences. In establishing this endowed Chair, they have supported and underscored the academic and more broadly educational importance of the humanities to which our School and its Deans have demonstrated a longstanding commitment.

As the first holder of the chair, I feel humbled and part of a larger cause. I promise that I will do my utmost best to assist in inspiring exemplary colleagues, devoted administrators, as well as our truly wonderful, broadly trained, free-spirited, and enterprising students in the common task of further solidifying and strengthening the institutional role and scholarly reputation of our beloved Humanities Center. This also means that I intend to foster and continue to cherish its essential ties with other

departments, notably in the humanities and, increasingly, the social sciences, all of which make up the larger intellectual community without whose continuous support and intellectual resources we could hardly succeed in the things we do well. I hope to contribute to the Center's and the School's visibility and prestige in the disciplinary fields that we cover as well as in the interdisciplinary and cross-departmental outreaches that we seek, not as a matter of mere convenience but of principle. Let me explain.

You are all aware that “the humanities” seem at times a strangely underdefined scholarly terrain. More than simply referring to study of the “great books” of the so-called Western tradition, more also than denoting the literatures that we describe as “modern” or “modernist”—important as these themes and preoccupations are—we think of “the humanities” in our Humanities Center as best defined and approached *indirectly*, especially via two related fields and methods, which go by the seemingly uncontroversial names of “intellectual history” and “comparative literature.” But these two well-known designations are hardly self-explanatory. Moreover, to the extent that they have clear historical meaning, they often also seem somewhat worn out. And in more than one sense, they are. In fact, we might even conceive of the task of “the humanities” without ever resorting to these two designations. Yet there is in their very definition something that already points beyond them and offers a hint as to where to go next.

The first designation, intellectual history, has a long and honorable tradition at Johns Hopkins, connected with names such as Arthur O. Lovejoy, a professor of philosophy from 1910 through 1938, who in the opening chapter of his well-known *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, the text of his 1933 William James Lectures at Harvard, did much to formulate a conception of and agenda for what

he defined as the “history of ideas.” Interestingly, Lovejoy paired attention to what he called “manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers,”<sup>1</sup> to a certain understanding of “comparative literature.” True, the connection between the two designations might seem to us a very loose one. After all, there are plenty of “CompLit” departments at American research universities and worldwide that do not occupy themselves directly with intellectual history or “the history of ideas” in the strongly philosophic sense Lovejoy gave to this term. But Lovejoy’s point is nonetheless worth pursuing.

While following Alfred North Whitehead’s suggestion, in *Science and the Modern World*, that literature expresses “the concrete outlook of humanity” and hence encapsulates the “inward thoughts of a generation,” Lovejoy added a further insight. In order to bring out literature’s “philosophic background,” one would need, he claimed, to first distinguish and analyze “the major ideas which appear again and again, . . . observing each of them as a recurrent unit in many contexts,”<sup>2</sup> that is to say, in different epochs, nations, and languages. But to do so requires one to move beyond all too narrow disciplinary, linguistic, and especially territorial confines. For this reason, Lovejoy insisted that, “in common with what is called the study of comparative literature, the history of ideas expresses a protest against the consequences which have often resulted from the conventional division of literary and some other historical studies by nationalities or languages.”<sup>3</sup>

More recent theorists have given more far-reaching—and, in my view, compelling—answers to the question of in what sense our study of literature could be

comparative. I am thinking of what David Wellbery and John Bender note in their programmatic preface to the volume *The Ends of Rhetoric*, namely that “the academic discipline of comparative literature is the successor in the world of the post-Humboldtian university to the tradition of rhetorical doctrine and education that dominated literary study in Europe prior to the emergence of the national philologies.”<sup>4</sup> Placing the field of comparative literature against this larger historical background, they suggest, would allow one to understand its greater ambition of investigating the deep-seated categories enabling human thought (and not just the “unit-ideas” that come to dominate it at certain times and on which Lovejoy’s “history of ideas” had focused). Reference to the rhetorical tradition from, say, Aristotle, through the medieval and modern conceptions of the liberal arts, all the way up to the structuralist and post-structuralist controversies of the late 1960s and beyond, “prompts reflection on the intellectual substance” and scope of an ever broadening field:

Following the “theory wave” of the past two decades [Wellbery and Bender write in 1990], comparative literature has increasingly become a discipline in which the conceptual foundations of literary study itself are being redrawn. The modifier “comparative” has therefore taken on a new meaning, referring no longer solely to the international dimension of the enterprise but also to its interdisciplinary and metacritical character. To pursue comparative literature today is in part to explore the connections that link literature to other fields of knowledge. Rhetoric is a domain where these connections become especially salient. Rhetorical inquiry, as it is thought and practiced today, occurs in an interdisciplinary matrix that touches on such fields as philosophy, linguistics, communication studies, psycho-analysis, cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, and political theory.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, to compare means to draw on the “conceptual resources of several fields.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, we could take issue with the assumed historical prominence and contemporary relevance of the model of rhetoric as these authors see it. Indeed, one might object that intellectual models, preceding and independent of the study of national literatures—I am thinking of the traditions of jurisprudence and scriptural exegesis—offered no less striking examples of “comparison,” thus defined. Moreover, while the invocation of historical and modern forms of “rhetoric” allows one to account for the passions or affects that pervade, if not regulate, understanding, they risk privileging a certain *linguistification* of experience that many of us no longer deem defensible on conceptual and empirical grounds. Finally, is “comparative” the proper modifier we need? And would the study of “literature,” when it is thus opened to alternative conceptual resources, still be the privileged field upon which it operates? I leave this question open, just as much as I have no concrete proposal for redesigning, indeed re-baptizing the ways we proceed.

What should be appreciated in the comparative approach thus expanded—especially by those among us who are interested in intellectual history and its theoretical underpinnings—is that it opens a far more productive set of disciplinary and methodological distinctions than the ones between, say, conceptual analysis, formal semantics, and pragmatics, on the one hand, and phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction, on the other. By the same token, and to put it more succinctly, as a comparatist, broadly defined, one need no longer feel compelled to side with philosophical schools of, say, analytic or continental thought (the latter being the syndrome with which theorists in our domain are too often lumped together). Instead, we could feel entitled to draw on both and to do so in a *freely metaphysical* or, if you like, *deeply pragmatic* temperament.

But how, you may wonder, do these larger considerations shed light on my own work? The answer is simple. I have always found it hard to pinpoint my disciplinary profile—to discipline my inter- or multi- and trans-disciplinary interests—and I still think, quite frankly, that no intellectual purpose would have been served by it. For these reasons, I consider being a professor in the Humanities Center and now holding a chair “in the humanities” as blessings indeed.

However, let me give three interrelated examples that might indicate how my still all too general description of our field might coalesce around particular and fairly specific themes. For reasons of time, let me report of just a few of my recent obsessions and give you merely their respective thesis (or rather, hypothesis) and overall argument, not their proof or demonstration. As I said, these are obsessions, surmises—perhaps indeed just “metaphysical” or, as Popper might have conjectured, “bold ideas”—which stand in need of further analysis and understanding, even though they can hardly be verified or falsified as such. Their corroboration proceeds differently and, in that sense, our “comparativist” theory of them, however rigorous or erudite, will form no contribution to either science or, say, philosophy (or, for that matter, any other discipline, as we know it). For what they are worth, these “ideas” have a non-scientific rationality and plausibility at best. We humanists, when at our best, are merely “transcendental belletrists,” as the German skeptic Odo Marquard once proudly exclaimed.

The three obsessions or themes that have captivated my attention are the following.

First, it has struck me that one cannot study, describe, and analyze, let alone comprehend, what an “event” is without immediately tapping into historical sources and intellectual registers that claim what—in the language and imagery of religion or, as it were, theologically—constitutes a “miracle.” Nor, I have felt compelled to add, although this may seem somewhat of a stretch, is it possible to understand either one of these notions—“event,” “miracle”—without addressing what in the language of cinema and so-called new media is called a “special effect.”

What is important is to realize that this does not only—or even primarily—hold true for so-called major events, for example world-shocking historical events, the determining or effective causes of which elude us; the comparison can also be made with what we take to be ordinary events or the eventfulness of the everyday. The religious testimony of the miracle—the very phenomenon or set(s) of phenomena for which it stands—might thus epitomize and flag, but also condense or magnify, foreground and highlight, the most down-to-earth, profane, and secular difficulty in our coming to terms with virtually any culturally mediated and ever more mediatized given. As Walt Whitman wrote in a notebook and also suggested throughout in a beautiful poem entitled “Miracles”: “We hear of miracles.—But what is there that is not a miracle?”<sup>7</sup>

My second theme relates directly to the first. One cannot theorize “the political” or concrete contemporary forms of “politics” without drawing, once again, on its theology, more precisely, its “political theology,” just as one can hardly assess its contemporary forms and re-shapings without reference to media, old and especially new. This is particularly clear in the ways that violence, in random terror no less than so-called justified wars, is differently—and never fully or convincingly—legitimated but always

clings to grounds and motivations that remain transcendent to any cause. “No violence without religion, no religion without violence,” I once wrote in a somewhat metaphysical mood. True, the clips, sound bites, and spin of public religion and its political theologies differ greatly, and so do their calculated and incalculable effects, leaving no alternative but to *learn to read the signs, to read between the lines, to see what is not visible, to hear what is not said*, unaided by sure criteriological means or by rules for their interpretation. Minimal differences have maximal import. An hour of zapping or surfing confirms my point.

The use and abuse of religion in political causes—and hence the need for a critique of “political idolatry,” as the French political scientist and contemporary of Sartre Raymond Aron once called it—remains as relevant today as it was in the days of a Henri Bergson, who in his last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, wisely noted that all too often “nations at war each declare that they have God on their side, the deity in question thus becoming the national god of paganism, whereas the God they imagine they are evoking is a God common to all mankind, the mere vision of Whom, could all men but attain it, would mean the immediate abolition of war.”<sup>8</sup> We know it doesn’t always work out that way and that these two contrasting yet complementary political theologies—say, the pagan and the Christian or, more broadly, Abrahamic one—can be equally damaging.

Lastly, while learning to read—and to read “comparatively”—is thus everything, one cannot read, least of all the so-called literatures of time, whether time novels or poetic, lyrical expressions of human temporality or narrative presentations of “the everyday,” without asking oneself what historical and non-literary (for example,

theological or philosophical) dealings with time are implied. There are parallel, convergent, and interchangeable methods of evoking the times of the past, the present, and the future, all of which feed into our capacity for reading the signs of the time. Indeed, the literary, theological, and philosophical instances of doing so could be said to revolve around a common concern, a spiritual exercise—a “way of life,” as Pierre Hadot called it—which allows them to shed light on each other in surprising ways. Though at certain distance from the “madness of the day” (Maurice Blanchot), they are as many comparable disciplines that teach us to grasp what matters and is urgent *here and now*.

These, for what they are worth, are some of the themes that have caught—and in the coming years will continue to draw—my attention. Whether they bring humanity—or even “the humanities”—several steps further remains to be seen. But I am convinced that where my account and exploration of them fails, others, not least of all our students, will succeed. Examples are legion. Their success may be measured by their ability to change the subject, find other themes, identify other obsessions, or to address the same or similar ones in much more promising, novel ways that I could not foresee. And then they, in turn, will no doubt fail and seek to begin all over or pass on the torch to others still. And, in the end, it will not be altogether clear what, if anything, constituted progress, let alone truth, in these domains. The pursuit of these questions—and of better ones—matters more than their tentative answers. The truth is in the process, not its conclusion.

With this, I have said what I wanted to share with you this afternoon. I thank you for coming and for your patience.

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1 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936, 1964), 19.

2 *Ibid.*, 17.

3 *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> David Wellbery and John Bender, eds., *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), vii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vii-viii

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

7 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 327 note 1.

8 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 215.