What is Wrong with National Literature Departments?

The essay asks what is wrong with national literature departments. Traditional literature departments, even with various politically conscious additions – women writers, authors of colour, postcolonial conditions, linguistic minorities, queer theory – assume by their very structure a romantic notion of the nation state, of borders and of linguistics as a major aspect of national identity and canonicity. The essay considers the early German Romantics to see how they understood the twinning of nation and culture, and how this is baggage that Western universities still carry, even as they try to open themselves to other cultures. “Frühromantiker” such as Friedrich Schlegel, A. W. Schlegel, Novalis and Fichte (along with Chateaubriand) idealize the Middle Ages as a time of great unity in Europe, and understand nationhood to have a divine aspect. Recently, the idea of the university and of national literature departments is being fundamentally rethought. Said, Bernheimer, Moebius, Reading, Foucault, Spivak, Bauman – to name just a few – have all worried about the place of literature in the light of globalisation, the dominance of Europe in literature departments, and the place of minority discourses. The essay suggests that Comparative Literature may be the hope for the future in literary studies, because it is a field that by definition combines linguistic, cultural and political perspectives in its approach to texts. At the same time, however, comparative literature has traditionally been dominated by Eurocentrism, which has been the source of much criticism. Should the dominant languages of Europe be set aside to make room for the less known, less powerful ones? The essay sees the European project of community as a source of hope, analogous to comparative literature, in facing both the challenge and cultural wealth of diversity.¹

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To start the discussion on “what is wrong with national literature departments”, I first need to point out the double meaning of my title: What has gone wrong with the traditional national literature departments? That is the first meaning of my title. The other is: what is wrong with having national literature departments? Aren’t they a necessary part of any university, of any education? To begin exploring these issues, we need to think for a moment about nation as a concept again. It was Hanna Arendt who noted, in *Men in Dark Times*, that to erase the distance “between men” is to erase the in-betweenness which makes for dialogue, and thus for world and humanity itself. Distance means borders, boundaries, but also objectification.

In *L’absolu littéraire*, Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy held that literature, criticism, theory and philosophy as we know them today (even as we refigure them) were largely put into place by the brothers Schlegel and their famous Jena circle. As David Simpson argues, in some respects “this attribution of an origin” is valid. Indeed, he adds, “Friedrich Schlegel’s *Critical Fragments* and *Athenaeum Fragments* are ... histories of the postmodern by anticipation” (136). Romanticism, Simpson concludes, contains clues about “the residual determinations that are still in play around the postmodern” (137). I concur with this view, and would add that our departmental structures in today’s academe are a remainder of this history. Therefore, I believe that a brief excursion into the early Romantics will prove useful here.

In his own age, Friedrich Schlegel writes, there was a revolution afoot; one that had already manifested itself in science (he means the new physics). But “revolution” is not an innocent term, and its political aspect must not be overlooked. Schlegel understands the Middle Ages as the time that gave birth to a national feeling in harmony with a concomitant, harmonious religious community. The nostalgia for the Middle Ages, its imagined happy unity of the Church in Rome and the notion of a medieval State, leads to a specific nineteenth-century political attitude (*Haltung*).

The birth of Romanticism, for the most part in Germany, also coincides with the birth of the modern nation state, the modern university and – significant in the context of this essay – with the founding of Comparative Literature (*vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*) as a discipline. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, within the space of a few years, four major texts appeared that idealized the Middle Ages as a heavenly period of unity in Christendom, in close connection with an imagined “state