

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2012

Review of The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare

Catherine Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Brown, Catherine, "Review of The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare" (2012). *The George Eliot Review*. 624.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/624>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Catherine Brown, *The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare*
(Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), pp.
xvii + 192. ISBN 978 1 906540 81 4. £45.**

This book is a defence of comparative literature in theory – if it has a theory – and in practice by concentrating on three novels – *Daniel Deronda*, *Anna Karenina*, *Women in Love* – which are structurally similar in various respects, most obviously in employing double plots focusing on two couples, and thematically related in terms of their interests and concerns. The book is clearly derived from a doctoral dissertation and has some obvious features of the genre: a thesis which it endeavours to make persuasive by argument and supporting evidence, reference to much previous criticism on the subject, a general introduction which attempts to demonstrate why such a study is needed and a conclusion that sums up what has been achieved and various problems that remain which the author has become aware of in the course of writing the book. Though there are numerous monographs derived from doctoral dissertations, this book stands out for its remarkable range of reference together with a breadth of reading in numerous languages and depth of knowledge that reminds one of George Eliot herself. There are occasional lapses that may raise an occasional doubt about the extent of the author's intellectual mastery, notably referring to 'Rosamund' in *Middlemarch*, still a common error among students but uncommon these days among critics. (For the record, E. M. Forster would have objected to an apostrophe being inserted in *Howards End*, and 'Katharine' though appropriate for Hepburn is not for Mansfield.)

Catherine Brown is well aware that comparative literature is a fairly marginal presence in literary study in universities, perhaps especially in Britain. Yet as she points out comparison is 'a practice that is involved in all reading' (p. 1). There was a time, however, when it was dominant. In the early days of English as an academic subject comparison reigned supreme. This may be illustrated by the following, probably apocryphal, story: a newly appointed lecturer at a Scottish university was given as his first assignment a lecture course on Spenser. A hundred lectures should be sufficient said the Professor. When he reached lecture seventy, the students were stamping their feet (as students often do, or used to, in the older Scottish universities) and chanting 'We want Spenser!' The assumption presumably was that before any understanding or appreciation of Spenser's writing was possible readers needed knowledge not just of his work but of the wide variety of texts it explicitly or implicitly interacted with. If this approach to the teaching of English literature had continued, it's doubtful whether the rise of English as probably the most popular Arts subject would have taken place as it assumed that the great majority of students could play little active role, since they could never acquire sufficient knowledge to be able to say anything of significance about the texts and authors they had to read; their relation to the subject was essentially passive. This changed with the emergence of Richards and 'practical criticism' in Britain and the New Critics in America. Small group teaching in tutorials or seminars became the predominant teaching mode and lectures were marginalized. The focus of discussion tended to be a single text or perhaps a few short poems with students apparently able to enter into discussion on equal terms with their teachers. Of course that equality was an illusion for the teachers were vastly better read than the students and came to the text with a depth of contextual knowledge that few students could match, so that teachers were as much in control as during the era of multiple lectures by polymathic professors. The new system did not abolish comparative literature but pushed it to

the margins; it was still necessary to any intellectually responsible understanding of literature but students could get by without it and certain academic critics could keep it at a very low level if they wanted to focus on a single author or a narrow range of texts.

How can one resist this state of affairs and make comparative literature again central to literary criticism if criticism will necessarily be superficial without it? Catherine Brown is well aware of the problem. Her solution is, however, drastic: a complete restructuring of academic study which 'involves rearranging all university subjects' (p. 7). Obviously this is not going to happen anytime soon, so what can one do in the meantime? Her response to the problem in this book is to choose texts with certain common features, considering them in relation to each other, and also bringing numerous other texts into the discussion. This interpretive method, she suggests, has the potentiality to open texts up to literary analysis of greater scope and interest than is possible if concentration is focused on a particular text alone.

I'm very sympathetic to this approach but it's arguable that Catherine Brown's way of putting it into practice is fairly conservative and is not likely to lead to comparative literature having a bigger role in English studies or literary study more generally within higher education. *Anna Karenina* is of course a Russian text and comparative literature almost always entails bringing together texts written in different languages. Does this mean that comparative literature demands that readers need to be linguists at a high level of attainment, for knowing a language well enough to appreciate its literary characteristics is not easily achieved? Brown is punctilious in quoting all non-English texts in the original, even those of critics, though translations are provided in square brackets. The implication would seem to be that knowing the original language of the texts one is dealing with is essential for any respectable form of comparative literature. Of course F. R. Leavis and George Steiner wrote on Tolstoy (Steiner also on Dostoevsky) without knowing Russian though they were apologetic about that. One wouldn't want to be without their contributions and it is a pity that more major critics haven't written more on texts they know only in translation. Though Brown doesn't say explicitly that those practising comparative literature should not use translations, her discourse would seem to suggest that. She interestingly discusses various translations of *Anna Karenina* though the primary reason for doing so is that it is relevant to Lawrence who had read the text only in various translations. But the wider question of the role of translation, if it has one, is not discussed. If translation is excluded from comparative literature at the academic level then it is likely to be restricted to literary study at the postgraduate level. If it is to have any role in teaching at the undergraduate level then translations are surely necessary. Though Derrida has written on the impossibility of translation he does not deny that it is also essential. One can agree that using translations is not ideal but without translations being used few students are likely to develop an interest in comparative literature and so want to take it further or specialize in it.

Brown also seems conservatively minded in how she deals with her three texts. One would have thought one of the significant advantages of thinking comparatively in literary terms would be engaging with two texts as closely related structurally and thematically as *Deronda* and *Anna Karenina*, but there is relatively little comparative discussion of them in the book and *Deronda* is largely discussed on its own. The main reason why Brown discusses them together only to a very limited extent is that Eliot hadn't read any Tolstoy and though Tolstoy had read some of Eliot's fiction he makes no reference to *Deronda*. A thoroughly comparative approach only happens in the chapter on *Women in Love* where Brown has the reassurance of

knowing that Lawrence has read *Anna Karenina*, even if only in translation, and had critically engaged with it, but there is little discussion of *Deronda* in relation to *Women in Love* as Brown can't be sure Lawrence had read it: 'Since it is not known whether Lawrence ever read *Daniel Deronda*, *Women in Love* can only implicitly and hypothetically be read as a response to it' (p. 132). I thought the chapter on *Women in Love* was the most successful in the book (unusually a reading of it by a female critic in which the main focus is not on feminist issues). *Women in Love* benefited critically from Brown's comparative discussion, but to determine whether comparative criticism is appropriate on the basis of whether writers had read the texts to be compared seems critically restrictive to an excessive degree.

One of the critical comparisons Brown does make between *Deronda* and *Anna Karenina* in regard to what Brown calls the 'disjunctions of domains' in both novels makes use of the conflicting meanings of the word 'cleavage'. She goes on:

The word *cleavage*, as applied to the line between female breasts, might be thought to refer to the point at which two separate breasts cleave to each – or else to the point where a hypothetical original sausage-like breast was cloven in two. In the first sense, the contrast is produced by selection; in the second, by intensification. The first more closely describes the division of *Daniel Deronda*; the second of *Anna Karenina*. (pp. 123-4)

This is fairly typical of Brown's critical discourse: apparent technical precision combined with metaphor which sometimes illuminates but often provokes the response, possibly or possibly not. In this case, she might have been well advised to remember the warning in *Middlemarch* about becoming 'entangled in metaphor'. Though a male critic is at an obvious disadvantage in any discussion of breasts, Brown might have taken into account that cleavages don't exist in nature since women's breasts are normally well separated, I would tentatively suggest, and cleavages produced predominantly through the use of certain types of clothing. So perhaps the cleavage metaphor requires some revision. (For those interested, 'cleavage' in relation to breasts is apparently of relatively recent origin, first used in the discourse of film censors.)

Readers of this review may be most interested in the discussion of *Deronda*, the longest and most challenging chapter in the book. Brown admits that she is on the side of those critics who have been troubled by *Deronda*'s double-plot, believing that artistic unity is undermined by 'a deficiency of connection between the two stories' (p. 62), a respected critical position, but she goes much further than previous critics in finding virtually every aspect of the novel problematic. Words such as 'unresolved', 'contradictions', 'incoherent', 'disjunctions' recur. Everywhere Brown looks there is a failure to achieve what she conceives to be a coherent artistic form. Gwendolen is a 'scapegoat' and denied tragic status and so is a 'victim of her text' (p. 74); her 'unhappy story' coexists with a 'happy' one but without there being any convincing aesthetic justification for this juxtaposition: '*Daniel Deronda* is an organism in which the vital organs work imperfectly together' (p. 87).

However, is Brown's conception of artistic coherence one which is appropriate for a novel like *Deronda*? She writes, discussing Alcharisi, 'She flatly rejects the religion of which the novel does much to approve' (p. 70), and goes on: 'Nonetheless, many of Alcharisi's criticisms of orthodox Judaism for misogyny and superstition are posed forcefully and remain unanswered' (p. 71). Is this an unresolved contradiction? To use a word like 'approves' for the novel's representation of Judaism is hardly adequate; Judaism has been responsible for providing an identity for a people dispersed across the world and subject to continual prejudice

and persecution. The novel's assumption that it is a force to be reckoned with does not require any 'approval' beyond that. Yet Judaism's subjection of women who wish to be as free as men and to choose their own way of life is undeniable, but there is no incoherence for there is no intention in the novel, I would argue, to reconcile them. Brown judges the novel adversely because she is expecting to find a coherence which the text may aim to subvert, the reader being confronted with a problematic conflict within Judaism (and not only Judaism) that cannot be resolved. Also her claim that there is a mismatch between a plot with a 'happy' outcome and one with an 'unhappy' one is persuasive only if one contemplates the novel from a distance. Brown's critical strategy has something in common with that of Northrop Frye, whom she refers to a few times and who someone said looked at texts as if through the wrong end of a telescope. Such an approach can work well with some texts, but not with Eliot's. Frye-like critical concepts are destabilized by a self-conscious use of realistic detail and an undercurrent of irony that prevents any easy application of such concepts, so that to apply the term 'scapegoat' to Gwendolen appears to be a procrustean procedure though it may be more appropriate in relation to Gerald Crich. Gwendolen certainly goes through some traumatic experiences, the result mainly of her problematic upbringing, ill-advised choices, bad luck, but there is ambiguity as to whether this 'unhappy story' will always remain so. There is clearly the possibility she could succumb to her demons but also the possibility she could survive and be a better person, on the Nietzschean principle that whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger. She also has good luck in that Grandcourt dies, though with some help from her. There are similar ambiguities with the 'happy' Deronda plot. Deronda certainly has good luck in that Mordecai is right about his being a Jew and that his mother unexpectedly turns up to confirm his Jewish origins. But the role of randomness in his (and anyone's) life is also apparent, for if he had never met Mirah on the river his Jewish origin would have meant little to him. Even when he commits himself to Mordecai's Jewish ideal, there is no sign that he embraces Judaism in theological terms. Though trying to create Jewish nationhood gives him the aim in life he's been searching for, at the time the novel was written Jewish nationhood would have been seen as a fantastic pipe-dream, not to mention Deronda's being a somewhat unlikely nation-builder. His preparations for going on his quest are sometimes seen by critics as unintentionally comic but I'm not so sure that this element of humour is unintentional. Thus who can predict whether Gwendolen's or Deronda's life in the future will be the happier or the more successful?

Criticism has its uses if it gives one new insight into literary texts, but it also serves its purpose if it provokes readers to disagree with it in a critically productive way, so though it should be clear that I disagree with Catherine Brown's reading of *Deronda* I'm also grateful to her for making me think again about the novel through responding to her critique.

Ken M. Newton
University of Dundee