How I Became an Americanist; Or The Making of a Mono-Lingual Cultural Comparativist

I

As an Americanist who gives a great deal of time and thought to methodological issues centered on American Studies, I am of course deeply involved in interdisciplinary work. I am not, however, a comparativist, if one cleaves to the conventions that once regulated the meaning of that term within the academy. That is, my daily business does not involve "the scholarly study of diverse cultures by means of literatures written in two or more languages." I have read The Stranger in the original, and No Exit and Madame Bovary; I have also wiggled my way through portions of I Promissi Sposi, Pinocchio, and La Divina Commedia. But even these private forays into French and Italian texts are long ago and faraway. A graduate-level crash-course in German, that briefly sent me in search of the verbs cunningly located at the ends of very long pages from The Sorrows of the Young Werther and Buddenbrooks, does not even deserve mention here; my acquaintance with the Italian idiom, which came about through being tutored by the wife of a Metropolitan Opera voice teacher, comes and goes, governed by how often I can make trips of renewal to Italy. Still and all, sorry as I am personally that I have no command, no conquering power, over linguistic territories other than that of my native English, I still make the audacious claim that I am indeed a comparativist through and through; a comparativist only incidently as the consequence of formal academic training; a comparativist primarily because of experiences that turned me into a person who compares and contrasts various cultures naturally, almost with a kind of fatality; and a comparativist according to the most recent views on the
matter that acknowledge the importance of inter-disciplinary studies—an emphasis that has replaced (in the States at least) the traditional focus upon comparative literatures with cross-cultural concerns that treat many more areas than that of literature alone.

The account I give here makes heavy use of the first-person pronoun for the same reason Henry David Thoreau gave in his Introduction to *Walden*: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.” Since I make no attempt to imitate the intricate narrative strategies of that other famous American autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, with its extraordinary use of the third-person voice and of a shop-window mannikin that replaces the traditional figure of the self-congratulating “hero,” I shall recount the history of my evolution into Americanist-as-comparativist using the conventions of “I”, “me,” and “my.” But like both Thoreau and Adams, nothing I say here is intended to be “personal” in nature. You will learn little or nothing about “Martha Banta.” You will, I hope, learn something of value about the mannikin-self—the type—who pursued one of the forms by which comparative studies expresses itself. And for those who are familiar with the narrative strategies of Henry Adams’s book, you will recognize that, I too, have roughly duplicated its two-part structure in this paper: first, a resume of the diverse “educations” undergone in coming to my present professional state as comparer of cultural “texts” — verbal and visual, high and low; second, a final portion that turns to some of the questions raised as the consequence of current acts of theory-making—questions that ought to stand in sharper focus because set against the experiences that make up the paper’s first half.

To start with the fact that conditions all that follows: I was a child of “Middletown,” quite literally so. I mean this as no loosely metaphoric reference to that almost mythical community that anyone who has done any reading in the classic texts of American sociology equates with “averageness.” I was