

KURT WAIS : A CENTENARY APPRAISAL¹

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Abstract

Kurt Wais (1907-1995) would be 100 years old on 9 January 2007. He was Professor of Romance Philology and Comparative Literature at Tübingen University until his retirement in 1975. His immense erudition spanning several literatures and epochs equipped him well for pioneering work in Comparative Literature, of which he was the leading authority in Germany. Drawing on his "Nachlass" (private papers) now deposited with the renowned German Literature Archive in Marbach/Neckar, the author, a pupil of Kurt Wais, demonstrates how the precocious scholar, who had won international recognition at the age of 31 with his authoritative book on Stéphane Mallarmé, developed into a versatile researcher, a dedicated teacher and a trustworthy colleague. But this is far from a merely personal success story, for the achievements of Kurt Wais bear testimony

to the strengths of German and European academic tradition. What Kurt Wais described as his "life's work", a monumental comparative study of Europe's early medieval epics, occupied him until his death, with only one volume published, while the remaining 9 volumes, though still in manuscript form, might provide intimations of Europe as a cohesive entity, predating the dreams of the architects of the EU by almost a thousand years.

1. Preamble : Outsiders' Perspective

I do not intend to turn this essay into a hagiography. But it is not easy for a grateful pupil to write about an inspiring teacher without voicing some enthusiasm. Furthermore, I am writing this essay for a Thai academic journal, which, though published entirely in English and aspiring to communicate with an international audience, does cater to its regular clientele of Thai readers. I cannot, therefore, presume upon the readers' familiarity with German academia, especially that of the 1960s when I studied Comparative Literature with Kurt Wais at the University of Tübingen.

¹ This article relies heavily on unpublished documents from the estate of Prof. Kurt Wais, now deposited with the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach/Neckar. Special thanks are due to his wife, Dr. Karin Wais, for permission to quote from Prof. Wais' letters. As for other unpublished letters, it has not been possible to contact all copyright holders, and the author wishes to declare hereby that the references and quotations have been used purely for the purpose of study and research. The translations are by the author.

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Kurt Wais, who died at the age of 88 in 1995, would be 100 years old on 9 January 2007. Tübingen University had a special significance for him. A Swabian by birth (and by conviction) and a native of Stuttgart, he took his doctorate in Tübingen, and after the war came back there to teach. He was appointed to the Chair of Romance Philology and Comparative Literature in 1954, from which he retired in 1975. He stayed on there until his death. By emphasizing his attachment to Tübingen, I do not mean to suggest any implication of insularity. Those who knew him could

testify that in terms of general interests and scholarship, Kurt Wais was a universalist. I am tempted to liken him to the great Swabian poet and dramatist, Friedrich Schiller, who in actual life did not travel beyond the frontiers of Germany, but whose universal message remains uncontested. But that would be rather far-fetched, for Kurt Wais travelled far and wide; he knew North America and South America fairly well, and came as far East as Pakistan. The point I am making here is that great scholars in the old days did not move very much geographically and in terms of institutional attachment. (Think of those great Oxbridge scholars and thinkers, for example.) A traditional university must have its definite physical identity, but as the European tradition would have it, the university is described as a "universitas litterarum". Kurt Wais represents this worthy tradition.

This essay is primarily based on personal reminiscences, not only those from my student days, but also from subsequent visits. Now that his "Nachlass" (private papers) has been deposited with the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach/Neckar (the birthplace of Schiller), I had occasion to derive benefit from it, although my research stay there in May 2006 was only a short one. In some ways the present essay is dictated by the discoveries that I made from those invaluable piles of *unpublished documents*, being letters to and from Kurt Wais, evaluations, recommendations and drafts of academic contributions, henceforth referred to as "the Marbach Papers". My exposure to those documents has helped me to understand him better and reinforced what I had already known through personal contact and through his publications. It is here that I should make a plea to my Thai colleagues, many of whom are now so enamoured with the latest theories, to pay

more attention to *archival research*, which need not be linked to antiquated subjects but can also enhance and enrich our study of the contemporary age.

I have elsewhere written that we Thai are deeply conscious of our indebtedness to our teachers, and in the eyes of foreigners we may appear to be reverential to our teachers to the point of becoming uncritical and submissive. We love to quote a famous valedictory by the great poet Sripraj (living towards the end of the 17th century), who before being executed for alleged misconduct by the Governor of the Southern province of Nakorn Sri Thammarat, defiantly declared: "*I am a man schooled by a master!* If I have done wrong, I deserve the punishment! If I am punished wrongfully, the executioner's sword will avenge me!" (And he was avenged by the King of Siam.) I myself may appear as an antiquated remnant of 17th- century Siam when I usually declare whose pupil I am. But an incident in 1985 gave me some confidence that an affinity might still have existed then between Europe and the old Siam. During the course of a conference in German Studies in Strasbourg, I found myself one evening over dinner in the company of elderly French-speaking professors from France and Belgium. When asked where and with whom I had studied, I simply replied: "In Tübingen with Kurt Wais". The elderly colleagues knew him well and one of them remarked: "Vous avez eu une bonne formation." (You had a good education.) Mind you, he did not say: "Vous auriez dû avoir une bonne formation." (You must have had a good education.) I have over the years treasured that remark and have tried my best to live up to the good reputation of the "School of Kurt Wais", although German scholars, including some of his own pupils, might today contest whether such a "school" did exist! Be that

as it may, he had a good reputation abroad, (although he told me that he resented being called a “Mallarmé expert”, for his scholarly interests ranged widely indeed.) Strange though it may seem, one of the first manuals of Comparative Literature in Thai, written by a Thai Orientalist trained in France, apodictically states the following: “Between the First World War and the Second World War, the most flourishing centre of Comparative Literature was France, but it has since lost its preeminence. First, the centre moved (sic) to Germany, headed by the scholar Kurt Wais. But it later moved to the United States where the discipline is being promoted seriously, extensively and with much dedication.”³ I suspect that the Thai authoress freely extrapolated from the standpoint represented by Marius-François Guyard in his little book *La Littérature comparée* (1961).⁴

Such “placing” may be questioned today, and I am doubtful whether German colleagues share these foreign scholars’ estimation of Kurt Wais’ role in the development of the discipline in Germany and in the international academic community. But if Comparative Literature is a discipline that by its very nature cuts across national boundaries, I plead that the voice of foreigners should be heard!

2. The German Academic Tradition

I do believe that Kurt Wais’ achievements as a scholar and university teacher have to be assessed both as his personal effort and as an illustration of the German academic tradition (before the advent of the post-1968 reform). Even after three years at a British university, I came to Tübingen in 1961 as a perplexed stranger, for the German higher education system then was in many respects different from the British one. I remember my first encounter with Kurt Wais in the autumn of 1961. When I presented myself to him, he did not hesitate to indicate to me the singularity of the German system. We spoke in French and he emphasized that “il n’y a pas de programme”, that is to say, there existed no fixed curriculum. For a novice like myself who had gone through a stratified British system, this kind of freedom was something very significant. A student had to structure his own course of studies, choosing from the multifarious offerings (perhaps through a process of trial and error), building up a body of knowledge of his own design and making his own judgement as to when he should be ready to present himself for an examination. As a graduate student I welcomed this arrangement, but I knew very well that those students fresh from school did find it hard to find their way. Many German students studied far too long, becoming a burden to the state (since German universities were fully subsidized by the state and the federal governments), and it is understandable why a more structured system has since been introduced.

Kurt Wais thrived very well in this traditional system. Being a very industrious person with an inquisitive mind, he made it a point not to repeat a course. During the four years I spent in Tübingen, Kurt Wais never once repeated the subject of his course offerings. Like most professors at

³ Sitha Pinichphuwadon. *Comparative Literature*. Bangkok: Ramkhamkaeng University Press, (Second Edition), 1979, p. 12.

⁴ Marius-François Guyard. *La Littérature comparée*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, (Third Edition) 1961, p. 11.

that time, he taught three courses, one proseminar, one upper seminar (called "Oberseminar" in German) and a twice-weekly lecture course. In the proseminar Kurt Wais, a renowned scholar of international stature, knew how to simplify difficult issues for students in their first semester at university. The upper seminar took a different character: the professor was acting more as what we today call a "knowledge manager", while the students engaged in a lively discussion based on a particular literary text assigned for the weekly reading. Term papers were also presented, and doctoral students sometimes gave progress reports. The main lecture demanded from the professor a skill that certainly could only be mastered with experience. No particular level was determined, and the lecture hall was filled with young students fresh out of school as well as doctoral students. This practice was characteristic of the humanities, for it was assumed that anybody who had completed high school should be in a position to grasp the message from the professor, who in turn had to adjust himself in such a way as make his every lecture a *public lecture* of some kind. No wonder that there were among the audience a number of free auditors, including pensioners who thirsted for knowledge. I found this system very enriching. If people expect you to come up with something new every semester, then you have to prepare yourself well; in other words, you have to engage in some kind of research all the time. Kurt Wais excelled in this. Within a framework that forces you to speak to a "classless" audience in your lecture, you have to try your utmost to be a good teacher and a good "public speaker". Some of the professors did not quite succeed in this. Kurt Wais, of course, had no problem with such a demand. If he had to quote from many foreign languages, he either translated the quotations or summarized them.

The German system at that time accorded considerable (or some would say, absolute) power to the university professor. Absolute power corrupts absolutely? Kurt Wais tried to discharge his responsibility as best as he could, but was not free from criticism. For example, the number of students admitted to the upper seminar was limited to about 20, and the professor had to select those attendees through an interview process. Naturally unsuccessful candidates often complained of arbitrariness. The system may have worked well with students of top quality, but those in the middle range or below the middle range must have found it very difficult to survive. Subsequent university reforms have tried to redress this imbalance by offering more classes at various levels. As we shall see in the section on his teaching, Kurt Wais never took his responsibility lightly. The academic system had been designed to respond to prewar conditions and was not ready to cope with the increasing number of students in the decades following the Second World War. Whatever the deficiencies of this rather undemocratic system, it must be admitted that once you entered into the inner circle of a scholar and teacher of the calibre of Kurt Wais, you received a very good education indeed. Face-to-face contact and personal attention were the hallmarks of a system that served as a guarantee of quality.

The use (or overuse) today of the term "research university" or "research-oriented university" in Thai academic circles may have derived from the American model without acknowledgement of its German origin. The humanities too could operate according to the research-oriented mode. The combination of teaching and research propagated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century was still very much alive in the 1960s. We students went

to the main lecture of a university professor with the expectation that, beyond the common run of basic knowledge in the field, the man on the rostrum would have something original to impart to us, the fruits of his research. Tübingen in my day could boast of a few world experts in certain disciplines, and I attended lectures given by one septuagenarian and one octogenarian who were known to be Europe's greatest authorities in Romance Philology and were spending their retirement in Tübingen (famous for its idyllic environment) doing part-time teaching. Kurt Wais expressly refused to be called an expert or a world authority on any particular subject. Although regarded as one of the top authorities on Stéphane Mallarmé, he never did once lecture or conduct a seminar on this poet during the 4 years I studied with him, preferring to branch off into other territories, as already mentioned above in the Preamble. This meant that he had to engage in fresh research all the time. In other words, teaching was based on research. But how could he come up regularly with something new? This is where the academic tradition proved to be conducive to innovation.

Unlike the British undergraduate who was required to write (short) weekly essays, even a newcomer to a German university attending a proseminar had to produce a term paper that called for some kind of "research". This practice had its strengths and weaknesses. To have to produce 10 weekly essays in the British system allowed you to improve yourself, whereas one single term paper written by a young student at a German university could turn out to be a chef-d'oeuvre or a mediocre piece of work, and in the latter case the student had no chance to redeem himself. The system was based on the belief that German secondary education should have equipped all students

well for tertiary education, since training in writing essays was given a high priority. Coming up to the university meant that you should be ready to undergo training as a "researcher", and naturally you should be able to work *independently*. I could notice that Kurt Wais was very patient with these "beginners", and with his assistants he was trying to help them to survive.

The upper seminar was more of a "salon" in the European tradition, and Kurt Wais acted, so to speak, as the host. We discussed a set text in an informal manner. The more formal part was taken up by papers presented by the students, whereby more demanding research topics were assigned than in the proseminar. A number of topics were proposed by the professor, and we students volunteered to address those we individually found to be to our liking. This was how the professor learned from his students. He may not have dug deep into those subjects himself, but the students' papers would provide the groundwork on which he could subsequently follow up and which he could deepen. Some of the assignments took the form of book reviews; the professor may have flipped through a new scholarly monograph, found it to be interesting, and if the student could perform reliable spadework, the professor would then be in a position to decide whether he himself should spend hours and hours immersing himself in that particular scholarly work. There was a kind of give-and-take relationship between the teacher and his pupils, which in our more recent academic environment could lapse into exploitation, with the teacher using his students as unpaid research assistants. One particular aspect of Kurt Wais' working method could be observed in the course of the weekly seminar. His comments on the students' presentations confirmed that he

had done considerable “homework” before assigning those topics. At the same time, with his immense erudition, he knew how to link the findings of the students’ “research” to a broader spectrum of research activities, past and present, thereby conjuring up a picture of the “state of the art” of that particular and related subjects and anchoring the students’ work in a web of scholarly associations and interactions. For budding “researchers”, to be exposed to this kind of activity on a weekly basis proved to be an education of incomparable value. It was also heartening to realize that a small man like yourself had a place in this academic community. Only a professor of high calibre could perform such a feat of what is now known as “knowledge management” (KM). I think I already knew then what a “research university” should look like, not necessarily a richly endowed institution whose members manage to publish in “peer-reviewed” journals with high “impact factors”, but a community of scholars whose daily life is propelled by a thirst for knowledge under the guidance of an erudite, perspicacious and dynamic leader.

One cannot, of course, generalize about professorial authority. I have known a professor who was so kind to a candidate that he upgraded an M.A. thesis to that of a Ph.D. by offering to lower grade A to grade B, with the concurrence of that particular candidate! Kurt Wais did not misuse his power but rather used it wisely. I seek leave here to report from personal experience. I presented myself to him with my degree certificate (from a distinguished British university) plus a recommendation from my supervisor in German literature with a wish to work on a Ph.D. thesis with him. He did not even look at the documents, although he knew that university well and had guest-lectured there the year before.

What he said to me still rings in my ears. “Let us give ourselves six months to get to know each other.” Fair enough! After six months he accepted me, and our teacher-pupil relationship turned out to be an ideal one. But looking back 40 years later, I cannot help asking myself what would have happened if he had not accepted me as a Ph.D. candidate. I might have had to return home without a graduate degree, or else wandered to another university, looking for another supervisor. There were no formal arrangements, no entrance examination, no fixed regulations of any kind in accepting or not accepting a candidate.

As a supervisor Kurt Wais operated on two levels. You could propose your own research topic to him and he would gauge its feasibility. He was not infallible, but he was always in a position to help you make up your mind, rationally. He dissuaded me from embarking on a topic dealing with Georg Büchner and France, as he knew that the subject had already been thoroughly explored in previous research. At another level, he kept abreast of the latest research and knew exactly where the gaps lay. These possible research topics more often than not emerged from the upper seminar. He would screen them and formulate them into research topics. Having known me better after the six-month trial period, he proposed to me a number of research topics, explaining the rationale for each and sent me home to reflect on what would suit my interest. Having been fairly well grounded in Romanticism, both French and German, during my undergraduate studies in Britain, I opted for a topic on the German Romantic, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and his relations to France. I thought that it would be interesting to address the critical and theoretical side of Romanticism rather than the usual poetic slant. The following three and a half years of research (with

“fieldwork” in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris) proved to be an enriching experience for me. Kurt Wais could sense that those relations must have run deep, but he had no concrete proof; hence thorough documentary research was needed, and that was to be my job.

A German professor in the humanities had to supervise not only doctoral theses (the M.A. had not yet been introduced), but also theses produced by candidates for the state examination (called the “*Staatsexamen*” in German), designed for people who wished to enter the teaching profession. This was very hard work, for the number of state examination candidates was very high in the 1960s. The Marbach Papers contain evaluations of these theses which more than substantiate how broad the range of Kurt Wais’ supervisory activities was, and the individual evaluations (running into hundreds) bore testimony to his conscientiousness. If this was the system that a German professor had to accept (however demanding it might have been), it was a framework that induced a real scholar to broaden and sharpen his academic and research capability. There is much to be said for the academic tradition of old Germany!

3. University Teaching and What It Entails

I have often, half-jokingly, told my Thai colleagues that a German professor, if he is a very conscientious person, could die of physical and mental fatigue. Among the Marbach Papers is a letter to Kurt Wais from a colleague at Cologne University, which describes very well the plight of a German professor in the late 1950s.

...without the help of an assistant, with 600 students I...had, for example, in this semester 24 (oral) state examinations, with half of the candidates submitting their theses, in addition to 200 term papers, together with several doctoral dissertations which one has to supervise continuously⁵

Kurt Wais’ situation was probably not much better (although he was fortunate to have competent assistants), and in a letter to the Office of the Rector (which had unwittingly asked for exact statistics on the number of candidates for the state examination), Kurt Wais had to respond that he was overloaded with all kinds of responsibilities and did not have time to keep such records. He went on to describe how much time he expended on a *daily* basis on advising students, including “consultations on the phone often until shortly before midnight.”⁶ Having experienced life at that overcrowded university myself, I do not think that Kurt Wais was exaggerating. It might be interesting for a chronicler of German higher education to come up with something in the nature of “One Day in the Life of a (Conscientious) German Professor”!

Teaching, then, meant only partially contact hours with students. As I mentioned in Section 2 on “The German Academic Tradition”, Kurt Wais did enjoy teaching, and teaching literature for him was a dialogic activity propelled by a salon-like atmosphere associated with the upper seminar. The pre-1968 era was conducive to the humanities, for teachers and pupils alike were steeped in the reading culture.

⁵ Letter from Wolfgang Binder to Kurt Wais, 01.02.1957.

⁶ Letter from Kurt Wais to the “Akademische Rektoramt” (n.d.).

Naturally, Kurt Wais could sense a significant change after 1968, which did not prove favourable to literary studies. In a letter to a publisher who had invited him to collaborate on a series of monographs on methodology and theory, Kurt Wais wrote: "It (the series) corresponds probably to the current trend, which we have observed without much gratification from our students, as many of them seem to be hiding their laziness in the reading of original texts under the pretext of fervent theorizing. Naturally I am ready to talk to you about this but shall probably have hardly anything new to offer on the subject of methodological studies, which did not interest me very much in the first place".⁷

This is an important statement and it can be misleading. Although Kurt Wais never taught a course in theory or methodology, his writings are certainly not devoid of methodological and theoretical considerations, as I shall demonstrate in Section 5 on "Mastery of the Short Form: A Close Reading", but these methods and theories were implicit rather than explicit. They did not constitute an independent discourse, so to speak. In any case, we should not forget that he lectured on literary criticism of the 20th century and could not possibly have avoided engaging in some form of methodological and theoretical debate, as we shall see in Section 6 on "The Rise of Comparative Literature". Perhaps this is exactly why some scholars today, not excluding his own pupils, are of the opinion that his scholarly works are "dated". But he did not prevent his younger colleagues from taking literary theory seriously. He spoke enthusiastically about the course on

modern literary theory conducted by his own Assistant at Tübingen, which was "crammed full".⁸ He himself did his utmost to find a rightful place for the said course within the official framework of the curricular offerings. University regulations stipulated that only "professors" were entitled to "lecture". Consequently, the young colleague's course had to be announced as a "practicum" ("*Übung*" in German),⁹ although the number of attendees was probably as high as that of the main lecture of a professor.

I have already described the salon-like atmosphere of the upper seminar, but the leisurely mode of dialogic pleasure (based on concrete texts) was not devoid of planning or structure. The "one-book-a-week" approach was well planned, in the sense that the books selected for our weekly reading did cohere in some way, although they were drawn from various literatures (with a bias towards Romance languages), and the written assignments were meant to substantiate the main theme for that particular semester or to enrich the main reading list. One characteristic of Kurt Wais' teaching in the form of a seminar was that he made us feel that we were all going on a literary expedition together, but the journey, of course, could be demanding. I remember one particular session devoted to the work of Charles Baudelaire: we were required to read about half of the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Fortunately, the whole book had been compulsory reading during my

⁸ Letter from Kurt Wais to Weber (first name not given), 24.06.1971.

⁹ Letter from Kurt Wais to Dieter Janik, 20.11.1969. Dieter Janik later became Professor of Romance Philology at Mainz University.

⁷ Letter from Kurt Wais to Lothar Rotsch, Lector at the Max Niemeyer Verlag, 20.04.1970.

undergraduate studies in Britain and I was already familiar with these poems. Those students who came to Baudelaire for the first time must have had a tough time. In his lecture on literary criticism, he analyzed the Anglo-American movement of New Criticism sympathetically, but in his actual teaching practice, Wais was more committed to literary history, and he very rarely lingered on a great poem to savour its literary quality. I heard him recite a poem in a deeply-felt manner only once, and that was a medieval Latin poem, not Baudelaire, not Mallarmé (on whose work he was a specialist of international standing!). I suspect that his immense erudition was somehow responsible for occasional lapses into sheer positivism. He knew so much, he could connect all things, he was overwhelmed by facts. A poem became an arte-fact!

Teaching automatically involved examination. The German academic tradition put great emphasis on oral examinations, probably with the conviction that a face-to-face encounter between the examiner and the examinee was the most reliable mode of gauging the candidate's capability. A German professor in those days had to administer oral examinations at various levels, including the intermediate examination, the state examination and the doctoral examination. It was the state examination that was probably most time-consuming and at the same time most exhausting for a professor. This again may be considered typically German. The candidates were those who intended to enter the teaching profession in grammar schools, and they were to be examined with utmost stringency under the supervision of a representative from the Ministry of Education (which in those days supervised in the operation of a German university). Besides the oral examination, every

candidate, as already mentioned in Section 2 on "The German Academic Tradition", had to prepare a state examination thesis which was no less demanding than an M.A. thesis of today. Every potential secondary school teacher was then expected to possess research ability as well. When I read Kurt Wais' evaluations of these theses, I could not help feeling that he was on the whole even more severe in his assessment of these state examination candidates than his own doctoral students (whom he might have hand-picked and supervised more closely and continuously.) The underlying philosophy was that quality at the secondary level could guarantee the quality of higher education. Kurt Wais himself took the state examination and served his term as a trainee (known in German as "*Referendarzeit*") before coming back to the university for his Ph.D.. If quality implies hard work, part of the onus naturally falls upon the German professor!

The responsibility of a university teacher was not restricted to student affairs. Young scholars intending to pursue a university career had to engage in post-doctoral research leading to a higher qualification known as the "*Habilitation*", which would qualify them for professorships. Again the Marbach Papers prove to be helpful. Some of these candidates were not his former pupils; they came to him out of sheer faith in his scholarly guidance. Exchanges of correspondence between Kurt Wais and these candidates testify to the seriousness of both sides. Kurt Wais was also occasionally invited to act as an external evaluator of candidates for the "*Habilitation*" at other universities. The lengthy, thorough and cogently argued evaluations that he wrote are remarkable examples of academic criticism. Kurt Wais had a special gift for characterizing the strengths and weaknesses

of these research works. These unpublished documents can tell us about more than just routine work. There were disagreements among the evaluators, sometimes as a result of prejudice or personal animosity. If convinced that injustice was being done, Kurt Wais would not hesitate to intercede, sometimes successfully, sometimes to no avail. I have known one such candidate who survived the ordeal as a result of Kurt Wais' intercession and later grew into an internationally renowned comparatist. Even today he speaks of Kurt Wais as a paragon of professionalism!

As I have pointed out in Section 2, the German academic tradition was extremely loosely structured and operated on the basis of the judgements of individual professors. It presumed upon the professional integrity of these scholars and could only thrive if the unwritten codes of professional ethics were observed. Fair-mindedness distinguished Kurt Wais. He knew that he had very able pupils who were well-qualified to fill professorial positions, as and when these became vacant. Again the German tradition operated on recommendations, and if the recommender was known to be highly respected and reliable, the candidate would stand a good chance. Kurt Wais used his authority and prestige wisely. When asked to recommend candidates for a professorial chair at the Free University Berlin, he wrote on 27.01.1972 a 3-page review of the state of the art of the discipline "Romance Philosophy", mentioning seven young scholars of promise, including two of his pupils. He then shortlisted them to three candidates, including one of his pupils, giving his reason as follows: "(The three candidates) seem to me to be of the same calibre in their feeling of commitment to what Romance Philosophy is and which, I would hope, should be able to withstand

the storms in Berlin."¹⁰ His own pupil did not get the job! It did not really matter. Kurt Wais had done his duty in a dignified manner. He refused to indulge in cronyism.

Requests of this nature came regularly to Kurt Wais, mostly from Deans of the Faculties of Arts of various universities. His responses were prompt and well-informed. It was a service that a university teacher had to perform as a member of the academic community. This service extended sometimes beyond the national frontiers in the form of requests from foreign institutions seeking candidates for, say, a post of German language lector. As a foreign language teacher, Kurt Wais attached great importance to language proficiency and familiarity with the culture of the respective countries, and his pupils who later became professors in modern languages had all spent a number of years as lecturers at foreign institutions. If he recommended a candidate (who might be his own pupil), he was sure that he was proposing somebody with real ability and seriousness of purpose. The following passage is drawn from a letter in French to the head of an institution in Turin. "In order to promote the study of Italian literature in Germany, it should be possible, in my opinion, to reserve the available positions for those among the candidates who seriously envisage a university career, rather than those who want to enjoy a pleasant stay in your beautiful country."¹¹ It may have turned out that some of his pupils got jobs in more than one of these "beautiful countries", but they were young scholars of real promise who were later to pursue a

¹⁰ Letter from Kurt Wais to Gerhard Goebel, 28.01.1972.

¹¹ Letter from Kurt Wais to Franco Simone, 30.01.1969.

distinguished university career and produce scholarly works of distinction on the culture and literature of that particular foreign country. The Marbach Papers document the early years of these eminent scholars, who were deservedly supported by their influential professor and who did not let him down! It is also a real pleasure to read Kurt Wais' letters to these pupils, which exude an unmistakably fatherly warmth.

When Kurt Wais mentioned those late-night telephone calls, as quoted above, it certainly had to do with students or colleagues seeking (urgent) advice. (There were no answering machines then, and he had the courtesy of answering the calls.) The *advisory* functions performed by a professor could be multifaceted, and I shall elaborate further on this issue in Section 4 on research. But one particular function which deserves to be mentioned here could probably be called the "encyclopedic function". It must have been the order of the day among literary scholars then that "if encyclopedias and reference works fail you, turn to Kurt Wais!" (His colleague, the Tübingen Germanist Richard Brinkmann, once described Kurt Wais to me as an "encyclopedia"!)

Again the Marbach Papers can be illuminating. A distinguished French comparatist wrote to Kurt Wais, saying that he was preparing a course on "The Influence of Rousseau on Literary Sensibility at the End of the 18th Century" and sought the latter's help in recommending relevant secondary literature.¹² A French professor, preparing a course on a French author, seeking a German professor's bibliographical advice! There is no need to emphasize that nationality had no role to play here and that Kurt Wais must have been highly regarded by his foreign

colleagues (not only as a Mallamé expert!). On another occasion, a Belgian Professor of Comparative Literature asked Kurt Wais for help in a rather unpleasant situation. He suspected a doctoral candidate of plagiarism, but could not identify the source. So he turned to Kurt Wais!¹³

We are dealing here with the pre-Internet era. In our contemporary parlance, Kurt Wais could figure as a "search engine" in literary studies. But there was nothing mechanical about this "walking database" who was always ready to help.

It can be observed that during the almost two decades prior to his retirement, Kurt Wais did not produce a monograph of the size of his Mallarmé book again, although he continuously published essays, articles and short monographs. He resigned himself to being a teacher, and as I have tried to demonstrate, his contribution in that capacity was very significant indeed.

4. Research : Between Universalism and Specialization

A foreign scholar coming into contact with German academic circles for the first time most probably would be surprised to be asked the question: "*Was ist Ihr Forschungsgebiet?*" ("What is your research area?") instead of "What is your subject?" or "What is your specialization?" This is in consonance with the German tradition of linking teaching and research together, and the primary assumption is that research is part of one's daily life and that every academic must be engaged in some form of research all the time. As I have tried to demonstrate in the foregoing sections, all

¹² Letter from Jacques Voisine to Kurt Wais (n.d.).

¹³ Letter from Armand Nivellet to Kurt Wais, 11.09.1965.

academic activities are linked with research, and students at all levels are also engaged in "research" of some description. It is true that there are institutions outside the universities, including those in the humanities, that devote themselves to research, such as the Academies of Sciences (with their chapters in the humanities, social sciences and fine arts) and some special institutions like the Centre for Literary Research Berlin. But in the humanities at least, the universities are still regarded as places where significant research is being conducted. The situation may not have changed very much since Kurt Wais' times. The kind of teaching that I have described presupposes continuous research on the part of the university teachers, and as we have seen, Kurt Wais deliberately committed himself to a very broad base in terms of the subject matter of his courses, which means that his research activities, which were intimately linked with his teaching, had to be broadly based too. In other words, the academic system, and especially the teaching system, conditioned Kurt Wais to be a *universalist*. In terms of literary history, he ranged very widely, namely, from the Middle Ages to the latest in contemporary literature. And as the sole holder of the Chair in Comparative Literature at Tübingen he had to respond to the demands of that particular discipline, not only in teaching but also in other related activities, including the supervision of theses and oral examinations in which candidates could propose special topics that the professor had to accommodate. All in all, universalism, both horizontally and vertically, constituted a basis for specialization.

We may have to ask how Kurt Wais settled for specific areas or topics of his research. Biographical data might be of some use here, and I would like to report from my personal acquaintance with him. Since his

school days, he loved to collect clippings from newspapers and magazines which he arranged according to countries. (When I visited him one year before his death, he was still busy with these clippings.) In the early 1960s, he showed me two folders containing clippings on Thailand. These were his "database", so to speak, and according to his wife, when he decided to embark on a particular area of interest, he did not have to start from scratch. One can probably describe, in our contemporary jargon, that his method of data collection was broadly *cumulative* rather than specifically project-based. Family background was supportive of his intellectual blossoming. His father, Gustav Wais, a journalist and editor of a leading newspaper in Stuttgart, lost his job during World War II because of his declared anti-Nazi attitude. He was an amateur historian and art historian, specializing in Stuttgart and Württemberg, and was reemployed after 1945 in the Bureau of Historic Monuments. He was also an art collector, and Kurt Wais once showed us the Daumier drawings which he had inherited from his father. Kurt Wais' knowledge of the visual arts and architecture, which he had imbibed from his own family background, was considerable. A native of Stuttgart, he went regularly to the theatre and opera, and he once told me that he knew a number of Shakespeare's plays by heart (in German translation, of course), and was very much at home in opera. He also told me that as a prisoner of war, he whiled away his time silently reciting Shakespeare and singing operatic arias to himself.

The family must have been very supportive of the young Kurt Wais in many ways, and according to his wife, trips to England, France and Italy to acquire skills in those languages were financed by the family. (I experienced Kurt Wais arguing in fluent

English with Cleanth Brooks, one of the founders of New Criticism, – although with an indelible Swabian accent – when the latter came to lecture in Tübingen in 1964.) As for the Romance languages, since he decided to do his “Habilitation” in Romance Philology and Comparative Literature, he had to master the three main languages well, namely French, Italian and Spanish, and having also spent some time in Romania as a young man, he must have learned Romanian as well.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that before switching to Romance Philology, he had done his Ph.D. with Hermann Schneider, one of Germany’s foremost medievalists as well as an expert in Nordic Studies. From medieval Nordic Studies, he moved on to more modern subjects, settled for Ibsen and embarked on learning modern Norwegian in order to be able to read both primary and secondary literature in the original. His book *Henrik Ibsen und das Problem des Vergangenen* (Henrik Ibsen and the Problem of the Past) was published in 1931, followed by a logical follow-up *Henrik Ibsens Wirkung in Spanien, Frankreich, Italien* (Henrik Ibsen’s Influence in Spain, France and Italy) in 1933.

I have indulged in this excursion into Kurt Wais’ formative years in order to demonstrate what education in the broadest sense of the word can contribute towards laying a foundation for a distinguished professional career. Well-versed in the languages, literature and culture of many nations and epochs, as well as in the various arts (culminating in a monograph on *Symbiose der Künste* [Symbiosis of the Arts] of 1936), he was, so to speak, predisposed to becoming a comparatist.

I must admit that I am more inclined to regard Kurt Wais as a universalist than a specialist, although he had his specializations. But anyone studying a “specialized” work of his will realize soon enough that his was in no way a narrow specialization. To produce a monograph or an essay that would communicate with his readers, he had to make a deliberate effort to rein in his staggering erudition. As I shall demonstrate in Section 5 on “Mastery of the Short Form”, his mature works were marked by laconic intensity, but the universalist penchant was there: it did not manifest itself explicitly, but was implicit in the text, inviting us to make further connections ourselves. In his younger days, he tended to be expansive. Let us consider one specific “specialized” work, namely his Mallarmé book which he published in 1938 at the age of 31 (and revised in 1952) and which was regarded as a milestone in Mallarmé research at the international level.

I was pleasantly surprised, when recently surfing the Internet, to find out that French scholars were still quoting him as an authority on the subject. A website (most probably for the benefit of those preparing for the French “Agrégation”) openly posits that it was Kurt Wais who first interpreted Mallarmé’s concept of poetry as an intermediary between prose and music.¹⁵ After more than 65 years, French scholars still acknowledge a German professor’s contribution to the understanding of a major French poet! Looking back over many decades, one can not help wondering how a young foreign scholar could have known so much, read so much, and above all, come up with such fresh insights and succinct interpretations of extremely difficult foreign

¹⁴ See Jacques Roos. “Kurt Wais”. In: *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 8 (1959), p. 38.

¹⁵ “Une dentelle s’abolit...”. <http://www.unice.fr/AGREGATION/dentelle.html>

poetry. It would be worthwhile to examine what characterizes this *opus magnum*.

Any reader will first be struck by its comprehensiveness (which is not to be confused with its length). It can easily be used as a reference work on Mallarmé! Naturally, it is very well documented, containing up-to-date information at the time of its writing (which the author updated and expanded in the second edition). A trip to France enabled him to gain access to some important primary sources, such as the unpublished correspondence between Mallarmé and Henri Cazalis, and in terms of factual data, his book had something new to offer, even to French scholars. Some scholars of today might think that the "l'homme et l'oeuvre" (the author and his work) approach is already outmoded, but Kurt Wais could prove that the two are intimately linked, even when he was analyzing individual works. While the book gives a broad picture of Mallarmé's creativity as a whole, it at the same time performs the function of a manual, in which the individual works are summarized (in German), analyzed and interpreted, and many of his interpretations diverge from those of previous scholars and critics writing on Mallarmé. But Kurt Wais did not espouse the approach practised by his Anglo-American contemporaries, the New Critics, or even the method that later gained currency in Germany, known as the "*Werkimmanenz*" (concentration on the work itself). He was committed to literary history, and his mastery of detail served this particular approach. Mallarmé was situated amidst a framework of literary and intellectual culture, peopled by all kinds of personalities and propped up by multifarious works of art of various genres, past and present, not necessarily literature, for music played an important role as well. People did not constitute merely a web of relationships

that illuminated the biographical side of the presentation: they were also carriers of ideas, and the Mallarmé book is in a sense written in the German tradition of "*Geistesgeschichte*" (which can be loosely translated as "intellectual history"). The subject of the book may be deceptively specific; its reading soon reveals that only a universalist could have written it.

Kurt Wais loved to relate, to connect. Let us consider a specific example. At one point in the Mallarmé book,¹⁶ he was discussing Mallarmé's interest in Hegel, introduced to the poet by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who with his other friend, Pontavice de Heussey, was looking for occult intimations from German philosophers and experimenting also with Buddhist meditations, as substantiated by a quote from Cazalis. From there a connection with Kierkegaard was established, soon to give way to Rimbaud, who, instead of scaling the meditative heights of Buddhism like Mallarmé, took to drugs. And here it was only a natural consequence that Thomas de Quincey and E. T.A. Hoffmann should be coopted, with further references made to Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire.¹⁷ Breathtaking scholarly writing, one could say! Erudite exhibitionism by a 31-year-old scholar? But he could substantiate all these connections. We may have to pass a temporary verdict that the dichotomy between universalism and specialization posited in the title of this section might be an artificial one. Yet, I

¹⁶ The first and second editions of this book have different titles. The first edition, published by H.C. Beck of Munich in 1938, bears the title *Mallarmé, ein Dichter der Jahrhundertwende*. The second reviewed and enlarged edition, also published by H.C. Beck, in 1952 has as its title *Mallarmé, Dichtung-Wahrheit-Haltung*.

¹⁷ See Second Edition, pp. 177-179.

cannot help feeling that in the case of Kurt Wais, universalism provided a solid underpinning for specialization. He did not choose to become a comparatist: he could not be anything else!

In writing a full-length monograph like the Mallarmé book, Kurt Wais could afford to be comprehensive. But we should not be misled into thinking that he was not amenable to the article or the essay, as I shall try to point out in Section 5 on "Mastery of the Short Form: A Close Reading". Besides, he had even written a *theoretical-cum-historical* piece on the essay under the title "Antwort auf eine Umfrage über den Essay" (Response to a Survey on the Essay).¹⁸ A scholar had to be flexible in responding to demands and requests which could come in various forms. When Wolfgang Kayser was entrusted with the task of preparing a new edition of the popular reference work, *Kleines literarisches Lexikon* (Small Literary Lexicon), he enlisted the help of Kurt Wais for the section on French literature, which had to be revamped. The correspondence between the two scholars, now among the Marbach Papers, reveals how accommodating Kurt Wais was, for he went as far as offering to write fresh articles to fill in the gaps in the previous edition. It should not be forgotten that he was responsible for all periods of French literature. (This happened to be the reference work that my generation of students used with much profit, and we were always struck by the brevity, precision and concision of the information given in the articles of the Lexicon.)

Kurt Wais regularly received requests of this nature and he could not always respond in the affirmative. One specific case deserves particular mention, being part of the project undertaken by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) under the title "Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages". The volume being prepared was called *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*, edited by Anna Balakian of New York University. Kurt Wais was at that time (1972) extremely busy and recommended to Madame Balakian two of his pupils, one with "a positivist tendency and interested more specifically in literary history" while the other "belongs rather to a purely aesthetic tendency".¹⁹ I could not find the relevant document to support Kurt Wais' final decision to accede to the request with his own contribution in English under the title "German Poets in the Proximity of Baudelaire and the Symbolists". Was this the result of the editor's fervent insistence or was he attracted by a theme already within the parameters of his "specialization", or should we say, nearer to his heart, having once devoted the best years of his life to Mallarmé? His erudition could mislead some people into taking him for an insensitive positivist. Let us listen to one of the French reviewers of his Mallarmé book: "The whole (enterprise) turns out a Mallarmé more humane than French criticism usually gives (us)".²⁰ His interests might be varied indeed, but they were marked by humane engagement.

¹⁹ Letter from Kurt Wais to Anna Balakian, 23.03.1972.

²⁰ Jacques Scherer. Review of Kurt Wais' *Mallarmé, ein Dichter der Jahrhundertwende*. In: *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (March 1939), p. 227.

¹⁸ Kurt Wais. *An den Grenzen der Nationalliteraturen. Vergleichende Aufsätze*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958, pp. 338-341.

In other words, Kurt Wais loved his subject, and the hard work associated with his multifaceted research could in most cases be considered a labour of love. The Marbach Papers contain a collection of correspondence with publishers, and to me as a foreigner, I do find something of particular interest insofar as academic publishing in Germany is concerned. The universities do not have to create their own university presses. There exist publishing houses that specialize in academic publishing and can survive on them (in some ways, of course, through subventions). Research findings find their outlet in the form of academic books or articles in journals published by these private concerns. The Marbach Papers testify to the professional competence of most publishing houses, which were either run by cultivated and learned directors themselves or else employed well-read staff members with a Ph.D. degree to work for them. These publishers contacted Kurt Wais with clear concepts and were adept and adroit in pointing out how the scholar would fit into their projects. The proposals were varied, including such functions as the editorship of a volume of essays, a learned journal, a monograph series, a *Festschrift*, or just contributions in the form of individual articles in an encyclopedia. I have noticed that Kurt Wais did not accept all the offers, and he probably rejected projects whose guidelines were too rigid. He might have acted less discriminatingly in his younger days, when he accepted the very demanding task of editing the volume *Die Gegenwarts-Dichtung der europäischen Völker* (Contemporary Literature of the European Peoples). His own chapter on French and Belgian literature, produced in 1939 during the height of the Nationalsocialist regime, contained some words and expressions derived from the then current ideology that were to mar his academic career after the Second World War, although it has recently

been concretely proved that in the preparation of the second edition of that book, he refused to sacrifice professionalism to the dictates of the powers-that-be, and had the courage to write a 13-page letter of protest to none other than Goebbels.²¹ So when we speak of Kurt Wais' research, we cannot simply restrict ourselves to his own output as such, but must also address his role in what we may today call *research management*, a function that required more than scholarly prowess and at times involved political astuteness which probably was not Kurt Wais' strength.

Research constitutes part of the major activities of a community of scholars. This means that one does not only pursue one's own preoccupation, but is expected to serve the academic community in various ways. As a scholar usually has to be up-to-date on developments in the field, he may also perform the useful duty of reviewing other people's work. Kurt Wais' list of book reviews is very long and the range of subject matter is very broad indeed. According to those close to him, his professional forthrightness in the estimation of works by colleagues did not always endear him to everybody, and in this the young Kurt Wais was sometimes taken to task by his teachers. He must have mellowed over the years, for I never heard him disparage other scholars' work. On the contrary, he encouraged his students to familiarize themselves with works by other scholars, and as I have pointed out in Section 2, our reports presented in the upper seminar were a kind of book review. This activity could certainly be considered research.

²¹ See Wolfgang Theile. "Deutsche Romanistik im 'Dritten Reich'. Zwei Fallstudien: F.-R. Hausmann und Kurt Wais". In: *Romanistik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 10, 2 (2004), p. 147.

I am inclined to think that book reviews and evaluations of students' theses supplement each other, although the levels of sophistication of the works under consideration may differ. Kurt Wais' vast experience in both activities sharpened his ability to characterize academic work that had a bearing on the professional career of students and colleagues. No wonder that his recommendations helped so many candidates! On more auspicious occasions, he was asked to write laudations for distinguished laureates. There exists one laudation written by Kurt Wais among the Marbach Papers. It concerns the Belgian literary critic and scholar Georges Poulet (1902-1991) who came to receive the Montaigne Prize in Tübingen on 27 May 1970. Kurt Wais must have read a great deal of Poulet's work (one of his "specializations" being 20th- century criticism), but I assume that extra research must have been done). At one point, Kurt Wais could not find the relevant information on Poulet's relationship with "German intellectual life" and simply had to turn directly to the latter for help.²² This kind of research does not require only breadth and depth from the researcher, but also an extraordinary ability to characterize a personality as reflected in his work. I have personally dealt with Poulet in my research, but this short piece of laudation by Kurt Wais makes me appreciate him all the more.

Kurt Wais once told his students how much he appreciated Saint-John Perse and sent his proposal to the Nobel Committee. I am not so naïve as to make a preposterous claim that the French poet was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on the strength of Kurt Wais' recommendation. But I cannot help thinking that if the members of the

²² Letter from Kurt Wais to Georges Poulet, 01.12.1969.

Committee had read Kurt Wais' proposal at all, they must surely have been impressed, not by Kurt Wais, but by his characterization of the literary merits of Saint-John Perse! Let us not forget his French reviewer's verdict on Kurt Wais' picture of Mallarmé! Did Kurt Wais again make Saint-John Perse more humane than the usual estimation made by the latter's compatriots?

I have not dwelled on the "humanizing" side of Kurt Wais' criticism and scholarship out of sheer hero worship. This was exactly where the strength of his teaching and research lay. And to hear him (in spite of his Swabian accent in whatever language he was speaking) was to share with him his grasp of the personality of poets and writers. Kurt Wais attached importance to "live" performances, and he often invited distinguished scholars and speakers to Tübingen. I heard the great French literary historian Antoine Adam discourse on the passage from Baroque to Classicism in French literature, and I still have a vivid memory of that special occasion. Research results published in printed form are one thing, but to hear a great scholar lecture on a subject that he loves is an experience to be treasured. Kurt Wais himself gladly accepted invitations to lecture at other institutions, both in Germany and abroad. For example, he lectured in French on the comparative subject of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Honoré de Balzac at Cambridge University in 1960.²³

²³ Letter from Stanley Aston to Kurt Wais, 02.02.1960; Letter from Jean-Bertrand Barrère to Kurt Wais, 02.02.1960. (It was this particular lecture that attracted the attention of my supervisor who recommended that I should further my graduate studies in Comparative Literature with Kurt Wais.)

The Marbach Papers document his involvement in two international associations, namely the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes (FILLM), of which he served as Vice-President for a number of years, and the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). He was, for example, given the honour of delivering the first plenary lecture at the ICLA Congress in Fribourg, Switzerland, in 1964. In a letter dated 24 August 1964 to his colleague Horst Rüdiger, he expressed his uneasiness in having to act as a keynote speaker, as it would “run counter to my intention ...of choosing a special theme”,²⁴ again a reservation typical of Kurt Wais vis-à-vis generalizing or theorizing, which was not in consonance with his notion of “research”. I know from first-hand experience what his preferred mode of research and scholarship was. In 1964 the University of Tübingen celebrated the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth with a lecture series on Shakespeare given by its own professors in various disciplines who came out in full force to prove that they were the pride of this ancient institution. Kurt Wais’ contribution was on “Shakespeare und die neueren Erzähler: Von Bonaventura und Manzoni bis Laforgue und Joyce” (Shakespeare and the Novelists : From Bonaventura and Manzoni to Laforgue and Joyce). I was in the audience and found the paper to be a stylistic masterpiece and at the same time an impressive feat of comparatistic research. He was addressing a specific topic, but the scholarly base was very broad indeed. The lecture transcended any dichotomy between universalism and specialization.

With his mastery of many foreign languages, why did he write only in German? His publications in foreign languages were

translations done by native speakers. This was by design, and not by default. Though not speaking about himself, he once maintained that “a work of literary criticism” should be endowed with “linguistic nuances” and would lose its “subtleties” in “every translation, including the very best”.²⁵ Kurt Wais could have written his Mallarmé book in French, for he mastered French to perfection, (his correspondence in French being extremely elegant), but that would not have satisfied him. I suspect there was more to this allegiance to the mother tongue than the reasons outlined above. We foreigners are well aware of the struggle on the part of German academia to establish German as the language of scholarship. They could not abandon Latin in favour of German straightaway. From the 17th century onwards, French was the *lingua franca* of Europe. (The German philosopher Leibniz wrote in French, and Frederick the Great could hardly write in German at all!) It was in the late 18th century that the great poets, thinkers and philosophers of Germany began to bequeath their works to the Western world in German. Foreigners often complain of the very complex structure of Kant’s and Hegel’s German, but these philosophers can never be ignored : they have to be read, for their message enriches the intellectual heritage of mankind. The same might apply to literary scholarship. In medieval studies and in historical linguistics, for example, foreign scholars had to learn German if they wanted to pursue meaningful research at all. The French reviewer of Kurt Wais’ Mallarmé book became impatient with his German, described as “uselessly complicated and obscure, Germanic to excess”, but had to admit that “from now on one would not be

²⁴ Letter from Kurt Wais to Horst Rüdiger, 24.08.1964.

²⁵ Letter from Kurt Wais to the Dean of the “Philosophische Fakultät”, 26.05.1972.

able to study Mallarmé without using the important work which Monsieur Wais has just devoted to him".²⁶

Things have changed over time. German universities in the age of globalization are offering courses in English, including some in the humanities as well. German linguists these days do not hesitate to publish in English. It is not for a foreigner to judge who is right and who is wrong.

Kurt Wais was fluent in several foreign languages, but in the dissemination of his research, he remained committed to the mother tongue. Yet he was highly recognized abroad. This is a puzzle that only his compatriots can solve.

5. Mastery of the Short Form : A Close Reading

If we are chary about highfalutin and dubious terms like "world literature" and "literary scholarship", Schlegel's achievement, in the framework of comparative criticism, is, nevertheless, still sufficiently clear. It consists of the fact that he dared to offer a synthesis between a sober, positivist, transnational literary overview on the one hand, and a free, ahistorical, comparative juxtaposition in the manner of Voltaire's "Essai sur la poésie épique" on the other. We can describe this achievement as the foundation of a comparative treatment of literary history, a treatment which here for the first time is, in its fullest

sense, a comparison and, in its fullest sense, a historiography, based on a potent erudition that derived from original texts in many languages, ranging from Greek, Gothic, Old Provençal to English and Spanish, deficient only because there were limits to what a single human being could master. His successful scholarly effort to appropriate the then still almost unexplored domain of Sanskrit Philology brought with it a sacrifice on the part of the aging Schlegel, resulting in his having to shelve his comparatistic studies, a sacrifice which the protagonists of the contemporary did not understand and which they used to support their hasty judgement on Schlegel's fizzling out in his later years.²⁷

This paragraph, taken from his essay "Wilhelm Schlegel und die vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft", (Wilhelm Schlegel and Comparative Literature), is the introduction to my book, *August Wilhelm Schlegel in Frankreich: Sein Anteil an der französischen Literaturkritik 1807-1835* (August Wilhelm Schlegel in France: His Contribution to French Literary Criticism 1807-1835) (1966). Although Kurt Wais wrote voluminous scholarly monographs, he was also master of the short form, namely the scholarly essay or the academic paper. In

²⁷ Kurt Wais. "Wilhelm Schlegel und die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft". In: Chetana Nagavajara. *August Wilhelm Schlegel in Frankreich. Sein Anteil und der französischen Literaturkritik 1807-1835*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1966, p. VIII.

²⁶ Jacques Scherer, op.cit., p. 225.

an age like ours dominated by the scientific and technological convention of apotheosizing the journal article as the absolute form of scholarly communication, Kurt Wais would have been very successful indeed! His essays are distinguished by a remarkable laconic quality, for he could pack so much information into them. But we are not dealing with the kind of "information" usually known to our Information Age: these essays must be read with extreme concentration, for they set as precondition a certain basic familiarity with the Western literary canon and critical/scholarly modes; their terms of reference are broad and they bring in associations that set you thinking further. In some respects, they represent a condensation of existing research findings (to use modern scholarly jargon), but in other respects, they also suggest future research topics. This is scholarship at its most dynamic.

Let us indulge in a close reading, by which I shall attempt to illustrate the points made above by fixing attention to the one paragraph quoted above.

First, we are made to realize that there exists a gap between Schlegel and our modern scholarly context, and it is necessary to place Schlegel in a framework that is familiar to the twentieth-century audience. (Kurt Wais' essay dates from 1966.) Goethe's concept of "world literature" (*Weltliteratur*) has not lost its currency, and tomes have been written on its application through the ensuing ages²⁸, but Kurt Wais seems to think that it does not quite describe the true nature of Schlegel's contribution (in spite of the fact that Goethe and Schlegel were contemporaries). Another term very much used in German scholarly circles, "Literaturwissenschaft" (which could

be loosely translated as "literary scholarship"), again is too austere to reflect the type of scholarly culture represented by Schlegel and his "employer", Madame de Staël, an amateur culture in the best sense of the word. So Kurt Wais settles for the concept of "Kritik" ("criticism"), in which the Schlegel brothers themselves felt quite at home. To be more precise, Wais adds the adjective "comparative" to make it more truthful to what was actually practised by Wilhelm Schlegel. In an unassuming way, Kurt Wais is entering into a *theoretical debate* of sorts, which might require, for the twenty-first-century readership, a more comprehensive exposition, for to be unassuming here presumes upon a solid base of cultural history, and not merely a narrowly conceived history of literary terms. To recapitulate, these three terms, namely, world literature, literary scholarship and comparative criticism, conjure up breathtaking vistas of European cultural and intellectual history that could fill voluminous monographs.

Kurt Wais then moves on to another theoretical debate which occupied many of his contemporaries in the twentieth century without resorting to the concepts which were very much in currency then, namely the dichotomy between the "synchronic" and the "diachronic". It can be seen that he does not take sides in this debate, and perhaps this neutrality requires no extra effort at all, for he is simply describing the achievement of Schlegel in mastering and harmonizing an ahistorical treatment, as illustrated by Voltaire's *Essai sur la poésie épique*, with literary historiography. The reference to Voltaire echoes a comparatistic movement launched by the great Czech scholar, René Wellek, who in his *History of Modern Criticism* (1955-1992) treats Voltaire and other 18th- century critics as the pioneers of "modern" criticism. Kurt Wais himself greatly admired Wellek and introduced the

²⁸ See *Debating World Literature*. Edited by Christopher Prendergast. London: Verso, 2004.

latter's work to his students in Tübingen. How many scholars in those days looked at Voltaire as a critic? All in all, the comparatistic side of Schlegel's work comes very much to the fore.

The range of Schlegel's comparative criticism is, according to Wais, premised on his command of several languages and literatures. Perhaps Wais is unconsciously indulging in a kind of disguised autobiographical narrative, for he too mastered several (Western) languages. (By a strange coincidence, when I introduced myself to him personally for the first time in the summer of 1961, he asked me in what language we should converse – we settled for French! Schlegel, it was related by his contemporaries, also asked his foreign guests who visited him at the University of Bonn what language they should speak!) This multilingualism is the condition officially set for Wais' students of Comparative Literature who should master at least three foreign languages, and Kurt Wais himself did not set great store on the kind of general, theoretically based comparatism that later became popular in academic circles. An academic discipline should possess a certain degree of specialization and Wais believed in linking comparatism with a particular philology, in his own case, with Romance Philology, a practice still upheld in many German universities, such as the biggest department of Comparative Literature in Germany at the Free University Berlin, although the Berlin professorial chairs are not explicitly called Comparative Literature and Romance / English / Germanic / Slavic Philology, but General and Comparative Literature.

Yet, specialization need not come into conflict with wider interests. That Wais should single out Schlegel's mastery of classical, medieval and modern languages

represents a tacit vindication of the German Romantics' universalism which spans temporal as well as spatial divides. Schlegel's uncontested position as the pioneer of Sanskrit Studies in Germany is highlighted here, an intellectual and scholarly preoccupation that had nothing to do with European imperialist ambitions, as Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) would have it. It is worth noting that Wais speaks of Schlegel's "sacrifice", meaning his unwavering devotion to Sanskrit Studies in his later years at the expense of his wider comparatistic interests. That Kurt Wais should come out in defense of Schlegel against the charge of declining intellectual power deserves our particular attention. Wais spent his "Indian summer" single-mindedly on medieval studies, culminating in the 10-part study of the early epics of Western Europe, a monumental project that remained unfinished for reasons that I shall bring up for discussion in Sections 6 and 7.

Those familiar with the German Romantic movement will be able to see the wider implications of their interest in medievalism, as represented by Schlegel's Gothic and Provençal Studies, and their reaching out to Sanskrit Studies. That Kurt Wais should underscore Schlegel's contribution in these fields is in consonance with the tone of my monograph on *Schlegel in Frankreich* which he was introducing. The monograph deals also with Schlegel's polemic against French Classicism, which according to him could not be claimed as an heir to Classical Antiquity. Besides, Schlegel accuses the French Classicists of ignoring the roots of European culture, equated with the Middle Ages, and consequently ignoring the great achievements that arose out of this native European soil, culminating in the works of Shakespeare and the Spanish Golden Age. Intent on linking up with Classical Antiquity and ending up with

mere imitation, the French are culturally an alien element on European soil! Their cultural hegemony is therefore misguided. Nations could rise to great cultural heights without imitating others, and all this is no European prerogative, as demonstrated by the great Sanskrit literature. One laudable aspect of the German Romantics' "ideology" is that they were serious scholars, and their theory was grounded in serious study. Kurt Wais' *empathetic* admiration for Schlegel's "sacrifice", consciously or unconsciously, can serve as a warning to literary scholars of our age. "Do your homework properly before embarking on theorizing or polemicizing!" How much shoddy scholarship was generated by the controversy around "Orientalism" has recently been demonstrated by Robert Irwin in his book *For Lust of Knowing. The Orientalists and their Enemies* (2006).²⁹

One paragraph by Kurt Wais can bring forth very rich associations indeed!

6. The Rise of Comparative Literature

Allow me to begin with an anecdote. In 1981 I went on a study tour of Germany with a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (usually known by its German acronym DAAD) and expressly sought interviews with two leading scholars of the University of Konstanz, namely the Professor of English, Wolfgang Iser, and the Professor of Romance Philology, Hans Robert Jauss, (known internationally as the pioneer of reception aesthetics). Konstanz at that time was highly regarded as the institution at which innovations in literary studies were being launched that cut across

²⁹ Robert Irwin. *For Lust of Knowing. The Orientalists and their Enemies*. London: Allen Lane, 2006.

the frontiers of traditional language departments. It was the interview with Jauss that is relevant to my purpose here. I told him that I had attended the Congress of the International Comparative Association (LCLA) held in Innsbruck in 1979 and how much I appreciated his chairmanship of one section in which his team and the veteran comparatist René Wellek clashed on the subject of literary evaluation. When he heard the word "Comparative Literature", Jauss immediately said that he had gone to Innsbruck at the request of friends but would not identify himself as a comparatist. As I was accompanied by a colleague from the French Department of my university, we had to converse in French. I still recall what Jauss said: "Le comparatisme en Allemagne a été fondé par Kurt Wais, qui a écrit des choses épouvantables." (Comparative Literature in Germany was founded by Kurt Wais, who wrote terrible things.) Jauss must have meant the volume *Die Gegenwarts-Dichtung der europäischen Völker* of 1939, already mentioned in Section 4. He did not know that I had studied with Kurt Wais, and the interview went on very smoothly.³⁰ So in the eyes of his colleagues, even those who were hostile to him, Kurt Wais was the *founder* of the discipline in Germany.

This is not entirely correct. There had been a number of precursors, as thoroughly investigated by Hugo Dyserinck in his book *Komparatistik : Eine Einführung* (Comparative Literature: An Introduction) of 1977, before Kurt Wais officially took his "Habilitation" in the subject "Romance

³⁰ See Chetana Nagavajara. "A Journey through the Land of Literary Studies" (1981-82). Reprinted in: Chetana Nagavajara. *As You Like It – As I Like It: On Criticism and Research*. Bangkok: Khombang Press, 2005, pp. 155-165 (in Thai).

Philology and Comparative Literature" in 1934 at the age of 27. But as fortune or misfortune would have it, he was to be appointed full professor in that combined discipline at his beloved Tübingen as late as 1954. With or without full professorial regalia, Wais was always productive as a comparatist. (During the one year of captivity as a prisoner of war, he was learning Russian from a fellow-prisoner!) He also organized an international conference in 1950 in Tübingen, attended by a number of highly distinguished scholars, and the Proceedings that he edited are a significant contribution to international literary studies. Hugo Dyserinck was very fair, when he maintained that although Kurt Wais did not succeed in institutionalizing Comparative Literature as an independent subject, "his work and his activity will in any case go down in the annals of this discipline as something positive".³¹

I am not sure that Kurt Wais himself wanted to develop Comparative Literature into an independent subject. I have in the previous chapters tried to demonstrate that he was unsympathetic towards excessive generalization and theorizing, which to him could lapse into wishy-washy pseudo-scholarship. So a firm footing in a specific philology would be a good precondition, and Romance Philology with its main specialities of French, Italian and Spanish was already by its very nature "comparatistic". (In actual practice he was also ready to supervise students wishing to combine Comparative Literature with English Philology or German Philology.) As late as 1973 he resisted the suggestion from the Dean of the School of Modern Languages at Tübingen University to make a slight change in the name of the discipline from "Romanische Philologie

und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft" to "Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft und Romanistik", claiming that the subject of his "Habilitation" had been named thus and should remain unchanged. So Comparative Literature was not to take precedence over Romance Philology! In this matter he remained consistent throughout his professional career. Shortly before his retirement, he wrote to one of the candidates for his Chair, who later turned out to be successful (certainly not a breach of professional ethics, as Kurt Wais was not a member of the Selection Committee) that he had enjoyed the freedom to operate in both disciplines, and then came a very significant statement: "I have deliberately refrained from applying for a Seminar in Comparative Literature on its own".³²

One may have to ask whether this was a matter of principle or blind loyalty to Romance Philology as such. The answer would probably be in favour of principle, or more precisely, of professional conviction. The Marbach Papers include Kurt Wais' correspondence with Horst Rüdiger, and it is abundantly clear that Kurt Wais really believed that the study of Comparative Literature had to be anchored in at least one specific philology and this should apply to the creation of, or appointment to, a professorial chair as well. When Horst Rüdiger was moving from Mainz to take up a new appointment in Bonn, Kurt Wais strongly recommended that the chair should be designated by a dual specialization, namely "Germanische Philologie und (underlined in the original) Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft" (German Philology and Comparative Literature).³³

³¹ Hugo Dyserinck. *Komparatistik. Eine Einführung*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1977, p. 39.

³² Letter from Kurt Wais to Wido Hempel, 18.03.1974.

³³ Letter from Kurt Wais to Horst Rüdiger, 05.11.1962.

Although Kurt Wais' suggestion came too late, Horst Rüdiger subsequently saw to it that his Chair in Comparative Literature was closely linked with the German Seminar. As Rüdiger was at that time also Director of the German Seminar, he could reorient it somewhat in the direction of Comparative Literature; for example, the Seminar Library had been expanded accordingly.³⁴

The Wais-Rüdiger model of Comparative Literature has since been adopted by other German institutions and seems to have worked well. The most flourishing institute in Germany today, namely that of the Free University Berlin, has 5 professorial chairs, each with a scholarly bias towards one specific philology or art form, but working collectively (needless to say, under a strong and benign leadership for a few decades).³⁵ Kurt Wais could not possibly have dreamt of such teamwork, for in his days the professorial system was still very much conceived as being based on individual chair holders. There was at that time no built-in mechanism to ensure cooperation and collaboration. The academic tradition, as I have pointed out in Chapter 2, operated on the assumption of *civilized collegiality*, and Kurt Wais must have experienced the

instability of the system himself during his last years of service before his retirement, when certain uncivilized elements crept into the idyllic Tübingen. Half a professorial chair for Comparative Literature, when compared to, say, the ideal situation in Berlin today, is child's play by present-day standards. The situation was compounded by the fact that Comparative Literature was then not recognized as a subject for the state examination, and job security could not be guaranteed for those who opted for the discipline on purely academic grounds. That Kurt Wais, against all the odds, could, in a maverick-like manner, achieve so much remains a marvel.

Kurt Wais never set himself up as leader of German Comparative Literature. Recognition was not acquired through self-assertive efforts, but was earned on the strength of his research, and much of this recognition came from foreign colleagues and institutions. He was from the outset outward-going, and he was aware that, by its very nature, Comparative Literature could only thrive in an international context, not only substantively through teaching and research, but also socially through personal contacts. The Marbach Papers testify to this outward-going practice. I have already mentioned his involvement in the ICLA and FILLM in Chapter 5, and the correspondence between Kurt Wais and Horst Rüdiger shows how seriously the two German scholars viewed their task. Not all international contacts proved to be fruitful. The FILLM Congress in Islamabad, Pakistan, in September 1969, for example, was a disappointment, for the participants from the host country were not actively involved at all, and Wais' verdict based on his attendance at 8 previous congresses was that they had gone there

³⁴ Letter from Horst Rüdiger to Kurt Wais, 27.12.1966.

³⁵ I am referring to Eberhard Lämmert, who also served one term as President of the Free University Berlin. He has been connected with Marbach too, having held the position of President of the Deutsche Schillergesellschaft (German Schiller Society) for 15 years. After the reunification, he helped to found the Zentrum für Literaturforschung Berlin (Centre for Literary Research Berlin). He has lectured in Thailand several times. In a private conversation, Professor Lämmert said to me that the rise of Comparative Literature in Germany owed much to Kurt Wais.

“one hundred years too soon”.³⁶ But on the whole, his relations with foreign colleagues and institutions must have been a source of much gratification for him. French colleagues held him in high esteem, (and it must not be forgotten that Tübingen was in the French-occupied zone after the war, and the French authorities cleared him of any charge of NS connections.³⁷) Correspondence with French colleagues constitutes a considerable part of the Marbach Papers. Naturally, his competence as a comparatist was sought after, and the Secretary-General of the European chapter of the ICLA wrote to Kurt Wais asking him to be part of the delegation from Europe to attend the Congress in Chapel Hill. Moreover, Kurt Wais’ stature surpassed that of a professor of literature : the “Association des Universitaires d’Europe” (Association of European University Teachers) was contemplating the creation of a “European University” and was planning a small expert meeting in Geneva in July 1958. A telegram was sent to him stating quite categorically: “VOTRE PRESENCE INDISPENSABLE” (Your presence indispensable).³⁸ The questionnaire that followed contained important issues of cultural policy. Another invitation came for a meeting in Munich in November 1959, using almost the same wording: “I certainly consider your participation as indispensable.”³⁹ This happened years before EU committees of this nature came into being.

Colleagues from abroad introduced themselves to Kurt Wais and offered to come to lecture in Tübingen. John Fletcher of the University of Norwich, one of the very first chair holders of Comparative Literature in the UK, made contact with Kurt Wais in 1969. But the most interesting case is that of the Zürich comparatist, Fritz Ernst, who introduced himself to Kurt Wais and made a trip to Tübingen on 13 May 1954. The Swiss scholar must have been a serious person, for he had sent an agenda for that meeting beforehand. It contained the following items: “(1) Present status of Comparative Literature in Germany; (2) Possibility of (setting up) an organ for this; and (3) Possibility of cooperation”.⁴⁰ Kurt Wais must have been impressed by the sincerity and seriousness of purpose on the part of Fritz Ernst. They subsequently decided to coedit a monograph series entitled “Forschungsprobleme der vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte”, (Research Topics in Comparative Literature).⁴¹ The premature death of Fritz Ernst in 1958 robbed Kurt Wais of a true friend, and he was trying to look for Ernst’s successor. For the first time in my dealing with the Marbach Papers, I could sense that Kurt Wais was going out of his way to remedy a situation which really was not directly his responsibility: he turned to his long-time friend Werner Paul Friederich, (who had moved to the USA and who, with Fernand Baldensperger, more or less helped to put American comparatism on the map, so to speak,) with a suggestion that it was about time Friederich should return home to Switzerland. Friederich’s reply (in English) was perhaps representative of the attitude of many European émigrés in American

³⁶ Kurt Wais. “Bericht über die Teilnahme am 11. Kongress der FILLM, Islamabad, 13.-26. September 1969”.

³⁷ Wolfgang Theile, op.cit., p. 142. (See Note 21).

³⁸ Telegram from Guy Michaud to Kurt Wais, 22.06.1958.

³⁹ Letter from Guy Michaud to Kurt Wais, 14.10.1959.

⁴⁰ Letter from Fritz Ernst to Kurt Wais, 09.05.1954.

⁴¹ My book, *Schlegel in Frankreich*, mentioned earlier, also appeared as Volume III in this series.

academia: "Sorry that I have to disappoint you, but I dearly love these USA which have been so good to me during the past thirty years and I naturally want to stay with my child and with all the places Molly knew so well."⁴²

Was Kurt Wais overstepping his role and acting like a self-appointed patriarch of Comparative Literature? I am inclined to think that his concern for the discipline as a whole was genuine. The Marbach Papers are studded with the German word "Nachwuchs" (younger generation) which comes up every so often. Both Kurt Wais and Horst Rüdiger were intent on paving the way for younger scholars to take their place. Their correspondence echoes the voices of two elder statesmen who were looking ahead to a brighter future for Comparative Literature in Germany. Of course, Kurt Wais had already trained young comparatists of great promise who could fill new chairs anytime. In a letter to Kurt Wais on 27 August 1964, Horst Rüdiger was reviewing the status of Comparative Literature in Germany, mentioning names of young colleagues, including, of course, Wais' pupils. As for Kurt Wais he rejoiced that new chairs in Comparative Literature were being created at various German universities.⁴³ I am sure that at the time of his retirement, he realized the limitations of the discipline at his own university and welcomed the new *decentralized* model for German comparatism.

Although he did not quite manage to create a distinctly identifiable "school" of Comparative Literature in Tübingen, his

scholarly achievements in the discipline were incontestable. The two volumes of collected essays, namely *An den Grenzen der Nationalliteraturen: Vergleichende Aufsätze* (On the Frontiers of National Literatures: Comparative Essays) of 1958 and *Europäische Literatur im Vergleich: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Comparative European Literature: Collected Essays) of 1983 bear testimony to his strength as a researcher, namely thorough documentation, analytical acuity, vast coverage in terms of subject matter, and above all the ability to connect. Viewed from the vantage point of present-day comparatism, one cannot help asking why with his immense erudition Kurt Wais did not bother to offer a more audacious and assertive synthesis. If only he could have been a little more sensitive to the lure of *theory*! As I have pointed out in Section 3, he was not interested in methodology or theory. It is not surprising that later scholars should be disappointed with him. An English reviewer of his *Europäische Literatur im Vergleich* was quite explicit in this: "But his massively-researched answers remain expository, combining an authoritarian command of 'knowledge' with a disappointingly modest attitude to underlying issues".⁴⁴ Pupils of Kurt Wais knew so well that what our teacher demanded of us was text-based philological conscientiousness. The "underlying issues" did surface in the upper seminar and we often continued to discuss them after those late Monday night sessions in the old "Aula" on the bank of the river Neckar. "The Monday salon", as I would like to call it, was not conducted by a literary high priest who made definitive

⁴² Letter from Werner Paul Friederich to Kurt Wais, 29.12.1958.

⁴³ Letter from Kurt Wais to Horst Rüdiger, 05.11.1962.

⁴⁴ Naomi Segal. Review of Kurt Wais' *Europäische Literatur im Vergleich. Gesammelte Aufsätze*. In: *French Studies*, 1985, XXXIX, p. 372.

pronouncements on all things. We were trained to be “amateurs” of literature in the etymological sense of the word and “modest” scholars who hesitated to make big claims unless we were able to substantiate them philologically. Looking back over four decades I suspect that this “modesty” can explain why a “Tübingen School of Comparative Literature” with its own distinct character did not emerge from that essentially fertile ground.

There was one area of Comparative Literature which Kurt Wais did address that came near to what we would today call “literary theory”, and that was *literary criticism*. Kurt Wais’ twice-weekly lecture on 20th- century criticism (in Europe and North and South America) was probably a novelty in German universities in the 1960s, since René Wellek’s *History of Modern Criticism* had at that time not yet reached the 20th century. Kurt Wais was an admirer of René Wellek, and in terms of methodology he adopted the Wellek model in dealing with criticism from the standpoint of “history of criticism”.⁴⁵ With no greater authority to rely upon, Kurt Wais must have done a great deal of research himself as far as the 20th century was concerned. It was a joy to listen to him analyzing works of colleagues whom he knew personally. For example, when considering the rediscovery of Baroque poetry by the Swiss scholar Jean Rousset, Kurt Wais related how he and Rousset traveled through the US together and learned much from each other first-hand. We then took up Rousset’s work in the

upper seminar.⁴⁶ Another foreign scholar whose works Kurt Wais introduced to us was Sir Maurice Bowra, and we did not know him only as an expert in the heroic poetry of many nations, but Kurt Wais told us of his visit to Oxford and that he found the English scholar to be the most “geistreich” (an untranslatable German word meaning witty, elegant and sophisticated at the same time) person he had ever met in his life. These personal touches were not meant to be merely entertaining; we students were not expected to imbibe only the message from the printed words, but to conjure up in our minds distinct personalities (not to be confused with celebrities), and all this made our reading of criticism and secondary literature more lively and more humane. Comparative Literature begins as a science of texts but is deep down a very humane science. We learned this from Kurt Wais, implicitly and tacitly.

So people took him for an “expert” on criticism. (He told me personally in all modesty when I visited him in 1981 that he was nowhere near Wellek and did not pursue this branch of studies for long.) The Marbach Papers are a great help in his respect. For example, the famous publisher

⁴⁵ As far as content was concerned, some of the works of individual critics which Kurt Wais introduced to his students were theoretically oriented. So the “historical” approach did not preclude an interest in theory as such.

⁴⁶ Years later I took my cue from Rousset’s and other critics’ reevaluation of Baroque literature and tried to find a correlation between the criticism of Baroque literature and the creativity of the Expressionist movement. See Chetana Nagavajara. “Reevaluation between Past and Present: Case Studies from Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Criticism”. In : *Across the Oceans. Studies from East to West in Honor of Richard K. Seymour*. Honolulu: College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, University of Hawaii, 1995. Reprinted in Chetana Nagavajara. *Fervently Mediating: Criticism from a Thai Perspective. Collected Articles 1982-2004*. Bangkok: Chomanad Press, 2004, pp. 309-324.

Brockhaus wrote to him asking for his contribution to the encyclopedia, *Der Große Brockhaus*, in the form of a comprehensive article on "Criticism", the reason being that the article was to have an international scope and colleagues had recommended Kurt Wais as "the most prominent representative of Comparative Literature".⁴⁷ Though not belonging officially to a German Department, he must have been knowledgeable enough about contemporary German criticism to be invited by the "Société des études germaniques" (Society for Germanic Studies) to deliver a lecture in Paris. Kurt Wais proposed to speak in French on the topic "Critique littéraire en Allemagne dans les derniers décades" (Literary Criticism in Germany in the Last Decades), which proved that he would prefer to address an audience consisting of non-Germanists as well, (a real comparatistic predilection?). But the Secretary of the Society proposed that the lecture be in German, and the date was set for 25 February 1956. Unfortunately, an illness prevented him from going to Paris for the purpose.⁴⁸ The point to be emphasized here is that he was regarded as a specialist in the history of criticism in Germany as well as abroad.

Insofar as his comparatistic orientation was concerned, Kurt Wais steered the middle course between the French and the American schools. Although he attended the ICLA Congress in Chapel Hill, where a controversy between the two Schools came to the fore, there exists no evidence that Kurt Wais took sides. Some of his

own works, including the theses he supervised, veered towards the French school, but his method could certainly not be simplified as the much-derided "rapports de fait" (factual relations) attributed to this school, as it also attached great importance to intellectual history. Kurt Wais' interest in criticism (which inevitably implied that he did not ignore literary theory) would align him with the American school. One point has to be made clear when we talk about literary theory. Kurt Wais and his pupils considered themselves as literary historians, and more specifically, as historians of criticism: they studied theories embedded in the critical works of others, and were not theorizing on the basis of other critics' theories. By nature a moderate person not prone to any radical positioning, Kurt Wais disapproved of René Etiemble's hostility towards the American school.⁴⁹

It is a truism that to get to know a scholar well, one has to go back to his roots. Wido Hempel, Kurt Wais' successor in the Tübingen Chair, characterized his colleague in the obituary published in the journal *Romanische Forschungen* in 1995 in the following terms: "and it can certainly be said that Kurt Wais, the daring and experienced discoverer of many literary seas, remained faithful to his Swabian homeland as well as to his scholarly roots."⁵⁰ Those scholarly roots were *Medieval Studies* initiated by his teacher Hermann Schneider in Tübingen.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Letter from Kurt Wais to Horst Rüdiger, 24.08.1964.

⁵⁰ Wido Hempel. "Nachruf : Kurt Wais (1907-1995)". In: *Romanische Forschungen*, 107: 3/4 (1995), p. 422.

⁵¹ According to his wife, Kurt Wais remained very close to his teacher Hermann Schneider until the latter's death, visiting him regularly and taking him for a walk. He was also very

⁴⁷ Letter from the Verlag Eberhard Brockhaus to Kurt Wais (n.d.).

⁴⁸ Letter from Claude David to Kurt Wais, 04.10.1955; Letter from Kurt Wais to Claude David, 11.11.1955; Letter from Claude David to Kurt Wais, 25.02.1956.

In private conversations and correspondence during the years preceding his retirement, Kurt Wais expressed his intention to concentrate his research activities on his Medieval Studies of which one volume had appeared in 1953 under the title *Frühe Epik Westeuropas und die Vorgeschichte des Nibelungenliedes* (Early Epics of Western Europe and the Prehistory of the Song of the Nibelungen). With his background in Germanic Studies, Nordic Studies, Celtic Studies and Romance Philology, he was better equipped than other medievalists to tackle such a challenging subject. Medieval Studies is a composite discipline, in our contemporary jargon, a multi-discipline, that a single scholar can hardly master. Kurt Wais knew he was confronting a gigantic task but remained undaunted. He once said that he was conscious of his limitations as a medievalist: he knew no Arabic and lacked training in music history and musicology. Kurt Wais himself described what he was doing as “mediävistische Komparatistik” (medieval comparatism),⁵² which surely is remote from the preoccupation of most “comparatists”, then and now.

In 1969, Volume 2 was about to be finished, but in the end it was not. I can only surmise why he could not finish it. Its scope was expanding beyond control. He mentioned in a letter that Volume 2 would contain a chapter dealing with a theme on which he had been working for a long time with an Egyptologist colleague in Tübingen.⁵³ Kurt

Wais was not dealing with just the epics of Western Europe anymore: the extra-European connections were too enticing to resist. This was the reason why he had to discipline himself in not accepting too many invitations and engagements. In a letter of the same year he called this project his “life’s work” and had “sworn an oath to decline even the most attractive invitation”.⁵⁴ No wonder that he was so sympathetic towards August Wilhelm Schlegel’s “sacrifice”, as we have seen in Section 5. Being such a good teacher and a generous colleague, he must have broken that oath a number of times! With Volume 2 left unfinished, he returned around 1972 to the early epics in Romance languages and once again imposed a “law upon myself not to accept any engagement until this plan is completed”.⁵⁵ Naturally he must have revoked that law himself.

Knowing so much and still thirsting for more, seeing connections everywhere and following the clues leading from one point to another, this was comparatism scaling dizzy heights that could hardly be reached. When Volume 1 came out in 1953, his Tübingen colleague, Wolfgang Mohr, in a review, could sense that Kurt Wais might deliver something that could parallel the monumental work by Ernst Robert Curtius’ *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (European Literature and Latin Middle Ages) of 1948.⁵⁶ Kurt Wais was perhaps trying to prove the thesis propounded by the German Romantics, especially the Schlegel brothers, that

close to his other Tübingen teacher, the Romance philologist, Gerhard Rohlfs. In his class, when he quoted them, he never failed to refer to them as “My teacher Hermann Schneider” and “My teacher Gerhard Rohlfs”.

⁵² Letter from Kurt Wais to Henry H.H. Remak, 14.02.1975.

⁵³ Letter from Kurt Wais to Gehrts (first name not given), 16.07.1970.

⁵⁴ Letter from Kurt Wais to J.C. Brandt-Castius, 24.03.1969.

⁵⁵ Letter from Kurt Wais to Frau Gerlinghoff (first name not given), 26.05.1972.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Mohr: Review of Kurt Wais’ *Frühe Epik Westeuropas*. In: *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft* 63 (1955-56), p. 19.

alongside the Graeco-Roman heritage, medieval Europe did produce a literary culture of comparable quality arising out of the native soil in the various vernaculars, as we have seen in Section 5 in connection with August Wilhelm Schlegel. Kurt Wais almost did it. When he died at the age of 88, he left a bulky manuscript containing Volumes 2 to 10, parts of which had already been completed and typed out. It is time that we turn to what I propose to call "The Marbach Legacy".

7. The Marbach Legacy : A Coda

The little town of Marbach on the river Neckar recently made national news when the President of the Federal Republic of Germany inaugurated on 6 June 2006 the new structure of a larger complex, called the "Literaturmuseum der Moderne" (Museum of Modern Literature), designed by the renowned British architect, David Chipperfield, and in his speech made a very significant statement: "If you are looking for something like a home for literature in Germany, then you will find it here in Marbach./ Other countries would naturally have situated such an institution in their capital. But culture in Germany has many capitals. This unique diversity characterizes the German cultural landscape."⁵⁷ Established some 120 years ago as a memorial to the great son of Marbach, Friedrich Schiller, and other Swabian poets, what had grown out of local patriotism has become a national institution and a research centre of international dimensions, for the study of German literature has become an

international discipline. International scholars converge there to conduct their research, propped by a well-organized archive and a good library. Kurt Wais' "Nachlass" made a short journey from his home in Tübingen to the Literature Archive in Marbach in 2000 and now constitutes part of the immense manuscript collection of poets, writers, thinkers and scholars. Without access to these papers, I would not have been able to write this essay in the way that I have done and might have had to rely partly on guesswork. And a pupil of Kurt Wais cannot, in good conscience, operate on guesswork!

What I propose to call "The Marbach Legacy" has yet to be organized properly according to archival principles, and that will probably take many more years. But as it stands, it is workable, thanks to the arduous preliminary work done by his widow, Dr. Karin Wais, herself a scholar of stature whose works on Rilke and Schiller are much recognized.⁵⁸ Though not yet catalogued, the manuscripts are arranged into groups, namely: correspondence with colleagues; correspondence with publishers and editors; correspondence with his family; letters of recommendations; manuscripts of unfinished articles; evaluations of theses; and last but not least, manuscripts of the remaining 9 volumes of the work *Early Epics of Western Europe*. The documents have been put into 25 boxes in total, of

⁵⁷ "Rede von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler zur Eröffnung des Literaturmuseums der Moderne am 6. Juni 2006 in Marbach". *Bundesregierung Bulletin* Nr. 57-1 vom 06.06.2006, p. 1.

⁵⁸ After the death of his first wife, Kurt Wais married a young Ph.D. student, Karin Bergeder, in 1960. Karin Wais completed her doctorate and continued to pursue her own research. Among her major publications, the following are worth mentioning: *Studien zu Rilkes Valéry-Übertragungen*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967; *Die Schiller-Chronik* unter Mitw. von Rose Unterberger. Frankfurt am Main: Insel-Verlag, 2005.

which 20 alone contain the manuscripts of the monumental medieval study. I am not saying that sheer volume means substantive weightiness. But anybody prepared even to inspect just the table of contents of each volume will soon realize that these piles of papers cannot be ignored.

Based on my own experience, I shall try to outline what we can learn from the Marbach Papers.

I asked myself first and foremost the very simple question that if I had not known Kurt Wais personally, would a picture of the man have emerged from just reading these documents? I would be inclined to answer in the affirmative. Here was a man endowed with a warmth of personality and a remarkable degree of sociability and collegiality, who was always ready to help other people (and not necessarily only through answering phone calls till shortly before midnight!). The letters can substantiate this impression. Looking at the dates of the letters sent to him and the dates of his responses, I soon found out how conscientious and friendly he was in dealing with other people. He sometimes almost answered by return of post, although there was no compulsion to do so. (He must have enjoyed letter-writing, and I cannot imagine if he was still living today, how he would deal with the unmanageable number of e-mails he might receive on a daily basis.)

Letters do not only illuminate personal relationships. We can almost reconstruct the scholarly *networks* of Kurt Wais' times by way of these exchanges of correspondence (in many languages – which reveals how good his French was, and how quaint, his English!) I do not sense any rivalry. There must have been some in-fighting behind the scenes, but these scholars of the postwar era, in their correspondence at least, were trying

to transform this “heap of broken images” (to quote T. S. Eliot) into a new platform for transnational cooperation that would help them to survive and pave the way for the younger generation, (hence the care for the “Nachwuchs” which I have mentioned in Section 6 on “The Rise of Comparative Literature”). Wolfgang Kayser too shared Kurt Wais' concern, when he wrote in 1951 that they should be thinking of helping the “Nachwuchs” to grow, for “you (Kurt Wais) are, if I am not mistaken, the only representative of the discipline in Germany”.⁵⁹ All this speaks for the humane side of academia in those days. There was no need for these scholars to press their institutions into signing “Memoranda of Understanding” (MOU) like today, for gentlemen's agreements seemed to work fairly satisfactorily.

The scholars were ready to help each other. A specific case might perhaps clarify my point. Even during the war, Kurt Wais maintained contact with some of his French colleagues. The doyenne of German Studies in France, Geneviève Bianquis, wrote to Kurt Wais from Dijon in 1944 in a rather personal, even confessional tone, telling him how she had managed to survive such a “terrible present” by devoting herself to research in German literature.⁶⁰ There was no sense of enmity here at all. After the war, when the second edition of Kurt Wais' Mallarmé book appeared, Madame Bianquis wrote again in January 1959 and did not hesitate to point out some minor mistranslations of Mallarmé's poems.⁶¹ A true friend indeed!

⁵⁹ Letter from Wolfgang Kayser to Kurt Wais, 06.07.1951.

⁶⁰ Letter from Geneviève Bianquis to Kurt Wais, 20.01.1944.

⁶¹ Letter from Geneviève Bianquis to Kurt Wais, 12.01.1959.

Correspondence with and about his pupils does throw light on teacher-pupil relationships. I cannot help feeling that in some cases he might have cared more about them than vice versa, judging from the indifference that some of them showed their former teacher in later years. If ever they had a chance to spend a few hours in the Manuscript Department of the Literaturarchiv in Marbach, they might begin to repent, for they would soon realize that he had done his utmost to help them individually (without breaking the unwritten codes of professional ethics, of course), be it in securing prestigious appointments or even making inroads for them into the publishing world!

Kurt Wais was a gifted letter-writer. The Marbach Papers offer ample material for a volume of selected letters to and from Kurt Wais. I maintain that such a publication will not only do Kurt Wais the honour that he deserves, but will also give us a very humane image of the European academic community (in an age that, alas, might now be gone forever).

I have dealt with the evaluations of theses and letters of recommendation in Section 3 and shall only confirm here that these documents speak well for the German academic tradition. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that the traditional professorial oligarchy, which was later to be subjected to reforms, carried with it immense responsibility on the part of the individual professors, not only in terms of sheer workload but also from the standpoint of ethics. The contemporary university has switched over to a system borrowed from the business sector, with a new top-down "management system" under the guidance (or dictatorship?) of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). I enjoyed reading the Marbach Papers which tell us about a

bygone era when mutual trust was still the guiding principle.

I have so far tried to relate the man to his age and to demonstrate how the intellectual environment and the academic tradition were favourable to the process of maturation of a distinguished teacher and scholar like Kurt Wais. If a young man of 31 could produce a work of the stature of *Mallarmé, ein Dichter der Jahrhundertwende* (Mallarmé, A Poet of the Turn of the Century), the octogenarian, steeped in the reading of early medieval epics in several languages, must have looked back to the work of the "Wunderkind" (child prodigy) with a smile. The youthful work was as good as it could have been – brilliant, conscientious, erudite, but with no great "ideology" to underpin it. The unfinished *Early Epics of Western Europe* was to be a monumental synthesis, and I think that Kurt Wais was trying to prove a point, which I have already mentioned in the previous section, namely to substantiate the Romantic notion of Europe as a cohesive entity (but with its doors open to other cultures), that predates the dreams of the architects of the EU by almost a thousand years! It was his penchant for erudition that accounted for his inability to "call it a day", so to speak, (not to mention failing health after the stroke he suffered just before his 80th birthday). His working method, in this case, was *centrifugal*, and the absence of any *centripetal* pull meant that no synthesis was in sight.

I am well aware that this *coda* is about Marbach, and I must not overlook the physical side of the manuscripts. We need not be impressed with their volume alone, but any closer scrutiny will reveal how much love was expended on this study. Some of the cleanly typed-out parts have not been left untouched; they have been corrected,

revised, with additions along the margins. Certain parts are hand-written; some are mere scribbles. I am of the opinion that the whole manuscript should be examined by a team of medievalists, or preferably by "medieval comparatists" (as Kurt Wais himself would call them) in order to gauge what is ready for publication, what needs editing prior to publication and what needs to be discarded as unpublishable. But the answer that we uninitiated would like to have is very simple: what does the whole thing tell us? It can not be just a heap of rubbish if a scholar of Kurt Wais' stature called it his "life's work".

There remains much in Kurt Wais' "Marbach Legacy" that needs to be investigated. Archival studies may not be an area to which today's literary scholars would like to devote their time. It is more exiting to deal with the latest theories! But when reliable answers to certain issues are not forthcoming, Marbach is there to help you. Kurt Wais had, and still has, his detractors, who point their finger at his "sins of youth" that can be identified in some of his early publications. But to accuse him of being implicated in Nazi ideology and activities is simply academic McCarthyism. Relying heavily on the Marbach Papers, Wolfgang Theile of Bamberg University has, in a very gentlemanly manner, dealt a blow to one of these detractors.⁶² I do not propose to rehearse the controversy any further, and only wish to confirm Wolfgang Theile's position. My short visit to Marbach in May 2006 yielded a real surprise. A hand-written letter from Kurt Wais to his colleague Horst Rüdiger dated 24 August 1964 is quite revelatory. I shall quote only a short passage.

You cannot, as far as research is concerned, do things on your

own initiative anymore, whether in jest or in seriousness, the very moment you enter a political organization; I have made the right decision not to do that in my whole life (in the Third Reich almost the only one of my age-group within the Faculty).⁶³

Unless one had the impertinence to accuse Kurt Wais of mendacity, this statement could clear up a number of uncertainties about Kurt Wais and politics. Even some of his friends and pupils today are inclined to think that he was politically naïve. Is it really that simple?

We are living in the computer age, and it is doubtful whether scholars of today would bequeath a "Nachlass" which can further research like that of Kurt Wais. How many of those Internet messages will be preserved for posterity? Marbach represents a reaffirmation of *the written culture*, and this essay is also meant to be *an apologia for archival research*. How many present-day messages are transmitted via the telephone? Yet the remnants of written culture are still with us. When one opens the appropriate page for transmitting an e-mail, the address section contains one line designated as "cc". How many people know that it means *carbon copy*? (In the old days without copying machines, you saved one for yourself, sent the other one to another addressee for information.) How many young people have used carbon paper and made carbon copies on a typewriter? Kurt Wais kept carbon copies of a great number of his letters and other documents, and I have been able to read much into his life and work thanks to these thin sheets of paper.

⁶² Wolfgang Theile, op. cit., (See Note 21).

⁶³ Letter from Kurt Wais to Horst Rüdiger, 24.08.1964.

I was contemplating ending this long essay by quoting the poem "Literaturarchiv in M." (Literature Archive in M.) by Rainer Kunze, but its rich classical allusions, including the river Styx and such characters as Charon, Orpheus and Eurydice, might require too many footnotes! Only the last two lines are easily comprehensible.

*It is a place of shadows
With the light from the world up there*

I have had the good fortune of knowing the physical structure of the Literaturarchiv, have gone down to the "underworld" to inspect Kurt Wais' "Nachlass" and can thus appreciate Rainer Kunze's message. The spacious cellar that stores books and manuscripts (mostly of dead poets and scholars) can be described as a place of shadows lit up by the wisdom of the real world *up there* ("Oberwelt" in the original) where their works were created. My research on Kurt Wais has moved in the opposite direction : I have culled from the shadows *down there* some guiding light that should illuminate our world *up here*.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Friends and colleagues have been helpful to me in many ways. My special thanks go to Dr. Karin Wais who has read the first draft of the manuscript and given her valuable comments. I also wish to thank the following colleagues for their advice: Prof. Hugo Dyserinck (Lanaken), Mr. Winfried Feifel (Marbach), Mr. Gert Pfafferrodt (München) and Mr. Jan-Ulrich Rademaker (Nattheim). A Thai Ph.D. student at Freiburg University, Mr. Chaiyakorn Kiatpongsan, has helped to photocopy some journal articles and reviews. That I have had the courage to embark on this archival research at all is due to the pioneering work of Prof. Wolfgang Theile, also a pupil of Kurt Wais. Last but not least, I must mention with gratitude the help I received from the staff members of the Manuscript Department and the Library of the Deutsche Literaturarchiv, Marbach.