theories and methodologies

What Does the Comparative Do for Literary History?

DJELAL KADIR

THE COMPARATIVE PROVIDES LITERARY HISTORY WITH A MARGIN OF REDEMPTIVE SELF-BETRAYAL. BY THE COMPARATIVE, WE SHOULD UNderstand certain practices of reading and inquiry that reveal actions and texts to be more than they appear and that expose narrative claims as other than they strictly claim to be. Historiography is likewise susceptible to this exposure. Narrative acts of literary history, no less subject to such self-salvaging through comparative discernment, alert us to historiography's uncertain adequacy to the histories it narrates. The redeeming quotient of the comparative signaled here resides in its preemption of tautology. The comparative, that is, can forestall, if not preclude outright, the possibility of any phenomenon's becoming definitively self-identical. In affirming the comparability of its objects, textual or otherwise, the comparative uncovers and ratifies the difference within and among phenomena and the contingencies of their existence, a sanctioning of difference that could mitigate solipsism and self-delusion. For literary history, this means foreclosing, or at least hedging against, *literary history*'s morphing into *world history* as tautologically plotted by certain master narratives of historiography that claim total explicatory power over the fortuities of history and historical life. These include narratives of imperial successions, providential history, world monarchies, epochal histories that plot human existence on the self-universalized grid of their own periodicity, and the history of Spirit commonly referred to as "Prussian universalisms." In this regard, Hegelian *Geistgeschichte*, with its dialectical-materialist derivative known as Marxism and its liberal-democratic free-market remnants called capitalism, both plied under the flag of modernization theory, is exemplary (Pomper, Elphick, and Vann). These are among historiography's most salient master narratives, perennially dominant in historical discourse and in the hegemony of states that have ideologically abetted and politically deployed them (Fasolt 219–32; Guha 24–47). The comparative persistently troubles the structural coherence of these historiographical master plots and their self-validating systematicity.

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As an instrument of critical wakefulness and historical discernment, the comparative is just as crucial in prompting us to understand the superlative for what it is. As well as unmasking the overarching narrative of self-universalizing historiography, the comparative serves to unveil the hectoring of the superlative as a national and imperial project of exceptionalism—for example, in the stentorian clamoring of poets such as Walt Whitman, which tends to contaminate the historiographical acumen of literary historians committed to its national traditions: "The Americans *of all nations at any time upon the earth* have probably the *fullest* poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the *greatest* poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the *largest* and *most stirring* appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir" (Whitman 5; my italics). Whitman's planetary reach proleptically points to certain perennial constructs in poetic, critical, and historiographical discourses whose political implications and historical exertions continue to resonate today.

Comparative cognizance, historical discourse, and literary performance come braided together from that primal scene of history when historical narrative self-consciously declared itself historiographical, betraying in that declaration an awareness of an inherent telltale supplement whose truth is even more enduring and whose "germinative power" more perennial than history itself (Benjamin 90). Thus, Walter Benjamin reminds us in "The Storyteller" that Herodotus, "the father of history," was also "the first storyteller of the Greeks" (89). Benjamin refers in particular to book 3, chapter 14, of Herodotus's *Histories*, where, he says, Herodotus rehearses at once the telling of "the true story" of history and the "true storytelling" of literature:

> From this story it may be seen what the nature of true storytelling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (90)

Just how long that long time of a story's potency and germination might endure is revealed by the story in Herodotus's *Histories* that Benjamin alludes to. It deals with the defeat of the Egyptian king Psammenitus by the Persian king Cambyses II at the Battle of Pelusium in 525 BC and the victory procession in which the triumphant Persian king paraded in humiliation the son and daughter of the vanquished Egyptian, an ignominy Psammenitus endures in silence, only to burst into deep grieving and audible lamentation on spotting one of his old and impoverished servants among paraded captives. While the history of the Battle of Pelusium is a detail in the reign of the Achaemenid Empire and the transfer of the throne of the pharaohs to Persia's Cambyses II, the story of Psammenitus's lamentation at the sight of his imprisoned servant resonates for readers from Michel de Montaigne, at the end of the sixteenth century, to Benjamin, who invokes Herodotus and Montaigne on this point in the middle of the twentieth century. And echoing in the discernment of both is that comparative difference between historiographical information and history's telling human story, the first, according to Benjamin, trapped in the moment of its informatic relevance, the latter enduring in seminal potentiality with a capacity for perennial germination.

We can read in the comparative sensibility demonstrated by Herodotus and discerned by Montaigne and Benjamin the intrinsic simultaneity of literature and history that threatens to implode into redundancy with our binomial construct *literary history* since, beginning with this initial scene of Western historiography, there appears to be no history that is not at the same time literature. It is the comparative

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discernment between these elements that keeps the historical information and the literary germ in contrapuntal simultaneity and that pulls us back from the pleonastic precipice of literary history as a tautology. As the "father of history" and the "first storyteller" of the Greeks, Herodotus displays a keen sense of the comparative dimension in historiographical performance. He also demonstrates from the beginning of his narrative an insight into the comparative nature of historical discourse and of history itself when, in justifying his undertaking, he acknowledges the need to safeguard the renown of deeds and of works "great and marvellous, which have been produced some by Hellenes and some by Barbarians" (bk. 1, preamble). And in the spirit of that comparative consciousness of what is Hellenic and what is not, he begins his narrative by referring, deferentially, to the declarations of "the Persians who have knowledge of history" (bk. 1, par. 1), thus starting his own seminal narrative by comparatively acknowledging the prior narrations of the "Barbarians."

The Comparative Logic of Literary History

If history, as Herodotus's legacy demonstrates, is inherently comparative, literary history is inexorably so. Literary traditions are more likely than not to find their self-definitions in comparative counterpoint and mutual, albeit asymmetrical, recognition. Their historicization rests no less on the productive juxtaposition of narrative formulations that translate and coalesce into defining formations. These are differential formations, which is to say they are products of transformative distinctiveness defined in relational contrast to alterities and to alternative configurations of historical discourse. History's self-differentiating narrative, then, intensifies when history is yoked to literature and the literary.

The story of history and the story of literature, like the narrative of Herodotus remarked by Benjamin, unfold in simultaneity. The two stories are coeval, if not coterminous. Their two narrative threads unwind in parallel: one (history's "true story") pertains to dramas such as imperial confrontations; the other ("true storytelling"), no less dramatic, depicts events like a king's recognition of his own and his kingdom's critical circumstances in the woeful predicament of his servant. Modern historiography, starting with Hegel in the first third of the nineteenth century, sanctions true history as the domain of narratives that emanate from sites of the state and its ideological formations, if not from empires and imperial reigns such as those of the Egyptian Psammenitus and the Persian Cambyses. Peoples without a state are relegated by this Hegelian logic to "pre-history"; they are "without history": "it is the state which first supplies a content which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it" (Hegel, *Lectures* 136). For its part, literature in the modern era that corresponds to the chronology of Hegel's philosophical discourse and historical formulation is said to find its production and formative definition in the nation, if not the nation-state. Thus, we have a parallel genesis of narratives in the "prose of history" produced by the state and in the prosodies of literature (poetic or prosaic) as coterminous with the nation, at least since Johann Gottfried von Herder, idiosyncratic student of Kant and Hegel's philosophical precursor, attributed the birth of the nation to its poets, thus rendering all literature congenitally national literature. In his paean to Homer and Shakespeare, Herder would proclaim, "A poet is the creator of the nation around him, he gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world" (qtd. in Suny and Kennedy 27). The danger of this spectral logic, in which history and literature are mirrored in the convergent binomial *literary history*, should be obvious, and just in case it is not, Hegel obviates this peril for us. He does so, now deliberately, now symptomatically, well before our postcolonial

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theories and postmodern critical discourses catch on over a century and a half later, when imperial formations morph into their current avatars. Here too it is the comparative as a diagnostic sensibility and a performative intervention that mitigates the peril of this spectral implosion. For Herder, whose notion of "radical difference" is often misread as precluding the comparative in deference to each nation's incomparable standard of perfection, would also write a seminal essay in 1797 whose incomparably comparative title speaks for itself: "Results of a Comparison of Different Peoples' Poetry in Ancient and Modern Times." And, with the results of his comparison, Herder preemptively contravenes the statist privilege in the production of history and its prose articulated by Hegel, his wayward philosophical epigone, some twenty-five years later in Hegel's formulation of *Weltgeschichte*, or "world history" (*Lectures*, esp. 42). Herder's would-be comparative preemption, if we may term it such, would foreclose the implosion of *literary history* into pleonasm, or, as already noted, into solipsistic tautology. Herder's comparison, in short, could serve as a safeguard against the slippage of world literature and its history into the Hegelian construct of world history, born of the self-privileging and state-centered productions of historiographical narrative. Hegel's self-serving philosophical position, as history amply demonstrates, has been eminently redeployable for the hegemonic ends of empire and colonization. Ranajit Guha points out that as far as the imperial and colonizing states were concerned, "the past of 'historyless' people they had conquered proved," in its "statelessness," to be "useful in their attempt to convert conquest into rulership" (44). Writing a quarter century before Hegel's *Lectures*, and though his lesson on comparisons would go astray in Hegel, Herder considered literature mobile, mutable, and transformative. And he also saw the need for any historicization of and theorization on literature to follow suit in their discursive motility as they comparatively tracked those morphing correlations:

> As nations migrate, as languages mingle and change, as new matters stir men, as their inclinations take another direction and their endeavors another aim, as new models influence their composition of images and concepts, even as the tongue, this little limb, moves differently and the ear gets used to different sounds: thus the art of poetry changes not only among different nations, but also within one people. (4)

Implicit in Herder's comparatistic diagnosis of "national poetry," which we can take to mean national literature in general, is an admonitory challenge to the mythographers of national identities and to those historiographers that would historicize the constructions of "radical difference" into incomparable stereotypes and essentialist national literary histories. The unremitting metamorphoses of literary cultures and the transformative contingencies inherent to the perennial refashioning portrayed in Herder's discernment would have the comparative parsing of radical differences consider the identities constructed on such differences as something other than reified fetishes of authenticity, or "marvelous possessions," in Stephen Greenblatt's titular phrase. The comparative logic implicit in Herder's admonition would have literary history be wary of the danger of taking other cultures as anthropological hieroglyphs for a historiography that confers history, and a hegemonically serviceable history at that, on a people deemed historyless. Early European modernity's greatest imperial project, in the American New World, proved paradigmatic of hegemony's perception of its world history as a divine dispensation, justly universal and thereby justified in transforming the "people without a history" into an archaic antecedent or a recrudescent appendage of itself, as I have pointed out at greater length elsewhere (*Columbus*).

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Comparative Inevitability

Like literary history, comparison may not be a logical necessity. Human history demonstrates, however, that both are inevitable. Seeking out what has been in order to satisfy the irrepressible human impulse to understand what is and what might become may be the most elemental definition of history, including literary history. The pursuit of understanding invariably occurs through contrastive correlation and comparative differentiation, processes that define the labors of comparison, including the epistemologies of comparative literature. This juncture, where historicization and comparison intersect, we tend to identify as a scene of *recognition*, a dialectical site where contrapuntal elements encounter each other and recognize themselves in the other.

Recognition is a crucial moment when epistemology, ethics, valuation, and communication come into conjunction and enjoin us to sort them out. When the imperative for that limning is overlooked or elided, unconscious determinants such as ideology, prejudice, or reflexive impulse govern knowing and discernment instead. Which is not to say that mindfulness and deliberateness are immune from preformed and habitual factors that prove determinative, despite one's best intentions and most honed consciousness. In this sense, all recognition is said to be unavoidably *misrecognition*, a predicament literary vocation and critical practice have long realized and dramatized, especially when seeking to diagnose the three R's of the comparative process I am alluding to here—*recognition*, *representation*, *redistribution*.

Chapter 4, A–B, of Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* remains the locus classicus on recognition. Along with Guha's already cited text, the work of the contemporary philosopher Nancy Fraser may be the most serviceable exegesis and updating of Hegel's concept in its relevance to our modern world (*Adding*; *Justice*; *Scales*). Key to an understanding of recognition in the context of the comparative is the mutual implication of subjects and the alternating positionality of the principals engaged in the process. This engagement is certainly asymmetrical. But recent scholarly discourse seems to have overlooked the fact that in the 1807 treatise, where Hegel lays out the dynamics of recognition, the human subjects must alternate between the positions of master and mastered for the mutuality of their engagement to be realized. Hegel himself may be partly responsible for this oversight through his later work that drifted toward a transhistorical, universal normativity that contributed recursively to the freezing of this alternation, thereby rendering the dynamic relationship between subjects hypostatically hierarchical. The comparative dynamic remains as a residual supplement even in that devolved, transhistorical normativity, however, and this energetic vestige continues to resonate with redemptive vigor in an otherwise static and statist totalization where recognition yields to the derogation of any alterity and to the elision or outright erasure of all alternative histories that are not state-engendered. World history as achieved in this presumptively universal process emerges as the counterpart to world literature, which, unlike world history, is worldly by virtue of the irrepressibly comparative dynamic that inexorably pluralizes *world* as a qualifier, a verb, and an object predicate of literary production and theoretical-critical analysis, as I have discussed variously elsewhere (*Memos*; "To Compare"; "To World").

Modern historiography injects a compounded correlation and a differential counterpoint into its narrative sensibility. These complexities have always been integral to the comparisons of comparative literature and to its disciplinary protocols. The metahistoriographical turn I refer to here extends most illustratively from Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) to Constantin Fasolt's *The Limits of His-*

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tory (2004). The first lays bare the emplotments of historical narrative by drawing on formalist and structuralist notions of constructedness alembicated in the work of mid-twentieth-century political philosophers and contextualist historians such as Quentin Skinner. Fasolt reaches back to the speech-act theory of linguists such as J. L. Austin to complicate the constitutive narrative emplotments descried by White, casting the performative dimension of history's narrative as a speech act possessed simultaneously of locutionary and of illocutionary significance. This continuous self-divergence has been part and parcel of comparative discernment in literary comparison, and, like those metahistoriographical processes, the dialectical recognition articulated by Hegel in his early Herderian phase morphs into what comparatists recognize as the dialogic heteroglossia defined by philologists and literary historians such as Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1930s and characterized as contrapuntal consciousness by Edward Said in the 1990s.

The heterotopic counterpoint implicit in this dialogue unwinds in our current critical discourses into several strands, albeit dialectically entwined. One of these is forcefully articulate in the reflections of the postcolonial critic R. Radhakrishnan. Another is symptomatically illustrative in the work of the poetry critic Charles Altieri. And yet a third strand is limned by the intellectual historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. I shall refer briefly to a 2009 essay of Radhakrishnan's ("Why Compare?") and to a 2012 essay of Altieri's ("What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry"). Both essays appeared in the journal *New Literary History*. Chakrabarty lays out a third position in his 2009 essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses," on which he elaborates in a more recent article titled "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change" (2012). We have in the counterpoint among these critical positions a cautionary tale on the comparative. To the degree that they are ideologically and historically determined by their particular discursive formations, more than comparative, these positions become comparable instances in the intricate relation between the analytic strategies of critical discourse and literary history. Within the space limitations of this essay, I can only outline this telling triangulation and the polyphony resonating within it of, on the one hand, the comparative as a diagnostic endeavor and, on the other, literary history as a cultural practice.

Taken as one part of a triple strand that binds discursive formations at any moment into what Jacques Rancière calls "a regime of representation" (29), each of these representative threads weaves a patch across a number of contemporary critical and historiographical discourses. Their relations to the comparative are by no means unproblematic. Starting with the title of his piece and the premise that "comparisons are never disinterested" (454), Radhakrishnan offers comparatists a most trenchant series of questions—"what is comparative humanity and how did humanity get comparative?" (455); "is there anything intrinsic in A that is desperately calling out to be compared with B, or is the comparison intuited gratuitously by an observant scholar who feels that there is something to be gained, by all, through the act of comparison?" (456); "what is at stake in the comparison, and who will benefit from the comparative performance? How does comparatism as pedagogy and methodology create its own epistemological object as subject and within what parameters of normativity?" (458). Radhakrishnan's brilliant maieutic delivery founders, however, on its own parameters of normativity, imploding into the putative comparatist's own subject identity—grammatical and epistemic—as an object of critique or into a wayward crossing of the categories of rights-bearing subjects and objects of comparison. Thus, when aptly adducing Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's "comparative humanist gesture" toward Africa (458), among

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other critical junctures of the comparative in literary history, Radhakrishnan overlooks the fact that neither novelist is a comparatist. Rather, as novelists they are both comparable epiphenomena of colonialism. On Saul Bellow's "egregious example compar[ing] the complexity of Leo Tolstoy with the richness of Zulu culture" (458), Radhakrishnan elides the fact that Bellow in his tendentious query, emanating from an imperial locus, is himself a symptomatic element that begs for comparison. And in noting that in *A Passage to India* "Forster's allegory remains trapped within the colonial imaginary and its mode of recognition and reciprocity" (469), Radhakrishnan disregards the fact that the allegory in question is not Forster's own but is his novel's narrative means of dramatizing the entrapments of the colonial imaginary.

Altieri offers another instance of the current vexed relation between the comparative and literary history. In his eloquent advocacy of textual-rhetorical "close reading," a reaction, in part, to world-systems-theory-based "distant reading," Altieri seeks to recuperate what he terms a rhetorical exemplarity of poetic acts by recourse to "demonstrative speech acts." They are, he says, in lieu of performative speech acts that divert attention from the rhetoricity and the rhetorical ideals that have taken us away from "the pleasures of aesthetic contemplation." His aim is to honor "the presentational, antimimetic ideals fundamental to modernist values" (66). Laudable as the intended project may be, its modernist inheritance occludes a formalism that blinds Altieri to the illocutionary significance of his demonstrative, locutionary speech acts. The result is that his acts turn away from historicity and literary history and retreat into a formalist self-centeredness that honors the autotelic métier of high modernism, its self-perceived autonomous incomparability and vocation, as the standard for poetic attainment. The illocutionary dimension of Altieri's performance unintentionally demonstrates its own exemplariness. "Exemplification" emerges as an endogenous repertoire, and "[l]iterary history, then, becomes in part the tracing of how authors establish styles as examples by modifying previous examples and trusting in their own technical innovations" (79). The critic and literary historian, instead of becoming entangled in the messiness of performativity and the comparative entailments of poetry's historical squalor, is enjoined to follow Altieri's example and "approach our modernist heritage somewhat differently: we can examine for their rhetorical force even the decisions sponsored by the efforts to purify the rhetoric of the tribe" (81). Thus, incomparably pure and unsullied by history, except its own, the tribe can give itself over to its poetry, which he defines as "that aspect of rhetorical practice that invites us to 'see in' to the minute particulars of expressive activity. . . . Education into 'seeing-in' enriches our possibilities for 'seeing as,' and thus for sorting what matters to us in the circumstances we deem relevant" (85). Absent the comparative, all recognition, then, devolves into self-recognition in the purified rhetoric of the tribe and in the pellucid mirror of the self, in which the tribal acquires universality. The margin between this exemplarity and the Whitmanian superlative becomes razor thin and the self-elevation to a supreme fiction an inevitability, especially when such neo-modernist "demonstration" neglects to recall the cautionary circumspection of one of the greatest modernists, Wallace Stevens, and his intricate evasions of as, in any idea of order, in any key.

In the face of such modernist self-seizure, Chakrabarty's ideas on species self-recognition prove most urgent. Given the devolution on the self in a neo-imperial era, it is not surprising that his keenness should alert us to the comparative in the self. Chakrabarty refers to what science calls the "Anthropocene Age," a "new geological era" ("Climate" 207–20; "Postcolonial Studies" 9), in which he urges on us a new cognizance

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of the comparative based on Homi Bhabha's Herderian reformulation—"the difference within" (Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies" 6). As the survival of the species is put in play, Chakrabarty sees the need for a comparative sensibility that can differentiate between human agency and the human as a geophysical force affecting the survivability of the planet. Although much of humanity's literary production and literary history dramatizes recognition and self-reflexivity, species self-recognition has historically not been a strong suit of *homo academicus* or of *homo philosophicus*, as the futility of Kant's effort to devise an anthropology attests. The best we can achieve as anthropological self-difference, Kant admits in 1798, is "anthropology from a pragmatic point of view." Finding even that pragmatic modality as a species at history's edge of survival now may well depend on our capability to muster the possibilities of the comparative in our poems and our climate.

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