theories and methodologies

Comparative Literature?

DAVID DAMROSCH

IN RECENT YEARS, NORTH AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES HAS BEEN MARKED BY A DOUBLE MOVEMENT: OUTWARD FROM THE Euro-American sphere toward the entire globe and inward within national traditions, in an intensified engagement with local cultures and subcultures. Both directions might seem natural stimuli to comparative study—most obviously in the transnational frame of global studies but also in more local comparisons: a natural way to understand the distinctiveness of a given culture, after all, is to compare it with and contrast it to others. Yet journal articles and job listings alike have not shown any major growth in comparative emphasis in recent years. Is the comparatist doomed to irrelevance, less equipped than the national specialist for local study and yet finding the literary globe expanding farther and farther out of reach, accessible only to a multitude of, again, local specialists?

The specter of amateurism haunts comparative literature today. As formalist approaches have waned, scholars have found so much to learn about the full outlines of individual cultures that they have often preferred delving deeply into one time and place over pursuing broad-based comparisons. For much of the twentieth century, comparatists staked out a distinct middle ground in between the national literatures and the vast space of the full globe, most often concentrating on the major literary traditions of western Europe as a graspable ground of international comparison. As literary studies has begun to wake from its long Eurocentric slumber, though, this middle ground has faded in importance, as has comparative literature's related advantage since the 1970s in the import-export trade in European literary theory. Today much theory is homegrown, and "traveling theory" circulates largely in translation, its concepts and texts seemingly usable without special regard to their time and place of origin, thereby undercutting a special role for comparative literature in theoretical work (Said, "Travelling Theory" and "Travelling Theory Reconsidered").

In principle, the growing emphasis on world literature provides a new venue for comparative study. Yet postcolonial and global studies today—focusing on issues of transmission and adaptation within a linguistic network like those of francophone or global English literature—are often

DAVID DAMROSCH is professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and president of the American Comparative Literature Association. He is the author of *The Narrative Covenant* (Harper, 1987), *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Harvard UP, 1995), *Meetings of the Mind* (Princeton UP, 2000), and *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton UP, forthcoming) and of articles on ancient, medieval, and modern literature and theory. He is also the general editor of *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* (2nd ed., 2002) and of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (forthcoming).

© 2003 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X67712 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hardly less monolingual than most studies of national traditions. Literatures outside the major colonial traditions continue to be studied mostly by specialists who have devoted decades to their chosen languages and cultures. Excellent comparative work is being done in such areas (e.g., Sheldon Pollock on Indian vernaculars and Steven Venturino on Tibetan postmodernism), and yet such venturesome work is still the exception rather than the rule, and it underscores the difficulty of doing serious work on a truly global basis. Lacking a deep knowledge of more than a few cultures, are comparatists constrained either to stay within a limited range of material or to succumb to a kind of scholarly tourism? The prominent comparatist A. Owen Aldridge used this analogy quite positively twenty years ago:

> In the days of exploration, it would have been impossible for any single European navigator to cover in a lifetime the entire geographic expanse of the two American continents, but in the twentieth century any tourist can visit by jet airplane all of the major centers of population in three or four months. We may hope for a similar future progress toward universal coverage in the study of literature. (1)

We need a better model today than literary jet-setting if we are to develop comparative studies adequate to the scope of the materials now available for comparison. Comparative literature can thrive in the coming years, but only through a renewed engagement with national traditions and with global contexts. Here I will discuss our problems and our options under three rubrics: national internationalism, cultural translation, and specialized generalism.

National Internationalism

As a discipline, comparative literature arose in a kind of competitive symbiosis with the nationalisms dominant in nineteenth-century Europe. While some comparatists studied the interactions of national traditions, others saw the nation-state as destined, like capitalism, to wither away in a few decades. This is the perspective that Marx and Engels endorsed in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1847, where they followed Goethe in proclaiming the rise of world literature as the cultural mirror of a postnational world:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (421)

The seductive lure of "intercourse in every direction" became the norm in postwar America. The comparatists of the 1950s saw the field of world literature as the grand successor to "the nationalistic heresy," as Albert Guérard put it in a lead article in the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* in 1958. Looking ahead to European unification, Guérard anticipated that "Comparative Literature will disappear in its very victory; just as 'foreign trade' between France and Germany will disappear in the Common Market; just as the 'foreign relations' between these two countries will be absorbed by a common parliament" (4). For Guérard, the overriding question in 1958 was, "How and when shall we commit suicide?" His answer: "Not just yet: we are needed so long as the nationalistic heresy has not been extirpated" (5).

We can no longer proceed as though this heresy is about to disappear. The European Parliament in Brussels is unlikely to supplant Europe's national governments during our lifetimes, and in an academic context the great majority of

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X67712 Published online by Cambridge University Press

teachers and scholars of literature continue to be based in departments organized along national lines. What does the ongoing vitality of national literary traditions mean for the understanding of world literature? Much recent literary study, inspired by figures like Foucault and Said, takes a dim view of nationalist ideologies and imperial enterprises, and yet in an odd way the critique of nationalism has turned out to coexist comfortably with a continuing nationalism in academic practice. The more one needs to know, say, about the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James I to understand Shakespeare, the less time one has available to learn about the cultural underpinnings of French drama or Greek tragedy, and one tends to downplay what one doesn't know.

Moving beyond a regionally linked set of traditions is harder still. The more committed today's Shakespeareans become to understanding literature within cultural context—at times, almost as a function of cultural context—the less likely they are to feel comfortable in comparing Shakespeare and Kalidasa. Indeed, even in a single region a range of disparate literatures can seem too daunting to tackle. Several years ago I was on a search committee looking to hire a medievalist; one of the hottest topics we found among our applications was the origins of nationalism in the medieval kingdoms that were struggling for mastery in the British Isles. The several writing samples on aspects of this theme all took a critical attitude toward the efforts of the Anglo-Saxons and then Anglo-Normans to promote themselves culturally and extend their sway politically, and yet none of these scholars was doing any work in Irish or Welsh literature. Not on principle, no doubt, since the richness of both traditions in the medieval period is widely recognized: the medievalists simply had not had time to learn those languages along with everything else they were studying. Instead of including material they could read only in translation and without a close cultural knowledge, they left it out of account altogether. Yet works like the Irish *Táin* and the Welsh *Mabinogi* are full of interest for explorations of cultural identity, while poets like Dafydd ap Gwilym have fascinating satirical things to say about Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Normans alike. Deconstructing nationalism in theory, these medievalists had succumbed to it in practice.

The point of this example is a double one: more than ever, serious study of national traditions can benefit from a multilingual and comparative perspective; conversely, comparative study must engage directly and affirmatively with national traditions, which are hardly about to wither away. Nationalism and internationalism are inextricably intertwined today, to their mutual benefit.

Cultural Translation

Throughout the twentieth century, comparatists tended to assume that nations were ephemeral but languages were eternal. Though nineteenth-century scholars like Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett had often worked comfortably in translation, comparative literature consolidated its base institutionally around romance philology and comparable fields of study, like classics and East Asian studies. As a result, translated works were no longer thought to be available as objects for scholarly study, and comparatists perforce neglected what they could not read in the original. Comparative study became institutionally bifurcated: world literature might be taught in translation to undergraduates, but graduate students and scholars were expected to focus on what they could read in the original. Adventurous people might venture beyond the boundaries of western Europe, into Slavic studies or "East-West" comparative studies, but any given scholar's range was sharply delimited by whatever languages there was "world enough and time" to study, to recall the line from Marvell that Erich Auerbach used as his regretful epigraph to *Mimesis*.

To thrive today, comparative study must embrace translation far more actively than it did during the past century. We can study texts fruitfully in good translations so long as we attend to

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X67712 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the cultural contexts from which they come. An older comparatism often centered on philologically based modes of interpretation, such as that advocated by Leo Spitzer in *Linguistics and Literary History*. Yet the insights that Auerbach and Spitzer gleaned from evidence like unusual turns of phrase or patterns of assonance can often be gained at other levels of a text as well. Kafka's haunting ironies play out in sentence structures that do not always translate well, yet "the Kafkaesque" is fully visible in translation at the levels of the paragraph and of the scene.

Translation can thus be used actively for comparative study, but it should also be used critically, drawing on the work of contemporary translation theorists who study language as part of a broad examination of cultural translation. A notable example of such an approach is the pathbreaking work of Lawrence Venuti, closely attentive to relations of power and influence between "source" and "target" cultures. Relatedly, Natalie Melas's forthcoming book, *All the Difference in the World*, admirably connects comparative and postcolonial studies, through a joint examination of issues of cultural translation in early comparatists like Charles Mills Gayley and in the contemporary Caribbean writer and theorist Edouard Glissant.

Specialized Generalism

The impulse to do comparative work remains, as it has always been, a generalizing one: to look beyond a single context or tradition. Often in the past, though, generalists operated at a high level of cultural abstraction, taking little or no note of local research on works and on their cultures of origin. Theorists like Northrop Frye and Roland Barthes typically made little reference to specialized scholarship as they developed their elegant theories in works like *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. At the end of *Mimesis*, Auerbach confesses his positive relief that working in Istanbul during the war had cut him off from "technical literature and periodicals." He says, "If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing" (557). Well, yes, but would he have had to read *all* the scholarship ever written on his chosen works to use any of it? His arguments could have gained in depth if he had consulted a good selection of the specialized literature, either during the war, when he was in Istanbul, with its extensive library, or after the war, when he could have revised his manuscript at any library of his choice.

A comparatist has much to gain from an active engagement with specialized knowledge, but this is not to say that a comparative work should simply be the sum total of a set of specialized studies. On the contrary, a comparatist needs to use the specialized literature selectively, with a kind of scholarly tact. When our purpose is not to delve into a culture in detail, the reader and even the work may benefit by being spared the full force of our local knowledge. Such selectivity should yield something other than a reduction from the plenitude of specialized studies. Intimately aware of a work's life at home, the specialist is not always in the best position to assess the dramatically different terms on which a text may work in a distant culture or a new theoretical framework. Looking at such new contexts, the generalist will find that much of the specialist's information about the work's origins is no longer relevant and not only can but should be set aside. At the same time, any work that has not been wholly assimilated to its new context will still carry with it many elements that can best be understood through an exploration of why they came to be there in the first place. The specialist's knowledge is the major safeguard against the generalist's will to power over texts that otherwise all too easily become grist for the mill of a preformed historical argument or theoretical system.

When I distinguish specialists from generalists, I mean to characterize approaches rather than individuals. Anyone can be a specialist

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X67712 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in some areas and a generalist in others. When we use a generalist approach, we should not cast off our specialist selves—or our specialist colleagues. Instead, the generalist has the same ethical responsibility toward specialized scholarship that a translator has toward a text's original language: to present the work effectively in its new cultural or theoretical context while at the same time fundamentally getting it right with reference to the source culture. Too often, a generalist who alludes dismissively to the narrow-minded concerns of specialists will merely end up retailing a warmed-over version of what specialists were saying a generation earlier. Generalists have much to learn from specialists and should always try to build honestly, though selectively, on the specialists' understandings, ideally even inspiring the specialists to revise their understandings in turn.

Comparative study today is becoming as concerned with national as with international contexts, as involved with translations as with original texts, and as connected to specialized scholarship as to general approaches. Comparative literature is experiencing the excitement of a newly global possibility, while at the same time it can continue to exert a leavening influence on nationally based and specialized study. Comparative literature? Absolutely!

Works Cited

Aldridge, A. Owen. "East/West Comparative Literature: An Inquiry into Possibilities." *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Theory and Strategy*. Ed. John J. Deeney. Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 1980. 1–24.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953.

Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill, 1976.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.

Gayley, Charles Mills. "What Is Comparative Literature?" 1903. *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*. Ed. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1973. 85–103.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989.

Guérard, Albert. "Comparative Literature?" *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 7 (1958): 1–6.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Trans. Samuel Moore. *Marx*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952. 415–34. Vol. 50 of *Great Books of the Western World*.

Melas, Natalie. *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*. Stanford: Stanford UP, forthcoming.

Pollock, Sheldon. "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular." *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 6–37.

Posnett, Hutcheson Macaulay. *Comparative Literature*. London: K. Paul, Trench, 1886. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970.

Said, Edward W. "Travelling Theory." *Raritan* 1.3 (1982): 41–67.

———. "Travelling Theory Reconsidered." *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction to Life*. Ed. Robert M. Polhemus and Roger B. Henkle. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. 251–65.

Spitzer, Leo. *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1948.

Venturino, Steven. "Reading Negotiations in the Tibetan Diaspora." *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Frank J. Koram. Quebec: World Heritage, 1997. 98–121.

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge, 1998.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X67712 Published online by Cambridge University Press