theories and methodologies

Global Comparatism and the Question of Language

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AS SHE STRUGGLES TO GET HER BEARINGS IN THE SUBTERRANEAN WORLD OF WONDERLAND, A DISORIENTED ALICE FINDS THAT THE ACT of fanning herself or eating a cake has become uncanny; instead of refreshing her and lifting her spirits, the items she encounters alternately telescope her body, nearly breaking her neck, and shrink her down toward the point of nonexistence. At least Alice experienced these dizzying changes sequentially; her scholarly successors in comparative literature are not so lucky. We find ourselves caught in the turmoil of a field that is exploding to global proportions even as enrollments shrink to levels not seen for half a century, putting severe downward pressure on faculty size, and no helpful mushroom is at hand to help us achieve a stable comfort level. Our inability to encompass the world by adding a wealth of new hires is a practical problem with theoretical consequences. Traditionally focused on the relations of a few literary "great powers," our discipline increasingly needs to take into account a much wider range of cultures, and of languages, than ever before. If we wish to respond to the opportunities and the challenges offered to comparatism by globalization, we will need to rethink our relation to the national languages and literatures that have long been the focus of comparative study.

Since its inception in the late eighteenth century, comparative literature has often seen its mission as the reframing of the nation. In a world—and, particularly, a Europe—torn apart by nationalist conflicts, comparatists from Germaine de Staël and Johann Gottfried Herder to Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach shared the goal of fostering mutual understanding and international exchange across the Rhine and the English Channel. This is the clear political agenda, for example, of Ernst Robert Curtius's magnum opus of the war years, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948). As Curtius remarked in his preface to the book's English translation, "After the war of 1914–18 I saw it as my task to make modern France understood in Germany," a task that took on renewed urgency after "the German catastrophe" of 1933–45. "What I have said," Curtius con-

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tinues, "will make it clear that my book is not the product of purely scholarly interests, that it grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture" (vii–viii).

If scholars like Curtius sought to harmonize relations among nations and their literatures, more expansive comparatists looked forward to the withering away of the nation-state itself. In a 1958 article entitled "Comparative Literature?" Albert Guérard offered an analogy to Europe's impending economic unification. He predicted 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). Unable to anticipate the simmering tensions of today's eurozone, Guérard considered that the overriding question for comparatists 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).

Guérard's religiously freighted language expresses the passive-aggressive attitude of many mid-century comparatists toward the national literatures. The 1975 report of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) on the state of the discipline dutifully emphasized that "any Comparative Literature program must depend heavily on its neighboring departments of national literatures" (Greene et al. 32), and yet comparatists often saw the national traditions as the limited bases on which to build the ambitious structures of more sophisticated comparative and theoretical analysis. The report's author, Thomas M. Greene, begins by stating that the rising discipline "was dedicated to high goals" in the postwar era: "It wanted to stand, and in large part did stand, for a new internationalism: for broader perspectives on works and authors, for a European grasp of historical movements, for larger contexts in the tracking of motifs, themes, and types as well as larger understandings of genres and modes." By implication, the merely national specialist is mired in an older nationalism, hemmed in by narrower perspectives, and confined to more limited contexts yielding less sophisticated understandings. Little wonder that not every national literature specialist embraced "this vision of a fresh and central academic discipline," even if it was "ambitious in the noblest sense" (28).

The specialists responded with charges of amateurism and superficiality, to which the principled comparatist could reply by proposing a mutually productive symbiosis; far from denying the value of the national traditions, comparative literature set them in a glittering international frame, while meeting the national specialists on the common ground of native or near-native fluency in the languages needed for the comparison. Language was key to this line of defense, not only to justify the existence of comparative literature as a separate discipline but also as the basis for a territorial accommodation with the national literature departments. Fortified with their cosmopolitan multilingualism, comparatists could make connections across linguistic borders far better than the typical North American professor of French or Italian, who might have at best a shaky grasp of German or classical Greek, but at the same time the practitioners of the new discipline tacitly agreed to avoid directly trespassing on their rivals' linguistic home turf. This division of academic territory meant that comparatists almost always worked across linguistic as well as national borders, ceding to national literature specialists their long-held primacy in their "national language" of choice, even when that language was spoken in various nations. So a dissertation in comparative literature could readily be written on Kafka, Proust, and Joyce but not Kafka, Mann, and Schnitzler, a grouping that would be left in the purview of the national literature specialists despite the equally international quality of the comparison.

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The time has come to revisit this all-too-neat division of territory. The one-to-one identification of nation and language was almost always a fiction, and it is becoming more and more tenuous, even in the case of many small countries with a national language rarely spoken beyond their borders. A full view of Israeli literature should include writing in Yiddish and Arabic as well as Hebrew, and Romanian literature should include the work of Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco in French, of Andrei Codrescu in English, and of the Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller in German. A multilingual comparative study can therefore concern writers from a single country. Conversely, because widespread languages such as Arabic, English, and Portuguese are international, a comparative study can encompass works written in the same language but in multiple countries or on multiple continents.

Throughout the twentieth century, comparatists staked out their linguistic ground at a defensible middle range: comparatists would work in more languages than national literature specialists—but not *too many* more. Only the three or four languages an individual could more or less master would be required; and, to a great extent, the languages of comparison were selected from a small group of major literary powers, predominantly those of western Europe. When the bulk of comparative work was being done on German, French, English, Italian, and Spanish literatures, supplemented by texts from classical Greece and Rome and from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia, a polymath such as René Wellek could achieve a solid command of all the languages that most comparatists would ever need. His lack of Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi was no more a detriment to his work than his native fluency in Czech was a benefit for his studies of Croce's aesthetics or of Kant in England or for his history of the Romantic age (1955), which dealt solely with Germany, France, Italy, and England. Notably, when Wellek gave a lecture in 1963 entitled "Czech Literature at the Crossroads of Europe," it was delivered not at a comparative literature conference but at a meeting of the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences (*Czech Literature*).

By 1975 Greene was aware of the challenges posed for the discipline by the rising tide of globalization: if the discipline's high goal really was to seek broader perspectives and more general understandings, why stop at the borders of western or even eastern Europe? As he noted with evident unease:

> There has also arisen widespread and growing interest in the non-European literatures—Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and many others less familiar. . . . A new vision of *global* literature is emerging, embracing all the verbal creativity during the history of our planet, a vision which will soon begin to make our comfortable European perspectives parochial. Few Comparatists, few scholars anywhere, are prepared for the dizzying implications of this widening of horizons, but they cannot be ignored. (Greene et al. 30)

Hoist by its own petard, the discipline was finding itself vulnerable to the very charges of narrowness and parochialism that it had been accustomed to level against the national literature specialists. The novelty of this situation is signaled by Greene's use of italics to designate the new vision of "*global* literature," and yet Greene wasn't questioning the value of embracing the world's verbal creativity; he simply couldn't reconcile such a project to his commitment to engaging with works in the original languages and with literary relations in a common cultural tradition.

As a specialist in Renaissance poetry, Greene had little interest in universal narrative patterns that might be traced across the world's cultures, whether the Jungian cycles evoked by Northrop Frye or the quasi-Platonic "invariants" championed by the Sorbonne's René Étiemble. Instead, his readings

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of Renaissance *imitatio* depended on years of intensive engagement with the verbal texture of poems by Petrarch, Ronsard, Wyatt, and their Latin forebears, sonnet by sonnet, line by line, and word by word. Working in the four languages he knew well and focusing throughout his career on a single literary period, Greene entered as fully into his poets' world as any national literature specialist could require. In a graduate seminar on Renaissance lyric, which I happened to take in the year after the publication of his ACLA report, Greene remarked one day, apropos of a line in Ronsard, that "I never thought about this the first fifty or so times I read this poem, but now I see it differently. . . ." What could be the benefit of a less intimate linguistic and literary-historical relation to one's objects of study? Years later Greene contributed an essay to the collection *Reading World Literature*, edited by his former student Sarah Lawall, who was soon to become the editor who expanded *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* far beyond its European base. His title? "Misunderstanding Poetry: Teaching outside the Western Canon."

Since the mid-1990s a growing number of comparatists have sought to move past the major-power parochialism of traditional comparatism: a laudable goal, but how are we to achieve it? No scholar can master the dozens of languages represented in our greatly expanded world-literature anthologies, and if no comparative literature department can hire enough new faculty members to embrace a truly global range of languages, what role can classic, philologically based comparison have in the brave new world of world literature? Too often the answer appears to be: none. North American departments and programs of comparative literature remain dominated by specialists in the traditionally favored few languages, modestly enlarged by a growing number of Arabists and sinologists, but at the great majority of colleges and universities the "less commonly taught languages" are studied—if at all—in area studies programs. World literature as a course of study has long been concentrated in low-level undergraduate survey courses taught almost entirely in translation, often by faculty members in English departments. Tellingly, the MLA *Job Information List* gives *world literature* as a search category in its English edition but not in its foreign language edition. A keyword search for *world literature* did turn up a handful of results in the 2012 foreign language edition, but usually only as one among several optional secondary fields mentioned in descriptions of French or Spanish positions.

One response to the problem of language is to give up our philological ambitions and to rely purely on translation. This approach is found not only in many introductory survey courses but also in Franco Moretti's scholarly program of "distant reading." In his widely cited 2004 article "Conjectures on World Literature," Moretti recommends that we rely on secondary sources such as literary histories and publication statistics to chart the global flow of the novel—a perspective that he advances as the best if not the only way to break through the philological impasse: "Many people have read more and better than I have, of course, but still, we are talking of hundreds of languages and literatures here. . . . But I actually think that it's our greatest chance, because the sheer enormity of the task makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different" (149).

Moretti is right that we have to do things differently today; the limits of individual capacity, and equally of departmental budgets, mean that we can't simply expand our familiar methods to a global scale. Yet the differential nature of a global perspective need not entail an abandonment of the philological grounding of classic comparative literature. Still less has globalization produced the withering away of "the nationalistic heresy" that Guérard anticipated with such suicidal

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bonhomie. On the contrary, rather than an opposition between comparatists and globalists, we need an interanimation of comparative and worldly perspectives: a newly ambitious engagement with "national" languages and with the idea of national literature itself that reframes both concepts in global terms. Comparison across linguistic and national boundaries is fundamental to the study of world literature; without a nuanced assessment of the interplay of similarity and difference, literary study loses its grounding in time, place, and language. But a global comparison today can well take place across either national *or* linguistic boundaries and need not always cross both kinds of border at once.

Whereas classic comparative literature made as little use as possible of translation, we now see an increasing focus on the global circulation of works in translation. Such an emphasis can rightly be criticized when it involves surrendering to the convenience of working in English translation, and yet the best work on translation today is far more philologically ambitious and conceptually interesting. Though such study seemed to Wellek a distinctly secondary concern—merely "the foreign trade of literature," as he once dismissively declared ("Crisis" 283)—we have much to learn from detailed study of the transformations a work undergoes as it moves to distant parts of the globe. This may entail a shift in language as well as region. Both are involved, for instance, in Ronit Ricci's luminous book *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (2011). Ricci traces the fortunes of a seminal tenth-century conversion narrative, the *Kitāb masāʾil ʿAbdullāh Bin Salām*, or *Book of One Thousand Questions*, as it was translated and adapted from Arabic into Javanese, Malay, and Tamil. Employing a sophisticated adaptation of Sheldon Pollock's conception of a "Sanskrit cosmopolis," Ricci offers a genuinely global view of premodern world literature, rooted not in European imperialism or in the modern economic world system but in the Islamic world community.

Deeply sensitive to cultural and linguistic difference, Ricci is already alive to the challenge Emily Apter poses in her book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), in which she criticizes proponents of world literary study who rely on a too simple image of ready translatability, urging instead a close attention to the irreducible difference within as well as across languages. Working from a historical and cultural base very different from Apter's deconstructive Parisian-francophone perspective, Ricci begins her study with an incisive chapter titled "On 'Translation' and Its Untranslatability," noting that the term *translation* itself has no direct translation in the Southeast Asian languages at the heart of her study (31–65). Ricci's far-reaching inquiries involve work in primary or secondary sources in Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Indonesian, Javanese, Malay, Persian, Portuguese, and Tamil. The likelihood that Ricci doesn't possess near-native fluency in all these dozen languages points us to another aspect of global comparatism today: we need to study more languages than ever, but we don't have to match the fluency of the national or area specialist in them all. A sliding scale of linguistic knowledge across six or eight languages may serve us well, so long as we make the best use we can of the languages we've studied and respect the limitations of what we know.

While an advanced multilingualism is needed for some projects, a global comparison can follow a single work in a global language in multiple contexts. Consider *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), by the Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu. A Tibetan exile who grew up in northern India, Norbu has long been active in the struggle for Tibetan independence from China. Hoping to expand awareness in India and abroad, he decided to write his book in the global medium of English and to

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take advantage of the worldwide popularity of the detective story. His sparkling pastiche was inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle, who—when he brings Sherlock Holmes back to life two years after Moriarty supposedly murdered him at the Reichenbach Falls—has Holmes explain his absence by telling Watson that he traveled to Tibet and met the grand lama. Norbu tells the tale of these missing years, in a comic mash-up of Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling, using as his narrator and substitute Watson a secondary character in Kipling's *Kim*, the babu Hurree Chunder Mookherjee.

Neither published in Tibet nor written in Tibetan, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* is nonetheless a work of Tibetan literature, drawing deeply on Tibetan history and religion; Tibetan concepts of reincarnation play a central role in the story's denouement. Yet it is equally a work of Anglo-Indian literature (or Anglo-Indo-Tibetan literature, if there is such a category), first published in India, where it won a literary prize. It had an ambiguous reception in India, however, likely in part because Norbu shows deep affection for Kipling and has fun with the character of Hurree Chunder Mookherjee, who becomes in his account a shrewd manipulator of foreigners' racist stereotypes of the excitable Indian. In a preface, Norbu writes warmly of his early enjoyment of the works of such imperial writers as Kipling and Rider Haggard, who opened up to him a wider world beyond the constrained surroundings of his refugee community in Dharamsala. Whereas Indian intellectuals generally find Kipling's portrayal of Mookherjee painful reading, Norbu's concern isn't with the heritage of British imperialism but with Chinese encroachment in Tibet, and he was able to deploy his childhood love of Kipling and Conan Doyle for the sake of his cultural-political project, to impressive literary effect.

Banned in Tibet and out of print in India, Norbu's novel remains in print in England and the United States, where it is read by avid members of the Baker Street Irregulars (the informal society of Holmes devotees, to which Norbu proudly belongs) and by lovers of postmodern metafiction. In the United States alone the book has appeared in two guises, appropriately enough in view of its hero's fame as a master of disguise. It was first presented in 2000 as a work of Holmesiana under the title *Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years*, but it was reissued in 2003 under its original title, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*. Yet the restored title didn't involve a full-scale reorientation toward Tibetan authenticity. Instead of showing a Tibetan map or temple scene, like those on the covers of the French, German, and Spanish translations, the American reissue uses a cover illustration geared to a postmodern audience: Mark Tansey's 1990 painting *Derrida Queries de Man*, which depicts the great deconstructionists in the guise of Holmes and Moriarty wrestling on the narrow path above the Reichenbach Falls, the towering cliffs around them formed not of stone but of text. So the novel has had different lives, half-lives, and shadow lives just in English, and a proper study of *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* in "the original" should take into account its multiple avatars around the globe: a comparative project par excellence.

As we struggle with the challenges of incorporating more languages and more national traditions into our work, we should also open up new avenues of comparison within our putatively national languages and within the borders of the often multilingual nations we discuss. For the study of world literature today, we need a comparative English literature as much as we need a global comparative literature. Done well, comparative and world literary studies involve a constant interaction with each other, one that operates across and within national and linguistic borders alike. Today's scholarly Alice can have her cakes and read them too.

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