theories and methodologies

What Does the Comparative Do for Theory?

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TWO ARGUMENTS ABOUT THEORY AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE HAVE BEEN INFLUENTIAL IN RECENT YEARS. ON THE ONE HAND, THERE has been much talk of the "death of theory," or the "end of theory," or "post-theory" in the humanities. On the other hand, there is a "crisis" of comparative literature, perhaps a perennial condition, if it hasn't culminated in the "death of a discipline." Under these circumstances, the question "What does the comparative do for theory?" assumes a poignant significance, which depends on what is meant by "comparative" and "theory." To answer this question, I explore an epistemological category I call "comparativity"—that is, metacomparison or the theoretical potential of comparison—in contrast to the usual term "comparison." If there is a crisis of comparative literature, it may be because we have moved too far from thinking comparativity as a way of knowing and engaging the world. Epistemology does not precede ontology, or ethics, or politics, but it is deeply involved in all of them. In this paper, I will argue for comparativity as at once an epistemological and metaepistemological mode of inquiry. Comparativity cannot be displaced or replaced by another disciplinary way of thinking, for comparativity is a trans- and metadisciplinary thought process, which by virtue of its self-critical reflexivity applies to all humanistic studies. My focus is therefore on the theoretical implications of comparativity.

Comparative literature has been closely tied to what is called simply theory, or French theory, particularly in the United States (Cusset). From its origins, comparative literature has seemed to be theoretically engaged with the very notion of literature or "general literature." However, we need to distinguish between the concepts of general literature and comparative literature. If general literature is concerned with investigating and establishing a theoretically grounded poetics, comparative literature entails comparing with and against each other the cultural assumptions and presuppositions and modes of thinking embodied in literary as well as nonliterary works and practices. Comparative literature embraces a

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field much larger than literature, since it has a built-in extraliterary function. Against systematic ambitions of a comprehensive poetics of (general) literature, comparative literature probes the intellectual and cultural assumptions and presuppositions of literature and literary theory. Comparative literature is in this sense the self-understanding of (general) literature. It may lack an identifiable canon or clearly demarcated disciplinary objects, but it does not amount to an aggregate sense of the "great works" of world literature consisting of masterpieces of national literatures. Clearly, comparative and world literature overlap, but they are not the same. Comparativity does not just extend canonicity to previously excluded or neglected works and traditions (non-Western or otherwise), though that is an important undertaking. Nor is it just a space into which more works or traditions can be incorporated and where their similarities and differences can be plotted and appreciated.

Comparing and Theorizing: Metaepistemology

Theory is now routinely applied to diverse subject fields and approaches, indeed to every imaginable subject and approach, but I am not looking at the application of theory here. Rather, I am interested in pursuing the ontological and epistemological relations between comparing and theorizing. I would argue that comparing is to comparison as theorizing is to theory. Something in comparing, as in theorizing, differs from the result of its own operation—that is, a comparison or a theory. I am taking comparative literature in the broader sense, as an epistemological and metaepistemological way of thinking. As such, what is evoked under the name of comparative literature makes a unique contribution to our understanding of theory.[1]

Comparison in the usual sense is generally interested in the practical results of its operation—that is, similarities or differences—often conceived from an implicitly self-centered or superior viewpoint, whereas comparativity, or the activity of comparing or thinking about how (not) to compare, is more concerned with how similarities and differences come about in the first place. Comparativity is not just comparing "texts" but, more important, comparing modes of thinking, or comparing against them. The point is not (just) to produce more comparisons and interpretations but to think about what is entailed by making comparisons. Thus, comparativity produces a knowledge that differs from that which is produced in making more comparisons, in making more comparative juxtapositions of texts, whether thematic, generic, genetic, or contextual. Likewise, while a theoretical perspective cannot see and hence explain what it does not and cannot recognize, it can recognize and clarify the system of presuppositions that makes it possible. This recognition and clarification I call "metaepistemological."

In this sense, comparative literature is not about cultural difference and its history but about how difference can always be conceived differently. However, it is only a first step toward tearing apart stable or even fixed differences and identities. Difference is not enough, nor is similarity or sameness. Two things being compared are regulated by the comparison, not by their supposedly inherent qualities. While the point of a comparison would seem paradoxically to lie in accessing those qualities, the comparison can change them, or at least their perception. Distinctions do not precede our conceptual activity; rather, we make and do them. Comparing implies selecting, abstracting, and decontextualizing, as well as recontexualizing. Thus, comparativity is about what comparison can reveal and conceal. Comparativity has a built-in metadimension, a second-order reflexivity. Distinctions do not exist autonomously but are drawn by human beings and thus contingent on our focus, predisposition, and skill. Distinctions may be drawn differently by different cultures and by

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the same culture at different times. Recognition of this contingency of distinctions is already a second-order observation of different systems of observation and a willingness to be metacomparative. Comparativity allows us to make alternative distinctions. Its distinctions and viewpoints have their singular qualities and for all their contingency cannot be reduced to other distinctions and viewpoints. Comparativity thus entails and acknowledges the incomparable and the inaccessible. The idea of commensuration as implied in comparativity may create relations between objects or entities that are otherwise not obviously or directly connected. But commensuration does not create such connections through a putatively shared metric. It may seem that only the comparable can be compared. But the point is to compare the incomparable. How? Perhaps only by constructing what is comparable. Yet the incomparable remains beyond comparison. Comparativity may be incomparability and incommensurability by other means.

Comparative inquiry is thus metainquiry. However, even as comparing is theorizing, comparativity cannot be grounded theoretically. This is a limit not of comparativity but of theory. Comparativity means persistently generating a self-unsettling tension between our concepts and what they conceptualize. Theory is more like curiosity, an attitude toward things and people that generates open-minded and open-ended questions. An open-mindedness that can tolerate the complexities of reality and the ambiguities of things and people and of our ways of thinking about them. At the same time, the theoretical dimension of comparativity makes us realize that there is nothing superior or mysterious about being "meta." Meta does not imply one-upmanship. Theory as metatheory simply means an awareness that things and people don't quite fit our theories. There can be no clear-cut distinction between first-order comparing and second-order metacomparing. Comparing contains a self-reflection on the very point and process of comparing. Comparing or theorizing is an inescapable condition in which we always find ourselves entangled. Comparativity pertains to the ways in which the world discloses itself to us and reveals our fallibility and vulnerability as we try to access and engage the world. What remains and perhaps will remain unknown and unthought in the world cannot be fully or adequately brought out by comparing or theorizing. The unknown, or the not yet (fully) known, is the necessary postulate in intercultural comparison, translation, and exchange. Comparativity thus helps bring the world into focus for us and enacts new understandings of and new manners of understanding the world and ourselves.

Comparative Theory: Dynamic Virtuality

Comparativity enables us to see where the potential of theory is at work—that is, to see theory as intrinsically comparative. Theory's potential lies in its capacity to actualize the virtual or reactualize the real. Gilles Deleuze makes a pointed distinction between the possible and the virtual: "The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a 'realisation.' By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualisation" (211). I want to highlight the fact that the virtual is connected with the dynamic. The word *dynamic* is derived from the Greek *dunamis*, connoting among other things capacity, power, and potentiality. The virtual can be seen as *dunamis*, as dynamism and potentiality. Theory puts into dynamic tension what is given and what is not given but still exists in virtuality and can yet emerge. Theory, insofar as it is comparative, is the putting into dynamic tension of what is actual and what is virtual but real. Thus, the virtual destabilizes categories or concepts that are already stabilized and even fixed. It frees a multiplicity of significations.

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Theory implies a distancing overview of the relations between things that may be hidden, or too obvious to see—or things that we don't want to see. The distancing effect of theory is inscribed in theory's engagement with the virtuality of things. But theory (distance and reflexivity) is not incompatible with practice (involvement and engagement). Theory in this sense enacts the potentiality or virtuality of things to be encountered and thought. Comparing in this theoretical mode has to do with the potentializing of the actual by (re)invention or (re)creation. What is invented or created cannot be specified in advance of comparing or theorizing.

We should realize that particular modes of inquiry and presentation are only our modes of measurement, not the world's. In this sense, comparativity is not about the ontology of reality but about epistemology—that is, our knowledge. In other words, our awareness of the limits and partiality of our knowing pertains not to ontology but to epistemology. After deconstruction, the undeconstructible remains. Comparativity relativizes the universal and universalizes the particular or singular at the same time. Comparativity does not stop with the universal or the particular but moves between them. It must maintain its paradoxical character of irresolvable tension without facile mediation of the universal-singular dialectic.

Comparatists get to imagine how things are (or were) before our concepts are applied to or imposed on them, before our theoretical gaze turns them into objects of knowledge. So the aim of comparative inquiry is as much to dispossess things of our knowledge as to imagine a kind of intercultural nonplace. This space is astutely evoked by Maurice Blanchot when he formulates the problem of translation as accentuating

> the feeling of a light space between the words and what they aim at, of a possibility for them to slip outside of this form they have been given to return to the starting point, that is here the original language but that also symbolizes *the original background on which words are imposed* to be born from a language that scarcely separates itself from emptiness. (187; emphasis added)

This nonplace is utopic and atopic, a virtual nonplace from which paradoxically the world opens up differently for us, again and again. A theory compares a work or culture with its own ideal—that is, its potentiality. It marks the gap between what is and what ought to be. To go beyond what has already been actualized as history is to reactivate and reactualize things differently. A comparative perspective is not predetermined by what is given. Through the activity of comparing, the given becomes contingent actuality and as such could have been, and can be, reactualized differently.

Comparativity is comparison in its productive and creative aspect. A comparison is good to the extent that comparativity is immanent in it as its questioning and going beyond. Thus, comparativity does not pertain narrowly to the objects of disciplinary study or its methodology but is an act of inquiry that enables us to see the contingent nature of our conceptualizations and hence of our openness, flexibility, and potentiality. Theorizing is reflexivity about theory's own mode of thinking and thus about different modes of thinking. To be aware of comparing as a problem is already to theorize. Comparativity enacts the making and unmaking of boundaries again and again. It is a conceptual space in which different modes of thinking and being encounter one another. Comparativity's chief modality is a fundamental concern with concepts and their contingent flexibilities in enabling thinking as virtual actualization.

Epistemic Comparativity: Rethinking Episteme and Paradigm

Concepts make sense discursively and systematically; they are nonessentialist. To examine

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presuppositions is to become conscious of the presuppositions of the comparatist, who is trying to make two or more systems comparable. While a cultural matrix produces its texts and their conventions, metacultural reflections are transcultural. Part of this reflexivity lies in speculating on the discursive and pragmatic functions of cross-cultural exchange and understanding. For example, a text can be fairly accurately translated, but why is it still received and understood differently in the context of the target language? The same could be true of an event, not only how but also why it can be viewed differently. Comparativity or metacomparison works across historical and cultural boundaries: intraculturally, across epistemological and historical boundaries, and interculturally, between cultural traditions. Comparativity may be the only mode of access we have to the *Sachen* between cultures, to extend Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the *Sache* to what I would call areas or matters of concern that may be fundamentally at stake or in dispute between cultures (180–81). Such intercultural matters of concern are the purview of comparativity. Only by defamiliarizing, decontextualizing, and hence recontextualizing various aspects of a culture and how it functions by virtue of its presuppositions can we hope to get (partial) access to what this culture is about. Only through comparativity can the (non)cultural and the (non)human too become identifiable, contestable, and thus shareable.

Part of the contingent and provisional nature of comparativity is that we do not compare or theorize without assuming and relying on our own presuppositions. But once we are engaged in comparative thinking, our initial presuppositions will no longer be the only valid ones, nor can they avoid being modified, even if they are nondogmatic. Comparativity may lead to an awareness of incomparability and incommensurability, of different systemic presuppositions that subtend the possibility and operation of making comparisons. The dialectic of the theoretical and the atheoretical encompasses a larger theoretical field. The comparing that determines comparisons and their relative worth is unconditional and incomparable.

A challenge for comparatists is that to explore the unknown is to investigate what seems obvious in our own culture as well as in a different culture, instead of what merely modifies or extends our knowledge. This attempt to know requires us to become aware of our own epistemes and those of another culture. To simplify drastically, an episteme is a set of presuppositions underlying current paradigms of knowledge and intelligibility. A distinction between episteme and paradigm can serve as a heuristic model in comparative inquiry. It highlights the contrast between the basic continuity of a tradition and the successive changes (in paradigms) that merely overlay fundamental similarities of the tradition, a contrast that could be made distinct only through comparison with another tradition or culture. Different paradigms may in fact belong to the same episteme. There may be a supersession of paradigms in a given period, but these changes may overlay basic similarities of the underlying episteme.[2] In this sense, when a vocabulary shift occurs from one language game to another, it is a mode of redescription that accompanies a paradigm shift. A comparatist needs to be alert not only to how a different culture operates with its own codes of language and thinking but also to how this redescription in the register of another culture would in turn force a redescription in the register of one's own. Comparativity helps us see what is entailed by the different ways of knowing in different cultural and intellectual traditions. Cultural differences are often located in the gap between epistemes rather than between paradigms. Comparative studies have tended to focus on the change of paradigms, but more attention should be devoted to epistemic differences that have paradigmatic consequences.

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Meta- and Adisciplinarity

Comparative literature's historicity has at least a dual aspect: its Eurocentric disciplinary history and its historical concerns and problematics. But we need to detach the comparative from both forms of historicity. Comparativity can be historically informed, but its essential problematics are not necessarily determined by its historicity. In comparative inquiry, there is an inherent tension between historicity (in the sense of genetic contextualization) and ahistorical comparative problematics. Comparativity posits and projects universal problematics even while accepting the limitations of perspectives and modes of thinking. In this sense, comparative literature's problematics are not Eurocentric despite its apparently Eurocentric or Euro-American dominance in the past. To regard comparative literature as a metaepistemological enterprise is a crucial way to make it non-Eurocentric.

Here lies the point of seeing comparative inquiry as a metadisciplinary theoretical practice. Comparative literature is intrinsically trans-, meta-, and even extradisciplinary. It is at the heart of the humanities by virtue of its metadisciplinary status. The meta dimension may even denote comparative literature's nondisciplinary or adisciplinary character. This has important paradoxical implications for the humanistic disciplines. When comparative inquiry enacts its own adisciplinarity it accentuates how individual disciplines are too differentiated and therefore partial and incomplete. By virtue of comparativity, the category of the human or the cultural, for example, is released from its narrow historical immediacy and determinateness. Conceptions of the humanistic disciplines are still too anthropocentric, even in their extension of canonical inclusiveness to previously neglected non-Western traditions and histories. But transformative initiatives are emerging. "Critical climate change," for example, is a new line or zone of inquiry for the transdisciplinary humanities (Di Leo and Mehan; Sussman). Such new perspectives are in part problem-oriented approaches to inquiry. The problems they address are too often minimized or ignored by disciplinary divisions.

A metadisciplinary conception of comparativity has at least three key components. First, it enables one to recognize and clarify one's own presuppositions and values. Second, it changes the framework of what has already been known in one's discipline. Third, it frees problems from their disciplinary confinement or even nonrecognition. In other words, metadisciplinarity is the logic of interdisciplinarity. That is, the interdisciplinary is already metadisciplinary. Metadisciplinarity highlights the reflexive circularity of interdisciplinary knowing: we try to know by reflecting on the forms and categories of our knowing. Thus, comparativity as metadisciplinarity is by the same token adisciplinarity; it is paradoxically the disciplinary self-consciousness of the humanities.

Comparative Ethos

Comparative inquiry is epistemological, but it is also ethical and political. By becoming aware of our own and others' projections (whether dogmatic or unconscious) of views and presuppositions onto reality, we become aware of the injustice done to the world. Injustice results from reifying perceptions of, and projections onto, reality. Injustice, epistemology, and ethicopolitics become one in the entanglement of world and self. Self-knowledge is thus intrinsically tied to ethics and politics. This is because the comparative viewpoint incorporates a self-relativizing and self-critical function. Often the comparatist tries to remain invisible or (self-)effaced, consciously or not, to maintain the illusion of objectivity or implied ethnocentric superiority. But comparatists are in fact embedded in larger, often invisible structures of assumptions and presuppositions. On the one hand, all questions (and

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problems) have presuppositions. Questions that arise in one tradition can be nonquestions in another. On the other hand, an explicit act of focus creates its own zones of shadowy nonattention. Comparativity may thus be the coming into awareness by both comparatists and their readers (as interlocutors) of their own underlying assumptions, as well as those of the cultures they are comparing.

The ethical is irreducible to the actual but involves a rethinking of the potential and a different actualizing of the real. Ethical implications of comparative inquiry have at least a dual aspect: first, we can achieve justice by revising and reshaping our knowledge; second, reflexive theory is directly linked to our ethos or disposition, to an ethical attitude toward what we have constituted as the object of knowledge through testing ourselves, and to how we can think differently. Thinking differently through comparativity is a modifying test of ourselves, of how we can transform ourselves and others through thinking comparatively and interculturally and through constructing new and strange relations to others and ourselves.

The world is there, or right here, but it discloses itself to us differently and incompletely, because of the different predispositions and skills we possess and because our access to it is always partial. Comparativity as metacomparison opens up the world for us and brings the world into a new focus each time we devise a new comparison or theory, and each time we are compelled to think about what is involved in and entailed by our comparing and theorizing.

Notes

1. Recent books in English focusing on theories of comparison include Apter; Behdad and Thomas; Casanova; Cheah and Culler; Chow; Culler; Damrosch, *How* and *What?*; Detienne; D'haen, Damrosch, and Kadir; Eoyang; Felski and Friedman; Hart; Hayot; Kadir; Liu; Melas; Prendergast; Saussy, *Comparative Literature* and *Great Walls*; Spariosu; Spivak; Xie; and Zhang.

2. I provide a more detailed exploration of the reciprocal relevance of the Foucauldian and Kuhnian concepts to comparative inquiry in ch. 4 of *Conditions of Comparison* (73–90).

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