theories and methodologies

The Postcolonial Comparative

ROBERT J. C. YOUNG

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IS UNLIKE ANY OTHER DISCIPLINE. ELSEWHERE—FOR EXAMPLE, IN POLITICS OR RELIGION—THE COMPARATIVE operates as a subdiscipline within a larger general discipline. The problem for comparative literature is that there is no general discipline of literature: institutionally, the discipline consists of nothing but the fragments of different languages. As a result, through a curious metonymic inversion, comparative literature has come to figure as the totalizing general discipline of which it should form a part. This is why it also seems to offer a natural home for the idea of *Weltliteratur*. Comparative literature promises the utopian recreation of the lost amphora of literature as it stood before its fall into the clutches of the nation.

Comparative Literature and Literature Compared

What does the comparative do? What is most remarkable is that it does something at all. Other literature departments define themselves by a particular language or a group of related languages and most disciplines by their subject field (physics, politics), but comparative literature, by contrast, defines itself by its act. By the law of its name, comparative literature must involve an act of comparison. When the French invented comparative literature, they named it by an act that had already taken place, *littérature comparée* or *littératures comparées*, literature(s) compared, which perhaps explains why French comparatists have been as certain about their subject and method as anglophone comparatists uncertain. Literature compared therefore defines itself as a discipline by means of a critical act: the comparison of literatures by the critic. The German, though taking a different form, makes the point more explicitly: *vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* or *vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*—"comparative literature science" or "comparative literature history." The English *comparative literature*, lacking science or history, conflates its subject matter, literature, with the critical act of comparison, omitting all

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mention of the act. Grammatically and logically, the description *comparative literature* suggests that literature, not the critic, is the agent, a literature that carries out a work of comparison and is distinct from noncomparative literature. With typical anglophone perfidiousness, however, comparative literature does none of these things: the "comparative" is performed by the critic, as in French, not by the literature. The name *comparative criticism* might be more logical if it did not introduce a further ambiguity.

Setting aside for now these national differences among the European names for comparative literature, since the institutional practice does not differ in principle, we can say that unlike any other literary discipline, comparative literature foregrounds the critical act as its organizing rationale. As a performative kind of knowledge, it is consequently haunted by the question of its methodology, perpetually alert to its principles of action, which is why comparative literature has always been compelled to operate at the front line of "theory." Defined by the how, not the what, comparative literature thus paradoxically encounters the most fundamental question of all in "what does the comparative do?"

It is also the most painful question, provoking comparative literature (in English) to a recurring state of crisis. In 1959 René Wellek articulated this anxious insecurity for all time with his famous remark that "[t]he most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (162). In what other discipline could one of its most eminent practitioners confess that it has neither subject matter nor methodology? Not only is comparative literature not a body of knowledge like other disciplines, but its own expert authorities are not even certain what knowledge it studies.

While longer genealogies for comparative literature have been created, the discipline—by virtue of its name and the era of its institutional foundation—nevertheless remains fundamentally defined by the "comparative method" that was developed in the nineteenth century, a (sub)discipline formed on an analogy with comparative anatomy, comparative law, and, above all, comparative philology. The comparative method rose to prominence with the prestigious successes in particular of anatomy (Georges Cuvier) and of philology's pathbreaking studies of the relations between languages. So too, logic seemed to dictate, there must be a comparative literature. What did the comparative in literature do? According to Antoine Meillet's classic 1925 description, the comparative is either typological or genetic (1). The first looks for universal laws, the second for a common history. The problem for literature was that while comparative philology, with its systematic comparison of language families established by Franz Bopp, was clearly able to focus on genetic relations, comparative literature, like anatomy and law, in general inclined toward the typological. What universal standards of comparison can be developed for literatures in different languages? And what does that comparison do? What does it achieve? How does it work?

A conventional example is Paul de Man's essay "Keats and Hölderlin." De Man begins by acknowledging that the two poets never read each other and have no historical links other than writing around the same time. It is de Man the comparatist who puts them together in 1956. De Man's reading links the two poets thematically, while he concludes by suggesting that the commonality he finds promises "a fruitful way to formulate the spiritual crisis that forms the background of twentieth-century literature" (45). The essay offers little about Hölderlin that is new, for what de Man does is to utilize Martin Heidegger's *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (1951) to provide a Heideggerian reading of Keats. Imagine the unlikely scenario in which de Man had been a proponent of world literature and had chosen to write an essay

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on Hölderlin and Mirza Ghalib. What would that Heideggerian reading have achieved? Although the poets are historically, geographically, and culturally more disparate, the achievement would have been the same: a Heideggerian reading of a non-German poet. The difference would have been in the implications for a twentieth-century literature that de Man implicitly assumes to be European.

Comparison as Translation

In comparative literature, such theory functions as the global measure of comparison, so that comparative literature itself can take the position of the universal, holding the literary texts together like the two points of John Donne's compasses. The requirement of comparison tends to emphasize common generic (in the tradition of Aristotle's *Poetics*) or conceptual ground (being, "the human spirit" [Brunel, Pichois, and Rousseau], the "inaesthetic" [Badiou]) that can bring the two together, usually through the invocation of concepts drawn from European poetics or philosophy. European theory operates as the node through which comparison is effected. This model is replicated in the German concept of *Weltliteratur*, in which literatures of the world are not compared directly with one another but mediated by the larger concept of world literature, a frame in which they are put side by side. To this degree, comparative literature works according to the general model of translation practiced in the human sciences outlined by Dipesh Chakrabarty. In the discipline of history, Chakrabarty observes, every historical instance is translated into historiography's universal, Newtonian schema of time; so too in anthropology and history every practice involving religious belief is mediated through the general category of religion or superstition; every practice involving other aspects of individual life-worlds is mediated through the category of culture. The historian makes distinct historical practices comprehensible through the mediation of such higher-level, abstract categories. To understand such practices and make them meaningful, the historian compares them by translating them all into secular, abstract concepts. The problem is that the singularity of each practice is lost in the universality of the category. So, for example, the fact that Bengali weavers integrated religious practices into their weaving is lost when their work is analyzed as a form of "labor." Chakrabarty contrasts this three-part model of translation—comparison through translation into a general, abstract term—with a two-part linguistic model of translation that he characterizes as "nonmodern." Nonmodern translation involves a form of barter where two comparable practices are put against each other, substituted despite their difference. Chakrabarty claims that this barter translation, which brings practices together while preserving or not disavowing their differences, is best suited to fiction (of the magic-realist type) and film, while the three-part model of translation must constitute the form of the realist, secular discourse of the social sciences (we set aside for now this generic identification of the writing of history with realism). How can the historian, Chakrabarty asks, while translating historical practices into secular, universal terms, preserve a sense of their singularity and cultural difference? His question comes close to what Partha Chatterjee sees as the historian's predicament: how to reconcile "the Western claiming to be the universal and the national aspiring to be different" (285). While Chatterjee confesses that he has no answer, Chakrabarty suggests that the historian should queer the translation into the secular universal with an inflection of the uncanny, a trace of difference. Or, to put it in a more translational idiom, the historian's account of singular practices must be foreignized rather than domesticated, decentered rather than annexed. The framework of comparative or world literature performs a function similar

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to the historian's mediating translation into the secular universal that Chakrabarty describes. For example, world literature anthologies generally include extracts from the Bible and the Koran, translating texts that billions of people read as sacred scripture into the secular category of literature, which allows them to be compared with other forms of literature, such as *Gilgamesh* or the writings of William Burroughs. This highlights the postcolonial question raised by Aamir Mufti—namely, Whose literature, whose world? Whose concept of literature? Whose idea of value, whose aesthetic? Is the relatively recent European idea of literature the same, for example, as the refined Arabic *al-adab*?

How can comparative literature perform its acts of comparison—compare the incomparable through its forms of translation—and yet at the same time articulate the specificities of literary singularity?

The Specter of Comparisons

While comparison always involves the danger of whatever theoretical, ideological, and cultural lens is brought to bear on its material, comparison in the West has generally had the aim of freeing literature from another ideological framework, nationalism—the very difference that Chatterjee wishes to retrieve. As is well known, many of the greatest comparatists have been medievalists, espousing a European literature based on the commonality of Latin rather than separate literatures answering to the aspirations of national pride (Curtius). The comparatists created a general "European literature" from the writings of the Middle Ages; whether by relation of languages or by literary traditions or genres, European literature was happily comparable with itself. But by the twentieth century the colonial ideology of European culture could no longer be ignored. Although the comparative method claimed to assess all cultures equally, literary comparison—like other comparative methods, such as comparative anatomy, which provided the biological basis of nineteenth-century racial theory—was guided by criteria that placed European concepts and values at their head. In practice the comparative espoused the primacy of European literature over all others, even to the extent that for many years European literature claimed to be world literature as such.

Wielding a more literary focus than Edward Said in *Orientalism*, the Moroccan critic Abdelfattah Kilito has challenged the assumptions of European comparatism articulated in discussions of Arabic literature by European critics: "Arabic literature is boring unless it bears a family resemblance to European literature. This family network is what rescues some Arabic books; outside of it, there is no hope of salvation" (15). Although Kilito is here paraphrasing the view of nineteenth-century French comparatists, the same rule, that non-Western literature is of interest only to the extent that it resembles Western literature, applies to many books that emanate from the Arab or Middle Eastern world today. Western accounts of contemporary world literature tend to celebrate novels that present stereotypical or assumed microcosmic portraits of non-Western societies—such as *The Jacoubian Building*, *The Kite Runner*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*—catering to Western preconceptions about the Middle East or the "Muslim world."

Kilito's point, however, is that while the Western comparatist may choose to compare in a liberal gesture of understanding and intercultural communication, to read without comparison is not an option for the Arab reader. Arabic literature is "subject to a double chronology": while classical Arabic literature always existed in its own time, Arabic literature since the nineteenth century has moved to Christian time and found itself "in another age and against a different horizon" (8–9). Arabic literature from the nineteenth century onward is always read in comparison

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with European literature, and not by choice. Kilito's main complaint is not that this is how Europeans read but that Arab readers too have internalized these views: "the reader of an Arabic text soon connects it, directly or indirectly, to a European text. He is necessarily a comparatist, or we could say a translator" (16). This is similar to Frantz Fanon's complaint that colonized subjects internalize the racist colonial view of their inferiority: as Stuart Hall puts it, the colonial regimes "had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other'" (225). The Arab writer writes, and is read, in translation: "Every study of a modern Arab writer," Kilito argues, "is, in effect, a comparative study. Who can read an Arab poet or novelist today without establishing a relationship between him and his European peers?" (19).

Kilito is challenging the phenomenon that Benedict Anderson has characterized as "the spectre of comparisons" (2): the compulsion in the non-Western world to see its own cultural creations through the lens of comparison with Europe. Not only did Europe colonize the world, it imposed its cultural tastes, aesthetic preferences, and criteria for judgment on the colonized. For centuries Europe has operated as the third, abstract mediating term in the three-part model of Western comparatism that imperial culture inflicted on the world. The "universal" terms of the comparative, or of *Weltliteratur*, continue today as a way of enforcing the ideology and practices of Western globalization in the literary world. How can the comparatist unpick and unpack his or her own perspectives, that well-meant interest in the "literature of the other" that often unconsciously imposes the very framework that comparison is intended to undo (Apter, "'Je'")? How can the comparatist avoid enacting the domesticating translation that Chakrabarty describes? But then who, as Marcel Detienne argues, can say in advance that literatures are incomparable without already having made a judgment about them?

The Postcolonial Comparative

In a brilliant intervention of 1995, Emily Apter argued that postcolonial critics were the contemporary successors to the founders of comparative literature, usurping their diasporic disciplinary space, transforming "the discursive maneuvers of unhappy consciousness characteristic of postwar criticism into a politicized, multicultural critical idiom" ("Comparative Exile" 86). On this reading, Said's habitual self-affiliation to Erich Auerbach becomes less personal than disciplinary. Nonetheless, Apter adds, comparative literature also has a "darker" side: "the comparatist as 'evictor' of native culture"—"the discipline's colonial legacy, still manifest in the assertion of Europe-based internationalism over minority discourses in many institutions and departments" (93). For the bulk of its history, comparative literature created the universal literature of Europe, keeping its distance from the Africanists and the orientalists. Despite French cultural influence, *littérature comparée* remained largely untouched by the *tiersmondisme* that flourished outside the universities in France in the 1950s and 1960s. In the United States, by contrast with Jewish émigrés of the 1930s (Steiner 148), postcolonials found their first welcome in English departments. Only more recently has comparative literature, in common with most other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, from law to theology, become postcolonialized. This has dramatically shifted the aura and subject matter of comparative literature away from its European focus.

The postcolonial comparative involves the most radical form of comparative literature: it compares the hitherto incomparable (Baneth-Nouailhetas and Joubert). It resists the ways in which its own literature has been compartmentalized—for example, the carving up of Caribbean literature into forms of English, American, French, and Spanish literature, as if writers on different islands had

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relations only with the metropolitan center. The radical move has been to compare the uncompared, literatures considered incomparable, a dimension that has been developed forcefully in minority literatures. So Toral Jatin Gajarawala, in *Untouchable Fictions*, has shown how Indian Dalit fiction operates not simply as a minority literature or literature of the oppressed but as a comparative literature that pits its hyperrealism against the realist tradition of Hindi and anglophone Indian literature. Gajarawala demonstrates the degree to which for all its radical claims, nationalist or otherwise, that tradition has operated as an elite literature that has historically avoided substantive treatment of caste or, when it has addressed it, has offered paternalistic solutions that leave the untouchables excluded.

The postcolonial comparative, however, goes further than putting hitherto incomparable traditions together disjunctively. For, as Gajarawala shows, the comparing takes place in the literature itself, through form and content, not just in subsequent critical acts of comparison. Not only does such writing compare the incomparable, it offers a different model of comparison. The postcolonial is not merely the new comparative literature in criticism, it also involves a new kind of comparative literature. Postcolonial literature is inherently comparative, intrinsically more comparative than other literatures because it is defined by its comparatism: *peau noire, masques blancs*. Postcolonial authors have always written comparative literature—a literature that did not have to wait for the frame of comparative literature to be in dialogue with other literatures. For postcolonial writers had no choice: that work was done by the violent, historical imposition of colonialism, which forced postcolonial society and its literature into comparison in the first place. Postcolonial literature therefore cannot be anything but comparative, since it is written from the position of always already having been put in comparison with other literatures. With postcolonialism, comparative literature finally comes into its own—as *literature*.

Postcolonial literature is the first literature that is a comparative literature rather than a *littérature comparée*. While all literature is in some sense comparative (no one writes without invoking other literature), postcolonial literature is haunted by its own comparatism, a literature, as Édouard Glissant puts it, of *relation*. One response takes the form of reversal and recomparison, exemplified by *négritude*. Another, "writing back," involves a comparative gesture, but, with its echo of *striking back*, it also resists the comparative relation in which it finds itself. Postcolonial literature, tormented by other literatures to which it does not belong, seeks to uncompare the comparative situation to which it has been assigned and simultaneously to recompare the terms and the position of the invidious, hierarchical comparison according to which the postcolonial is always translated into the universal terms of the West. European literature no longer succeeds in imposing itself as the universal through which postcolonial literature must be translated (this is how the postcolonial differs from "Commonwealth" and "francophone" literature): the translation works the other way around, transforming the European text into its own idiom. Since Fanon, we might say, postcolonial literature has been concerned with the refusal of the specter of comparisons, exorcising it by militantly reversing the power relation. So too V. S. Naipaul's Biswas painfully fails to replicate the successes of Samuel Smiles's *Self Help*, but Samuel Smiles himself is translated into a figure of mocking comedy. This translation does not constitute Chakrabarty's nonmodern barter either, for it is a detranslation rather than a translation as exchange—a transmutation into the postcolonial writer's distinctive vernacular, an act of anthropofagy. Most postcolonial writers do not feel obliged to translate their work into the universal idiom of literature in the man-

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ner that Chakrabarty describes for historiography. Their work of translation compares by decentering, domesticating the foreign, rather than being assimilated into its globalized form. The current penchant for foreignization in translation studies assumes the perspective of the dominant language: from the point of view of the "minor" language, or literature, domesticization is the radical option. The colonial experience, after all, involved nothing other than the painful violence of foreignization. The postcolonial therefore domesticates the foreign, detranslating and retranslating the terms of its own forced comparatism, comparing where it was uncompared, uncomparing where it was invidiously compared, recomparing on its own terms.

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