theories and methodologies

Merely Comparative

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When one has so general and comprehensive an intention one can at first do nothing.

—Erich Auerbach

COMPARISON WAS ONCE SUPREMELY A MATTER OF METHOD. ERNEST RENAN IN HIS *PENSÉES DE 1848* CALLED COMPARISON "THE GREAT INstrument of criticism" (296).[1] Echoing the sentiment some two decades later, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett asserted that "we may call *consciously* comparative thinking the great glory of our nineteenth century" (76). Comparison had been extensively deployed as an analytic tool before the nineteenth century—to produce, for instance, the massive taxonomies that lay the foundations for natural history and in the gathering of the concordances and chronologies of universal histories. What sharply distinguished the comparative method, what made it in effect a specific method, for nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century scholars, by their own account, was the principle of development. This underlying temporal unity allowed for the most disparate entities to be set into meaningful relation. In words from an 1871 lecture by an early and enthusiastic proponent of comparative literature:

> [T]he method in which this study can be best pursued is that which is pursued in anatomy, in language, in mythology . . . , namely, the comparative. The literary productions of all ages and peoples can be classed, can be brought into comparison and contrast, can be taken out of their isolation as belonging to one nation, or one separate era, and be brought under divisions as the embodiment of the same aesthetic principles, the universal laws of mental, social and moral development. . . . (Shackford 42)

The comparative method in its heyday indicated a robust and transitive action—the comparative did a great deal indeed, and its application produced knowledge in the strongest, most positive sense. The comprehensive scope envisioned exceeded the capacities of any one investigator, which is why some of its proponents imagined compara-

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tive literature as a collaborative endeavor on the model of experimental science, in which experts would collect literary data in their areas of specialization that could in turn be submitted to the comparative method and thus reveal fundamental laws of literature (Gayley).

For nearly a century after the First World War, the comparative method, with its positivism and its vast, synthetic program, fell out of favor and out of view in the humanistic disciplines. When in the late nineteen eighties and the nineteen nineties, scholars returned their attention to the notion of comparison, spurred in part by critiques of Eurocentrism and by the injunctions of multiculturalism, comparison tended to name not method but scope, or a transversal extension in geographic and disciplinary space (Melas). If the aim of the renewed attention to comparison, in a broad sense, was to correct exclusions of various sorts (Eurocentrism, elitism, sexism, racism, nationalism, etc.), it was precisely *not* pursued through the application of a comparative method. From the point of view of "the space of comparison," to use the 1993 Bernheimer report's phrase (41–42), the question "what does the comparative do?" is more likely to elicit a response about what the comparative is or ought to be than about what it does. I'd like to take the occasion of this forum to go one step further and explore what the comparative might imply when it doesn't actively do anything, when it isn't the application of method or the implementation of a project with the positive outcome of producing new categories and measurable increases in knowledge, but when instead the comparative is merely comparative.

The comparative in our time confronts the rapid technical and economic developments of globalization as well as a resurgence in the twenty-first century of the comparative method in its systematizing form. This robust turn, sparked by Franco Moretti's remarkable essay "Conjectures on World Literature," the book that followed it, and the several volumes of collaborative scholarship tracing the global history of the novel, most recently took digital form in the Stanford Literary Lab, founded in 2010, which puts new computational powers to work in the service of quantitative analyses and systematizing experiments on literature and literary form (litlab.stanford.edu). The comparative method, particularly in its classificatory mode, has thus embarked on a vigorous new afterlife in the emergent digital humanities. This is comparison hard at work, constituting categories, differentiating them finely by marshaling unprecedented amounts of literary data to establish grounds of similarity and lines of difference, evaluating them, seeking invariables among the variations, attempting to chart consistent lines of change and development. The result will be, presumably, greater mastery of categories and therefore more certain and positive knowledge of the generalizations possible about the vast archive of world literature. To the extent that the task of comparative literature in an age of globalization is understood as one of quantitative inclusion, one that would bring the whole of the knowable world of literature into comparison, then the advent of computational comparison represents the accomplishment of a telos of sorts for the grand, systematizing ambitions of the comparative method as it was first formulated in the nineteenth century.

But while the comparative method is conceived as the application of a method by scholars and machines in pursuit of knowledge, the comparative as a space or a transversal relationality is conceived as deriving from a given, a condition, first of all, consequent on larger historical developments. Édouard Glissant's notion of the *Tout-monde* ("All-World") or *chaos-monde* ("chaos-world"), for instance, follows on the long history of European conquests, which with the conquest of the Americas first brought the world as an empirical totality into human consciousness. During the centuries of direct colonial domination, that totality was mediated by a hierarchy of

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values represented in the universal standard of European civilizational forms and personified by the elite, white European male as exemplary subject. When in the wake of the initial movements of decolonization that universalizing standard founders, what obtains, for Glissant, is *Relation*. This is not the relation between one culture or territorial unit and another culture or territorial unit mediated by an authoritative standard but rather relationality as such—that is, the condition of existing in the midst of the copresence of all the cultures in the *Tout-monde*. Relation is therefore not the product of a distinct, voluntary act of comparison effected by a knowing subject but a comparative condition, or a mode of being. One of Glissant's chapter titles in his *Poétique de la Relation* (*Poetics of Relation*) expresses Relation in the form of a sequence of past participles—verbs converted to adjectives: "Relié (Relayé) Relaté" (183), which Betsy Wing elegantly translates as "Relinked, (Relayed), Related" (169). More directly than the English *related* (though it too can signify "have given an account"), the French *relaté* literally denotes "narrated" and obliquely connotes "relativized."

The conception of geographic space, or the world, underlying Glissant's *Tout-monde* does not take the form of a totality of discrete cultures occupying distinct and knowable territorial units. As Jacques Coursil aptly puts it:

> This spatializing vision of a great totality that contains everything is directly induced from the problematic of an absolute in the form of a universal assemblage containing territory-objects. . . . All to the contrary, "Relation" is a psychic content, a symbolic structure, a "totality of cultures" inscribed in each of us. It is an "unconscious/unknown" [*un «insu»*]. Hence, there is no observer and no observatory of "Relation." (99)

The categories of psychic content and symbolic structure are Coursil's and imply a psychoanalytic perspective that is not directly reflected in Glissant's text, but nonetheless they perform the crucial heuristic function of exposing the ways in which Relation breaks down the subject-object distinction embedded in conceptions of space as an object of knowledge. To understand Relation as a symbolic structure or an unconscious/unknown underscores the consequences of distinguishing between the voluntarist act of relating one thing to another and the condition consequent on being in relation. Coursil takes the point one step further in a lapidary sentence that invites us to conceive of a country or other territorial space in Relation not as a knowable and comparable geographic unit of analysis but rather as a site from which the history, or the story, of the world is told: "This county was once only a point in the geography of the earth; henceforth, it is a context in which the story of the world is related [*un contexte dans lequel se raconte l'histoire du monde*]" (98). It is important that the story of the world is in the singular here—at issue is not relativism as pluralization, where now many different versions of the story of the world proliferate. What matters, what connects each singular story to the whole of the world, is the relativization underlying the process of Relation as each singular narration of the world is inscribed (unconsciously, unknowingly) in each of "us." This, then, would be one way to begin to gloss Relation in terms of the sequence of participles: *relinked*, *relayed*, *related* (narrated, relativized), where Relation is intimately bound up with the relativization inherent in the conditions of possibility for narrating the story of the world from any place in the world.

The comparison at stake here is given and not produced as knowledge; it takes place, as it were, at the multiple intersections of differential effects and is not ultimately reducible or even necessarily related to knowledge or positive certainty. We might align mere comparison with the ethics of reading that Gayatri Spivak develops with the notion of

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reading over distance (a countercategory to Moretti's distant reading), or teleopoiesis. As she explains, "[I]t is not even 'learning about other cultures.' This is imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps. Teleopoiesis. Literature is what escapes the system; you cannot speed read it. The figure 'is' irreducible" (52).

On this view, the text acts comparatively on the reader, if you will, as much as the reader acts on a text: "imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps." The "perhaps" dangling at the end of the sentence here seems diffidently decisive to the extent that it marks the absence of positive, knowable guarantees. Spivak's formulation depends on a human subjectivity, even a subject of aesthetic experience. A machine couldn't do it, perhaps. The idea of "another culture" still obtains, only it is positioned here as the object not of knowledge but of imagination.

In his illuminating reflection on race and comparison, Fred Moten harks to a similar disposition of comparison to argue against the enclosed specificity or ghettoization of putatively minoritarian or "ethnic" subdisciplines, like black studies, on the grounds that they are, on the contrary, eminently relational:

> Ultimately, the paraontological force that is transmitted in the long chain of life and death performances that are the concern of black studies is horribly misunderstood if it is understood as exclusive. *Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness*. That claim is neither the first nor the last anticipatory reorientation but is, rather, an irreducible element of the differentially repeating plane that intersects and animates the comparativist sphere. (1746; my emphasis)

Moten reminds us indirectly that reparative groupings or subdisciplines—black studies in his case, but this could extend to francophone studies or postcolonial studies—are often construed to produce new, defensible identitarian unities that quickly convert to strategies of containment and hence are positioned to reproduce the patterns of exclusion they initially critiqued. To the rational and active comparative act of the constitution of categories that underlies this containment, Moten counterposes a "differentially repeating plane that intersects and animates the comparativist sphere," an intriguingly mobile constellation that is not built from concerted action or directed intellectual labor but that instead implicates a relational interconnection.

Comparaison Désœuvrée or Mere Comparison

Jean-Luc Nancy's *communauté désœuvrée* bears a striking affinity with Glissant's notion of Relation, as I have noted elsewhere. For present purposes, I want to turn briefly to the idea of *désœuvrement*—meaning literally the absence (*dé-*) of work or a project (*œuvre*) and equivalent in English to "idleness," or "inoperativity"—to explore what could be entailed in the relation between comparison and work or doing, with the aim of elaborating on comparisons that (at first) do nothing. According to Nancy, community is the "great absent" for a metaphysics that centers on the subject as an absolute, "of 'being' as absolute, perfectly detached, distinct and closed, without relation" (17). When subjects join to form a community on this model, they fuse together around a project or *œuvre* (the early Christian brotherhood is one example), which itself takes the form of an overarching and absolute subject. Nancy proposes a notion of community that, instead of effectuating itself as a project or *œuvre*, exposes singularities, the latter understood as separate beings that are "not indivisible but singular" (23). This community is *désœuvrée*, without a task, or idle, in the precise sense that it is not something individuals can willfully make or produce; it

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is something they experience, something that happens to them: "We do not produce [community]; we experience it (or this experience makes us) [*On ne la produit pas, on en fait l'expérience (ou son expérience nous fait)*]" (78). The absence of a unifying project or work is the condition of possibility for community understood as the mutual exposure of singularities. Singularities do not make community; rather, they are exposed through it. Givenness, the other of will, labor, or production, comes into view in the *communauté désœuvrée* not only as necessity, or preexisting limits, but also as gift and as a field of communication: "Community is given to us and is a given—or we are given to and delivered according to the community: it is a gift to renew, to communicate; it is not a work to produce [*ce n'est pas une œuvre à faire*] . . ." (87).

The adjective *mere* in its most common contemporary usage effects a *désœuvrement* (an unworking, or idling) on whatever noun it qualifies. It signifies "nothing more than," or, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, "having no greater extent, range, value, power, or importance than the designation implies; that is barely or only what it is said to be." One might say that *mere* is an adjective (or *merely* is an adverb) that doesn't do any work to the extent that it adds nothing to the noun it qualifies.[2] The word's connotation is usually pejorative, and it thus almost always serves as a verbal gesture of dismissal on the grounds of obvious limitation or inadequacy. I happened upon the phrase "'merely' compare" in an out-of-the-way 1961 essay by the comparatist Henry Remak, where he uses it to characterize the derogatory attitude of proponents of what was then known as the French school of comparative literature—which aimed to limit the discipline to the empirical study of *relations de fait*: that is, relations based on demonstrable facts (documented influence, intermediaries, travel, etc.)—toward the more capacious approaches of the American school. "They look askance," writes Remak, "at studies which 'merely' compare, which 'merely' point out analogies and contrasts" (4). He contests the accusation and defends the less rigidly empirical and prescriptive practice of the American school, but he is intent on showing that it is not "merely" comparative. The gambit of my speculative proposal here is that, transposed to a potentially analogous divide in our own time—loosely, between systematizers and nonsystematizers or perhaps between empirically minded and ethically minded approaches—Remak's phrase prompts attention to the ramifications of mere comparison for its own sake, perhaps not in order to promote a full transvaluation but at least to highlight a space of discourse and inquiry otherwise foreclosed or unnoticed.

Two important recent works draw attention to the rich theoretical and critical possibilities of such a discursive space and would certainly be crucial supports to the self-effacing foundations of a theory of mere comparison. In *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, Anne-Lise François attends to articulations of experience that cannot be "counted," or, as she phrases it in her provisional definition, that amount to "a way of imparting knowledge such that it cannot be claimed and acted on" (1). François in effect elaborates a surprising density of significance for the potentialities of forms of knowledge that cannot be acted on and whose import lies in the withdrawal or hesitation before action. If the "self-cancelling revelation" implied in the open secret releases us from the "imperative to act upon knowledge," to make knowledge do something, it also points to a noninstrumental realm of reflection. In a formulation that brings Glissant's Relation to mind and sharpens its critical edge, François writes of "measuring difference not by what an action materially produces but by the imaginative possibilities revelation may either open or eclipse" (21). She articulates a particularly compelling case for the value of inaction for an ecological ethos. Counterposed to

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a grasping, possessive form of knowledge, inaction, or a form of criticism or a comparison that (at first) does nothing, "would be more than the indefinite avoidance of taking positions of power, whether theoretical, symbolic, or physical." It would be "a pointing that would give notice of an unrealized *x* and, just as surely and swiftly, put it irretrievably 'off limits,' beyond development" (36).

Excavating a related problematic, Rei Terada examines forms of perception that lie below or just to the side of actionable thought. These practices of what she calls "phenomenophilia" attend to transient, indefinite objects of perception and tarry in mere appearance, "deferring as long as possible a determination of fact" (27). Mining this interval, this suspension, minimal as it is, Terada opens out its critical potential, outlining it as a position that inhabits the given without directly opposing it but also without immediately accepting or endorsing it. In the gesture of looking away, she locates the "phenomenophilic appeal to mere appearance for a reprieve from endorsing the inevitable" (8). Mere appearance, to the eye of reason classically the realm of error or illusion, here in its very mereness internally interrupts the norm of what is given. Perhaps with this motion mereness (nothing more than) verges briefly into sheerness (nothing less than), thus revealing for a moment the values that constitute its own determination. If François's argument opens a window onto the occluded varieties of noninstrumental thought and the urgency of attending to what cannot be acted on, Terada's slips a wedge into mereness.

One thorny problem with attempting an argument for the merely comparative is that the active and willful intent of such argumentation inevitably risks promoting mere comparison as a sheer positive value and hence undermining its mereness, just as promoting doing nothing amounts to making it do something, to making it useful or operational in its very noninstrumentality. Here Terada's rigorous insistence on reprieve or momentary relief from the coercion of assent seems useful as a cautionary gesture and as a scrupulous articulation of what it might mean to remain strictly to the side of method. The merely comparative, like all the figurations I have brought to bear on it in this paper (Relation, teleopoiesis, *désœuvrement*, etc.), ultimately persists in the midst of larger comparative structures and processes. The merely comparative would describe a practice of comparison that doesn't begin from the foundation of empirical unities and in which comparison is not put to work in the service of a distinct project. Directed toward neither the consolidation nor the operationalization of categories, it would seek to traverse them and plumb the space between them. Pursuing mere comparison may have no definitive outcome, but if there is one, it is not known in advance. Of course, I can only offer here a speculative, preliminary sketch of what the merely comparative might entail. Then again, such a practice of comparison may itself always be merely provisional.

Comparison in the Material World; or, "The Irony of Globalization"

The most immediate context for these reflections is the resurgence of the comparative method in its systematizing form in recent approaches to, for instance, world literature. Daunting as it may be, however, it is also important to glance at the larger material conditions that may be underlying, motivating, or informing the comparative project now. In a recent essay, Pheng Cheah launches a challenge to meliorative articulations of comparison in academic study, those seeking to correct exclusions or reverse epistemic violence, by pointing out that these ethical, voluntarist efforts to "raise consciousness," as he puts it, in fact "obscure more fundamental processes of comparison that create the material conditions of the capacity for ethical comparison. These processes are concerned

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with the quantification and calculation of the conditions of human life in order to increase life as a resource" (536). Because the biopolitical ethos of late capitalist globalization, based as it is on the quantification of life, is intrinsically inclusive, recent intellectual comparative projects, according to Cheah, cannot be presumed to resist it and can indeed be construed as complementary epiphenomena, easily accommodated into its infrastructure. "Literature," he points out in a fine cautionary formulation, "is also part of the postindustrial comparison machine . . ." (543).

It may well be that no comparison can ever be mere enough to elude this machine as it operates on the macro register of global flows of capital and prestige, and yet in the more restricted compass of the corporate university in the United States, at least a provisional purchase may be won by Spivak's vision of teleopoietic (or merely) comparative literature as "the irony of globalization," a form of thought and discourse that undercuts and interrupts the presumptions and the manifestations of globalization in other spheres. The merely comparative, after all, is not premised on quantitative inclusivity and does not purport to augment knowledge or to increase the availability of resources. Srinivas Aravamudan advocates for "the university-in-the-world" as a "counterconcept" to our globalizing universities, with their proliferating offshore franchises and increasingly instrumental schemes. He points to "the largely unrealized possibility of the university as one of the rare sites of genuine intellectual hospitality in an increasingly commodified and brutalized world or what Derrida has called 'the university without condition'" (31). As a form of relation that is ultimately (or in the interval of deferred action and determinations of fact) without guarantee, the merely comparative may well have its modest place in this version of worldliness.

Notes

1. Unattributed translations are mine.

2. It is interesting to note, however, a revolution in the sense of *mere* over time, since earlier (now obsolete) definitions deriving from a different root include "famous, illustrious, splendid, noble, excellent." More proximately, within the etymology from the Latin *merus* ("undiluted," "pure") there is also a range of earlier definitions that mobilize a more positive sense of *mere*. This intriguing etymological twist prompts reflection on how purity is valued and what exactly the difference between "nothing more than" and "nothing less than" might entail.

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