Forum

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A New Comparative Literature—Levinas, Ethics, and Compromise

To the Editor:

I read Thomas Claviez's article "Done and Over With—Finally? Otherness, Metonymy, and the Ethics of Comparison" (128.3 [2013]: 608–14) with interest. It pairs a discussion about the nature of comparative literature, my favorite field, with a discussion of ethics and aesthetics, subjects on which Claviez has already published. I expected new insight into how we can do comparative literature, and the article delivered. Claviez suggests that the principle governing this field should be compromise, an idea he rehabilitates in his elegant turns of phrase at the end of his contribution, giving it the prestige this kind of solution is not normally accorded. His thesis is that comparative literature cannot be governed by one principle but requires a compromise between at least two, one that would acknowledge an identity and one that would acknowledge what the law of identity does not include. With such a solution, Claviez also fulfills a deconstructive imperative for the new conception of the field and its limits.

But this is only one version of deconstruction, a fact that Claviez does not acknowledge, since he offers a rather narrow understanding of comparative literature and deconstruction. Claviez does not consider that comparative literature, like deconstruction, might do something other than classify already existing terms and their others, the laws and the outlaws. Once there are laws, identities, nations, languages, once categories are there, it is too late for comparative literature, too late for deconstruction, because it is too late to shape what counts as signification.

If I know that there is Chinese literature or women's literature or outlaw literature or even that there is literature, I already know too much. The same goes for world literature, cosmopolitanism, and globalization, which are mentioned in other articles on comparative litera-

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ture that appear in the same issue of *PMLA*. All these are forms of politics (in Levinas's sense) with little revolutionary potential as far as hermeneutic and ethical theories are concerned.

Here we can also correct Claviez's understanding of Levinas. Levinas's ethics is about an encounter with oneself in terms other than those used to identify "I" and "me" in the Western ethical tradition, which should be obvious from a sentence like this one that Claviez quotes: "The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me" (609). The same idea is behind Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which shows an ethics beyond good/evil, animal/human, and me/other as its organizing differences. To imagine my relation with Saddam Hussein, or with any concrete other—a thief, a homeless person, a neighbor, an outlaw—as an example of Levinas's ethics is an exercise in sadomasochism.

In other words, following Levinas, I cannot tell if I am addressing myself or another, which, in turn, calls for a relation to the law altogether different from the one Claviez supposes in his notion of compromise. Comparative literature has a great opportunity to be the kind of foundational discourse that Heidegger as well as Freud would approve of, a discourse that would reinvent signification, legality, and strangeness and not only affirm identities that already exist.

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Reply:

I thank my colleague Petar Ramadanovic for his perceptive reply to my essay, in which he rightly calls for a "new conception" of comparative literature and of "its limits." His objection to my attempt at forming such a conception is that I still seem to be rooted in "a rather narrow understanding of comparative literature and deconstruction," that I do not take into account that both "might do something other than classify already existing terms and their others." A "correct" understanding of Levinas's radical ethics, in Ramadanovic's view, "calls for a relation to the law altogether different" from the concept of compromise that I suggest and provides an opportunity to conceive of comparative literature as a "foundational discourse . . . that would reinvent signification, legality, and strangeness and not only affirm identities that already exist."

Although I am in accord with my colleague's demand for a new role for and conception of comparative literature, I disagree with some of his assumptions and objections. My allegedly narrow understanding of deconstruction grows out of one of its central tenets—namely, to dismiss the possibility and desirability of creating another alternative foundational discourse, even one approved by Heidegger or Freud. A discourse that claims to reinvent signification, legality, and strangeness would simply pose as one more master discourse vying for an Archimedian point of view, establishing a new logos and thus another engineer's myth. This is why I urged a rereading of Lévi-Strauss's conception of myth that, when liberated from the Barthesian ballast of ideology, offers a new take on myth as bricolage—another word, by the way, for compromise. In fact, the impatient cry for an alternative foundational discourse seems to echo the impatience with otherness that my essay begins by addressing.

I am afraid that I was not able to develop my concept of metonymy sufficiently in the essay. My redefinition of this trope implies that it could allow us to avoid the desperate search for a metaphorical "third"—a third that would pop up again should we search for another foundational discourse or a reinvented legality. A conception of myth as metonymic and contingent rather than as minimetaphor attempts to retain strangeness, not as reinvented but as unrecognizable; that is why I took such pains to critically reassess the concept of recognition and its genealogy. And metonymy, if taken radically, as

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