Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

1 Origins 12
2 Emigrations 50
3 Politics 84
4 Theories 122
5 Languages 165
6 Literatures 207
7 Worlds 253
8 Comparisons 303

Conclusion: Rebirth of a Discipline 334

Bibliography 349
Index 375
Introduction

Late one night, half a century ago, as a graduate student in comparative literature neared the date of his doctoral oral exam, his wife dreamed they were woken up by the sound of a truck and a knock on the door. When her husband went downstairs to answer it, he found a pair of workmen, in overalls, who proved to be two of his examiners, Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli. Recounting this dream in 1968 in his presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association, Harry Levin reported that “the student reacted with that savoir-faire which is always so happy a feature of dreams. He simply remounted the stairs and reported to his wife, ‘The men are here to compare the literature’” (“Comparing the Literature,” 6). This book is intended to answer the question behind the young woman’s dream: Just what was her husband doing with his life? And as for ourselves, how should we go about plying the comparatist’s trade today? How can we best address the many disparate literatures now at play in literary studies, and what do we really mean by “comparing” them?

Comparing the Literatures is addressed not only to students and faculty in comparative literature programs, but to anyone interested in incorporating a comparative dimension into their work. Insofar as “comparative literature” signifies working across national boundaries, a growing number of scholars in national literature departments are becoming comparatists to a significant degree: a study of Walcott’s Omeros and Joyce’s Ulysses is as much a comparative project as a study of Joyce and Homer. Comparatists have classically crossed linguistic as well as geographical borders, but studies within individual languages increasingly involve comparative explorations: of varieties of “weird English” (Ch’ien), of Francophone transculturations, of standard versus colloquial Arabics. A recent anthology of literature in Portuguese includes work from Angola,
Cape Verde, East Timor, Goa, Guinea-Bissau, Macau, and Mozambique, as well as Brazil and Portugal. Even to speak of “the Lusophone world” would be an oversimplification for the anthology’s editors, who gave it the plural title *Mundos em português* (Buescu and Mata, 2017). Furthermore, the contemporary concern with issues of migration and diaspora has heightened attention to the presence of multiple languages within national cultures, which were never as monolingual as the ideology of the “national language” supposed. For many of us today, comparison begins at home.

While questions of comparative method and purpose are now broadly shared across literary and cultural studies, the challenges of comparison become particularly acute within the discipline of comparative literature. As the Dutch comparatist Joep Leerssen has asked, “What is the unit of comparison? Is it the language community or its awkward sister, the race? Is it a given ‘society’ at a given stage of its ‘development’?”. He notes that these alternatives were widely debated in the nineteenth century and are still in the air, “as is the almost palpable reluctance to spell out precisely what terms like language or race or a literature called ‘comparative’ actually, specifically mean” (“Comparing What, Precisely?” 207). The solutions that comparatists have found over the years—and also their confusions and their outright failures—can provide instructive lessons for broad-based literary studies in general.

The challenge of defining what, precisely, comparatists do has only increased since Harry Levin’s day, an era in which the discipline was imbued with assumptions that limited but also delimited the field, providing relatively clear parameters for teaching, research, and program requirements. Most comparatists focused on a handful of major western European powers, and within those literatures their emphasis was on the high-humanist tradition of the aristocratic past and its middle-class heritage. This was already a very considerable domain for even an entire department to encompass. In 1960 Werner Friederich, founder of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, noted wryly that the term “world literature” was rarely being applied to much of the world:

Apart from the fact that such a presumptuous term makes for shallowness and partisanship which should not be tolerated in a good
university, it is simply bad public relations to use this term and to offend more than half of humanity. . . . Sometimes, in flippant moments, I think we should call our programs NATO Literatures—yet even that would be extravagant, for we do not usually deal with more than one fourth of the 15 NATO-Nations. (“On the Integrity of Our Planning,” 14–15)

Friederich, however, wasn’t calling for an expansion of the field of comparative literature; instead, he recommended dropping the term “world literature” altogether.

Even within the favored few NATO-Literatures, women’s writing, minority writers, and popular literature or film—to say nothing of that infant medium, television—weren’t yet seriously competing for attention with Virgil, Dante, Flaubert, and Joyce. The internet, with its cyberworld of digital media, didn’t yet exist; it was only in 1969, a year after Levin recounted his oneiric anecdote, that a graduate student at UCLA transmitted the first message through the early ARPANET, then being developed with funding transferred by the Department of Defense from its ballistic missile program.

The intellectual boundaries of comparative literature were seconded by social norms. Levin’s mostly male colleagues might be amused by the gendered incomprehension of the dreaming wife, but today women far outnumber men in literature PhD programs, and many more women—both scholars and writers—appear in the following chapters than would have been found in a comparable survey fifty or even twenty-five years ago. Nor are marriages still assumed to be heterosexual, and a recent survey of my department’s students yielded self-identifications under three different categories, “Male,” “Female,” and “Other.” Levin’s anecdote also played on the incongruous idea that Ivy League faculty could morph into maintenance men. The class-based humor of this metamorphosis may look darker today to the many adjunct (or, now, “clinical”) faculty who can feel all too much like migrant blue-collar workers. The difficulties of securing a tenure-track job affect all fields, but they have a special urgency for comparatists: will jobs, never plentiful, dry up altogether as beleaguered literature departments pull back to nationally defined core fields?
Comparatists have long played a central role in the import-export trade in literary theory, but as theoretical perspectives take hold in many different venues, does the discipline still have a distinctive identity and purpose? Older discussions of “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (Wellek) or “Criticism and Crisis” (de Man) have given way to stark accounts of disciplinary death (Spivak) and “Exquisite Cadavers” (Saussy). Perhaps it is a sign of the times that vampires and zombies have been the subject of recent seminars at the ACLA’s conferences. Are the undead poised for promotion from objects of study to a membership category? Friends with Death Benefits?

As if these problems weren’t enough, the humanities at large are under severe strain, buffeted by declining enrollments as STEM fields garner more and more interest from college students and their anxious parents. Meanwhile, cash-poor governments reduce funding for any areas that don’t lend themselves to corporate partnerships, a situation that has gotten a good deal worse since Bill Readings surveyed The University in Ruins in 1996. Both humanistic values and the internationalism so central to comparative studies are under attack today by metastasizing ethnonationalisms in many parts of the world, not least the United States. These problems don’t just haunt graduate students’ dreams but are the waking concerns of students and faculty alike.

Despite all these challenges, comparative studies are thriving in many ways. The very pressures besetting national literature programs give them good reason to hire people who can teach courses that reach outward from their core literatures, and globalization gives increasing fluidity to national traditions themselves. Whereas the comparatists of the postwar era felt a mission to help put a war-weary Europe back together, we now have an expanding set of equally compelling needs, from the crises of migration and of the environment to the worldwide rise of inequality, together with violent conflicts that have the United States involved in an Orwellian state of perpetual war. The polarization of political discourse, and the general shortening of people’s Twitter-fed attention spans, give literature a vital role in helping all of us to think more deeply and to envision ways the world could be remade. Literature’s utopias, dystopias, and heterotopias are needed more than ever today.
If the study of Renaissance poetry and bourgeois novels could once have seemed a kind of escapism or high-toned consumerism, today the careful reading of challenging literary works has something of the oppositional force of the slow food movement in a world dominated by artery-clogging fast food. The globalizing forces that have given the world McDonald’s and McFiction also bring us a far wider range of alternative literary worlds, both old and new, giving us new kinds of aesthetic pleasure as well as broader ethical and political perspectives, challenging us to make effective use of an ever-widening range of comparisons. All these changes, both positive and negative, require us to rethink the ways we read, the ways we organize our programs, and the ways we carry on virtually every aspect of our scholarly life and work.

A period of conceptual and institutional ferment represents a time of danger and a time of opportunity. The kind of training that Harry Levin and René Wellek gave their students will no longer suffice even for market purposes, much less for making the most of the intellectual possibilities opening up for us in a global vision of the world’s literary production. Yet many programs in comparative literature took shape in the 1950s and 1960s and have not been fully rethought since then. Major intellectual changes came with the rise of literary theory in the late 1960s and then the waves of feminist, postcolonial, and cultural studies, yet most programs have evolved through a series of ad hoc incremental steps. By now they have become motley enterprises, trying to convey—or confine—a rapidly evolving discipline within aging intellectual and programmatic structures. Even otherwise progressive thinkers sometimes seem deeply wedded to doing what they were doing twenty or thirty years ago.

Patchwork repairs can be stitched together for quite a while (here the zombies could make themselves useful), but they are likely to pull apart in a period of tectonic change. Comparative literature today is experiencing a paradigm shift of the sort that occurs only once or twice in a century, and an effective response will require us to rethink the grounds of comparison from the ground up. If we keep on doing what we’ve been doing, our ideas will look ever more threadbare, our methods amateurish, our results scattershot. Departments and deans will have good reason to pull back, promoting narrower but better focused work within the individual
major literary traditions, if they don’t abandon foreign literatures outright. Graduate students already feel increasing pressure to cut back intellectually, as they find themselves caught in the crosswinds of an ever-expanding intellectual mandate amid a contracting material economy. Stipends stagnate, debts mount up, and associate deans deny housing extensions as they press students to get up and out, all at a time when there is more to learn than ever before. Maybe there just isn’t time—or funding—to master that third language, still less to start a fourth? Maybe those wider comparisons should be dropped from the dissertation? Wouldn’t it be better to stick with two neighboring national traditions, one period, one genre, a manageable comparison of three or four novels, using the familiar theoretical framework your adviser was taught thirty years ago?

These pressures make this the best possible time to think freshly about comparative studies, as we have compelling ethical and practical reasons to move beyond business as usual. What tools do we need to have in our toolboxes today? What resources should we draw on as we respond to the changes sweeping across literary studies, the humanities, and the public sphere? One of my themes will be that our global literary aspirations need to be matched by greater engagement with the rich variety of comparative scholarship across the past two centuries and in many parts of the globe, from Brazil to the Balkans to China and Japan. American comparatists can be farseeing in their literary vision but oddly myopic in their scholarly attention, largely ignoring the wider world of comparative work beyond our borders. Elsewhere, comparatists often follow developments in the United States and two or three western European countries but may not look farther afield; a genuinely global grasp of comparative studies lags far behind the steady expansion of our literary awareness. This book is written within a U.S.-American context but with regular reference to initiatives and formations abroad.¹

¹ Even when discussions elsewhere have been translated, they are often neglected within the Anglosphere, and many valuable studies have never been translated at all. I use translations whenever they are available (with occasional modifications); the translations are my own when I quote from a work whose title is given only in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, or Portuguese.
Our institutional arrangements are a critical part of this story, and we need to become more aware of what our practices do both for and to their practitioners. In a time of strain and flux, these arrangements cease to be mere matters of convenience and become the focus of high-stakes contests over definition and control. Equally important are the assumptions that often go uncontested, reinforcing ossified hierarchies and relations of authority, sustaining an academic politics that can be very different from our own self-image. As Mary Douglas argued in her incisive late book *How Institutions Think*, institutions powerfully shape the questions scholars ask, the ways we approach those questions, and the answers we find. The following chapters take up key issues that people doing comparative work need to rethink today, working both within and against our institutional and disciplinary constraints, whether we are in a department of comparative literature or are undertaking a comparative project from a different home base. There is no single set of languages, canon of texts, or body of theory that every comparatist needs to know, but each of us ought to get a good sense of the options available to us under each of these categories, and to know what we're doing when we make our choices of materials and methods.

One of the crucial things that we should know is how we relate to our predecessors. *Comparing the Literatures* offers a broadly historical sweep from the turn of the nineteenth century to the present, looking particularly at turning points in the lives and work of people who remain vitally relevant for our present concerns and debates. The border-crossing discipline of comparative literature has attracted a fair share of borderline personalities, restless souls unwilling to accept the confinement of more closely bounded fields of study. These are often people whose background has set them askew from their society, even if they haven't emigrated outright. Their work has been shaped as much by struggles with colleagues—and with their own inner demons—as by purely intellectual concerns.

From autobiographical sketches to full-scale memoirs, comparatists have had a good deal to say about themselves, in an accumulating body of writing that represents a neglected resource for the study of the problems and promise of comparative studies going forward. Out of modesty, embarrassment, or sheer narcissism, scholarly memoirists sometimes
downplay these conflicts, coating them with a patina of nostalgia or self-deprecating humor, while other accounts are darkly colored by long-cherished grudges. Yet an attentive reading can find instructive lessons in these writings, and equally in the confessional undercurrents that well up between the lines of sober textual explications, whether we hear the traumatic echoes of war and exile reverberating through Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* or tease out the uncanny mixture of concealment and confession in Paul de Man’s coolly seductive essays.

Looking at scholarly activists from Johann Gottfried Herder and Germaine de Staël to Gayatri Spivak, Franco Moretti, and other contemporaries, we can gain insight into the personal and political stakes in the longstanding debates over comparative studies. With the perspective of time, we can better see continuities among people who would once have seemed diametrically opposed, and we may more readily observe problems that persist in our own work but that can be harder to recognize when we’re in the midst of them ourselves. Every reader of this book will have an individual set of formative figures to explore, a group only partially overlapping with the people presented here, not only foundational figures but also influential teachers, whether or not they are among the names usually invoked in our journals. As Charles Bernheimer instructed the contributors to the ACLA’s 1993 report on the discipline, “Situate your subject!”—meaning our subject position as well as whatever subject we were treating.

My own perspective is that of someone raised and teaching in the United States, though also with a strong awareness of German Jewish immigrant roots, and with parents who vividly recalled their early days in the Philippines, where they met. I am a liberal humanist by outlook, struggling as many of us are to make sense of an increasingly illiberal world. In theoretical terms, I am a structuralist in recovery. A lingering structuralism fuels a continuing interest both in literary forms and in programmatic structures, while the “recovery” aspect has given this book a much more pronounced political cast than it would have had if I’d written it closer to my student years in the 1970s, when textuality frequently eclipsed history, at least in the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale. Even then, studying ancient Near Eastern and colonial-era Mesoamerican
literatures brought me into close contact with scholars for whom material culture was a central concern, in fields that provided constant reminders of how many artifacts, and lives, have been lost in the course of ancient and modern imperial adventures alike.

Working frequently in earlier periods, I am concerned about the steady drift of literary studies toward a heavy concentration on the past two centuries, even the past fifty years: just 1 percent of the history of literacy to date. We have become increasingly adept at deconstructing racism, imperialism, and more recently speciesism while ignoring the creeping presentism in much of our work. Yet even to understand the consequences of modern imperialisms, for instance, it is helpful to attend to the many empires that came before them. In “Prolegomena to a Cosmopolitanism in Deep Time,” Bruce Robbins has called for a “temporal cosmopolitanism” that would compare the literatures of such disparate empires as the Persian, the Ottoman, and the Chinese together with the later European empires, without either romanticizing precapitalist empires or letting the European ones off the hook. In the following chapters, I draw as often from older periods as from the past century when I bring forward literary examples—actually comparing some literature—to illustrate a question of method or approach. These examples range from Shulgi of Ur in the late third millennium BCE to Ovid and Apuleius in Rome, Murasaki Shikibu in Heian Japan and Higuchi Ichiyō in the Meiji Period, James Joyce, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Marguerite Yourcenar in the twentieth century, and contemporary global writers including Yoko Tawada and the Korean American internet duo Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries.

A running theme in this book will be the long-standing tension between inclusive and exclusive visions of comparative study. This tension has surfaced at every level—socially, ideologically, institutionally, in terms of the literature being studied, and in terms of theoretical approaches. Comparative literature has roots in the disparate perspectives of the aristocratic de Staël and the populist Herder, evolving through the nineteenth century in unstable combinations of cosmopolitanism and nationalism. These early trends have translated institutionally into comparatists’ passive-aggressive relations to national literature departments, into Ivy League condescension to Midwestern state schools, and into internecine
conflicts between Europeanists versus postcolonialists versus students of world literature. These oppositions too often yield exclusivist position-takings that limit our ability to build solidarity as we all struggle within our institutions and in our wider society. We need to brush the discipline’s history against the grain: to see why promising avenues were shut down a century and more ago; to recover common grounds of comparison from differing perspectives; to realize how many writers remain neglected—or are newly eclipsed—in our seemingly ever-expansive era; and to consider how we can reconfig our persistently conservative institutional practices in order to realize comparative literature’s progressive goals.

Not formed around any set literary canon, critical method, or institutional structure, comparative literature is the sum of its answers to the vexed questions that arise when we look closely into its organizing principles. With political debate becoming increasingly polarized in our troubled times, I have found it useful to take an extended look at the varied politics of comparative studies. This is a running theme throughout the book and is highlighted in chapter 3, which follows the initial chapters on origins and emigrations and then leads into the disciplinary terms “theories,” “languages,” “literatures,” “worlds,” and “comparisons,” with each chapter building on the previous ones. A discipline’s agenda in a typical decade could be shaped by debates over any one of these key terms; today we confront them all at once. If we fail to find creative ways to deal with these disputed questions, comparative literature will disintegrate amid their competing vectors. Conversely, however, the social and intellectual upheavals we face can prompt us toward a deeper understanding of the discipline’s achievements, its persistent internal contradictions, and its future possibilities.

My central theme is that there is a history that everyone interested in comparative study ought to possess, and a cluster of perennial questions that each of us should come to terms with, whatever our institutional location, whether we are full-time or periodic comparatists, and however variously each of us may formulate the syllabi we design, the research questions we ask, and the ways we seek to intervene on our campuses and in society at large. Sixty years ago, in the sparkling “Polemical Introduction” to Anatomy of Criticism (1957), Northrop Frye insisted that any dis-
cipline worth its salt should be conceivable as “a coherent and systematic study, the elementary principles of which could be explained to any intelligent nineteen-year-old” (14). To build support for comparative study in difficult times, we need to do better at formulating our principles and explaining them to intelligent nineteen-year-olds, to our puzzled life partners, and to harried fiftysomething deans.

This is what any discipline needs to do. We shouldn’t fear—or flatter ourselves—that comparative literature has become so expansive and various that it can no longer be conceived as a discipline at all but instead has become an “Indiscipline” (Ferris), some “wraithlike” entity (Saussy) haunting Bill Readings’s University in Ruins. Northrop Frye’s response to the theoretically unreflective close readings of the 1950s was to situate the work of practical criticism within a broad framework, a poetics of literature. So too, introducing the 2006 ACLA report, Haun Saussy proposed that the discipline “needs, as its manual of procedures, not a theory (a philosophy or an ideology) but a poetics (an elucidation of the art of making, as applied to its own practices)” (“Exquisite Cadavers,” 23–24). In the following chapters, surveying comparative literature’s history, its present tensions, and its future prospects, I attempt to reframe the exfoliating variety of comparative studies today. An anatomy of comparison, you might say; a disciplinary poetics.
Index

Abhinavagupta, 162–64
Aboulela, Leila, 182–83
Abu-Lughod, Janet, 319
academic conferences, 4, 118, 119, 183, 185, 228, 334–36
academic profession, 3–7, 30, 92, 116, 279, 334–39; colonialism in, 89; Spitzer on, 79–80. See also universities
Achebe, Chinua, 122, 229, 231, 274
Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum, 33–39, 44–48
Adorno, Theodor W., 83, 108, 134, 143, 149
Aeschylus, 283
Akunin, Boris, 209
Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, 289
American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), 4, 84, 86–87, 96–97, 334–36, 339; reports by: see Bernheimer Report; Greene, Thomas; Heise, Ursula; Saussy, Haun
Anandavardhana, 162–64
Anderson, Benedict, 41, 266, 314, 329–31
Anna and the King of Siam (film), 326
Apter, Emily, 194, 196, 268, 274, 281, 298; on periodization, 318; on Spitzer, 65, 71; on translation, 177–81
Apuleius, 9, 105, 321–23
Arac, Jonathan, 288–89
Arantes, Paulo Eduardo, 147
Arendt, Hannah, 299, 318
Ariosto, Ludovico, 246
Aristophanes, 42, 103
Aristotle, 153
Arnold, Matthew, 104, 241
Assmann, Jan, 320, 343
Asturias, Miguel Ángel, 229–30, 264
Atwood, Margaret, 102, 107, 197
Auerbach, Clemens, 71
Auerbach, Erich, 8, 52, 62–63, 66, 70–73, 75n3, 101, 110, 126–27, 151; Eurocentrism of, 286; perspectivism and, 303; prophecy of, 197–98; Wellek on, 304
Augustine, 140
Austen, Jane, 108, 110, 317
Aziz (“Art Fact” blog), 341
Azuaje-Alamo, Manuel, 271n1
Badiou, Alain, 232
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 125–26, 130, 272–73
Balakian, Anna, 52, 66, 84–85, 88, 90, 96, 97; surrealism and, 85, 104, 120, 203
Balzac, Honoré de, 138–39, 152
Baldensperger, Ferdinand, 93–94
Bareta, Pío, 193
Barish, Evelyn, 132, 134–35
Barlowe, Wayne, 241–42
Barolini, Teodolinda, 245–46
Barth, John, 257
Bassnett, Susan, 200, 338
Baudelaire, Charles, 133, 224
Becker, Howard, 149
Beckett, Samuel, 248, 282
Beecroft, Alexander, 287
Beil, Ulrich, 19
Belcher, Wendy, 200
Bender, Thomas, 111
Benjamin, Walter, 149
Bennett, Arnold, 261
Beowulf, 214, 259, 264

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
INDEX

Berczik, Árpád, 45–46
Bermann, Sandra, 200
Bernheimer Report, 8, 225, 233, 334
Bhabha, Homi, 125, 185, 295
Bharata, 157
Bhattacharyya, Baidik, 14, 338
Binet, Laurent, 134n2
Birns, Nicholas, and Juan E. De Castro, 286
Blackmur, R. P., 110, 120
Blake, William, 110
Blessing, James, 86–88
Bloom, Harold, 123–24, 129; The Anxiety of Influence, 112–13, 151, 303
Boitani, Piero, and Emilia Di Rocco, 279–80
Bolaño, Roberto, 286
Bosch, Hieronymus, 240
Bourdieu, Pierre, 148, 288
Bourget, Paul, 215
Boym, Svetlana, 14, 338
Brady, Christopher, 224
Brandes, Georg, 35, 45, 94, 227–28, 322
Brando, Marlon, 327, 342
Brasillach, Robert, 137
Brassai, Samuel, 33–34, 36–37
Braudel, Fernand, 310, 319
Brazilian literary scholarship, 147–50
Brecht, Bertolt, 149, 257
Brennan, Timothy, 324–25
Breton, André, 120, 203, 269, 339
Brewster, Kingman, 99
Broch, Hermann, 263, 285
Brooke-Rose, Christine, 183–85
Brooks, Peter, 98, 112, 131
Brown, Marshall, 274–77, 281
Brown, Norman O., 106
Buck, Pearl, 58
Buescu, Helena Carvalhão, 273, 339
Bulgakov, Mikhail, 269
Bulson, Eric, 287
Burkart, Rosemarie, 72, 74, 77
Burke, Kenneth, 109, 316
Burton, Richard, 158
Burton, Robert, 105–6
Bush, George W., 101, 342
Butler, Judith, 224
Buzzati, Dino, 149
Byron, George Gordon, Lord, 12, 28, 212, 257
Caillié, René, 166n1, 168
Calasso, Roberto, 171
Calinescu, Matei, 320–21
Calvino, Italo, 260–61, 270
Camões, Luís de, 323n2
Candido, Antonio, 27, 147–50, 156
Canetti, Elias, 285–86
canon and canonicity, 7, 110, 145, 148, 207, 223–33, 294; de Man and, 143; expansion of, 120, 224–25, 228, 278; the “hypercanon,” 225–33; “lonely canonicals,” 35; major and minor authors, 225–29; “pedagogical,” 273; of theory, 145, 151
Cantemir, Dimitrie, 269
Cao Shunqing, 312
Cao Xueqin, 55, 155, 317
Carpentier, Alejo, 263
Carroll, Lewis, 105, 124, 271n1, 342
Cártărescu, Mircea, 269, 286
Carter, Jimmy, 317
Casanova, Pascale, 17, 40, 148, 267, 295–97, 338
Cather, Willa, 221n2
Catullus, 269
Cavafy, C. P., 149
Cavell, Stanley, 115
Caws, Mary Ann, 73, 278
Céline, Louis-Ferdinand, 82, 136
Cérf, Bennett, 222
Cervantes, Miguel de, 130, 166, 193, 214, 216, 261, 283
Césaire, Aimé, 120n3
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 323
Chamberlain, Neville, 282
Chatterjee, Partha, 156
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 18, 54, 106, 214
Cheah, Pheng, 296–300, 302, 317–18, 329, 338
INDEX • 377

Chiang Kai-shek, 56, 58, 63
Chon I, 272
Chow, Rey, 230
Christie, Agatha, 209, 262
Churchill, Winston, 61–62
Clendinnen, Inga, 343
Coetzee, J. M., 229–30
Coleridge, Samuel T., 256, 305
Coletti, Vittorio, 43
Columbus, Christopher, 218
comparative literature: categorical stereotyping in, 265–68; as “contrastive literature,” 307, 309; current status and approaches of, 4–7, 9–11, 224–25, 279, 309–18, 324–25, 334–47; decline and revival of, 334–35; defined, 1; development of, 2–5, 7–10, 12–49, 85–121, 128, 174, 176, 304, 306; early charges against, 174, 176; elitism in, 90–91, 96; emigrants’ contributions to, 50–85, 91, 95–98, 110–20, 130, 169; first journal of, 33; as “foreign trade” (Wellek), 91, 94, 129, 207; gender bias in, 52, 89–91, 117; graduate students and, 4, 6, 79–80, 87–90, 92–93, 199; inclusive vs. exclusive approaches to, 9–10, 313; as “literary tourism,” 281, 296; philological roots of, 13–14, 174, 177; “plural comparativism,” 310; politics of, 8, 10, 84, 87–88, 93, 108, 115–17, 120; presentism in, 9, 320; resistance to, 88, 174, 207–8, 225, 230, 258, 307–8, 312–13; rivalry and strife in, 90–95, 121, 174–75, 208; scope and limits of, 1–6, 11, 286–92, 303–33; university funding for, 4, 86–88, 169–70; utopianism of, 84–86. See also Eurocentrism; literary theory; world literature
Conrad, Joseph, 108, 110–12, 149, 194, 323, 330; Wells and, 261
Constant, Benjamin, 15, 23, 26
Confucian classics, 53, 56–57, 63, 283, 342
Corneille, Pierre, 18
Corneliussen, Hilde G., and Jill Walker Rettberg, 236
Correia dos Santos, Carolina, 147
Cortázar, Julio, 229
cosmopolitanism, 9, 15, 31–32, 47, 267, 284, 307; as “global nomadism,” 312; Lin Yutang and, 62–63; locally grounded, 215; methodological, 315–16; Posnett on, 39–43. See also internationalism; universalism
Coste, Didier, 279, 280
Cristofaro, Francesco de, 281
Croce, Benedetto, 126, 180
Cromwell, Oliver, 216
Culler, Jonathan, 109, 125, 129, 191n6
Curtius, Ernst Robert, 104
Dabashi, Hamid, 286–87
Dai Dudu, Li Tiezi, and Zhang An, 341–43
Dalí, Salvador, 339, 343
Dante Alighieri, 3, 54, 75, 99, 107, 117, 224, 269–70, 283; in anthologies, 278, 280; Longfellow’s translation of, 240, 245; painting of, 341–43
Dante’s Inferno (video game), 237–42, 245–46
Daudet, Alphonse, 215
David, Jérôme, 22
Davies, Robertson, 107
Defoe, Daniel, 130, 214, 288
de Graef, Ortwin, 131, 134–35, 141
deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, 312
de Man, Paul, 4, 8, 52, 97, 116, 123–24, 130–42, 151, 161, 337–38; collaborationist writings by, 124, 131; Kaplan and, 135–38; Johnson and, 138–42, 155; Said and, 112, 115, 116
Demosthenes, 12
Denecke, Wiebke, 287
Dening, Walter, 289–91
Derrida, Jacques, 115, 116–17, 125, 131, 144, 156, 160, 162, 164; on binaries, 266; Cheah and, 298, 299, 318; de Man on, 151; Magliola and, 306–7; pharma-kon concept of, 141; Spivak’s translation of De la grammatologie, 116–17, 120, 144n4, 256

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Desai, Anita, 66
Detienne, Marcel, 309–12
Détrie, Muriel, 190
Devi, Mahasweta, 119
de Vries, Hent, 338–39
Dewey, John, 51–52
D’haen, Theo, 323
Dickens, Charles, 111, 295
Diderot, Denis, 12, 190
Dimitrov, Martin, 134
Dimock, Wai Chee, 299
Dinnerstein, Dorothy, 139–40
Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante (painting), 341–42
Domínguez, César, 269
Donne, John, 104
Doré, Gustave, 240
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 169, 193, 209, 269–70, 278, 280, 282, 340
Douglas, Mary, 7, 98
Doyle, Arthur Conan, 64, 209, 255–56, 260
Drieu la Rochelle, Pierre, 137
Dumas, Alexandre, 149
Duras, Marguerite, 227
Ďurišin, Dionýz, 259, 262, 265
Durrans, Stéphanie, 221n2

Eagleton, Terry, 125
Eastwood, Clint, 129n1
Eco, Umberto, 254, 260–62
Edelstein, Ludwig, 127
Edmond, Jacob, 339, 341
Eikhenbaum, Boris, 275
Einstein, Albert, 341–42
Eliot, George, 108
Eliot, T. S., 104, 131, 180, 219, 264–65
Emerson, Caryl, 125
Emmerich, Karen, 200
Emmerich, Michael, 286
Enzensberger, Hans Magnus, 295–96
Erpenbeck, Jenny, 209
Escher, M. C., 343
Étiemble, René, 128–29, 166–73, 189–90, 206, 279, 307; prophecy of, 195–98; Google translation of, 201–2; on translating poetry, 203–4
Ette, Ottmar, 133–34
Eurocentrism, 97, 128, 145, 157, 183, 190, 223–24, 282, 305; in anthologies, 278, 280–82; Euro-American theory, 130, 145, 155, 232, 280
Even-Zohar, Itamar, 200

Fagles, Robert, 171n2, 199–200
Fang, Weigui, 338
Fanon, Frantz, 125, 143–45, 148, 150, 183
Farah, Nuruddin, 299
Faulkner, William, 263, 265, 270, 283
Felman, Shoshana, 131, 141
Felski, Rita, 313
feminist literary criticism, 52, 117–19, 124, 139–41
Ferris, David, 11
Fielding, Henry, 130, 214
Final Fantasy (video game series), 234, 244n7
Flaubert, Gustave, 3
folk songs and ballads, 15, 38, 40, 45–47;
Herder and, 16–19, 22, 33, 47; Hungarian, 33–34, 37–38, 45; Indian (bhakti), 155
Ford Foundation, 89
Foster, John Burt, 286
Foucault, Michel, 109–10, 112, 115, 123–25, 224
Frankfurt School, 123–24, 129
French Revolution, 15–17, 29
Freud, Sigmund, 66–67, 110, 112, 140
Frick, Grace, 220–22
Friday, Nancy, 139–40
Friederich, Werner, 2–3, 85, 87, 93–94, 337
Friedman, Susan Stanford, 313, 319–20
Friedman, Thomas, 288
Frost, Robert, 180
Furst, Lilian R., 52, 66–70, 74, 79, 83, 98, 304–5
Frye, Northrop, 110, 112, 114, 120, 122, 125, 126, 129, 288; Anatomy of Criticism, 10–11, 102–8, 128, 317, 346
Gallagher, Susan, 273
Galsworthy, John, 229
INDEX • 379

Ganguly, Debjani, 338
García Márquez, Gabriel, 228–30, 263–65, 270, 283, 329
Genette, Gérard, 125, 152
Gervinus, Georg Gottfried, 19, 31, 34
Ghalib, 204–5, 206, 213, 231
Ghosh, Amitav, 299
Giamatti, A. Bartlett, 98–100, 111
Gikandi, Simon, 299
Gilgamesh, Epic of, 190–91, 237; Final Fantasy and, 234–35
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 124
Glissant, Édouard, 125, 148, 299
globalization, 4–5, 124, 129, 176, 189, 296, 298, 300, 336, 339
glossolalia, 178–80
Gnisci, Armando, 125
Godzich, Wlad, 190–91
Goedicke, Karl, 48
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 19, 21, 23, 28, 47, 262, 264, 342; Weltliteratur and, 31, 34, 38, 269, 282, 295
Gogol, Nikolai, 285
GoWilt, Christopher, 329
Golden, William, 136
Golding, William, 259
Goldmann, Lucien, 143
Goncourt brothers, 215
Gordimer, Nadine, 227, 230, 293
Gorky, Maxim, 342
Graff, Gerald, 142
Grahame, Kenneth, 262
Gramsci, Antonio, 110
Grand Theft Ovid (performance piece), 242–46, 252
Green, Geoffrey, 70
Greenblatt, Stephen, 122
Greene, Roland, 139
Grimm, Jacob, 31–32
Grimm, Petra, and Heinrich Badura, 244
Guérard, Albert, 27, 94–95, 207–8, 269
Guillén, Claudio, 306
Guillén, Jorge, 306
Guillory, John, 136, 277
Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, 76
Gundolf, Friedrich, 76
Gupta, Suman, 338
Gutiérrez Nájera, Manuel, 215, 223
Hamann, Johann Georg, 21
Hamsun, Knut, 227–28
Haneda Masashi, 286
Hartley, L. P., 156
Hartman, Geoffrey, 112, 122–24, 131–32
Hassan, Wail S., 180–81
Hatcher, Anna Granville, 77
Hayot, Eric, 236, 254, 258, 267–68, 319, 337, 338
Hazard, Paul, 84–85
Hazlitt, William, 229
Hegel, G.W.F., 158, 266, 298, 299, 318; on epics, 315; on poetry and translation, 203
Heidegger, Martin, 134, 299
Heise, Ursula, 337
Helgesson, Stefan, 150, 267
Heller-Roazen, Daniel, 178
Hemon, Aleksandar, 299
Herder, Johann Gottfried, 8, 9, 13–23, 31, 37–38, 41, 48, 80, 198, 299; folk literature and, 16–19, 22, 33, 47, 262; “the Herder effect,” 17
Hesiod, 280
Hesse, Hermann, 175
Hess-Lüttich, Ernest, 236
Higonnet, Margaret, 52–53
Higuchi Ichiyō, 9, 182, 228, 232–33, 289, 291–92
Hinojosa, Christopher, 262
Hitchcock, Peter, 329, 338
Hitler, Adolf, 62, 76, 82, 109, 282
Hizakurige (Jippensha Ikku), 169
Hollander, Robert, 246
Holquist, Michael, 98, 125
Homer, 1, 42, 171n2, 200, 203, 237, 315, 342, 345
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 111
Horace, 158, 341
Horkheimer, Max, 83
Horta, Paulo Lemos, 267
Howard, Joan, 220
Hu Shih, 50–56, 59–60, 97, 208
Huysmans, Joris-Karl, 314
Hyman, Mac, 222
Ibn Shu-yung, 51–52
Jervis, Charles, 214
Jhabvala, Ruth Prawer, 66
Johnson, Barbara, 138–42, 155, 181, 223
Jones, William, 13, 32, 156
Jordan, Michael, 342
Krsteva, Julia, 52, 116–17, 123–24, 134n2, 147, 248
Kukrit Pramoj, 325–33
Kundera, Milan, 282, 284, 294
Kurosawa, Akira, 327
Labé, Louise, 277
Lacan, Jacques, 155
Lagerlöf, Selma, 271, 294
Lahiri, Jhumpa, 254
Lamping, Dieter, 269, 293–95
language study and proficiency, 6, 86, 89–90, 98–99, 165–77, 188–206; sliding scale of, 191. See also translation
Las Casas, Bartolomé de, 216–19, 223
Lautréamont, Comte de, 101
Lawall, Sarah, 281–82
Lazarus, Neil, 325
Leerssen, Joep, 2, 42
Lefevere, André, 200
Lennon, Brian, 184
Lentricchia, Frank, 108
Levin, Harry, 1–3, 5, 66, 306; “compare the literature” anecdote by, 1, 336; “Report on Professional Standards,” 86, 90–92; Thomas anecdote by, 303
Levine, Suzanne Jill, and Katie Lateef-Jan, 338
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 312
Levy, Lital, 200, 339, 340
Lewis, C. S., 260–61
Li Bai, 342
libraries and archives, 12–13, 57, 285, 339–40, 343–44; Moretti and, 301; in Slovenia, 209–11, 252
Lin Tai-yi, 60–64
Lin Yutang, 51–53, 56–65, 110, 342
Lispector, Clarice, 231, 233, 324–25
literary markets, 213–23
literature, idea of: Frye on, 105–8; Herder on, 16; Horace on, 341; Moretti on, 288, 296–97; Mufti on, 288
Littau, Karen, 236
Llovet, Jordi, et al., 125, 127–28, 150
Loeb Classical Library, 192, 203
Löffler, Sigfrid, 293–95, 298–99, 302
Loraux, Nicole, 312
Lovejoy, Arthur, 82–83
Lough, Robert, 14
Lukács, Georg, 108, 143–44, 149, 264
Luther, Martin, 54
Lu Xun, 60, 227–28, 289
Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria, 147, 149
Machiavelli, Niccolò, 212, 285
Macksey, Richard, 71n2, 77–78
Magliola, Robert, 306
Mahābhārata, 160–61
Mahadeviakka, 155
Mahfouz, Naguib, 227–28, 231
Mailier, Norman, 280
Maine, Henry, 42
Mallarmé, Stéphane, 136, 314
Mallette, Karla, 146
Malory, Thomas, 234
Mandelstam, Osip, 182
Manea, Norman, 176
Mani, B. Venkat, 340, 343
Mann, Thomas, 175, 222, 282, 331
Mao Zedong, 341–42
Márai, Sándor, 35–36, 171
Maran, René, 288
Marcus, Steven, 110–11, 111n2
Marcus Aurelius, 59, 321
Marcuse, Herbert, 106–7
Marie de France, 219, 220
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, 180
Marling, William, 329
Marno, David, 38
Martí Monterde, Antoni, 37, 150
Marx, Karl, 110, 144, 149, 156, 299, 314
McDougal, Stuart, 334
media studies, 234, 236. See also new media and literature
Melas, Natalie, 46, 52, 314, 324
Meltzl, Hugo, 30–40, 44–48, 196
Melville, Herman, 264, 283, 345
Menand, Louis, 132
Menander, 103
Mencius, 62
Mengestu, Dinaw, 299
Mensel, Ernst Heinrich, 96
Merwin, W. S., 204–5
Meyer, Richard, 48
Meyer-Lübke, Wilhelm, 79
Mickiewicz, Adam, 212
Miller, D. A., 108–9
Miller, J. Hillis, 112, 123–24, 131
Milton, John, 18, 104, 213, 216, 218
Milne, A. A., 262
Miner, Earl, 129, 154
Mir, Mir Muhammad Taqi, 205
Mishima, Yukio, 170, 331–32
Mitko, Thimi, 48
Moberg, Bergur, 226
modernism, 111, 128, 180, 225, 231, 247, 291, 328; and modernity, 261, 265–66, 318–25, 331–33
Montaigne, Michel de, 23
More, Thomas, 81, 214–15, 254
Moretti, Franco, 8, 52, 145, 208, 264–65, 267, 277, 287–90, 296–99; critiques of, 296–97; distant reading program of, 177, 192–93, 289, 298, 300–302
Mori Ōgai, 232
Morrison, Toni, 225, 231, 263
Moser, Christian, and Linda Simonis, 338
Mo Yan, 270
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 81, 245
Mufti, Aamir, 288, 338
Muhsin Khan, Muhammad, 178
Mu Jen, 272
Mullaney, Thomas, 60
Müller, Herta, 176
Muntatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker), 228, 323, 332
Murakami, Haruki, 193, 329
Murasaki Shikibu, 9, 130, 154–55, 291, 308, 317; Mishima and, 332; translations of *Genji*, 169, 170–71, 286; video game adaptations of, 234, 238
Murugan, Perumal, 171–72
Musil, Robert, 285
Nabokov, Dmitri, 220
Nabokov, Vladimir, 76, 219–23, 248, 339
Naipaul, V. S., 299
Napoleon Bonaparte, 12, 15, 17, 23–25, 28–29, 342
Narayan, R. K., 230
Nathan, Leonard, 157–63
nationalism (and national identity), 9, 19–20, 31–34, 54, 180–81, 207–9, 280, 311; Anderson on, 266; Balakian on, 85; foreign language study and, 196; French, 311–12; German, 15, 17, 22, 31–32, 34; Guérard on, 94–95, 207–8; Herder and, 17–20, 22–23; literary markets and, 213, 222–23; Meltzl on, 37; Posnett on, 41; supranationalism, 262–65; transnationalism, 219–23; universities and, 88, 91, 94–95, 174–75; Wellek on, 91, 94. See also literary theory: national contexts of
National Defense Education Act (NDEA), 86–89
National Science Foundation, 89
Necker, Jacques, 15–16, 26
Nelson, Lowry, 98–100
Nerval, Gérard de, 136
Neveu, Gérard, de, 136
New Criticism, 103, 116, 120, 157–58, 162, 247; New New Criticism, 108
new media and literature, 234–46. See also electronic literature
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 148, 295
Nguyen Du, 169, 190
Nguyen Tran Huan, 169
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 111, 331, 342
Nobel Prize, 58, 176, 227, 272–73, 285
Noli, Fan, 284
Nooteboom, Cees, 286
Norris, Christopher, 132
novels: changing status of, 25–26, 138, 154; terms for, 308, 317; theories of, 128, 130, 289
Nwana, Pita, 205
Oe Kenzaburo, 270–73, 284
Oesterley, Hermann, 48
Ondaatje, Michael, 299
Orientalism, 260, 266, 326; Said on, 113
Orwell, George, 62, 104, 259
Ovid, 9, 158, 182, 248–49, 252, 321. See also Grand Theft Ovid
Özbek, Yasemin, 72
Packard, Vance, 104
Palencia-Roth, Michael, 307
Pamuk, Orhan, 227, 262, 269–70, 339–40
Parker, Frank, 101
Parla, Jale, 288–89
Paton, Alan, 230
Paul, Saint, 178
Pavel, Thomas, 254
Pavić, Milorad, 190–91
Peake, Mervyn, 259
Pelein, Victor, 193, 195
Percy, Thomas, 19
Pereira da Silva, J. M., 27
Pericles, 62
periodization, 125, 318–33
peripherality, 27, 146, 147, 149, 215, 227, 232, 287, 288, 297, 333; semiperipheral regions, 23, 215, 289, 331
perspectivism, 303–5
Petőfi, Sándor, 45
Petrarch, 153, 177, 212, 274–77
Peyre, Henri, 78, 86
Phillips, John, 216–19
philology, 13–14, 174, 177; de Man and, 151; Herder and, 22; nationalism and, 31–32; “resistance philology,” 71, 83; Spitzer and, 77–81
Piechocki, Katharina, 82n
Pišťanek, Peter, 193
Pizer, John, 269
Plato, 62, 143n3
Plečnik, Jože, 209–11
Poggioli, Renato, 1, 66
Pollock, Sheldon, 14, 146, 164, 189, 314–15
Pope, Alexander, 200
Popol Vuh, 345
Porter, Catherine, 200
postcolonial studies, 5, 10, 43, 53, 124–25, 145, 149, 281, 295, 313, 325, 334, 336, 339; Balakian and, 120n3; canonicity and, 224, 229–31; Cheah and, 299–300, 317–18; modernization and, 319; Said and, 110, 125; scholarship on, 338; socialist realism in, 324; Spivak and, 117; Warwick Research Collective and, 193, 199
postmodernism, 231, 257, 261, 319, 321
poststructuralism. See structuralism and poststructuralism
Pound, Ezra, 248, 322
power, forms of, 104, 110, 112–14, 118, 158, 164, 200, 208; poetic, 162, 203; religious, 179, 216
Premchand, Munshi, 229, 233
Prendergast, Christopher, 267–68, 278
Prešeren, France, 211–13, 223, 252
Prešeren, Janz Krstnik, 211–12, 252
Pressman, Jessica, 246–48
Primic, Julija, 211
Pritchett, Frances W. (mother and daughter), 204–6
Proust, Marcel, 110, 112, 136, 174, 235, 261, 332; scholarship on, 152, 175, 227–28, 231, 331
Puchner, Martin, 282n3, 343
Pushkin, Alexander, 209, 342
Pynchon, Thomas, 283
Qian, Suoqiao, 63
Quint, David, 101
Qur’an, 178, 183, 203
Rabelais, Francois, 80–83, 105, 179, 214, 269, 272
Racine, Jean, 18–19, 280
Radhakrishnan, R., 313
Raffa, Guy, 246
INDEX • 385

Steiner, George, 52, 178, 179
Stendhal, 108, 282, 285
Sterne, Laurence, 214
Stimpson, Catherine, 122
Stoppard, Tom, 245–46
Story of the Stone. See Cao Xueqin
Strachey, Lytton, 344
structuralism and poststructuralism, 8, 102, 108, 112, 120, 126, 224
Sturm-Trigonakis, Elke, 248, 294
Swift, Jonathan, 110
Szabo, Levente T., 48
Tageldin, Shaden, 181
Tagore, Rabindranath, 227, 233, 342
Tale of the Heike, 234
Tamil literature, 48, 145, 171–72
Tanpinar, Ahmet Hamdi, 193
Tao Yuanming, 249
Tasso, Torquato, 269
Tawada, Yoko, 9, 184–88
Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 104
Thomas, Dylan, 303
Thomsen, Mads Rosendahl, 35, 268–69, 299
Thorkelin, Grimir Jonsson, 214
Thornber, Karen, 287
Thousand and One Nights, The, 57, 194, 260
Tihanov, Galin, 275, 285
Toer, Pramoedya Ananta, 228–29, 329–33
Tolkien, J.R.R., 9, 253–65, 271
Tolstoy, Leo, 50, 52, 169, 254, 282, 285–86; Anna Karenina, 269–70; War and Peace, 235
Tourney, Gideon, 200
translation, 6n, 143–44, 170–74, 188–94, 199–200, 213–15, 274–75; challenges of, 172–73, 177–81; Etienne on, 168–70; fictional treatments of, 182–88; Google Translate program, 179, 201–2; new media and, 236; poetry and, 180, 203–6; traduttore traditore maxim, 172–73, 284; untranslatability, 157, 177–81, 204, 316
translation studies, 174, 189, 199–200, 281, 338
Trilling, Diana, 111
Trilling, Lionel, 107, 110–11
Trotzky, Leon, 193
Tsui, Jing, 60–61
Twain, Mark, 270–71, 283
Tyler, Royall, 170, 171n2
Ugly American, The (film), 327
Ungureanu, Delia, 339–40
universalism, 32, 41–42, 47, 59, 86, 155, 307, 310; Euro-universalism, 305, 314, 317; relativist, 316
universities: Douglas on, 98; French, 91, 94, 101, 128, 279; growth of, 30, 128; Italian, 280–81; nationalist departments in, 88, 91, 94–95, 174–75, 207–8; in 1960s, 88–90; rivalry in, 88. See also academic profession
Untermeyer, Louis, 180
Urquhart, Thomas, 214
Vālmikī. See Rāmāyaṇa
Van Looy, Jan, and Jan Baetens, 238
Venuti, Lawrence, 169, 178, 200, 232; on anthologies, 278; on Frost, 180; on translation theory, 173, 178, 275
Vermeulen, Pieter, 267
Vernant, Jean-Pierre, 312
Vespucci, Amerigo, 254
Vico, Giambattista, 110–11, 198
Vidal-Naquet, Pierre, 312
Virgil, 3, 12, 200, 214, 321
Vladislavić, Ivan, 193–94
Vogt-William, Christine, 262
Voltaire, 18
Vossler, Kurt, 74
Wagner, Richard, 264
Walcott, Derek, 1, 229, 274
Waley, Arthur, 169–70
Walkowitz, Rebecca, 247–48, 319, 338
Wallerstein, Immanuel, 287
Walsh, Richard, 58
Wang, David Der-wei, 325
Warren, Austin, 125
Warwick Research Collective, 193–95, 199, 298, 325
Washburn, Dennis, 170

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Watanabe Karuo, 272
Water Margin, The (Chinese novel), 54
Watt, Ian, 128, 130, 265, 317
Weinrich, Harald, 189
Weisinger, Herbert, 264–65, 202
Wells, H. G., 261
White, Edmund, 321
White, Hayden, 112, 115
Whitehead, S. B., 122–23
Wilde, Oscar, 108
Williams, Raymond, 122–23, 143, 301
Wilson, Horace Hayman, 14, 156–58
Wimsatt, William K., 162, 164
Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, 18–19
Wolfram von Eschenbach, 34
Wollaeger, Mark, and Matt Eatough, 319
Wood, Ralph, 261
Woolf, Virginia, 101, 227–28, 231, 261, 269; as eminent post-Victorian, 321; on women writers, 26
Wu Cheng’én, 13, 169
Wyatt, Thomas, 177, 277
Xie, Ming, 316
Xuanzang, 13, 14
Yeats, William Butler, 116, 117
Yokota-Murakami, Takayuki, 307–9, 317
Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, 9, 247–52
Yourcenar, Marguerite, 9, 220–23, 263
Yu, Pauline, 307
Zabel, Blaž, 43
Zhang Longxi, 314
Zilberman, Regina, 133
Zogu, Ahmet, 283–84
Zola, Émile, 215, 232
Zook, Darren C., 323