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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 ethno-nationalisms 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 reconfigure 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.

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