

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Hutchinson, Ben (2022) Comparativism, or What We Talk about When We Talk about Comparing. Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures .

DOI

2096-4374(2022)01-0015-11

Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/95503/>

Document Version

Publisher pdf

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

***Comparativism* or What We Talk about When We Talk about Comparing**

⊙ Ben Hutchinson

University of Kent

Abstract: In this essay, I suggest that the study of comparative literature is subject to the same distorting pressures as the study of the Orient. “Comparativism,” as I call it, is like orientalism: both a description and a distortion. Constructing its critique in the process of comparing, it inherits deep foundations of historical, cultural, and geographical prejudice. As with Said’s orientalism, the cornerstone of this construction is West-Eastern (and North-Southern) paternalism, but it is far from the only building block: other obstacles include predetermined views of genre, medium, and even language. There is little, in fact, that is not grist to the mill of Western-educated critics. Eastern comparative methodologies, however, are no more innocent of power struggles than their Western counterparts; for one thing, the structural role of empire is shared by both West and East. Simply replacing one hemisphere with another will hardly recalibrate our critical compasses; wherever we are looking from, partiality of perspective is inevitable. The question, then, is whether comparativism constructs itself diversely in diverse circumstances, or whether its prejudices remain essentially the same despite the changing details of time and place. It is a matter, in other words, of the old comparative contest between similarity and difference. What do we talk about when we talk about comparing?

Keywords: comparativism, orientalism, comparative methodology, world literature

CLC: I1 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2022)01-0015-11

Doi: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202201002

Few books have had an impact on their discipline as far-reaching as that of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. For better or worse, Said’s epoch-defining study revolutionized how we see West-Eastern relations in the modern era, creating an army of postcolonial culture warriors. Asia, in all its immensity, was no longer to be understood as a mere geographical marker, but as a cultural concept, an exotic Other projected—and thereby distorted—onto the canvas of Western fantasies. Orientalism understood as the study of the Orient became “orientalism” understood as the construction of the Orient, with all that this implies in terms of prejudice and presupposition. Identity, Said showed us, was in the eye of the beholder.

Beyond any single aspect of his much-contested argument, one of the key consequences of Said’s work has been to render *all* methodological terminology potentially suspect. If orientalism suggests the distorting effects of cultural construction, might this not also be true of other areas and of other

“isms”—Arcticism, for instance, or Caribbeanism or Africanism? Methodology, we have learned, is not a neutral prism; the view from one part of the world onto another is never entirely disinterested. We are all standing somewhere.

The study of comparative literature, I want to suggest in what follows, is subject to the same distorting pressures as the study of the Orient. In fact, I would go further: it is not just *subject* to such pressures—it is *defined* by them, by the attempt to reflect on, to write about, and to do justice to the ricocheting reactions of one culture to another. “Comparativism,” as this essay calls it, is anything but disinterested: it constructs its critique in the process of comparing—or rather, it inherits it, building on deep foundations of historical, cultural, and geographical prejudice. As with Said’s orientalism, the cornerstone of this construction is West-Eastern (and North-Southern) paternalism, but it is far from the only building block: other obstacles include predetermined views of genre, medium, and even language. There is little, in fact, that is not grist to the will of Western-educated critics. As comparatists, we are beholden to our own preconceptions.

I must thus begin, in the spirit of full disclosure, with a disclaimer. Like everyone else, I come from somewhere specific, which in my case is the heart of the Western, European tradition. I can attempt to overcome my education through further education, through “provincializing” Europe, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s much-cited term, and learning to see the world from elsewhere. I can write a *Very Short Introduction* to comparative literature invoking an age of Global South and realigned peripheries, identifying Eurocentrism as “the great fear of contemporary criticism in an age of postcolonial globalization” (Hutchinson 8). What I cannot do, though, any more than anyone else can, is rewrite my origin or upbringing; what I cannot do is erase my own Eurocentric education. In the words of the old joke in response to a request for directions: I would not start from here. But I can *only* start from here, since I can only judge any future experience in contrast to those that I have already had. However hard I may strive to look beyond the limitations of my own life experience, I cannot unlearn—nor would I necessarily want to unlearn—decades of acculturation. None of our conceptions are immaculate; we are all contingent creatures of circumstance. We are always already compromised.

Writ large, such a paradox describes the position of comparative literature in the 21st century. The history of the discipline as it has developed in the West—and the *dominance* of the discipline as it has developed in the West—means that our approach to comparison is ineluctably predetermined: centuries of power structures press upon our attempts to resist them. The emergence of comparative approaches to languages in the colonial projects of British India or French North Africa; the evolution of competitive approaches to culture in the nation-building projects of 19th-century Europe; the pathos of “exile” as a driving force, both physically and metaphysically, of the mid-20th-century consolidation of the academic discipline: all these moments and more constitute, for better or worse, the contemporary comparatist’s inheritance.

Or such, at least, is the view from the West. An Eastern or Southern comparatist could—at least in principle—tell a different story about the development of comparative approaches to literature, a story uninfluenced by this Western, Northern narrative. Africans, to cite Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s argument in *Decolonizing the Mind*, do not need Europeans to tell them how to think; Asians did not require the arrival of European colonists to show them the importance, for the Early Modern period, of a *lingua franca* like Sanskrit (Pollock 59-80). We still have much to learn about the multifaceted, multipolar history of our discipline: a comparative history of comparative literature—as suggested by the present

issue's emphasis on "global" epistemologies—remains an obvious desideratum. Parallels between Western and Eastern spheres of influence are certainly not lacking: the importance of having numerous competing languages within a circumscribed cultural area is common to the emergence of comparative literature in both Europe and India, for instance, while the structural role of empire is shared by both West and East, whether in the British dominance of Asia in the 19th century or the Japanese cultural hegemony over China and Korea in the early 20th century (see Thornber 2009). Eastern comparative methodologies are no more innocent of power struggles than their Western counterparts.

Whatever the merits of dividing comparative cultures into monolithic blocs in this manner—simply replacing West with East, or North with South, will hardly recalibrate our critical compasses—the question that emerges from this juxtaposition is whether comparativism constructs itself diversely in diverse circumstances, or whether its prejudices remain essentially the same despite the changing details of time and place. It is a matter, in other words, of the old comparative contest between similarity and difference. Is there, in the final analysis, a limited, recurring number of methodological moves?

To answer this question, it will be helpful to distinguish between two kinds of comparativism. Let us call them, relying on the Kantian terms, *a priori* and *a posteriori* comparativism: where the former describes the distorting effects common to *all* modes of comparison, whatever their angle, the latter categorizes and classifies those effects contingent on specific cultural contexts. If *a priori* comparativism is epistemological, in other words, *a posteriori* comparativism is geopolitical. The relationship between the two—between similarity and difference—constitutes the sum total, one might say, of global comparative (pre)conditions.

The obvious starting-point for any consideration of the first form of comparativism lies in the term "comparative literature." Its very syntax is suggestive: what is the precise status of the adjective? The two main variations within the European tradition have the modifier dangling uneasily between tenses, with the Germanic present participle *vergleichend* implying an ongoing process where the Romanic *comparée* indicates completion. Viewed comparatively, the mess is almost metaphysical, evoking a continuum of comparison ranging from the logical German insistence on "work in progress" to the radical French implication that the literature *has already been* compared, and is now simply awaiting critical collection. English has neither comparing nor compared, but comparative: the primly methodological term avoids the question of tense implicit in many of the other European languages, proffering a quasi-scientific objectivity that looks back to its origins in the comparative philology of the early 19th century. The colonial history of this philology, however, tells us just how compromised such objectivity really is.

The term becomes more metaphysical still if we consider colonial philology from the other side. In Hindi, as well as in related Indian languages such as Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, or Telugu, comparative literature is known as *tulnātmak sahitya*. The adjective *tulnātmak* indicates something like "infused with comparison," literally understood as having the "soul" or *ātma* of comparison (*tulnā*). The stem *ātma* derives from the Sanskrit root *ātman*, a key Buddhist term that signifies a range of related ideas of self, breath, essence, or spirit (and that gives us, among other words, the German *Atem*). Writing in 1907, meanwhile, Rabindranath Tagore famously proposed the Bengali *vis̄va s̄ahitya* as the better term, insisting that world literature should be understood—pace the Goethean model of *Weltliteratur*—as a means of recalibrating the relationship between self and other

(Tagore 147-149). Tagore rejects what he sees as the problematic Western emphasis on the “nation,” emphasizing rather the dynamic, interdependent nature of literature, which he views not as “the mere total of works composed by different hands” but as a “part of man’s universal creativity.” Too many of us, warns Tagore, think of literature in the manner of a “rustic,” parcelling out patches of land piece by piece. Against such provincialism he offers his concept of *vis̥va s̥ahitya*, understood as the “universal spirit” manifesting itself through the verbal arts.¹

Whatever term for “comparative literature” we adopt, moreover, we must also consider the relationship between adjective and noun. Who is doing the comparing, and what is being compared? The intuitively obvious answers to these questions—respectively, critics and texts—are complicated by their contrast to cognate fields. “English literature” can describe any texts written in English (however complex its changing geopolitical contexts may be); even a syncretic term like “Indian” literature, with its twenty-two official languages, offers a readily identifiable relationship between adjective and noun, text and place. “Comparative,” however, is at best a shifting modifier, begging the question it would purport to answer. Who is comparing what to what?

The evasive nature of the modifier places, in turn, a peculiar pressure on the noun. Given that “comparative” indicates a methodology—and not, like almost all other comparable qualifiers (English, Indian, etc.), a field—it is singularly ill-matched to the substantive “literature.” It is much more accurate, albeit less elegant, to speak of comparative literary studies or comparative criticism, since it is at this point that the process of comparing takes place—and not at the level of literature itself, which is blessedly innocent of any operations we may undertake upon it. We work *on* English literature, but *in* comparative literature—unless, as with this and many other contributions to the present issue, we are reflecting upon its methodological presuppositions.

That this prepositional distinction is more than merely trivial suggests the particular pathology of comparative literature. It is *pre-positioned*: like few other disciplines in the Humanities, comparative literature is obsessed with its own theoretical framework, to the point where much contemporary comparativism might more accurately be termed comparative literary *theory*. Comparison, that is to say, is more theorized than practised: a mobile army of metaphors and metonymies, and it staggers from skirmish to skirmish in a state of constant civil war over its own basic premises. To say that this makes it a second-order discourse understates the case; as the corpses of dead and decaying theories pile up on top of each other, comparative literature flees ever further into third-, fourth-, and fifth-order levels of self-consciousness.² All criticism, to be sure, is writing about writing; but comparison is writing about writing about writing, with pieces like the present essay—a work of comparative theory about comparative approaches to comparative literature—operating at three or four removes from any original work of art. The potential for infinite regress is vertiginous.

Such, then, is the most basic *a priori* fact of comparativism. It is a machine for self-reflection, constantly turning back on itself in ever more intricate coils of comment and contextualization. One of the earliest disciplinary statements already suggests as much: Philarète Chasles, in his inaugural lecture of 1835 entitled “Littérature étrangère comparée,” (“Comparative Foreign Literature”) suggests that the aim of the discipline should be to “calculate the influence of thought upon thought” (13-39). Susan Bassnett, who cites this passage in her *Critical Introduction to Comparative Literature*, suggests that “a key word in that text is ‘influence,’” (13) but one might equally make a case for the preposition “upon,” understood as the marker of both mutual interaction (“this perpetual exchange upon the

individual nationalities”) and epistemological recursion (Chasles adds his thought upon thought upon thought, as does Bassnett, and as now do I). There is always another turn of the comparative screw.

The dangers of this are obvious. If the observer effect—the possibility that the act of observation may affect what is observed—risks distorting our relationship to all artistic processes, the comparer effect risks distorting our relationship to ourselves. For we are constantly second-guessing—and with essays like this one, third- and fourth-guessing—our own motives; we are constantly worrying over the ways in which we do and do not, should and should not, compare. The act of observing may alter the object, but the act of comparing alters the observer, in as much as she is forced to reflect on the presuppositions underlying her comparing, and then on the presuppositions underlying those presuppositions, and so on. Wherever it is based, whatever its inherited tradition, comparativism is defined by self-consciousness. No wonder it seems to be in a permanent state of identity crisis.

How, then, are we to prevent such self-consciousness from becoming crippling? How are we to cut the Gordian knot of endless recursion? One way to do so is to focus not on comparative literary studies, but on comparative *literature*: how do writers—whether intertextually allusive modernists such as James Joyce or T. S. Eliot, or interlinguistically elusive contemporaries such as Ngugi or Yōko Tawada—pursue comparison within creative, rather than critical writing? How is writing itself comparative, before we freight it with our secondary baggage? Smuggled back into the work of literature itself, comparison might escape the border police of our competing methodologies.

Another way, I think we can now say after several decades of ever more sophisticated meta-level discussions of comparative theory, is simply to return to the old-fashioned approach: to take two (or more) texts and compare them, without recourse to the slippery slope of second-order self-reflexivity. The naivety of such an undertaking will make the seasoned comparatist smile—what about all the power structures and prejudgments that it occludes?—but such is the approach taken by beginners in the field, by students or casual readers as yet blessedly unaware of the theoretical complications that await them. The observer’s perspective, in this prelapsarian model of comparison, does not consciously impede—however much it may unconsciously predetermine—the texts under discussion, and that is no little advantage. Comparative literature, after all, should be about *literature*, not just about comparison.

That we quickly lose such innocent epistemology is natural enough, and in itself no bad thing. No one wants to stay naïve forever. My state-of-nature story shows us, however, that evolving as a comparatist—learning the codes and catches of the discipline—comports losses as well as gains, chief among which is the growing distance between critic and text. Perhaps this is why the French term it *littérature comparée*: the comparison has already taken place by the time that the critic arrives to add her theoretical reflections to it. It is also, however, why comparative literature can only ever be an academic discipline, while English (or French, or Kenyan) literature is read and enjoyed by millions of unaffiliated citizens going about their daily lives. Comparative literature is a classic “inside baseball” topic, said one of the publishers of my *Very Short Introduction*, and he was not wrong. Like it or not, you have to be initiated to appreciate its full complexities.

There is a danger, then, that going deeper and deeper inside the ball will only bring us diminishing returns. Comparativism of this sort can only ever appeal to a small, self-selecting group, an unhappy few who focus not on the original work of art, but on the secondary (or tertiary) methodology. There is little to be gained, in my view, by relitigating the theory wars under another name, since this will

simply take the discipline ever further away from the ordinary reader. If they want to maintain and even broaden their potential audience, comparative critics are better advised to focus on the practice of comparison, on what they can learn by juxtaposing texts and contexts from different languages and traditions, rather than on endlessly competing, endlessly self-referential theories. Already in 1969, Harry Levin complained that “we spend far too much of our energy talking . . . about Comparative Literature and not enough comparing the literature” (89). Half a century later, this tendency has only become more pronounced.

Part of the problem, in any case, is that such theories themselves tend to reinforce the status quo by reproducing dominant, Western paradigms. Even when they seek to deconstruct critical hierarchies of West and East, North and South, comparative theorists assume perspectives premised on the European tradition. As Revathi Krishnaswamy argued in 2010, despite the good intentions of many scholars “the disciplines of comparative literature, literary theory, and comparative poetics [continue] to be Eurocentric pedagogical projects that reproduce colonial stereotypes and perpetuate a neo-colonial division of labour between the knowing west and the known rest” (401). Where non-Western theories or methodologies are, exceptionally, brought to the fore, they tend to be perceived as regionally specific—as the equivalent of “local colour” in books or films—and not as globally resonant; or they are patronized as having social value or historical interest, but little aesthetic legitimacy.³ Yet this, of course, is because the very terms of aesthetic legitimacy are (pre)determined by international—which is to say, Western—taste. As Krishnaswamy concludes, comparative approaches to literature should “support projects grounded in positivistic, empirical, materialistic thought, as well as those grounded in more anti-positivistic, deconstructive, or hermeneutical thinking” (416).

This is another way of saying, then, that the *a priori* comparative perspective must be complemented by its *a posteriori* counterpart. The first step towards acknowledging the *a posteriori* effects of comparativism is to reflect on how and why we choose given texts for comparison. Before we even think about what we do when comparing works of literature, that is to say, we need to think about what has led us to choose *these* works and not others. For this process itself is, of course, subject to all sorts of pressures, only some of which are in our conscious control. For one thing, we can only compare what we know—which means not only that we are beholden, even as we try to escape them, to the works with which we grew up, but also that we are beholden to the *forms* and *genres* with which we grew up. The novel, to take an obvious example, now predetermines the vast majority of what we see as prose, but it is of course a fairly recent invention. However, one defines its parameters—whether by looking back to its origins in *Don Quixote* at the start of the 17th century, or by looking forward to its development into *the* modern European genre of the 19th century—its pre-eminence really only stretches over a few hundred years (in essence, the period of bourgeois modernity). Franco Moretti has shown in *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* and *The Novel* that one can follow the variations of the genre around the world; but in doing so we are already creating a prism—and ultimately perhaps also, a prison—for comparison. Does it really make sense to call *The Tale of Genji* a novel, or do we do it a disservice in seeking to make it correspond to our anachronistic, predetermined idea of what prose should be? Does it help or hinder to compare older, non-Western works to our modern, Western models? In comparing two or more “novels,” we are not just comparing specific texts, but implicitly the whole history of the genre’s preconditions. In channelling us towards this form and not another one, comparison narrows our horizons as much as it expands them.

Narrowing down the topic is, of course, the precondition of any research project. Anyone who has ever supervised a doctoral thesis will know that there comes a moment where the student has to be encouraged not to keep broadening their ideas, but to zoom in on a specific research question, lest the whole thing become unmanageable. The problem with pursuing such a process as a comparatist, however, is that the methodology is predetermined by the terminology. Sherlock Holmes famously tells Watson that it is a cardinal sin to theorize before one is in full possession of all the data, and yet this is precisely what comparison obliges us to do. In theory, the “comparative” method offers the broadest of approaches, since its purview is—at least potentially—limitless; in practice, however, it anticipates these approaches, telling us how to read before we have even read. Imagine, to take a structural parallel, if I announce that I am working on and in Structuralist Literature, or Marxist Literature: there is nothing wrong with this, clearly, but the point is that my ideological inclination is already evident before I even begin discussing the literature. Comparison may offer the broadest of methodologies, but it is still a methodology, and as such it is far from the neutral arbiter that it may seem to be.

The most obvious way in which comparativism is very far from neutral—it is the topic of this issue—is in its geopolitical bias. From the moment that Hugó Meltzl defined his “principle of polyglottism,” in his editorial to the very first issue of *Acta Comparationis* in 1877, as exclusively European—all ten of his permitted languages were confined to the old continent—the attempt to reach beyond Europe has been one of the driving forces of the discipline. However laudable this intention, though, its very framing suggests that the terms are those of the West: languages identified as non-Western could only be considered, Meltzl notoriously wrote, when “Asian literatures finally come around to accepting our alphabet” (49). The idea, then, that comparative literature should acquire a more “global” epistemology—an idea that recurs throughout the history of the discipline—is itself, paradoxically, profoundly local, since it presupposes a (Western) core beyond which the discipline should develop. We have been struggling to escape the centre/peripheries model ever since.

It is in the very nature of a *posteriori* comparativism, in other words, that it should depend on a pre-existing prism. The philosophical logic of the term helps highlight the fact that comparative literature, as it has developed in Europe, works backwards from effects to causes: non-Western constructs—the Far East, the Global South—are seen from Western perspectives. While the West retains the right to define its own identity, to conceptualize and legitimize itself on its own terms, no such right is extended to other areas of the world, which must await the approval of the “international” community—translated into the *lingua franca* of English—with gated breath, supplicants at the borders of a self-satisfied, self-determining continent. The “Greenwich meridian” remains a European latitude.

What is there, to ask the key question of this issue, beyond such Eurocentrism? How can comparative literature find a new cartography, one that moves us away from the Mercator map of Western, Northern dominance? Two obvious answers propose themselves: to alter both the practice, and the theory, of comparison. The former solution involves resuscitating what I have termed the old-fashioned approach of comparing two or more texts across cultures—only this time not via the centre-periphery model of the West vs. the Rest, but rather via geographical and cultural links that are not predetermined by colonial history. We—by which I mean the international community of comparatists who are not already specialists in the field—need to hear more about the relations between Persian and Arabic poetics, for instance, or about the modes of interaction between the many forms of African

literature. Western-trained comparatists need to go through a period of listening to the world, rather than of talking at it.

As for the second, theoretical way forward, it is clear that comparative literature has increasingly been defined, since the start of the new millennium, by its attempt to establish new terms for new times. For all their differences, terms such as world literature, planetary literature, and global literature—corresponding, respectively, to the gathering forces of postcolonialism, environmentalism, and globalization—share a common desire to reconfigure what we might call the Western paradigm. It is worth reflecting, however, on the precise nature of this paradigm. At one level, the move beyond Eurocentrism marks a disciplinary development very much in line with the pattern that Thomas Kuhn famously established in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: out of crisis—which, in the case of comparative literature, one might define as the collapse of European colonialism occasioned by World War II—the discipline corrected itself into a new course of action, a new set of shared beliefs. For such a paradigm shift to have been possible, though, it must have been preceded by a previous set of beliefs—namely, in the power of comparison to open up new angles on literature and culture in the first place. *Comparative literature*, that is to say, is already a paradigm: as Kuhn notes, “a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself” (113), a description that neatly captures the comparative epistemology as we know it. In his “Postscript” of 1969, Kuhn distinguishes between “local” and “global” paradigms (173-208), and the distinction might usefully be applied to the transition—with all the attendant resistance and demurrals that Kuhn would recognize—from Eurocentric to world literature. We need to acknowledge the paradigmatic quality of comparison *tout court*, in other words, before we acknowledge the paradigmatic shifts within it.

I do not propose to rehearse the salient characteristics of this shift here, since much has already been written about them. What I want to highlight, rather, is the change in adjectival emphasis, the common attempt to move the discourse away from the methodology of comparison and (back?) towards the *field* of its purview. That this purview is now held to encompass everything—we await the arrival of “universal literature”—is inevitably utopian: no place, after all, is all-encompassing and value-neutral. The issue is addressed, however, by the way in which all three terms—world literature, planetary literature, and global literature—are conceived as challenging rather than celebrating their own premises, as questioning *what it means* to speak of international literature as much as how to create or to criticize it. Comparative literature, in the twenty-first century, is born sceptical.

The fact that “world literature” has its own profoundly European origins gives the lie, in any case, to attempts to position it as a more inclusive version of comparative literature. Goethe, and before him the historian August Ludwig Schlözer and the poet Christoph Martin Wieland, could only conceive *Weltliteratur* as an expanded version of European literature: where Goethe claimed that we should always return to Ancient Greece as our default model, Schlözer was referring to the Icelandic sagas (Schamoni 288-298), and Wieland to Horace (Weitz 206-208). Looked at historically, “world literature” seems to confirm, rather than contradict, the distorting effects of comparativism.

It is all the more imperative, then, to consider those voices that argued, at around the same time that *Weltliteratur* was being formulated, that Europe should step aside. Prominent among these was Johann Gottfried Herder, the philosopher and anthropologist who was notably the young Goethe’s tutor. As Herder saw it, Europeans were “worn-out old men.” This did not mean, however, that their exhaustion should be projected onto the rest of the world. On the contrary:

Let no one augur from the greying of Europe the decline and death of our whole species! What harm would it do to the latter if a degenerated part of it perished, if a few withered twigs and leaves of the sap-rich tree fell off? Others take the place of the withered ones and bloom up more freshly. Why should the western corner of our northern hemisphere alone possess culture? (Herder 419; emphasis original)

Already in the 1790s, in other words, Herder's critique of European culture implies a more capacious sense of world literature—understood metonymically as adjacent to, rather than metaphorically as a substitute for, the wider world.⁴ Europe is a “degenerated part,” a senescent synecdoche, of a broader whole: the world is a “sap-rich tree” of which the old continent represents merely a decaying branch. The European part, Herder suggests—his insistence on the *Volksgeist*, on the irreducible particularity of nations and cultures, notwithstanding—must be understood within the global whole.

Herder's critique of Eurocentrism *avant la lettre* not only provides a counterpart to the dominant voices of his day, but it also underscores the more basic issue of comparative epistemology. His complaint, in the “Letters for the Advancement of Humanity (1793-1797),” about the very notion of “measuring all peoples *by the measure of us Europeans*” (Herder's italics) quickly segues into a methodological questioning of first principles: “Where is the means of comparison?” (“das Mittel der Vergleichung”; 386). Where indeed? Herder insists that each *Volksgeist* is unique, and thus strictly speaking incomparable. We need not follow him to this extent—he means, I think, *incommensurable* rather than incomparable, and in any case the otherness of cultures can surely be overstated⁵—to see that true comparison posits, indeed requires, a level playing field. If the variables are not controlled, to change the metaphor, then it is not clear that comparison can produce robust results. The history of comparativism, in this regard, is the history of a rigged experiment.

Our detour via Herder shows us, then, that *a posteriori* comparativism—the construction of a comparative method based on geopolitical contingencies—leads back to *a priori* comparativism, understood as the first principles of this method. Comparing inevitably involves distorting—not just through simplifying, as in Said's critique of the orientalist view of the East, but also through complicating the texts under comparison through contrast and juxtaposition. This is not necessarily a bad thing, to be sure, but it is an inevitable thing: we all have our prejudices and predispositions. Perhaps we need to hear *more* about them, then, not less. Since we cannot suppress pre-existing knowledge, perhaps we should at least be honest about it. Might we, for instance, counterbalance dominant Western perspectives by learning more about the view of the West from elsewhere? We are forever hearing about European ideas of Asia or Africa, but what about Asian or African ideas of Europe? If we must have *idées reçues*, we should at least have equal access to them, equal opportunities of contrast and comparison.

Recast as pre-judgement or *Vor-urteil* in the Gadamerian sense, prejudice may in fact be a necessary part of the comparative process. In Gadamer's terms, we cannot but refer to our own position in the present when seeking to understand the past: “it is part of real understanding . . . that we regain the concepts of an historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them [*unser eigenes Begreifen mit enthalten*]” (337). Such, surely, is also the position of the comparatist: our concepts of a cultural other also include our own comprehension of them. We hold an intuitive opinion, and we then revise it in the light of the new perspective afforded us by contrast and

comparison. We cannot compare, in other words, without being aware of the distorting impact of the very process of comparison.

Understood in such terms, comparativism emerges, in the end, as something akin to Rilke's definition of fame: the sum total of all our misunderstandings of each other. To be sure, the comparative approach to culture, viewed as an international discourse, has undoubtedly been dominated by the Western perspective. But this is simply a reflection of the power structures of modernity: colonialism, which made it possible for us to compare, made it impossible for us to compare impartially. The more fundamental, epistemological point is that while it could have been different, it would have been the same: whatever power structure obtains—whether West to East or East to West, North to South or South to North—partiality of perspective is inevitable. Out of such partiality, comparativism is born: there is methodology in our madness. Whether viewed with Said as an ideology, with Kuhn as a paradigm, or with Gadamer as a prejudgement, comparative literature is predetermined not just by its own politically compromised history, but by the very nature of its double-edged enterprise. All attempts to register, let alone to reinvent this enterprise must first acknowledge its continuing effects in the present as well as in the past. What we talk about when we talk about comparing is mostly ourselves.

Notes

1. For discussion of Tagore's concept, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, "Viśvasāhitya: Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of World Literature," *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, edited by Debjani Ganguly, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 261-278, and Bhavya Tiwari, "Rabindranath Tagore's Comparative World Literature," *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, et al., Routledge, 2011, pp. 342-346.
2. That this is the case can be seen by considering disciplinary structures such as libraries or pedagogical anthologies. A library of comparative literature is inevitably a library of secondary sources, since the primary texts themselves more properly belong to classifications that are either linguistic (e.g. English, Russian) or historical (e.g. 18th century). Anthologies of comparative literature, meanwhile, take this same basic tendency a step further, becoming what one might term tertiary sources: in the *Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, for instance, all thirty-two essays are essentially meta-level reflections on *what it means to compare*, with later entries inevitably referring back to earlier ones. There is nothing wrong with this, of course; the book is invaluable. But it illustrates our collective view of comparative literature as an ever more self-referential, theoretical field, rather than as the site of actual comparison.
3. Such is the case, to cite Krishnaswamy's example, for the "Dalit literature" of untouchable castes in India; see Krishnaswamy, pp. 412-415.
4. For a reading of Herder within Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, see Hutchinson, "Two Aspects of Language, Two Types of Comparison: Towards a Rhetoric of Comparative and World Literature," *Comparative Literature*, upcoming in 2023.
5. See Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, Chapter 1, "The Myth of the Other," for a very helpful discussion of the extent to which the otherness of China was strategically overstated by the West.
- 6.

Works Cited

- Bassnett, Susan. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Blackwells, 1993.
- Chasles, Philarète. "Littérature étrangère compare [1835]." *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, edited by H. J. Schulz and P. H. Rhein, U of North Carolina P, 1973, pp. 13-39.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Garrett Bowden and John Cumming, Seabury, 1975.

- Herder, J. G. "Letters for the Advancement of Humanity." *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Michael N. Forster, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 370-424.
- Hutchinson, Ben. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Krishnaswamy, Revathi. "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2010, pp. 399-419.
- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago UP, 2002.
- Levin, Harry. "Comparing the Literature." *Grounds for Comparison*, Harvard UP, 1972, pp. 74-90.
- Meltzl, Hugó. "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature [1877]." *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, Princeton UP, 2009, pp. 41-49.
- Pollock, Sheldon. "Cosmopolitanism, Vernacularism, and Pre-modernity." *Global Intellectual History*, edited by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, Columbia UP, 2013, pp. 59-80.
- Schamoni, Wolfgang. "'Weltliteratur'—zuerst 1773 bei August Ludwig Schlözer." *Arcadia*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008, pp. 288-298.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "World Literature." *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Sisir Kumar Das, Oxford UP, 2001, pp. 147-149.
- Thorner, Karen. *Empire of Texts in Motion: Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese Transculturations of Japanese Literature*. Harvard UP, 2009.
- Weitz, Hans-J. "Weltliteratur zuerst bei Wieland." *Arcadia*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1987, pp. 206-208.
- Zhang, Longxi. *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, Stanford UP, 1998.