I.

There would be no raison d'être for the comparative method if it was not the classification of entities or traits which first have to be separate and distinct before their similarities can be used to establish taxonomies and developmental sequences.

—Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*

The universalist concept of all the literatures of the world being held together as a totality, one that transcends restrictive national and linguistic boundaries, remains an enormously appealing one to many people nearly two centuries after Goethe proclaimed the notion of *Weltliteratur* in the 1820s. As Edward Said writes, “For many modern scholars—including myself—Goethe's grandly utopian vision is considered to be the foundation of what was to become the field of comparative literature, whose underlying and perhaps unrealizable rationale was this vast synthesis of the world's literary production transcending borders and languages but not in any way effacing their individuality and historical concreteness.”¹ Arising in the historical context of nascent nationalisms in Europe, the notion of world literature partook of the aspirations toward global peace, cosmopolitical right, and intercultural hospitality that were among the most important intellectual legacies of that period.² As Susan Bassnett writes: “With the advantages of retrospection, we can see that ‘comparative’ was set against ‘national,’ and that whilst the study of ‘national’ literatures risked accusations of partisanship, the study of ‘comparative’ literature carried with it a sense of transcendence of the narrowly nationalistic.”³ Comparative literature as it is pursued in North America still retains many of these historically specific but
arguably universally valid aspirations. However, despite the explicit use of the term “comparative,” these aspirations are not always accompanied by a sustained critical engagement with comparison as a historically overdetermined problematic. More often than not, it is assumed that comparison occurs as a matter of course whenever we juxtapose two (or more) national languages and literatures, geographical regions, authors, or themes, and rarely do critics stop and ponder what the gesture of comparing consists in, amounts to, indeed realizes and reinforces. These days, the term “comparative” is often used in tandem or interchangeably with words such as “diverse,” “global,” “international,” “transnational,” “crosscultural,” “planetary,” and the like, in ways that once again conjure the signature aspiration of “more than one,” of going beyond restrictive national boundaries that have been used to define “world literature,” yet the nebulousness of the term, as well, seems to persist in direct proportion to its popular usage. In a field that defines itself so consciously as plural and interdisciplinary to begin with, such nebulousness is, one suspects, unlikely to go away simply with renewed assertions of the openness of comparative literature’s terrain or the permeability of its borders.

As part of a cluster of concepts that sees linguistic cosmopolitanism and the peaceful coexistence of national and cultural traditions as its telos, comparison in comparative literature is understandably grounded, as the etymology of the word suggests, in the notion of parity—in the possibility of peer-like equality and mutuality among those being compared. As Bassnett puts it, “Communication, comingling, sharing were key words in this view of comparative literature, which depoliticized writing and aspired towards universal concord.” Hence, whereas a single national literary tradition needs to be investigated in accordance with its historical specifics, comparative literature often proceeds with investigating multiple literary traditions on the assumption that there ought to be a degree of commonality and equivalence—and thus comparability—among them; that they are, somehow, on a par with one another despite their obvious differences. Interestingly, the assumption of parity/sameness is premised on a requirement of linguistic disparity/difference: if not at least two or three languages are involved, the work is often described (as it is by some of my friends and colleagues in the profession) as “not comparatist.”

What are the implications of this prerequisite multilingualism? Although, having always worked in differentiated linguistic traditions,
I deeply appreciate the intellectual and personal benefits of knowing multiple languages, it appears problematic (to me at least) to equate comparison with multilingualism per se. In that equation, so often voiced in the decision-making processes of hiring committees and other professional situations, language has come to be viewed as a stand-in for method, and the ability to use a particular language, more or less as the equivalent of having knowledge itself—indeed, as a privileged—because nativist—way into a culture, a key that opens all doors. As Susan Sniader Lanser puts it, as a discipline comparative literature has relied on an “insistence on language as the primary site of difference and hence not only the discipline’s central basis for ‘comparison’ but the very ground of its disciplinary legitimacy.” Such a belief in the absolute merit of being multilingual is, of course, debatable: the multilingualism essential for political surveillance and intelligence networks such as the FBI or the CIA, and the multilingualism needed for purposes of religious indoctrination, as in the case of Jesuit and Protestant missionaries throughout the centuries, are but two obvious questionable examples. Moreover, as Roland Greene asks: “What does it mean to ‘know’ a language? When can one be said to know English or Spanish, if these languages are so multifarious in themselves? How does a comparatist, with his or her paradisciplinary investments, need to know French differently than a scholar of the nineteenth-century French novel? How does knowing languages in the academic sense dispose us toward reproducing the conventional studies of the national literatures?” It also goes without saying that a prerequisite multilingualism usually ends up, in practice, in the form of a highly selective multilingualism, one that is only “narrowly comparative.” Despite all such legitimate concerns, however, the habits of according supremacy to multilingualism and of conflating multilingualism categorically with comparative work per se continue unabated in some circles.

Because differentiation or plurality (multilingualism) as such is presumed, paradoxically, to be the basis for the commonality or parity (comparison) among languages, the kind of comparative literature that adopts this presumption tends, it follows, to concern itself not with challenging the presumption at all but instead with defining and defending what literature is and does. René Wellek and Austin Warren’s classic Theory of Literature remains an exemplary case of an erudite and sophisticated account of what the literary is under the rubric of comparative literature. First published in the late 1940s, Wellek and Warren’s project sought ambitiously to demarcate the
specifics of literature in such ways as to distinguish it from science, on
the one hand, and from everyday language, on the other. The authors
clarify from the outset that their interest in literature is to be
distinguished from mere enjoyment and appreciation; rather, they
write, it is an interest in a systematic way of studying literature, in
what they call a theory of literature:

Like every human being, each work of literature has its individual
characteristics; but it also shares common properties with other
works of art, just as every man shares traits with humanity, with all
members of his sex, nation, class, profession, etc. We can thus
generalize concerning works of art, Elizabethan drama, all drama, all
literature, all art. Literary criticism and literary history both attempt
to characterize the individuality of a work, of an author, of a period,
or of a national literature. But this characterization can be
accomplished only in universal terms, on the basis of a literary
theory. Literary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of
literary scholarship today.12

Historically speaking, Wellek and Warren's endeavor to formalize
literary study and turn literature into an autonomous field of special-
ization follows two well-recognized paths: first, that of differentiating
literature externally from other fields; second, that of analyzing the
internal dynamics of literary genres, forms, styles, and so forth. Such
an effort at elaboration continues the logic of the invention of
disciplinary knowledge in the human sciences that Michel Foucault
discusses in The Order of Things. For Foucault, modern literature's
increasing impenetrability—and need for theorization—is symptom-
atic of the epistemic shifts since classical times in the relations of
representation, shifts that result in the ultimate separation in modern
times between words and things. "From the nineteenth century,"
Foucault writes, "language began to fold in upon itself, to acquire its
own particular density, to deploy a history, an objectivity, and laws of
its own. It became one object of knowledge among others, on the
same level as living beings, wealth and value, and the history of events
and men."13 To compensate for the demise of its status as a transpar-
ent, universal means of communication, Foucault argues, language
develops into roughly three major forms of writing or discourses—
the scientific (or positivistic), the exegetic (or interpretive), and the
literary (or self-referential).14 Foucault's argument provides a means
for explaining the appearance of literature as a distinct field and
object of study, an appearance that is traceable to the historical

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trajectory of knowledge production in the West. Comparative literature’s disciplinary emphasis on multilingualism, it would seem, is simply a furthering of this ongoing objectification of literature in multiple languages.

But Foucault’s work offers another important insight—not so much on the appearance of literature as on the practice of comparison rooted in the copresence of dissimilar kinds of phenomena. The Order of Things is, after all, a study of the history of the classification or organization of knowledge in the West, in which the propinquity or common ground that once existed among things has purportedly become lost. According to Foucault, the study was inspired by his encounter with one of Jorge Luis Borges’s inventions, the fantastic “Chinese encyclopedia” (entitled the “Celestial Emporium of Benign Knowledge” in Borges’s text) in which all the familiar landmarks and connections of Western thought are disturbed and threatened with collapse.15 Foucault writes:

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges’s enumeration consists . . . in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. . . . Borges . . . simply dispenses with the least obvious, but most compelling, of necessities; he does away with the site, the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed. . . . What has been removed, in short, is the famous “operating table” . . . in two superimposed senses: the nickel-plated, rubbery table swathed in white, glittering beneath a glass sun devouring all shadow—the table where, for an instant, perhaps forever, the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine; and also a table, a tabula, that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and their differences—the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space.16

The idea that different languages can have among them a certain parity, similitude, or equivalence is, arguably, a type of comparative thinking derived from the “operating table,” what Foucault also refers to as the taxonomic method of knowledge production. Foucault’s point is that when this method used to work in classical times, with its ever-expandable classificatory interstices and descending order of proximities (such as species, genus, family, and so forth in natural history, for instance), it served at once as the conceptual horizon and the technical means of charting and naming the world’s phenomena. As a spatially organized rationale, taxonomy provides a grid of
intelligibility in the midst of infinite material variations. Because, whether or not it is literally visible, the grid remains stable, transformations are a matter of addition and accumulation: supplementary knowledges would affirm and perpetuate the function of inclusiveness that is an inalienable property of the table. Something of this supposedly defunct operating table seems to be still alive in the realm of comparative literature. The grid of intelligibility here is that of literature as understood in Europe, and historical variations are often conceived of in terms of other cultures’ welcome entries into or becoming synthesized with the European tradition. As Wellek and Warren put it: “[I]t is important to think of literature as a totality and to trace the growth and development of literature without regard to linguistic distinctions. . . . Western literature, at least, forms a unity, a whole . . . and, without minimizing the importance of Oriental influences, especially that of the Bible, one must recognize a close unity which includes all Europe, Russia, the United States, and the Latin American literatures.”17

Wellek and Warren’s formulation of comparison, which may be named “Europe and Its Others,” remains a common norm of comparative literary studies in North America today. In this formulation, the rationale for comparing hinges on the conjunction and; the and, moreover, (as I already mentioned) signals a form of supplementation that authorizes the first term, Europe, as the grid of reference, to which may be added others in a subsequent and subordinate fashion. An outcome of this kind of comparison is an often asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital and intellectual labor, so that cultures of Europe (the grid), such as French and German, tend to be studied with meticulousness while cultures on the margins of Europe, such as those in Latin America, Africa, or Asia, even when they are differentiated by unique, mutually unintelligible linguistic traditions, may simply be considered examples of the same geographical areas (and hence not warranting comparative study). (To this classic division by geography we may also add the hierarchical divide between “French” and “Francophone” writings.)18 The and thus instigates not only comparison but also a politics of comparison: on the one side, the infinite opening of histories, cultures, languages in their internal vicissitudes in such a manner as to enable their studies to become ever more nuanced and refined; on the other side, a crude lumping together of other histories, cultures, and languages with scant regard to exactly the same kinds of details and internal dynamics of thought that, theoretically speaking, should be part of
the study of any tradition. These other histories, cultures, and languages remain by default undifferentiated—and thus never genuinely on a par with Europe—within an ostensibly comparative framework. As a form of comparative practice, therefore, “Europe and Its Others” has methodologically predetermined the outcome of comparison: European thinking and writing will continue as more thoroughly examined and carefully dissected than non-European ones, and thus—to follow the logic of the vicious circle—as the more credible criterion for future projects of comparison. Those who study Europe will always appear to be more bona fide comparatists; as Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto puts it:

Like “literature,” “comparative” is not an ideologically neutral term. “Comparatists” refer to those who specialize in certain European literatures, whereas those who study Chinese and Japanese are called “Asian comparatists.” . . . [A]t the disciplinary core of comparative literature has always been the idea of Europe. I would even venture to argue that comparative literature is less a discipline of literature than a type of area studies, a counterpart to East Asian studies, Middle Eastern studies, Latin American studies, etc.19

Consider, for instance, the study of what is called the novel. The heightened theoretical consciousness about the historicity of literary genres notwithstanding, the generic term “the novel” continues to be in use in a rather unchallenged manner. When one looks closely at what is meant by the novel, one usually finds English (and sometimes French) materials. Once outside the arena of Western Europe, the term is almost always invoked with a national or ethnic qualifier, as is evident in the studies of the modern Japanese novel, the American novel, the Russian novel, the Argentinian novel, and so on. Although many of such studies explore the historical lack of fit between the novel as a genre and the particular literary traditions of various geopolitical locations, and although some of them also tend to emphasize the novel as a “nexus of transnational exchange,” the fact that so many local varieties now accompany this genre called the novel indicates that the paradigm of “Europe and Its Others” is fully in play.20 Even as the politically savvy specialists of English and French novels now take pains to research and argue the influences of non-European cultures in the makings of the baggy monster, it is simply inconceivable for students of, say, modern Japanese, Chinese, Cuban, or Algerian fiction to call their novels the novel without the national or ethnic label, while their counterparts in English depart-

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ments continue to be able to get away with talking about the novel as such. The apparent lack of the need to make English visible in the same manner and the accepted convention of presenting the English novel as a kind of general equivalent are good instances of how the idealistic project of provincializing Europe, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase, is no more than a glimmer at this point.\textsuperscript{21}

The politics of comparison at stake here is that those who can talk about the novel in a particular set of monolingual terms (English) are comparatists in the sense of Foucault's taxonomists. Their notion of the novel works with the assumption of a kind of differentiation that is ultimately additive or cumulative in method, requiring others to name themselves as other even while they retain the generic term as the grid of general intelligence, the center that generates additional information.

Because language as such tends to be viewed as a neutral fact, seldom is it pointed out in discussions of comparative literature that languages and cultures rarely enter the world stage and encounter one another on an equal footing, that "languages embed relations of dominance," and that the notion of parity embedded in comparison as it currently stands would need to be recognized perhaps as a form of utopianism that tends to run aground in practice.\textsuperscript{22} Even in its inception, we should remember, the notion of a world literature, one that transcends national boundaries, emerged in a historical context in which thinkers were attempting to address and mediate the conflictual, warring political situation within Europe. Yet, as Lanser reminds us, the consequences are somewhat ironic:

Comparative literature grew up in an era of imperialist nationalism which some comparatists hoped to combat by affirming a transnational spirit in the human sciences. This agenda must have seemed especially pressing in the years when comparative literature was developing in Europe and the United States, since these were years in which the very countries collaborating most fully in the comparative project, France and Germany, were bitter enemies. "Rising above" national boundaries and partisan identities was surely a crucial strategy of resistance, a way to preserve not simply personal and collegial relations, or even the project of comparative literary scholarship, but "culture" itself. It is sadly ironic that this resistance to nationalism ended up constructing an androcentric Continentalism that became its own exclusivity.\textsuperscript{23}

In the twenty-first century, we need to ask what it really means for any practice of writing to be considered to transcend national boundaries. Why is it such a good thing to transcend national
boundaries? Is not such a transcending, which signifies a certain privilege of mobility, always part of a power structure, with those who can apparently transcend the boundaries (the ones who talk about the novel, for instance) setting the criteria for evaluation? And, as is evident in the case of those who must talk not about the novel as such but about the Brazilian novel, the Egyptian novel, and so forth, the possibility of moving beyond national boundaries is not exactly at everyone’s disposal. As Réda Bensmaïa, commenting on the reductionist tendencies in the Western reception of Maghrebi literature, writes:

What has long struck me was the nonchalance with which the work of these writers was analyzed. Whenever these novels were studied, they were almost invariably reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies. Their literariness was rarely taken seriously. And once they were finally integrated into the deconstructed canon of world literature, they were made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas. This kind of reading resulted more often than not in their being reduced to mere signifiers of other signifiers, with a total disregard for what makes them literary works in and of themselves.24

In this predominant, hierarchizing frame of comparison, not only is the literariness of non-Western literatures readily overlooked, as Bensmaïa rightly notes, but those who continue to be immobilized according to national and ethnic boundaries are rarely able to transcend those boundaries even when what they write is clearly not confinable to single nations or ethnicities. This incommensurability between what scholars might want to uphold as the ethical as well as theoretical ideal of an inclusive world literature, on the one hand, and the actual events that take place in the name of comparison, on the other, requires us to conceive of a radically different set of terms for comparative literary studies.

II.

European modernity was always already there.

—H. D. Harootunian, “Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem”

For our purposes, then, Foucault’s The Order of Things is helpful insofar as it provides an account of how the methods of organizing knowledge are historical and thus, perhaps, changeable. As the

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classical ways of knowledge production, with their key mechanism of cumulative (and inexhaustible) inclusion, came to an end in modern times, the spatial logic of the grid gives way to an archeological network wherein the once assumed clear continuities (and unities) among differentiated knowledge items are displaced onto fissures, mutations, and subterranean genealogies, the totality of which can never again be mapped out in taxonomic certitude and coherence. Knowledge production would henceforth be a matter of tracking the broken lines, shapes, and patterns that may have become occluded, gone underground, or taken flight.

In his imaginative portrayals of the seismic shifts in the human sciences—in the ways man comes to know the world and himself—Foucault is also, quite obviously, theorizing a new possibility of comparison. In the absence of taxonomic assurance and no longer resting securely on a presumption of similarity, equivalence, and likeness, comparison, Foucault’s observations imply, must rather be reconceptualized as an act of judging the value of different things horizontally, in sheer approximation to one another—an act that, because it is inseparable from history, would have to remain speculative rather than conclusive, and ready to subject itself periodically to revamped semiotic relations. As much as it is inevitable (since the violent yoking together of disparate things has become inevitable in modern and postmodern times), comparison would also seem an unfinalizable event because its meanings have to be repeatedly negotiated—not merely on the basis of the constantly increasing quantity of materials involved but more importantly on the basis of the partialities, erasures, and disappearances that have been inscribed over time into such materials’ seemingly positivistic existences.

Not surprisingly, the scholars who have been working on more marginalized cultures are somewhat ahead of the game here, for reasons that are inherent to the politics of comparison, even though the latter may not always be explicitly stated. With a focus on modernity as a post-European cultural problematic in the Indian Subcontinent, Anglo Africa, Spanish America, the Mediterranean, and East Asia, a number of critics have advanced the discussion of comparison by foregrounding, in their studies of the literary and other writings of those areas, the conflicts and incongruities resulting from the encounter with Europe that are manifest in the articulations of the native/indigenous traditions and identities. The aftermath of this encounter, a historically given condition that is regularly reinforced not simply as a meeting, a contact, or a conversation, but
specifically as an encounter with that which is culturally superior—this aftermath is what I am designating by the term “post-European.”

In his work on post-British India, for instance, Partha Chatterjee offers at once in-depth analyses of the multifaceted social and cultural problems of India as a “developing nation,” and a trenchant critique of the dominance of European conceptual models. He does so by highlighting the stigma of derivation that accompanies any kind of progress made by third-world nations. At the heart of nationalism in Asia and Africa is, according to Chatterjee, a fundamental contradiction: intended to bring about freedom from European domination, the pursuit of nationhood as such remains trapped within European post-Enlightenment rationalist discourse. (I will return to Chatterjee’s work toward the end.) A similar understanding of the difficulty inherent in postcolonial cultures’ assertion of freedom is provided by Olakunle George, who in his work on postcolonial Nigerian literature and literary criticism argues how the notion of agency, so indispensable to modern and contemporary cultural work, cannot be reduced to a simple matter of opposition or resistance. To the contrary, he writes, agency requires us precisely to take into account the blindesses, self-contradictions, and ambiguities that inform modern African literary and critical practices. While it would have been inconceivable for African writers and critics not to have responded to the preemptive presence of the West and devised ways of coming to terms with that presence, it is equally untenable, George suggests, to imagine them as single-mindedly and consistently opposing that presence with an agential power that has remained pure and untouched by the traumatic effects of history.

Likewise, in the context of Spanish America, Carlos J. Alonso writes that modernity, as both an aesthetic and socioeconomic phenomenon, is by necessity constituted as an ambivalent cultural discourse. According to Alonso, the peculiar ethnic and racial makeup of Spanish American history means that the critique of European imperialism that is part of this modernity is, rhetorically, much less invested in a nostalgic look back to a preexisting native/indigenous past (as is possible in the case of postcolonial Indian historiography’s investment in precolonial India, for instance) than in a progressive movement toward the new and thus, ironically, toward Europe. This love-hate relationship with Europe becomes the source of self-imagining for various Spanish American cultures, and it is the contradictions embedded in that relationship that, for Alonso, define the specificity of these cultures’ modernity.

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Gregory Jusdanis explores the role played by literature in the construction of a modern Greek national culture on the margins of a powerful Western Europe and its secularist institutions and beliefs. Citing Wellek's definition of comparative literature as the study of “all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unity of all literary creation and experience,” Jusdanis comments, “This ideology demands that others be like us.” Comparatists, Jusdanis says, “have presumed from the beginning the existence of a universal literature, the founding paradigm of all literary production. Yet an examination of contemporary literatures from the Mediterranean would have demonstrated that this notion hardly corresponds to the reality of Europe, let alone the rest of the world.”28 Like George, Jusdanis argues that coming to terms with the institutional practices of theorization and monumentalization (such as canon formation) is crucial for understanding the emergence of modern Greek literature as such. The specificity of Greekness as both a national and a literary identity, accordingly, is part of a belated modernity, sustained by an aesthetics that is compensatory in function.

Naoki Sakai approaches a comparable set of historical dynamics in the context of Japan by focusing on the apparent preoccupation with Japanese “particularity” on the part of modern Japanese philosophers and intellectuals. Interestingly, what may appear to be an obsessive self-referentiality in this case is, Sakai argues, always already a mimetic desire, responsive and oriented toward the West's imposition of itself on the Rest:

The history of Japanese thought was created as a symmetrical equivalent to the history of Western thought or of Western philosophy, so that this field has been dominated from the outset by demands for symmetry and equality. The entire discipline has been built on the premise that, if there is thought in the West, there ought to be its equivalent in Japan. But these demands necessarily gave rise to a sense of lack, as is best testified to by the often professed bitter realization that there was nothing worth calling philosophy in Japan, although there should be an equivalent to it. Because of this mimetic desire, intellectuals since Nishi Amane (1829–1897) have repeatedly deplored the absence of a systematic reasoning or of philosophical thinking in Japan. . . . [T]he self-referential character was inscribed on the history of Japanese thought by way of this mimetic desire.29

He goes on to propose the term “schema of configuration” as a way of marking this complex state of affairs:
[T]he self-referential relationship to one’s own language always assumes the schema of configuration. . . [T]he self-referentiality to one’s own language necessarily comprises the desire to be seen from the viewpoint of a foreign language. The reason for which self-referentiality in fact can never free itself from the transferential desire to see from another position is, thus, already outlined in the schema of configuration. Our desire to know what we have supposedly known in our own language thus arrives by way of our desire for the figure of a foreign language.30

Of relevance to the present discussion in these scholarly studies, which I have presented in only the most schematic manner, is a suggestive alternative paradigm of comparison. No longer simply a spontaneous act occasioned by, say, the taxonomic arrangement of multiple linguistic spheres, comparison is understood by these critics as a type of discursive situation, involuntarily brought into play by and inextricable from the conditions of modern world politics—a discursive situation that in the end does not quite conform to classical comparative aspirations. Unlike the old-fashioned comparative literature based on Europe, none of the studies in question vociferously declares its own agenda as international or cosmopolitan; to the contrary, each is firmly located within a specific cultural framework. Yet, in their very cultural specificities, these studies nonetheless come across as transcultural, with implications that resonate well beyond their individual locations. Be they articulated by way of discursive derivation and entrapment (Chatterjee), agency-in-motion (George), ambivalence (Alonso), belatedness and compensation (Jusdanis), or mimetic desire and configuration (Sakai), the literary, cultural, and identitarian formations of non-Western modernity are, according to these critics, thoroughly immersed in, indeed predicated on, comparison. But this is not the kind of comparison that can be tabulated rationally or cumulatively so that differences are simply chronologically recent variations to be incorporated into a familiar grid of reference. Instead, comparison now resembles the archaeological tracking of historical remnants that Foucault identifies as the modern order of things. To do its job properly, this kind of comparative practice must be willing to abandon inclusionary taxonomizing habits and ready to interpret cultural narratives symptomatically, as fragments that bear clues—often indirect, perverse, and prejudiced—to a history of ideological coercions and exclusions.

An important conceptual link among these post-European comparative studies is that a post-European culture needs to be recog-
nized as always operating biculturally or multiculturally even when it appears predominantly preoccupied with itself. If we substitute the names of other postcolonial cultures for “Greek” and “Japanese,” these passages from Jusdanis and Sakai may be taken as transcripts of the general post-European predicament, one that is inscribed by necessity in comparatism and must be grasped through comparatism:

Greekness was an attempt to determine an authentically Greek nature in the overwhelming presence of European modernity, experienced by Greeks in terms of insufficiency and inferiority. . . . Greekness embodied the foreign and the local, the traditional and the new.

“Japanese thought” was, from the outset, posited as the subject for comparative investigation. The history of Japanese thought has been a field of self-referential knowledge for Japanese students precisely because, in this field, they enunciate in comparative modalities. . . . The students have not had any other choices but to enunciate in a comparative setting. . . . They might be free in their choice of subject matter, but in the modern world they could never freely select enunciative modalities other than those of comparison.31

The apparently monolingual, monocultural, or mononational investigations of India, Nigeria, Spanish America, modern Greece, or Japan, in other words, should be understood as full-fledged comparative projects, their precarious and enigmatic enunciations bearing testimony to an interlingual, intercultural, and international historicity that exposes the positivistic limits of the (Western) human sciences—that exposes, indeed, the finitude of (Western) man as a domain of the known and knowable that Foucault so memorably elucidates.32 For similar reasons, the pursuit of comparative literature in non-Western countries is often not entirely distinguishable from national literature studies. As Bassnett reminds us, by the 1970s, when comparative literature in the West was being radicalized by various kinds of theory,

comparative literature began to gain ground in the rest of the world. New programmes in comparative literature began to emerge in China, in Taiwan, in Japan and other Asian countries, based, however, not on any ideal of universalism but on the very aspect of literary study that many western comparatists had sought to deny: the specificity of national literatures.
Bassnett’s conclusion is instructive: “Implicit to comparative literature outside Europe and the United States is the need to start with the home culture and to look outwards, rather than with the European model of literary excellence and to look inwards.”

Rather than seeing language and linguistic differentiation as the exclusive way to demarcate the notion of comparison, then, specialists of national literatures (which often involve, in the postcolonial as well as in premodern contexts, multiple languages) may, under certain circumstances, be helping to bring about a revamping of the definition and practice of comparative literary studies. Comparison would in this case include a critique of the uneven distribution of cultural capital among languages themselves, a critique that in turn would necessitate a questioning of any unqualified insistence on multilingualism as the determining factor in comparative literary work. For, even though knowledge of multiple languages is undoubtedly an advantage (one we should always encourage our students to acquire), it is something else altogether to turn linguistic ability into a means of intellectual exclusion. Doing so would result only in the suppression of a viable kind of comparative literary studies, which, for compelling historical reasons, participates in comparison differently and which, in fact, offers persuasive ways of challenging and broadening the hitherto prevalent conventions.

To this extent, Samuel Weber’s notion that comparative literature may be part of a foundering (rather than founding) of aesthetics is pertinently on the mark. In his deconstructive reading of Immanuel Kant’s writings, Weber offers the view that the aesthetic, as Kant argues it, is much less about the founding or systematizing of a field of knowledge (as Wellek, for instance, would have it) than about an oscillating process of judgment. This is the process in which, because there are no a priori universal rules for representing and evaluating what is unique, heterogeneous, and particular, judgment must include in its undertaking a reflection on the ability to represent and evaluate per se (as what is at stake). Such reflection consists in a movement to reach the universal and an effort to lay bare the very terms on which we arrive at a particular phenomenon’s value. According to Weber,

[I]t is only in its reflective form that judgment can be studied as such, since only here does it attempt to “think” its way, as it were, from the particular to the universal. . . . Should judgment actually arrive at its goal, should it produce valid knowledge, the particular would henceforth be contained within the universal, and judgment would
have become determinative, cognitive, and part of theoretical thinking. It is only where this movement toward the universal is, in a certain sense, perpetuated and held in suspense that judgment reflects its own operation.34

Ultimately, therefore, aesthetic judgment involves a reflection of the terms of the reflecting activity (or subjectivity) from within rather than only a reflection of the external object it judges, bringing with it a potential for dismantling those terms precisely as the reflecting activity (or subjectivity) tries to reach for the universal. Defined along these lines, aesthetic or reflective judgment seems poignantly germane to those areas of knowledge production in which problems of radical otherness are the most acute.

Advancing Weber's reading one step further, we may argue that the stakes of aesthetic or reflective judgment are also constitutive of the politics of comparison in the postcolonial global context. In the place traditionally occupied by literature or art in such judgment, let us now put cultural difference. In the various studies of post-European cultures mentioned above, is not cultural difference exactly that “object” which confronts us repeatedly with the limits of the terms of its representation and evaluation, demanding thus a reflective judgment of those terms themselves? To the more narrowly defined aesthetic question as to how can we represent and evaluate this object, cultural difference, in all its particularity (without simply falling back on a previously determined aesthetic system), we must thus add another (historical and political) level of complication: that of the hierarchical frameworks of comparison—and judgment—that have long been present as universals, that tend to subsume otherness rather than deconstruct their processes of operation from within.

Chatterjee expounds on this predicament of judgment in relation to the concept of nationalism in the third world. Like some historians of postcoloniality, he poses the implicitly Kantian question: how to read/do justice to the “work” that is the postcolonial nation and its culture, without compromising and erasing the particularity of its alterity? He finds himself immediately faced, as I mentioned above, with the politics of comparison in the troubling guise of derivation: a third-world nation cannot be/become itself without being derivative of that epistemological frame against which it is struggling; and yet, try as it may, it cannot free itself of that frame.

Nationalist thought in the third world, Chatterjee writes, “reasons within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure
corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate.” Given this powerful prescript-ion of non-Western cultural difference (as lack, inferiority, or imitation), how might the particularity of such difference—let’s say, in the form of a national literature—be approached at all? What would an aesthetic or reflective judgment of such difference look like—what are the terms that would have to be subjected to critique, that would come to “founder” as it were? Can this judgment ever become autonomous from the politics of comparison in which the frame of reference has been decidedly Western, against which the non-Western “work” or cultural difference can be seen only as a derivation? Or, as Chatterjee puts it: “Can nationalist thought produce a discourse of order while daring to negate the very foundations of a system of knowledge that has conquered the world?”35 It is with these questions in the foreground that he responds to the much popularized notion of “imagined communities”—Benedict Anderson’s shorthand for nationhood in the era of print capitalism—with the rhetorical question, “Whose imagined community?”36

At this point, the comparative paradigm that I have abbreviated as “Europe and Its Others” may be supplemented (and compared) with a paradigm that, as we see in the works of Chatterjee, George, Alonso, Jusdanis, and Sakai, may be abbreviated as “Post-European Culture and the West.” Whereas, as I mentioned, the first paradigm indicates a semiotic relationship that stabilizes Europe as the grid of intelligibility to which may be added more and more others, the second paradigm would signify that, even in the seemingly narcissistic or obsessive preoccupation with itself, a culture such as postcolonial India, postcolonial Africa, Spanish America, modern Greece, or modern Japan already contains, in its many forms of self-writing, imprints of a fraught and prevalent relation of comparison/judgment in which Europe haunts it as the referent of supremacy. In this latter paradigm, the conjunction and is not a matter of taxonomic addition or inclusion. Rather, it designates a relation of temporality, with Europe being experienced not exactly spatially as a chartable geographical location but much more as a memory, a cluster of lingering ideological and emotional effects whose force takes the form of a lived historical violation, one that preconditions linguistic and cultural consciousness. The schism between this involuntary, neurotic and the complacent and of “Europe and Its Others” constitutes the extent of the rupturing—and deterritorialization—of comparative literature as a field and a practice at the present time.

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To be precise, the post-European culture is caught between this “always already” present that is Europe, on the one hand, and the histories and traditions it must now live as its pasts, on the other—pasts that nonetheless continue to erupt as so many suppressed indices of time with forgotten and/or unfinished potentialities. It is in the light of such consistently occluded relations of temporalities that H. D. Harootunian writes about what he calls the strategies of comparability. Resonating with Foucault’s critique of classical tabular epistemology and with Johannes Fabian’s critique of Western anthropology’s habit of reifying non-Western cultures, Harootunian, a specialist of Asian modernity, suggests that much of the contemporary work undertaken in the humanities and social sciences, from area studies to postcolonial and cultural studies, has tended to privilege space rather than a time-space correlation as a way to think comparatively. His words, intended to address issues in historiography, are equally applicable to the comparative literature of “Europe and Its Others”:

The inevitable impulse to compare fused with a strategy to classify and categorize according to criteria based upon geo-political privilege. As a result of this principle of classification, societies were invariably ranked according to spatial distance from an empowering model which was identified with the achievement of industrial and technological supremacy—namely the countries of Euro-America. In a sense this was simply a replication of the hierarchizing of political power.

This classification strategy, itself signifying the static synchronicity of the spatial, was mapped onto an evolutionary trajectory that succeeded in apotheosizing the model of natural history and thus defining the task of a comparative agenda which, according to Johannes Fabian, constituted a vast, “omnivorous intellectual machine permitting the ‘equal’ treatment of human culture at all times and in all places.”

As differences are imagined as spatial distinctions, Harootunian writes, the unequal and uneven material conditions that have left their marks on post-European cultures at an everyday level in the crisscrossings of nonsynchronous temporalities tend to be eschewed—and so are the possibilities of comparability (and, we may add, the possibilities of aesthetic or reflective judgment) inscribed therein. For this reason, Harootunian is skeptical of the “spectre of comparisons” spoken of by Anderson in the latter’s more recent work. That spectre, Harootunian argues in his review of Anderson’s book,
remains definitively that of Europe, which Anderson seems to continue to prioritize as a space, a location, and thus an incomparable point of origin.40 For Harootunian, what should inform a new kind of comparative practice is rather the “larger spectrality of societies deeply involved in fashioning a modernity coeval with Euro-America yet whose difference is dramatized by the revenant, the past and the premodern culture of reference, which appear as ghosts that have not yet died but have become repressed excess . . . ready to return . . . to haunt and disturb the historical present.”41

Although he is clearly critical of the politics of comparison in the form of “Europe and Its Others,” Harootunian’s argument implies that neither should comparison in the form of “Post-European Culture and the West” remain an albatross on our necks. Therein lies his unique contribution to the present topic. In Harootunian’s vision for a future comparative practice, the and in “Post-European Culture and the West” needs to disconnect as well, so that its hitherto compulsory presence and its historically specific predominance can become, finally, a temporally delimited phenomenon. In its stead, other possibilities of supplementarity, other semiotic conjunctions mediated by different temporal dynamics, can come to the fore. The conventions of “Europe and Its Others” and “Post-European Culture and the West” would then hopefully give way to other, as yet unrealized comparative perspectives, the potential range and contents of which we have only just begun to imagine.

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NOTES


2 For an example of an influential and controversial philosophical essay on these ideas, see Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace, preface by Nicholas Murray Butler (Los Angeles: U.S. Library Association, Inc., 1932). The text of this edition follows the first edition of Kant’s essay, translated from the German and published in London in 1796.


4 “[T]he ‘origin’ of U.S. Comparative Literature had something of a relationship with the events that secured it: the flights of European intellectuals, including such distinguished men as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek, Renato Poggioli, and Claudio Guillén, from ‘totalitarian’ regimes in Europe. One might say that U.S.

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Comparative Literature was founded on inter-European hospitality.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 8.

5 For an admirable attempt to engage with the problems posed by comparison in the age of multiculturalism, see Charles Bernheimer, “Introduction: the Anxieties of Comparison,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Bernheimer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), 1–17. However, Bernheimer’s definition of comparison is rather too open-ended to be able to address some of the more thorny issues involved: “Comparison is indeed the . . . what is it?—activity, function, practice? all of these?—that assures that our field will always be unstable, shifting, insecure, and self-critical” (2). These days, such a definition would tend to be adopted by sensible practitioners of almost any field of knowledge. For an account that emphasizes the more familiar humanistic dimensions of comparison as an act of liberation, defamiliarization, and creativity, see Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time: the Promise of Comparative Literature,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 77–85. By contrast, some scholars see comparison as a matter of “defining general and constant rules” (see Michael Riffaterre, “On the Complementarity of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 67). This notion of comparison, which has stemmed from comparative literature’s close relationship to poststructuralist theory since the 1970s, is also unsatisfactory for reasons that will become clear in the rest of this essay.

6 See Bassnett, 27 and following, for a discussion of the French origins of this binarist (études binaires) approach, which has influenced generations of comparative literature scholars.

7 For a recent account of world literature, see, for instance, David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003). Damrosch defines world literature in terms of circulation: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language”; “world literature is . . . a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike” (4, 5). For a persuasive earlier study of the histories and politics involved in examples of such circulation, see Michael Hanne, *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* (Providence: Berghan Press, 1994).

8 Bassnett, 21.


10 Roland Greene, “Their Generation,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 146.

11 Lanser, 288.

study in a similar manner: “The most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology” (in Concepts of Criticism, ed. and intro. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963], 282).


14 See Foucault’s elaborations in the section “Language Becomes Object” (294–300) of The Order of Things. These elaborations obviously demand much more discussion. However, because my goal in this essay is to discuss the problems of comparison, I will have to leave aside a detailed discussion of the historical emergence of literature as such as Foucault proposed (together with the controversies over the definitions of the literary) for another occasion. In her argument for a new comparative literature in Death of a Discipline, Spivak reissues a romantic and modernist call for understanding literature as what “escapes the system” (52) and “contains the element of surprising the historical” (55), as “transgressive” (56), and as the “Unheimlich” (74). Such definitions of literature seem strictly in keeping with the trajectory of the emergence of so-called literary language in the West as Foucault describes it, though Spivak is describing writings of what she calls the global South as well as those of the European canon.


16 Foucault, xvi–xvii.

17 Wellek and Warren, 49.


22 Lanser, 295. To this extent, even as scholars see translation as a way out of the conundrums of Eurocentrism and the elitism of those who favor using only original languages, I find most of the currently popular debates about translation rather unhelpful because they tend to remain bound to an unhistoricized notion of language and language users as such.

23 Lanser, 290.
29 Naoki Sakai, Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism, foreword by Meaghan Morris (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 48.
30 Sakai, 59.
31 Judanis, 80; Sakai, 51.
32 See, in particular, chaps. 9 and 10 of Foucault (303–87).
33 Bassnett, 5, 38.
34 Samuel Weber, “The Foundering of Aesthetics: Thoughts on the Current State of Comparative Literature,” in The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice, ed. and intro. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 65. Weber's essay offers a thought provoking reading of Kant's work (in particular The Critique of Judgment) and a critique of Wellek’s (mis)use of it for the founding of something like a discipline of general literature. Above all, the essay makes possible a linkage, with rich ramifications, between the issues of comparative literature and the wider problematic of aesthetic or reflective judgment. Among contemporary critics, Spivak’s work is exemplary of an engagement with Kant along these lines in relation to post-European cultures. See, for instance, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999).
35 Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, 38, 42.
39 Harootunian, “Some Thoughts,” 8 (ms. page). Harootunian is quoting from Fabian’s Time and the Other, 16–17. In that work, Fabian argues that even taxonomy, a seemingly spatial arrangement, contains temporal implications: “[S]etting up a semiotic relation, especially if it is part of a taxonomy of relations, is itself a temporal act. While pretending to move in the flat space of classification, the taxonomist in fact takes a position on a temporal slope—uphill, or upstream, from the object of his scientific desire” (Time and the Other, 151).

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Telescope,” *diacritics* 29.4 (winter 1999): 135–49. Harootunian’s critique of Anderson is intimately tied to his sustained critique of the establishment of area studies and its lost calling for comparability; see, for instance, Harootunian, “Tracking the Dinosaur: Area Studies in a Time of ‘Globalism,’” in *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000), 25–58. See also his “Introduction: the ‘Afterlife’ of Area Studies” (coauthored with Miyoshi), and “Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/Area Studies’ Desires,” in *Learning Places*, 1–18, 150–74. For reasons of space, I must defer an elaborate discussion of this topic here. For related discussions of comparability regarding the nation as found in Anderson’s work, see the other essays in the same special issue of *diacritics*, in particular Pheng Cheah, “Grounds of Comparison,” 3–18.


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