

INTRODUCTION

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In 1971, two professors from the United States, Hans-Joachim Schulz and Philip Rhein, compiled a collection of theoretical essays on the initial development of Comparative Literature as an academic discipline. The book was entitled *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*. It starts with Goethe's discussions on the concept of World Literature in 1827; ends with Croce's counterargument about Comparative Literature in his 1903 work *La Critica*. The collection aimed to represent all those countries in which Comparative Literature had enjoyed some academic repute and productiveness: France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain and the United States. The two US professors presented a confident picture that Comparative Literature was born in Europe and in the early years had been practiced by European scholars and intellectuals.

Almost half a century later, we, also two US professors, are bringing together a collection of theoretical essays important to our understanding of how Comparative Literature has been practiced around the world. Among the 11 essays included in this special issue, most generated for panels which we have organized at ACLA conferences, and ICLA Congresses, 3 deal with Comparative Literature in European countries (France, Germany and Sweden). The remaining 8 essays bring the readers to the countries from 5 other continents and 6 other civilizations (Turkey, Gulf Arab, Iran, Georgia/Russia, Japan, US, Morocco, and New Zealand).

This special issue attempts a survey of comparative literature around the world to acquire some global perspective on the field. It also side-steps the unending dialogue about what comparative literature is. British comparatist Susan Bassnett once wrote "Sooner or later, anyone who claims to be working in comparative literature has to try and answer the inevitable question: 'What is it?'" This onomastic obsession has occupied many U. S. comparatists for generations. Instead of vainly searching for an abstract definition, we start with a more empirical question: what do comparatists — around the world — do? These 11 exciting and eye-opening essays constitute some of the answer!

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Most books on comparative literature tend to assume a narrative that is ethnocentric: the field germinated in France, spread to Germany, and the United States. Little attention has been paid to cultures, in often multilingual countries, where literary study was comparative literature *avant la lettre*. As Sibel Irzik & Jale Parla have convincingly argued, the very beginning of Comparative Literature in modern Turkey took form as a “comparative consciousness” born out of the vernacularization of Ottoman literature that started around the 1850s. The legacy of the Ottoman Empire involves three Islamic languages: Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Such a “comparative consciousness” was first a heightened “awareness of and confrontation with the strong Arabic and Persian influence,” and then “directed to foreign influence that included the adoption of French matter.” Such a “comparative consciousness” witnessed Turkey’s difficult passage from one civilization to another.

Turkey was certainly not alone in this regard. Jose Luis Jobim & Joao Cezar de Castro Rocha trace the first significant moment of Comparative Literature in Brazil to the 1840s when arguably the most famous Brazilian poem “Song of Exile” by Goncalves Dias came into existence. “My land has palm trees, / Where the *sabia* bird sings;/ The birds that warble here/Do not warble as they do there.” Structured as a comparison between what may be found here (in Portugal) and there (in Brazil), the poem compares Brazil to its former metropolis, Portugal. Without doubt, such a “comparative consciousness” was born out of Brazil’s struggle with its own national identity and its complex relationship with Portugal and other European countries.

When discussing the emergence of Comparative Literature in modern China, Yue Daiyun once noted that Comparative Literature in modern China first came as a “consciousness,” a “perception” and a “world view,” which was deeply associated with China’s transformation from a pre-modern society to a nation-state struggling with modernization and progress. In his essay on Comparative Literature in the Arab world, Alaaeldin Mahmoud emphasizes the impact of the Arab *Nahdah* (Renaissance). He cites, “the precursors of the Arab Nahdah (Renaissance) were the heralds of the earliest beginning of Comparative Literature in the Arab world.” In other words, the birth of Comparative Literature in the Arab world was very much shaped by the Arab Renaissance, which brought about the literary modernization of the Arab world.

It is clear that in many countries, there is a difference between Comparative Literature *de jure* and Comparative Literature *de facto*. Which is to say that comparative literature is being practiced often under a different rubric, whether Swedish literature and other literatures; German literature and other literatures. The practitioners of literary comparison are often in departments of national literature. Indeed, this shouldn’t be surprising: the nationalism of Europe in the nineteenth century exaggerated the co-identity of nation and native language, when in fact many nations (Turkey, India, Singapore, Morocco) actively use more than one language in their national discourse. Even English literature is not strictly English, but the offspring of European literature, as any scholar of Chaucer, whose sources are French and Italian, know. What is interesting is whether the comparatism is practiced as a self-reflective study of one’s own national literature, or whether it is restricted to “foreign” literatures. We find it instructive, and perhaps significant, that in mainland China (The People’s Republic of China), the key figures in comparative literature are often from Departments of Chinese, whereas in Taiwan (The Republic of China), comparative literature is often affiliated with

departments of foreign language. In our opinion, both tendencies reflect true comparative literature, which can be both intracultural as well as intercultural.

What these reports (in fact, many of them are histories of the discipline in the respective countries) show is that each country has its own “take” on comparative literature. There are some countries (New Zealand, for example) where the discussion about language involves a dichotomy between the oral and the textual, between the indigenous, which is often not composed in writing, with the literate, which is. What the textual bias in the word “literature”, if taken literally, shows is that the bias ignores whole cultural traditions of significance which are oral more than textual (such as the Maori corpus in New Zealand literature): it also points out a lacunae in the scholarly lexicon: we distinguish between people who can read and those who can’t read a language: they are hierarchially and hegemonically distinct as “literate” and “illiterate”, but we do not, at least not in English, have words which distinguish those who can speak a language and those who cannot. This would necessarily include many Western scholars of other traditions who have often learned to read the other language, but who are not capable of speaking the other language: this has not prevented some scholars and poets from becoming experts, even translators, of languages they may read, but do not speak (Arthur Waley, for example, and, more glaringly perhaps, Ezra Pound).³

The textual bias in Western comparative literature, which came to a head in the French Deconstructionists, indicate certain technical biases which undermine a truly global perspective. If one hews too closely to the literal meaning of the word “literature,” one forfeits any legitimacy to concerns in comparative literature that occupy many of us: intermedial studies of the relationship between the arts; the study of different countries in the growing field of comparative culture; the study of film and cinematic art as not coterminous with the script (or text) in a movie; oral traditions, not excluding such classics as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* as well as half (*Guo-feng*) of the Chinese classic, the *Shijing*.

These reflections on global practice have been revelatory. More than one report reinforces the notion that influence study (considered as a neutral approach among most Western comparatists), is inherently hegemonic, asserting a superiority of the influencer over the influencee. What these reports also remind us is that the causal model, a legacy of nineteenth-century positivism, does not work when it comes to a human constructions like culture and literature, which does not answer to the physical restrictions of cause and effect. Human interactions are not, in fact, like billiard ball encounters; they are crucially interactive and involve mutual influence — even between cultures where one is regarded (erroneously) as superior to the other.

A number of observations may be made at this point. First, to truly understand the origin and initial development of Comparative Literature in a global context, one has to take into consideration a variety of spatially and temporally diverse nations and cultures. In this sense, Prof. Schulz and Prof. Rhein’s book should be renamed as *European Comparative Literature: The Early Years*. *Comparative Literature: The Early Years* should have been a multi-volume work contributed by writers and intellectuals from diverse nations, regions and civilizations around the world.

³ I (Eugene Eoyang) once tried to coin a neologism for people who can read a language, but cannot speak it: the best I could come up with was “oral” and “im-oral”, which, for obvious reasons, was unsuitable.

Second, the “comparative consciousness” that emerged out of those non-Western⁴ countries often involved with painful and violent cross-cultural and cross-civilizational conflict. The most extreme case is the Iranian perception of Comparative Literature: a picture that depicts two apples with a human face looking at each other. The green (the believers) and the red (the nonbelievers) color of these two apples depict the clash of civilizations rather than dialogue among civilizations. According to Behnam Fomeshi, Comparative Literature in Iran has been highly politicized to support the idea of *superiority of us (Persian) over the Western other*. By contrast, European Comparative Literature mainly targeted literatures within Europe, or within Western civilization. Goethe once planned an article entitled “European, i.e., World Literature” in which he meant to discuss German, French, English, Scottish and Italian literature and what they might benefit from mutual dialogue. Even in the 1950s when Auerbach wrote his *Mimesis*, Comparative Literature for him was still comparing different literatures in the West.

Third, although one might say that Goethe’s discourse on *Weltliteratur* ushered in a new “consciousness,” a new “world view,” the initial development of Comparative Literature in Europe was first and foremost academic. In 1877, when Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz founded the first journal devoted to Comparative Literature, he was trying hard to situate Comparative Literature among other more established and defined academic fields such as Philosophy, Esthetics, Ethnology, Anthropology, Literary History, and Comparative Philology. In the same vein, Hutcheson Macauley Posnett’s book *Comparative Literature* (1886) may be seen as an attempt to connect Comparative Literature with the principles and methods of another academic field: Social Science. As a result, Europe in the early years made the most substantial contribution regarding Comparative Literature as an academic discipline, although such a contribution was also very much tied to the European context. In comparison, the initial development of Comparative Literature in non-Western countries was often more about cross-cultural and cross-civilizational readings and writings practiced by writers and intellectuals.

One of us has insisted that the field of comparative literature has benefitted from the dishevelment caused by the difficulty of definition.⁵ In the U. S., comparative literature departments have been the incubators of such sub-disciplines as: Post-Colonial Studies (Edward Said was, after all, a card-carrying comparatist); East-West Studies; Film Studies;⁶ Women’s Studies; Gender Studies; Translation Studies; Cross-Cultural

⁴ Eugene Eoyang has taken issue with this useful, but ethnocentric term, “non-Western,” as there is no counterpart term as a balance: no “non-Asian” in Chinese or Japanese, only the equivalent of “foreign”. The term “non-Western” violates a point of logic in the Chinese classic, the *Zhuangzi*, in which we are advised that it is better to define something by what it is, than what it isn’t. “Foreign”, in English, also includes countries that are Western. Cf. Eugene Eoyang, “Around the World in One Semester: Integrating Western with ‘Other’ Literatures,” *Quarterly World Report of the Council on National Literatures*, Volume VII, Numbers 1/2 (January/April), pp.18-22.

⁵ Eugene Eoyang, *The Promise and Premise of Creativity: Why Comparative Literature Matters*, especially Chapters 13-17.

⁶ Film Studies was started against considerable skepticism in the 1960s at Indiana University’s Comparative Literature Program. In order to secure curriculum approval, and to present “movies” as worthy of intellectual standing, Harry Geduld, Charles Eckert, and Gerald Rabkin proposed the first film courses under the rubric, “Film Adaptations”, and focused on film versions of Shakespeare: Laurence

Studies; Inter-Arts Studies., Global Studies, World Literature, as well as what is now fashionably labeled: “interdisciplinary studies”.

It is perhaps a harbinger of the future, and of true globalization, instead of an Anglophone hegemony, that these essays will also appear in a Brazilian periodical devoted to comparative literature: *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*. It is perhaps also indicative that a journal in comparative literature in China has expressed interest in publishing a translation of these essays. In the next phase of its development, one must recognize the global development of comparative literature as a field. This is especially heartening for U. S. comparatists who must be reminded that the field may be flourishing elsewhere even if academic deans should be withdrawing support in America.

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Olivier’s *Henry V*; Joseph Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar*; and Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (his film adaption of *Macbeth*)