

KRZYSZTOF ROWIŃSKI  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

## Questions of Comparison

***Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses.* Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, eds., Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, pp. 352.**

**ISBN 978-1421409122**

The convergence, especially in the last two decades, of translation studies and comparative literature is a phenomenon that brings together two disciplines with troubled histories. Although both are in fact much older disciplines, a fuller recognition of their importance (at least in the context of the American academia) is a matter of the last couple of decades. The last two decades also saw a heated discussion over the state of comparative literature as a discipline: with a great sense of ethical urgency, scholars of comparative literature in the American academia, influenced to a large part by postcolonial studies, have sparked a debate which renewed interest in world literature and gave rise to attempts at re-envisioning the study of literature.

Inasmuch as translation studies are usually traced to Russian Formalism and the Prague Linguistic Circle,<sup>1</sup> contemporary US comparative literature comes out of (even if it is a legacy the discipline strongly disavows) cultural studies and the so called “cultural turn” in general on the hand, and post-War migration of literary scholars from Europe to the US on the other.

Despite some opposition in the world of translation studies,<sup>2</sup> the

---

1 Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, Psychology Press, 2002, p. 16.

2 In his conference presentation on translation, rewriting and circulation of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Edwin Gentzler caustically remarked that “only recently, comparative literature discovered translation.” See Edwin Gentzler, “Translation, Rewriting, and Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night's Dream*” (presented at the International Shakespeare Conference, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2014); Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Wiley, 1993, p. 11.

convergence of the two disciplines has become a fact of reality that is hard to dispute. The larger social reason for this is usually located in the increase in mass migration in the modern era, forcing a focus on non-European literatures that ought to have had, as many contributors to the volume propose, come out earlier, due to ethical, rather than practical, reasons. One of the essays exploring such a relationship between migration and comparison is Mary Layoun's "Beginnings and Endings." Concerned mostly with methodologies of comparative literature, the chapter examines the possibility of a less authoritative method of comparison, one that is "committed to the effort to cohabit with, listen to, and consider alternate stories of those who are different" (229).

And yet, most of the contributions to the volume seem to be indicative of yet another turn in the discussion over the state of the discipline. Layoun's focus on modernity, modern migration and colonial capitalism restricts the scope of the discussion to European modernity, whose primacy has come to be strongly contested in the most recent debates in the field. Following the rise of World Studies institutes at a number of universities in the United States and most specifically the appearance of Inter-Imperiality Studies,<sup>3</sup> comparatists in the American academia have begun to take more interest in the *longue durée* approach, taken from the field of comparative history. Essays such as Walter Mignolo's "On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?," R. Radhakrishnan's "Why Compare?," and Shu-mei Shih's "Comparison as Relation" point to the importance of establishing de-centered, non-hierarchical grounds for comparison. Part of that de-centering, or, to use Mignolo's term, "decolonizing" of the discipline, relies on the recognition of non-European imperial networks.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that *Comparison* is a volume of scholarship united by a shared direction; to the contrary, besides the already-mentioned distinction between the inter-imperial scholars and Layoun's chapter, there is a number of different models of comparison, both in terms of its grounds and the general model. For instance, Rebecca Walkowitz, in her discussion of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* as a novel that was "born translated" (237), refers to what is known as the "circulation model" of comparative literature, focusing on how texts travel across national boundaries. A number of scholars in the volume, including

---

<sup>3</sup> Laura Doyle, "Inter-Imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World," *Interventions*, 2013, p. 1–38.

most prominently Haun Saussy and Shu-mei Shih, have argued against the model, pointing out that it “effectively cuts off from consideration the literatures of many small nations and minor languages that are nonetheless also touched by world historical processes” (83).

The structure of the book suggests a multi-faceted take on comparison: the first section asks fundamental questions about comparison's *raison d'être*, the second part focuses on the “uses and abuses” of comparison, while the third one discusses different disciplines making use of comparison. In fact, most of the volume is clearly devoted to comparative literature, and the addition of two essays by anthropologists and one historical perspective on comparison towards the end does not significantly alter that focus. In light of that proportion, the division into sections seems to reflect the editors' initial intentions rather than the actual contents of the book. Contributions to *Comparison* could perhaps be better divided between essays discussing the problematic nature of comparison as a method and attempting to decontextualize or decenter the “axes of comparison,” and texts giving examples of comparative critique at work in particular cases. The latter, smaller category comprises texts such as Ania Loomba's comparative analysis of the categories *caste* and *race* (“Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique”), Bruce Robbins' discussion of Noam Chomsky's cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitan claim to an extraterrestrial perspective (“Chomsky's Golden Rule: Comparison and Cosmopolitanism”), as well as Pheng Cheah's brilliant tracing of the issues resurfacing in the current American debate in European continental philosophy (“The Material World of Comparison”).

The “methodological” part of the volume opens with an exchange between R. Radhakrishnan and Susan Stanford Friedman, who ask if one should or should not compare at all—and whether such choice is available to us in the first place. In the first of the two essays Radhakrishnan suggests we look at comparison as a one-way alley: once begun, it denies a return to the “single frame” of national literature (17). A comparison therefore permanently deterritorializes a text and moves it into the shared space of comparison—one, however, that too often reflects the center-periphery model of the metropolitan self. If we are to compare at all, Radhakrishnan argues, we need to deconstruct the apparatus of comparison and consequently decentralize it, “[wean comparison] away from the hegemony of centrism” (32).

Friedman, in turn, sees comparison as an inevitable part of our

cognition, implying that comparison might not be a matter of choice. Even if we do choose not to compare, she argues, that choice is fraught with the peril of identity politics based on a romanticization of the local against the cosmopolitan. To choose not to compare, she writes, “is to stick your head in the sand” (43).

Most of the contributors to the volume seem to share Friedman's position. Zhang Longxi in his discussion of the double bind of comparison opposes the stance represented by the Chinese philosopher Yang Zhu, who wept at the crossroad, as it could lead both north and south at the same time. Thus rejecting the possibility of a life spent at the crossroad, and, in effect, the notion of untranslatability, Zhang insists that comparison is “ontologically and epistemologically necessary, inevitable, and always already functioning.” (60)

Discussing notions of (in)commensurability alongside (un)translatability, Zhang's essay is grounded very strongly in translation studies. In countries with a rich tradition of translation (especially those with a large share of translated works in the literary market, such as Poland<sup>4</sup>) and translation study, this is perhaps a logical point of departure in the discussion of comparative literature. In fact, it may be suggested that the addition of translation studies to the field of comparative literature marks the transition from the old, German model of the discipline, to the one present today in the American academia, represented by books such as Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* or Emily Apter's *Translation Zone*.<sup>5</sup>

The largest cohort of authors in the volume are scholars united under the general rubric of rethinking comparison in a non-hierarchical, de-centered way. The main focus in these chapters is on the perspective of the comparatist; the message is so clear that it is somewhat surprising how quickly it is forgotten with regard to the authors themselves (as I shall mention at the end).

A prime example of the “perspective” essays is Haun Saussy's piece, discussing literary comparatists' wariness of the universalizing tendencies inherent in the practice of comparison: if we compare texts, we are likely to stress their similarities. However, as he cautions, rejecting comparison for

---

4 Polish Publishing in Figures, Vol. LVIII: 2012, Warsaw: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2013, <http://www.bn.org.pl/download/document/1377611929.pdf>.

5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline, The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

that reason would not help with the idea of inequality or incommensurability, but it would remove it from view. The discipline does indeed need, the author argues, a “step away from putative universalism” (69), but it also need not fall into the illusion of extreme singularity. Using Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Galtung, and John Rawls, Saussy suggests comparative literature needs to rethink its categories and organizing principles, so that a balance between the generalizing and the particularizing tendencies can be found.

Another contribution in the tradition of non-hierarchical, non-universalizing comparison comes from Shu-mei Shih. In a very clear manner, Shih outlines the problem of hierarchy in comparison. She distinguishes very convincingly between her proposition and the positions of the three major scholars associated with the world literature debate: unlike Pascale Casanova's metropolitan model, David Damrosch's circulation-based model, and Franco Moretti's notion of distant reading, Shih's “relational comparison” (79) allows to establish a meaningful, in-depth connection between two non-European literatures, or between texts which do not necessarily have to travel to “merit” comparison. Building off of Édouard Glissant's notion of relation,<sup>6</sup> Shih proposes an “arc of comparison,” a structure to which texts can be added at any point, because of the shared larger historical processes that affect them. World literature then ought to be thought of not as a collection of juxtapositions, but rather as a “network of horizontal and vertical relations.” (95)

The implications of Shih's *relational comparison* are far-reaching. Within this frame, comparative literature cannot be seen as a discipline or curriculum that is parallel to the study of, for instance, German or Chinese literature; rather, it is the study of literature in general that necessitates an interconnected, relational view, as the only possible mode of reading literature. In other words, Shih's proposition is not so much a relational model for comparative literature, as it is a vision of literature *as* comparison. “Comparison as Relation” is perhaps one of the most original and promising contributions to the volume.

Writing from a fairly similar standpoint, Walter D. Mignolo, a proponent of the “decolonizing comparative studies” (101), criticizes the tendency to treat the history of literature as a single story originating in Greece. Comparative literature must not only focus on non-European literatures, but also adapt its categories to the traditions from which these

---

6 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

literatures originate; otherwise, he points out, we will only observe a change in the enunciated, the statement, but not in the enunciation.

In a move away from the debate over the grounds of comparison *per se*, Ania Loomba challenges the distinction between “premodern” categories of cultural difference and the “modern” category of “race.” Localizing the debate in the context of India and the attempts by Dalit activists to make a case at the United Nations Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001 for “caste” being a category comparable to “race,” Loomba performs comparative work on medieval and early colonial texts to examine the expressions of religious and cultural difference. Going back to medieval Europe, Loomba demonstrates that religious difference was expressed in terms of color, which points to the inseparability of the two formations of prejudice. Instead of a break with the “premodern” conceptions of “cultural difference” with the arrival of racial “science,” the author argues, there was a continuity between the two ideological traditions. Through an analysis of the categories, Loomba is able to trace “the politics of comparison, and the politics of the denial of comparison” (161). The chapter is a good example of useful, focused work on comparative categories as elements of analysis. It clearly demonstrates how comparative work may serve to refocus a debate because of a deconstruction of its primary categories.

One significant flaw of *Comparison* is that its contributors analyze Comparative Literature *as* an American discipline, without reference to the place of the debate. This is not only due to the fact that most (seventeen out of eighteen) contributors work at American universities. Even if authors address the problem of the discipline's categories—like Walter Mignolo, whose analysis, nevertheless, concerns more the European roots of the discipline than the current American academic hegemony—they fail to localize their own debate in the very specific context of US leading universities. There seems to be an unspoken assumption that comparative literature in the United States represents accurately the state of the discipline worldwide, which is a gesture that bears some resemblance to that of naming the Major League Baseball's championship “World Series.” The push for the visibility of the comparatist (quite closely echoing Lawrence Venuti's concern with the invisibility of the translator<sup>7</sup>), and calls to re-focus the discipline away from Europe, apparent in so many of the volume's essays, make that tacit assumption about the discipline all the more

---

7 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London; New York: Routledge, 2008.

surprising.

In general, however, *Comparison* is a much-needed and important publication that speaks to the immense energy and potential of the on-going discussion about the state of comparative literature as a discipline. The number of interesting and crucial issues raised, as well as the range of topics and approaches leaves no doubt as to the volume's usefulness in the debate that will surely continue in the coming years.