To Compare, To World Two Verbs, One Discipline

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In a special 2004 issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* devoted to “World Literature and Globalization,” I considered the possibilities of “world” as a verb, as a transitive verb, to be exact. Once “to world” is read as transitive, the ensuing question about the binomial “world literature” would logically become “which world are we worlding literature into and why?” And, concomitantly, from what position are we worlding world literature?

On this occasion, I invite us to consider the verb “to compare” as an intransitive verb. Logically, this would lead to the grammatical subject of comparison as something or someone other than us, the comparatists. The focus in “to compare” as intransitive verb would fall on what it is that compares and how. For our disciplinary purposes, the focus would fall on literature. This focus is not an insignificant event, especially for those in comparative literature who confess to no longer be reading any literature. Arbitrary as the proposed exercise might appear, I believe it could possibly shed some light on the dual phrases “comparative literature” and “world literature” that on this occasion we consider in counterpoint.

Let us first take the verb “to compare,” not as what we are wont to do, but as what would be done by the verb’s subject if the verb were intransitive. What compares, how, and to what effect? And, in the case of comparative literature, if the agential subject we designate for the verb is “literature,” the question then is how does literature do so? Once we claim that literature is the verbal agent, that literature compares, intransitively, and we can then describe it adjectivally by what it does and call it “comparative,” how does this “comparative literature” differ from what we now understand by the phrase? And what might this difference between comparative literature as literature that compares intransitively and comparative literature as predicate of our own professional performance as transitive action of comparing reveal about the phenomenon? Once we understand comparative literature in this context, then we could move to the next logical question with which we are tasked by the topic of this seminar. Namely, how could this atypical phenomenon of comparative literature as something that does the comparison without an object predicate relate to what we call world literature, especially if we characterize world litera-
ture not as a phenomenal object but as a predicate, as literature that is predicated on the action of a transitive verb “to world”?

I suspect that through this grammatical exercise we shall discover, on the one hand, that literature might well be inevitably comparative, in which case our practices as comparatists are concurrent with inevitability, inexorably engaged in performing the obvious. On the other hand, we might re-discover that world literature is far from being a logical necessity or inevitability, inasmuch as the lexis “world” has no particular or necessarily predictable referent. This discovery makes it unavoidable for us to have to explain the phenomenon we are referring to as the predicate object or as the predicative process of our worlding actions—which world, at what time, in what location, through which language, and with what intentions. World, in other words, can never be taken as a given since it is invariably the constructed outcome of our particular performative interventions. And, by extension, the literature it conditions becomes a particular literature whose specificity is a derivative of the instance of the phenomenon “world” we define as predicative referent of our action in the verb to world. I shall say nothing about the questionable relevance to comparative literature of those who still claim to be comparatists without the need to read any literature since in effect they remove themselves from one of the terms of the binomial, thereby giving an altogether different meaning to intransitive action by transforming comparison into solipsistic onanism.

There could well be some resistance to this epistemic operation that I propose here, though not because of its technical difficulty. We all know our grammar. Rather, it might seem difficult because we are not accustomed to this mirroring in which we reverse the traditional roles of comparative literature and world literature, thus making the first nominal, or indexical, and the second predicative, or verbal. Being part of the world, we are prone to assume that it is what it is regardless of our being in it and, thus, world literature is just what the binomial says. And being by circumstance, inclination, and professional formation comparatists, we are wont to see comparative literature as the outcome of our own practices and studious performativity, a role we might well be disinclined to relinquish.² Let us reverse these conventional assumptions and see what we have and what the relationship between what we have might be.

My hypothesis is that the outcome of this exercise might reveal comparative literature and world literature not as antithetical phenomena, as the “versus” in the title of this seminar would have it. Rather than antithesis, the two could well be correlative processes. In which case, in disciplinary terms, the program or department that identifies us through the professional affiliation of being comparatists indicates not merely an institutional phenomenon but a discursive process. We, in other words, are identified administratively as a unit called the faculty, the program,
or the department of comparative literature by virtue of being engaged in a process, a worlding endeavor. This opens up the possibility that we are not circumscribed within a nominal or phenomenal disciplinary entity called literature that is adjectively characterized now by comparative, now by world in alternating oscillation or in antithetical counterpoint.

I propose such a course of action and venture such a hypothesis for two reasons, one pragmatic, the other, theoretical. Pragmatically speaking, there are good reasons, political and institutional, to see beyond an adversarial relationship between comparative literature and world literature. As I am suggesting here, the two are mutually implicated and any institutional or managerial attempt to counter-pose the two or to divide them up as separate pedagogical and epistemological domains could prove deleterious to both pedagogy and epistemology. Theoretically, there is something inimical to literature in the supposition that its comparativity originates in us and in our practices, just as the thought that the world, including world literature, exists as a phenomenal given—as something that preexists our intrusive acts of cognition, construction, and definition—amounts to a presumption that overlooks the repercussions of our managerial and productive intervention. In both pragmatic and theoretical terms, our formation as comparatists predisposes us to mitigate the hubris of our performativity in forging the comparative nature of literature, and it alerts us as well to the formative and consequential effects of our interference in the order of the world, including the literary order of differential contexts in the world that might not even see themselves as world or as worldly but as discrete and highly localized constellation of language practices. By language practices I mean linguistic usage for other than mechanistically functional or instrumental ends, which is one of the ways we are prone to define what we understand by literature. And by discrete and highly localized practices I do not imply isolate and inviolable authenticity. And I certainly do not suggest an essentialist reduction of any of the sites of literary practice, whether they do or do not see themselves as the world or as world literature.

On the plane of institutional pragmatics, we have ample anecdotal evidence for a good case against the epistemic management and pedagogy of world literature outside of a comparatistic curriculum, especially if we view literature as constitutionally endowed with comparative attributes that pre-exist our disciplinary or institutional intervention. We have all witnessed the packaging, marketing, and teaching of world literature by and in monolingual, monocultural, and national, not to say nationalist and ethno-nationalist, institutional contexts where any comparativity that might inhere in literature becomes elided, glossed over, or erased. We have sufficient experience with this disembodiment of world literature from the world and, more significantly, from the specificity of the literature’s own particular worlds, to know that this sort of alienation of world literature from any comparatistic sensi-
bility translates into a strong form of appropriation, distortion, and recasting of the literature’s world life into conformity with the one world of those who carry out this sort of misappropriation. Our colleague Martin Puchner sums up this process in a pithy phrase, “world literature is not written but made—made by a marketplace” (49). A degree of appropriation is, of course, inevitable even in the most sensitive forms of cultural translocation and textual translation. But to the degree that this appropriation occurs in a comparatistic situation, and this is the spirit that has characterized our collective endeavors in making The Longman Anthology of World Literature, for example, the risks of undue deformation of a literature’s originary world and the distortion of the defining world of that literature are somewhat mitigated, even if not fully allayed. The comparatist’s alertness to this risk hopefully spurs his or her inclination and ability to articulate the perils and promise of the process. These pragmatic issues and their theoretical correlates have been addressed widely and eloquently by readers both distant and close.

The theoretical question is what I wish to turn to, briefly. This is not to imply that this matter has not been amply dealt with in theory. But we are all aware that the theoretical dimension of this or any other complex is something we are obliged to perpetually explore and articulate anew, lest we lose sight of what we are engaged in doing and why we do it. This exploration is especially crucial at a historical moment such as the present in which we witness not an epoch of anti-theory but an a-theoretical tendency, even on the part of those who claim to no longer read literature. We can speculate on the underlying reasons for this. My own hunch is that the eschewal of theoretical engagement could well be a form of defensive or preemptive self-absolution in a historical era in which imputability or attribution of responsibility for institutionally, socially, and politically actionable behavior leaves us exposed to indefensible ethical inconsistency and incontrovertible indictments, especially when it comes to wrenching parts of the world out of their contexts and assimilating them to our own world or worldliness. But be that as it may, I want to stay focused on the grammatical exercise I initially proposed, grammar being a strong enough form of theory to have crystallized into axiomatic precepts and inviolable modus operandi that have made grammaticality synonymous with the praxis of correctness. These are the structures I am trying to unsettle here by jostling the protocols of actant subjects, object predicates, and verbal constructs we are habituated to impute to performative agency in the binomials “comparative literature” and “world literature.”

The consideration of the verb “to compare,” from whose adjectival form we derive comparative, as intransitive verb highlights the parity of elements brought together by the prefix com-, or with; a parity that reaches for an equivalency of disparate elements, but, failing that, must settle for an identity among them. That identity, we know, can be a simile, or a contrast. It might be for this reason that
certain Romance languages such as Spanish operate with dual verbs, comparar and equiparar, whose action in English is consigned to the sole verb “to compare.” The Latin comparare, from which we derive the English, held these dual actions in one, thus denoting simultaneously “to treat as equals” and “to set against.” The Latin verb aequiparare from which the Spanish derives equiparar, also equivocates, denoting at once to equalize or set on an equal level as well as to rival. Spanish usage has dropped the second denotation, thus making it possible for us to distinguish between comparar and equiparar, with the first connoting principally contrast and the latter equalization. In English, this polyvocity devolves to the one verb compare, which requires explanation and must be unpacked in each instance. The contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy had examined the social implications of this lexical complex in French in his 1986 treatise La communauté déseuvrée, a discussion explored through the issue of incommensurability most recently by our colleague Natalie Melas in her book on the discipline of comparative literature All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison.

What emerges from this line of theoretical exploration, at least for me, are the differential possibilities of comparison, a potential I see becoming most salient through the reading of the verb “to compare” as an intransitive verb. By differential I mean the default connotation of comparing, namely, identity, rather than the etymologically more denotative equivalence. Just as we have come to accept and appreciate the differential nature of identity in our mathematical calculus, cultural politics, and disciplinary discourses, we have understood that comparables, or what we call with regard to literature, comparatives, can only exist as such by virtue of the differences among them, rather than by virtue of their equivalences. And, especially, when things compare intransitively, they manifest the coincidence of similitudes that identify them not as congruent and hermetically overlapping, but as partaking of sufficient commonality so as to be of relational or of correlative relevance to each other. Comparative literature, then, as an outcome of this process, keeps the accent on the differential rather than privileging the assimilative. And it does so not by dint of our mediation, but because of the nature of literature and its relational and referential characteristics that evince comparativity. The elements of parity brought, literally, into contiguity by the Latin prefix con, or “with,” have a better chance to survive as differential specificities in a relationship of identity on their own, in their own intransitive acts, grammatically speaking, than when acted upon by us as agent subjects of transitive verbs exerting mediate and repercussive interventions that discursively construct, reify, or politically essentialize them. There is a sense in which this sort of differential intransitivity in the verb “compare” is most apposite to the phenomenon of literature, especially, since literature itself is by definition a differentiated deployment of language that becomes identifiable as
literature as a result of a negative identity, as a result of what it is not: it is not literal, it is not instrumental, it is not transparent, it is not immediate presence, it is not self-identical, it is not immutable. But, yes, it does indeed function as a correlative of all these spectral reversals. In this sense, comparative literature has a certain tautological quality in the conjugation of its binomial terms.

If such a move toward foregrounding verbal intransitivity safeguards something in comparative literature, the opposite tack, a highlighted awareness of the effects of transitive action in the construct “world literature” rescues something of the world and its literature from the transactive exertions we impose as intervening subjects. Especially since we are fully aware now that our seemingly innocuous acts in naming the world and in yoking it to literature perform more than a nominal role. We actually construct and define both world and literature in and through the binomial phrase. Becoming conscious of taking world literature as the object predicate of what we do might ensure that we do not overlook the fact that we are doing it, a not uncommon oversight in our current practices, one that allows us to take the world, the literature, and world literature as givens rather than identifying them as our own epistemic, economic, and ideological constructs.

In changing the case of nominatives to predicates, and in training a light on the subjects, I wish to move the emphasis in our assessment from what we do to the fact that it is we who are doing it. This shift is not changing the subject in the sense that we are diverting our attention away from comparative literature and world literature. Rather, I wish to call attention to the fact that we are the ones subjecting these binomials and their referents to whatever we consider them to be. To the degree that both world literature and comparative literature derive their particular existence from our acts—acts that could well be conscious, suppositious, or presumptive—they share a commonality. What comparative literature and world literature have in common, then, are us. And this is by no means intended to privilege our centrality, whether as distant or as close readers. Rather, my intention is to highlight our actionable imputability, to remind us of the responsibility as highly trained, thoroughly programmed, systematically honed disciplinary subjects whose acts with regard to literature, whether comparative or world literature, are so intricately conditioned as to go without saying. Our discipline functions simultaneously as enablement and as cloak of invisibility that occludes our interventionist agency in the case of world literature and exaggerates our performativity where comparative literature is concerned. Thus, any adversarial, contestatory, or antithetical positioning of comparative literature and world literature does not inhere in either. Rather, this, too, reflects our deeds, interests, and disciplinary formation.

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I have dealt with this possibility in my guest-editor’s introduction to the 40th anniversary issue of Comparative Literature Studies. See Kadir, “To World, To Globalize” 1–9.

See Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature.” Walkowitz goes so far as to substitute “comparison literature” for certain type of fiction whose intertextual and intercultural nature has been traditionally identified as the domain of “comparative literature,” pointing to the inherently comparatistic history of certain books and of the constitutive processes that define them. By “comparison literature,” Walkowitz says, she is referring to “a genre of world fiction that I am calling ‘comparison literature.’ With this term, I mean to consider the relationship between the writing of world literature and the reading protocols we bring to those texts. And I mean to draw our attention to the traditional distinction between the disciplines of national literature, which typically refer to what books are, who wrote them, or where they were produced, and the discipline of comparative literature, which typically refers to what we do with books. ‘Comparison literature’ implies both of these projects, asking us to understand comparison as the work of scholars, to be sure, but also as the work of books that calculate, as Ishiguro’s do, the transnational contexts of their own production, circulation, and study” (223). Walkowitz revisionary nomination seems to be predicated on a long-debated distinction between “the disciplines of national literature” she redefines as textual production (“what books are, who wrote them, or where they were produced”), and “the discipline of comparative literature,” which she says, “typically refers to what we do with books,” what the field has commonly called reception studies and circulation history. While the distinctions she draws between the national and the comparative might not be so clearly differentiable (indeed the contours and efficacy of such distinctions have often been debated throughout the history of the discipline), and while she limits the complex history and practices of comparative literature to just one of its concerns (fortune or reception and circulation history), her sentence of a comparatistic element constitutionally inherent to literature and to the worldly vicissitudes of its production and circulation is insightful and suggestive, nonetheless.

This is not a novel insight, and one of its earliest articulations in early modernity can be found in Nicholas of Cusa’s De docta ignorantia [Of Learned Ignorance] of 1440, with which I deal elsewhere (see chapter 3, “Of Learned Ignorance: Nicholas of Cusa, Cardinal Spaces of Culture” in Djelal Kadir, Memos from the Besieged City: Lifelines for Cultural Sustainability). In chapter 3 of book 1 of his treatise, Cusa explores the mathematical relationship of the circle to the polygon as analogue of the relationship of our intellect to truth. He notes: “The intellect is related to truth as a polygon to a circle. The inscribed polygon grows more like a circle the more angles it has. Yet even though the multiplication of its angles were infinite, nothing will make the polygon equal the circle” (91). The exploration of relational dynamics in comparing, in this case of intellect to truth, of polygon to circle, and of the first set of correlative elements to the second, foreground what is perhaps the most crucial dynamic in the act of comparing, namely, the relationship between identity and equivalence.
WORKS CITED


