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# The Futures of Comparative Literature

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# 比较文学的未来诸相

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**摘　要:** 为了回应全球化现象,比较主义应该生成一套有关文学价值与普适性的概念。对比较文学学科的论辩式梳理显示,二战后的文学理论已危及大学中各学科间的界限;基于这一原因,此学科一直受到冷战人文主义所规约,而这又是基于阿诺德式的"世界"概念。比较主义应该制约而非采用这类概念,其理应承担的任务要包括:生产差异、守卫不可转译性、收复该学科与理论哲学的关系;简言之,比较主义应该拆解文学价值的一统化概念。

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# The Futures of Comparative Literature

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**Abstract:** Comparativism, this essay argues, should respond to the phenomenon of globalization by producing a critique of the concepts of literary value and universality. A polemical genealogy of the discipline of Comparative Literature shows "literary theory" in the post – war period to have emerged as a threat to disciplinary boundaries in the university, and for this reason to have always been regulated by a Cold – War humanism grounded in an Arnoldian belief in concepts like "the world." Comparativism should militate against such concepts rather than adopt them; it should take up the tasks of producing difference, of guarding untranslatability, of recapturing the discipline's relation to speculative philosophy—in short, of unbuilding a unitary conception of literary value.

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"The Futures of Comparative Literature." This is in some ways a pretty odd title, but I do not want to focus on its oddities alone and never get to the nub, thus disappointing anyone who might hope for something like a plausibly prophetic account of Comparative Literature's future, or a polemical push of the field of literary studies in one or another direction. What I would like to do in this brief essay is give my readers a sense of what Comparative Literature is in the present, some inklings about what it's been in the past, and why in my view a version of Comparative Literature is important for the future of liberal arts more generally. I'll get to my sense of what the "futures" of Comparative Literature might look like—but first let me ask why anyone should care, really, about this weird parasitic discipline, and why the question of its future or futures should be anything more than a pretty arcane disciplinary matter.

Here's a story. When the Emir of Abu Dhabi approached the president of NYU about creating a Liberal Arts college in the emirate, he had in mind, it seems, the rather long – sighted idea that the liberal arts as taught in the United States—and as conceived originally in the European university and para – university setting of cosmopolitan, urban elites from the 18th century on—

that these liberal arts could be at the core of the development of civil society adequate to the challenges of the region, adequate to imagining and bringing about a future for a country now flush with petroleum profits but not destined to remain so. A bright genealogical line can be drawn from the Emir's request back to the claim, the Arnoldian claim, on which the liberal arts have stood for nearly two centuries: that "culture," as Matthew Arnold writes in *Culture and Anarchy*, in 1869,

> is the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. ①

One can see why this view of the liberal arts might have appealed to the Emir of Abu Dhabi. His is a perplexing society indeed—as close politically as we come, today, to classical Athenian society: a society of citizens and non-citizens, with rights and privileges accruing to a small cadre of Emirati citizens, obligations of different sorts to the non-citizens, who are laborers from Pakistan, India, and many other countries. Shoring up the liberal arts must mean, must have meant, starting with a university for the elites and pursuing, by means of the study of cultural universals, "total perfection" rather than partisan or partial or mechanistic or habitual "notions and habits." This, then, but also with a longer view toward creating a non-technocratic, non mechanistic view of the society both in the elites and in the balance of the citizenry—this must have seemed like an enlightened and feasible, incrementalist goal.

When the curriculum of NYU-Abu Dhabi was developed, however, it took a surprising angle on this Arnoldian story. The notion that there is a "best which has been thought and said in the world" has turned out to be controversial both within and outside of the academy—as decolonization, the opening of canons, on up to the so-called culture wars and the theory wars of the past twenty years have shown. In the place held by this cultural superlative, by this notion that "the best which has been thought and said in the world" exists as such, and that if it exists is accessible, and that if it is accessible it is teachable, and that if it is teachable its teaching is desirable—in this place a different value was installed. The goal remained the same—the Arnoldian goal of "turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits," particularly stock notions of society—but the device, the means, or the *method* was different. "Mechanism," and the merely "mechanical" following of "stock notions and habits" were to be discouraged—by putting together a strong science component to the curriculum, and a humanities core built around topics and notions drawn from the field of Comparative Literature. Comparativism, in short, stepped into the controversial spot where reference to the "best which has been thought and said in the world" had stood. It was not only that the literature courses to be taught at Abu Dhabi were to bring together literature from different languages, translated often into English, as if the "best" Indian novel could be read against and with the "best" British, Colombian, and Italian ones, in a "great booksy" meeting of the "best"—but rather that the curriculum, even the history curriculum, was imagined according to what we should call a *comparativist* template. This template acknowledges and emphasizes that fields of human knowledge emerge relationally and define themselves relationally, in the hustle and bustle of contact with other languages, with antagonistic ideas, with different protocols of expression, different ways of establishing the falsehood or truth of claims, different and antinomic ways of assigning the value of "best" or of "worst" to this or that work, different histories, different conceptions of the borders of the fields of human knowledge. Comparativism of this sort, in short, does not self-evidently believe there is such a thing as "the world," and a fortiori that there are works valued by "the world," among other things because one thing may be a "work" in one "world" and not in another. This negotiated jumble seemed a pretty good model, to the administration as well as to the leaders of Abu Dhabi, not just for knowledge production in the twenty-first century, but for civil society as well.

We have come far from Arnoldian superlatives, however, or from the superlative normativity of elite concepts like the "best which has been thought and said in the world." "Comparativism," it would appear, attends to difference—indeed that's where it starts and what it requires: comparativism attends to cultural difference, religious, ethnic, and linguistic difference. But it does more than just attend to differences, of world and of work, and of ways of valuing work and world. If comparativism *remains* comparativist it is because it concludes where Arnold left off—with difference produced from seeming totalities, analyzed and brought into the domain of knowledge, but not reduced, or not necessarily reduced, or not even brought into what Arnold calls "the world." "Comparativism," on this description, can indeed produce, or at least it can model, a civil society whose juridical frame is neutral with respect to differences. It can attend to and produce a wholly different sort of world than the one Arnold envi-

sions, a world that is not one.

How did this come about? How does it come about that the futures of civil society seem to pass through Comparative Literature? The leader of an emergent, complex nation seeks to secure for his country a future beyond fundamentalisms of all sorts, beyond the carbon – based economy we suffer at present; he imagines converting the sorts of commodities he exports into intellectual commodity, at a point in the future, having secured a civil society amenable to such an economy. The cosmopolitan university he enrolls to make this come about which chooses to join the project partly out of the intellectual challenge, partly out of a clear sense of the economic benefits to derive from it. I am not starry eyed about either side of this collaboration, of course. How did it come about that something as seemingly trivial as a subfield of literary studies serves as the hinge for this futuristic enterprise?

Let me begin again by giving you a sense of where I think the discipline, if it is one, may be headed, in what shape, and to what end; and of why it matters that Comparative Literature be understood as a discipline that is about the future, its own, and about futurity in general—by first going backward, to the circumstances of its foundation as a discipline in the United States. It's an almost biblical story, and it begins in the babble of the war years and the immediate postwar period, call it between early 1937 and 1955 or so, when, as the story goes, a cluster of intellectuals from Europe, members of the academic elite, threatened throughout Europe for their political inclinations or for their religion, emigrate to the United States. Their names might be Dúmaso Alonso, René Wellek, Américo Castro, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, Theodor Adorno. They bring along not just training in a number of different fields of study, competency in different European languages and literatures, familiarity with many sorts of lexicons, but also the supposition or the fantasy that such training, such familiarity, such polyglot and multicultural competency is an answer to the disastrous rise of nationalisms and totalitarianisms they are fleeing. They organize fields of knowledge in opposition to and distinction from national languages and literatures. My story then finds the new discipline of Comparative Literature at the heart of an enterprise oriented both toward an alternative future—alternative to the disasters of monoglot European national culture, which seems always destined to produce friend – enemy distinctions—and away from a specific past. "Literature" becomes the repository of national cultural and linguistic value; but that literature is always "comparative" means that it is always defined and studied relationally, that all cultures, national languages, and nations, are relationally defined—and this expresses the hope that the sense of correlative, relational definition need not be understood as either a state of war, or a state of friendship: it is a state of comparison.

This rather utopian, compensatory view of the cultural shape and value of Comparative Literature, and of comparison more broadly, takes shape, in the fullest flower of the Cold War in the United States—during the period in which the United States and the Soviet Union faced off across different sorts of fortified ideological as well as physical walls. This circumstance has a fascinatingly inhibiting and deforming effect upon the society of both countries, of course, and the university and academic culture are not exempt. Fields from linguistics to biology, history to political science are obviously defined in part against or in accord with perceived national interests. Study of national languages is bolstered between 1943 and 1944 through the Army Specialized Training Program, which funded some five hundred intensive speaking courses in more than 30 languages in US universities. ② Philosophy in the United States develops its analytical edge in part as a response to the perceived Marxisization of Continental philosophy. The disciplinary fantasy that Comparativism can provide a cosmopolitan alternative to national and nationalist chauvinism comes under the usual suspicion with which cosmopolitan ideologies are greeted. You might say that the Cold War deprives Comparative Literature of its future, of its concern with futurity. And you might further say that into this lack, into the place where the affective fantasy of the first generation of comparativists placed the future, steps something else: literary theory, high theory, Comparative Literature's surrogate future. Excluded from departments of philosophy in the United States, continental philosophy finds an exile's home where it has no professional standing and is perceived to have no disciplinary and, more importantly, no social consequences: in Comparative Literature. How does the story of Comparative Literature's loss of a future, and then its regaining of a theoretical future, a substitute future in theory, go? How does it begin?

Let me go back to babble and Babel. "Was ever, since Babel," William Riley Parker asked in 1962, "was ever the world so conscious of language? Has there been another time, before or after Gutenberg, when so much language assailed mortal man—from tireless presses, and hurrying people, and over the troubled air? We live among strange voices. Was it only yesterday we relished silence between the reassurances of familiar sounds?" ③ With these words Parker, the past president of the Modern Languages Association, opens his "Envoy" to the third edition of *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*, from March of 1962. This 1962 edition of Parker's influential report and handbook surveyed the progress made since that report was first published, in 1954 and then reissued in 1957, and took account in particular the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which had been recently passed by Congress. Title VI of this act

authorized and funded the creation of centers for the teaching and study of foreign languages, at both the secondary and the more advanced, university levels. Reauthorization of the NDEA, and of Title VI centers, has been a particularly contentious issue since the late 1960's; in 1954, however, and in 1957, and in 1958, and finally in1962, when Parker looks back on Babel, the teaching of foreign languages in the United States is envisioned as part of a more general diplomatic and economic Cold War strategy intended to bring about parity between the United States and the Soviet block countries. Parker's rather lyrical evocation of a time "yesterday" when "familiar sounds" surrounded us, interrupted only by "silences" we could "relish," sets in place contrastively the "tireless presses" and "hurrying people" of a troubled, strange, and unfamiliar modernity. Our Babel is the future of that familiar past; our modernity is its outcome. "Assailing," "strange voices" press in upon the "familiar" monoglot babble that marks our own domestic scenes. Babel's tower has come down, and now we inhabit a public sphere that is not only polyglot but also, and crucially, liable to make us "conscious of language," a babbling public sphere whose encounter with our own private, or at least peacefully local, recollected language – history shores up the communal identification of an increasingly differentiated Republic. The logic that informs Parker's scene is domestic, but it is also geopolitical. And it is, most importantly for our purposes, the logic that governs the emergence and consolidation of disciplinary practices in the United States, and sets the disciplinary borders still in play to – day.

Now consider the dialectical passion – play, or three – or four – part dance staged between, on one hand, the copia of "strange voices" speaking other languages, the Babelian dispersal of tongues that threatens the walls of the American republic; on the other the familiar sounds and relished silence of the home, of the sphere of private contemplation, of a society as yet untouched by globalization; and finally the mixed domain that Parker calls the "consciousness of language," the position "we" occupy now, and the position from which he writes his handbook. The emergence and short hegemony of "high theory" in University culture in the United States, whose origins may well date from the exile of continental philosophy into departments of literature, and comparative literature in particular, but whose highest point might be said to run from roughly 1969 to 1984, this hegemony and then decline of "high theory" is signaled already from the complex status of this last moment in Parker's description, the moment marked by a "consciousness of language." Parker lobs the expression to his readers as a sort of *lorgniappe*, embedded in an elegantly self – answering question intended in part to emblematize and ward off any possible anxieties excited by post – War European immigration or by the battles for racial integration opening after the War, by subsuming these anxieties in a governing Judeo – Christian narrative (the dispersal of languages at Babel emerging somehow as the forerunner of the Cold War, a figure that also allows block politics to assume the character of theodicy). But the "conciousness of language" is a powerfully problematical notion as well: "language" as well as "consciousness" serve as bridge – words in more ways than one, designating neither private nor public domains or speech – situations. The "consciousness of language" pertains to the phenomenology of every – day experience, and has to do, if we follow Parker, with our awareness of the "troubled air" we breathe, among urban crowds of "strangers" — "strangers" speaking other national languages, as with European immigrants, or "strangers" speaking the diverse languages of racial, economic and cultural difference *internal* to the United States, as with the internal immigration of African Americans to urban centers in the North; it pertains also to an administrative – political sphere, in which it suddenly appears that differences within communities and between communities must be negotiated with reference to accepted languages and accepted standards (languages and standards not "foreign" to any, or equally "foreign" to all); the "consciousness of language" is drawn from an emerging commercial – mediatic or econometric sphere, in which the relative "consciousness" of different market – segments becomes the subject of the most pressing analytic and commercial concern (think here of the rise of marketing and advertising as fields of inquiry at this time, as forms of reflecting upon public "consciousness of language"); and it pertains to the more rarefied academic and theological discourses in which the "consciousness of language" is itself the subject of *disciplinary* concern—like the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, ethics, or political philosophy—and of institutional negotiation.

The place set at the dialectical table by the "consciousness of language" is thus richly and contradictorily over – determined. By the time that "high theory" has come onto the scene to occupy that place (or to occupy a place of that place), the place set for it by Parker, it is already clear that this contradictory and over – determined quality of the "consciousness of language" has threatened, not to consolidate disciplinary self – recognition in the University (for instance, into language – and cultural – studies departments "conscious" of themselves as such, reflecting upon their protocols, rules of expression, administrative identity, and so on), but to threaten it. And so, *pari passu* with the emergence of a "consciousness of language," sanctioned academically in the form of new funding for translation schools and Title VI area study centers, in the form too of the emergence of academic departments and programs working across the boundaries of *national* languages (for instance, the rise of Comparative Literary studies, the beginnings of Departments of

Foreign Languages and of Romance Studies), in the form as well of a new set of proper *objects of study* in metalinguistics, furnished in the United States for instance by Chomsky, in Europe by structural anthropology. In step then with the emergence of a "consciousness of language" there arises a compensatory, domestic figure of thought that serves to regulate this *theoretical* "consciousness," that serves to keep it from breaking apart into its excessively abstract terms—and which serves to make unthinkable the "consciousness of language" in the richly fragmented, overdetermined sense afforded it in the immediate post – War period, to make this construction of the relation between "consciousness" and "language" an improper object of thought.

What shape does this regulating figure assume? Consider this argument, made by the distinguished literary scholar Murray Sachs in *Profession1984* —the professional journal of the Modern Languages Association. Sachs' immediate subject is cross – disciplinary collaboration. Collaboration between faculty, between universities and high – schools, and among departments, he writes, should drive us away from the "fragmentation" brought about by vertical and horizontal differentiation within the University (different departmental structures, different objects of study), as well as by different regimes of study, also arranged horizontally as well as vertically. These regimes of study distinguish between the "consciousness of language" as a utilitarian instrument, and the "consciousness of language" provided by metatheoreticl reflection upon the "literariness" of language rather than it use; they stand on the difference between the teaching of foreign languages, or of literatures more broadly, in high schools and in non – elite universities; and the teaching of literature and culture under the aspect of French and Continental theory or under the influence of contiguous disciplines like linguistics, or philosophy, or history, in elite institutions of higher learning. The effect has been one of dispersal. Sachs concludes recasting the figure of Babelian fragmentation in the heightened diction of genuine alarm, but also sketching for us the figure, welcoming and familiar, that will serve to guide us through the wasteland of this scattered modernity. The year, after all, is 1984. The disastrous confrontationalism of the Reagan regime has made the search for alternative forms of sociability a matter of pressing concern. Sachs writes:

> In a profession so shatteringly fragmented in its every dimension, what are the realistic prospects for successful collaboration? How can people work together who have so little likelihood of finding any extensive common ground on which to stand? Those many new forms of vertical and horizontal fragmentation in our field now constitute the main centrifugal force driving us apart, impelling us away from the center of our discipline, and foreclosing any hope of forming a coherent professional entity…It is worth reminding ourselves that we all chose this profession voluntarily, and no doubt passionately…Whatever the individual impulse, do we not all still have within us the poignant hope of recapturing that love again somehow? That hope is the one professional truth we can be sure we all have in common, and that love is, I think, for each of us, the true center of our discipline, the center we are, perhaps unconsciously, seeking when we are moved by the idea of collaboration. ④

The lovely and compelling figure of hope—hope for a recaptured love, hope for recaptured passion, for recovered time, for a future beyond the long, Orwellian Cold War, for *perestroika*, a term first employed publicly by Mikhail Gorbachev in that very year, in 1984—the figure of "hope" furnishes Sachs with "truth," with a disciplinary center, with an idea of the future. "Hope" is a form, "perhaps unconscious," that "moves" us affectively and should, Sachs argues, "move" us professionally as well. It should provide the "connections" dismally lacking to – day, in 1984; it should create between us a community of purpose based on the recognition of a common passion, that led to a common choice (we chose the profession of literary studies), in a time we have in common—the mythic, infantile time when our passions and choices were untrammeled by the coercion of fashion, the market, professional correctness, disciplinary constraints. For Sachs, in short, the consolidating and constituting term in the construction of disciplinary communities would itself not form part of the object of reflection for that community: the "hope," "perhaps unconscious," for a return to the domestic myth, is not to be thought through, but to be recognized *as an affective form* that regulates the "consciousness of language." Regulates it, but also shelters it from disciplinarization: the road back from Babel lies not through the reflexive logic of disciplines that submit their languages and formative myths to the models of thought and consciousness provided by those languages, but in the unexamined affect that attaches to these half – remembered languages and formative myths. Sachs's "hope" is the figure with which the late Cold War translates Arnold's understanding of "world."

Now this is not a new story that I am telling you, but I want to emphasize in it these four elements:

First, that from the middle of the 20th century on, in the United States the dialectic of disciplinarity in foreign languages and in the discipline of Comparative Literature has embraced a nostalgic, domestic – geopolitical desire for community;

Second, that the notion of a theoretical or reflexive moment was present in the teaching of Comparative Literature from the

first, even in documents like the handbook on *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*;

Third, that this reflexive or theoretical moment threatens to unsettle the public – private, domestic – theological dialectic on which the logic of the Cold War university complex stands;

And fourth, that a compensatory set of figures is then marshaled so as to regulate that reflexive – theoretical moment—including the figure that Sachs evokes—the figure of "hope"; but also the reinvigorated humanist – Oedipal scenario of a lost love, the figure of a common choice, of the vocation for teaching, and so on.

In this context, then, what has Comparative Literature become, now that the coldest days of the Cold War are behind us, in the era of internationalization, of the global market, of the loss of linguistic diversity, of the production of a global monoculture? How can it help to furnish a future beyond this humanistic, Arnoldian "hope" for a "cultural" or "worldly" or "worldwide" affectivity, of "hope" for the world – wide, hopeful culture of affect alone? In my view, Comparative Literature opens a future, opens many futures, when it returns to familiar and monoglot domestic scenes under other, increasingly unfamiliar aspects, prepared to recognize other languages where the European Enlightenment (or rather, where a certain legacy of the Enlightenment) has taught us to hear just one, prepared to assume the pleasure of its violence. Here, I believe, Comparative Literature and other meta – national disciplinary bodies have a crucial role to play. It is here that the "consciousness of language" can *least* easily be regulated by "hope," by the ghost of a "world" to come, or by the figure of genteel infancy or its corresponding, adult form, the affect – forms of autonomous, common "human passion" that have shadowed "hope" and "world" since Babel.

Let's begin again, by the notion that Comparative Literature has not a future, but rather many *futures*, plural. We probably understand there to be a hidden, pressing, urgent question behind this assertion, something like this: *Does* Comparative Literature have a future—not many futures, but any future at all? After all, despite the increased strength of what I'd like to call the global – university – system, on the model of the global – trade – system, we're seeing national languages departments in universities closed, defunded, or folded into larger units throughout the United States and Europe. In the United States we're seeing school districts told that the teaching of foreign languages need not be a central part of elementary and high school curricula—which, driven now by the test – heavy standards of the No Child Left Behind standards that were enacted under the Bush administration, require school – districts to shift resources to scored subjects like math, reading, and writing in English. We are conscious of the continuing triumphal march of English across the globe, on the wings of trade and the internet. Anxiously, we ask follow – up questions under the urgent cover of this first one: what shape will Comparative Literature have to assume, if it is to survive the defunding of the liberal arts in the United States, the spread of global English, the rapid extinction of natural languages, and the emergence of a corporate geoculture resting on technological innovation? How will Comparative Literature survive when the value of something called "literature" is unsettled by the opening of canons, by digitalization, by the questioning of the privilege of high culture? How will Comparative Literature survive, if "comparison" becomes, with the homogenizing forces of globalism, the internet, the internationalization of the labor market, how will Comparative Literature survive if under these circumstances "comparison" becomes less and less necessary, even impossible, as local differences are subsumed in the patent universality of the market, of geoculture, of an Anglophone world – wide – world? But questions like these also ask us to think in less practical ways, and to ask more puzzling sorts of questions. Some of them are on their face either obscure or trivial. Obscure, as when we speak of a "futures" market—when we speak of the possible futures of an academic discipline, call it Comparative Literature, are we talking about a trade in academic commodities? Is there a commodities futures market like the regular commodities and values markets, silver, gold, coffee, and so on – – that used to be located in the Chicago exchange? What would trade in the "futures" of Comparative Literature look like on that market? Should we begin imagining ancillary markets attached like parasites to the academic commodities market—trade in the insurance and reinsurance of the value of this or that field? Derivatives? Should we fear inflation in the market in disciplinary commodities? Should the laws of supply and demand dictate what counts as a worthy intellectual investment? Alternatively, discussing "The Futures of Comparative Literature" may sound trivial straight off—what is there that doesn't have futures, many futures, as many as we can imagine, depending on this or that state of affairs? We might say that a country or a concept, call these "America" or "China," has many futures, or that "socialism" or "capitalism" have many futures, and that these futures vary depending on whether carbon – based economies successfully make a transition to other forms of energy; on whether earthquakes and tsunamis require of advanced societies like ours a greater or lesser dependence upon nuclear energy; or we might say that these futures depend on whether a particularly virulent strain of influenza travels globally, on the very wings of a transportation system that supports the labor – export economies we have developed in the 21st century. We

might say that art has many futures, or that the *tomato* does, or that *you* or *I* have many futures—and what we mean by this is, trivially, that nothing about the future is determined.

Asking about "The Futures of Comparative Literature" could also, perhaps less trivially, lead us to consider, as I have been doing, how something like "Comparative Literature" imagines its future or futures now, and how it has imagined its futures in the past.

Finally, we might mean by "The Futures of Comparative Literature" something like this: that "Comparative Literature" defines itself by a particular understanding of "futures," of futurity, of the way that societies think about their future or futures.

These last two ways of understanding "The Futures of Comparative Literature" bear upon the internal norms of the field rather than upon the pressures or crises it may face from external, economic or institutional factors. I doubt that it would be generally agreed that the discipline of "Comparative Literature" does have a distinct way of thinking about its own future, or about *the future*, about futurity in general—though in my view it has both.

Bearing in mind this cluster of questions, trivial and not, regarding the "futures" of Comparative Literature, what, then, would it mean to lose hope in Arnold's "world"? What would it mean to be forced to recognize other languages, already operating in the familiar and monoglot domestic scene? To approach literary studies with these sorts of questions in mind means doing two equally dangerous things more or less simultaneously. It means in the first place retaining and emphasizing the particularity of national linguistic and cultural traditions as a source of difference, that is, understanding "consciousness of languages" as not just the acknowledgement but the production of differences for the purposes of comparison. This entails actively refusing, indeed working to dismantle, universalisms of most sorts, "worlds" of most sorts, including the "world" of "world" literature. On this description, Comparative Literature serves the function of reparticularizing universalism: it stands against "the world."

Paradoxically, however, our approach to literary studies now entails, in the second place, building in place of these absent, dissipated worlds or universals, a maxim or norm that will apply more or less universally: "*only* compare!" on the model of E. M. Forster's Modernist maxim: "Only connect!" On that model, but also against it, since the purpose of "comparison" understood in this special sense is not "connection" but the production and dissemination of difference. And also against it, in the sense that we refuse the implicit heroism of the Modernist venture by stressing the first term, the humble and humiliating term "only": "only compare!" Etienne Balibar has proposed, controversially, that the Marxian tradition should develop the "ontology of relation" he finds in Marx and in Spinoza's work, and supply it in place of (or prior to) the identitarian ontologies on which humanist and anthropological Marxism has come to depend.[⑤] (Controversially, because of the seeming incongruity between the notion of "relation" and the claims of ontology.) In the same spirit and in some ways with a view to describing a similar normative-conceptual ground: an ontology of comparison, with a corresponding ethical norm: "*Only* compare!"

To take Comparative Literature down these two roads simultaneously, with the goal of producing a form of civic identity that is not conditioned by "hope" or by a vacuous sense of the "world," will mean undertaking the following five tasks.

First, the study of literary and other cultures should take up again methodologically the matter of mediation. Attending to the "consciousness of language" in the polyglot future means thinking of and about mediation outside of teleology. It means understanding mediation to take place under the aspect instead of the uncertainty, the contingency, of all future states and outcomes.

Second, Comparative Literature should map out again its position with respect to the languages of philosophy, analytic as well as continental, to philosophy of science, of mind, logic, epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics, and so on. When it does so, Comparative Literature will recognize that its long battle with analytic and ordinary-language philosophy has been won. Continental philosophy, exiled or rusticated in the United States into the field of literary studies, has found in literary studies and developed there the tools to focus on the political philosophy of linguistic mediation, on studies of comparativism outside of a given formal and chronological frame, and outside the horizon of linguistic formalization to which analytic philosophical idioms are destined. In a world without hope, that is, in a world with a genuine *future*, philosophy is a subfield of Comparative Literature, an object of study as well as one of its many procedures and protocols.

Third, Comparative Literature must take seriously the challenge posed to the classical humanities, and to the liberal arts, by animal or animality studies. This will mean extending *both* the notion of comparativism to include aspects of interspecies comparison, *and* the notion of "literature" to include cultural products by, and not just about, *nonhuman animals*. More broadly still, to approach literary studies bearing in mind the maxim of radical, re-philosophized comparison means opening the notion of "language" well beyond the standard definition, as "national natural language" and even beyond inter-species communicative forms, and toward sign-forms whose communicative aspect is secondary, or not-yet- or no-longer-understood, toward what

we might call not – yet – or no – longer – languages.

Fourth, in its futures, if it is to be attentive to its futures, Comparative Literature will take up the field of translation studies. Comparative Literature should seek to reorient this field away from the presumption of translatability, toward a functional and technical account of translation, and toward the presumption of untranslatability. Again, what this means will have to wait.

And fifth. In its futures, if it is to be attentive to its futures, Comparative Literature should take a strong position *against* the emerging field of "World literature." The focus of this strong position is not only linguistic specificity, it is a critique of the notion of "world" that "world literature" entails—a notion unmistakably conditioned on one side by a colonial, elitist imaginary at work when Goethe was conceiving the term, and on the other by the tendential creation of forms of universal equivalence associated with global capitalism. The worlds of Comparative Literature are not the world of "World Literature."

Let me close by returning, after indulging in this very prescriptive, if not prophetic, vein, to my opening scenario. The story now reads something like this. (We remain in the world of fiction.) The liberal arts college founded in the collaboration between the Emirate and New York University stands open but empty. En route to the new classrooms, students and faculty travel to Abu Dhabi from across the globe. The curriculum there is to have the radically comparativist edge I have described. One prospective faculty member, a specialist in Comparative Literature of the sort I am interested in, turns to another, as the airplane touches down. She is remembering a scene, perhaps merely legendary, said to have taken place about a hundred years ago, when the ship the? George Washington pulled into New York Harbor bearing two Europeans and a radical and unsettling new form of study. Turning to her colleague, my imagined comparativist, landing in Abu Dhabi to begin her teaching there, says to her colleague, as Sigmund Freud is said to have remarked about Americans to Carl Jung, who accompanied him, "They don't realize that we are bringing them the plague."? But the years have not passed in vain; we are no longer aboard a steamship or an airship bound from the metropolis to the colonies, bearing the infectious germ of the Arnoldian Enlightenment's unthought consequences. Standing at the gate, awaiting the airplane, the Emirati host (a man? A woman?) turns to say to a passer – by (a woman? A man? A laborer? Emirati or non – Emirati?) in a language the two may not share: "They don't realize that we bear the plague." We who fly aboard the plane but also overhear the conversation on the ground (but do we understand the language that we overhear?) now must seek to understand how to *compare*, only compare, these two "plagues" with which we are infected, with which we infect others, ourselves.

Understanding the plagues of difference: of Comparative Literature's futures, of its possible or probable futures, this is the one that I would like to offer you today. To map and to mobilize the civically necessary plagues of radical comparativism: these are the futures of Comparative Literature.

## Notes

①Matthew Arnold. *Culture and Anarchy*. Ed. Samuel Lipman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. 5.

②See Barry L. Velleman. "The 'Scientific Linguist' Goes to War: The United States A. S. T. Program in Foreign Languages." *Historiographia Linguistica* 35:3 (2008). 385.

③William Riley Parker. *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*. Third Edition. U. S. Government Printing Office: Department of State Publication 7324, March 1962. 151.

④Murray Sachs. "Collaboration's End 'Live in fragments no longer'." *Profession* 84. New York: MLA, 1984.

⑤My thoughts on Balibar's suggestion, which he develops in *The Philosophy of Marx* (New York: Verso, 1995), may be found in my *Wild Materialism: The Ethic of Terror and the Modern Republic* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 110 – 50.

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