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Why Compare?

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Indiscipline, je pense à vous

In an essay written for the most recent of the American Comparative Literature Association's (A.C.L.A.) ten year reports on the discipline, I addressed the nature of this Association's recurring series of reports as embodying a logic of *indiscipline* that afflicts not only this field of study but also, more generally, the humanities (Ferris). I fully intended not to return to the subject since it seemed to me then that this logic had become so entrenched that Comparative Literature was no longer capable of discerning the questions posed by its critical practice. As a result, I predicted then, and still hold to this prediction, that the A.C.L.A.'s habit of examining the state of "discipline" could only repeat the same result like a most forlorn Odysseus destined to embark every ten years or so on a new adventure to burn some other Troy into the past one more time. The heroic achievements of these reports have now left in their wake Greece, Europe, multiculturalism, and soon the world and its globe, and all in the interest of connecting Comparative Literature to the prevailing object of contemporary critical emphasis.¹ That Comparative Literature has lacked the discipline to avoid repeating itself in this recurrent exercise is an effect of what I referred to as its *indiscipline*. While this word could be taken up as embodying what many see as a positive attribute of the field – its lack of definition – it was used to indicate quite the opposite: a lack of definition is actually a limitation not an unbounded horizon. This is nowhere more present than in Comparative Literature's pursuit of the world as a place of boundless promise when in fact that pursuit is only a more extensive expression of an imprecise methodological task, namely, comparison, that is present across the humanities at large but whose effects are concentrated to an extraordinary degree within Comparative Literature. Having said this, it should also be pointed out

that it is Comparative Literature's gift to be able to recognize this limit even if it should repeatedly succumb to it. This double aspect and its relation to the current situation of the humanities, their sense of crisis and loss of value, is what underpins this return to the question of Comparative Literature's *indiscipline*. The relation between this indiscipline and the current sense of crisis in the humanities is the subject of this chapter. This crisis will be examined as the effect of the comparative project so singularly embodied by Comparative Literature, a project that simultaneously demands and denies that the humanities have, either collectively or alone, their own proper object of study. It is such a sense of crisis that now raises fundamental questions about the task of comparison within the humanities, in particular, the extent to which this task has contributed to the ineffectiveness experienced by the humanities when called upon to justify their existence. For this reason alone, it is now imperative to ask: why compare?

The contemporary situation of the humanities now resembles more and more the history that Comparative Literature has always known. The sense of crisis that René Wellek inserted into the history of Comparative Literature has now migrated across the humanities as the latter is increasingly faced with the question well known to this field: what is its object of study, that is, what guides the contemporary significance of the humanities when the past can no longer assure such significance? The question is even more pressing at a moment when a pervasive sense of the decline of the humanities only seems capable of cultivating a mood of crisis and anxiety-laden self-reflection. The need to respond to this question hangs over conferences such as the one organized by the Cambridge University's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities in July 2009, as well as events such as a recent lecture, entitled "What about the Humanities?," at Cornell's Society for the Humanities by Don Randel, president of the Mellon Foundation (Randel, 2010). The growing presence of these events is the sign of an anxiety that has spread beyond Comparative Literature despite the latter's success at containing such anxiety by constitutionally internalizing it in the form of a report on what Comparative Literature now is or what it wants to be (until the arrival of the next report).² Unfortunately, now, neither Comparative Literature nor the humanities have the luxury to debate their own self-definition. Now, that definition is being made on their behalf as evidenced by the closing or downgrading of Comparative Literature and humanities departments and programs and the dissolution of existing humanities departments into marriages of fiscal convenience – an unthinkable option at the time of Comparative Literature's expansion in the 1970s. But, it is not just the cultural side of the humanities that is being affected: the philosophy department at Middlesex University, despite its high ranking, was deemed unsustainable and the decision was made in 2010 to "phase out" the program (Driscoll, 2010; Morgan, 2010). While it is easy to lament a managerial or corporate ethos as the cause of these decisions, this simply displaces the problem away from the humanities themselves while attempting to rally round some core value that is the opposite of all managerial practices. Identifying such a core was the subject of Randel's lecture. Significantly, in order to do so, Randel suggested that:

... we declare a moratorium on the use of the phrase "the crisis in the humanities." There are too many other real crises to go around. Take for example the nation's political life [...] This raises more questions on the criteria to determine the value of the humanities. [...] The current economic stress simply brings to the fore even more forcefully the wish to justify everything in instrumental terms.

Randel's sense that the rhetoric of crisis is at best a diversionary practice in the humanities recalls Paul de Man's contention that this rhetoric of crisis is the symptom of a deeper rooted question (Paul de Man, 1983: pp. 3–19).

Recent reflections on the humanities have affirmed that they, like Comparative Literature are faced with a problem, but they have not posed the question whether these self-reflexive examinations are themselves part of the crisis they proclaim to the extent that they sustain the humanities at the limit of their significance (and precisely in order to sustain this limit so that such reflections remain repeatable). Nor have they critically explored the link between an economic and an intellectual crisis. Has the current economic crisis become confused with what was already a problem for the humanities, namely, the question of their significance, the question of what they can be compared to? Do the economic terms of the current crisis obscure the extent to which the humanities have sustained themselves? Here the humanities has taken its lead from Comparative Literature by making uncertainty about how to define their significance become the subject of a limitless reflection, in effect, transforming Cartesian self doubt into a cultural project but forgetting, as Kierkegaard pointed out, to question the instrumental purpose of that doubt, namely, to develop the "content of a concept" where no content was evident or could be positively agreed upon. But, is this questioning even possible now for the humanities? And, if not, what happens to Comparative Literature which has long thrived on this project that links theoretical doubt to cultural and critical significance? In this current climate, has the "crisis" of Comparative Literature now been revealed as only useful within this field? When generalized to the humanities, does this sense of recurrent crisis as the ground of self-definition expose the weakness that now makes Comparative Literature (as well as the humanities) become the opportunistic target of crises not of its own making?

Like the humanities, Comparative Literature is now positioned at a point where institutional economics, value, and limit coincide. With the convergence of these three forces, it is no longer simply a matter of discerning how the logic of *indiscipline* affects this field of study since what has been claimed as a strength from within Comparative Literature threatens to become a liability in the broader context of the humanities. However, despite the migration of its practices and interests across other fields of study, there is an important difference to note between Comparative Literature and the humanities. More than many fields in the humanities, Comparative Literature is poised between a debate over what it should examine (Europe, multiculturalism, world literature, for example) and its engagement with the methodological basis of humanistic study, an engagement experienced through the limit that this methodol-

ogy and its *indiscipline* imposes upon various fields of study in the humanities. Only by grasping this capacity, can Comparative Literature avoid having to justify, one more time, its significance by displacing its methodological awareness into this or that body of literature or cultural production no matter what that body is defined as being. Resisting the desire to reenact this displacement allows Comparative Literature to pose the question of the limit within which reflection on the value of the humanities has been confined. Taking up this question is crucial at a moment when the humanities are being transformed into economic instruments – precisely the moment when the right to be educated has become the selling of that right.

Crisis

The limit that induces hyper-reflection as well as a sense of crisis in the humanities is one that Comparative Literature has recognized as fundamental to what it does even when it has tried to displace this recognition. René Wellek already put his finger on this fundamental problem in 1963 when he wrote that Comparative Literature “has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology.” Wellek goes on to observe that Comparative Literature “has been saddled with an obsolete methodology.” The obsolete methodology he refers to is at best a naïve kind of comparison (“myths and legends,” “ideas which nations have of each other,” and approaches that Wellek brands as “positivistic factualism”) that does not inquire seriously into the nature of the object it studies (Wellek, 1963: pp. 284–285). For Wellek, the path out of this obsolete practice of comparison lies in abandoning “the artificial distinction between ‘comparative’ and ‘general’ literature.” The consequence of this position, Wellek continues, is that:

there are no proprietary rights and no recognized “vested interests” in literary scholarship. Everybody has the right to study any question even if it is confined to a single work in a single language and everybody has the right to study even history or philosophy or any other topic. (Wellek, 1963: pp. 290–291)

With this remark Wellek opens literary study, and also the humanities, to the kind of critical and cultural relativism he was later to deplore in the form of literary and critical theory (Wellek, 1983: 1–8). For Wellek, crisis is seemingly dissolved in a definitional openness about Comparative Literature but this openness is what came back to haunt both Comparative Literature and the humanities as a limit. This is not the kind of limit commonly associated with the material emphasized by this or that field of study (such as literature for literary study, and so on). It is a limit produced by a lack of definition about what constitutes and drives Comparative Literature as a field of critical inquiry. As such, it is paradoxical. Yet, this has not stopped the reiteration of this lack of definition, after Wellek, as possessing the positive value of a limitlessness in which the significance and the strength of the field is enshrined. These

assertions have their counterpart within the humanities when they are framed as a quintessential aspect of what it is to be human (as limitless possibility becomes the idea under which the value of the being human is asserted). Despite their ideological character, such claims have now become ineffective when made in the current context defined as it is by crises that are separately intellectual and economic. The appeal to the value of the human has become so obviously transparent that the humanities as an organizing term may be nothing more than the historical remainder of another time and era or, at worst, a catch-all term for everything in the university that does not privilege the illusion of quantifiable examination or a mathematical model of symbolic purity. Eschewing such options, the humanities are left to make evaluative claims about their own significance, claims that frequently take the form of asserting the value of the humanities by proclaiming the value invested in the materials they examine (literature, art, history, thought). As Randel bluntly stated, “humanists have long believed that the study of the humanities essentially required no justification. The importance of the humanities was self evident.” Self-evidence is no longer evidence since the terrain on which significance is now played out requires not only economic metaphors but also criteria that are brutally economic (Weber, 2010).³ In the face of this historical transformation (a history that moves from humanism, to politics, to economics as the key source of its significance), the humanities, like Comparative Literature, is left with what Walter Benjamin would have seen as an appeal to an auratic redeemer: a concept of the humanities in which literature, art, etc., look back at us with their, or rather, our value in a personification that is at the heart of auratic reception: “Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects” (Benjamin, 2006: 4.338). For Comparative Literature, did Europe, multiculturalism, the globe provide no more than images for the auratic self-reception of this field? Why, within this field, has the politics of this *mode* of reception never been raised but always displaced by reference to the identities involved?

The displacement of value into the object examined is more easily sustained in the case of those fields of study whose title actually names an object to which a classified body of material responds, such as English Literature, History, and so on. Since, in distinction to these fields, Comparative Literature foregrounds itself as a method, a more problematic issue comes to the fore: while mimicking the naming of an object, the title of Comparative Literature actually indicates a claim to method. As Natalie Melas has recalled for us, Lane Cooper pointed out this confusion between method and object in the 1920s and suggested resolving this question by adopting the name Comparative Study of Literature (Melas, 2007: p. 1; Cooper, 1942: p. 75).⁴ What Cooper’s desire for clarity in the name of this field points to is not so much that Comparative Literature is misnamed (we can all agree that there is no such thing as a literature that is *comparative* rather than Russian, Chinese, etc.) but rather, his remarks locate a methodological basis for this field in the task of comparing. It is this task that Comparative Literature can offer for reflection in a moment that invites the

question, “why compare?” A question whose answer is not an invitation to endless analogy nor is it the occasion for the bemused answer that comparatists don’t really compare anymore (to be bemused here is to confuse specific acts of comparison belonging to a particular time in the history of Comparative Literature with a task whose significance is more general than this field). So, why compare?

The importance of this question is that it names a task that informs the humanities as a whole. In this respect, Comparative Literature poses the question of the significance of the humanities in general. This is because methods define a discipline while objects studied merely define a field of study. Here, the foregrounding of comparison in Comparative Literature highlights the methodological basis of the fields that comprise the humanities and, in so doing, implicates those fields within the logic of *indiscipline* to which Comparative Literature has recurrently turned whenever it evades the question of its own limit. The humanities are a comparative endeavor since their fundamental stake is that whatever is produced in the name of art, culture, literature, history, or thought has been historically grounded in an answer to the question of what it is like to be human, a question that immediately sets up a conflict about the right of this or that claim to such a title. In short, this is a conflict about the right to define the human subject according to a particular image. And, even if works of art refuse this claim – as is the case with automatic writing or art based solely on the dictates of chance or mechanical production – it has been the task of their political, social, and academic interpretation to re-institute that claim, namely, the significance of the humanities resides in the reflection of the human subject. And, the method for sustaining that reflection has not ceased to be comparative.

The fact that Comparative Literature names such a method as the attribute defining its field of study indicates the extent to which it is faced with the choice of either reflecting upon or embodying this fundamental task within the humanities. It is thus a matter of utmost concern to the future of the humanities whether or not the history of Comparative Literature’s own response to the fact that it is grounded in a method rather than this or that subject can be avoided. The choice facing the future of Comparative Literature is then whether it can bring focus to the methodological basis of humanistic study or whether it will displace this opportunity, once again, by identifying yet another body of material in which to relocate its comparative practices: Europe, multiculturalism, globalization, economics ... as reflection becomes simply another mirror in which to see itself. If it does the former, then the crisis of definition into which it periodically places itself can be seen as a structure of its history, as a means by which it registers a fundamental issue at the center of its practice. By doing so, it raises the possibility of articulating its significance, not by opposing what it has been, but exposing the institutional ideology that defines value through the production of crisis. If it does the latter, then it remains an *indiscipline* willfully entrapped within the repetition of a practice whose history is driven by strategies of self-evasion.

It is true that Comparative Literature is not the only field of study within the humanities that now engages in a reflection on its own significance. As Haun Saussy

has argued the triumph of Comparative Literature has been its replication within many of the fields of study that make up the humanities (see Saussy, 2006: pp. 3–5). While Saussy is referring to the presence across many fields in the humanities of two emphases that have defined Comparative Literature, theory and transnationalism, another symptomatic aspect of Comparative Literature has accompanied this proliferation: a questioning of what constitutes a field of study within the humanities when there no longer appears to be a limit to what can migrate from one field to another. The comparative drive helped Comparative Literature become the preeminent field for theory and transnational inquiry, a drive that placed Comparative Literature in the position of reflecting on what it means to study literature in distinction to a practice that preferred to limit a literature to its historical and national geography. Yet, within this comparative drive, as Saussy recognizes, there remains a weakness: a loss of identity and specificity which occurs when the generality of comparison turns on the boundaries that have protected the fields of the humanities from themselves since the division of the modern university into departmental categories – a decision that ensured administrative effectiveness in the guise of intellectual discipline. Comparative Literature's option in this situation is either to succumb or to recognize that to compare also means to ask what literature is in terms of our critical relation to it rather than ask what it represents (which means what it is comparable to).

The question of what comparison *should* be is legible across the self-reflexive exercise begun by the A.C.L.A. in 1965 when the first of its reports on the discipline was completed.⁵ After the 1975 Greene report, this exercise has taken the form of a collection of essays in response to the lead essay. In the case of both these two later reports, the hesitancy of “an” in the title should not be overlooked – as if uncertainty about the context provided by a given age were already present not to mention a lack of confidence about evoking this or that age as an adequate response to questions about, as the A.C.L.A. puts it, the “state of discipline.” Already in their titles, these reports broadcast their contingency as well as the dependence of Comparative Literature on its contemporary critical context. The gap in reports between 1975 and 1993 is significant in this respect since this period marks the time in which Comparative Literature had an enormous influence on defining an age of literary study rather than the other way around. It would have been ludicrous to have written a report under the title “Comparative Literature in an Age of Theory” since the two were largely synonymous for a time. To an increasing degree these reports reflect anxiety about what Comparative Literature is and the significance that can be attached to whatever the field was, is, or should be. From this anxiety, the rhetoric of crisis springs as a means of displacing precisely what this anxiety is responding to: namely, comparison's inability to account theoretically for its own practice except by the extension of that practice.

As stated above, these moments of self-reflection are no longer restricted to Comparative Literature but have become increasingly common for other fields, especially English, as well as for the humanities in general. This sense of a crisis within the humanities and uncertainty about how to address a future while preserving the

past (itself a recipe for perpetuating crisis) has prompted the pursuit of new areas of study whose contemporary presence seems to guarantee a future for the humanities. Foremost among these is the as yet poorly defined field of digital humanities – a field whose difference from past analogic practices would seem to ring the end of the comparative era in the humanities. Unfortunately, the consequences of conceiving the humanities in digital terms remain largely unexamined despite the pursuit of their promise within many universities as a panacea of sorts for the current situation of the humanities. The question that remains pending here is whether the change from analogue to digital media is accompanied by a change in how the humanities perceives its significance or whether the humanities as a discipline has stuck to the longstanding sense of its own significance and simply extended its horizon to other forms while remaining unchanged by those forms.⁶ What this question embodies is a reservation about the role of confusing technological newness with a change of perception and whether this confusion is the only means available to salvage the humanities from themselves or whether the persistence of analogical, comparative means of analysis is unavoidable and is simply imported into digital material. If the latter is true, then the central question to be addressed concerns why the comparative method has successively invited these crisis-like moments of self-reflection as a means of articulating the significance of not just the field of Comparative Literature but also, now, the humanities at large. This is the question already posed by the history of Comparative Literature's displacement into a series of contexts as it is swallowed up by a desire to transcend its peculiar relation to discipline and field, a relation that has now passed institutionally to the rise of interdisciplinary centers. If these centers are to avoid the rehearsal of crisis as a means of sustaining their futures, then they must also avoid becoming sites for the endless rearrangement or reflection of perceived and imagined contexts. This is particularly true in the case of the humanities where interdisciplinary work now runs the risk of looking like rearranging different colored deck chairs on the Titanic rather than any radical departure from what has always been done across and between this or that field of the humanities.⁷

Compare

Given this sense of crisis in the humanities, what is the role of a Comparative Literature when its guiding task no longer appears to be sustainable? Or to put this question more bluntly, *why compare?* To recognize what remains at stake in this question, an understanding of the function of the task of comparison and what it addresses is first necessary.

The task of comparison is a task that originates in relation to a world. It is not a task that belongs to the world despite the current tendency to see the comparative part of Comparative Literature as if the words “world” and “comparative” were so interchangeable that no real difference can be discerned as one is translated *as* the other because one is so comparable to the other. This translation drives the imperative

that Comparative Literature should now become “World Literature” as it extends what it can compare but does not change the comparative practice by which it has always operated. It also remains a challenge to distinguish sociological and practical forces from this development since this turn to the world has as much to do with an attempt to address the precarious position of literary study as well as the precarious future of Comparative Literature within the contemporary university. But, whatever motivates this drive, the fact remains that embedded within this drive there resides the claim of a methodology with a limitless extension of subject matter across space (see Weber, 2010: p.1). The terms of this confusion are complex since both the method as well as this extension draw upon the world for their significance. Accordingly, it needs to be clarified how comparison arises in a relation to the world that is different from its conceptualization as the world – precisely now that Comparative Literature and other fields are claiming global practices.

The point at which this worldly task and the act of cultural interpretation first emerge in an unambiguously positive way can be discerned in a passage from Aristotle’s *Poetics* – the founding text of western poetics in the sense that it is the first text in this tradition that argues for the significance of the poetic in a world that exists or can exist. In this passage, Aristotle claims a comparative relation between the image and what exists in the world in order to establish the ubiquity of the mimetic intention he wishes to proclaim on behalf of literature: “The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses [*eikonas*] is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, this because of that [*hóti hoútōs bekeínos*]” (Aristotle, 1927: 48b, ll. 15–18). Comparison is here a form of knowledge that is rooted in likenesses, in the fact that there is or could be someone or something to which the image of a person or thing refers. Significance is then invested in what exists in the world. Aristotle, however, also extends this significance to what is comparable to what exists in the world. With this step Aristotle breaks with the Platonic understanding of comparison rooted in what is truly real, namely, the ideal. To do so, Aristotle introduces two levels of comparison: one that is closed and one that is open. The first, the historical one, is closed because it is limited to what already exists. The second remains open since it is defined in terms of possibility: it is what could have already existed. However, the possibility of this second comparison is always rooted in the indisputable factual truth of the first. This means that what Aristotle describes as possibility here is open to the extent that it adheres to the facticity of the first. It is therefore an openness within limit. Here, the sense of limit referred to at the beginning of this chapter returns: that a lack of definition is actually a limit not an unbounded horizon. How the second level of comparison becomes meaningful is described by Aristotle when he distinguishes literature from history writing:

The writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in metre or not. The real difference is this: that one tells what happened (*genomena*) and the other what might happen (*genoíro*). For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give

general truths while history gives particular facts. By a “general truth” I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily (*kata to eikos* *he to anankaion*). (Aristotle, 1927: 51b, ll. 1–7)

With this general truth, Aristotle gives comparison a significance that appears to be unbounded; however, it is only meaningful as long as it adheres to the example of the first historical comparison. Here, the meaning of a general truth lies in its comparison to the knowledge of particular facts since it is only in this comparison that general truth can claim to be more than mere fiction. For example, a general truth is something that could have happened, it thus relies upon a double status: it is what didn’t happen but it is something that does not contradict what happens or happened since it relies on being like these for its meaning. Aristotle makes this absolutely clear when he refers to the use of real names in tragedy as opposed to the use of names that define types in comedy:

In tragedy, on the other hand, they keep to real names. The reason is that the possible is persuasive (*titbanon esti to dunaton*). If a thing has not happened, we do not yet believe in its possibility, but what has happened is obviously possible. Had it been impossible, it would not have happened. (Aristotle, 1927: 51b, ll. 15–20)

In tragedy, a real name, that is, the name of someone who existed, lends factual possibility to the person portrayed. Here, the relation of what is real (the name of someone who exists or existed) to what is not real (the fictional character existing only in a literary form) is based on a comparison between what exists and what is like that existence. Aristotle’s extension of comparison sets up the possibilities of histories that are not, in the strict sense, historical, yet they remain within the bounds of historical understanding. This point is crucial. It places a non-existing event or person within a fundamentally historical frame. Comparison in this respect is not an innocently aesthetic exercise (we *like* likenesses). It is codified in a fundamentally historical account of meaning as the justification of its existence. This then means that, for Aristotle, comparison is driven by an essentially historical purpose even when it deals with non-historical material such as poetic or cultural productions. Comparison is the mode in which our critical discourse occurs as our reliance on the phenomenological language of analogy, metaphor, in short, of saying what literature is like or not like, confirms.

Controlling a potentially wayward fictionality by bringing it under the umbrella of a general truth comparable to historical fact indicates the extent to which Aristotle’s account of comparison is itself circumscribed by Plato’s rejection of the artistic mimesis practiced by poets and dramatists, a mimesis that is, in effect, a simulacrum of comparison. We tend to read this relation backwards, as if Aristotle’s interpretation of fiction as historical possibility laid to rest the challenge to comparison Plato perceived within artistic imitation. But, even within this history it is crucial to recognize that Aristotle changes the terms in which fiction is understood by comparing art to

history but he does not question the analogy between history and literature through which this takes place. Such an analogy is simply traced back to a universal, natural tendency to compare as the basis of the act of imitation. To reveal what this refusal to question is confronting, it is necessary to return to Plato but not to the infamous passage in which the poets and dramatists are expelled. That passage is a distraction. Rather, Plato's the allegory of the cave is the decisive passage for this question since what is at stake in this allegory is the existence of comparison as a learned rather than natural activity.

Despite no reference to this passage as an allegory by Plato, the tradition has rightly identified Plato's account of comparison as necessitating the serial character of allegorical presentation, that is, a presentation that enacts a movement in time in order to recuperate time within a defined space – whether Plato's cave, Europe, world, etc. This is precisely the step Aristotle evades by his appeal to the naturalness of the comparative task because it is innate to humans. In distinction, Plato's allegory recognizes the necessity of leading its victims to the world in order to enact comparison as a mode of knowledge. Unlike Aristotle, Plato recognizes a temporal element in the establishment of comparison as a mode of knowledge. This temporality is given in the form of a narrative in which Plato first describes how those who have been chained in the cave are set free in order to see the source of the images projected on the wall. This provides the occasion for an initial comparison: no longer viewing shadows, the freed prisoner of the cave now views images that are “more true” [*alethestera*]. Yet, his understanding of these images, and thus of comparison, is thwarted by the effect of the fire that prevents him from seeing how its light causes the images to be projected as shadows. As a result, the freed prisoner concludes that the shadows, which were all he could see previously, are in fact more true than the images, their source, that have been revealed to him. This rejection of how the cave functions allows a second comparison to arise when what is normative (prior knowledge, the world as it was known) is judged to be better. Before, the world of the prisoners was all that was known – now that world is known comparatively as a better world. This marks the first step in Plato's allegory; it establishes a comparison in which what is known as the world is privileged over a recognition of the conditions of knowing that world (precisely the issue that has afflicted Comparative Literature as a field – the confusion of method with object of study). The knowledge this prisoner refused now has to be appropriated in another way. This sets up the second attempt at comparison when the prisoner is dragged out of the cave and into the world of daylight.

This second step aims to reinstate what Plato's text had first presented as “more true” – that the images are truer than the shadows on the wall. This part of the allegory is well known; it recounts how the eyes of the prisoner are at first incapable of seeing anything but by degrees they are able to discern the world in a movement that progresses from viewing shadows to viewing the sun itself:

And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from

these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens and heaven itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by day the sun and the sun's light [...] And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place. (Plato, 1969: 516a–b)

Getting to the point that will establish comparison as knowledge takes time; it takes what Plato calls “habituation [*sunetheia*]” (Plato, 1969: 516a) – precisely what did not occur in the cave. If habituation had been permitted in the cave then the prisoner's passage to an outside world would not be required but then, as Plato's own interpretation of this allegory insists, a false knowledge would have been created. This is why the prisoner must learn what the world is in comparison to his own past. From this learning, comparison emerges as something other than the retreat to the normative, the facticity with which the prisoners view the shadows. The world in this case is not a fact, it is not a self-evident content whose mere existence, however multiple, constitutes its meaningfulness. If it were this content, there would be no need for Plato to imagine the return of this prisoner to the cave; the comparison would already be in force. This return establishes the world as existing in relation to the cave and, in so doing, it indicates how comparison is the method through which a world is affirmed. As Plato makes clear in the following question, the world is not in itself a reservoir of comparison; it takes the negative force of ridicule as well as a rejection of the time in which habituation occurs:

And before his eyes had recovered – and the adjustment would not be quick – while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? (Plato, 1969: 516e–517b)

Only by maintaining the blindness of the returning prisoner can the comparison invested in the world be different from what was already described as “more true.” The ridicule directed at the returning prisoner by those still imprisoned in the cave is instrumental in producing this comparison but, as the question in which this ridicule is referred to makes plain, this ridicule rests on the possibility that his inability to see what is normative for those prisoners is what invites ridicule. This last step is crucial. The prisoners' ridicule of the returning prisoner is used to make them appear ridiculous. But, what is easily overlooked here is that this ridicule is not directed at what the returning prisoner knows but simply to the blindness that arises from movement between places: cave and world. Isn't this also a repetition of the blindness that made the freed prisoner first prefer the shadows over the images because the brightness of the fire would cause pain to his eyes? Here, in this first failed attempt comparison leads to the reassertion of the normative as comparatively better yet the cause of this comparatively better knowledge has nothing to do with the value or content of that knowledge. The same is true for the second moment when the ridicule of the others is used to affirm what he has learned outside the cave. What then is really at stake in this allegory which twice enacts comparison by curtailing its temporality into

what Plato calls habituation? And, why is it that the world, in Aristotle as well, is consistently called upon to embody a comparison that the world is powerless to affirm?

Why?

With these questions in mind, we can now return to the sense of crisis Comparative Literature adopted before its management of crisis became generalized as a defining trope of the humanities. In effect, what we are witnessing here is the end of an era when this task reigned unseen and unquestioned as the source of significance for the humanities. What sustained this task and what was repeated across its history is what was recognized already in Plato's and Aristotle's account of comparison: the necessity of its embodiment in a world. While Aristotle pursues the task of comparison by insisting that the comparative value of what is without a world is in fact the world, Plato underscores the extent to which this world (and therefore comparison) requires the necessity of effectively negating the experience of temporality if the comparative task is to be established. The purpose of the narrative in the allegory of the cave is to overcome the necessity of accounting for comparison in the form of a narrative. This negation of the temporal and the spatial valuation of the world demanded by this negation is what defines comparison as an essentially localized task. How this occurs in Plato is as follows: temporal adjustment is cut short as the cave becomes the place that asserts the sovereignty of place over time as the decisive element in constituting comparison. Is this why it is only "natural" that Comparative Literature and the humanities should have pursued globalization with such zeal?

The pursuit of world literature and the global is not simply a pursuit of a trope that has migrated throughout the contemporary university. Rather, this pursuit has been the task of comparison from its very beginning. This is why, for Comparative Literature, the significance of world literature is not that there are more literatures, cultures beyond a European canon; its significance is that it fulfils the inmost tendency of the methodological practice that has justified not only the significance of literary study but also the humanities. Armed with a task that derives meaningfulness from its relation to the world, it is not surprising that Comparative Literature and the humanities have sought out an object that promises unbounded comparison. But what remains unrecognized here is that the comparative task that drives this pursuit is what is in crisis as Comparative Literature and the humanities are forced to confront the boundary of their significance. The index to this boundary is already present in the founding move of comparison as Plato enacts it: the prisoner who is freed can only be led to comparison by force both within the cave and when he is led outside the cave. The significant role played by force in this allegory of comparison cannot be overlooked – it occurs four times, preceding each of the scenes in which a prisoner is located in a defined space or a different part of the same space.⁸ Each time this forcing occurs, it sets up a scene for comparison. First, the scene in which all the prisoners are described in their chains which establishes one side of the comparison in the third

scene; second, when one prisoner is forced out of his chained position; third, the scene in front of the fire which leads to the comparison of shadow over image when the prisoner who is freed is forced to look at the fire; and fourth, when the same prisoner is dragged to the scene in which the world of daylight will be experienced. Why is comparison preceded by an act of forcing? And, what relation does this have to why we compare?

The presence of forcing is the sign of a difficulty that arises because what is to be compared knows nothing of the task to which it will be submitted. The form in which this has arisen within Comparative Literature has been the turn to an intensive account of a world that it cannot comprehend in its extensiveness. Faced with a multiplicity it cannot master (and when has it ever mastered a more limited multiplicity), Comparative Literature submits the world to the practice of its disavowed European model: two to three national literatures, etc, as if this had ever been a comprehensive engagement with Europe. Here, the extensive drive of the comparative task pulls back while trying to preserve that drive in the face of a challenge of its own making. This intensive turn is also already present in Plato's allegory in the necessity that the freed prisoner returns to the cave in order to enact the comparison that makes the world of daylight fully meaningful. The necessity of this turning back lies in the fact that the world cannot by itself embody comparison either intensively or extensively. This is why the return or turning back is so necessary; the field of comparison is always a circumscribed field of limited historical duration – this is what the A.C.L.A. recognizes in its constitution when it demands a state of the discipline report at an interval equivalent to the historical duration of an Homeric epic. To act in accordance to this constraint is now, clearly, to force another comparison to take place within a circumscribed context – *Comparative Literature in an age of ...* The means by which this forcing takes place is not quite as sharp as it is when the freed prisoner returns to the cave and is ridiculed but something like ridicule could easily assert itself if the first A.C.L.A. report is compared to its later examples – especially when the word Eurocentric is so easily available to justify this backward look at a “world” fatally confined to its ideology. Despite the intellectual impasse it re-enacts, there is something this backward look can teach us about why we compare.

To re-enact the restriction that enables comparison is to preserve the field in which comparison is possible. To hold to that field as the embodiment of the comparative task is to risk sustaining the ideological interests that thrive within that field. This is precisely what happens when the limit within which Europe became an object for Comparative Literature is extended to other domains before finally incorporating the largest domain of all, the world. Such is the historical development of Comparative Literature. But, to articulate Europe as limit is to recognize how comparison has moved its field of inquiry in order to avoid facing the conditions of the task it pursues. It has done so in order to deflect attention away from its semblance of method (this semblance is what is articulated by Aristotle's grounding of comparison in a possible history). This deflection also makes a virtue of such semblance as Comparative Literature displays its *indiscipline*. To remain blind to the function of this deflection

it to ignore the limit within which comparison operates – and which forces comparison to be identified with what it compares. This blindness allows ideology to make a claim to history as it pursues another as yet unbounded and apparently uncircumscribed field. Recognition of this limit is what occurs when we proclaim a crisis albeit a crisis whose purpose has been to reset the conditions necessary for its return once the previous dissolution of crisis has run its course. That the humanities are now faced with a crisis of a different order, a crisis that threatens their history (and above all, their ability to persist in a mode of crisis), indicates the extent to which the quasi-method under which they and Comparative Literature have operated can no longer, in a quintessentially Aristotelian move, displace itself into another possible role that is just like the “different but always the same” role it has adopted in the past.

It is here, at this point in the history of the humanities, that another question begins to emerge. It is a question that Comparative Literature has bequeathed to the humanities, the question of whether the force with which the humanities has precipitated its crises remains operational or is simply irrelevant because the terms of what a crisis is no longer belongs to those who are in crisis. Evidence clearly shows that the humanities lack the force to confront a sense of crisis that is not of its own making. The ineffectiveness of its own figurative self-reflection confirms that the humanities no longer have the ideological force to define themselves. Its crises are now at the end of their history and that is not the history that Aristotle calls a general truth: that is, yet another possible arrangement of the past. This impasse, in and of itself is already a step forward since it offers the knowledge that what has been played out in the humanities and Comparative Literature may be no more than a rationality forced to recognize the historical limit to which it owes its existence and to which it always turns. The value of this turn no longer holds as the secular claim of literature to the presumption of a universal value borders on self-ridicule. What then is the fate of the task that sustained this value and its history? Here it is a question of a comparison that concealed its own forceful engagement with the past in order to turn its eyes to a future that saw no impossibility, that could never imagine there would never be another Troy to burn so that it could repeat its tale and live to compare another day. To begin to understand this other question is to begin to understand why we compared.

That there is another question to ask and that it can be articulated in the context of Comparative Literature (rather than displacing Comparative Literature into yet another context, yet another future that repeats its past) is the index of a possibility that has not been chosen. The reasons for this are both institutional and political (here the drive against an undeveloped theoretical moment has played a significant role). These reasons are institutional to the extent that Comparative Literature has sought a status comparable to other long established or more easily established fields in the humanities. This has foreclosed its creation of a context in which the humanities can engage with and be challenged by fields not yet neutralized by the ease with which the modern university channels any source of challenge into the discourse of a name,

into a subject of desire. These reasons are political to the extent that the political offered self-evident truths whose aims could not be challenged. But in an age when politics no longer automatically sets the agenda for what issues or contexts should be addressed, and in an age in which the institution is molded by the advance of global economics as the decisive model (and nowhere is this felt more than in the pursuit of Globalization), Comparative Literature and the humanities run the risk of making the mistake of simply changing politics for economics lest the next boat to the future should leave without them. Instead, should we not ask what crisis has now put economics into the position of the boundless denominator of intellectual work? Is this not a lesson we should have learned from a history that turned to politics when the aesthetic was no longer enough? To compare these moments in our history is to see how the logic of comparison betrays the intellectual project it appears to sustain. If such a project is to survive, the last thing it needs to do is to submit to the ideologies of its contemporary contexts. Rather, it needs to examine its relation to those contexts so that the past does not become, again and again, its betrayal. A reflection on comparison that is capable of interrupting its own unfolding in a mode other than the coercion of crisis would be a start so that our present can make a claim on *why* and avoid the endless repetitions of *what* and *how*. The natural sciences may ask about *what* is in our world, the social sciences may measure *how* we are in that world, we, at least, can ask *why* – and that is why we compare.

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NOTES

- 1 The titles of the two most recent reports have also set the template for their own repetition, "Comparative literature in an Age of X." As economics has now taken on the role that politics has long enjoyed as the significant denominator or our modernity *Comparative literature in an Age of Economics* is entirely possible as the title of the next A.C.L.A. report.
- 2 Article VI of the A.C.L.A.'s constitution states that "A Report on the State of the Discipline must be issued at least every ten years."
- 3 Here, as Samuel Weber cogently points out, the espousal of globalization by cultural and literary study does not come without the terms on which globalization operates, and those terms are economic.
- 4 Wellek comments on this proposal as follows: "There is little use in deploring the grammar of the term and to insist that it should be called 'the comparative study of literature,' since everybody understands the elliptic usage" (1963: p. 290).
- 5 The Levin Report (1965) is followed by the Greene report (1975), then by the Bernheimer Report (1993) and the Saussy Report (2004). The following statement provides an apt summary of what these reports have become: "reflect the vibrant, often contested, diversity

- of comparative literature while chronicling the past decade's scholarship and prompting thought about future directions" (Katznelson and Milner, 2002). However, to return this statement to its proper context, Comparative Literature must be replaced by Political Science. The point here is that these reports belong to an age in which the university and its fields of study have turned inward in order to articulate their value and significance. The occurrence of this exercise beyond the humanities, indicates the residual presence in those disciplines of issues and questions that betray their non-quantitative origins within the university curriculum while also suggesting the extent to which the development of the university and its curriculum takes place within a history that is, in effect, in reaction against the humanities.
- 6 Institutionally, what appears to have happened is a refutation of what Benjamin thought would be an effect of new technical forms, namely a change in perception. In a recent volume, Timothy Murray, reflects the hesitations that accompany the advent of the digital
 - when he considers the conjunction of the digital and the baroque: "Perhaps they thus stand figurally as if enfolded into one another, thereby signifying the paradox and enigma of analogy itself. Might not we understand analogy as something not simply transcended by digitality but as something deeply cryptic and disturbingly disjunctive that is deeply crucial to digitality's structure and representations?" (Preface: *Digital Baroque* ix).
 - 7 W.J.T. Mitchell (1996: p. 323), also adopts the deck chair figure but limits it to an interdisciplinarity that "systematizes the similarities and differences between artistic media and semiotic codes."
 - 8 "They've been there since childhood, forced (*enankasmenoï*) into the same place" (Plato, 1969: 514a); "When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled/forced (*anankazoito*) to stand up, turn his head" (Plato, 1969: 515c); "And if someone compelled/forced (*anankazoi*) him to look at the light itself" (Plato, 1969: 515d); "And if someone by force dragged (*belkoi*) him away from there, up the rough, steep path" (Plato, 1969: 515e).

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A COMPANION TO

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