
Indiscipline

DAVID FERRIS

Andromaque, je pense à vous . . .

One can imagine the response if a latter-day Hegel, writing not on art but on the university, were to proclaim that the humanities are a thing of the past. Fingers will no doubt point with ironic confidence at the continuing presence of the humanities as if this proclamation were nothing more than a denial of the mere existence of our departments of history, philosophy, English, French, Italian, German, East Asian, classics—even comparative literature. The empirical evidence that the humanities survive is just too plainly to be seen—and there can be no question about the evidence of the empirical, can there? Yet even the continuing survival of these departments fails to counter the sense that their claim on the intellectual life of the university has diminished significantly over the last forty or so years. Is this because the humanities are no longer in tune with fundamental changes in what now constitutes knowledge, changes that have already taken place but whose consequences have not yet wrought their full effect on how the university has historically organized its knowledge? Or is this because the humanities really *are* a thing of the past? Are the humanities already living on beyond their means, awaiting a significance promised by their mere surviving?

Given that the nature of the university changed greatly in the latter half of the twentieth century, whether the humanities can articulate a significance for themselves within the contemporary transformation of the university is now a pressing question. More pointedly, can they do so without resorting to incantations of the value of being human, of the value of the history of the humanities, of the value of the illimitable transportability of those skills of close reading (who does that anymore?) to more professional vocations? Can they do this in an age that appears to be experiencing a transvaluation of all values even if it has not registered the consequences of such a transvaluation? To ignore this transvaluation is human, or, as Nietzsche would

say, all too human. Only by ignoring such a transvaluation can the shell of the past persist in the form of a shelter for the humanities. But to accept this transvaluation is to accept its repercussions for the methods of study that have long claimed the value of being human as their crowning value. And to accept these repercussions is to pose a question about the humanities and their current configuration within the university. Do the humanities have a place within this transvaluation beyond the mere survival of what they have been, and beyond strategic reconfigurations of their traditional division?

Within this situation the case of comparative literature appears to merit special consideration. A relative newcomer institutionally, it did not come into existence until after the traditional divisions of literary study had been established—after all, it needed something to compare. Does this meta-humanities position then mark comparative literature as different from the traditional divisions of the humanities? Does this mean that comparative literature should be claimed as the one area of study that can escape the difficulties the traditional disciplines of the humanities now face within the transvalued university? Such a claim easily fuels the sense of exception that comparative literature has fostered for itself. It also fuels one of the common refrains of our times, at least where comparative literature is concerned. On the basis of such a claim, could we not say that comparative literature is the discipline that is not a discipline? As such, is it *the* discipline of our allegedly postmodern and transvalued times, the discipline that eschews definition of itself as a discipline? And is not this resistance to definition the sign of having rejected not just certain values but the value of defining values, the value of a historically suspect past?

To situate comparative literature as this avatar of our times does, however, require caution, and not only because of the ease with which a resistance to definition quickly becomes a value in its own right. Can we really say that the difficulties comparative literature has experienced in defining itself as a discipline are the reflection of a particular era or time? The temptation to see such a connection between our age and the disciplinary elusiveness of this field of study is strong but hardly accurate. Difficulties in self-definition defined the history of comparative literature even from its institutional beginnings in the very un-postmodern milieu of the 1870s. In an essay that Haun Saussy's contribution has recalled from the 1870s, none other than Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz already writes that "*Comparative Literature . . . is . . . by no means a fully defined and established discipline. As a matter of fact it is still far from that goal*" (1973, 56). To return to this observation almost 130 years later is to return with a conflicted response. For Meltzl, definition and establishment go hand in hand, and their separation is a source of weakness. For us, however, establishment and definition are easily separated from one another. Consequently, we have little difficulty

seeing comparative literature in the same light as other established disciplines while at the same time renouncing any need to define precisely what has been established in its name. Here it is tempting to assert the self-contradictory and evasive rhetoric of our age and define comparative literature as the discipline that is not a discipline. Let us have our cake and eat it too. What Meltzl saw as a weakness is now our strength.

But why has the enduring theme of comparative literature and its history, an anxiety about defining what it is, an anxiety that now produces reports in the form of reports about reports, why has this theme finally emerged and found its reflection in the general historical condition of our age? Was comparative literature then always, and *avant la lettre*, postmodern? Or is there something else at work in the history of its development, a logic that drives comparative literature to question continually what constitutes it as a discipline? Is this a logic that also ensures, in its calculation, that the answer to what comparative literature is should always fail in order to preserve the question? This inability to define itself, this failure to become a discipline, in effect, this *indiscipline*—why does it not disappear in the distraction of our presumed postmodernity? But what does it mean that we should still be brought to this question now, at this moment in the history of the humanities, in our presumed postmodernity?

Confronted with such questions, the example of Meltzl is again instructive. Faced with a field of study but no defined discipline, Meltzl founded a journal in 1877, a journal known from 1879 on as *Acta comparationis litterarum universarum*. This footnote in the history of comparative literature is worth recounting for only one reason: the claim that a field lacks definition is met with the attempt to substantiate this same field in a series of examples or “acts.” This tendency has been widespread and is nowhere more present than in volumes devoted to the subject of comparative literature. It has been easier to offer a demonstration, to *do* something called a “comparative reading” than it has been to conceptualize the project of comparativism. Why this is so is a question comparative literature needs to ask, but only in the knowledge that it is a question addressed *to* comparative literature. It may not, in fact, be a question that can be asked from within comparative literature or even in its name, lest the response end up being one more comparative act, one more comparative performance. But if it has to be asked from somewhere else, this necessity also has to be recognized as part of the current situation of comparative literature. The question is: where is this elsewhere from which the situation of comparative literature can be discerned?

To know the current situation of comparative literature is of course the reason the ACLA engages in its ten-year exercise on the state of the discipline. This, the fourth report, comes at a time when the field reflects the increased presence of literatures other than those of its classical European past. This inclusion now points comparative literature toward the question of the institutional position it will be called upon

to play as the university registers distinct shifts in what constitutes the meaning of foreignness as well as how it provides an educational experience. Accompanying this shift, there arises a changing sense in the value of certain foreign languages, languages that once formed the core of comparative literature’s classical past, the period of its “Eur-iquity.” An initial effect of this shift is that comparative literature now finds itself situated within the humanities between the expansiveness of English programs that look increasingly comparative (even if the medium of every text is English) and the continuing growth of departments of Hispanic literatures and languages. Comparative literature, along with the non-Hispanic foreign literatures, is increasingly positioned between these two poles. Given this situation, it is not beyond possibility that the evolution of the study of literature within humanities will, in the short term, yield a tripartite division in which the disciplinary structure of the past will preserve itself, albeit in greatly reduced form. There will be English, Hispanic literatures, and Comparative Studies—the latter acting as a “home” for languages and literatures no longer able to sustain departmental status (a balkanization based on institutional rather than intellectual needs). It is at this point that the tendency toward global studies and world literature within comparative literature can easily become a rationale for the administrative exigency that would form an umbrella department under the title of Comparative Studies. What happens to comparative literature at such a juncture is worth contemplating now if this field is to retain a signature for itself rather than be shaped by such an exigency.

To pose this question now is to pose it at a time when the traditional departmental support structure for comparative literature is entering a critical phase. The most recent statistics show that the foreign literatures historically most closely associated with comparative literature have achieved, at least temporarily, smaller declines in their enrollments. However, a downward trend continues, and it is a trend that indicates increasing difficulties ahead for comparative literature as it has been traditionally conceived.¹ This is so not only because these departments are producing fewer students but because, as these departments grow smaller, their ability to sustain doctoral study and therefore provide courses for comparative literature students diminishes. In this respect, the fate as well as the purpose of this model of comparative literature is tied directly to the condition of language and literature study in the modern university. Here the anxiety about standards voiced in the Levin (1963) and Greene (1975) reports becomes a luxury we can no longer indulge. It is no longer simply a question of locating where or how high the standard should be. The question now, if Levin and Greene were to ask it, would be whether there will be something for their comparative literature to standardize. Or has this field of study evolved beyond the kind of restriction within which such standards are conceivable? A world already translated?

Bernheimer's report (1995) clearly reflects a commitment to such an evolution. In doing so, comparative literature takes on the task that the modern university has also taken up: to institute as its own the same global forces whose allure informed the Bernheimer report. This move beyond limited cultural pluralism, this move to a horizon seemingly without limit, does not, however, completely escape the question posed symptomatically in the previous reports by Levin and Greene. Their insistence on standards may have been defined in the form of European literatures, but to dismiss why they insisted on standards merely because such standards have been articulated in European terms evades the opportunity to address the ongoing consequences of two defining and contrary forces within comparative literature: comparison without bounds, and the possibility of a discipline. The latter force marks the reflection on comparative literature until Bernheimer—and it is present both in an insistence on standards and in the repeated anxiety, from Meltzl to Wellek, about how to define comparative literature, to bring it to discipline. To escape into a world, or more precisely, to take up *the world* as the subject of comparative literature gives a radical, all-encompassing emphasis to the former force—as if to say that the failure of the latter can be mitigated by pursuit of the former. But even here, and *pace* Bernheimer, comparative literature is once again faced with confronting the question of standards for its own expanded horizons and for access to those horizons.

In the past (increasingly mythical), such standards were easier to articulate: a knowledge of three literatures in their original language and a level of theoretical sophistication appropriate to the conceptual nature of a field no longer confined to national restrictions. Such a model works, according to the traditions of comparative literature, as long as the three original languages do not wander far from the language menu prevailing in the modern university. Thus, an argument runs, comparative literature should not expand beyond the foreign literary and linguistic infrastructure of its institutional situation—in effect, it should replicate and sustain this situation. But, if comparative literature is to do more than shore up graduate study in certain foreign literatures, it must decide whether the linguistic requirements of its past are still in force although no longer European in character. If such requirements are held to, then the specter of standards returns here. As a result, the Bernheimer report is forced to face what might be its own worst nightmare: the ghostly appearance of a multicultural Levin, perhaps still dressed as a plumber, but armed with the knowledge of every conceivable literature and its language, chanting “This is the standard, this is the standard.”² If comparative literature is to distinguish itself from English at this point, the question of such standards threatens to return. As comparative literature radicalizes its inmost comparatist gesture in an unashamedly expansionist model, it poses ever more insistently the question of the intellectual identity of such a model

within the university of late capitalism, the question of its discipline, the question of its distinction and identity.

The ghostly return of a multicultural Levin is the return of the perennial question of comparative literature: is there a limit to its expansive trajectory? Because Levin, and later Greene, sought an answer to that question in a standard accentuating the acquisition of the original languages of a literature (read, available languages), comparative literature became an easy target for just about anyone from late capitalism possessed with a minimal awareness of ideology. Standards equal Eurocentrism. The boldness of this claim would sweep away in a single gesture another issue, an issue more central to comparative literature than its historical Eurocentrism (which can be read as a symptomatic response to this issue). It is an issue present from the very inception of comparative literature as a field: the translatability of a subject speaking from within a national identity, which establishes the possibility of comparing literature. In the heady atmosphere of an incipient multiculturalism, Bernheimer's report could not see that the narrowness observed in Levin, for instance, was a restricted form of what, the later report argued, should take place in the study of literature. The stake is not Europe but access to the model Europe had held, quite literally, in exile for itself: the right to compare without restriction, the right to exemplify comparison. Without such a right there could never have been a Eurocentric comparative literature. At the same time, without such a right there could never be a comparative literature beyond such a Eurocentrism. What Bernheimer reiterates is this right, a right whose existence goes to the very center of comparison as we have come to understand it, while validating the value of that center as crucial to the critical enterprises that define our times.

Yet rather than reflecting on the theoretical issue that haunts comparative literature wherever this right is exercised—its claim to exercise such a right and to place it at the center of the humanities, in short, a claim to found a discipline in comparison—Bernheimer advocates an imperative (hence, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, its many “shoulds”) that exports the most essential historical right of traditional comparative literature in order to welcome its return in the form of its own displaced subject. In this odyssey, the relation of such a subject to literature remains unchanged: its unchanged status is the effect of a comparative project whose first expansionist steps emphasized Europe; whose development stalled in front of the seductive prospect of a discipline, the prospect of standards, the prospect of a method for comparative literature; and whose most recent turn picks up once more the thematic rationale of its history. First Europe, then the world.

The logic that informs this tendency can already be discerned in Meltzl. With the second volume of the journal he founded in 1877, a new motto is adopted. It comes

from Schiller and reads as follows: "It would be a pitiful, petty ideal to write for *one* nation only: for a philosophical spirit this limitation is absolutely unbearable. This spirit could not confine itself to such a changeable, accidental, and arbitrary form of humanity, a fragment (and what else is the greatest nation?)" (Schiller, 253-04). In taking up this remark (from a letter written by Schiller in October 1789), Meltzl's incipient comparativism reveals its dependence on an idea central to the romantic critical project: the fragment. The concept of a nation, according to which the study of literature was to organize itself within the university, no longer retains its integral role. Now it is more appropriate to speak of literatures within these units as they register the failure of a nation to sustain its previous significance. This development not only reflects a tendency present in comparativism from its beginning, but it is also witness to the sense of fragmentation that Schiller expresses and that the first journal of comparative literature takes up as its guiding motto.

If the greatest nation is still a fragment—and what else could have been at stake in comparative literature's Eurocentrism than such a nation?—this Euro project is already fated to disintegrate, to become one nation among other nations, to join, as it were, an organization of fragments, each assuring the failure of the other's hegemony. Here the status quo threatens to become a paralysis as the task of comparativism is defined more and more as the task of limiting nationhood, of producing the nation in its failure, as the fragment it already was. The movement toward a reinvention of the idea of world literature is a logical consequence of this task—a world that no part can lay claim to as its world except by laying claim to the world as an essentially fragmentary experience.

But, as always, where the fragment arises, a desire for totality is never far behind. The literary theory of Lena Romanticism already understood this aspect of the fragment and developed it in such a way as to totalize the world in its fragmentation: the fragmentary experience of totality becomes totalizing in itself. Has comparative literature become the institutional form of this theory? The discipline of fragmentation, the medium in which other disciplines are made to reflect an essential fragmentary tendency? To borrow a coinage by Walter Benjamin, has comparative literature become the *Reflexionsmedium* of the humanities? The discipline that undoes the concept of discipline through its reflexive mediation of all other disciplines? Or is this undoing, this desire to be undone, no more than the endgame of a history of aesthetic experience that Hegel also sought to end, an experience only able to reproduce its own unending end as the condition of its survival? Because it was Hegel who sought to end such an experience, it would be tempting to see his rejection of Lena Romanticism as the rejection of something anti-Hegelian, of something that undermines the resolutely totalizing character of his thought—never mind his judgment on the fu-

ture of art. To do so is not only to refuse to recognize that there is a totalizing tendency at work in both, but it is also to evade the question of what is at stake now as we align comparative literature with an essentially Romantic project.

Meltzl's turn to Schiller is symptomatic of the forces now traversing comparative literature as it seeks a new postmodern institutional identity. To argue that this identity favors incompleteness over totality is not to argue a merely formal concern. It is also to take up the question of a nation, a question that has always been in play within comparative literature. Schiller is instructive in this respect. Limiting the nation to the status of a fragment is, in Schiller's words, to affirm the nation as "a changeable, accidental, arbitrary form of humanity." That Schiller is capable of this awareness should give us pause for thought. Aren't we accustomed to attribute to Schiller the ideological basis of politics in Western nations? But aren't the terms in which Schiller describes the concept of a nation close to the terms that the world, after postcolonialism, is accustomed to using to criticize the historic emphasis of comparative literature on core European languages and literatures? Europe, now recognizable as a changeable, accidental, arbitrary form of humanity. And is it not in the name of a future for humanity, as well as the humanities, that this criticism is made? What kind of history can sustain such a contradiction? But the question that really needs to be posed here is whether this future is not still essentially European in effect, a Europe that would no longer be Europe but a Europe effaced into other names: nation, earth, world, planet . . . in these words our progression and our enlightenment, indeed, our comparison, now puts itself at stake, as recent publications insist.

Nowhere has this stake been more pronounced than in the tentative steps comparative literature has made in articulating a future for itself in the form of a world. But as David Damrosch's recent work in this area witnesses, comparative literature, even as it expands beyond a European base and becomes the foster home of world literature, is still faced with the anxiety René Wellek experienced within that base. In his 1958 essay "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," Wellek writes that "the most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that we have not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (Wellek 1963, 283).³ The very fact that Damrosch's book has been or can be written reflects the difficulty in establishing, in Wellek's words, a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology for the literature we know in terms of the world.⁴ It is also a sign that the persistent question of comparative literature is still at work, if only in a displacement.

It is no longer the question of one discipline. Rather, that discipline's questioning of the nationalization of literary study now poses the question of what literature must now belong to when, to reframe the beginning of this essay, the value of nation has been transvalued. What is posed by the advent of world literature is not only the ques-

tion of what defines literary study, but more importantly, it is the question of where and how, in the modern university, is the world to be located? The question is pressing if comparative literature is to avoid becoming no more than the gatekeeper to the new cultural and increasingly virtual, Grand Tour—to PowerPoint and beyond? Damrosch offers an answer to this question (which he calls, not unadvisedly, “the comparatist’s lurking panic”) when he writes, “World literature is not an immense body of material that must somehow, impossibly, be mastered; it is a mode of reading that can be experienced *intensively* with a few works just as effectively as it can be explored *extensively* with a large number” (Damrosch 2003, 299). Here, Damrosch’s approach would displace the will to master that has driven and plagued the history of comparative literature when faced by the impossible extensiveness of its field. By displacing the emphasis from a body of literature to a mode of reading, Damrosch is able to overcome the challenge posed by this extensiveness: world literature is not a body of literature but a way of reading literature, in effect, an experience of the world.

But even in this displacement there remains the tendency that has haunted comparative literature throughout its history. The purpose of this intensive reading is to experience what could otherwise be experienced if it were not so impossible a task: the experience of the world through its extensive multiplicity. Damrosch asserts that the *intensive* reading experience achieves, “just as effectively,” what the *extensive* experience of the world also promises. What is to be known, in effect, mastered, is what a world is—whether this is achieved through a restricted or extensive reading experience. Here comparative literature, faced with the impossible—and not for the first time in its history but always at those points where it poses the question of its theoretical and methodological foundation—justifies its retreat into the confines of the possible: the possibility of what would otherwise be an impossible experience of literature, literature in its totality as a world. The goal has not changed; rather, the experience of that goal has been relocated. It is here, displaced into a mode of reading, that the imperative to master the field, the world, lives on and does so despite, but perhaps also because of, the evidence of its impossibility. The same imperative that surfaces with such regularity in the history of comparative literature (and signaled by the suspicion that such mastery will always be impossible, that comparative literature is impossible as a discipline) is now channeled through a mode rather than an object.

One is tempted to conclude that it is between this imperative and its impossibility that what is at stake in the world of world literature takes place: a constant struggle between the project of comparison and what continues to evade that project, namely, the world (despite the fact that it is only conceived from within that project). To mediate this difficulty (which means, Hegel-like, to give the project of comparison a future in the face of its most difficult task, comprehending what a world is, bring-

ing it within the sphere of comparison), Damrosch promotes an intensive reading experience in strict analogy to an extensive experience (the latter being the kind that gives graduate students, as well as ourselves, dreams of plumbers who compare the literature). The analogy is clearly weighted in favor of the intensive as a means of sustaining the comparative project as it contemplates its fate in the impossible experience of the world. Thanks to this intensiveness, the world can be read as if it had been read in its extensiveness.⁵ Harry Levin’s ghost need not return to haunt our waking days. The plumber, it appears, has been laid to rest.

But, does the plumbing work? Does it lay to rest the need to take up once again the question of comparative literature, or does it run the risk of divorcing comparative literature from its only vital question, the question always lurking in its history even when it takes custody of the world, namely, *why is it so indiscipline?*

It is increasingly clear that the humanities, as we know them today, have developed greatly from the impulse comparative literature gave to them in the last fifty years. As Haun Saussy points out in his chapter, this has occurred to such an extent that comparative literature is now suffused throughout the humanities. The consequence of this extension is that the question comparative literature has historically posed about itself and its place within the humanities is no longer its proper question; it is no longer a question it can simply pose to itself, no longer a question it can pose about itself. The question of comparative literature has become everyone’s question, a fact reinforced by its pursuit of the world. To refuse this pursuit is to dream that one could fall asleep and reawaken as René Wellek circa 1958. The question of comparative literature is now the question of the humanities at a time when the past is no longer enough to ensure their future.

Where then does this future lie? In a world? In the world? But, to ensure this future under the rubric of a world or even the world—is this one more attempt to rescue comparative literature from the failure Wellek had already sensed in his own time, or is it a definitive break with the conditions governing that past and its failure? Did one comparative literature die to give rise to another? Or has the logic of comparison against which Wellek, and later Levin and Greene, struggled survived to claim the world in an impossibly other voice, the voice of the world, a totality of fragmented nations only able to speak in the exile of their nationality, that is, in comparative literature? If the latter, then another question awaits us: Is comparative literature a distinct activity, or is it merely the particular form of a more general comparative project, the comparative project of the humanities?

If the latter, the guiding logic at stake here has taken a long time to find its voice within the humanities. This logic, and its effects, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out at the beginning of his *La création du monde ou la mondialisation* has a decidedly Hege-

lian provenance. Nancy cites the following passage from Hegel, which, despite being stated in terms of commerce, reads like an account of the recent history of comparative literature and the humanities: "The extension, according to natural necessity, of commerce with foreign nations, as for example the commerce between Europe and a new continent, has had a skeptical effect on the dogmatism of their sense of community such as it existed before and on the irrefutable certitude of a host of concepts concerning law and truth" (Hegel, "The Relation between Skepticism and Philosophy"; cited by Nancy 2002, 15). Invested in this extension, then as now, is a sense of advancement, a sense of overcoming a dogmatic past whose strictures made it clear precisely what constituted "the literature." Although the passage cited by Nancy gives a strong sense of the logical consequences of the project of globalization, it is not, as Nancy goes on to remark, an accurate account of our current situation. This situation, Nancy observes, is one in which the West "is no longer even able to encounter the relativity of its norms and its doubt about its own assurance" (15).

The time of relativity and doubt already occurs in Hegel. The difference between Hegel and today is that the "skepticism in which Hegel saw the richness of the shaking up of dogmatisms no longer has today, as it had for him, the resource of a future in which the dialectic would carry reason further, more in advance, more to the forefront of a truth and a sense of the world" (Nancy 2002, 15). To insist that we are in this stage of relativity is to harbor the hope that what we call the world conceals a truth and a sense accessible through the relativity of our fragmentary certitudes. It is also to reveal the Hegelian character of our own attempts to make Hegel a thing of the past. But more than this, Nancy warns that it is in this very same movement through which skepticism aims at a greater "truth and sense of the world" that "the assurance of historical progress is suspended, that the convergence of knowledge, of ethics, and of living well together is taken apart, and that the domination of an empire united in technical power and pure economic reason is affirmed" (15).

If the recent history of comparative literature finds its rationale in a skepticism about the assumed certainties of a European past, has it unwittingly subscribed to the will of a university that now bows to technical power while transforming reason into economic reason? Has it in fact affirmed the very forces it claims to resist? In this context, has the very idea of literature, understood in terms of the world, become the means by which the comparative project has sought to suspend its historical progress one more time?

The fear of such a suspension plays a strong role in the imperative to master that Damrosch gives voice to at the end of *What Is World Literature?* There it takes the form of an impossibility that has haunted both the dreams and the waking hours of those who have sought to know comparative literature. This persistent statement of

anxiety about comparative literature's impossibility indicates that the history of comparative literature has only ever been thought from the perspective of a discipline. In this respect, the character of this history has invariably been dialectical, always seeking to incorporate what remains other to it and always suspending itself before this other. In the periodic suspension of its own sense and reason has comparative literature assured its future. This is why Wellek's anxieties about comparative literature are not simply his own, nor do they mark a privileged point of consciousness in the history of comparative literature; rather, they are one of the many points of suspension present in this history. To have a history marked by such suspensions is to have a history founded on an impasse that must be periodically reproduced but always in a different form so at least the illusion of progress is maintained. The logic that governs this reproduction is the logic of comparison. It is present in the passage Nancy cites from Hegel: through commerce and the exchanges it establishes between Europe and new continents comparisons are made, comparisons that provide an awareness of the means by which Europe has projected itself as Europe (a means it cannot see without the awareness initiated by comparison). Europe can no longer simply refer to itself as Europe but must recognize the fragmentary limitation of an existence without comparison. Here the double bind of comparison makes itself felt most forcefully: Europe is brought to the recognition that it cannot affirm itself as Europe without comparison. But with comparison, it cannot sustain itself as the entity it wants to affirm through comparison. Confined to such a situation, comparison produces no other results; it is, to use a formula easily adopted by our times, nothing more than the possibility of its own impossibility. In short, what is at stake here is not Europe but a logic whose purpose is to assure its own impasse and reproduce itself as this impasse. Such a logic can take us to many different places, to many futures, even different worlds, but each journey returns to the same as if, like some amnesic Odysseus, we are fated to set off for home one more time because we have forgotten we are already where we have set out to go.

In her Wellek Lectures on Comparative Literature, Gayatri Spivak states a version of this problem when she says, "Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" (2003, 72). This recognition provides the awareness that comparative literature, as indicated by the title under which these lectures were subsequently published, *Death of a Discipline*, has experienced its death. This never means that it no longer exists. After all, for something to *experience* its death means that it is not dead, at least not yet. Spivak's lectures are positioned between such an experience and an anticipated death. This is why Spivak, in her preface, expresses the hope that her book "will be read as the last gasp of a dying discipline" (xii). And after that last gasp? The silence of apocalyptic wisdom? Spivak's hope that her book will

be read as the last gasp of a dying discipline seems far from the original title of these lectures when they were given at Irvine in 2000: "The New Comparative Literature." Seems far, but isn't really. The desire for the new, the modern, and the desire for an end (that modernity should be the end) have always been closely related. They have also always involved a curious rhetoric whose temporality gives all the force of occurrence to something that has not yet occurred—what Spivak invokes as "a definitive future anteriority, a 'to come'-ness, a 'will have happened' quality" (6). Thanks to this future anteriority, what is written here as the last gasp of comparative literature can only be read as such from a point at which no more comparison and no other gasp is possible. For Spivak to see her lectures in this light is to reveal comparative literature as the carefully rehearsed performance of a desire, the desire for its impossibility, the impossibility of itself in the form of its radical *indiscipline*. To articulate such a state is no mean feat, but to articulate it only in the hope that "there may be some in the academy who do not believe that the critical edge of the humanities should be appropriated and determined by the market" (xii) may be to miss the point of why this state can be and has been articulated now.

To pronounce the death of a discipline, particularly the "old" discipline of comparative literature, is to claim that its internal ordering, its disciplining of literature, is no longer vital. The order at stake here is nothing other than discipline itself, the concept of discipline through which so much of the history of comparative literature has registered its self-uncertainty. What Spivak envisages as the "new" comparative literature arises from the attempt to cross over from the impasse that resonates throughout this history even in its globalization phase. Spivak rightly sees that such globalization, despite its name, remains a restricted economy. Her call for a crossing over to a "new" comparative literature indicates her awareness of the need to break with this system of exchange and its Hegelian character. Yet the rhetoric of crossing that sustains this break, along with a reiterated call for a "new" comparative literature, invites suspicion that what is being played out in this death is the history comparative literature has repeatedly bequeathed to itself in moments of self-inflicted crisis—not to mention, once more, that what is also at stake in these moments is the renewal of comparative literature as a kind of reason.

To voice this renewal in terms of old and new comparative literatures is to invoke comparison as the purpose of difference, as the purpose of all those crossings that academic work now seems so intent on rehearsing over and over again.⁶ But more is at stake here than just another crossing. Rather, what is at stake is crossing as the modern form of the comparative project of humanities: crossing as the gateway to a "new" comparative literature in which crossing becomes an end in itself. This is tantamount to saying that comparative literature can only take its method, comparison,

as its subject if it is to survive its own history. Here comparison not only understands crossing as its most necessary step but, as crossing, it is understood as the opening to "a species of alterity" that Spivak names as the planet. This step, necessarily strategic, is essentially comparative, since it derives its force in comparison to what it supplants: the "old" comparative literature—comparative literature as conflict of Eurocentrism and cultural studies, globalization, world. Even in this most strategized of forms, the logic that drives the history of comparative literature persists—the logic that seeks and fails to find standards, the logic that confines comparative literature to the productive paradox of a discipline without disciplinarity, the logic of its *indiscipline*. But no new comparative literature is foundable on these terms since what is founded as the new is predicated on what comparative literature has repeatedly experienced as its history, namely, its impossibility. Comparative literature is, in this respect, an essentially Kantian undertaking—a critique that seeks to sustain the limits within which it operates; in effect, it is a theoretical account of the humanities in general.

Despite the strong sense of the "pastness" of a certain comparative literature, Spivak's strategic turn to "planet" and "planetary" is symptomatic of a situation that is not simply the situation of comparative literature but the situation of the humanities as they evolved in the modern university. For Spivak, the planetary arises as a result of "cross[ing] borders under the auspices of a Comparative Literature supplemented by Area Studies" (72). Earlier in her lectures, she had explained this "new" comparative literature as one "that would work to make the traditional linguistic sophistication of Comparative Literature supplement Area Studies (and history, anthropology, political theory, and sociology) by approaching the language of the other not only as a 'field' language" (9). How this would occur relies, Spivak claims, on "a reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself" (13). Alterity is not only central to this project of a "new" comparative literature, but it is also, by implication, central to the possibility that the humanities can survive their own history. The effort of "othering" referred to here is also the effort that produces crossing. By making this effort an end in itself, the comparatist can now offer an answer to the most embarrassing question comparatists are confronted with: What do you compare? No longer need we shyly reply that we really don't compare anything, that our field of study is misnamed. The answer is now, "We compare what cannot be compared." The logic that used to drive comparative literature toward an end, toward a sense of discipline, while depriving it of just such an end, now becomes its possibility, the possibility of its impossibility.

Such is the force of the planet envisaged by Spivak, this "species of alterity" that, in the almost final words of her lectures performs the following role: "The 'planet' is here, as perhaps always, a catachresis. . . Its alterity, determining experience, is myste-

rious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible” (102). Beyond the protective “perhaps” and the “however imperfectly”—strategies that protect the impossible from actually being experienced, strategies that therefore protect comparative literature from a decisive death—the question of comparative literature’s history remains in force: why must comparative literature always be transfixed before the seduction of the impossible?

As already argued, it is not simply comparative literature that is at stake here but the possibility of the humanities in late modernity—specifically, the possibility of the disciplinary formation out of which comparative literature emerged and to which it responds. To say that this disciplinary formation is at stake is, however, also to say that what is in play now is the concept of Enlightenment modernity out of which the humanities and its disciplines developed. What the history of comparative literature registers is an essential *indiscipline* at the very core of this concept, but not an *indiscipline* that can be simply accorded the value of alterity with respect to the Enlightenment and modernity—as if the “rationality” of the Enlightenment and the modernity it inaugurates could be confined to an exclusion of alterity. But to bring this force of *indiscipline*, this impossibility we would know as alterity, out of its confinement by modernity—is this not already the still most essential gesture of modernity? Let us not forget that modernity is itself founded on impossibility, as Winckelmann put it, the impossibility of imitating an inimitable antiquity.

In this impossibility, modernity finds its future as what is other to antiquity, finds itself as the possibility of what would be, in effect, an other antiquity, our future antiquity, our future anterior. Such a modernity is an unfailingly comparative project: it originates in an unflattering comparison of itself to antiquity, and it aims at achieving the comparability of itself to antiquity to the extent that it would supplant antiquity. The apparent unraveling of this project, so easily assignable to what we call postmodernity, does not, however, mean that we have crossed over and therefore crossed out of the comparative logic so essential to the founding and continuation of this project. Rather, it means that the incomparability assigned to antiquity is the impossibility on which modernity is founded. Modernity did not compare itself to what was incomparable but only to what was *conceived* as incomparable, and it did so by means of comparison. Because such incomparability is complicit with comparison, the impossibility it represents is already claimed by comparison. This is the comparative logic that drives our modernity—even beyond itself. To cross over or out of this logic by invoking the impossible is to subscribe to this logic one more time. Our modernity is, in effect, founded on the invocation of its impossibility. No postmodernity escapes this logic; it is also its foundation, or, as an indifferent postmodern would have it, its foundation without foundation, its impossible foundation.

Wherever impossibility is invoked, the comparative project of modernity is never far away. Within the humanities, the history of comparative literature has expressed this project more purely than other “disciplines.” Whether this takes the form of the impossibility of defining this field of study (which can then become a definition of itself as a discipline), the impossibility of knowing a world for world literature (which then sustains an intensive analogy), or alterity as impossibility (which then claims a planet in a strategic displacement of the world), each authorizes the comparative project in terms of an impossibility that becomes ever more radical (radical also meaning ever more extensive here). This is not just any impossibility but an impossibility that institutes literature and the reading of literature as the medium in which the possibility of the humanities is to be defined and redefined and re-redefined again precisely because, at its core, it preserves its impossibility like a talisman ensuring its future, ensuring that it can always be compared.

Such impossibility is the guardian of comparison. Between old and new, Europe and the world, again and again. It is thus through the articulation of its own impossibility that comparative literature survives until a periodic crisis, as arbitrary as Schiller’s nations, announces that it is time to find something new to compare itself to, one more time. And where do we find this comparison nowadays if not in the impossible other—an other commensurate with, but not other to, impossibility? But what is *this* impossibility if not a discipline in its *indiscipline*? What is comparative literature if not a discipline transfixed with, and distracted by, the totality of its impossibility as well as the infinite task of translating and transforming this impossibility, a discipline only able to survive in the failure of its own inmost tendency, and nowhere more spectacularly, as Hegel already knew and was fond of pointing out, than after the owl of Minerva has taken flight?

Transfixed and distracted by its own history, comparative literature is forced to radicalize its own acts of comparison. Yet comparative literature is not alone in this radicalization. In honor of postmodernity’s hyper-reflexiveness, it is now a tendency within the humanities to transform its own impasses into the reason for their existence. Thus, the humanities prepare themselves for the role of alterity within the university of late capitalism, but an alterity appropriated and determined into impossibility—in effect, a determined impossibility, an impossibility that now affords their last gasp possibility.

It is in this last gesture, both radical and extreme, that a world whose future is staked on comparison can be read as the gesture toward an impossibility in which the promise of alterity is always made. But can Europe, the world, or even the planet ever lay claim to such a promise without subjecting alterity, making it a subject of analogy, giving it the voice of impossibility, essentializing impossibility to authorize

comparison? Alterity, finally comparable, contained? Can there be any comparison for alterity? If this promise can never be made without such a subjection, then comparative literature could, of course, be rightly described as a discipline of exile. It can be nothing other than the discipline that produces itself by exiling itself from a place whose impossibility will always affirm its exile. Such a comparative literature can have no other task than to produce something from which it is permanently exiled while thematically repeating that exile in the form of one nation or another, one continent or another.⁷ And what could fulfill that permanent exile more spectacularly than exile itself? To be exiled, not from a nation or a continent, but from exile itself? And what could be more reassuring than this hyper-reflexive situation in which our modernity preserves itself as its failure, as its postmodernity? What can be more comforting (or a better example of undisciplined thought) than to claim that, in our relation to exile, we also find ourselves in the state we say we are exiled from? And yet, as we rely upon this dialectical extrication, can we really claim that Hegel is a thing of the past?

In its history, this “exile” of comparative literature has taken various forms: the “standard” of Levin; the absence of definition in both Meltzl and Wellek; more recently, the extensive knowledge of a world; and finally, impossibility. To have come to this point is to have named the concept that appears with greater and greater insistence in each of these manifestations. Whether coming to this point marks the death of a discipline or whether it marks one more instance of a project whose (predictably impossible) object is its only promise of survival remains to be seen (remains, since this is the logic of comparative literature, its *indiscipline*)—and will be seen when it arrives yet again ten years from now when “the status of the discipline” is interrogated once more. We should expect as much; after all, art did not end with Hegel—and, unfortunately, neither did Hegel.

The question is whether comparative literature can take up the question that the project of comparison has historically been unable to confront, the question of an incomparable impossibility, an impossibility without condition, an impossibility no longer understood from the perspective of the possibility of a discipline or field of study, an impossibility that is no more than a lack of discipline.⁸ To take up this question is to take up the issue of where and from what position literature, the other word in this “discipline,” can still be thought within late modernity—assuming, of course, that literature no longer needs to be exiled in the politics of representation or in the politics of comparison through which modernity exacted its revenge on antiquity, an assumption that will be as difficult to resist as it is to pursue. In pursuing this question, it is worth remembering that, strictly speaking, alterity can have no analogy, not even an impossible one. To bring such alterity within the sphere of comparison is to refuse such a question in order to confine the humanities to the possibility of an

impossible future and an equally impossible past: an alterity whose impossibility is only too possible.

That comparative literature should have pursued this impossibility as the most essential characteristic of its history as well as its future affords us an opportunity to reflect on the project to which the humanities belong as well as the seduction of its unending impossibilities. But to fall prey to this seduction over and over again indicates that our values have not yet suffered their fullest transvaluation but remain caught within the comparative logic that sustains our modernity even as we proclaim its demise. To fall prey to this seduction is also to confirm the extent to which we still, despite our modernity, define literature and its interpretation in terms of its possibility—precisely the definition that allowed Aristotle to overcome the impossibility Plato laid at the door of the poetic. For Aristotle, what Plato dismisses as the impossibility of the poetic (its inability to distinguish between representations of what exists and what does not, what is real and what is only possible) becomes the source of its value: in Aristotle’s hands the poetic is not confined to dealing with what is or what already exists, but with what could exist, what is possible.⁹

Whether the study of literature can give up the comparative logic that sustains this history and find its critical significance within the transformation of the university remains to be seen.¹⁰ It is still there, more than anywhere else—more than Europe, the world, or the planet—that the most decisive intervention awaits us. Otherwise, our significance will be as a thing of the past, surviving our own end through the promise of its repetition while embracing, as Baudelaire put it when he describes in “Le Cygne” that distant moment of modernity figured in Andromaque’s exile, “ce Simois menteur”—an old world made new, again, the essential gesture of our modernity, this comparative project and its self-inflicted *indiscipline*.

To begin to interpret this project and its hold on the disciplines of the humanities is to promise a future that is neither a thing nor the past, and it is to make this promise while refusing to displace the question of literature into what literature is said to represent, reflect, or imitate, that is, into the past of all the things it has been compared to. To understand the difference between this displacement and its interpretation is to understand why there has been such a thing as comparative literature as well as why this field suspends itself before the prospect of the humanities and their discipline. And, to understand this difference, is it not also to understand the question posed by a criticism without condition, an interpretation without condition, in short, literature, that is, a literature no longer confined to the *indiscipline* of being compared to the impossible?

NOTES

1. The most recent report by the MLA on enrollment trends in foreign languages and literatures has registered a slower rate of decrease if not an equilibrium. These indications are hard to interpret in any prognostic way, however, since the last few years have also registered significant increases in the overall enrollment at many universities and colleges. If the overall enrollment increases by, say, 10 percent, but enrollment figures in some departments remain the same or show growth less than 10 percent, then even an increase in the overall number of students studying a particular language cannot conceal a decreased overall demand for that language amongst current students. The most recent report by Elizabeth B. Welles, "Foreign Language Enrollments in the United States Institutions of Higher Education Fall 2002," does not reflect this issue, nor is it yet able to interpret fully the consequences of expanding the definition of foreign language to include American Sign Language (which has had a statistically significant effect on undergraduate enrollment in foreign languages since it accounted for 21,613 students in 2003, up from 852 in 1995).

As always in such reports, the statistics need to be interpreted with care, particularly when read from the perspective of a discipline such as comparative literature that intensively emphasizes graduate study. In this respect, Table 2a (Welles 2004) provides a salutary picture of languages that have either sustained increases or have remained at roughly the same level of enrollment for undergraduates in four-year colleges but have experienced a significant drop in graduate enrollment. At the graduate level, between 1995 and 1998 there were significant enrollment declines in French (29%) and German (30%); however, both experienced lesser declines between 1998 and 2002 (French, 5%, German 4.5%). A different picture occurs at the undergraduate level though: German increased slightly between 1998 and 2002, while French continued to decrease but at a lesser rate. Graduate enrollment in Italian increased by 13% between 1998 and 2002 after dipping between 1995 and 1998; it also showed a significant increase at the undergraduate level between 1995, 1998, and 2002 (up by 43%). Asian languages (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) all showed significant increases in undergraduate enrollment between 1995, 1998, and 2002; but at the graduate level, all registered declines between 1998 and 2002 (Chinese declined 23.5%, Korean declined 36%, and Japanese declined 30%). Overall, graduate enrollment in foreign language departments between 1998 and 2002 increased by 11.9%, but this was still not enough to make up for a decline of 15.2% between 1995 and 1998. This 11.9% increase results from enrollment growth in Ancient Greek (35%), Arabic (20%), Hebrew (56%), Italian (13%; in 2002 Italian returned to its 1995 level), Latin (17%; in 2002 Latin also returned to its 1995 level), Spanish (10%), and other languages (50%). Of these languages, Hebrew, Ancient Greek, and Spanish account for an increase of 4,457 students at the graduate level between 1998 and 2002. Although the languages experiencing the next largest increases were significant percentage-wise (Arabic, Italian, and Latin), they only yielded a net increase of 359 graduate students. The group "other languages" showed an increase of 601 students for the same period after falling between 1995 and 1998. While these gains amount to a total of 5,417 additional students at the graduate level, they are offset by losses or zero growth in the other languages, so that the net gain for all languages is 3,912 students. This means that, in languages other than Hebrew,

Ancient Greek, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Latin, and the group "other languages," a decline in the order of some 1,505 students was experienced.

If we concede that the university has now become an enrollment-driven entity, the advice these figures could be said to offer to comparative literature would follow (with some expansion, although for different reasons) what Alexandre Kojève is reported to have given a group of radical students in 1968: learn Greek. On the strength of the percentages just cited, we would now say: learn Hebrew too. Despite high percentage increases in Latin, Italian, and Arabic, the numerical increase for these three languages is very small (Italian gained 122 graduate students; Latin, 151; and Arabic, 86) when compared to Hebrew and Greek (gains of 1,991 and 1,562 graduate students respectively). But statistics and institutional pressures aside, the question remains: is the fate (and therefore the definition) of comparative literature only tied to the fate of foreign language teaching in the United States?

2. On this anecdote concerning the appearance in a graduate student's dream of Harry Levin dressed as a plumber, see Peter Brooks's response to the Bernheimer report, "Must We Apologize?" Brooks recounts the story as follows: "A persistent piece of graduate student lore at Harvard in the early 1960s concerned the dream of a student in comparative literature on the eve of his oral exams. The doorbell rang, the student stumbled from bed, opened the door, and found himself faced with Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli (the two professors in the department) dressed as plumbers, carrying pipe wrenches and acetylene torches, who announced: 'We've come to compare the literature'" (Brooks 1995, 97).

3. Marjorie Perloff, in an essay included in the Bernheimer volume, also returns to this sentence and comments: "This is the malaise that has haunted comparative literature from its inception and that continues to bedevil it in the 'age of multiculturalism'" (Perloff 1995, 178).

4. To this may be added a recent anthology of essays on the subject of world literature: *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004).

5. It is not only in the world that this extensiveness is given expression. The difference that distinguishes comparative literature from national literature study is marked by extensiveness—and to such an extent that comparative literature must pursue this extensiveness as the sign of its distinction while lamenting the difficulty this poses for its self-definition.

6. That "crossing" is the rhetorical banner of our age can be implied from the number of books published within the last ten years that contain either "crossing borders" or "crossing boundaries" or some variation of these words as part of their titles—not to mention the numerous conferences that take "crossing" in one form or another as their thematic focus.

7. If, as Emily Apter recalls in her contribution to the volume of essays sparked by the Bernheimer report, it is only through a Europe experienced in exile, experienced in a foreign context, that comparative literature is established in the United States, then what is at stake in the world of our comparative exile is the fragmentary experience that Schiller perceives in nationhood. To speak of the nation in this fragmentary way is to recognize that a nation, in order to be recognized as a nation, is already in a relation of exile to itself. Isn't this why exile, whether internal or external, has had such a long history as a punishment for dissidence? Through the ability to exile, the state acclaims its existence as a state.

8. It is in this sense that Derrida has broached the question of the future of the humanities in his text "The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition" (2001). The

sense of the impossible developed by Derrida in this text is not something calculated to resist the progress of the humanities and thereby define them in terms of what is always possible (an impossibility understood only from the perspective of a “masterable possible” [53]). Rather, Derrida poses the question of what happens, of what future the humanities will face, once the possibility they have pursued loses its condition, becomes impossible. Here the impossible is no longer thought of as a resisting force against which the possibility of a field or discipline within the humanities articulates itself. For Derrida, the impossible marks the limit where what arrives without condition, without calculation, therefore without comparison, can take place with all the singularity of an event. For Derrida, it is at such a point that the humanities and the university that fosters them are “in the world” they are “attempting to think” (55). Since the singularity of this event requires a future that is no longer simply possible or impossible, it opens a project for the humanities in terms of a future that is not just confined to the impossible and is therefore not just enclosed within the humanities and their history. The task of the humanities, then, is to think about the nature as well as the consequences of a limit that not only makes the humanities *possible* but that also opens the humanities to a future no longer subject to what they have been—not to mention the comparative project according to which they have been organized.

9. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to the production of what could exist (*tà dunatà*: possible, potential things [see 1451a36–38]) as the essential role of the poet. On the fundamental importance of a concept of possibility to Aristotle’s founding of our critical history, see David Ferris, “The Possibility of Literary History,” in *Theory and the Evasion of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1–36.

10. That comparison inaugurates the value of literature and art after Plato becomes apparent in Aristotle’s explanation of the causes of mimesis: “The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, this because of that [*hóti hoútos hekeínos*],” *Poetics* 48b17.

WORKS CITED

- Bernheimer, Charles, ed. 1995. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Brooks, Peter. 1995. “Must We Apologize?” In *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer, 86–106. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Damrosch, David. 2003. *What Is World Literature?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2001. “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition.” In *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, ed. Tom Cohen, 24–57. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Greene, Roland. 1995. “The Greene Report, 1975.” In *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer, 28–38. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levin, Harry. 1995. “The Levin Report, 1965.” In *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Meltzl de Lomnitz, Hugo. 1973. “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature.” In *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, 53–62. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2002. *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*. Paris: Galilée.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1995. “‘Literature’ in the Expanded Field.” In *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer, 175–86. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schiller, Friedrich. 1943–2003. *Schillers Werke*. Edited by Julius Petersen and Gerhard Fricke. 42 vols. Weimar: Böhlau.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 2003. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wellek, René. 1963. “The Crisis in Comparative Literature.” In *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols Jr., 282–95. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Welles, Elizabeth B. 2004. “Foreign Language Enrollments in the United States Institutions of Higher Education Fall 2002.” *ADFL Bulletin* 35.2 (Winter 2004): 1–20.