The Geography of Comparative Literature

Rebecca Gould
A debate recently took place on the pages of the journal *History and Theory* concerning the geographical provenance of history as a discipline. The occasion was a forum on *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*, a book by three professors of South Indian history (Rao/Shulman/Subrahmanyan 2001). *Textures of Time* advances the thesis that early modern South Asia possessed indigenous historical traditions, unrecognized in European scholarship. Its premises were challenged by a Sanskritist and two historians, the first focused on the colonial period, the second engaging with the book’s premises from the vantage point of the contemporary postcolonial condition (Pollock 2007; Mantena 2007; Cherkuri 2007). The debate productively expanded the conversation as to the identity of history beyond European geographies. A reader of this forum would have concluded that there was no plausible reason to confine historiographic inquiry to European archives and that Eurocentrism, in this particular discipline at least, was a thing of the past.¹

Could such a conversation have taken place today within the discipline of comparative literature? Institutionally, this would seem an unlikely proposition. Although, epistemically, literature has at least as much geographical and temporal purchase as history in the disciplinary sense, comparative investigations into the meaning and substance of literary knowledge are absent from most major scholarly journals concerned with non-European literary traditions, and are at best weakly represented in the corresponding anthologies.² Even more problematically, such inquiries have almost no hold in contemporary academia. A survey of the parallel institutional networks – journals, anthologies, and academic departments – pertinent to history and other social science disciplines indicates that the latter are able to sustain cross-cultural comparison with a depth that humanities disciplines such as comparative literature can only aspire towards.

Anticipating the same disciplinary antinomy over a decade ago, Franco Moretti opened his influential essay ‘Conjectures on World Literature’ by admitting that

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¹ *History and Theory* has done much to expand intellectual inquiry beyond European boundaries. For a related forum on Eurocentrism in the contemporary humanities see Dietze 2008 and Chakrabarty’s response (2008).

² See Richter 2006 and Rivkin/Ryan 2004 discussed below.
his discipline had not in terms of global representation lived up to its Goethean beginnings. Instead, comparative literature by the end of the twentieth century had become »a much modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and most[ly] revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature)« (Moretti 2000, 54). In this same essay, Moretti explained how his knowledge of non-western literary traditions was gleaned primarily from historians (ibid., 62). Whence these bifurcation between the historical and the literary in the global context? If it is true that modern comparative literary studies perpetuates Eurocentrism more actively than history, how can scholars of comparative literature apply the lessons gleaned from the discipline of history without losing contact with the epistemic specificities of their own fields of inquiry?3

Genre criticism, one of comparative literature’s most significant contributions to humanistic inquiry, is a case in point for European prejudice in the global study of literary knowledge. Alistair Fowler’s classic contribution to genre criticism, *Kinds of Literature* (1982), assumed the irrelevance of genre studies to non-European literature. German counterparts to Fowler’s investigation went some distance beyond Anglophone criticism, but only by a small margin. For example, Rutkowski’s contribution to genre theory included an ›Internationales Literaturverzeichnis zur Allgemeinen Gattungspoetik‹ (1968, 137–149), but the bibliographical references to (secondary sources on) Persian and Sanskrit literatures were not incorporated into a general theory of literary genres.

Partly as a consequence of genre criticism’s temporal trajectory, medieval contributions to genre criticism are omitted in Fowler’s classic survey. Breakthroughs that transformed Arabic, Persian, and other non-European poetic traditions during the period when, according to Fowler’s account, Latinate Europe came to suspect the literary imagination, are also absent. Fowler’s normative trajectory for the framework through which genre studies must pass leads directly from Aristotle to Sir Philip Sidney in the early modern period. This lineage elides all contributions from non-European literary traditions during the intervening millennium. Aristotle’s counter-Platonic defense of literature’s fictional dimension was, according to Fowler, lost for centuries, and only rediscovered by Europeans with the onset of early modernity. »Not until Sidney do we reach a full defense of poesy’s ideal truth«, writes Fowler, »and even then it is couched in enigmas – as that the literary artist ›nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth‹« (Fowler 1982, 6). While Fowler cannot be faulted for simply reporting on developments internal to the English literary tradition, for the comparativist, the implication that the literary imagination vanished from the medieval world at large is fraught with problems.

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3 For Eurocentrism as an epistemic challenge in contexts other than comparative literature, see i.a. Gould 2008 for area studies, Amin 1988 for political science and economy, and Chakrabarty 2000 for history.
Classical Arabo-Persian poetics can here come to the aid of genre criticism, and show what is lost when a local account of the European imagination – albeit one impressively in command of normative argumentation – is mapped onto the world. A case in point is the concept of *takhyīl* (imagination) adumbrated in the works of ʿAbd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078). ʿAbd al-Qahir’s works demonstrate the limitations of the modern genre theory’s omission of medieval precedents (see Van Gelder/Hammond 2008; Gould 2010). Al-Jurjani’s defense of poetic imagery in the Qur’an, and, even more daringly, his proposal that the study of pre-Islamic poetry was a necessary prelude to the proper understanding of the Qur’an, in his second masterpiece, *Inimitability of the Qur’an (Fī ḥaz al-Qur’an)*, interestingly dovetails with Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*, published half a millennium later. Meanwhile, in *Secrets of Eloquence (Asrar al-Balagha)*, al-Jurjani transformed his concept of the imagination (*takhyīl*) to make it refer not only to «a certain type of figurative language» but also to «the logic behind the placement of the image in the text» (Van Gelder/Hammond 2008, 29). Nor was al-Jurjani alone in conjoining the justification of the imagination to the religious quest for truth: many of his predecessors and followers, including Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn-Rushd (Averroes), and al-Qarṭajanni (of Cartagena, Spain) testified to Arabic literary theory’s productive engagements with both the Aristotelian tradition and with Qur’anic hermeneutics (although it is true that these two intellectual movements rarely converged for the critics named here).

The geographic and temporal elisions as exhibited in Fowler’s account of genre – singled out here for its broad theoretical reach and salience – could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. Nor are such blind spots confined to Euro-American literary scholarship. The presumption that literary culture entered a period of decline during the medieval and early modern period is also manifest in the writings of scholars from the Islamicate world.⁴ The regnant narrative that moves seamlessly from Aristotle to Sidney, assuming that nothing of salience was written between these two acmes of European literature, has dramatically shaped the trajectory of Arabic literary history narrated by scholars from the Middle Eastern world. Indeed, the very concept of *nahḍa* (renaissance), that so dominates modern Arabic literary history and which is taken to have begun in the late nineteenth-century with the intellectual turn to Europe, itself conveys the impression, on analogy with the medieval-renaissance sequence transported from European history, that the immediately preceding centuries were periods of darkness. As a result of this narrative’s hegemony, we find the eminent Arab critic and poet Jabrā Ibrāhim Jabrā (d. 1994) say

⁴ Following Hodgson (1974, 56–60), *Islamicate* refers here to Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literary cultures, as well as to other literatures inflected by Islamic traditions and too numerous to list. *Islamicate* is used in preference to *Islamic*, inasmuch as a literary culture is not congruent with religious identity. The term is unsatisfactory inasmuch as it introduces a false dichotomy between religion and culture that does not always illuminate the traditions in question, but it usefully prevents the conflation of all aspects of Islamicate literary culture with Islamic thought.
of modern Arabic literary history that «what is occurring now in the world of Arab-
ic poetry has no equal now in our literary past» and affirming that the only mod-
els and parallels for modern Arabic poetry are to be found «in Western literature
and art, not in Arabic» (cited in DeYoung 1997, 161–162).

Another instance of such internalized colonialism may be found in the efforts of
the dean of twentieth century Arab-Egyptian literature, Taha Hussein (d. 1973),
to identify Egypt exclusively with a European Mediterranean culture and to dis-
associate this region’s intellectual heritage from medieval Islamic civilization. As
Hussein states programmatically in The Future of Culture in Egypt (Mustaqbal
al-Thaqafa fi Misr, 1938): «the Egyptian mind had no serious contact with the
Far Eastern mind; nor did it live harmoniously with the Persian mind. The Egyp-
tian mind has had regular, peaceful, and mutually beneficial relations only with the
Near East and Greece» (Hussein 1975, 4, emphasis added). And again: «The an-
cient Egyptian mind is not an Eastern mind […] It only exerted influence on and
was in turn influenced by the neighboring non-Egyptian peoples, principally the
Greeks» (ibid.). Taha Hussein’s education at the Sorbonne had steeped him in Eu-
ropean literary traditions. His efforts to purge Egypt’s cultural heritage of all non-
European ancestries and to graft onto it a European genealogy is profoundly en-
tangled with the legacies of a colonial hegemony that was ultimately internalized
by the spokespeople of a colonized culture.

Judging by the last several decades of scholarship, history, making the most of
its productive relationship to the archive, has proven more capable than literature
of reversing the Eurocentric trend. If modernity is intrinsically an historical con-
cept – an argument, in other words, about the shape of time – then perhaps one
should only expect to find the entangled modernities of the contemporary world
rendered more globally by history than by literary studies.5 By default, the object
of an historical inquiry lies within the realm of human attainment. Literary-the-
oretical inquires by contrast confront the ineffable, a condition that leads, among
other formulations, to Stanley Corngold’s definition of comparative literature as «a
disciplined mysticism» (Corngold 2005, 143). As a category, the ineffable is no-
toriously resistant to comparison. Although history in the past has often done the
work of history and vice-versa (see for example White 1975), the division of labor
between the fictional and the factual remains largely in academia today, and helps
account for the disciplinary bias this essay seeks to critique.

5 A reviewer’s response to the differential success of history as compared to literary studies in bringing
about its own globalization adduced here is succinct and, as a gauge of the state of literary studies,
troubling enough to merit citation. «Historians will win reputation by doing this kind of historical
research», writes the anonymous reviewer, «while you will lose reputation by being a specialist for
medieval Arabic literature in the field of literary studies» (emphasis added). Acquiring symbolic
capital in literary studies is directly linked to one’s ability to adopt a European idiom.
It is not for nothing that one of the most resilient concepts in recent reflections on the disciplinary identity of comparative literature has been the ‘untranslatable’, a term that as it were circumnavigates comparative literature’s epistemic orientation. From Bhabha (1994, 91) to Spivak (2005) to Apter (2008), the untranslatable has been framed as the object and goal of comparative literary studies. If comparative literary studies must privilege the untranslatable – and here I do not dissent from the authors named, but rather wish to probe the implications of their thesis – then where does that leave the discipline’s imperative to compare, given the difficulty of comparing what cannot be explained even in terms of itself? I propose that, notwithstanding the theoretically attractive proposition that to compare is precisely not to translate, the nature of knowledge is such that even comparativists will inevitably be drawn most to the traditions that navigate what is for them the most familiar terrain. The empirical engagements of comparative literature’s foremost proponents of untranslatability vividly illustrate this tendency.

If the untranslatable is the necessary (or ideal) point of departure for comparative literature, then it follows that the discipline is best off basing itself on what has already been translated. Otherwise, the untranslatable would simply be the conceptual equivalent of nonsense. In the absence of any prior linguistic or contextual knowledge of a given untranslatable how can meaning be deduced? Keeping in mind the untranslatable’s necessary dependence on the already translated, the internal limitations to the discipline flagged by Moretti appear to follow naturally from its epistemic orientation, which is less a condition to be overcome than a limitation to be better cognized.

A precondition for the inward knowledge afforded by literary analysis is mastery of the language in which a text is written. When the point of departure as well as the point of return is oriented to the inquirer, the result is a peculiar reflexivity that may at times resist empirical breadth. A historical inquiry that travels from one world region or one temporality to another can follow an empirical trajectory more seamlessly than can a literary inquiry constrained to a specific textual and linguistic tradition, and which must justify its findings in light of that textual trail. Empirical contributions cannot redeem theoretically flawed work. Likewise, theoretical significance cannot redeem work based on false empirical premises. The divergence between the criteria of validity for the two methods in part explains the greater persistence of Eurocentrism in comparative literature as compared to historical inquiry.

Ironically, then, the literary analyst appears to be more empirically restricted than the historian. For the former, context must be taken for granted so as to later become invisible in the act of critical inquiry. By contrast, the empirical terrain traversed by an historical inquiry can and must be made visible. If history’s job is to make context visible, the job of comparative literature is to reach a point
where context can simply be assumed. This point can be readily reached only when the context is already known. These are some plausible reasons for the contemporary divide in intellectual labor, which may broadly be glossed as follows: »literature for the European / history for the non-European«.

Institutional Eurocentrism

In the average American liberal-arts college, the distribution of intellectual labor runs like this: History, with five faculty teaching American, British, and European history and one teaching Islam, sometimes Asian and Indian history. English, with three faculty teaching American literature, two teaching British literature, and a third teaching postcolonial world literature in English only (Pollock 2010). At more progressive institutions, one might find a department called ›Literature‹ or, alternately, ›Foreign Languages‹, where one would find a few of the neglected literatures taught in a piecemeal manner; perhaps a course in Spanish or French, or, in more exotic scenarios, Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian, depending the available faculty. ›Literature‹ departments represent the exception rather than the rule: where they exist, they usually serve an instrumental, non-literary, function, such as language instruction. In brief, the study of the non-European world in American universities is a domain populated largely by historians and anthropologists, not scholars of comparative literature. Social science addresses itself empirically to the entire world, notwithstanding the significant power imbalances that frame its engagements, whereas comparativists, ironically, restrict themselves to Euro-American contexts, even, when writing from non-European spaces. There would seem to be an unstated presumption that the non-European world does not yield literature that possesses the same depth and complexity as Europe and its New World colonies, while by contrast no one, aside from the most vulgar Hegelians of bygone eras, has ever doubted that the non-European world yields history.

A certain degree of insularity is to be expected, if not necessarily applauded, in the scholarship of any country. What is of interest here is not so much that, due in part to limited resources, non-European languages, cultures, civilizations, and literatures are rarely taught in the United States outside research universities, but rather the departments (and therefore the disciplines) into which these regions tends to be shepherded when scholars decide pay attention to the non-European world. When a university decides to extend its curriculum to encompass the Islamic world, they hire in history, and sometimes religion, but almost never in literature. This explains why few Comparative Literature departments in research universities across the country have full-time faculty in non-European languages. At best, the norm is one or two faculty for a non-European language, who might fight
for the recognition of their field among ten to twenty faculty working in European languages.

This distribution of intellectual labor is by no means a purely American or Anglophone phenomenon, although its inflections vary across the globe. Neither the Peter Szondi-Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft at the Freie Universität Berlin, nor the similarly named institutes at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, nor the Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main have full time faculty in non-European traditions. This restriction holds true even for the center for comparative literary studies in Germany, the Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft (Komparatistik) at Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz. In Germany, as with the rest of Europe and North America, the literary study of the non-European world is reserved for departments of Arabistik, Türkistik, and Iranistik, all of which foreground language, social history and religion, to the detriment of literature. At Middle Eastern universities, such as, notably, the University of Damascus, comparative studies are commonly situated in English language and literature departments. The problematic implications of this overlap that makes technical ability in English tantamount to comparativism and comparativism tantamount to fluency in English has been discussed by Edward Said and others (Said 1993, 305). The malaise attending literary comparativism is thus global, and the time has come for comparative literature to learn from the examples of neighboring disciplines that have more successfully negotiated the Eurocentric condition.

What advice should be given to students who wish to specialize in non-European literatures? Across the world, area studies seems the surest path to deep knowledge of non-European literary cultures. But the push to area studies has also arguably drawn students away from comparative literature. Notwithstanding the defense of area studies by prominent social scientists as »a place from which to rewrite the history of the social sciences, and to examine how their categories are implicated in a certain history of Europe« (Mitchell 2004, 109), what commonly goes by the name of ›area studies‹ in the United States is an aggregate of knowledges that, more often than not, fail to address their own boundaries and limitations. Lacking a method specific to itself, area studies tends by default to construct its inquiries according to historical trajectories.

Area studies models make the literary subservient to non-literary modes of inquiry. Thus it should come as no surprise that, across the globe, practically no room is given to models for studying non-European literature that foreground the autonomy of the literary artifact and that seek to formulate a disciplinary-specific methodology on this basis. If one’s interests are methodological in nature, the implication seems to be, one might as well restrict oneself to the study of texts in English. Judging by the most frequently encountered job advertisements, English departments often explicitly prefer specialist applicants with expertise in Anglophone postcolonial literature, rather than in non-English vernaculars. English
studies do nonetheless have a major advantage over history from the literary point of view: literature’s discursive autonomy stands a greater chance of being valued within the framework of this discipline. If one is hard-pressed to find high discursive valuations for literary studies even in scholarship on European traditions, it should not be surprising that literary valuations are even harder to come by in the institutional study of non-European traditions. What prevents comparative literature from engaging in comparison?

Canonical Eurocentrism

This divergence between the epistemological premises informing literature and history helps to explain the geographic distribution of the most recent edition of *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Leitch et al. 2001 and 2010, henceforth *NATC*). Out of over three thousand pages of text, less than one hundred are devoted to non-European literary-theoretical traditions. From the one hundred and forty-eight authors whose works are excerpted in the 2010 edition of the *NATC*, only one contribution is taken from the dense and voluminous archive of Arabo-Persian literary theory: Adunis’s *Introduction to Arabic Poetry* (*Muqaddimah li-al-shi’r al-‘Arabi*, 1971, mistranslated here as *Introduction to Arab Poetics*), while four in all are taken from literary-critical traditions outside the Euro-American context.

Even this small proportion of contributions from non-European literary traditions represents a watershed of sorts. Adunis takes his place alongside three other seminal non-European literary theorists: Karatani Kōjin of Japan, Zehou Li of China, and C.D. Narasimhaiah of India. Each of these inclusions represents an improvement over the first edition of this anthology, published in 2001. The general editor for both editions, Vincent B. Leitch, stated in a pre-publication interview that the additions were made after specialists in Arabic, Chinese, Indic, and Japanese traditions were found to present the editorial board with a range of selections from which they could choose in their respective traditions (Leitch/Morris 2009, 299). Curiously, although Leitch indicates that the consulting editors »draft[ed] the headnotes, bibliographies, and annotations that accompany the final selections« (ibid.), the names of these specialists are not mentioned in *NATC*.

Minimal in themselves, the additions of Adunis, Kōjin, Zehou Li, and Narasimhaiah contribute to the current canon of literary-theoretical texts. All other anthologies of literary theory and criticism, such as Richter’s *The Critical Tradition*, which has undergone three editions (1989, 1998, and 2006), and Rivkin/Ryan’s, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, which has undergone two editions (1998 and 2004), fail to offer a global representation even more dramatically than *NATC*. But why confine an anthology of theory and criticism to primarily European traditions? Why assume that the most important audience for a text such as *NATC* is
most deeply interested in Anglo-European contributions? In part, one might answer, because orders by American students are likely to yield the greatest revenues for this text, regardless of who is reading it or who stands to benefit most. The disjuncture of such imbalances is clarified when one considers that the most widely available version of the first edition of *NATC*, in electronic format, bears on its title page a telling stamp in Persian, marking it as the property of the ›Department of Farsi and Foreign Languages‹ in an Iranian university.6 This stamp demonstrates how such an anthology has impacted borders far outside the American continent:

![The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism](image)

Fig. 1: Persian-language bookplate for the first edition of *NATC*.

*NATC*’s second evident bias is the temporal distribution of its selections. Apparently, the editorial board did not heed the critique of Marshall Brown, who noted when reviewing the first edition that the high degree of »condescension toward the past« undercuts the good work on evidence elsewhere in the text’s assembly (Brown 2003, 455). Not only are the disproportions noted by another critic, Donald Marshall (2003, 465), even more extreme in this second edition; numerous contemporary authors have been added, including Henry Louis Gates, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Franco Moretti, Dick Hebdige, bell hooks, Lisa Lowe, Judith Butler, Paul Gilroy, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As for the ancient and me-

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dieval theorists, Quintilian, Plotinus, Macrobius, Hugh of St. Victor, Geoffrey of Visnauf, Giambattista Giraldi, and Pierre de Ronsard, have all been removed, and no theorist from any premodern period has been added. The editorial policy of privileging the contemporary at the expense of the past perhaps stemmed from a reasonable desire to make the inclusion of still-living theorists an anthological priority. Yet NATC’s title misleadingly suggests that the anthology surveys the entire field of literary theory. In a restricted sense, this temporal distribution simply reflects the presentism of modern theory in general and is unsurprising coming from an editorial board that consists of six modern literature specialists and one medievalist.7 Examined more deeply, the temporal bias has profound ramifications from the point of view of geographic representation, which is of greatest interest to us here.

NATC’s temporal bias is reflected most damagingly in the four selections from non-European traditions. The editorial endorsements that preface each of the non-European texts suggest that the primary measurement of the value of each selection was their ability to illuminate Western perspectives and traditions. Thus, the Adunis selection is from the section of An Introduction to Arabic Poetry that deals with »poetry and modernity«; Zehou Li’s Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View »weaves a hybrid aesthetic theory out of stands from Kant and Marx as well as Chinese traditions«; C. D. Narasimhaiah’s essay »Towards the Formulation of a Common Poetic for Indian Literatures Today« »integrates […] T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and other Westerners with an array of Sanskrit concepts from Medieval times«; and Karatani Kōjin’s Origins of Modern Japanese Literature »shows how the alien modern Western concept of ›literature‹ traumatically entered the Japanese world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries« (Leitch/Morris 2009, 299). For each of these inclusions, the merit of the text is gauged by the extent of its interaction with Kant, Marx, Eliot, Leavis, or with foundational issues in the Continental and Anglophone literary-critical traditions.

It is less the geographic biases themselves that are problematic here as their unreflective applications. The editors casually state in the first edition that »Theory remains resolutely Eurocentric, but we look forward to a time when it will go global« (NATC 2001, xxxvi), while apparently forgetting that it is only European modernity that has managed to obscure the intrinsically globally scope of theory. This statement shifts the burden of provincializing Europe away from NATC’s editors and others who participate in the process of canonizing theory onto an impersonal abstraction devoid of agency. It is theory that must »go global«, the editors imply, rather than those who guide its canonization. This remark prompted yet another critic of the first edition of NATC, Beth Kowaleski Wallace, to make a perspica-

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7 The medievalist is Laurie A. Finke. The only difference between the editors for the first and second edition is the addition of T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, a specialist in modern African-American literature, for the 2010 edition.
cious correction. »It is not theory«, Wallace writes, »that is ›Eurocentric‹, but a particular understanding of theory« (Wallace 2003, 462). Indeed, Eurocentrism appears to be less a condition of history, modern or otherwise, than a product of the human imagination.

To use the Eurocentrism of contemporary theory as an excuse for not venturing beyond modern borders is to reify – and precisely not to revise – hegemonic notions of cultural difference, and thereby to undermine the achievements of NATC’s best theorists. Above all, it means ignoring the achievements of postcolonial theory, in particular subaltern studies (which is only represented here by texts by Spivak and Bhabha that have at best marginal bearing on questions central to postcoloniality). Although the Chakrabartian project of provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) has come under criticism for its ultimate capitulation to Eurocentrism, this now classic text remains a useful prolegomenon to an alternative account of the hegemony of European norms in the narration of literary history. Chakrabarty’s book, which like Spivak, Bhabha, and Apter, advises »the incorporation of that which remains untranslatable« (ibid., 83) further substantiates the argument adduced above that the most searing critiques of Eurocentrism have been issued from history rather than from literary studies.

Even historians, such as Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha, who question the norms of modern European historiography through critical accounts of »history at the limit of world-history« (Guha 2002), nonetheless identify as historians rather than as literary scholars. Guha, to reference only the most eminent historian in subaltern studies, has given us local histories of peasant resistance in colonial Bengal and of the internal experience of the »domination without hegemony« that, on Guha’s reading, characterized Indian society under colonial rule (Guha 1983; 1998). While the particulars of his account of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance still await detailed substantiation, no one would deny that Guha has substantially extended the archive. The historian has here contributed material that no one thought fit to access before him. An achievement on the order of Guha’s has yet to emerge from comparative literature, due to the discipline’s specific commitment – sometimes crippling, at other times revelatory – to the untranslatable.

While historians have been preoccupied with extending the archive, comparative literary theorist from Spivak to Bhabha to Said are almost without exception exclusively concerned with European archives. From among this triumvirate, only Spivak has substantially extended the archive of South Asian literatures through her translations of Mahaswata Devi (Spivak 1988; 1994; 2003). Even in this noteworthy instance, Spivak’s translational interventions have arguably not deepened or otherwise inflected her most influential theoretical contributions. No premodern Indian author or literary tradition enters substantively into Spivak’s articulated vision for comparative literature’s afterlife (Spivak 2003).

Does the absence of textual representation for premodern non-Western traditions in NATC and the critical tradition it proposes to represent mean that non-
European literary-critical traditions fall short of their modern Euro-American counterparts? That such an assumption has gained widespread credence is suggested by a comment that recently appeared on the pages of *New Literary History*. In a special issue devoted to the question of comparison in literary contexts, the comparativist Mary Layoun asserts the intrinsic modernity of comparison as such: «in the broadest sense, comparison is resolutely situated on the ground (political, historical, social) of modernity, occasioned by the very component aspects of that modernity» (Layoun 2009, 585). Layoun relates the comparative impulse to modern sociological transformations, including the dislocations of peoples, forced diasporas, migrations, the emergence of the metropolis and its implicit destruction of social hierarchies. Although this catalog is familiar and even persuasive in certain respects, it is beset with problems. If modernity is a condition of possibility for comparison, or if it is perceived as being so, this would go some distance towards explaining the temporal bias that sustains much contemporary inquiry in comparative literature, including, perhaps especially, postcolonial inquiries that explicitly resist and contest Eurocentric assumptions. There may in fact be a circular logic operative here, whereby the shapers of opinion in comparative literature decide that comparison is always only modern and thereby reify the concept of comparison to bring it into accordance with modernity, rather than striving to keep comparison open to premodern conceptualizations of space and time.

Or does the temporal distribution in the *Norton Anthology* confirm ‘Abdelfattah Kilito’s suggestion (2002) that modern archives are more inflected by the horizon of world literature than were texts in the medieval period and in antiquity? How else do we account for the fact that whenever multiculturalism and plurality are invoked by *NATC* as well as by most normative texts in the anthological genre, they veer in the direction of modernity? The past, by contrast, is static from the perspective of canon-formation: Western if not European, saturated with great names, and tending towards the regulated, the reversed, and already-normalized. When risks are taken in *NATC*, they invariably transpire in the modern sections.

From New Criticism to New Historicism to Post-structuralism to Reader Response theory, every major intellectual trend that has shaped the discipline of English literature and the better-represented European literatures such as French and German has been interested in the autonomy of the literary artifact and in the specificity of literary knowledge. Inasmuch as non-European literatures are institutionally subordinated to history for research purposes and teaching in these languages is relegated to area studies departments, such autonomy is far from being realized in non-European literary fields. The implications are obvious: literary studies of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu are institutionally prevented from nourishing intellectual ambitions comparable to the ambitions implicit in literary engagements with English, French, and German archives.
Comparison Beyond Europe

The geographical imbalance described above contains one great irony. Comparative literature possesses tremendous cache in the Arab World, at the very moment when, in the words of Ferial Ghazoul, »it seems to be going through yet another crisis […] in the metropolitan centres of the West« (2006, 119). Comparative literature’s contemporary ascent in the Arab and Persian world follows a trajectory precisely the inverse of its North American and European descent. This may be because, in the Islamicate world, the discipline stands at the forefront of debates in postcolonial and gender studies in a way it has aspired to do, but often has not been able to achieve, in North American contexts. Comparative literature possesses a political salience in the Middle East that it lacks in contemporary America and Europe. Ghazoul’s account of comparative literature in the Arabic world is as profound as it is accurate: »The old-fashioned insistence on investigating influence and tracing sources is no longer what comparatists look for; today’s comparatists are more concerned with making sense of differences, of being able to juxtapose two or more contrasting modes without opting for one or the other.« (ibid., 120)

The most outstanding figure in the history of comparative literature in the Arab world is undoubtedly Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal (1916–1968). Hilal received a doctorate from the Sorbonne for his dissertation on *L’influence de la prose Arabe sur la prose Persane aux V* et *V*é *siècles de l’Hégire* in 1952, and continued over the course of his brief life to publish widely in the fields of French, Arabic, and Persian literature. For many decades he directed the department of Comparative Literature at the University of Cairo, the center of comparative literature in the Arab world. Arab-Persian literary relations were a particular strength of comparative literature in Cairo, as evinced by the Arabic translation of Raduyani’s Persian classic, *Translator of Rhetoric* (Raduyani 1983) and by Ramlah Mahmud Ghanim’s monograph on the dissemination of the *muzdawáj* (vernacular strophic poetry) across Arabic and Persian literatures (Ghanim 1991) and by the same author’s comparative study of the Arabic poetry of Abu Firas and the Persian poetry of Khaqani of Shirwan, both of whom wrote extensively on incarceration and captivity (Ghanim 1991b).

Hilal also translated extensively from French – Maeterlinck, Moliere, Voltaire, and, most importantly Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), as well as from Persian. In addition to his engagements with the concept of comparative literature that were directed primarily to France, Hilal studied in detail the mutual relations of Persian and Arabic literary culture, particularly with respect to the dissemination of the Lalya Majnun story (Hilal 1962). In looking eastwards for the sources of comparative literature, Hilal radically broke with Taha Hussein’s internalized Orientalism. Hilal’s doctorate was in comparative literature (Hilal 1996, 15), and yet he substantially contributed to Oriental philology, translating into Arabic, among other classical Persian texts, Jami’s *Layli and Majnun*. The Cairene legacy of
comparative literature in the modern era thus ultimately contests the disciplinary
dichotomies of modern scholarship that ascribe literature to Europe and history to
the non-European world.

The renewed interest in the legacies of Hilal and the origins of comparative
literature in the contemporary Arab world is matched by David Damrosch’s invo-
cation of Hugo Meltzl, the Hungarian founder of the weekly publication *Acta
Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877–1888). Distinguished by its trans-
regional ambitions and comparative scope, *ACLU* was the first transnational pe-
riodical explicitly devoted to comparative literature (Tóth-Nagy 2005, 56). In
Damrosch’s words, Meltzl sought to »rescue Goethe’s conception of world litera-
ture from an emphasis on a national literature’s absorption of foreign influences
and its own impact abroad« (Damrosch 2006, 102). In the words of Horst Fassel,
Meltzl’s concept of literature at once encompassed national categories even as it
transcended them. »Literatur manifestiert sich regional als Nationalliteratur«,
writes Fassel, summarizing Meltzl’s views, »international hypothetisch als Weltli-
teratur« (Fassel 2005, 28).

As of this writing, entire literary traditions still remain untouched by the dis-
cipline of comparative literature. A particularly fertile field for future inquiry is the
discipline of rhetoric, or as it is known to the Arabo-Persian world, ‘*ilm al-balāgha*. The
influential Egyptian periodical *Fusul* has in a special issue proposed a merger
between classical Arabic literary theory and modern comparative literary studies
account of genre in the Persian tradition, but such work represents only the begin-
nning. Genre theory remains a desideratum for contemporary scholarship on
Arabo-Persian literary traditions. Correspondences between twentieth-century
structuralism and the theory of *nazm* (structure) in classical Arabo-Persian rhetoric
await substantiation and contestation. Relations between poetry, history, and other
disciplinary discourses have not yet been probed for these traditions. When con-
ducted from a comparative angle of inquiry, such work, though necessarily specialist in nature, will undoubtedly enrich literary theory at the global level.

One great virtue of comparative literary studies in the Arab and Persian worlds
is its comparative newness. One consequence of this newness is the discipline’s
(largely untapped) capacity to provoke new ways of reading. Even as Spivak pre-
sides over the »death of a discipline« (Spivak 2003) in the Euro-American context,
scholars from the Arab and Persian world are learning to approach their literary
pasts in ways informed by European methodologies but not subordinate to
them (Islami Nudushan 1980; Khezri 2011). Khezri in particular has shown
how Arab scholars of comparative literature such as Taha Nida borrowed method-
ologies and concepts from European intellectual history while at the same time
revising this foreign inheritance to suit the exigencies of Islamicate modernity
(Nida 1991; Khezri 2011).
These points bring us to the argument that many theorists of postcoloniality have made for the privilege afforded by the subaltern perspective, for what Sudipta Kaviraj, in a probing essay calls »The Advantages of Being a Barbarian« (Kaviraj 2003). In the colonized and postcolonized world, so the argument runs, »peoples of the world outside of Euro-America have been forced to live lives comparatively by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization or subjection enforced by the specter of imperialism« (Harootunian 2005, 26). While there may be limitations to this line of argumentation, including the possible uncritical validation of circumstances arising from contingency rather than deliberation, it does usefully speak to a broader theory of the exilic imagination condensed by Adorno into the dictum that »it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home« (Adorno 2005, 39). Inasmuch as »access to two cultures is, in some ways, better than [access to] one« (Kaviraj 2003, 149), Islamicate literary cultures stand to play a large part in mediating this form of knowledge through the perspectival advantage afforded to the ›barbarian‹. My only point of dissent with respect to the privileging of the exilic imagination is the prevalent tendency, perpetuated by Adorno, of associating this knowledge form exclusively with modernity.

An unprejudiced review of the work that has already been done in Arabic and Persian, among many other non-Western literatures to advance the concept of comparison makes Lubrich’s program for a Eurocentric future for literary comparison appear unnecessarily restrictive. »German comparatists«, writes the professor of Comparative Literature at the Peter Szondi-Institut für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft, Berlin, »may with good conscience focus on […] readings of British, French, Italian, Spanish or Russian or Greek and Latin authors (and, for that matter, give less priority to others).« (Lubrich 2006, 63) Pace Lubrich, the imperative to compare is located deeply in the human episteme and cannot be confined to any specific geography. However, it is not primarily Lubrich’s geographic focus that is at fault in this prognosis. More damaging – and here the critique is intended to apply broadly to comparative literary manifestos of all shapes and sizes, from anthologies to journal issues, to single-authored polemics – is the concept of literature that drives the agenda of literacy comparativists today. Corngold, whose discussion of the untranslatable framed this essay’s earlier con-

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8 In this essay, Kaviraj importantly registers his distance from postcolonial theory on the grounds that he is suspicious of »its claim to being a theory at all« (2003, 161). Kaviraj’s objection to the configuration of postcolonial theory as »theory« answers my objection to the dangers of validating contingent circumstances, but his point has not been taken on board by other theorists.

9 It should be noted that the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, to which the Peter Szondi-Institut belongs, is also home to a new project called ›Zukunftslphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship‹, which has as its explicate aim the comparison of Greek, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Chinese textual traditions. During 2010–2011, I was one of Zukunftslphilologie’s two inaugural fellows, and am grateful for the support this program afforded me.
trast between comparative literature and related disciplines, concludes his program for his discipline’s future with the unpromising proposal that comparative literature become a means of knowing subaltern others by fostering familiarity with »our own dislocation, outside language, outside competence« (Corngold 2005, 144). Strikingly absent from Corngold’s account is any concrete program for decolonizing his field. The unstated assumption seems to be that comparativist readings of Flaubert and Hölderlin will, through some vatic pronouncement, magically assist in postcolonial liberation. Pace Corngold, there is no intrinsic link between comparativist readings of European texts and the encounter with subaltern knowledge. Such uncertain chains of reasoning, which continue to constitute the common sense of the discipline, should be replaced with a robust agenda for decolonizing literary comparativism through non-European archives.

Corngold has accurately noted that comparative literature does not in fact strive for commensurability between its objects of comparison. The perfect analogy is therefore not one of translation, but rather of translation’s impossibility, or even undesirability, inasmuch as »configurations in different languages are never analogous« (ibid., 141). Although the configurations that comprise the substance of comparative literature are never analogous, they are most definitely related. The terms of these relations, this essay argued, has been drastically misconstrued by the discipline at large. But even if scholars were to limit their comparisons to traditions such as German, French, and English, that stood greater promise of mutual commensurability with each other than, say, Arabic, Tamil, and Chinese, such commensurability would surely be illusory. Nor can comparison in modernity – or in any other temporality – be contained within a colonial framework, whereby India becomes »relevant« to Great Britain because it was once colonized by that empire. As is well known, ancient Greece pertains as profoundly to the medieval Islamic world as to Renaissance Europe. Just as temporal prejudice generates and enables geographic tunnel vision, so will the replacement of temporal prejudice by a reflexive global modernity enable new geographic horizons for comparison past and present.

The coercion imposed by modernization has not cancelled out the freedom enabled by literature. A new generation of postcolonial subjects joins the discipline of comparative literature from non-European metropolises and their peripheries, and strives to articulate the meaning of comparison in terms of their own traditions and Lebenswelten. In transforming the substance of comparison, they will alter the norms through which their discipline – our discipline – is constituted. These students inherit European and American traditions in genres and contexts that frequently render them unrecognizable from the vantage point of their origins. A case in point is the very term »comparative literature«, which in Arabic has become al-adab muqarana, and in Persian has become adabiyat tašbiqi, neither of which fully corresponds to its English counterpart (Zarrinkub 1959). These
partial and at times felicitous failures in translation can yield insights otherwise
cognitively unavailable to the discipline.

Already in 1836, Auguste L. G. Gobert-Alvin sought in his lecture course, *Études de littérature compare*, to vindicate the principle of comparision. »C’est un principe universellement«, wrote Gobert-Alvin, »reconnu que dans toute étude rien n’est plus utile que la méthode de la comparaison.« »C’est par elle«, Gobert-Alvin continues, »que la esprit acquiert les idées plus nettes et plus justes et des conaissances plus durables« (1836, ii). In later decades, Meltzl carried the discipline of comparative literature considerably beyond Gobert-Alvin’s geography when he incorporated the literatures of China and India into his conceptions of world literature (Damrosch 2006). Gobert-Alvin’s methodological defense of comparison nonetheless indicates that, notwithstanding failures in application, the epistemic usefulness of the comparative method was recognized even at this early stage in the history of this modern discipline. Comparison was not merely an effect of Indo-European linguistics as students and especially critics of Leibniz, Humboldt, Bopp, and Jones have assumed (Mauro/Formigari 1990).

Notwithstanding the challenges the multiplicity of literary cultures poses to the coherence of a discipline, geographic comprehensiveness falls entirely within comparative literature’s mandate. If comparative literature is not sufficiently comparative, it cannot claim to be a discipline. Meltzl voiced a strong critique of the nation-based provincialisms that attended the comparative literary studies of his day in the inaugural issue of *Acta Comparationis*. In a stunningly prescient critique of the nation-state, and of the implications of this political form for the future of his discipline, Meltzl argued that

> Every nation demands its own ›world literature‹ without quite knowing what is meant by it. By now, every nation considers itself, for one good reason or another, superior to all other nations […] This unhealthy ›national principle‹ therefore constitutes the fundamental premise of the entire spiritual life of modern Europe […] Instead of giving free reign to polyglottism and reaping the fruits in the future […] every nation today insists on the strictest monoglottism, by considering its own language superior or even destined to rule supreme. *This is a childish competition whose result will finally be that all of them remain – inferior.*
(Meltzl 1877, 60; emphasis added)

More than any other discipline, comparative literature is called on to assume a medial position between national literatures – which in the non-western context are taxonomied in terms of area studies – and conceptual history. From the latter, it can learn how to approach the archive and how to expand its empirical horizons. From the former, comparative literature can learn the linguistic skills that are a necessary prerequisite to serious engagements with textual traditions. By combining area studies with history while remaining faithful to the discursive autonomy of the literary artifact, comparative literature can induce conceptual and empirical change. Perhaps, having located a hitherto unperceived point of contact between Islamicate and Euro-American literary traditions, or, even more likely, having lo-
cated a salient disjuncture, one of these students will be moved to write a book, in a language other than English, that will counter the widely-held »death« of comparative literature (Spivak 2003) with an account of its rebirth.

Rebecca Gould
Department of Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Iowa

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