

# Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age

By David Damrosch

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It is fitting that Comparative Literature, a discipline that thrives on reinterpreting narratives and finding new connections, should have no definitive account of its history. Both Comparative Literature's origins and purposes are subject to continual debates and revisions: Susan Bassnett and Gayatri Spivak pronounced it dead or at least dying, with the former advocating for its absorption into Translation Studies, and the latter seeing its outdated methods as obstructing a truly planetary criticism.<sup>1</sup> David Damrosch is no harbinger of doom; he neither tolls the death knell for the discipline nor calls for a complete overhaul. This latest contribution to the debate is simultaneously a robust defence of Comparative Literature's place in the

scholarly landscape, and a timely criticism of its shortcomings and entrenched habits. The question often posed to Comparative Literature is one of survival: how to ensure the continuing relevance of comparative criticism when the object of study – world literature – is so vast and increasingly difficult to define? This book attempts to pin down the essence of the comparative approach while offering a few signposts toward its future.

Somewhat refreshingly, Damrosch avoids starting his tour of the discipline with its foundation within universities. Instead, the first stop takes in the personal libraries of Gottfried Herder and Germaine de Staël, two eighteenth-century writers who sparked wider discussion of literature across boundaries of class, nation,

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

and gender. Herder's collection of folk poems gathered from several countries, *Völklied*, and de Staël's politically charged literary salons, represented great advances in the popularisation of literature, but also inaugurated a mode of reading that encompassed multiple languages and literatures. Emphasising Herder and de Staël's cosmopolitanism, Damrosch claims an implicit politics of anti-despotism for the discipline, but the risk of excessive idealism is counterbalanced by his attention to national contexts, noting that Herder's project was one of nation-building as well as transnational connections. It is for this reason that 'a dismissively antinationalist stance can't do justice to the internationalism of many national literatures' (208). This exacting and historicising approach to interactions within and between national literatures, coupled with an unwillingness to simply prescribe comparatism as a panacea for nationalist inwardness, makes *Comparing the Literatures* a sprawling and compelling human story.

Commencing with these two figures, Damrosch stakes the political ground for the discipline. Yet he also draws attention to their peripherality in relation to centres of power and cultural influence, thereby establishing a common thread woven throughout the book: the theme of the outsider. For de Staël, literary criticism and political discussion were ways of asserting herself as a woman in the predominantly male public sphere, as well as means of coping with her social ostracisation from Paris during the reign of Napoleon. Exile becomes a refrain throughout the history of comparative scholarship, none more so than for Erich Auerbach, whose *Mimesis* (1946) still

stands as a seminal comparative work. The tale of this German-Jewish academic who sought refuge from the Nazi regime in Istanbul is well-known in the field, and his time there is memorably illuminated elsewhere by Emily Apter as an emblematic instance of scholarly interdisciplinarity and 'global *translatio*' (Apter 2011: 41). Yet Damrosch reminds us that although discussion of Auerbach often centres around this period, we may forget that his exile did not end there, and that his eventual resettlement in the U.S. was certainly not a homecoming. The discipline has been shaped considerably by many European scholars who moved to the U.S., not least among them Paul de Man, whose case Damrosch uses to amplify the internal contradictions of literary theory in practice. Respected in his time as a practitioner of deconstructive analysis, the posthumous discovery of a cache of letters revealing his contributions to anti-Semitic publications during the war sent a shockwave reverberating throughout the academic world. The last word is given to a former student of de Man's, Barbara Johnson, who writes that although his materialist conception of language remains valuable, 'he did nothing to unseat the traditional white male author from his hiding place behind the impersonality of the universal subject, the subject supposed to be without gender, race, or history' (as cited in Damrosch: 142). It is a reminder that the comparative critic's posture of self-effacement and non-belonging does not always align with the discipline's egalitarian and cosmopolitan ideals.

The prominence of continental philosophy has led to a persistently Eurocentric

and strangely ‘Amerifugal’ focus in the field. U.S. Comparative Literature departments still primarily favour European literatures, languages, and theories, while neglecting homegrown authors and indigenous literary cultures of the Americas. This can partly be explained by departmental rigidity, so for Damrosch ‘the time has come to abandon this all too neat division of territory’ (175), urging greater interdisciplinarity and a wider scope of available theory. While many texts from long-neglected traditions around the world are slowly coming into critical view, the same cannot be said for scholarship and poetics from those traditions, resulting in a situation described by Revathi Krishnaswamy as ‘world lit without world lit crit’ (as cited in Damrosch: 145). Pushing back against the narrow conceptions of theory in the Euro-American academic sphere, Damrosch puts forward Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyana*, an epic Sanskrit poem, as a ripe candidate for wider theoretical application, as it enshrines poetry as an immediate ethical response to suffering in nature: ‘in the Sanskrit tradition, poetry is not an artifact but an activity’ (154). For Damrosch, the application of theory should cut both ways; the theory itself is modified through interaction with the text. Attempting to fix theory as immutable will ‘distort as much as it reveals’ (126). These unpredictable dynamics call for a judicious and contextually anchored use of theory, a sentiment that actually echoes some of the figures most associated with the rise of postcolonial thought and deconstruction; Edward Said was concerned that theory had exhausted itself, and Spivak observed that excessive deconstruction can stifle its original

disruptive potential. This is not to say that the available tools are redundant; Damrosch’s reading of Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta* (‘The Cloud Messenger’) combines both Anandavardhana’s social poetics of Sanskrit, and Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance*, seeing the hero’s message to his far-away beloved as illustrative of ‘deconstructive themes of the deferral and self-cancellation of meaning’ (160). Critical theory and traditional scholarship can co-exist and work to mutual benefit.

Generally speaking, Damrosch heeds his own advice, citing literary theorists to both clarify arguments and provoke new conversations. The only area of theory that is somewhat neglected, despite being one of growing interest and urgency, is eco-criticism. It therefore seems like a missed opportunity to have not teased out the ecological resonances from the *Rāmāyana* and the *Meghadūta*. Yet as Damrosch argues, rather than impose the framework first, it is incumbent on today’s comparatists to attend to the texts on their own terms rather than forcibly fit them into current frames of interpretation. Thus, a critical sensitivity to the most important contextual determinant – language itself – becomes even more pressing. Time was when Comparative Literature was the exclusive domain of a certain kind of polyglot; mastering at least three languages was a requirement, and the old linguistic snobbery is neatly demonstrated here by one of Damrosch’s former classmates, who after a de Man seminar in the 1970s, remarked of the professor’s Belgian accent that ‘his French really isn’t that good’ (174). The era of Comparative Literature’s haughtiness towards monoglots,

bilinguists, and speakers of non-metropolitan dialects, is thankfully over, but Damrosch makes a welcome case for possessing intermediate knowledge of a language, and for continuing to study languages at postgraduate level and beyond, rather than expecting fluency from the get-go. The use of translations is also now widely accepted; Lawrence Venuti's arguments against instrumentalism and Bassnett's identification of the cultural turn in Translation Studies are rightly recognised as underscoring the value of translation and translators to literature. More intriguing still is the translingual writing exemplified by the work of Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada, for whom 'a reflective semifluency may have advantages over naïve native fluency' (184). Comparative Literature is well-suited to exploring the questions raised by texts that inhabit this zone between cultures.

Throughout the book, Damrosch navigates a dazzling array of media with ease, from a comparison of J. R. R. Tolkien's high fantasy and Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism, to the restaging of Ovid using the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Halo* videogames. The proliferation of these immersive fictional universes makes the range of material facing new comparatists quite daunting. But he reiterates that the best comparative work stems from the curiosity to venture outside of one's prior expertise, the sagacity to respect and reinvent traditions, and the desire to expand the conversation. He singles out Frances W. Pritchett's work on Igbo literature as exemplary of this spirit, driven by dilettantism in the most positive sense of the original Italian: *diletto* or 'delight'. This is something we scholars of world literatures, or

indeed academics from any discipline who are curious about what comparison can do, would do well to remember.

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## Bibliography

–Apter, Emily. 2011. *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).