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Comparative Literature

Two Aspects of Language, Two Types of Comparison: Towards a rhetoric of comparative and world literature --Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	<p>This article revisits the emergence of 'comparative' and 'world' literature within the early nineteenth century, arguing that we can only understand the full normative force of the two terms if we read them rhetorically. In order to do this, the article draws on Roman Jakobson's classic essay 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances' (1956). Jakobson makes a number of claims in this essay, the most celebrated of which is his distinction between the two poles of 'metaphoric' and 'metonymic' language. The motor of metaphor, Jakobson reminds us, is similarity (one thing is like another); the motor of metonymy, on the other hand, is contiguity (one thing is part of another). Jakobson's distinction, the article suggests, maps instructively onto the mechanisms of comparative and world literature: where the former compares one text to another, the latter situates one text within the global field of others. For comparison to be possible, initially, the things being compared must stand apart; to claim the status of world literature for a given work, conversely, is to make it part of a broader whole. Comparative and world literature may thus be said to function as a mobile army of metaphors and metonymies.</p>

Two Aspects of Language, Two Types of Comparison: Towards a rhetoric of comparative and world literature

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the period before, during, and after 1800, comparison emerged as the defining methodology of the human sciences. Writing a century ago in the founding editorial of the *Revue de littérature comparée* in 1921, Fernand Baldensperger identified a handful of precursors in the eighteenth century before noting the rapid rise, with the beginning of the nineteenth century, of forms of comparative methodology: “la Mythologie comparée avec l'histoire” (mythology compared with history) in 1802, “l'Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie” (comparative history of systems of philosophy) in 1804, even “Erotique comparée” (comparative erotics) in 1806 (Baldensperger 8). Driven by the emergence of philology in British East India and French North Africa (Turner 125-46), the term *comparative* was first formally used in conjunction with literature in 1816, when two of Napoleon's Egyptologists, François-Joseph-Michel Noël and François de La Place, began publishing their *Cours de littérature comparée* in Paris. The era of comparative literature – which would culminate, according to Baldensperger, in the great Sainte-Beuve's use of the term in 1868 – had begun.

What had also begun, however, was the era of world literature. While comparative literature emerged as a discipline in modern European discourse of the early nineteenth century, world literature – or *Weltliteratur*, in its canonical Germanic formulation – emerged as a discursive term only shortly afterwards, in Goethe's epoch-making formulation of 1827. What, then, was the relationship between the two, and why did they develop where and when they did?

In what follows, I propose to sketch out a way of answering this question by considering the two terms not, as is usually the case, as socio-political categories driven

by market forces of circulation and translation, but rather as *rhetorical* categories determined by their own internal logic. Adopting the approach pioneered by Quentin Skinner and the so-called “Cambridge School” of intellectual historians,¹ I will situate the emergence of comparative and world literature within their respective settings, arguing that we can only understand the full force of these quotation marks by reading the two terms as texts within very specific contexts. What, I want to ask, is their normative power as *terms*? To what extent does their rhetorical structure predetermine their parameters? How can we avoid what Marc Fumaroli calls “le paradoxe d’une histoire littéraire qui historicise tout, sauf le concept d’où elle tire son nom et sa légitimité” (17; the paradox of a literary history that historicizes everything except the concept from which it derives its name and legitimacy)?

By posing such questions, I do not mean to add to the already voluminous quantity of *post hoc* theorization about the discipline in the twenty-first century.² Comparative literature is littered with the corpses of dead and decaying theories; world literature, in particular, is often more theorized than practiced, having become for the millennial generation of literary critics what poststructuralist theory was for the previous generation – a prism through which to see all human production. What I wish to identify, rather, is the way in which the *contemporary* context of the terms laid the tracks for their subsequent emergence as disciplinary fields. Comparison may be odious, but it is also ‘odorous’, to cite Dogberry’s malapropism in *Much Ado about Nothing* (3: v), by which I mean that its mechanisms – its pre-suppositions and prejudices – have a specific smell tied to a specific time and place. It is only by resituating its rhetoric within these historical preconditions, I want to suggest, that we can appreciate the extent to which the twenty-first-century discipline of comparative literature, for all its claims to a post-colonial, post-capitalist perspective, is still driven

by the legacy of nineteenth-century aesthetics. Whether we like it or not, contemporary comparatists are all children – or perhaps now, orphans – of the Imperial era.

To justify such a claim, and to help prize open the epistemological pincers of the discipline as it emerged out of the sea of nineteenth-century scholarship, I turn to Roman Jakobson's classic essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956). Jakobson makes a number of rhetorical moves in this essay, but no doubt the most celebrated is his distinction between the two poles of "metaphoric" and "metonymic" language. The motor of metaphor, Jakobson reminds us, is similarity (one thing is *like* another); the motor of metonymy, on the other hand, is contiguity (one thing is *next to*, or *part of*, another). Echoing Baldensperger's technique, in his first editorial of the *Revue de littérature comparée*, of identifying two principal kinds of comparative methodology – "Deux directions maîtresses sollicitaient dès lors la littérature comparée" (19; Two master movements called forth comparative literature) – I want to suggest, in what follows, that Jakobson's distinction maps instructively onto the mechanisms of comparative and world literature: where the former *compares* one text to another, the latter *situates* one text within the global (or 'semantic') field of others (Matzner 49-53). For comparison to be possible, initially, the things being compared must stand apart; to claim the status of world literature for a given work, conversely, is to make it a synecdoche of a broader whole.³ Comparative and world literature may be said to function, in short, as a mobile army of metaphors and metonymies.

Nietzsche's famous version of this phrase in his essay "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" ("On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense", 1873) holds that *truth* is rhetorical, "eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden" (Nietzsche 1988, 880; "a sum of human relations which [have been] poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned", Nietzsche 1989, 250). What I want to show here, by analogy, is that *disciplinary* truth is rhetorical, constructed as it is on a vocabulary that may initially be fresh, but that over time hardens into barely perceptible dogma and doxa, like "Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben" (Nietzsche 1988, 880; "worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image", Nietzsche 1989, 250). The only way to reinvigorate such terms is to re-examine their historical premises, turning the rhetorical force of fossilized vocabulary back against itself. To paraphrase Nietzsche, Jakobson's terms can help us remember that disciplinary truths are ideologies about which it has been forgotten that they are ideologies.

Let us begin, then, by sketching out a broad set of divisions between the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language as they relate to comparative and world literature. The inevitably schematic nature of such an opposition does not diminish its expository power, not least because it does not preclude exchange between the two poles. My intention is not to essentialize either comparative or world literature: I do not want to say that they *are* one thing or another, nor do I wish to claim that they are limited to the terms listed in their respective columns. My argument, rather is that their *disciplinary* development has been predicated, rhetorically speaking, on a series of unexamined assumptions and implied oppositions. My hope, in short, is that the payoff is worth the provocation:

Comparative Literature

Metaphor

Romanticism

Poetry

Absence

Similarity

Substitution

European

Aesthetics

Signifier

World Literature

Metonymy

Realism

Prose

Presence

Contiguity

Combination

Global

Politics

Signified

To follow this set of oppositions through the opening decades of the nineteenth century is to witness the emergence of “comparative” and “world” literature as disciplinary categories, with all the implications that this has for us, their discursive heirs, two centuries later. “The bipolar structure of language [...] requires systematic comparative study”, writes Jakobson in his seminal essay (78-9). The multi-polar structure of comparison requires systematic linguistic study, we might now respond.

If the initial opposition between metaphor and metonymy dictates all the subsequent terms, it is because their interplay is fundamental to any mode of hermeneutic understanding. Aristotle famously privileged metaphor, declaring it the true mark of genius and ensuring its enduring pre-eminence by elevating it, in his *Poetics*, to the status of a master trope (see Aristotle 1457b). By the time of the twentieth century, however, formalist and structuralist critics had re-established metonymy as metaphor’s rhetorical other, drawn as they were to the structure of binary

oppositions. “A competition between both devices, metonymic and metaphoric, is manifest in any symbolic process”, notes Jakobson (80).⁴ The comparative process, as we will see, is no exception to this rule.

Where the distinction becomes particularly interesting, however, is in the stylistic characteristics that Jakobson ascribes to the two poles. Metaphoric writing, he claims, is essentially Romantic and poetic; metonymic writing, on the other hand, is essentially realist and prosaic.⁵ My contention in this essay is that the relationship between the two incipient models of comparative and world literature in the early nineteenth century corresponds, *mutatis mutandis*, to this pattern. Comparative literature emerges out of the Romantic aspiration around 1800 to find what Friedrich Schlegel termed “die Quelle aller Sprachen” (the source of all languages);⁶ world literature emerges in 1827, right at the start of the realist period that Hegel famously termed “the age of prose”.⁷ Romantic literature functions through comparison (one need only think of the preponderance of similes – expressed through the telling “as if/als ob/comme si” plus subjunctive constructions – in paradigmatic writers such as Wordsworth, Eichendorff, or Musset); realist literature posits a world in which the protagonist attempts to find his or her place (the typical model of the *Bildungsroman* of the mid-nineteenth century, from Dickens to Keller to Flaubert). As models of transnationalism, in other words, the two terms *comparative literature* and *world literature* mirror the aesthetic developments of the nineteenth century into their very grammar.

To say that comparative literature emerges out of the spirit of Romanticism is to say, moreover, that it inherits a whole set of discursive assumptions. Chief among these is the notion that “language is vitally metaphorical”, to cite that most representative of Romantic creeds, Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” (1821) – “that is,

[that] it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension” (Shelley 482). This “relation of things” is, of course, precisely what the comparative critic sets out to apprehend, seeking to defamiliarize literature through fresh comparisons just as the Romantic poet seeks to defamiliarize life through fresh formulations. Such a process, for the comparatist, is necessarily predicated on absence, on the idea that (further) meaning can only be disclosed through triangulation, understood as a philological variation on the Hegelian dialectic: the tension between the thesis and antithesis of two separate texts (or terms, or ideas) produces the synthesis of greater insight. The comparative pay-off, one might say, is not situational or pre-existing (“before unapprehended”); it is conceptual or *post hoc*, contingent on the subjective perspective of the comparatist. Such an epistemology mirrors the process of the subject discovering itself that drives the emergence of Romanticism: what ultimately underpins the Romantic epiphany is, of course, the *ex machina* guarantee of God (or some comparably formulated Absolute), but even short of this the defining enthusiasms of the Romantic sensibility – love, art, the sublime – are predicated on self-transcendence, on the notion that the individual has to surpass itself in order to gain access to nobler emotions, to a finer-grained “apprehension”. Absence, in short, precedes presence.

It is no mere historical coincidence, then, that comparative literature emerged as a discipline at the height of Romanticism – not least because it originally did so as comparative *philology*. Understood as the study of language in its historical texts and contexts, philology boomed in the early nineteenth century as colonialism opened up whole new continents for fieldwork; comparisons between modern European and ancient Oriental languages became inevitable. Based on their experiences in British India, early Orientalists such as Sir William Jones (1746-94) argued that European and

“Asiatick” languages shared common roots in an original language known as “Proto-Indo-European” (Jones 329-60); poetry, in particular, served as the evidential basis for the argument, providing linguistic grist to the West-Eastern mill of cultural comparison.⁸ Jones and his followers suggested analogies between the classical Asian languages of Persian and Sanskrit and the classical European languages of Latin and Greek, and their colonial fieldwork became the basis for subsequent theorists of European romanticism to dream of finding Schlegel’s “source of all languages” through what he termed “vergleichende Grammatik” (comparative grammar):

Jener entscheidende Punkt [...], der hier alles aufhellen wird, ist die innre Structur der Sprachen oder die vergleichende Grammatik, welche uns ganz neue Aufschlüsse über die Genealogie der Sprachen auf ähnliche Weise geben wird, wie die vergleichende Anatomie über die höhere Naturgeschichte Licht verbreitet hat. (Schlegel 1808, 28)

The decisive point [...] that will illuminate everything here is the inner structure of languages or comparative grammar, which will give us completely new insights into the genealogy of languages in a manner analogous to the way in which comparative anatomy has illuminated the higher history of nature.

In these heady early days of the discipline, then, comparative grammar was to be something like Casaubon’s key to all mythologies. The transcendental impulse was built into the very structure of comparison: triangulation between two continental linguistic traditions made possible the identification of a third, *a priori* antecedent, the

Proto-Indo-European *Ursprache* so coveted by Romantic philologists. The absent ancestor synthesized, *ex hypothesi*, its present successors.

That the discipline of comparative literature developed out of a dialectic of similarity and difference is, I think, obvious enough, even allowing for the egregious imbalances of power that accompanied its emergence (and that continue to accompany it, whether we like it or not, to this day). The very process of comparison posits repetition with variation, identity with otherness: complete identity would obviate the need for comparison, turning it into a Borgesian parody of supreme sameness; complete otherness would render comparison impossible, since there would be no basis for mutual enlightenment. Between Pierre Menard on the one hand and “apples and pears” on the other, comparison stakes its middle ground. When mapped onto Jakobson’s rhetorical distinctions, however, the dialectic gains renewed purchase. “The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines”, writes Jakobson: “one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively” (Jakobson 76). If comparative literature advances through similarity (and thus, by extension, difference), world literature, conversely, is predicated on contiguity.

That such contiguity is not uncomplicated is one of the chief insights of recent work on metonymy, above all Sebastian Matzner’s study of 2016. There is no doubt that “the traditional figures of contiguity are metonymy and synecdoche”, in the words of Wellek and Warren’s influential *Theory of Literature* (1949; 199); the question is, though, what exactly is meant here by “contiguity”? The term amounts, Matzner concludes after reviewing the Roman rhetoricians, to little more than a vague assertion

of propinquity, with no inherent logical basis uniting both signifier and signified (Matzner 44-49). What, after all, does a typical metonym such as “heart” really have in common with its intended idea of “courage”? The closest one can get to a linguistic concept of contiguity, Matzner suggests, is a “theory of semantic fields” (49-53), since it is ultimately impossible to ground it in its own, self-sufficient terms. Metonymy is predicated “not on an abstract logic, but on pragmatically determined association” (Matzner, 52).

Such pragmatic wooliness also applies, I want to suggest, to the notion of world literature. It, too, proves impossible to ground on its own terms, constantly reorganizing itself around its evolving parts. The many theories of world literature – from discursive systems of translation/circulation to totalizing paradigms of everything ever written – all depend, at some level, on implying a synecdochic relationship between part and whole that is anything but settled. The complications of contiguity are the complications of world literature: there is no single, Archimedean vantage point from which to survey the shifting relationships between its adjacent elements. The canonical conception of *Weltliteratur* already implies as much: for Goethe, world literature is a matter of exchange between differing national discourses, between pre-existing sets of socio-cultural assumptions and discrete linguistic traditions – and not least, as we will shortly see, between differing temporal regimes.

Examining some of the further statements that Goethe made on the subject – beyond the all-too-famous claim of 1827 that “die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit” (“the epoch of world literature is at hand”) – helps us appreciate the extent to which he understood world literature as a force field of national literatures “touching on” each other (to cite the etymology of contiguity). “Denn daraus nur kann endlich die allgemeine Weltliteratur entspringen”, writes Goethe in 1830, in a draft of his

introduction to Thomas Carlyle's *Life of Schiller* (first published in English in 1825), "dass die Nationen die Verhältnisse aller gegen alle kennen lernen und so wird es nicht leicht fehlen, dass jede in der andern etwas Annehmliches und etwas Widerwärtiges, etwas Nachahmenswertes und etwas zu Meidendes antreffen wird" (Strich 1946, 400; "For that after all is the only way towards a general world literature, for all nations to learn their relationships each to the other; and each is bound to find in the other something attractive and something repellent, something worthy of emulation and something to be avoided", Strich 1949, 351). The push-and-pull of mutual interaction – with its characteristically Goethean hint of chemical or magnetic language, of elective or rejected affinity – suggests that world literature, unlike comparative literature, is not constituted by the pursuit of similarity and difference, but rather by the "relationships" between respective national literatures. Rhetoric reflects – but also shapes – methodology.

The crucial point that the Jakobsonian idea of contiguity allows us to see – a point not always best served by the selective citation of Goethe in anthologies of *Weltliteratur* – is that such contiguity *respects* difference, rather than reducing it. In Goethe's own words:

Die Eigenheiten einer Nation sind wie ihre Sprache und ihre Münzsorten, sie erleichtern den Verkehr, ja sie machen ihn erst vollkommen möglich. Eine wahrhaft allgemeine Duldung wird am sichersten erreicht, wenn man das Besondere der einzelnen Menschen und Völkerschaften auf sich beruhen lässt, bei der Überzeugung jedoch festhält, dass das das wahrhaft Verdienstliche sich dadurch auszeichnet, dass es der ganzen Menschheit angehört. (Strich 1946, 23)

The characteristics of a nation are like its language or its coinage, they facilitate intercourse and even make it possible. The surest way to achieve universal tolerance is to leave untouched what is peculiar to each man or group, remembering that all that is best in the world is the property of all mankind. (Strich 1949, 13-14)

The dialectic of world literature, that is to say, is predicated not on the comparative model of similarity and difference, but on the communicative model of national and transnational modes of understanding and exchange: as Goethe writes in a letter of 1827, “poetry [*Dichtung*] is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality” (Goethe 1986, 227). If cosmopolitanism is a kind of contiguity, in other words, it requires parts that can touch on each other; to have a cosmopolis, there must first be a polis.

Pragmatically as well as rhetorically, Goethe’s understanding of world literature is designed to foreground the rapidly developing market for literary translation and circulation – not least, of course, of his own books. His request to Thomas Carlyle in 1828, for his opinion on whether the translated version of *Tasso* can be considered English, provides a case in point:

Sie werden mich höchlich verbinden, wenn Sie mich hierüber aufklären und erleuchten; denn eben diese Bezüge vom Originale zur Übersetzung sind es ja, welche die Verhältnisse von Nation zu Nation am allerdeutlichsten aussprechen und die man zur Förderung der vor- und

obwaltenden allgemeinen Weltliteratur vorzüglich zu kennen und zu beurteilen hat. (Strich 1946, 398)

You will greatly oblige me by informing me on this point; for it is just this connection between original and translation that expresses most clearly the relationship of nation to nation and that one must above all know if one wishes to encourage a common world literature transcending national boundaries. (Strich 1949, 349-50)

The Enlightenment image of the “marketplace” of ideas here becomes an economic reality, such that it is now the reality that is the image: it is not the circulation of literature that is a market, but the market of literature that is circulation. “The relationship of nation to nation” is a function of “connection” (*Bezüge*), of finding ways to combine the parts of a “common world literature”. The logic of *Weltliteratur* – its implied tendency to totalization – is not just Goethean, it is also Hegelian: the true is the whole.

Such metonymic logic, in which the part points towards the whole, explains the emergence of world literature as an attempt to transcend “national” modes of thinking. The methodology of comparative literature is predicated upon identifying national traits – since otherwise they cannot be compared – whereas world literature gestures (however inconclusively) towards a universal totality akin to Schiller’s “universal history” (*Universalgeschichte*).⁹ Yet it does so, of course, from a necessarily partial perspective, principally by expanding on a pre-existing, European epistemology. In its pre-Goethean origins, the term was in fact decidedly European: the historian August Wilhelm Schlözer, writing in 1773, spoke of *Weltliteratur* in reference to the Icelandic

sagas (Schamoni 288-98), while the poet Christoph Martin Wieland, writing sometime between 1790 and 1813, used the term in reference to Horace (Weitz 206-08). By 1827, meanwhile, Goethe himself is notoriously insisting – for all his expansive gestures towards Chinese, or Serbian – that “im Bedürfniß von etwas Musterhaftem müssen wir immer zu den alten Griechen zurückgehen, in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist” (Eckermann 1955, 212; “if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented”, Eckermann 1850, 351). Despite Goethe’s interests in Persian and Islamic literature, then, the assumption that Europe is the center of the cultural world remains implicit, as does the enduring genuflection to Antiquity. World literature emerges, in other words, with three principal characteristics: it is German in paternity, European in authority, and Classical in legitimacy.

The negotiation between European and global frames of reference – to begin with the first two of these three characteristics – is thus at the heart of the relationship between the comparative and world paradigms as they emerged in the early nineteenth century. Problematic notions of “West” and “East” have haunted the discipline of comparative literature ever since its inception. If the Enlightenment belief in the ineluctable progress of mankind privileged Western culture as the center of the Republic of Letters, following the French Revolution the concept of “Europe” surfed a wave of pathos, figuring in journal titles – *Europa* (1803), *Archives littéraires de l’Europe* (1804) – and any number of manifestos insisting, to cite one well-known tract of the time by Novalis, on the common cultural heritage of *Christianity or Europe* (1802). Figures such as Madame de Staël worked hard to encourage international exchange within Europe, particularly along the all-important Franco-German axis, even introducing notably modern reflections on the role of women or on the North-South

cultural divide: for de Staël, for instance, Southern Europe functioned as a kind of internal Orient (Staël ch. 8). The real Orient, however, was barely acknowledged.

The rise of philology changed the nature of this comparison. Particularly in Germany, but also in leading European cities such as London, Paris, and Copenhagen, enthusiasm for Schlegel's idea of comparative grammar – as expounded in his influential study *On the Language and Wisdom of India* (1808) – led to ever more heroic attempts at comparing languages. Figures such as Franz Bopp, with his almost parodically professorial *Comparative Grammar of the Sanscrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Gothic, German, and Sclavonic Languages* (translated into English 1845-53), took the intellectual craze for Indo-European languages to new heights; by 1842, a Philological Society had been founded in London, following the creation of similar institutions in France and in Germany. In an age in which the study of languages and literatures was more closely entwined than today, Wilhelm von Humboldt's stated ambition "to blaze the trail for an individual, historical comparison of languages" (Humboldt 90) encapsulated the general belief that the comparative method was at the cutting edge of scholarship.

Arguably the most influential figure behind this Romantic view of comparison was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder's essay *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*On the Origin of Language*, 1772) paved the way for subsequent developments in linguistics; his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 1784-91) explored – and critiqued – the seeming inevitability of "progress" and emancipation, leading Hegel and Schlegel, to name but two, to produce similar philosophies of history. To read Herder in our post-colonial, transnational age is to be struck, even now, by just how modern many of his political attitudes are, in contrast to those of contemporaries such as Kant

or Hegel. Time and again he inveighs not only against the evils that Europe is visiting upon its colonies, but also against the very notion of “measuring all peoples *by the measure of us Europeans*” (“eine Messung aller Völker *nach uns Europäern*”). “Where,” he asks not unreasonably in his *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (*Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 1793-7), “is the means of comparison?” (Herder 2002, 386; “wo ist das Mittel der Vergleichung?”, Herder 1971, 250). Strictly speaking, in fact, Herder rejects the very idea of comparison, arguing that what he famously terms the *Volksgeist* of each nation is unique and thus, strictly speaking, incomparable (although what he really wants to resist, it seems, is not so much comparability as *commensurability*, since his notion of the nation necessarily implies international interaction and thus comparison).¹⁰ Either way, his insistence on the irreducible particularity of differing cultural traditions is startling, and startlingly modern.

What makes Herder so pertinent to our purposes here, in any case, is the way in which his critique of Enlightenment Eurocentrism anticipates the subsequent expansion to the “world” perspective. Describing Europeans, in contrast to the youthful energy of other parts of the world, as “worn-out old men”, Herder makes this exhaustion the precondition for the emergence of more vigorous cultures elsewhere:

Daß also niemand aus dem Ergrauen Europas den Verfall und Tod unsres ganzen Geschlechts auguriere! Was schadete es diesem, wenn ein ausgearteter Teil von ihm unterginge? wenn einige verdorrete Zweige und Blätter des saftreichen Baumes abfielen? Andre treten in der Verdorreten Stelle und blühen frischer empor. Warum sollte der westliche Winkel unsres Nordhemisphärs die Kultur allein besitzen, und besitzet er sie allein? (Herder 1971, 302)

Let no one augur from the greying of Europe the decline and death of our whole species! What harm would it do to the latter if a degenerated part of it perished, if a few withered twigs and leaves of the sap-rich tree fell off? Others take the place of the withered ones and bloom up more freshly. Why should the western corner of our northern hemisphere alone possess culture? (Herder 2002, 419)

Already in the 1790s, in other words, Herder's critique of European culture implies a more capacious sense of world literature – understood once again, to return to Jakobson's terms, metonymically rather than metaphorically. Europe is a “degenerated part”, a senescent synecdoche, of a broader whole: the world is a “sap-rich tree” of which the old continent represents merely a decaying branch. The European part, Herder suggests – his insistence on the irreducible particularity of nations and cultures notwithstanding – must thus be understood within the global whole. “It is evident that everything is tending *to a larger whole!*” Herder exclaims as early as 1774. “We embrace the circle of the earth” (Herder 2002, 352; “sichtbarlich geht alles *ins Große!* Wir umfassen [...] den Kreis der Erde”, Herder 1984, 677). Such language strikingly anticipates his pupil Goethe's later claim that “all that is best in the world is the property of all mankind”. The true, to return once again to Hegel's celebrated phrase, is now not just the whole; it is the “whole species”.

What we might also notice about Herder's metonymic logic, to come now to the third of the three principal characteristics of emergent world literature identified above – Classical in legitimacy – is that it develops as a temporal category. If *Weltliteratur* as theorized by Schläzer, Wieland, and Goethe derives its legitimacy from

its Classical or mythological roots, this is not so much a question of ancestral prestige as of rhetorical logic. For the aspiration to totality implicit in the notion of a “world” is necessarily diachronic, as well as synchronic: the whole of which a given text is a part encompasses time, as well as space. Europe, in Herder’s synecdoche, is not just “the western corner of our northern hemisphere” – it is also “decline and death”, time-bound categories if ever there were any. The metonymic logic of world literature implies a temporal as well as a spatial continuum.

This tension between the European/synchronic and global/diachronic perspectives points – to mobilize the penultimate terms in our initial list – to a more fundamental epistemic distinction between comparative literature understood as a question of *aesthetics* and world literature understood as a question of *politics*. Viewed in Jakobson’s terms, the distinction between the categories is built into their rhetoric, and so ultimately into the ways that they conceptualize their objects of enquiry: to compare one text with another, to say that it is *like* (or *unlike*) another, is to make an aesthetic judgement about how it relates to other works of art; to situate one text alongside another, to say that it is *part* of a broader discourse, is to make a political statement about how it relates to other aspects of this discourse. This is not to say that world literature does not comport aesthetic questions, nor comparative literature political ones, but simply that their rhetorical logic points towards diverging sets of preoccupations. Where comparative literature emerges out of philological concerns, out of Romantic and Idealist debates about the origins of language, world literature emerges out of political concerns, out of Realist and “universal” debates about the union of cultures. In this regard as in others, Goethe’s reflections on world literature set the tone: writing in 1828 about Scottish journals such as the *Edinburgh Review*, for instance, he

hopes that they will contribute to the “gehofften allgemeinen Weltliteratur” (“the universal world literature we hope for”):

Nur wiederholen wir, dass nicht die Rede sein könne, die Nationen sollen überein denken, sondern sie sollen nur einander gewahr werden, sich begreifen, und wenn sie sich wechselseitig nicht lieben mögen, sich einander wenigsten dulden lernen. (Strich 1946, 399)

We repeat however that there can be no question of nations thinking alike, the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and, even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another. (Strich 1949, 350)

Setting aside the idea of national homogenization (“thinking alike”) as neither possible nor desirable, Goethe expresses a hope, rather, for international exchange (“understand[ing] each other”): the logic is finally political rather than aesthetic, a quasi-Herderian recognition that *Weltliteratur*, if it is about anything, is about *incommensurability* as much as *commensurability*, about respecting difference rather than reducing it. The partial, metonymic rhetoric of world literature points towards its universal, metaphysical ethics.

Another way of putting this – to come now to the final pair of terms on our list – is to say that comparative literature inherits the Romantic fetishization of the signifier, while world literature develops as a way of foregrounding the signified. Emerging out of philology, comparative approaches to literary texts tended to concentrate not so much on *what* was said as on *how* it was said, on the ways in which the various

languages – whether European or Asian, African or American – could be shown to share common roots and reflexes. As it developed over the course of the following two centuries, much of the discipline of comparative literature remained focused on questions of form, style, or genre that could be held to “transcend” national or linguistic boundaries: from early pioneers such as William Jones or Wilhelm von Humboldt, via mid-twentieth-century classics such as Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946) or Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), to the more recent waves of structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-humanist theory, comparison has long preferred to explore *modes* of meaning – realism, the lyric, fairy tales – to meaning itself, aesthetics to ideology.¹¹ That such preferences are themselves profoundly ideological is self-evident, and in this regard no ideology has been more influential than that of Romanticism, the consequences of which have continued to inflect comparative literature ever since.

If world literature, conversely, was and is a fundamentally political project – how to move beyond Europe? How to do justice to the competing perspectives of different parts of the globe? – it is because it is concerned not just with the circulation of meaning (to use David Damrosch’s much-cited term), but more specifically with the ways in which meaning *survives* circulation, indeed arguably gains from it. The signifier, in other words, cedes priority to the signified, if only because the sheer scale of world literature means that – unlike in the traditional model of comparative literature focused on a core of “original” texts – even the most multilingual critic soon finds it necessary to work with translations. “The toughest lesson for me [...] is that world literature forces me to forego, at least as regards those languages that I do not command, all that I normally hold dear, namely close formal-aesthetic and historical analyses of texts”, writes one recent critic in the pages of *Comparative Literature* (Weninger, 328).

What is written becomes more significant, in this regard, than *how* it is written; content becomes more significant – because more transferable – than form. Politics supplements aesthetics.

The distinction emerges all the more clearly if we turn to a final allusion in the title of this essay. If the “two types” of comparative and world literature, with their attendant engines of similarity and difference, echo the “two aspects of language” identified by Roman Jakobson, they also echo Arnaldo Momigliano’s description of “Two Types of Universal History”, in an essay of this name first published in 1986. Taking the examples of E. A. Freeman and Max Weber, Momigliano identifies opposing methods of pursuing Schiller’s great dream of a “universal” historiography. He begins by explicitly associating the technique of Freeman, a nineteenth-century Oxford historian, with the “comparative method”, citing Freeman’s lecture on the “Unity of History” – part of a lecture series entitled *Comparative Politics* – to this effect. As Freeman writes:

I do not for a moment hesitate to say that the discovery of the Comparative Method in philology – let me add in politics and history and the whole range of human thoughts – marks a stage in the progress of the human mind at least as great and memorable as the revival of Greek and Latin learning. The great contribution of the nineteenth century to the advance of human knowledge may boldly take its stand alongside the great contribution of the fifteenth (Momigliano 238).

As this passage suggests, Freeman’s proselytizing zeal for the comparative method was nothing if not typical of the high-Victorian mindset, rooted in the philological – but also political – certainties of the Imperial era. Inspired by the work of leading

contemporary scholars such as Friedrich Max Müller and Thomas Arnold, the Victorian comparatists “emphasized the similarity of Western nations, as the identities in the cultural institutions of European nations seemed to suggest that each must have descended in common from an original Aryan homeland” (Morrisroe 31). Freeman, for his part, aimed to do for politics what Müller had done for philology, by demonstrating “that the Greeks, Italians and Teutons have a large common stock of institutions, institutions whose likeness cannot be otherwise accounted for than by the supposition of their common primitive origin” (Freeman iv). That scholars from other European nations argued along similar lines – as Tuska Benes notes, for instance, “comparative philology epitomized the nineteenth-century German quest for origins” (Benes 10) – merely reinforces the point. The comparative method existed to prove the “unity” – which is to say, the superiority – of European culture.

Against this first kind of “universal history” understood as the establishment of similarities, Momigliano sets Max Weber’s approach to the topic understood as the pursuit of differences. While the opposition is largely motivated, it seems, by Weber’s rejection of the late-nineteenth-century categories of race and nationalism (although Momigliano is at pains to tell the reader, somewhat disingenuously, how little he understands of Weber’s thought), what emerges out of the contrast is the fact that Weber, unlike the nineteenth-century comparatists, “escaped the danger of being Europeo-centric or Aryano-centric” (Momigliano 242). While he does so by taking religion as his principal point of interest – meaning that Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures inevitably assume a position of great importance – the cognitive consequences of this broader purview echo the logic of world literature as outlined above. “For Max Weber”, writes Momigliano, “the task of the intellectuals was to give worldly dimensions to unworldly creeds. [...] The efforts that the intellectuals of the various

religions made to harmonize creeds with power or gain could be measured and compared in terms of degrees of rationality” (Momigliano 242). Anticipating Edward Said’s notion of *worldliness* – understood as a way of thinking that is “situated in the world, and about that world” (Said 375) – Weber’s methodology, as presented by Momigliano, embodies an approach to comparison that rejects the metaphoric attempt to make inferior (Eastern, non-European) cultures substitute for a superior (Western, European) culture. It offers, rather, a way of seeing all cultures as equally legitimate aspects of a universal totality, seeking, in Momigliano’s words, “the rationality inherent in the attitudes of each group as a whole” (Momigliano 242). The rhetoric, once more, is metonymic.

Here as elsewhere, then, *Weltliteratur* betrays its Germanic paternity, perhaps nowhere more tellingly than in the way that it enacts the rhetorical force of the hermeneutic circle. Momigliano’s Weberian negotiation between group and whole strikingly mirrors that between part and whole as outlined by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the founder of modern hermeneutics. Writing in 1819 – which is to say, precisely in the post-Romantic period in which the modern terminology of comparative and world literature was emerging – Schleiermacher held that the “art of understanding” (*die Kunst des Verstehens*) was driven by a circular logic: the parts form the whole, which in turn informs the parts. “Ueberall ist das vollkommne Wissen in diesem scheinbaren Kreise dass jedes Besondere nur aus dem Allgemeinen dessen Theil es ist verstanden werden kann und umgekehrt” (Schleiermacher 2012, 129; “complete knowledge is contained within an apparent circle, so that every extraordinary thing can only be understood in the context of the general of which it is a part, and vice versa”, Schleiermacher 1978, 10). Such is not only the metaphysical logic of hermeneutics;

such is also the metonymic logic of world literature, in which texts go in search of ever-broader contexts. The “world” is the sum of its parts.

The “two types” of comparative and world literature must thus be understood, we have suggested over the course of this essay, as semantic as well as systemic categories. Jakobson’s distinction between metaphoric and metonymic modes of writing helps us to appreciate the rhetorical as well as historical legacies of the two terms, for the simple reason that the normative force of the terms as disciplinary markers means that the rhetorical *is*, in effect, the historical legacy. For all our claims, in the twenty-first century, to have liberated ourselves from the disciplinary straitjacket of nineteenth-century dogma, this legacy – this *odor*, to return to Dogberry’s eloquent catachresis – remains with us today, most obviously in the semantic difference inherent in the very terms themselves: while the adjectival form of *comparative* literature indicates that it constitutes a methodology, a way of reading, the nominal form of *world* literature suggests that it constitutes a field, a body of texts within a broader context. Indeed, a final antithesis underscores this distinction: while concluding, at the end of his close study of metonymy, that Jakobson was essentially right to oppose it to metaphor, Matzner suggests that “metaphor’s underlying principle of similarity or analogy is intrinsically verb-centred, since it is actions or states which are being compared, whereas metonymy’s underlying principle of lexical contiguity is intrinsically noun-based” (Matzner 266). The relevance of this distinction to our purposes is clear from the very grammar of the terms: comparative literature, proceeding metaphorically, is “verb-centred” (*vergleichend* / *comparée*); world literature, proceeding metonymically, is “noun-based”. Syntax, as ever, implies sensibility.

The awkward nature of this distinction between methodological and geographical categories resembles nothing so much, in fact, as that between analytic and continental philosophy – a distinction memorably described by Bernard Williams as being like dividing cars “into front-wheel drive and Japanese” (Williams 23). Yet it has been far subtler than the apartheid between the two forms of philosophy, if no less significant in its consequences, smuggling a weight of rhetorical baggage into the history of comparative approaches to literature. That the distinction is, of course, discursively simplistic – not least because any aspiration to totality must always, by definition, remain unfulfilled – tells its own story about the need for further enquiry into the rhetorical history of comparison. The limits of our language, to paraphrase Wittgenstein’s famous phrase, are the limits of our world literature.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the classic statement of this methodology – which advocates, above all, the importance of understanding terms and ideas within their contemporary context – see Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.

² It seems almost otiose to cite such well-known studies as those by Damrosch (2003) and Apter (2013), which have laid out, from very different perspectives, the groundwork for much recent research. Among other studies, Beecroft’s “ecological” approach to world literature is particularly valuable, offering as it does a typology of languages understood as “dialects with a literature” (Beecroft, 6). For a recent manifesto of multilingualism and world literature, see Orsini (2015).

³ For reasons of brevity and focus, I shall not dwell here at any length on the complex relationship between synecdoche and metonymy – beyond noting that I follow Matzner in understanding the former as a variant of the latter, since “synecdoche shares both the aesthetic effects and the structural mechanisms of metonymy” (Matzner 164).

⁴ See also Fumaroli's 1994 preface to *L'Âge de l'éloquence*, in which he notes the significance of Jakobson's two categories for any modern appreciation of rhetorical structures (p. xv).

⁵ As Matzner notes, the Russian critic Boris Eikhenbaum, writing in 1923, was the first to associate metaphor with poetry and metonymy with prose (Matzner 26).

⁶ Such are the terms in which Schlegel writes to Ludwig Tieck in September 1903, seeking "die Quelle aller Sprachen, aller Gedanken, und Gedichte des menschlichen Geistes; *alles*, alles, stammt aus Indien ohne Ausnahme" (the source of all languages, all thoughts, and all poems of the human spirit; *everything*, everything comes from India without exception). See Schlegel 1972, 135-6.

⁷ For discussion of Hegel's terms, see Heller, 1-20.

⁸ As M.H. Abrams pointed out in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Jones was one of the first critics to employ the lyric as an 'idealized poetic norm' (Abrams, 84-88), primarily through the examples of Persian and Arabic poems. For further discussion of the lyric as a vehicle of West-Eastern comparison, see the essays collected in "West-East Lyric: A Comparative Approach to Lyric History", *Comparative Critical Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020), edited by Fatima Burney and Sara Hakeem Grewal.

⁹ Schiller's point, in his lecture entitled "Was heisst und zu welchem Zwecke studiert man Universalgeschichte?", is that none of us has an overview of the whole of history, and that as such we are forced to fill in the gaps in order to create some sort of "rationally connected whole". The fact that he delivered the lecture in the fateful year of 1789, just before the French Revolution erupted, proves him right. See Weninger, 2010.

¹⁰ Unlike the *philosophes*, who saw the essence of human nature as unvarying from culture to culture, Herder insisted on the contingency of cultural experience. If the Enlightenment unit of comparison was similarity, one might say, for Herder it was difference. As Isaiah Berlin argued, this does not make him a relativist so much as a pluralist (see Berlin 2013).

¹¹ The move to abstraction (from content to form, from the particular to the general) is in a sense built into the very project of comparative literature, as its continental names – "vergleichende und allgemeine Literatur" / "littérature générale et comparée" – suggest.

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