Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age by David Damrosch (review)

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Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age. By David Damrosch. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. x + 386 pp. Cloth $35.00. ISBN 9780691134994.

David Damrosch's lengthy new study *Comparing the Literatures* is a useful, introductory survey aimed at students and faculty in comparative literature programs and "anyone interested in incorporating a comparative dimension into their work" (1). Broadly speaking, he seeks to respond to two interrelated questions: "How can we best address the many disparate literatures now at play in literary studies, and what do we really mean by 'comparing' them?" (1)

Comparing the Literatures begins with a dream about a moving van. It proceeds to unload box after box containing the accumulated materials of several centuries of comparative literary practice and theorization. Whereas moving boxes are typically labeled according to the rooms into which one anticipates unpacking the items, Damrosch here labels the chapters according to a loose schema of subject areas, with chapters on "Origins," "Emigrations," "Politics," "Theories," "Languages," "Literatures," "Worlds," and "Comparisons." He concludes with a section entitled "Rebirth of a Discipline," a clear indication that the book comprises, among other things, a response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 2003 *Death of a Discipline* and a continuation of the two scholars' often fiery dialogues on the nature, the commitments, and the futures (or not) of comparative and world literature.

Damrosch's chapter on "Theories" is a powerful read, in which he tackles head-on the question of what he terms the "import-export trade in literary theory" (129). He asks: "If theories developed in Paris or Frankfurt are applied by Chinese and American scholars to Brazilian novels or Sanskrit poetry, how much will be distorted or lost altogether?" (129) In response, he provides several concrete suggestions. First, he argues, we need to contextualize theory, rather than treating it as a repository of "transcendent ideas" (129). Second, comparatists must allow the primary literature to "exert real pressure on the theory,"

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speaking back, as it were, and modifying it as needed in order to be both responsive and responsible to the literature and its contexts (129). And third, he calls for attention to a wider range of theoretical texts and perspectives beyond the Euro-American. In addition, he encourages comparatists to be more mindful of "the theoretical perspectives embedded in literature itself" (151). Given that the Theory Survey remains a core part of most undergraduate and (to my knowledge) all North American graduate programs in Comparative Literature, this chapter is certainly worth a read, and some serious discussion, as faculty, graduate officers, undergraduate directors, and heads consider curricular revision and planning.

Although I find the "Theories" chapter to be inspiring reading, I find the final chapter, on "Comparisons," problematic. For much of the chapter, Damrosch focuses on ideas of comparative literature, which employ "compare" as a verb: to put two or more different things into conversation, identifying points of similarity and difference. Whether discussing the "perspectivism" of René Wellek and Erich Auerbach (303), the "comparative literature 'with Chinese characteristics'" of Cao Shunqing (312), or the "methodological cosmopolitanism" of Sheldon Pollock (315), Damrosch appears to endorse this A versus B approach, while yet pointing out its dangers, which include "Western conceptions masquerading as universal values" (307). He does attempt to parse out his own, different approach in a short section on "Modernisms and Modernities" (318–323) but a more in-depth explication would have been welcome.

To be sure, any single scholar's approach to comparative literature will necessarily be constrained by the languages in which one works, the cultural areas in which one is well-versed, and the historical periods that one knows well. *World* literature, in Damrosch's formulation, is rather more capacious, comprising "works that are discussed beyond the ranks of specialists in an author's country or region of origin" (229). Attention shifts from the particularities of the original language of composition to the affordances of the language of translation (often English), and Damrosch clearly recognizes both the worlds that acts of translation and circulation make available, as well as the dangers of "antidemocratic Anglo-triumphalism" (296). That said, the world literature that comes up for discussion in *Comparing the Literatures* has an odd geography that bears mention. The list of Illustrations (vii) provides a microcosm of the volume as a whole. The world of Damrosch's world literature features Eastern European polyglot efforts indexed upon a Latinate base (such as the January 1886 cover of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*) and prominent Western European theorists (Paul de Man, for instance), along with contemporary digital texts

and transmedia adaptations (the *Final Fantasy* Gilgamesh action figure). East Asia appears predominantly via moments of analog comparison or reflection upon European figures and technologies: Dai Dudu, Li Tiezi, and Zhang An's *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante*, or Lin Yutang with Lin Tai-yi demonstrating his typewriter. Which is to say: the world of this world literature is constructed as a survey from the vantage of modern European languages and conceptual models, with East Asian texts, digital media, and colonial and postcolonial writing appearing along the more distant horizon. A single scholar cannot know everything, nor can a single volume touch on all literatures. Yet surely it bears mention that, in this widely ranging study of the disciplines of comparative literature and world literature, texts as powerful and foundational to modern literary study as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 1972 "On the Abolition of the English Department" show up not at all.[1] Deconstruction comes up for repeated mention; decolonization, not so. Thus, while the discussion of South Asian and East Asian texts is welcome, one must mourn the missed opportunity to register the critiques, insights, and innovations of Black and Indigenous scholars and authors.

Though his study's ambit is future-oriented—asking us to "rethink the ways we organize our programs, and the ways we carry on virtually every aspect of our scholarly life and work" (5)—Damrosch's study is better understood as a history of the discipline. Indeed, he argues that we need to "brush the discipline's history against the grain: to see why promising avenues were shut down a century and more ago; to recover common grounds of comparison from differing perspectives; to realize how many writers remain neglected . . .; and to consider how we can reconfigure our persistently conservative institutional practices in order to realize comparative literature's progressive goals" (10). There is a history, Damrosh avers, "that everyone interested in comparative study ought to possess" (10) and he draws on memoires, newspapers, archival sources, scholarly volumes, and a wealth of literary texts in order to limn it. He begins with an examination of two libraries: that of the Genevan feminist conductor of literary salons Madame de Staël (1766–1817) and that of Prussian folklorist, philologist, and linguist Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). As Damrosch points out, the history "of comparative literature is in many respects a history of archives—of libraries and collections preserved or lost, studied or forgotten, sometimes rediscovered, sometimes not" (13). Given that Herder's philological studies of Germanic folklore were enriched by comparative awareness of Greek, Latin, Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic—and that de Staël's bedroom included

a portrait of her lover standing beside his Arabian stallion "Sultan"—this would have been an ideal opportunity to "brush . . . history against the grain" by at least mentioning the inherent orientalism embodied in these early comparatists' libraries. To be sure, Edward Said does appear in *Comparing the Literatures*, but not until the following chapter and not in relation to comparative literature's "origins," but in relation to Erich Auerbach's exilic post–World War II tome *Mimesis*.

To his great credit, Damrosch's historical approach to the discipline does indeed point out a number of "promising avenues that were shut down a century and more ago." To cite but one of the most salient of these, in his brief account of the early years of the American Comparative Literature Association, Damrosch points out that, "If the United States offered an unusual opportunity for broader-based studies, it was as the price of a pervasive dissociation from American literature and from the country's cultural and political debates," including engagement with antiwar activism and the formation of women's studies and ethnic studies programs (97). From the vantage point of the United States in autumn of the year 2020, this avenue certainly seems crucial to reopen and even to center. Indeed, in the Conclusion, Damrosch suggests that the search for "new and better ways to compare the literature today" (326) may lie in intertwining pleasure and purpose ("*dulce*" and "*utile*"), weaving political interventions from the "fields of women's, ethnic, and postcolonial studies" together with philological attention and theoretical innovation (341, 335).

Many will no doubt find *Comparing the Literatures* to be useful as a textbook for undergraduate courses, especially introductory or midlevel ones, in which students would benefit from the various scaffolding apparatus that Damrosch offers. These include topical overviews of the role of languages, theories, and politics in the disciplines of Comparative Literature and World Literature; biographical context for some oft-encountered theorists; and accessibly phrased dicta for comparative study, all threaded through a smooth historiography of the field as it has developed in Europe and North America.

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Note

1. "On the Abolition of the English Department," a collaborative effort by (then-named) James Ngugi, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban Io Liyong, is reprinted in Ngũgĩ wa Thing'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics* (London: Heineman, 1972).

Modernism after Postcolonialism: Toward a Nonterritorial Comparative Literature. By Mara de Gennaro. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. xi + 224 pp. Hardcover $94.95. Paperback $34.95, E-book.

Mara de Gennaro's study is ambitious and impressive. It pursues a rich variety of ideas, it chooses texts for reasons familiar to modernist and postcolonial scholars but pairs them in surprising ways, and its innovative close readings justify these pairings. De Gennaro's methodologies require parsing before my discussion of how she illuminates works by four major modernists, four major postcolonial figures, and various anglophone and francophone theorists.

Though de Gennaro does not gather the following aims into a mission statement, they undergird her analyses.

—*Modernism After Postcolonialism* synthesizes an anticolonial and antiracist project spanning global literature and theory throughout the modernist and postcolonial epochs.

—It critiques anxiety, including its indirect textual manifestations. As de Gennaro explains, anxiety for what Heidegger called a "reassuring world picture" leads people to build walls and to oppress or conquer others. Writers might, to their credit, *display* anxiety, for example, by depicting protagonists who fail to understand themselves or their racial and sexual others. Or writers might, to their discredit, *repress* anxiety—though it will likely affect their texts nonetheless. In either case—or when authorial intentions are irrelevant—de Gennaro teases out anxiety's formal manifestations.