

# WHAT IS 'COMPARATIVE' LITERATURE?'<sup>i</sup>

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## Abstract

This article approaches the problems of self-definition surrounding 'comparative literature' by analysing the nature of comparison *per se*, and the place of this practice in literary criticism past and present. It argues that comparison in its broadest sense is involved in all thought, but that comparison in the strictest sense is involved in only a minority of all criticism, whether described as comparative or otherwise. Certain works of literature call especially clearly for a comparative approach, through allusion to other works, or through establishing internally comparative structures (for example in parallel plots); such works might collectively be denoted by the noun phrase 'comparative literature'. The nature of 'comparability' is analysed, and various factors affecting the results of comparison are noted in turn, including the topic on which the comparanda are compared, their number, and the degree of detail of their description. It is argued that literary criticism would benefit from greater self-consciousness with regard to comparison, and that departments of comparative literature would be well-placed to lead the process of theorising comparison, which hitherto has been remarkably overlooked.

## Comparison *per se*

This article concerns a practice which is involved in all reading, yet has hardly ever been the explicit subject of literary theory. Comparison, in the broadest sense of term, is the mental process which enables us to perceive similarity and difference. Smells and ideas cannot be distinguished without perceiving their similarities and differences to others. Will cannot be exercised without comparing options; *to choose* comes from *gusto*, and involves, as Sainsburies would have us do, *tasting the difference*. A critic describes a literary work as *mimetic* only after comparing it with both life and other works. Matthew Arnold, who coined the term *comparative literature* as a translation of *littérature comparée*, claimed in his inaugural lecture at Oxford University in 1857 that 'No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literature'.<sup>ii</sup> In our own century, Richard Rorty wrote: 'Good criticism is a matter of bouncing some of the books you have read off the rest of the books you have read'.<sup>iii</sup> (2006: 64) He might have added that good reading of

criticism involves bouncing the criticism you are reading off the rest of the criticism which you have read.

Yet this is not comparison in the strict sense of the term. This involves paying a similar quantity and quality of attention to a discrete number of objects in order to determine their similarities and differences with regard to possession, lack, or degree of possession of a particular quality. A minority of literary criticism practised today is of this kind - both of the inter-national, inter-linguistic, inter-artistic kind which presents itself as *comparative literature*, and of the criticism which includes none of these divisions. The minority may be larger in the first case, but it is still a minority. A comparison of George Eliot with George Sand on a given topic may have the interest, but also the complication, of involving linguistic and cultural variables which are not directly related to the topic concerned. A comparison of George Eliot with Elizabeth Gaskell, which involves fewer circumstantial variables, may be more cleanly comparative, and in this sense *more* comparative. But only relatively; any two writers have differences of circumstance, and any comparison must be performed against a ground which is to some degree abstract. Asymmetric comparison – paying a different quantity or quality to two comparanda - has strong similarities with much criticism which is not usually considered comparative. For example, studying the influence of Miguel de Cervantes's *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha* on Nikos Kazantzakis's *Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά* [*Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorbas*] has much in common with studying the representation of attitudes towards sex in rural 1930s Greece in the latter novel. In both cases one is looking for features of one complex object (a novel, and an aspect of a culture) in another; the discussion of any topic in literature involves a comparison of the form *looking for X in Y*.

In the sixth yearbook of the British Comparative Literature Association's *Comparative Criticism* Elinor Shaffer commented: 'Conducting a retrospective inquiry into specifically comparative modes of close analysis, we find that a very few comparative literary handbooks offered some direct discussion of comparative analysis of texts'.<sup>iv</sup> The position of comparison as a topic in philosophy is also undeservedly obscure. No English-language reference work of philosophy of which I am aware has an entry for the term, despite the facts that comparison is as important a method to philosophy as to literary criticism, and that it is fraught with philosophical

implications. Therefore all literary criticism is comparative in a broad sense, whereas much criticism called comparative is not comparative in the strictest sense.

The academic *subject comparative literature*, it is commented with a frequency which has tamed it into a reassuring truism, is *anxiogenic*.<sup>v</sup> This is partly because it is not easily defined either by method *or* matter. In the 1970s Robert Clements commented that ‘Comparative Literature sometimes figures in university curricula, but very few people know what they mean by the term’, and the last two decennial reports of the American Comparative Literature Association defined themselves as concerned with the state (and therefore also the nature) of the discipline, rather than, as previously, on the standard of what was performed within it. In 2006 Robert Wenginger claimed that ‘nothing is written or published *in comparative*’, and pointed out that the Bernheimer report had dropped the proud initial capital letters from the discipline.<sup>vi</sup> (xii) Even this, it seemed, was too bold a move, and the Saussy report oscillated between *comparative literature* and *Comparative Literature*.

The problem of defining the subject by method is, as I have argued, that much of what is done under its remit is not comparative in narrower sense. The bibliography of the British Comparative Literature Association’s first (1979) *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* contained sections for works concerning ‘Literary Genres, Types and Forms’, ‘Bible, Classical Antiquity’, ‘Individual Countries’, ‘Individual Authors’, and ‘Comparative, World and General Literature’. The three terms of the last category are often themselves imprecisely distinguished – as *общая литература*, *Allgemeinliteratur*, *littérature générale*, and *literatura universal* are from the equivalents of *comparative literature* in their own languages.

The question then arises of whether comparative literature should simply be called, and become, the study of literature. Proponents of departments of literature include René Wellek and Austin Warren, who in 1949 argued against the idea of national literatures: ‘There’s just literature’.<sup>vii</sup> Fourteen years later Wellek wished that ‘we could simply speak of the study of literature [...] and that there were, as Albert Thibaudet proposed, professors of literature just as there are professors of philosophy and of history’.<sup>viii</sup> And in 2006 Jonathan Culler argued against Charles Bernheimer that: ‘The turn to culture makes sense for national literature departments: the division of literature by national or linguistic boundaries was always rather dubious, but such divisions as these are a very reasonable way of organizing the study of culture’; this

would leave comparative literature with the distinctive role of studying literature: ‘As the site of the study of literature in general, comparative literature would provide a home for poetics’.<sup>ix</sup> Objections to such a plan come from those who consider that literature should always be related to culture in its broadest sense, and to other art forms. In 1972 Levin, and in 1995 Bernheimer, argued that comparative literature did not and should not concern literature alone. It is also objected that the general study of literature in practice rarely fulfils that remit, consisting largely in the study of European literature and its nearest relatives. Clearly, *European literature*, not *general*, *world*, or *comparative literature* should be the title of courses if that is what is studied. However, Anthony Appiah rightly urged in response to the criticisms of Eurocentrism made in the 1995 ACLA report: ‘Study these interconnected European literatures, I say. They make sense together. They were made for each other’.<sup>x</sup>

Both parts of the title *comparative literature*, then, imperfectly denote the subject’s *de facto* remit. So I would like at this point to make a proposal which cuts through the Gordian knot of most of the problems of definition discussed above. If one were to conceive of academic departments as a city which has developed haphazardly from the middle ages onwards, then I, a zealous town-planner, propose to raze the city to the ground and rebuild it on a grid-plan. These are perhaps not serious practical proposals, but they will at least illustrate my conception of comparative literature.

### **Excursus on the Idea of a University**

Each university would have two types of structure, to be called for example *faculties* and *divisions*. The *faculties* would be named after disciplines, or objects of study which clearly indicate a correspondent discipline: history, literature, biology, and so forth. The *divisions* would correspond to categories of subject matter. For the arts and humanities, India, Russia, and Britain, for example, might have their own divisions. All academics and students would be obliged to belong to at least one, and rarely more than two, faculties and divisions. The current author, for example, would belong to the faculty of literature and to the British and Russian divisions. A scholar working on Tolstoi’s relationship to Repin might belong to the faculties of literature and art, and to the Russian division. Someone else, researching English Common Law, might belong to the law faculty and the British division.

Such a warp and weft of discipline and subject matter would encourage both disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. Literary theory would be taught in the faculty of literature using examples from different languages, thereby avoiding the current replication of teaching between language faculties. Someone currently belonging to a comparative literature department would belong to one or more divisions, and either to the literature faculty alone, or also to the history, sociology, philosophy, theology, art, or music faculties. The theory of literary comparison would be taught in the literature faculty. The phrase *comparative literature* would be reserved to describe criticism which compared (in a fairly strict sense) literary works with each other. Those who, as Peter Brooks claimed of himself as a graduate student, are not ‘*comparing* literature, just working in more than one’ would consider themselves to be working in literature.<sup>xi</sup> Those working in inter-artistic study would describe themselves as doing just that. As a result, the anxiety surrounding the phrase *comparative literature* would be much diminished.

In addition, the freedom of individual academics to have more contact with either their faculty or their division would reflect the obvious importance of both perspectives to literary study. Spivak’s claim that ‘The verbal text is jealous of its linguistic signature but impatient of national identity’ is far from equally true of all texts.<sup>xii</sup> Nationalism may, as Freud claimed, involve ‘Narzißmus der kleinen Differenzen’ [narcissism in respect of minor differences], but ethnic distinctions pre-exist the nationalist movements which often seize on, manipulate, and exaggerate them, and an awareness *of* these differences is a proper component of comparative literature in the strict sense too.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Making Comparisons**

I have already tried to define *comparison* as a verb, but *a comparison* is both an action and its outcome - *making a comparison* can refer both to the process of comparing and to the description of this process and its result (one cannot be described without the other). For example, were someone to say that a historian compares Hitler and Stalin, she might mean that the historian tries to discover the similarities and differences of these men, or that he draws attention to such similarities and differences as he has found them to possess. This is an important ambiguity – between the performance and results of comparison, between the

discovery of results and their dissemination, and therefore between empiricism and rhetoric.

Language is not necessary to the performance of comparison, but it is to its description, in which it can prove limited. In English the language of comparison tends to imply one of three positions, which may be approximated to similarity, difference, and neutrality. One compares something *and*, *with* or *to* something else; *and* is neutral, *with* suggests the expectation of similarity, and *to* suggests the expectation of difference. Something is the same *as* something, but different *to*, *from*, or *than* it. Apart from the fact that *to* is more common in British English, and *from* and *than*, in North American English, *to* implies orientation towards the differing other, *from* implies departure from it, and *than* implies an alternative to and possible displacement of it. The comparer should compare and choose her words with care.

In contrast to *to contrast* (*contra-stare*, to stand against), *to compare* also means ‘to regard or represent as analogous or similar’, and, intransitively, ‘to be of the same or similar quality or value (as in) “gin compares with rum in alcohol content”’ – hence examination questions beginning ‘compare and [on the other hand] contrast’. H.M. Posnett, one of the first Anglophone theorists of comparative literature, in the 1880s implied identity by *comparison* when he asserted that ‘The most colourless proposition of the logician is either the assertion of a comparison, A is B, or the denial of a comparison, A is not B’.<sup>xiv</sup> Correspondingly, a *compare* is an analogy, equal, or rival of something else. Many terms for comparison stress likeness over difference: *to com-pare* is to bring together parities, *vergleichen* makes *gleich* [the same], *сравнить* makes *равный* [equal], and a *сравнение* is a simile as well as a comparison. The ancient Greek *παραβολή* [from *παρα* plus *βολή*, a casting, throwing, or putting] is a placing side by side, or an analogy. In a parable, as in an allegory, something is made to stand for something else on the basis of similarity or translation; *παραβολή* was borrowed in the Latin *parabola*, or comparison, and in post-classical Latin it is an allegory, proverb, discourse, or speech – an expansion of meaning which acknowledges the importance of comparison to rhetoric. The Latin *comparare* also meant to place together, couple, unite, pit against, treat as equal. By contrast, the modern Greek term for comparison, *συγκρίνω* [to judge together] avoids the prejudgement of results which pertain to both *compare* and *contrast*. Whereas the Latin instruction *cp.* in practice often invites contrast, *cf.* invites open-minded comparison.

Of course, *no two things* are identical or absolutely different; they attract comparative investigation because they are felt to be a *metaphor* in Todorov's sense (constituted by the tension of difference and resemblance, separateness and communication).<sup>xv</sup> That is, an initial comparison will have suggested either that the *comparanda* are *different* (an adjective used rhetorically to indicate that they are more different than might be expected) or, more often, that they are *similar* (that is, more similar than might be expected). The idea of an initial comparison preceding further comparison indicates another ambiguity in the word, which can refer not just to a methodical process, but to the unexamined impression which prompts it.

When comparing literary works originating in different places, differences between them are the assumed basis, and one of the ends, of the investigation: the background of divergence against which the similarities which suggested the comparison appear, and the finer points which appear against those similarities. Description of difference in relation to an other is one aim of comparison, but description of difference in relation to the self is not. The very impulse to compare complex objects produces the attendant impulse to stabilize at least one of the *comparanda* rather than pay attention to the instabilities of all simultaneously; to limit the length of investigation of each literary work, for example, in order to maintain contact between them, and to limit the potentially-infinite discovery of difference in thick description - and, therefore, of non-comparability. In addition, the arts, unlike the sciences, are infrequently able to use quantitative units in comparison (although they might do so more often than they do), but rely on a crude vocabulary of identity, opposition, equilibrium, and comparatives, modified by intensifiers and qualifiers. Most comparative cadences in literary study assert either identity or difference: 'Both *Война и Мир* [*War and Peace*] and *Анна Каренина* [*Anna Karenina*] treat the Russian people as a repository of value'; 'In contrast to *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* presents itself as a novel in the European mode'. The vague term *relatively* is used to indicate a relatively small degree of difference. The phrases *just as* and (more conscientiously) *rather as* cover a range of degrees and types of similarity; *whereas* covers a range of differences; the present assertions are no more precise than what they describe. Or little more. Or hardly more. Yet in explicitly comparative work the degree of descriptive detail attained is crucial, since it determines what is described as a similarity and what as a difference. In practice the transition from the first to the second often involves a slight increase in detail. It is salutary to be

reminded of the flexibility of such terms as *similarity* and *difference*, which are such heavily-used tools of thought, and are supposed antonyms; similarity is merely difference on a relatively small scale, and the choice between them can be determined in the interests of rhetoric. Indeed, comparisons have long been associated with not only rhetoric but odiousness: ‘Odyous of olde been comparisonis, And of comparisonis engendyrd is haterede’. (Lydgate, 1430) In Shakespeare’s works comparison is repeatedly characterised as quibbling, equivocation, jibing allusion and scoffing analogy.

But – if it is done conscientiously - one condition of a methodical comparison being considered worthy of pursuit is that the things concerned are in fact *comparable*. Comparability involves a degree of similarity in the *comparanda*. Of course, any thing can be compared with anything else, and *comparable* resembles *similar* and *different* in being a relative, not an absolute, term, the applicability of which rests on a comparison. The same is true of *non-* and *in-* *comparable*. Charges of non-comparability rhetorically assert that lack of interest, tactlessness, unfairness, or some other wrong would be involved in pursuing a comparison. These are statements of value. The assertion that any one thing, rather than an assembly of things, is *incomparable*, or *beyond compare*, implies that the qualities which it has in common with the other things most like it are trivial in comparison to its distinguishing characteristic/s, and that the pursuance of comparison would involve paying insufficient attention to those characteristics, thus rendering the comparison either trivial or invalid. The assertion ‘you can’t compare Salieri to Mozart’ implicitly argues that their similarities are unimportant compared to their differences, and that to describe either would be at best uninteresting and at worst insulting to Mozart. Similarly, Orsino tells Viola in *Twelfth Night*: ‘Make no compare/ Between that love a woman can bear me/ And that I owe Olivia’. (*Twelfth Night*: 2.4.100) Sometimes people describe a work of art as *incomparable* not only in order to express admiration for it, but also to imply that it is in the nature of the work’s excellence to determine a mode in which it alone should be explored, and which is always by far the most valuable mode in which to explore it. This is also what is meant by claims of uniqueness. The most extreme version of this argument is that the work’s own terms are the *only* terms on which it can be understood. The implication (rarely embraced) is that the work uses a private language in Wittgenstein’s sense, and is therefore incomprehensible. Comparatists assert both comparability and comprehensibility.



Peter Szondi asserted that ‘Kein Kunstwerk behauptet daß es unvergleichbar ist (das behauptet allenfalls der Künstler oder den Kritiker), wohl aber verlangt es, daß es nicht verglichen werde’ [No work of art declares that it is incomparable (at most it is the artist or critic who claims that), but every work of art demands that it not be compared]<sup>xvi</sup>. But this is clearly wrong- certain works do clearly ask to be compared with others: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* to the *Ὀδύσσεια* [*Odyssey*] of Homer for example. One entity of which incomprehensibility as well as incomparability is sometimes asserted is God – a claim made by several kinds of theism. The same compound assertion is made in order to express or advocate a sense of quasi-religious awe in relation to non-divine subjects - for example, since the later 1960s, to the Holocaust. A bill is currently passing through Israeli Parliament would outlaw comparisons to the Nazis.<sup>xvii</sup>

Assertions of non-comparability as applied to combinations of objects are often based on a sense that the way in which they are most likely to be compared will not generate *valid* results. Neither apples nor oranges are proverbially asserted to be intrinsically incomparable, but they are asserted to be mutually non-comparable - presumably because their similarities of size and use generate the risk that they will be judged according to the same criteria, and an orange would be unfairly criticized as less crisp than an apple (in this sense the idiom may be contrasted with *chalk and cheese* – more of a contrast). Hazlitt stated that ‘Comparisons are [...] impertinent, and lead only to the discovery of defects by making one thing the standard of another which has no relation to it’.<sup>xviii</sup> Similarities should therefore not be allowed to obscure differences which affect comparability; this is perhaps the sense behind the perfect rhyme in the roughly-equivalent Serbian phrase *поредити бабе и жабе* [to compare grandmothers and toads]. The charge of incommensurability denies that a certain type of measure can be applied to all of the proposed *comparanda*. For example, Spanish has an idiom which disparages *sumar peras con manzanas* [adding pears and apples].<sup>xix</sup> It is certainly possible to count *pieces of fruit*, but the specific category of *pear-or-apple* is, the idiom implies, of little interest. The Russian idiom *сравнивать тёплое с мягким* prohibits the comparison of the warm with the soft, since no single measure can be made of warmth and softness. Finally, certain qualities are differently perceived by different people. The Hungarian idiom *ízlések és pofonok* [tastes and smacks] suggests that the relative value of different objects cannot be absolutely decided if they are judged on qualities which are differently perceived by individuals,

rather as two smacks in the face cannot be compared if they are received by different people. It is also the case that *any* comparison must be performed by one person. Non-subjective qualities can be determined as belonging to different objects by different people – as Franco Morretti argues - and the objects can be compared by a third person making use of their descriptions, but for a comparison to take place the *comparanda* must be apprehended by one mind.<sup>xx</sup> Relative unity of physical or conceptual place assists the equally-important unity of time. Systematic comparisons require a succession of mental movements between wholes and parts in order to select the *comparanda*, to decide on the quality on which to compare them, and to determine the correspondent qualities of each of the *comparanda*. But, the end result of comparison is generated in an instant in which the qualities are simultaneously present to the comparer's mind.

### **Comparison in Comparative Literature**

I have suggested that today comparison is a minority pursuit. But it has played a central part in the development of criticism as a subject – notably, in a European context, in comparisons of the Greeks to the Romans, and the Ancients to the moderns. Comparison and criticism were connected more systematically in the later nineteenth century, when literary studies were modelled on the evolving scientific disciplines: *Literaturwissenschaft*, on *Naturwissenschaft*. Specifically, comparative literature was modelled on other subjects with *comparative* in their titles, including philology, biology, and philosophy. Science, in part, proceeds inductively through comparison; experiments analyse a *comparandum* in relation to an isolated variable, and observe deviations from the *secundum comparatum* or *control*. Comparative philology operated by observing similarities in languages which had been hitherto been assumed to be unconnected, and then by both using historical information to explain the connection, and by inducing historical hypotheses from the connection.

The results of such comparisons were sometimes explained, in the dimension of time, with the use of a tree metaphor. Indeed, tree-shaped comparativism has shown considerable durability in literary study, where it has tended either to point to similar social conditions generating similar literary phenomena, or to posit direct influence between phenomena. Posnett tended to the first in his comparisons of clan, town, national, and world literature. More recently, Franco Moretti described the history of British nineteenth century detective fiction in evolutionary terms, showing the results

of his symmetric comparisons of novels in tree diagrams which showed the divergence and convergence over time of what he denoted as different genres.<sup>xxi</sup>

The study of influence, which has proved a stronger and more enduring vein of criticism than social comparison, is necessarily asymmetric. Aleksei Veselovskii, brother of Aleksandr and co-founder of the Department of World Literature at Moscow University with Nikolai Storozhenko in 1873, stated at the beginning of his 1881 *The Western Influence in New Russian Literature* that ‘The exchange of ideas, images, fables, artistic forms between the tribes and peoples of the civilized world is one of the most important things studied by the still-young science of literary history’.<sup>xxii</sup> In 1961 Henry Remak criticized French criticism for its emphasis on influence studies rather than comparison in the strictest sense, arguing that ‘*Purely comparative subjects constitute an inexhaustible reservoir hardly tapped by contemporary scholars who seem to have forgotten that the name of our discipline is “comparative literature” not “influential literature”*’.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In 1993 Claudio Guillén distinguished three supranational bases for literary comparison: influence, socio-historic conditions, and critical methodology. Of course, some critical methodology is necessary to the observation of those similarities and differences which may then be explained in terms of socio-historic conditions or influence; in this sense, Guillén’s third basis is the only ‘basis’, and the other two are contexts used to explain the results found thereon. For example, Moretti classified and compared detective novels according to the kinds of clues which they gave to the reader, and explained the survival and extinction of genres in terms of the literary marketplace.<sup>xxiv</sup> Nonetheless, the intention to explain similarities and differences in terms extrinsic to the literature can affect the modes of comparison used, and the results generated.

Culler argued that ‘World literature courses that bring together the great books from around the world seem to base comparability on a notion of excellence, so that comparison – the principle of comparability – rather than opening new possibilities for cultural value, more often than not restricts and totalizes it’.<sup>xxv</sup> However, courses of world and general literature do not necessarily assert the *comparability* of the works of literature they select, any more than they demand their comparison; indeed, they may purport to make their selection on the criterion of incomparability. When comparison is required, it will not be the comparison of excellence (the excellence of a work of literature being connected to its uniqueness), but will have reference to

‘specific intellectual norms or models – generic, thematic, historical’ which, Culler himself argues, ‘are subject to investigation and argument in ways that the vacuous bureaucratic norms are not’.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the phrase *comparative literature*, *comparative* is the attribute of *literature*. Yet it is almost never understood in this way, the semantic meaning having drifted apart from the compositional meaning. The same is true of *vergleichende Literatur* and *сравнительная литература*, although not of *literature comparée*, in which the literature is the passive object of comparison. Clements noted that the equivalent ‘East Asian terms are a compound essentially of two substantives. The Chinese *pi-chiao wên-hsüeh*, the Japanese *hikaku bungaku*, and the Korean *pigyo munhak* consist of “comparison” plus “literature”. The terms thus denote [...] the scientific comparison of two or more literatures without inclusion of adjectival modifiers. Perhaps if we followed suit and adopted the simple “literature comparison” we might eliminate a great deal of discussion’.<sup>xxvii</sup> On the other hand, Wellek considered that ‘There is little use in deploring the grammar of the term and to insist that it should be called “the comparative study of literature”, since everybody understands the elliptic usage’.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Yet I would argue that the phrase *comparative literature* does have a potential meaning which corresponds with its compositional sense: literature which invites the performance of internal comparison, or which, to put it another way, *contains comparisons*. This is to use the noun *comparison* in a sense distinct from the two discussed above, a process and its result. In this sense ‘a comparison’ is a quality or set of qualities which may obviously or easily be interestingly compared with another quality or qualities in the same literary work. The work which contains them cannot be well understood without the performance of this comparison. *Waiting for Godot* is comparative between its first and second halves. In their presentation of parallel stories of two couples, *Daniel Deronda*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Women in Love* are comparative literature - not by virtue of containing significant contrasts, which most literature does, but by virtue of presenting parallels and divisions (between comic and tragic couples) which are more sustained and ostentatious than those presented by other literature. This might be the most useful, and grammatically cogent, application of the term *comparative literature*.

A comparison of novels as comparative works of literature is a second-order comparison similar to the comparison of ratios. This kind of comparison possesses the

advantage of confessing the variable of context. To say that ‘Daniel’s relationship to Gwendolen is the equivalent in *Daniel Deronda* of Levin’s relationship to Anna in *Anna Karenina*’ is less problematic than claiming ‘Daniel is like Levin’, or ‘Gwendolen is like Anna’. According to Crookshank ‘The comparability of two facts is a function of the comparability of their contexts’, and ‘scrupulous criticism’ ‘forbids the possibly fortuitous resemblance between two several data *detached* from their circumstances being taken as significant’.<sup>xxix</sup> He goes on to assert that in the comparative methodology of science or philosophy, the ‘guiding principle will be analogy, reasoning in accordance with what in mathematics is called a proportion, that is to say, the equality between two ratios: A is to B as Y is to Z. Such an equivalence is compatible with no matter how great an heterogeneity between A and Y, B and Z. [...] Confucius was in China that which Socrates was in Greece’.<sup>xxx</sup> Of course, internal literary comparisons likewise involve differences of context, and all assertions of the similarities of Gwendolen and Alcharisi (in *Daniel Deronda*) should be contextualized by the two women’s very different family circumstances, native countries, and musical talents: a simile might run: ‘Gwendolen is to her circumstances as Alcharisi is to hers’. That is, any comparison of components of complex objects is, implicitly or otherwise, a comparison of ratios. One is reminded that *ratio* is the etymological ancestor of *reason*, *pace* René Etiemble’s claim that ‘comparaison n’est pas raison’.<sup>xxxi</sup> Comparing the comparisons of two stories in three novels of two times and two countries makes this fact particularly clear. Of course, the questions remain of the relationship of China to Greece, of *Anna Karenina* to *Daniel Deronda*, and of Russian to English. Gwendolen and Alcharisi are *comparable* in a way in which Gwendolen and Anna are not, simply because they are parts of the same work of art. In this sense the two levels of comparison – within, and between, works – are importantly distinguished.

Most comparisons have one or both of two motives: the desire to compare the *comparanda*, and the desire to explore the topic or topics on which they are being compared. In the latter case the *comparanda* will be chosen according to the topic, and will not necessarily be compared directly with each other. In the former case, topics of comparison will be suggested by the *comparanda* – but complex *comparanda* may suggest an infinitude of them. A full description of an act of literary comparison therefore contains an adverbial phrase: ‘I compare A and B *with regard to* C (and D and E and F)’. Steiner posited an axis from literal translation of texts,

through imitation, to what he called the *interanimation* of texts within a national, linguistic, or broader cultural region.<sup>xxxii</sup> This *interanimation* may be observed in relation to particular topics or qualities, on which they might be said to *compare notes*. *Anna Karenina* and *Daniel Deronda*, for example, could interestingly be compared with regard to love, lust, married life, double-plotting, tragedy, comedy, art, politics, intellectualism, cosmopolitanism, God, children, Schopenhauer, death, misanthropy, satire, horses, railways, symbolism, kitsch – amongst many others. Complex topics of comparison generate a field of comparison - a nexus of subject matter and methodologies within which the novels are compared on the possession of simpler qualities. For example, a consideration of the ways in which these novels are realist or otherwise would require their description with regard to a range of literary qualities. Erich Auerbach rightly observed that ‘Schon die Auffindung des Ansatzpunktes [...] ist Intuition’ (even the discovery of the starting point is a matter of intuition).<sup>xxxiii</sup> A topic for comparison may be intuited as the highest common factor of interest of all of the *comparanda*: a comparison of race-horses which have nothing else in common might well concern their ability to race against other horses. The category *later-nineteenth early-twentieth century European novel*, however, is too large to bring novels of which this is the highest common factor into direct comparative contact. The highest common factor is likely to shrink, the more *comparanda* are involved.

The concept of a *topic* may be replaced by any one of several metaphors, each of which implies a slightly different comparative method. An *axis* of comparison implies a quality according to the degree of possession of which the *comparanda* are placed along a single axis. A *fulcrum* implies asymmetric comparison: the idea would be that performing comparison is like magnifying the force of a *secundum comparatum* through a lever resting on a *tertium comparationis* in order to lift the *primum comparandum* into clearer view or onto the same level as the *secundum comparatum* - for example, to lift *Frankenstein* into clearer view by applying the force of *Paradise Lost* through a lever resting on the fulcrum of the Fall. Auerbach uses *Ansatzpunkt* to denote a point of vantage from which different cultural objects may be simultaneously viewed.

Comparisons of quantity (for example, *amount of reference to God*) can to some extent be distinguished from comparisons of quality (for example, *conception of God*). However, this distinction, which is apparently one of kind, could also be

expressed as one of degree, just as distinctions of degree can also be expressed as distinctions of kind. Clearer is the distinction between comparisons which do, and do not, employ a standard external to the objects being compared. For example, Iasnaia Poliana – Tolstoy’s estate - and Saint Petersburg can be compared on their distance from the fixed third point which is Moscow, on the single axis of distance. In more complex comparisons the result is more ostensive. F.R. Leavis compares George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence on sex as follows: ‘the point may be made by saying that they are not only equally unlike Maupassant in their attitudes towards sex; they are unlike in the same way’ (which is like saying that Tula and Iasnaia Poliana both lie in roughly the same distance and direction from Moscow). Masaki Hirai in *Sisters in Literature* compares the relationships of the two sisters of Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, E.M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*, and Lawrence’s *Women in Love* to those of Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles’s *Antigone*, on the analogy of describing musical variations upon a theme.<sup>xxxiv</sup> No conversion to a single axis is possible here, and nor was it when R.A. Jelliffe attempted to foster comparativism by teaching a course on tragedy: quote, ‘constant reference was made [...] both to the governing idea of the course, the idea of tragedy, and to the substance and the treatment of one of these plays compared with another’.<sup>xxxv</sup> The relations of *Вишнёвый сад* [*The Cherry Orchard*] and Beckett’s *Happy Days* to ‘the idea of tragedy’ cannot be placed on an axis, but both plays can be raised to view on the fulcrum of tragedy, or – to use an alternative metaphor - viewed from the tragic high ground.

On the other hand, *comparanda* may be compared in relation to qualities which are generated by their very comparison. This may be illustrated by Anna Karenina’s reaction to her husband Karenin on her return home from Moscow. Anna has frequent social contacts with many men, but after meeting Vronskii she does not compare him and Karenin in relation to a real or imagined standard of man, but judges each largely on possession of the quality *attractiveness to Anna when the comparison is between Karenin and Vronskii*. Of course, this quality has as much reference to Anna as to those men, and critics comparing literature - unlike women comparing men - should seek to *exclude* intrinsically personal reactions as far as possible. However, comparisons of complex objects inevitably generate qualities which are peculiar to that comparison. In this sense compared works of literature could be thought of as involved in a mutual process, as suggested by the reflexive Russian verb *соотноситься* [to correspond with or compare oneself] which, unlike

*sravnivat* / *sravnit*', exists only in the imperfective aspect, and so is a process rather than a finite action. Wayne C. Booth classified the questions which may be asked of a text into those which it invites, those to which it responds, and those by which it is violated.<sup>xxxvi</sup> (1988: 89) Ideally, comparatists bring together works which are capable of conducting with each other an exploratory conversation, on a single topic, which is worth overhearing. This topic was not necessarily the one about which each individually has most to say – but all must find plenty to say on it when they started their discussion.

When comparison is insensitively performed, it is apt to exaggerate either likeness or difference. Fluellen does the first in his attempt to demonstrate the likeness of 'Macedon and Monmouth':

if you look in the maps of the world, I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon, and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth. It is called Wye at Monmouth, but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river; but 'tis all one, 'tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both.

(*Henry V*: IV. 7. 21-31)

The *significance* of the results of Fluellen's comparison is on his own terms clear: similarities of places imply the similarities of their rulers, and the similarities of their rulers support his King's claim to France. Literary comparatists, by contrast, sometimes face the question about their efforts: *cui bono*? A given work resembles and differs from a given other work in certain ways. What follows? The comparatist can respond in one or both of two ways. He or she can try to establish the *reasons* for the results (in terms of space, time, or influence), or he or she can try to establish the results' *significance*. The latter, which might be related to the reasons, could lie in an improved understanding of the texts and of their genres, of the authors' lives, oeuvres, countries, and languages, and cultural modes. Literary comparisons worth the trouble of performing will therefore contrast with the Hatter's riddle to Alice at the tea-party in *Wonderland*, 'Why is a raven like a writing desk?' (95).<sup>xxxvii</sup> Neither the Hatter nor the March Hare have the 'slightest idea'. Solutions can be and have been found; Carroll himself suggested, when asked: 'Because it can produce a few notes, though



they are very flat'. But these solutions do not, individually or collectively, indicate that ravens and writing desks are in Todorov's sense metaphors (constituted by the *tension* of difference and resemblance, separateness and communication). Nor does their discovery entail much interpretative risk; the degree of validity and profundity of the answers to the riddle found is immediately obvious.

One factor which greatly influences the outcome of comparison is the number of comparanda. The results of comparing two *comparanda* are more likely to be conceivable on a single axis, of which they may involuntarily be considered to mark out opposite ends. Modern English does not employ superlatives unless at least three *comparanda* are alluded to, but that does not prevent the illusion that the *comparandum* out of two which possesses *more* of a given quality, is *most* in possession of it, as in Shakespeare's English: 'Not to bestow my youngest daughter/ Before I have a husband for the elder'. (*Taming of the Shrew*) Leavis exemplifies and embraces the exaggeration to which such comparison can give rise in literary criticism: quote 'Lawrence sees what the needs are, and understands their nature, so much better than George Eliot. In the comparison, in fact, we have to judge that George Eliot doesn't understand them at all'.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The addition of a third *comparandum* makes it more likely that the results will be conceived on a two-dimensional field, and can also dilute the generalizations which may be suggested by a comparison of two: a Russian and an English novel may appear less strongly representative of their respective countries if read in comparison with a German, Czech, or American novel. With reference to the third language, which used to be required of many comparatists in the United States, Saussy wrote: 'the third language, like an uninvited guest, points to the things that a two-language pattern leaves out'; 'the apex of the triangle just determined is also a point from which a new angle opens up for measurement'.<sup>xxxix</sup> Fluellen might have had greater difficulty in demonstrating that King Henry was a second Alexander had a third point of comparison been involved. Bernheimer celebrates comparison for revealing external presences within works: 'the voice of comparative literature is "unhomely" and this very quality of dispossession – a kind of haunting by otherness – is that voice's great strength'.<sup>xl</sup> David Ferris goes further, in celebrating comparisons which do not generate coherent results in the bluntly paradoxical assertion: 'We compare what cannot be compared'.<sup>xli</sup>

Like any assertion of incomparability, however, this is either a relative statement or untrue. It was noted at the beginning of this article that comparison is intrinsic to thought and willed action. Given this, I would argue that it is worth sharpening one's skills at comparison, and consciousness of comparison's attractions and dangers, in the intellectually challenging but practically sheltered environment of literary criticism. Such criticism cultivates sensitivity, since comparison requires empirical openness to the precise location of the centre of gravity which permits a balance of separateness and communication between the *comparanda*. The term *comparatively* is related to *relatively*, with the latter understood not just in its connection to relativism (which is not a necessary concomitant of comparative thought), but to relationships – to the understanding of any phenomenon in its relevant contexts, and in the light of potential alternatives. At a political level, the willingness to compare one thing or oneself with an other or others undermines absolutism. And it is an ethically sound aim of human interaction for individuals to respect their own and each other's quiddity, whilst reaching to find maximum common ground. Moreover, ethical analyses may be assisted by comparative reference to moral benchmarks: far from inducing ethical relativism, their use forbids it. Since comparison is involved in all thought, thought about comparison is necessarily self-reflexive. This is one reason why analysis of the use of comparison in literary criticism should form an important part of literary theory, and why comparative literature courses as they currently exist can serve as a home for literary theory. The difference of degree rather than kind between similarity and difference, the mind's tendency to seek out equivalents, and the limited attention paid to any individual object being compared, applies to comparison in its broadest sense, from which comparison in the narrower sense is distinguished as much by degree as by kind, and which is unconsciously performed in everything from understanding linguistic *différance*, to reading *Anna Karenina* in relation to all of the novels which one remembers, to choosing one's lover. Thinking about comparison gives a better sense of where art fits into life - how it relates to it - and how it compares to it.

7720 words including endnotes.

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<sup>i</sup> This article is developed from material in the monograph *The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare* (London: Legenda, 2011). Its three central chapters concern *Daniel Deronda*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Women in Love* as double-plotted novels, and compares how they compare their plots - hence the puns of the title and subtitle. The introduction and conclusion set up and reflect on this exercise, and reflect on the nature of comparison itself, inside and outside of literary study. This article draws on these outer, meta-critical, chapters; I am grateful to the editors for permission to do so.

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Looking Back At "Literary Theory"', in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 63-67 (p. 64).

<sup>iv</sup> Elinor Shaffer, ed., *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979-), 1984: xiv.

<sup>v</sup> Charles Bernheimer opened the 1995 American Comparative Literature Association report with the statement: 'Comparative literature is anxiogenic'. Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Weninger, 'Comparative Literature at a Crossroads?', *Comparative Critical Studies* 2006, 3 (1-2): xi-xix (xii).

<sup>vii</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), p. 49.

<sup>viii</sup> René Wellek, 'The Crisis of Comparative Literature', in *Concepts of Criticism*, edited by Stephen G. Nichols (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 282-295 (p. 290).

<sup>ix</sup> Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, p. 240.

<sup>x</sup> Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, pp. 51-57.

<sup>xi</sup> Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, p. 53.

<sup>xii</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag), p. 85.

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- <sup>xiv</sup> H.M. Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, 1886), p. 73.
- <sup>xv</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Genres du discours* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 226.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Peter Szondi, *Hölderline-Studien: mit einem Traktet über philologische Erkenntnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1967), p. 21.
- <sup>xvii</sup> BBC News website 10.1.12 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16488042> accessed 20.1.12.
- <sup>xviii</sup> William Hazlitt, *Table Talk* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), p. 92.
- <sup>xix</sup> This and similar idioms are taken from the Wikipedia article ‘Apples and Oranges’: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apples\\_and\\_oranges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apples_and_oranges), accessed 28.2.12.
- <sup>xx</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 4-5.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, pp. 73, 75.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Quoted in Rachel Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 18.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Henry Festschrift Remak, ‘Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function’, in *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, edited by Newton Phelps Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pp. 3-37 (p. 5).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, p. 75.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Jonathan Culler, ‘Comparative Literature, at Last’, in Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, pp. 237-48 (p. 242).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Culler, ‘Comparative Literature, at Last’, p. 244.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Robert J. Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1978), p. 11.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> René Wellek, ‘The Crisis of Comparative Literature’, in *Concepts of Criticism*, edited by Stephen G. Nichols (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 282-295 (p. 290).
- <sup>xxix</sup> Paul Masson-Oursel, *Comparative Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), pp. 7, 50.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Masson-Oursel, *Comparative Philosophy*, p. 44.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> René Étiemble, *Comparaison n’est pas raison: la crise de la littérature comparée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

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- <sup>xxxii</sup> Steiner, George, 'What Is Comparative Literature?', *Comparative Criticism*, 18 (1996), 157-71 (p. 436).
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1946), p. 306.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Masako Hirai, *Sisters in Literature: Female Sexuality in 'Antigone', 'Middlemarch', 'Howards End' and 'Women in Love'* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 8, 25.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> R. A. Jelliffe, 'An Experiment in Comparative Literature', *College English* 9 (1947) 2: 85-87 (p. 86).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 89.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 95.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence, Novelist* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955), pp. 115-16.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Haun Saussy, 'Comparative Literature?', *PMLA* 2003, 118(2): 336-41 (336, 340).
- <sup>xl</sup> Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, p. 12.
- <sup>xli</sup> Ferris, David, 'Indiscipline', in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 78-99 (p. 91).