
ARTICLES – COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Modern Languages Open Comparative Literature Launch Issue

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Editor's Introduction

Our aim in putting together this special issue launching comparative literature for *Modern Languages Open* was to provide a dynamic snapshot of current thinking around issues of critical importance to the field, and to encourage further discussion around the same topics as the section grows and evolves. Conceived partly as being in dialogue with the 'State of the Discipline' reports produced by the American Comparative Literature Association every ten years (most recently in 2014–15),¹ we approached some of the foremost thinkers in the field to set out questions and themes that reflected their own comparative research interests and practice. However, we also specifically wanted to locate the points of discussion here within a modern languages framework. This is, of course, primarily because of the disciplinary context of the *MLO* journal itself, but also because we identified a certain commonality of anxiety around status and direction between the fields of modern languages and comparative literature.²

Unlike in the United States, most comparative literature departments or programmes in the United Kingdom operate within units of – broadly conceived – modern languages and cultures.³ Looking to the future, this disciplinary interface presents those of us who teach and research across both areas with the opportunity to challenge the monolithic presence of what Spivak has termed a 'canonical "World Literature" – often practically in translation – that is being propagated, generally from the old metropole'.⁴ This opportunity – indeed, necessity – to redefine the parameters of the field of study, and to 'disturb the reigning order of

¹ See <https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

² 'We can confidently predict that ten years from now, comparative literature will be in a state of crisis. It is always in crisis. In 2004 I ventured that nothing has ever defined comparative literature so well as the search for its own definition, a search conducted between and against better-established fields.' Haun Saussy, 'Comparative Literature: The Next Ten Years', 9 March 2014. <https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/comparative-literature-next-ten-years> [accessed 20 June 2018]. The crisis in modern languages stems at least in part from a dramatic decline in student uptake at school and university level (in the UK at least), and has engendered what Katrin Kohl has termed 'a unique opportunity to rethink and re-imagine what modern languages should consist of as an academic subject'. This opportunity is embodied in projects such as the AHRC's Open World Research Initiative. See <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/oxford-and-brexit/brexit-analysis/modern-languages-uk> and <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/owri/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

³ For example, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at the University of Kent, King's College London, University of Glasgow, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, Royal Holloway University of London, University of St Andrews and University College London.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The End of Languages?', 3 March 2014. <https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/end-languages> [accessed 20 June 2018].

priorities',⁵ is an equally pressing matter for modern languages, and I would argue that it is precisely by thinking each field through the other that we might find just cause for optimism and mutual renewal of purpose.

For instance, recent large-scale research projects in the UK such as 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' (TML) have aimed to reframe the disciplinary landscape of modern languages, arguing that it should be seen as 'an expert mode of enquiry whose founding research question is how languages and cultures operate and interact across diverse axes of connection'.⁶ By using a vocabulary of cultural connectivity and transnational interaction that recalls and echoes the disciplinary landscape of comparative literature, TML reframes the two as cognate fields that can and must enrich one another going forward. Indeed, it seems self-evident (but is perhaps just as easily forgotten) that comparative literature flourishes through the knowledge of multiple languages just as much as modern languages will continue to thrive from the input of comparative study.

These underlying elements are fortuitously interwoven throughout the six contributions to this issue, and they work together to constitute an astoundingly rich range of perspectives on issues that unite and concern both fields of study. The question of translation, in particular (and perhaps predictably), looms large within the articles collected here. But this is translation conceived of in new and exciting ways – as a source of connectivity (Ginger), as a mode of 'ferrying' concepts and modes of thinking between national languages and cultures (Tihanov) and even genres (Mussgnug), and as a 'common cause' practice that sheds light on language as a fundamental aspect of human life and identity (Cronin).

Similarly, the thorny issue of how to define 'world literature' – alongside related questions of planetary thinking and the categorization of literature across existing national borders – has emerged as another point of critically rich debate. Moving beyond the foundational definition of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, subsequently developed by thinkers such as Moretti and Damrosch to capture the movements and circulations of commodified culture under globalization, we shift here to consider how the 'world' in world literature ought to be defined in the contemporary moment (Saussy), and the recognition that there are many worlds and many scales of vision thereof (Orsini et al.). We move, via Spivak's 'worldliness', towards the sort of 'planetary' perspective that inspires Mussgnug's call for responsible and responsive *local* sensitivity. This has longstanding ramifications for our work as comparatists. For when Christopher Bush suggested that reconsidering the scale of the 'area' might relieve the burden of the world in world literature, he also sounded a humorous warning bell for future directions of study: 'Now if we could just do something about comparative...'.⁷ Yet as Mussgnug points out, it is those very practices of comparison, and repeated renegotiation, that grant comparative literature its own transformational sense of relevance to the wider field of Arts and Humanities studies.

Each of the articles herein can be read as a manifesto of sorts, to borrow from Saussy's title. Each one aims to pose new questions, to stake out new areas of enquiry, and to suggest new frameworks of thought. The contributors all employ different lenses and measures of scope in order to do so: from a focus on the 'transportability' of one thinker (Bakhtin) through different linguistic and cultural frameworks; the history of one geocultural area (East Asia); and one mode of literary analysis (genre), to new perspectives on translation studies, world literature and on comparative study itself. All the articles are written as brief reports, designed

⁵ Haun Saussy, 'Comparative Literature: The Next Ten Years', 9 March 2014. <https://stateofthedisipline.acla.org/entry/comparative-literature-next-ten-years> [accessed 20 June 2018].

⁶ See <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

⁷ Christopher Bush, 'Areas: Bigger than the Nation, Smaller than the World', 23 April 2014. <https://stateofthedisipline.acla.org/entry/areas-bigger-nation-smaller-world> [accessed 24 May 2018].

to be accessible to undergraduate and postgraduate students of comparative literature at the same time as hopefully stimulating new academic scholarship that will engage with and build on this set of daring new perspectives and ideas.

The issue opens with Andrew Ginger's 'Comparative Study and the Nature of Connections: Of the Aesthetic Appreciation of History'. Ginger eloquently argues for the importance of an aesthetic mode of comparative study – one that takes into account intimacy and mood, and that 'involves attending to how things feel or appear to be alike, to the sensual textures of what they share, of their sameness' (p. 1). Arguing against the need for rigid criteria of comparison, and over-attention to causality or systematic theories, Ginger makes a case for privileging the craft that comparatists practice in tracing commonalities across time and space, a craft that allows for cross-historical dialogue spread over different modes of distance. Conjuring the image of the nineteenth-century thaumatrope to illustrate his argument, Ginger allows Baudelaire to dialogue with American teen movies in an example of what he terms 'patterns of bubbles' of time and space. These are patterns that might even be able to 'enable the marginalized and subjugated to re-assert their own value' within the field of study in question (p. 1).

Such attention to layers and textures of meaning also characterizes Francesca Orsini, Karima Laachir and Sara Marzagora's new take on the 'world literature' debate, 'Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a Ground-Up and Located Approach to World Literature'. In what constitutes a dynamic and impassioned plea for a truly 'globalizing' direction for comparative literature, the authors take to task the universal application of Western categories of enquiry to non-Western literatures, thereby calling into question the single 'world' in what they perceive to be a currently 'thin and patchy' *world* literature. Their paper, which presents the team's ECR-funded project 'Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies', summarizes four initial problems with this 'globalizing guise': the reinscription of the nation, the exclusive focus on empire, the partitioning of literature in local languages from Anglo- and Francophone literatures, and the predilection for 'universal categories and simple macro-models that aim to cover the whole world like a single map' (p. 2). In response, they propose a multilingual approach that locates multiple traces of languages in texts: a ground-up, located take on local production that acknowledges loaded positionalities, uneven trajectories of circulation, and that conceives of history, time and space as multiple, relational and fragmentary. They argue for attention to disconnections as well as to zones of contact, to fractures and asymmetries, and for the 'right to disengage' (p. 6). These elements form part of those significant geographies that their approach privileges: geographies of community that acknowledge the unpredictability and multiplicity of spatial connections forged through relations and patterns, in turn echoing Ginger's insistence on connectivity through comparison, but in a located constellation of South–South networks.

In the next paper, 'The Comparative History of East Asian Literatures: A Sort of Manifesto', Haun Saussy also takes somewhat weary issue with 'oriental' literatures being made to fit into a cultural world order that has been defined by others, and again emphasizes that it absolutely matters how we specify the 'world' in world literature. His own definition, for the purposes of this mini-manifesto, is that world literature is 'the literature of that world which is available to the persons who call it so' (p. 2), and, as such, explorations of 'world literature' open up the possibility for conceiving of overlapping or indeed mutually unrelated worlds. In order to illustrate this manifesto, Saussy proposes comparison of the relationships among the languages, literatures and cultures of Asia before 1800. This is a comparison situated prior to the age of globalization that so often defines the parameters of world literature, and before the passage of European influence. Instead, it aims to chart how literary themes

and cultural genres spread over what are now national borders and became in turn fluid and rigid within them. Saussy's analysis 'indicates currents, tides, shoals, beacons and other features that permit or hinder passage' (p. 6), thus daringly decentring current debates on the accepted globalized ordering of things.

Galina Tihanov focuses his contribution on questions of the definition of world literature, and the role of translation therein, on one (albeit towering) cultural figure: Mikhail Bakhtin. In 'Ferrying a Thinker across Time and Language: Bakhtin, Translation and World Literature', Tihanov asks the question of what truly constitutes translation, if we consider that its emphasis on originality and fidelity was a relatively recent phenomenon? In fact, re-privileging elements of appropriation, creativity and play allows Tihanov to recast the role and function of translation across cultures, and to underscore its related attention to tradition and genre. Taking the example of Bakhtin's oeuvre, Tihanov shows how the reception and understanding of thought and meaning can differ dramatically in relation to domestic traditions of philosophy and translation, and this allows him to articulate Bakhtin's own relation and relevance to 'world literature'. Furthermore, Bakhtin paid little attention to the notion of world literature as a fixed canon of great writers, but conceived of it instead as a 'study of the process that shapes the novel to become a world genre' (p. 12). As such, he occupies a unique standpoint: in temporal terms for his attention to the pre-modern, and in spatial terms for his attention to the non-European (and pre-European) elements in European literature. By foregrounding these elements of creativity and play in translation, and the persistence of meaning across borders of time and language, Tihanov thus suggests innovative pathways for reviving and opening up modern languages as a comparative field of study.

In a similar spirit, Florian Mussgnug uses the question of genre as his departure point in 'Planetary Figurations: Intensive Genre in World Literature' to interrogate the spatial and temporal reach of comparative literature as a mode of enquiry. Arguing forcefully that genre deserves a more considered place as a critical concept or tool because of its transhistorical sameness – which allows a historical past to merge with contemporary relevance under one label – Mussgnug picks up on the same affective framework (or 'critical mood') that features in Ginger's work. Genre, in this configuration, becomes a site for potential encounter, and one that by its very nature permits flux and encourages creative intervention. In dialogue with Berlant, Braidotti, Dimock and Felski, Mussgnug suggests charting the transformations of genre through a series of articulations, or figurations, that are embedded within networks of potentiality, mutuality and kinship. This sort of planetary perspective on literary genre both displays and displaces poles of power to allow space for creative interventions in the present – precisely through the relational nature of comparative work itself. Indeed – as Mussgnug concludes – modern languages, in all its linguistic and cultural diversity, is ideally placed to capture and expand such comparative work and, by so doing, to take on a more decidedly planetary outlook itself.

Lastly, Michael Cronin's 'Translation Studies and the Common Cause' takes a deliberately polemical stance towards a perceived lack of critical attention to translation within the social sciences and, further, within comparative literature itself. Pedagogical concerns about the interface between language and literature in both comparative literature and modern languages writ large underpin his contribution. Again, Cronin underscores the importance of aesthetics (echoing Ginger's piece in this issue) as that which encouraged the spread of what he calls 'cosmopolitan languages' (Sanskrit, Latin, Chinese and so on). Yet, monolingual prejudices born of nineteenth-century nationalisms have succeeded in marginalizing 'the translational crossings between literatures, languages and cultures' (p. 3) in practices that persist in teaching, publishing and even in creative writing itself, to this day. Cronin launches an urgent call for diversification that co-opts ecocritical thought and suggests that we should be 'more


directed towards how we use our various modes of enquiry – modern languages, comparative literature, translation studies – to strengthen biocultural diversity and ensure that we relate cultures in their distinctness rather than eliminate them in their (imagined) commonality' (p. 4). This is a terracentric paradigm, one that demands due consideration of a 'view from everywhere' (p. 8). Within such a framework, translation becomes a methodology for locating fecundity, resources and situated knowledges (see Orsini et al.), a common cause that can and should be implemented and encouraged through comparative study of literatures and cultures.

The six papers collected here showcase the kind of innovative, creative and groundbreaking work that we should like to encourage for submission to this new comparative literature section of *Modern Languages Open*. As section editor, I should like to extend grateful thanks to all our authors – Michael Cronin, Andrew Ginger, Florian Mussgnug, Francesca Orsini (with Karima Laachir and Sara Marzagora), Haun Saussy and Galin Tihanov – for their outstanding contributions; to the editorial board – Florian Mussgnug, Henriette Partzsch and Emily Spiers – for their dedicated input at every stage at compiling the launch issue; and to the team at *Modern Languages Open* – especially Clare Hooper and Katherine Pulman – for all their support and assistance along the way.

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