

# WHAT IS LEFT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND WORLD LITERATURE? NOTES ON INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE, ITS CONCRETE UNIVERSALITY AND ENIGMATICITY

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The names, and eventually the notions, of world literature and comparative literature are often contrasted, although they share fields of research. Today, these terms should be first viewed as academic labels designating literary studies that address international and/or interlinguistic and/or intercultural issues with no restrictive references to languages, nations, cultures and continents. Both notions are somewhat outdated. World literature, which cannot be disassociated from Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, referred to the ontology of Romantic literature and the expansion of the book trade, which began the universalization of literatures. The ontology of literature and the rise of the book trade were not considered contradictory: Goethe and Romantic critics thought that due to the ontological status of literature, world literatures would be read according to a progressive unity that was to be associated with the universalizing power of the book trade. The qualifier *comparative* in comparative literature was linked to the epistemic background of the beginning of the nineteenth century and its broad references to comparative sciences such as, for example, comparative linguistics or comparative zoology. In today's context, globalization partially explains the revival of the notion of world literature, although literary works in our globalized world should be conflated neither with literature-universal, nor with a kind of geographic cohesion of literatures. The enlightening initial opposition between Jean-Jacques Ampère's early studies in comparative literature and Goethe's *Weltliteratur* can form a supplement to these short historical remarks. For the former, a literature can be the distinct

counterpart of another literature, whatever relations connect these two literatures. For the latter, the other literature, translated, displaced, is simultaneously a surprise and what can be inserted in his own world and literature, then augmented, modified; this alliance of the Same and the Other is the first condition for the development of *Weltliteratur*. This early opposition between Ampère and Goethe and the implications of both designations or notions, comparative literature and world literature, correlate with a fundamental question that we still entertain and comment upon: can we bring to any large unification of literatures the same kind of understanding brought to bear on the acts and works of individuals—writers, readers—or limited writers’ or readers’ groups, or broader ensembles—nations and, eventually, regions? The answer to this question should paradoxically lead to a minimal characterization of literary works and consequently to an equally minimal approach to comparative literature and world literature, or to what is left of them. This article’s tentative minimal requalification of both disciplines will rest on cursive readings of the subtext of one canonical work of comparative literature, Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, and of the book that provoked the return to the notion of world literature in North America, David Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?*

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This fundamental question seeks to define the challenges and contradictions of comparative literature and world literature. Both disciplines presuppose the diversity and cohesiveness of literatures; in other words, they offer totalizing images of literatures that should not be confused with the image of the totality of literatures. As a result, they call for new descriptions of the ways we identify links and quasi-wholes among literature and assess their universality. We remain attached to the recognition of this universality, which we consider a condition of our international/intercultural readings. Consequently, although this article recalls the most dominant approaches to comparative literature and world literature, it does not reiterate the current world literature/comparative literature debates, which some critics view as analogous to those between the Moderns and the Ancients, or between less and more Eurocentrism (see e.g. D’haen 35, 42, 44, 135), nor try keeping an equidistant approach to both disciplines, contrary to René Etiemble, who is today often referred to by world literature critics. Etiemble defended a critical practice that he named “*littérature vraiment générale*,” precisely equidistant from comparative literature and world literature. In order to define both disciplines’ challenges and contradictions, this article aims at designating their *locus communis*, the foundational ideas they share: the multiplicity of literatures is manifest and a crucial feature of our encounter with literature(s) and the world; this encounter calls for the recognition of a kind of continuity or cohesion of our readings, but not for their unity; all literatures are mutually heterogeneous, as are the many places of the world, but just as the world’s many places are within and mediated by this single world, literatures can be thought of as belonging to literature. Literatures are literature insofar as they function as mutual mediations within one world, which is to be equated with one single mediation of all that it contains: people, actions, objects, and literatures. This *locus communis* allows

us to question the conceptual openness and flexibility of world literature and the many cosmopolitan and international views of comparative literature: because of comparative literature's more or less obvious positivism and world literature's list of widely recognized works, many critics overlook the construction and function of the universal image of literature(s). The latter cannot be only referred either to comparative literature's internationalism or to some interpretations of humanism, already highlighted by Goethe when he coined the word *Weltliteratur*.

Because the initial question remains relevant, we think that any argument about comparative and world literature should take their more salient identifications and methods into account. Although this decision will eventually seem schematic and restrictive, it is a good way to highlight the most basic questions of both disciplines, while we should avoid the many uncertainties that the history of their academic designations demonstrates.

This initial question can be discussed in terms of the history of the ambiguous uses of the designations *comparative* and *world*. Discussions of the qualifier *comparative* in comparative literature are innumerable; comments on Goethe's invention and definition of the word *Weltliteratur*, similarly number in the hundreds, with no definite conclusion. Today, we could read these ambiguities as explicit confirmations of Etiemble's remark in *Comparaison n'est pas raison*, which equally applies to scholars of comparative literature and of world literature: "Comparatists do not agree either on an object or a method for their 'science'" (*Comparaison* 155). Etiemble points to the difficulties and uncertainties that anyone who views literatures as diverse and relational must confront. The many variations in qualifying literary connections, which comparative literature and world literature both demonstrate, prove the difficulty of associating the singular and the relational and of characterizing this association.

Consequently, it is no surprise that comparative definitions of both disciplines remain uncertain today. Many comparative literature handbooks define world literature as a subfield of comparative literature (see e.g. Brunel et al.). On the other hand, world literature handbooks refer to comparative literature as an inclusion within world literature,<sup>1</sup> because they regard world literature as an, or *the*, overall approach to the many literatures of the world. French handbooks most often view world literature as a moment in the history of comparative literature. In China, most discussions of world literature conclude by pluralizing it as *world literatures*. This change is more than a small literal variation; it responds to the perception that world literature encompasses a relatively small number of literatures. Any use of the word *world* implies and demands the plural.<sup>2</sup> By an ironic turn, the expression *world literatures* is likely to be regarded as a complement to, or the truest qualification of, comparative literature.

Today, critics often decide to reread past comparative literature essays under the label of world literature. Sometimes, such a rereading proves to be a kind of misreading, which we should view as relevant in so far as it points to implicit or explicit questions that comparative literature and world literature must answer. For example,

the French comparatist Joseph Texte, who published *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire, étude sur les relations littéraires de la France et de l'Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle* in 1895 (translated into English in London in 1899 as *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Cosmopolitan Spirit in Literature: A Study of the Literary Relations between France and England during the Eighteenth Century*), is today recognized as a defender of world literature (see Tihanov). This recognition is, however, hypothetical. Texte's essay actually addressed the "romantic" influence of England upon Rousseau; the deliberately anachronistic use of the qualifier "romantic" implied that the influence was negative and was associated with the notion of race. Texte never quoted Goethe's *Weltliteratur*; however, he concluded his essay with the hope that national literatures would someday no longer be in competition with one another and would be read under a unified view. Today, readings of Texte under the label of world literature make this hope central, identifying it with a search for universality that is partially supported by Texte's preface to the English edition of his essay: he recognized the limits of his book and that his nationalist point of view should be attenuated. More importantly, the meaning of Texte's references to cosmopolitanism is altered by present-day critics. In Texte's argument, cosmopolitanism designates the disparity and separation of literatures in Europe, and cannot be viewed as an ideal and unifying approach to literatures. Texte's case and ideological variations and current interpretations of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines...* illustrate that comparative literature and world literature imply relativist views and are not free from ideological implications or expressions. Relativism is, paradoxically, a limit to any national point of view and a means to delineate literary relations, and it cannot be avoided. This is Damrosch's remarkable suggestion in *What Is World Literature?* Comparative literature and world literature experts do know that any picture they give of literature(s) is partial, even though they assert its relevance.

Many methods and critical practices in both disciplines exemplify this paradoxical relativism. Comparative literature deals with variable and constant data in many fashions—literary genre studies, literary and aesthetic categories, literary histories that presuppose the continuity of literature through all literatures. World literature plays upon the unity and diversity of literature(s) by focusing upon some manifest literary routes or the world circulation of some unchanged literary forms such as *pantoum*, world literary histories in one language or many, literary groups and works that have attained world importance but cannot be kept too distant from less recognized ones; whichever prominent literary work or literature world literature quotes, there are always minor counterparts. World literature should, therefore, be put in the plural.

This short evocation of both disciplines' proximities and similarities, and of their handling of universal and relativist viewpoints, shows that they can be easily deconstructed. Their dualities—the constant and the variable, the world and its minor locations—do not make it explicitly possible to designate the universality they presuppose—they do not disassociate literatures' continuity and diversity, literatures'

unique container (the world) and multiplicity. Comparative literature and world literature are obviously subjects to a paradox that produces their uncertainty and is connected to the difficulty of linking broad references to literature(s) with the understanding of restricted references such as writers, works, groups of writers and works, and nations.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze outlines the same kind of paradox that he recognized in philosophical arguments, and which is relevant to both comparative literature and world literature: “Avec l’identique, on pense bien de toutes ses forces, mais sans avoir la moindre pensée, n’a-t-on pas au contraire, dans le différent, la plus haute pensée, mais qu’on ne peut pas penser” (*Différence et répétition* 292).<sup>3</sup> We can exemplify this paradox with a short analysis of two exemplary works: Eric Auerbach’s history of realism in Western literatures and David Damrosch’s selection and definition of works of world literature. The former is identified with comparative literature, and the latter with world literature.

In comparative literature and world literature, the paradox of the singular (what Deleuze calls the different) and the universal (what he calls the identical) is most often highlighted by means of critical paradigms and by referring to factual data. Critical paradigms and, consequently, critics’ reading positions are given priority. In *What Is World Literature?* Damrosch correctly remarks that world literature is an objective construction of readers and critics; the latter are responsible for characterizing world literature and identifying its works because of the vast and significant data it encompasses. This should equally apply to Auerbach: his history of realism in Western literatures presupposes the authority of the critic. Auerbach views the characteristics of works and, consequently, can define, classify, and situate them in the time line he has selected, no matter which discontinuities prevail in the history of realism. Thus, both comparative literature and world literature presuppose a normative approach to changes in literatures. As Damrosch argues in *How to Read World Literature*, particularly in Chapter 2 (“Reading across Time”) and Chapter 3 (“Reading across Literatures”), world literature postulates a Kantian time-space frame that legitimizes critical paradigms and overviews of works and literatures, and allows for cross-spatial and cross-temporal references. In *Mimesis*, the combination of time and space frames is defined, as often occurs in Western criticism that takes a wide time span into account, by a teleological perspective upon history (from Homer to Virginia Woolf). This perspective implies a regressive move from the twentieth century to antiquity. The historical relations that Auerbach delineates are essentially extensions of the present; historical parallelisms cannot be genetic, since comparisons require explicitly defined literary objects, historical data, and time lines.

This use of critical paradigms and time-space frames authorizes constant comparisons, although neither Auerbach nor Damrosch uses the word. The relation between diverse realisms and works, and between various extensively circulated works, allows the critic to read the same information in singular works and many historical backgrounds, as well as the unification of these backgrounds: Europe in *Mimesis*, the

world in *What Is World Literature?* In other words, an analysis that applies to different scales and complexities presupposes the unity of its objects. “Realism” and “world literature” are kinds of self-organizing critical devices that account for the persistence of patterns (mimesis, wide circulation of works) in diverse and new paths, and serve as tools of systematization. They do not answer the singular/universal issue, insofar as they do not justify how the works they discuss relate to one another nor how they can be seen as simultaneously singular and universal. René Wellek noted in “Auerbach’s Special Realism” that the effective and constant critical reference in Auerbach’s study is an existential view of the individual. To take the discussion beyond Wellek’s observation, the continuous existential view of the individual is the only means of designating a constant and multiple relation that escapes the abstraction and closure of the self-organizing critical device, *realism*. With regard to *What Is World Literature?* first, we should again stress the importance Damrosch places on the role of the reader, and of substitutes such as the translator or the critic, to authorize multiple variations of works. We should also observe that these variations (such as translations and interpretations) are considered to characterize the works themselves. The relation between works and literatures is equated with the variability of works of world literature; in other words, the self-organizing power that is recognized in works that circulate the most extensively, although this power presupposes the operation of readers and translators. The ability of widely circulated works to change while remaining the same is seen as a substitute for connections between people (readers) and works. These works are *the relation* because they are altered. It is essential to note two things: alterations are contingent and eventually result in uncertain references to the source work; and the only constant designation of the work being referred to is its title.<sup>4</sup> The designation of works of world literature is ultimately nominalist. Damrosch’s observations are not new to the field of comparative literature: in *Mythe de Rimbaud*, Etiemble had already reduced the identification of Rimbaud’s world reception to the only *designation* of Rimbaud’s poems.

Eventually, and against their explicit arguments, Auerbach’s *Mimesis* and Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?* suggest that comparative literature and world literature rest on:

1. self-developing critical devices;
2. minimal critical notions (the figure of the individual and the titles of works; that is, names, in other words, “rigid designators”), regardless of the quantity of works, data, and references that are quoted;
3. an exterior view of literary works that prevents a definition of the internal power relation of these works, and identifies variations of these works as partially arbitrary or random. The works that Auerbach and Damrosch analyze in their respective studies are just a few among many others that are relevant and should be cited. Comparative literature and world literature are, consequently, paradoxical, as their designations of wholes—the whole of literary works that must be classified as realist, the whole or the various wholes that constitute world literature—are only implicit.

4. The question that is logically antecedent to both Auerbach's and Damrosch's arguments has not been answered: what allows literary works to admit these variable comparisons that refer to a constant critical notion (realism), or to be qualified as universally relational (variations of works)? Remarkably, this question is equally relevant for most literatures of the past, whatever literary tradition or ontology they refer to, and contemporary works that are viewed within the context of globalization.

These observations of comparative literature and world literature may be considered schematic, but they do exemplify the inherent paradox of both disciplines, which scholars have often highlighted. Harry Levin remarked that comparative literature and universal literature (his translation of *Weltliteratur*) are inseparably holistic and relativist (374), while Claudio Guillen referred to this duality with the trenchant expression, *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*. To answer the question that, in our opinion, most often remains unanswered, we must elaborate upon holism and relativism in literary criticism.

Without a general idea of literature, we cannot read literatures and works as relational, and without a recognition of individual works, we cannot attribute any reality to the notion of literature. Holism is exemplified by the old literary traditions, Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, the beginnings of comparative literature, T.S. Eliot's article "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and even deconstruction. The recognition of holism should not lead to the kind of literary idealism, which can be seen in nineteenth-century French comparative literature and, today, within world literature, in Pascale Casanova's definition of an international literary space, "The World of Letters," which "functions invisibly for the most part" (72). In Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* holism is neither explicitly nor implicitly invoked, though it does have an equivalent: all works and literatures in the world are part of some sort of unity because they have only one container: the world. Because the latter is unique, it legitimizes literary variations; they can be viewed as very distant from their sources, but not as breaking with them. These qualifications show that holism is an abstraction that is not obliged to identify literature and literatures explicitly. Though holism upholds thought about literature, it cannot support a definition of literature, and this is a remarkable confirmation of Deleuze's interpretation of the identical/different paradox.

Due to this abstraction, holism implies a strong relativism and allows us to recognize and name any literary work, and characterize it as relational. This basic duality is exemplified in French comparative literature, particularly between the nineteenth century and the 1950s: the holistic view of literature(s) demands a positivistic description of works and literatures. Compiling historical and factual data on literatures and works, and ensuring they comply with relativism, compensates for the abstraction of holism—which is, paradoxically, confirmed by factual data—and invites us to acknowledge that the notion of literature does not presuppose a constant and stable identification.

Whichever method is applied, the constitutive paradoxes (universality/singularity;



holism/relativism) of comparative literature and world literature insist that we view any literature and literatures' wholes as mutable and developing ensembles, which we can further describe with the single word *totalization*. Totalization, however, cannot be conflated with totality. If we agree with Zhang Longxi's affirmation that Aristotle's *Poetics* belongs to world literature and seek to defend the latter without a total view of "World Poetics," we are merely recognizing this totalization. By accepting Zhang Longxi's broad view of poetics and by using the notion of totalization, we stress that comparative literature and world literature, while they presuppose the universalization of singular works and specific literatures, assume that the universality of literature(s) has no ready justification, accepted historical explanations, or references to our world. The duality of holism and relativism implies a view of literary works and literature(s) as kinds of broad oxymorons, which multiple realisms and variations of works further imply. As a result, neither discipline recommends intricate interpretations of literary works, nor do they explore the underlying structures beneath the meanings and effects of those works; hermeneutic and structural orientations do not hold prominence.

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These brief observations enable us to revise or rewrite the main tenets of both disciplines and to answer the question that we consider logically antecedent to Auerbach's and Damrosch's arguments. This revision (or rewriting) should not be regarded as correcting these two books, but as a move towards the minimal phenomenological and epistemic conditions of comparative literature and world literature. Both resist ready figurations of the universal, which are attached to identifications of structures, and to connections among broad meanings, which are the domain of hermeneutics.

When applied to single works, the duality of holism and relativism that both disciplines share should be redefined as the duality of concrete and universal. Any print literary work is a concrete object; its print text is its "objectivity." Each time readers and critics quote a work and a series of works from different languages, cultures, etc., they associate many concretes—objectivities—and their locations with the work(s) with which they are engaging, and consequently open a sequence of possible and paradoxical relations between works. Beyond the singular/concrete work and its location are other works, locations and limits; beyond these other works, locations and limits are still others. The universal is designated or implied by the sequences of concretes/singularities, locations and limits, and by the explicit or implicit postulation that is shared by readers and critics: this chain of similar or analogical positions among works allows readers to identify affinities, causal connections or structural resemblances. When Goethe read a Chinese novel in a French translation, he recognized an affinity between the characters in that novel and those in Western novels. Without this postulation, comments on realism, such as can be found in Auerbach's *Mimesis*, could not be offered, nor the infinite variations of literary works described in texts such as Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?*

The objectivities and sequences of literary works and the postulations of critics and readers are components of totalization, which we have defined as the dynamics



of mutable literary ensembles, the consequence of free conjunctions of works, which should be deemed radically distinct or distant and, in part, exterior to readers' and critics' languages and cultures. Harry Levin pointed out that to make two distinct works proximate, whichever agents or modes of conjunction—such as readers, translations, or adaptations—are considered, is the beginning of comparative literature (374). This conjunction depends upon material, historical, and sociological circumstances, and the action of bringing two or more works together.

This conjunction cannot be defined by these conditions only, but should refer to the world as a whole. As Auerbach's and Damrosch's arguments imply, the specificity of comparative literature and world literature is coherent with a view of the world that emerged in the nineteenth century and is still prevalent today (see Sloterdijk). Industrialization and empires led to the view of the world as a vast home; nowadays, globalization, whichever explanation for it is offered, seems to be a continuation of this manifest-destiny view of the world. Within this vast home and its history are many spaces and timelines. As a result, if we associate and compare multiple realisms, we regard them as referring to one single world, which, however, offers many different scenes. If we read the expression *world literature* literally, we must define the relation of literary works to the unique world that contains them. These references to our world are justifications of comparative literature and world literature that imply a characterization of the literary work that is neither ideal—a kind of Kantian approach to literature, nor nominalist—in which literature is the discourse that is declared literature. The former characterization should be equated with a return to the abstraction of the universal; the latter would run the risk of identifying literature(s) with an arbitrary disparity. Both disciplines presuppose that literary works can be made mutually proximate because they exist in one single world that contains agents who know that there is no unifying definition. Variations of literatures and works can neither be dissociated from the variety of the world nor viewed as radical singularities because they express the variety of this single world; this same argument applies to realism. Paradoxically, all works and their objectivities mimic the objectivity of the actual world, which implies multiple realisms and counter-realisms, and explains why there is more than one book in our world.

These observations allow us to go further in identifying works with concrete universals. The objectivity of any single work makes it concrete. This "concreteness" makes all works equivalents and, consequently, mirrors of all singularities in the world; the works' "concreteness" is universal, although none displays the semiotic features that allow us to identify the constitutive rule of the play of equivalents and mirrors. This is confirmed by the variability of realism and by the decontextualization, variations, and displacements of works of world literature. Realism does not overshadow the play of equivalents and mirrors that is augmented by the myriad situations of world literature. The uniqueness of the world makes the variable unity of the many forms of literary works possible. The concrete universals of literary works cannot be disassociated from their assemblages, metonymic continuities, dis-

continuities, and similarities: works and literature(s) authorize their transformative characterizations.

Our initial question is thus answered. The specific status of literary works as concrete universals empowers critics to shift from one individual to another, and from individuals to groups, whatever *shape* and *quantity* qualify the group. *Shape* should here be defined as a series of forms that we suspect to be similar due to the objectivity of each form, or as a time sequence of concrete universals the specificities of which must be linked. *Quantity*, in this case, means that the same critical principles apply to literary ensembles of any size.

Distant and close readings (Franco Moretti's words in *Distant Reading*) share these critical principles. The former view concrete universals and their similarities according to large quantities and historical timelines; the latter consider that these similarities should be first described according to specific kinds of relations and unifications. However, distant readings should not be conflated with handlings of data only, and close readings with hermeneutic or structural approaches only. In all these cases, the works' constitutive paradox as concrete universals is taken into account.

The multiple status of literary works as concrete universals that show metonymic proximities has consequences upon readers' and critics' approaches. No singular literary instances, in other words, no works, can wholly exemplify their models: genre, structure, literariness, human type, situation, etc. At the moment the example, or the work, is designated, it is separated from the model it should illustrate. Example and model are discontinuous because the work, a concrete universal, only infers its exemplification of the universal. Harry Levin commented upon this state of abeyance that any drama is an "objectivity" in a triple sense: it is a "presentation of material events" (33); in principle, this presentation is the representation of a written dialogue; moreover, it "calls upon a simultaneous group of spectators to witness the presentation" (33). As a complement to Levin's observation, we may note that the various presentations and reactions or interpretations of spectators' groups are ways to designate the play and its "objectivity," and to constitute it as a "concrete universal." All these elements—the play, the presentation, the representation, the spectators—never perfectly coincide; however, they cannot be disassociated and function as mutual mediators, although their mutual relevance and the presentation's one remain enigmatic because of the coincidence imperfection. By a turn of the screw, the play can construct an explicit enigma: Harry Levin quotes *Hamlet*.

We propose a brief supplement to Harry Levin's discussion: this enigma identifies the questioning power that is attached to the "concrete universal" of any work. This power implies that literary works enable multiple inferences—internal or external, from work to work, from work to any other datum—and, consequently, numerous relations that confirm the metonymic continuities of works and literatures, and that identify them according to many analogies. As a result, the minimal characterization of drama, its phenomenology, and its status can be extended to all literary genres and works. A literary work is simultaneously a presentation, a text, a representation, a

structure, and a set of analogies between it and any genre, model, or object to which it belongs. Implied or explicit analogies are invitations to literal readings, and in turn to questioning of its own analogies and those that literal readings can suggest to the exteriority of the work. Both types of questionings are endless, and address any kind of relation that we can identify. This is the mediating function of literature: it does not dissociate the singular/concrete from the universal,<sup>5</sup> and does not imply searching for any universal model or rule, since the literary work is presentation and representation. Because of the questioning it inspires, the concrete universal of a literary work does not authorize any continuous and consistent reading, but makes the latter a play upon implications and inferences. Let us return to Levin's example and recall that *Hamlet* excludes any reading of this kind. As Moretti's schemas show ("Network Theory"), in *Hamlet*, there are too many implications, analogies, and inferences to be unfolded.

Most studies in comparative literature and world literature presuppose these questionings and inferences, and these relations that the "concrete universal" invites us to recognize. According to Damrosch, the variations in works of world literature show that the original work does not coincide with the translation/adaptation, and let us complement Damrosch's remark with the following: in compliance with the dissociation of example and model, the play upon a work's rigid designators such as the title or the author's name opens the work up to numerous inferences. Auerbach's argument should lead us to this obvious conclusion: multiple realisms prove that any presentation that identifies its representation to possible references—mimesis—is an enigmatic "objectivity." The manifest questioning that characterizes literary works triggers the search for formal, aesthetic, textual, generic, and thematic similarities, and this search is a process of questioning. This critical questioning cannot be suppressed because any precise similarity between translations and originals, on the one hand, and kinds of realism, on the other, seems to be a specific case of difference: mis-translation is simply the lower limit of literal translation, as the precise description of Achilles's shield is the upper limit of realism in Western literatures.

These remarks provide a paradoxical assessment of world literature and comparative literature. Both disciplines compare, relate, explain, justify, generalize, interpret, and contextualize works. They seek first to demonstrate that works, when read according to their transferences and translations, allow unfamiliar concepts, forms, and themes, to transform, even deform, those of the recipients without necessarily designating any common ground; and second that, when analyzed according to transnational, transcultural, or translinguistic aesthetic or literary categories, they exempt critics from keeping abstract concepts or notions, and allow them to draw partial connections between what are often very distant works. Remarkably, although literary transferences and translations decontextualize and alter their originals, they keep a kind of preponderance of perspective upon local works. They make readers accept another work's and another writer's viewpoints, with no knowledge of their background; that is the paradox of the reception of the Chinese poet Bei Dao

(see Owen).<sup>6</sup> Equally remarkably, the partial connections that the use of aesthetic or literary categories allow strip the latter of their universality and resist our critical thinking as a whole, without reducing it to shambles. When transferred, literary works do not change their stable literary identification, but prioritize difference and relation over stability, thus excluding the notion of a common literary substance or space, since every literary work is a “concrete universal” that allows any possible transference. This is also true when works are compared: the interplay of transfers and comparisons with the status of a concrete universal that characterizes any work highlights the latter’s questioning power.

## NOTES

1. For an example of this type of debate, see Spivak and Damrosch.
- 418** 2. Longxi Zhang remarks that a “truly global world literature” demands not only the plural but also a reconceptualization of poetics.
3. “With the identical, we think with all our force, but without producing the least thought; with the different, by contrast, we do have the highest thought, but also that which cannot be thought?” (*Difference and Repetition* 285).
4. This observation is partially incorrect. Often, titles of translations are different from the titles in the original language. The only rigid designator remains the writer’s last name.
5. This expression is used by Sartre; it has antecedents in Hegel. Sartre’s first use of it is in *Situations II* (197).
6. Owen’s argument that the poems are inevitably decontextualized can be contrasted with the presentation of the translation of Bei Dao’s poem “Fin ou commencement” in *Le Monde diplomatique* in August 1989. A few biographical lines contextualize the poem from an implicit political perspective.

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