

Cosmopolitan Comparison

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I.

When I was invited to speak before you today, I assumed it was ACLA's normal practice to bring in a marginal scholar from a marginal field to provide reflections on Comparative Literature from the margins. I hope that is in fact the practice, because that's what we've got here. I was also told to feel free to use the occasion as a bully pulpit to talk about things I care about, and I don't want to disappoint my hosts. I am the outsider looking in, who wishes Comparative Literature well, and wishes it might do even more than it's already doing to achieve this wellness. But as an outsider there is a lot I don't know, and my deep fear—aside from angering you, which is not atypical for me, or worse, boring you—is violating one of my very few methodological commitments (which I learned from Jerry Fodor): *try not to say anything false*.

I want to stay positive too but these are very unpositive times. I just arrived in New Orleans and haven't been privileged to hear your discussions but I can't imagine people have not been talking about the current darkness: the historic cutback in jobs (there are now fewer available faculty positions in language and literature than in the last 35 years); faculty salaries frozen or people furloughed; searches cut, graduate student awards cut, publication subventions cut, publication itself cut most worrisomely for the first-time author's tenure book and cut most of all in literary

studies—everything cut but teaching hours and committee work and payroll deductions. And this is to say nothing about the widespread public scorn heaped on the humanities, the constant demand for our self-justification ... and bigger, deeper problems: the erosion of reading, the loss of concentration, the digital rewiring of our brains (and of course there's the mass hysteria, dogs and cats living together, and so on). "Cosmopolitan comparison"? Not the top priority.

Yet, for the purposes of my talk today I'm simply going to assume that we're just in the trough of another Kondratieff wave, and the pendulum will one day swing back to a point where it will make good sense to reflect on Comparative Literature, for as a great Indian poet says, a good reader will one day appear, *kālah hy ayam niravadhiḥ vipulā ca pṛthvī* "for time is endless and earth is vast." I am not buttering you up when I tell you I consider CL to be a critically important intellectual practice. First because simply, it is, or has been and can again be, the study of **literature**, a defining feature of human being and an object of analysis unavailable to any other academic field except for those that poach off of Comparative Literature. And second because, again simply, it is **comparative**. The injunction to "compare," first of all, recapitulates the phenomenology of literature itself: since all writing and all meaning are in the last analysis comparative, all reading must be openly comparative. . But the injunction enshrined in the disciplinary designation also ensures that questions of theory and method remain central to the field, as they should always be but usually are not.

I suspect you'll find something seriously wrong with this starry-eyed vision of the field. I know that the very centrality of "literature" is contested; that the theory and method demanded by "comparative" seem to have flatlined in the last decade; that the discipline is in crisis yet again, dying or maybe dead, and waiting, hoping, somehow to be reborn.

First, let me say, from a personal perspective, that I feel your disciplinary pain. In fact, in me you behold a man deeply wounded in the disciplinary wars—wars of position among intellectuals, wars of maneuver among bureaucrats—and who has thereby sunk to the true nadir of contemporary disciplinarity, the lowest link of the Great Chain of Academic Being. At the top of this chain, high in the scholarly empyrean, you'll find Economics in the sphere of the Seraphim and Cherubim (the natural sciences largely have their own privileged universe); from there you descend to the middle realms, the Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, and Powers of Political Science and thence to the Angels (and Archangels) of History, then to the terrestrial gardens of the Western humanities, and thence down to the gloomy deep of today's academy, where the Non-West resides, recapitulating the above hierarchies in an infernal caricature, first the social sciences, then history, and lower still, non-Western literary studies, and lower even than that, in the nethermost abyss, on the very floor of the Burning Lake, nonwestern nonmodern philology.

I know I shouldn't take this disciplinarity disorder (and Satanic inversion of hierarchy) personally; I am just the most extreme example of a myopic dispensation that is in fact affecting the university as a whole. First of all, as I've just suggested,

it's shared by Asian studies more broadly. My own department, MEALAC, just experienced yet another rectification in names (we've had six in the past century). Should we call ourselves Regional and Comparative Languages and Cultures? Regional and Comparative Studies? Postareal and Comparative Studies? Postcolonial Studies? Postoriental Studies? (~~Some even suggested we acknowledge our true condition and call ourselves Oriental Studies, the dept's name in 1890~~). We settled, exhausted, on the anodyne MESSAS. (We discovered that—if you'll excuse my Sanskrit—all names suck, as a general rule, but the less they say the less they suck. MESAAS says almost nothing.) Renaming was thrust upon us because of the new faculty members—historians, political scientists, sociologists—who have joined us thanks to the ever-accelerating exclusion of the non-West from the rest of a university. We are the dumping ground of the American disciplinary episteme. We should probably have called ourselves the Department of Les Damnés de la Terre academique.

So your disciplinary angst is widely shared. That said, there is something worrisome, even primally worrisome, about CL, though not for the reason you may think. Whereas Anthropology is not going to lose access to anthropos, or political science to politics or economists to the economy, it is by no means paranoid to wonder whether Comparative Literature can lose, is in some cases actually losing, access to literature because we are losing access to language.

I remember the first time I saw it openly stated that we are linguistically fallen beings and there is nothing to be done about. This was in a book that Edward Said

published in 1975: “Our fate as scholars today is precisely that of our students, for how many of us can do classical philology? At best we learned Greek or German to pass reading exams,” and he advises using translations. And just a few years ago the situation was described by a comparatist with a complacency that made my jaw drop: “The disappearance of classical languages has been followed by the disappearance of medieval languages, so that emphasis increasingly falls on literature produced from the sixteenth century onwards. This will inevitably affect how we think about literary history....” (Bassnett; she also recommends translations: who’s going to do all of these?). Well, yes, it will affect how you comparatists think, but really, is one simply supposed to roll over before the fact, and die? Aren’t we supposed to try to educate students to be smarter than we are?

In India, the loss of literary-language knowledge is not distant thunder but a present catastrophe. I spare you my analysis though here is my predication: within 30 years the number of people capable of reading the historical languages of India—two thousand years of literature in a dozen languages, the longest continuous and richest multicultural literary record in world history—will have reached a statistical zero.

It seems a blasted landscape, then, of vanishing of jobs and programs, disciplinary identities, competencies, and even objects.

II.

What if in the face of gloom one were be utopian for just a moment? What would be the kinds of changes one would want to see made, what values

institutionalized? This question brings me at long last to the question of cosmopolitanism.

Aside from the fact that this is the theme of the conference this year, I would have chosen cosmopolitanism, this way both of striving to be both a scholar and a citizen, as my response to the looming threat. Cosmopolitanism is not about eating idli sambar in New York and Chicken McNuggets in Bangalore; it is about making the maximal demands of oneself and one's university and one's field and of the world at large because it means being both here and there, then and now, at once. It is an open and broad embrace of human experience both as a scholarly and a political practice.

What might the cosmopolitanization of Comparative Literature mean, and why might this be a good thing? I would like to spend the rest of this presentation considering these two questions. I want to look at the **what** question in three ways: cosmopolitanism in space—CL's relationship with the non-West; in time—its relationship with the past (I'll be quick on both); and cosmopolitanism in theoretical practice—CL's relationship with comparativism itself. And then reflect on the **why** question by looking nonmodernly, nonWestly, and philologically from my location at the floor of the Burning Lake.

CL is already, in its very constitution, on the road to cosmopolitanism by moving away from home in the act of comparison. But how far along this road has it actually gone?

The Cosmopolitanization of Comparative Literature (1): Space

You have been hearing the clamor to cosmopolitanize Comparative Literature space by provincializing Europe repeatedly in the past twenty years. The ACLA report of 1993 urged comparative literature to globalize; “ the 2004 report even more strongly endorsed an expansion beyond Europe; and to top it all off Gayatri recently threatened your whole discipline with death if you dared to resist. So I am sure many of you are sick and tired of the whole question by now, but I don’t see how it can be avoided if one really wants to take the cosmopolitan practice of CL seriously. How far is CL now addressing the “world as a whole”?

One simpleminded way is to look at the numbers. I couldn’t find any already available so I did an informal statistical analysis of **appointments** and **research**. There are 21 Ph.D. programs in Comparative Literature in the top 25 universities in the US. The total regular and affiliated faculty of these programs is 584; of these, the number of faculty working primarily on non-Western literatures is 96, that is, **16%**. *Affiliated* faculty in nonwestern studies, i.e., courtesy appointments, constituted only **10 per cent** of this number. There is every reason to assume that this already small number would shrink even further outside the major centers. (The winner in my survey was Indiana, with one-third nonwestern; the loser, with 1 nonwestern faculty member among 23, probably knows it who is. “Winning” and “losing” here are not accidents but *choices*. ~~In case you’re curious, the outliers, with respect to core faculty, were Indiana with 35.7% non-Western at one end, and Duke with 4.3%—1 person out of 23—at the other).~~

“**Research**” was somewhat harder to quantify but as a modest experiment I looked at the two “official” journals of the field in English, and the figures are just what the faculty percentages would predict. In the last 36 issues of *Comparative literature* I count some 144 articles, of which those on the non-West number 13, or **9 per cent**.

In *Comparative Critical Studies* (the journal of the British Comparative Literature Association) for the past five years : 121 articles, of which I count 16 that are concerned with non-Europe. That is about **13 per cent**. (The major exception to this is the non-official journal *Comparative Literature Studies* (Penn State).)

I must say I find these numbers unsettling. But the situation is even worse if we think about the cosmopolitanization of time.

The Cosmopolitanization of Comparative Literature (2): Time

I don't usually cite T. S. Eliot; I especially don't like citing “What is a Classic?” on this occasion, in large part because Eliot had an uncosmopolitan way of conceiving of cosmopolitanism. But in this 1944 lecture Eliot got at least one thing right when he says, “In our age ... there is coming into existence a new kind of provincialism which perhaps deserves a new name. It is a provincialism, not of space, but of time; one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares.”

Unfortunately Eliot can think of nothing serious to say about this threat, or why in fact it does constitute a provincialism. Here I have to defer for a moment my

argument why we should be open to entering the foreign country that is the past, where they really do do things differently. But that Eliot was right—that historical knowledge is growing shallower across the social sciences and humanities under a narcissistic fixation on the present—can hardly be doubted.

I did not have time to do a similar analysis of the place of history in the top CL programs in the US; it's a messier question anyway. The only aspect I was able to quantify was the importance, or lack of importance, accorded to the study of "historical" or "premodern" or "classical" languages. I find only two programs in the entire country that ask doctoral candidates to learn a language that would provide them with a deep temporal perspective on their literary culture. (And it goes without saying unfortunately that not a single program in the US requires that graduate students have some exposure to a non-Western language.)

Whatever else it may mean to aspire to cosmopolitanism, the aspiration must presumably comprise some awareness of the cosmos of which we are citizens—even if that is only citizenship in a "community of fate". That is not happening in CL. Its time/space provincialization is extreme: If I were reckless enough to try to put a number on it I believe I could argue—though this is an argument I would like to be proved wrong about—that 90 per cent of CL graduate education and research today is directed toward a mere 3 per cent of human literary experience. ~~[400 of 4000 years, 1/3 of the world; 90 per cent is a compromise between 85% nonmodern nonwestern at the major centers and probably 95% elsewhere.]~~

The Cosmopolitanization of Comparative Literature (3): Theory

The cosmopolitan virtue, often and justly praised, that is inherent in a disciplinary practice conceived outside of, even against, the nation-state silo—or, equally bad, the T6 area silo—that has organized other literary studies, already lends itself to the expansion of theory between the present time and space of CL. And comparativists have themselves begun to acknowledge its importance; in a recent issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* devoted to the present and future of CL one writer plaintively but redemptively asks, “The literary canon now houses an ever-growing number of non-Western writers, but how many of us in ‘the West’ ... have taken the time to read up on the ~~poetological~~ and ... theoretical traditions of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, or the Far East?” (Robert Weninger). In the past, the lack of reliable or readable translations of important texts in non-Western literary theory may have been a legitimate excuse. But with works like, say, Steven Owens’ inimitable *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, or the new series *Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought* soon to be issued by Columbia U. Press, it no longer will be.

What do we seek from such knowledge, or indeed, from time-space expansion? Engaging with non-Western non-modern theory is not simply the intellectual equivalent of a new taste experience for bored palates. It’s about teaching ourselves to take seriously the historicity of meaning, to learn to read—in the first instance though never in the last—like, say, a tenth-century Indian or Chinese. This has purposes beyond better understand the text at hand. I don’t think there is a more

important lesson —more profoundly **postcolonial** lesson—to teach our students than learning that texts have made other good senses to other people at other times, and how they have made those senses. There is a huge reclamation job to be done here
[Extreme Poetry]

Another kind cosmopolitan theoretical practice—less familiar but far more productive than mere pluralization—might emerge from a rethinking of comparison itself, its actual history, and how it has been done in the past and how it might be done differently in the future.

I can't imagine these questions are a matter of indifference to CL, but I also don't seem to find very much sustained conceptual work on comparison as an intellectual practice from literary comparativists: the various ways we can compare things and the various kinds of knowledge we get from those comparisons. The people who really seem to care about this are our colleagues in the social sciences: scholars of comparative politics have produced a whole subdiscipline in the theory of political comparison; anthropologists have looked at disciplinary differences in comparison; sociologists have deeply probed the logic of comparison in macro social change such as revolutions; some historians have begun to argue—rightly as I'll suggest—that all history is comparative.

Perhaps it's because comparativists in the social sciences have a status problem vis-à-vis mathematical modelers, and have to defend their turf far more desperately than CL people do, that they produce more and better theoretical literature on the scholarly value of comparison. Or perhaps nobody bothers to think

about comparison in CL because comparison has lost all interest. It's also entirely possible that I have overlooked a brilliant book called *The Historical Ontology of the Comparative Literary Method*, or *The Logic of Literary Comparison*. But I would dearly love to read a good account of how and when and why cultural comparison arose, what relationship the rise of *disciplinary* comparison in the 18th century has to do with Christianity (the discourse on comparison's predecessor *conformité* now being studied by Carlo Ginzburg) and colonialism (the rise of comparative history studied by Donald Kelley), and why some people—like premodern South Asians—had no interest at all in comparison as a *method*. I remain frustrated by references in CL that don't seem to go beyond *rapports de faits* and “affinities,” toward a systematic typology that arranges and makes epistemological sense of the kinds of literary comparison we can engage in. What Earl Miner wrote 30 years ago still seems to be true: “Perhaps the least studied issue in comparative literature is what is meant by ‘comparative’ and, more precisely, what are the principles or canons of comparability.”

There are deep problems with the way that comparison is often practiced, above all across cultures, and which scholars in E. Asia in particular have begun to address. Others have recently pointed more generally to the way the comparative method tends to produce “an ideal type, of which the texts compared come to function as variants,” but then suggest that the only way out is to compare within a single culture. “The more sophisticated one's understanding of discourse, the harder

it is to compare Western and non-Western texts, for each depends for its meaning and identity on its place within a discursive system.”

Now, for one thing, this suggests the comparison is a choice, but a lot of evidence indicates that we cannot *not* compare. And for another, scholars vary in how they compare and why, and reflecting on methods and reasons suggests that the logic of literary comparison may actually have an emancipatory form toward which we can aspire—once we unlearn forms that reproduce domination.

It’s not the time or place to talk about the tacit comparison that Hegel saw as inherent in the construction of the identity of any thing, or the comparison embedded in Kant’s transcendental unity or Marx’s commodity form, or the more recent argument from a sociologist, that comparison is not only intrinsic to social analysis, it is intrinsic to much of lived social experience (what he calls “vernacular comparison”). But the take-away point is that comparison is everywhere, and we won’t be able to address its dangers—anticosomopolitan dangers—unless we make our embedded comparisons conscious.

There is a closely linked group of problems we cannot solve if we cannot even see. One is the naturalization of the unit of analysis, where the unitness of the unit is at issue, as for example when we assume for purposes of comparative ethnicity the existence of strongly bounded ethnic units, when these are only imperfectly bounded. Another is reduction, where *difference within* one of the comparative partners is flattened to create a homogeneous case. Comparison often flattens across partners, too, through cognitive generalization based on a single case.

You cannot select out what is to serve as the second item in a comparison without having first identified family resemblances between the two cases. In order to compare epic **A** with epic **B** you must first generalize features of **A** before you are even able to identify **B** as a legitimate comparative partner—you must in fact already and a priori and thanks to **A** alone have decided what constitutes an epic. In the very act of generalizing that case as the unit of analysis you are already suppressing, or potentially suppressing, elements of difference—elements that it is the whole purpose of comparison to capture. As an example of all these errors I recommend the discussion of “epic” in the earliest sustained work in comparative literature, Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, which offers a case-study in the way domination can be built into this mode of thought: there is “the epic proper” (Homer)—[*der*] *wahrhaften Grundcharakter des eigentlichen Epos*, a property derived from its “universally human character [*Allgemeinmenschliche*], which somehow Hegel knows—and then a range of incomplete or failed instances. Comparison becomes the deductive ordering of what is already decided rather than an inductive search for what is unknown.

The epistemology at work here can be connected with the very concrete and very serious kind of domination underwritten by neocolonialism in the guise of modernization theory. This rests basically on a form of comparativism, where, as Tim Mitchell has put it, “The object of study remains defined and grasped only in terms of its relationship to the West,” which provides the normative history “against which all other histories will be measured.” Difference again becomes deficiency;

you compare India to Europe and find it lacking ... and then attempt to turn former into the latter.

But though comparison may be inevitable domination is not, not if we make our inevitable but implicit comparisons explicit, explain what role they are playing in the interpretation of our primary object, and refuse to turn a particular in a paradigm. If we can cultivate active mindfulness in our method—let's call it a sort of methodological Buddhism—we can find ways of practicing comparison without hegemony, a cosmopolitan comparison.

III.

Let me try to illustrate that kind of comparison—one that strives to take spatial, temporal, and methodological cosmopolitanism seriously—by restating some of my earlier reflections on the problem of *cosmopolitanism itself* in two historical and quite contrary formations.

Beginning in the early first millennium and lasting in some recognizable form for the next thousand years, a whole world—from today's England to Romania, and from southern Germany to North Africa participated in what I have called the Latin cosmopolis, the order of Latinitas. This cosmopolitan formation was disseminated by force of Roman arms. It sought to impose a single political and legal order everywhere, and induced participation in Latin culture by a process of bureaucratic preferment. Wherever Latin was carried by arms it slashed and burned the linguistic landscape, destroying Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan in Italy; Punic, Phoenician, Libyan in North Africa, and other languages elsewhere. A sign of this *universalization*

without difference was the graphic sign itself: Latin was written in an alphabet readable everywhere in this cosmopolis across space and time.

Beginning in the early first millennium and lasting in some recognizable form for the next thousand years, a whole world—from today's Afghanistan to Bali and from Tibet to Sri Lanka—participated in what I have called the Sanskrit cosmopolis (it is not without significance for the logic of its existence that, unlike Latinitas or Arabiya or Hellenismos, this formation never named itself). Across this cosmopolitan formation, we can perceive ubiquitous signs of a shared culture-power order—but without any evidence that it was disseminated by force. Sanskrit culture seems to have been adopted without any bureaucratic, legal, or unified religious inducement. There was everywhere an image of global power (*cakravarti ksetra* or imperial field) but without its stable realization across this space. “India” itself was moveable and reproduced everywhere: there is a Kurukshetra in Cambodia and a Ganges River in Java (the *exact same*, and not a “new,” Kurukshetra and Ganges). Sanskrit cosmopolitanism nurtured local literary cultures everywhere. A sign of this *universalization with difference* was the graphic sign itself: Wherever Sanskrit went it was written in local alphabets, whose very invention it stimulated.

These historical facts were embodied in two “foundational fictions,” the *Aeneid* of Vergil and the *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa:

Vergil begins with violence, *arma virumque cano*, that brings about the origins of the Latin people (*genus latinum*) and “power without limit” (*imperium sine fine*). Kalidasa bows down to the mother and father of the universe—*jagatah pitarau*

vande—who are *vāgarthāv iva samprktau*, “fused together like a word and its meaning,” in order that he might more deeply understand word and meaning when he tells the story of a universalistic political power. Two visions of “cosmo-politan” order are offered here that differ profoundly.

First, consider the character of the *polis* each one projects: The one is comprised of a particular people clearly placed in time and space; the other is centered on a lineage of mythic status so inclusive that half the kings of India could, and did, claim descent from it, while the place (Ayodhya), if a real piece of land in eastern Uttar Pradesh, could just as easily be conceived of—and was conceived of—as located in many other places such as central Thailand (Ayutthaya). In the case of the city of Rome, the cosmos was transformed into their polis, the *orbis* brought into their *urbs*, as Ovid put it—and the expansion happened by the will of God (it is Jupiter who grants “empire without end”) and to a fully ethnicized political community (“Romans, masters of the world, the people of the toga”). In the other, the cosmos is “all that moves with life” (*jagat*), where the father and mother of the universe choose no one people for rule over others (and where, in historical fact, no ruler ever proclaimed his identity in ethnic terms), and rather than reducing the world to their city they expanded their city to the world, ruling “the whole earth as if it were one city” (according to a seventh-century poet). And how markedly different are the conceptions of the relationship between culture and power in the cosmopolis. In the one case, literature works as a verbal instrument for celebrating power; in the other, literature is a celebration of the power of the verbal instrument itself.

These historical facts and fictions—even if my caricature portraits are exaggerated—permit us to compare two kinds of cosmopolitan formation: a coercive cosmopolitanism and a voluntaristic cosmopolitanism—but we can do this only of course if we are mindful in our comparisons and practice a comparison without hegemony, which enables us to capture the *variability* of the phenomenon. In the same way, the formations that succeeded the Latin and the Sanskrit cosmopolis displayed radically different characters, what I once characterized as, on the one hand, a vernacularism of necessity and, on the other, a vernacularism of accommodation; as well as radically different ways in which the cosmopolitan and the vernacular could not just coexist but be mutually sustaining.

IV

Nothing I have said so far, however, explains what's so good about “cosmopolitanism” that I should have so tried your patience suggesting ways to cosmopolitanize Comparative Literature. It is not something that goes without saying, so let me say something about it in conclusion.

Local and global interactions and affiliations have always existed and always will, though the locales and the globes have changed by orders of magnitude. These interactions and affiliations are usually naturalized, however, and the choices ignored that are always being made in the ways they are realized. We have witnessed centuries of coercive cosmopolitanism (in Asia no less than in the West), attempting to create worlds after their own often violent images, in the domain of power no less than in the domain of culture. We have witnessed a recalcitrant vernacularism, too,

from Kosovo and Kashmir to Israel and Iran. But a little historical discipline—above all, comparative literary historical discipline—suffices to show that these is nothing destined about the culture-power forms.

In the West, cosmopolitanism has always been treated as a philosophical problem. From Kant to Appiah (indeed, from the Stoics and Cynics), the question has been how to **reason** ourselves beyond ourselves, whether culturally, politically, or morally. I have never found this exercise very useful; in fact, I find it a little wrong-headed. Think of Kant rationalizing about “nature’s will” (somehow Kant *knew* nature’s will), which “*wisely*” he tells us, “uses two means to separate the nations and prevent them from intermingling—linguistic and religious differences (*Perpetual Peace*, named by Ulrich Beck, without a hint of irony, “the founding text of the contemporary world”).-Kant may have believed we are “unavoidably side by side” but he also believed we are unavoidably separate. And since Kant philosophers (who in fact in their current academic avatar constitute the single most provincial discipline in the university) have elaborated ever more desperate Ptolemaic models in trying to think themselves beyond this separation, beyond particularism and universalism—which are only required, of course, if your experience convinces you (like Beck) that “It is impossible to imagine a viable, realistic cosmopolitanism outside the context in which universalism and relativism, nationalism and ethnicism, are dominant strategies.”

There is something wrong going on here. It seems that very act of theorizing cosmopolitanism is in some sense not just bootstrapping but self-canceling. This is

because the cosmopolitan is precisely what exists beyond discursive formulation, since all such formulation must, by definition, be vernacular. It is for us a form of life that exceeds the boundaries of what we generally hold to be logical about social existence: commitments to one's language, one's people, one's religion. How does one balance those commitments against the negation, or at least suspension, of those commitments that is demanded by cosmopolitanism? How can reason think its way to a state of being that violates everything that counts as social, cultural, or political reason?

For my part I want practices not professions, and philosophers of cosmopolitanism are theoretical physicists in white coats when we need mechanics with dirty hands. It is not philosophy (let alone sociology) but historical literary studies that we need to turn to, where we find actual forms of cosmopolitan life that people have practiced though not necessarily conceptualized as such. History for me is therefore a practical not a moral imperative, it isn't rescuing the casualties of history from "the enormous condescension of posterity" but like literature itself a place to find different ways of being human, perhaps even tools for living, as Kenneth Burke once put it. And it is required for reasons other than the fact that cosmopolitanism is something you do, not something you think. What history shows is that the constraints on cosmopolitan practice that some hold to be constitutive of human life are only constitutive of their theory of human life.

It is here, in trying to understand cosmopolitan **practices** rather than cosmopolitan **professions**, that CL, more particularly, the comparative history of

literary culture, takes on its supreme importance. Literature has been one of the prime modalities for creating community, for it is in part from acts of reading, hearing, performing, reproducing, sharing and circulating literary texts that social groups have produced themselves and understood themselves as groups. What the comparison of literature provides is the sort of hope that utopians like me can derive from once-existent *topoi*, those real places and real practices of the past that show how malleable are the supposed iron laws—ethnicity, “linguism,” nationhood, and the like—governing the culture and power that make up the common sense of modern social science. For sociologists of modernity like Craig Calhoun, “The idea of individuals abstract enough to be able to choose all their ‘identifications’” may be “deeply misleading,” but not for us literary historians of nonmodernity. We know there once were human beings who inhabited a conceptual universe not so dissimilar from cosmopolis however paradoxical modernity has made such a habitation seem. A universe that they **never named** as if aware of the self-cancellation that such naming produces for cosmopolitanism. A universe of imperial **centers without peripheries** because the center could be located everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. A universe of peoples with **multiple mother-tongues** (and in fact **no “mother” tongue** linking language and blood), free of longing for language origins and people origins; **peoples without ethnicities**—a real “multitude” instead of ethnicized and nationalized subjects—whose movements were never stopped by political borders; where universalism knew its limits and did not stand in fatal contradiction with either cultural or political particularisms; where otherness in a

sense could dissolve because signs of sameness could be perceived everywhere—and everywhere be locally inflected. The more we learn to *see* the more we see that much of the past is made up of just such “anomalies,” as social science and politics today would regard them, but which seem less and less anomalous the larger their numbers grow.

I make no claim that my comments provide any support for a “robust conception of the proper basis of political community” that hard-headed students of cosmopolitan democracy like David Held demand, or for the “institutions” that Craig thinks is the “big question” of cosmopolitanism. But I also reject the dichotomy between cosmopolitan realists and cosmopolitan idealists. I do pedagogy and not policy, and believe cosmopolitan practices for cosmopolitan citizenship are something essential and something we can learn. One way to learn these practices is by studying history and literature outside of nations and civilizations—precisely as the “**comparative**” in “Comparative Literature” requires—and, equally important, unlearning the false dichotomies and universalisms of an ever more un-cosmopolitan Western social science **and philosophy**— precisely as the “**literature**” in “Comparative Literature” insists. There have been places and times where the relations of power and culture resembled nothing of our notions of nation and civilization; where forms of life escaped the dichotomy of the truly real and the falsely constructed; where single gods with multiple avatars exemplified an otherwise unthinkable “pluralistic universalism” () that is a perfect image of a new cosmopolitanism. Such times and places and notions of the world, which literary

comparison is uniquely capable of revealing, may give utopia some hope and so, in their own indirect way, help us take one step toward a different future.