

**GROUNDS FOR COMPARISON? ALAIN BADIOU'S 'SINGULAR UNIVERSALISM'
AND NATALIE MELAS'S 'MINIMAL INCOMMENSURABILITY'**

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In Haun Saussy's contribution to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, which mistakingly came to be seen by many as "the 2004 Report" on the state of the discipline (Saussy viii), he pinpoints the issue that makes comparative literature such a problematic field to define: "The history of comparative literature as a university discipline is not one of steadily deepening understanding of a single object of study, but rather a history of attempts to locate that object of study" (12). Unlike comparative philology or comparative anatomy, which find their common points of reference in their respective linguistic or anatomic "latest shared ancestor," comparative literature has no such "*tertium comparationis*" upon which to ground itself (13). Unable to conform to the historical, "tree-shaped" pattern of these other comparative disciplines because of its "interest in modern literary traffic across languages and borders," comparative literature must effectively construct its own "trunk" (13). Saussy surveys several potential candidates to serve as the discipline's fixed object of study—"the universality of human experience" (13), "literariness" (17), "culture" (19)—but ultimately concludes that it is precisely the "lack of a permanent defining object" that accounts for not only the "fragility" but also the "success" of the institution of comparative literature (24).

Be that as it may, comparatists engaged in the process of comparison must inevitably develop their own methodological frameworks within which to conduct their analyses. Since the

1993 Bernheimer Report's controversial declaration that the new task of comparative literature would be to "contextualiz[e] literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender" in a move that perhaps renders "literature" an inadequate term to "describe our object of study" (42), a rift has emerged between scholars who embrace the move towards cultural studies—which emphasizes ontological and epistemological difference—and those who want to retain the 'literariness' of the discipline—a stance which requires the implicit acceptance of some underlying form of universality shared by literary artifacts that is accessible regardless of one's geographical and temporal location. Natalie Melas, a postcolonial critic fully entrenched in the particularities of cultural context, navigates the relativism that threatens to undermine cross-cultural comparisons in *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* by grounding her analysis in a "very particular form of incommensurability: space offers a ground of comparison, but no given basis of equivalence" (xii). Alain Badiou, a philosopher who professes to lack "faith in comparative literature" (46), ventures into a form of comparative analysis in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* that differs dramatically from Melas's in terms of its methodology: he grounds his comparison in "the universality of great poems" (46). Although the fact that Badiou is not a comparatist himself no doubt disqualifies him from being called upon to illustrate a certain tendency in the discipline, his comparative method—which essentially discards all cultural, linguistic, and temporal disparities as irrelevant—stands in direct opposition to the recent methodological focus on difference that grounds Melas's interpretative investigation. In comparing these two radically different approaches to comparison, this paper aspires to highlight the benefits and pitfalls of both methodologies, and ultimately show that the existence of such disparate methods within comparative literature is essential to the continued development of the discipline.

In “Grounds for Comparison,” the introductory chapter of *All the Difference in the World*, Melas lays down the foundations of her interpretative schema; in doing so, she provides a detailed genealogy of the discipline that underlines the methodological consequences of the shift from a temporal understanding of comparison to a spatial one. She locates evidence of the early progress oriented underpinnings of comparative literature in Charles Mills Gayley’s important 1903 essay “What is Comparative Literature?” For Gayley, a “crucial figure in the institutionalization of comparative literature at the turn of the century” (10), the discipline was rooted in a temporal, progressive method he derived from anthropology. As Melas explains, “The comparative method that dominated late-nineteenth-century anthropology applied across a single civilizational scale where all the world’s cultures had their place in an evolutionary hierarchy progressing from the simple or ‘savage’ to the complex and highly differentiated societies of ‘civilization’” (15). The application of this “evolutionary hierarchy” to comparative literature allowed Gayley to measure all literary artifacts against each other based on their particular position in the evolutionary scale: “all differences in *kind* [were] measurable as differences of *degree* in development or growth” (15). While Melas admires the “comprehensive scope” of Gayley’s project (15), which included non-European literatures among its objects of study, the problem with this vertical axis of comparison is that it places the comparatist in the position to make evaluative judgments which reinforce an imperialist, Eurocentric attitude towards the other (19).

Melas sees the “epoch of space” (26) ushered in by Michel Foucault in the 1960s as the antidote to the hierarchizing temporal axis of comparison. Similarly comprehensive in scope to Gayley’s methodology, a comparative method grounded in spatial principles is able to include

literature from all over the world in its purview without measuring its objects of study against each other:

The space of comparison, inclusive by virtue of its transversal extensiveness, would in the first moment negate the negation of this temporal unity and withdraw the discriminating evolutionary hierarchy from the geography of the globe as one might lift a distorting temporal veil in order to reveal space as such. . . .The grounds of comparison today, thus, are in a first moment, literally *grounds*—that is, in a rather bewildering way, potentially the globe itself. But if space provokes comparison, it also confounds its epistemological operations. (29)

Comparing literatures along a spatial (horizontal) axis rather than a temporal (vertical) one allows us to compare without placing judgment. While Melas no doubt sees this as a step in the right direction, she is cautious about the epistemological repercussions of embracing spatial inclusivity: in making space the grounds for comparison, the actual *basis of equivalence* is left unquestioned.

Melas avoids reducing the ground of comparison *to* a basis of equivalence—a methodological slippage she identifies in James Clifford’s seminal essay “Travelling Cultures” (31)—through building on the notion of “incommensurability” developed by Foucault in relation to his concept of *heteropia*. She identifies a crucial change in Foucault’s definition of heteropia from *The Order of Things* (1966) to “Of Other Spaces” (1967), which then becomes the crux of her methodology of comparison without equivalence. In *The Order of Things*, heterotopia—which Foucault defines as “the disorder that makes the fragments of a great number of possible orders sparkle in a single dimension” (qtd. in Melas 27)—comes across “as a figure for absolute incommensurability, which paralyzes the knower into aphasia if he looks too directly upon it” (27). This nihilistic articulation of incommensurable difference is tempered considerably in “Of Other Spaces” by an emphasis on the literal *space* of comparison, as Melas explains:

“[T]he status of place (the *topos* in heterotopia) has undergone a marked materialization from the metaphorical ‘site’ of taxonomic categories to the actually existing common ground underlying disparate spaces” (28). Melas adopts this notion of a heterogenous space in which “fragments of a great number of possible orders sparkle in a single dimension” without paralyzing the knower or being erroneously rendered equivalent as the foundation for her own grounds of comparison: “With Foucault’s spatial heterotopia in mind we might propose a minimal form of incommensurability, which produces a generative dislocation without silencing discourse or marking the limit of knowledge. This minimal incommensurability instead opens up the possibility of an intelligible relation at the limits of comparison” (31). By qualifying the noun “incommensurability” with the adjective “minimal,” Melas contrives a space of comparison in which “generative dislocation” allows an “intelligible relation” to form between disparate elements. Melas’s “minimal incommensurability” is thus an exceedingly pragmatic construct in that it facilitates a culturally aware form of comparison which, while remaining attentive to difference, is able to avert the debilitating skepticism of relativism that would declare comparison across cultural and linguistic boundaries ultimately impossible. While her book is consequently unable to “develop a single continuous argument about postcolonial comparison” (43) due to the “generative dislocation” of her methodology, it nevertheless succeeds in forestalling the “aphasia” which threatens to incapacitate the “knower” confronted by difference at every turn.

But can a methodology based on a pragmatically modified notion of incomparability, on the addition of a qualifying adjective to a noun that refers to the otherwise incapacitating ontological and epistemological gap between things, truly hold as a sustainable ground for

comparison? For some theorists, Melas's attempt to compare within a space of "minimal" incommensurability would surely not prove strong enough to overcome the debilitating loss of totality in the field of comparative literature. Literary scholar Masao Miyoshi, for example, was until his death in 2009 an ardent defender of the need to reestablish an underlying sense of universality to literary studies. In "A Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity, and Totality" (2000), Miyoshi reflects on what he sees as the immense damage done to the field of literary studies in recent years by the rampaging "logic of difference" (9). The critical attention to difference, which functioned initially as a "strategy of liberation," has become in Miyoshi's view an atomizing force that has essentially rendered the discipline of comparative literature obsolete: "If every literary and cultural system is incommensurable, the idea of 'comparative' literature is an oxymoron. Incomparables cannot be compared" (9). Miyoshi identifies a central consequence of the ubiquity of theories of difference in the shift from a "grammatical/formal analysis of literary products" (5) to the consideration of literature "nearly always. . .in relation to the extra-literary events and situations in history" (6); ultimately, he sees this investigation of "[p]articularity without totality" as "nonsense, deadening, and useless" (10). While the ground for a new form of universalism proposed by Miyoshi—the nurturing of "our common bonds to the planet" (11)—is ultimately unconvincing, his lament over the consequences of investigating "particularity without totality" mirrors that of critics who were concerned by the Bernheimer Report's suggestion to remove 'literature' from its central position in the title of the discipline. (Michael Riffaterre was particularly critical of this point in his response to the Report. He regretted "the committee's reactions or overreactions to pressure from the proponents of cultural studies" [71] and argued that it is "quite urgent that *literature* remain central to discourse, culture, ideology, and so on because literature encompasses all of them and raises questions

about all of them” [73].) Despite the fact that Miyoshi’s call for a newly defined totality has been dismissed by some as mere “nostalgia for a manufactured essentialism” (Jay 30), the lack of a unified ground for comparison remains a crucial issue for the future of comparative literature. Must all comparatists become indistinguishable from cultural studies scholars and ground their work in the racial, gendered, ideological, and geographical particularities of literary artifacts? Are we now forbidden to compare ‘universal’ human themes across linguistic, temporal, and geographical boundaries?

In a relatively bold move within the intellectual climate of the day, the philosopher Alain Badiou justifies his comparison of two texts separated by an immense linguistic, temporal, and geographical chasm by professing his belief in “the universality of great poems, even when they are presented in the almost invariably disastrous approximation that translation represents” (46). While recognizing that the poets he compares— Labîd ben Rabi’a and Mallarmé—are set apart from each other by a distance so large it “is almost devoid of concept” (47), he sees “a proximity in thought” (46) in their work that spurs him to place them in a comparative dialectic because he believes “‘Comparison’ can serve as a sort of experimental verification of this universality” (46). “A Poetic Dialectic,” one of ten essays in Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, coheres with the premise stated in the epigraph to the book, which maintains “that art is itself a producer of truths” and that the study of “inaesthetics”—as opposed to aesthetics, which generally “turn[s] art into an object for philosophy”—“describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art” (n. pag.). What precisely Badiou means when he writes about the “truths” produced by art is clarified in the book’s first chapter, “Art and Philosophy.”

In “Art and Philosophy,” Badiou outlines the three schemata that philosophy has historically employed when dealing with art: the *didactic schema*, whose “thesis is that art is incapable of truth” even though “art presents itself (like the hysteric) in the guise of effective, immediate, or naked truth” (which is why Plato banishes the poets from his ideal city) (2); the *romantic schema*, whose “thesis is that art *alone* is capable of truth” and that “art accomplishes what philosophy itself can only point toward” (3); and finally the *classical schema*, established by Aristotle, which claims “a) Art. . .is incapable of truth. Its essence is mimetic, and its regime is that of semblance,” but also “b) This incapacity does not pose a serious problem. . . .Art has a therapeutic function, and not at all a cognitive or revelatory one” (4). It is this final Aristotelean schema, which demarcates truth from verisimilitude, that accounts for the relative peace between philosophy and art over the centuries (4). According to Badiou, the twentieth century has not brought forth any new schema for defining the relationship between art and philosophy in the modern world; as he sees it, “Marxism is didactic, psychoanalysis classical, and Heideggerian hermeneutics romantic” (5). Today these schemata suffer from “saturation and closure,” and consequently Badiou argues that it is “necessary to propose a new schema, a fourth modality of the link between philosophy and art” (8). Following his conclusion that “In these inherited schemata, the relation between artworks and truth never succeeds in being at once singular and immanent,” (9) he proposes a schema in which truth is at once *immanently* and *singularly* related to works of art:

Art *itself* is a truth procedure. Or again: The philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths—be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy. (9)

In positing truths as immanent, singular presences within art, works of art become comparable on the grounds that they all exist in the same relation to truth. Philosophy—which, unlike art, is not itself a producer of truths—becomes “the go-between in our encounters with truths, the procurer of truth” (10). For Badiou, philosophy is a medium, a transitional space through which truths are communicated but in which they do not reside. In a spatial metaphor that differs ontologically from Melas’s, then, Badiou defines art as the production site of immanent, singular truths that can be “procured” and, by extension, compared, because philosophy “makes disparate truths *compossible*” (14, my emphasis). Although this metaphor of art as a site of truth production entirely disregards geographical space, it is able to construct a ground for comparison that effectively transcends geographical, temporal, and linguistic boundaries without committing the major offense of essentialism: the plurality and singularity of these immanent truths provide a ground for comparison without reducing the objects of comparison to universalized equivalents.

Several comparatists have responded favourably to the methodological implications of Badiou’s comparative study—most notably Emily Apter. In “Nothing is Translatable,” a chapter in her 2006 book *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Apter concedes that—although she was “initially disconcerted by Badiou’s blanket rejection of the ethics of location” (87)—his notion of “singular universalism has interesting ramifications for literary comparison” (86). Because of its grounding in “affinities of the Idea” with the important qualification that “it is a text’s *singularity* that confers universal value or truth” (86, my emphasis), Badiou’s method becomes a feasible remedy for the paralysis often experienced at the point of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparison. She cites Peter Hallward’s *Absolutely Postcolonial; Writing between the Singular and the Specific*—“the sole experiment to date of Badiou-inspired

postcolonial comparatism” (89)—as exemplary of how Badiou’s “singular universalism” can be applied as “a corrective to the postmodern relativism besetting postcolonial studies, its uncritical embrace of plural registers, its fetishization of the politics of difference, and its naive celebration of ‘the local’” (90).

Badiou’s “singular universalism” has unsurprisingly drawn criticism from a number of other comparatists. In response to the slightly different version of Apter’s essay published in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization* as “‘Je ne crois pas beaucoup à la littérature comparée’: *Universal Poetics and Postcolonial Comparatism*,” Djelal Kadir writes in his own contribution to the same collection (entitled “Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism”) that we must be wary of accepting the precepts of “post-difference” thinkers such as Badiou (74). According to Kadir, Badiou’s post-difference ethics fall dangerously in line with the politics of “the Same,” which are not only “inimical to comparative literature” but also “nurturing and abetting of terrorism” because they ultimately promote an “indifference to difference” (74-5). David Damrosch, in his essay published in the same collection entitled “World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,” also explicitly criticizes Badiou as an advocate of a mode of comparison that involves the “ungrounded, universalizing juxtaposition of radically unconnected works” (51). Badiou’s complete disregard for both the cultural means of production of a literary text and his own particular position as a textual interpreter no doubt raises red flags for many in terms of the potential reinstatement of Eurocentric, orientalist, or generally chauvinistic reading practices. However, while Kadir may be correct in alerting us to the fact that Badiou’s thinking ultimately aligns with a problematic philosophy of “indifference to difference,” Damrosch’s accusation that he engages in an “ungrounded, universalizing juxtaposition of radically unconnected works” certainly does not do justice to Badiou’s

understanding of the singular, immanent truths that are produced by art and made “compossible” by philosophy. While Badiou’s methodology may superficially appear to be dismissible along the same lines as Miyoshi’s “manufactured essentialism,” the complexity inherent in Badiou’s notion of truths—which I have barely begun to scratch the surface of here—renders any superficial charge of facile essentialism erroneous.

To argue in favour of retaining either Melas’s “minimal incommensurability” or Badiou’s “singular universalism” and discarding the other would ultimately be to commit Gayley’s methodological ‘sin’ of imposing an “evolutionary hierarchy” on my objects of comparison. In juxtaposing them here, I hope it has been made clear that both methods contain extremely valuable insights while they also exhibit the potential to fall into different interpretative danger zones. Melas’s space of “minimal incommensurability,” which successfully incorporates the centrality of difference into its grounds for comparison, begins to look more like a fragile pragmatic construct rather than a solid ground upon which to conduct comparisons when confronted with the truly incapacitating ontological and epistemological ramifications of the “logic of difference.” Badiou’s “singular universalism,” which succeeds in transcending geographical, temporal, and linguistic differences by positing that works of art share the same ontological relation to truth (regardless of the singularity of the truths they produce), nevertheless becomes suspect when one begins to question the particular position of the philosopher and his inevitable cultural biases. I myself, like Badiou, possess a (somewhat unverifiable) belief in “the universality of great poems”; I also, however, share Melas’s conviction that recognizing both the cultural context of a literary work and one’s position as a “knower” of that work is crucial to any interpretative act. In any case, I would certainly not endorse that the discipline of comparative

literature move wholeheartedly toward the investigation of the particularities of cultural context at the expense of its focus on literature as such, regardless of how difficult and problematic an object it is to define. The radically different views espoused by comparatists in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization* point to the fact that if there is one thing that can be agreed upon in this field, it is perhaps the reality that we will never unanimously agree, as Saussy perceptively observed, on either a defining object of study or a definitive methodological approach for our research. As one could conclude from comparing Melas's and Badiou's methodologies and the differing reactions to them, the irresolvable tension between the methodological imperative to temper the debilitating implications of relativism, on the one hand, and the desire to unify through articulating a non-reductive form of universalism, on the other, will no doubt remain a key issue of contestation within the discipline of comparative literature—at the same time as it is perhaps the precipitating force behind the inception and continuation of the entire field.

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