PROJECT MUSE®

Comparative Literature in a World Become Tlon

Djelal Kadir

Comparative Critical Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 125-138
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ccs.2006.0010>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199720>

Comparative Literature in a World Become Tlön

DJELAL KADIR

What is the role of Comparative Literature in a time when worldly reality contravenes the dynamic of comparativity that is at the heart of the discipline, a time when a global *Realpolitik* driven by absolutes threatens to moot the spirit of comparatism altogether? Ignoring worldly reality would mean becoming complicit in the contravention of the comparative; capitulating to absolutes that now grip the world would mean a disciplinary self-negation. Under the current circumstances, then, can Comparative Literature muster an alternative, an option to the decidedly Manichean and eschatological beginning of a new century and third millennium? Comparative Literature has always justified its métier by leveraging a *tertium quid* beyond dichotomous antitheses. Now implicitly, now overtly, a non-binary principle has governed the discipline, namely, that the view from nowhere is bound to be limited, and, conversely, the view from everywhere is unlikely to be anything other than delusional. Can Comparative Literature, then, negotiate a course in the current *Realkultur* that is so unremittingly pressured by an incomparably dualistic and antinomian *Realpolitik*?

In the last century, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges ironically dramatized a similar predicament in his uncanny fictions. At a historical moment on the verge of an eschatological nihilism whose deadly delusions soon overtook Europe, he wrote ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ (1940),¹ a narrative of a spectral vanishing point and ubiquitous totality. Ten years later, Borges’s monitory dramatization of that delusional ambition would echo as death rattle in Hannah Arendt’s now classic treatise *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt would write: ‘Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it. The deduction may proceed logically or dialectically; in either case, it involves a consistent process of

argumentation which, because it thinks in terms of a process, is supposed to be able to comprehend the movement of the suprahuman, natural or historical processes.... Once it has established its premise, its point of departure, experiences no longer interfere with ideological thinking, nor can it be taught by reality'.² This is the prospect of totalization prognosticated by Borges at the threshold of World War II. Arendt's diagnosis of it as reality came ten years later. The baneful consequences of that totalitarianism are still with us at the beginning of the new century. The scene of Borges's prognosis and Arendt's subsequent appraisal is a millenarian eschatology that was embodied in the Third Reich.

The years between 1940 and 1951 were not only defining of the history of Europe and much of the rest of the world, they also revealed some of the most malevolent possibilities of the human species. Between Borges's ironic augury and Arendt's tragic reflection there is a reversal of the common wisdom that historical iteration would have the first instance occur as tragedy and the second as farce. In mid-twentieth-century Europe, unlike the events of the mid-nineteenth century, of 1848 France to be exact, the farcical came first in Borges's monitory irony; the tragedy followed, and it fell to Arendt to dissect it when the carnage was done. I have elaborated on Borges's admonition in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' elsewhere.³ In history's confirmation of Borges's prescience, the most ominous phrase in the coda of Borges's tale, 'the world will be Tlön', was soon corroborated, as were its baleful consequences, documented in Arendt's *ex eventu* diagnosis. Half a century later, at the beginning of the third millennium, Borges and Arendt intersect once again, as they did, asynchronously, on the Third Reich. The admonition of the first and the analysis of the latter converge at an historical juncture that is as defined by the rage for totalization as it is driven by axiomatic premises and ideological zeal, neither of which is any less immune to experience and could be no more resistant to the lessons of reality than ever before in human history. The result is a historical moment governed by regimes of death, even as they proclaim themselves as 'pro-life' and for the cause of human liberty. The maelstrom of this paradox swallows up any *tertium quid*, or third term, that might mitigate the absolutes in the reigning antinomy and its insolubility. Thus, the terms of the self-contradiction, as self-totalizing as the totality wrought by their irreconcilability, seek to preempt any possible third term of correlation. It is in the nature of the absolute to foreclose on the relational, and the

total deems itself unquestionably incomparable. Finding ourselves framed within an epoch that would brook no third term at the beginning of the third millennium, what is the role of Comparative Literature when the *tertium comparationis* would be foreclosed and comparativity preemptively trumped? What might be the options for Comparative Literature as discourse and as pedagogy inexorably embedded in a global *Realpolitik* of self-exemption from correlation and a *Realkultur* of impervious exceptionalism?

The answer to this variously stated question of ‘*Quo vadis* Comparative Literature?’ has to be sought in the vagaries of that sinuous course that winds among today’s absolutes – the absolutes of would-be universals, of reflexive identity, of self-serving pragmatism, of techno-automatism, of hegemonic immanentism, of ethno-cultural certainties, and of disciplinary autisms. Under such circumstances, any course must be accompanied by the realization and forthright admission that Comparative Literature is in and of this world and, as such, it is an eminently political endeavor, and, as with all political tasks, this too must be guided by a supple but steady sense of ethics, all of which requires a critical self-awareness that checks the inevitability of replicating hegemony in the very effort of interrogating and de-centering what hegemonically frames the existing disciplinary discourse and its political intercourse. Tacking a course among the terrific, and often terrorific perils of prescriptive universals and predatory pragmatisms entails working within and through these predicaments with detached engagement, constantly (re-)qualified commitment, fluid steadfastness, self-effacing assertiveness, and secular belief in the cause of cultivating the more benign (which, in a priori self-congratulatory fashion, we refer to as more humane) impulses of the human species. In the process, we may be placing ourselves in the grip of paradox but, like contradictions, paradoxes can and should be negotiated, even while absolutes, like antinomies, continue to assert their self-declared immunity from correlation with anything that might differ from them.

I may well be exhorting us to what has often been referred to as a form of ‘Humanism’, but I would rather take the more circuitous course of description than the direct vector of a culturally self-referring shorthand or code such as ‘Humanism’. For the human to designate all that is valued by humans as ‘Humanism’ is a tautological precision that comes with the inexorable accuracy of the human’s converting itself into the bull’s-eye of cosmic exactitude and paragon of rightness. Historical precedent tells us that the results of such unexamined self-

foregrounding have been mixed at best, whether in the depredations of Renaissance Humanism in the Age of Discovery and Colonization, or in Enlightenment Rationality's rationalization of the most inhuman acts in the name of progress and civilization (see, for example, Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History').⁴ The current absolutist age, whether as idealist universalism or as opportunistic pragmatism, or as adventitious synthesis of both, is remarkably consonant with such precedents in human history.

Comparative Literature could well be inextricably continuous with this history, but whatever sliver of self-absolution humanity has been able to salvage from its humanness has come from the sporadic possibility of critical reflection. Critique and self-critique, no matter how fitful and paradoxical, are also part and parcel of this history, though a part obstructed, more often than not, by the more prevalent impulse of self-affirmation and the more overriding penchant for self-assertion. Inevitably, then, Comparative Literature seems destined at the moment to find its *métier*, once again, in the secular reflection of paradoxically being human and this-worldly in an epoch that recapitulates the other-worldly enthusiasms and deadly zealotry of human history's intermittent slide into totalizing antinomies and hegemonic totalitarianisms. Comparative Literature found its last resurgence at precisely that moment of totalization and totalitarianism, which, as already noted, was presciently dramatized by Borges and surgically assessed by Arendt at mid-twentieth century. Almost six decades later, this revolution or periodic *ricorso* finds us at that threshold yet again. Thus, we keep coming back to the inescapable question: How are we likely to cross that limit line, and how are our efforts likely to differ from the disciplinary parameters we inherited from Comparative Literature's resurgence out of the ashes of terror at mid-twentieth century?

That twentieth-century inheritance under whose aegis we have been labouring is notably embodied in such figures as Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek, and a few surviving members of the dispersed Frankfurt School, who emerged as a counterpoint to the totalitarian antinomies diagnosed by Arendt. But the fulcrum of their Comparative Literature rested on the same Enlightenment Rationality whose aberrant mutations produced the very totalitarian regimes the discipline sought, with tragically varying success, to interrogate, to critique, and, finally, to flee. The mid-twentieth century's antitheses formed a counterpoint of racialized ethno-nationalisms, with the most emphatically schematic

formalisms of philologists and linguists emerging as reaction formation and echoic reversal of the race- and ethnicity-based political programmes, pogroms, and perverse soteriologies. This certainly was at the heart of the Nazis' National Socialism. And analogous Salvationist programmes of evangelical and fundamentalist fervor, especially in the three Abrahamic traditions, are now again defining the Manichaean zealotry at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The ideological screen of competing economic systems of the Cold War notwithstanding, economic justice all too often proved an aleatory pretext, whether in capitalism or in socialist soviet societies, since the official apparatuses of both systems foreclosed on the attainment of this sort of justice very early in the contest. The unabashed predatoriness of Western capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century, no less than the unalloyed gangster capitalism of post-soviet societies, perhaps as compensatory gesture for delayed predation, demonstrate that neither system ever took distributive justice seriously, except as systemic symptomatology, what was placed on show for propagandistic purposes. While both East and West rushed in to fill the vacuum of decolonization from nineteenth-century European colonialism, and while both Soviet Russia and the Euro-Anglo-American West lost little time in re-colonizing the newly decolonized countries they were able to gather within their respective spheres of influence at mid-twentieth century, their Enlightenment-driven *mission civilisatrice* was as much racially and ethno-nationally inflected as it was defined by the economic ulterior motives, whose material benefits for the hegemonic metropolises have not been inconsiderable. In the event, the agon was Modernist and part of the Enlightenment project, as was the project of Comparative Literature and Area Studies that followed in tandem. This is to say that Comparative Literature founded its disciplinary paradigms on contrastive and contrapuntal analyses of highly differentiated national and cultural entities, often coincident with linguistic and ethno-cultural communities whose dissimilarities were necessarily accentuated for the sake of comparativity. The result, as it turns out, has been an abstracted schematization that has often dematerialized the historical reality of peoples for purposes of knowledge production and semiotic management, whether under the rubric of linguistic analyses, general literature, structural mythographies, Area Studies, or the most recent avatar of this a-historical dematerialization, namely, cultural studies. Emancipatory and anti-hegemonic as this programme might have declared itself to be, the outcome has in fact been an exacerbation

of ethno-racialized difference and essentialist reification of identity so that identity and difference become semantically and politically equivalent. As early as 1944, that is to say, contemporaneously with the totalization prognosticated by Borges's 'Tlön' and Arendt's postmortem totalitarianism, two displaced members of the Frankfurt School would note in their co-authored opus *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract qualities'.⁵ The authors are Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who would prove as determinative as the formalists, the philologists, the mythographers, the structuralists, the ethnographers, auto-ethnographers, and the culturalists in the institutional formation of the Comparative Literature that is our most immediate inheritance.

If comparatism, in Adorno's and Horkheimer's distillation, ends by mitigating material and historical specificity for the sake of comparability, the dialectical converse of this predicament, the assertion of differentiated specificity for the sake of affirming a recognizable subject (individual, collective, ethno-racial, national) ends by constructing an incomparable identity that elides or erases correlative difference so as to furnish a dedicated (targeted) *raison d'être* to a unique self-identical entity. The result is a reversion to the reification and the essentializing that a would-be post-comparatist discourse intended to allay in its affirmation of difference as material and historical specificity. Etienne Balibar diagnosed this as 'differentialist racism [...] a meta-racism, or what we might call a 'second-position' racism, which presents itself as having drawn the lessons from the conflict between racism and anti-racism, as politically operational theory of the causes of social aggression' (Balibar, 'Is There A "Neo-Racism"?').⁶ It falls to Comparative Literature to parse out and to extricate itself from this spectral paradox, and to do so without re-inscribing the abstraction of specificity and without de-materializing history, that is, without imploding into the dialectical converse from which it originally attempted to liberate its historical subject, its own disciplinary subject agency, and the epistemic interventions of its comparative enterprise. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this is where Comparative Literature finds itself and it is from here that it must chart an epistemological, scholarly, and pedagogical course as a disciplinary formation and discursive field. While certain lineaments of this re-defined course were proleptically delineated already in the last decade of the twentieth century (see, for example, among others,

Fredric Jameson's *The Seeds of Time*),⁷ the vehemence with which the raw force of ideological absolutes and antinomian fundamentalisms have assaulted society, sociality, and their dialectical predicaments at the beginning of the twenty-first century has had the rattling effect of obfuscating, if not shattering, the promise of those proleptic efforts. It is in the opacity of this anxious historical moment of vehement ideologies and shrill public discourse that Comparative Literature is now fated to re-clarify its own disciplinary contours and re-set its course. And what might, or what should, this course look like, then?

We might begin by noting the potential synergy among a number of recent approaches. If we could bring these discrete efforts into some sort of negotiated conjunction, we could well move the discipline beyond the reassertion of its own self-privileging centrality in what it perceives as its sidereal system. Thus, such strategies as 'distant reading' (Moretti, 2000),⁸ 'planetarity' (Spivak, 2003),⁹ 'world literature' (Damrosch, 2003)¹⁰ that have already emerged in the new century are clearly symptomatic of what Alberto Moreiras has called 'negative globality'.¹¹ There is something neo-Romantic in this formulation by Moreiras, which, like the original Romanticism of John Keats's 'negative capability', is founded on a disruption that, if properly managed, could prove even more enabling and empowering than what was interrupted. Moreiras, who refers to this disruption as 'reversal of expectations' (p. 50), derives his binomial formulation from two historians, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, specifically from their co-authored essay 'World History in a Global Age'.¹² Not unlike Comparative Literature, obviously, the discipline of history also has had to countenance its own discursive and institutional recalibrations in a world in transformation.

Be that as it may, and the various disciplines can indeed learn much from each other's coping strategies, what have emerged as strategic adaptations among the aforementioned comparatists do indeed have a global purview. And the basis of each is rooted in a 'negative globality', or an interruptive reversal in a rationalized, modernist historical process that turned out to be other than intended and other than anticipated. In this regard, the proposed strategy in each case turns out to be a default alternative to what has proved to be untenable – Moretti's 'distant reading' a reaction to the impossibility of comprehensive mastery of proliferating textuality, Spivak's 'planetarity' a response to the rapacity of globalization, Damrosch's 'world literature' a functionalist expediency of whatever might circulate at large, or fungibility as opportune value for 'world' status designation.

Admirable as these directives for Comparative Literature might be, they are not unproblematic and their limitations have already been amply rehearsed: Jonathan Arac, among others, has pointed out the real peril of hegemonic totalization inherent to generalizations that accrue to 'distance' at the expense of cultural specificity and textual particularity in Moretti's proposal.¹³ In the pages of this journal, the editor Robert K. Weninger, in a most valuable review has pointed out the dangers in Spivak's 'planetary' of not merely displacing the centrality of Northern Hemisphere-based comparatism, but of resulting in a neo-hegemonic re-inscription of centrality, substituting a self-privileging Southern Hemisphere-based comparatism for what it has displaced (135).¹⁴ And, while not intended as riposte to Damrosch's opportune 'world literature', my own parsing of the term 'world' as verb, and as transitive verb at that, would indicate that what circulates as fungible value to rise to the status of 'world literature' is neither unintended nor aleatory, but as in all markets, it is a product of selection and/or speculation, both actions that cannot be allowed to remain un-imputable in what should be the historical and material rigors of Comparative Literature.¹⁵ Left to the mercy of supposedly anonymous market forces and their absolute randomness – what neoliberalism euphemizes as 'free-market economy' – fungibility and circulation would mean no less a form of totalization where absolute contingency replaces inevitable necessity as inexorable and un-imputable hegemonic determinant of what 'world literature' might be.

In view of these predicaments, I would characterize the new course I would envision for the discipline as a *negotiated comparative literature*, or a *comparatism of multilateral negotiation*. In a time of ascendant *Realkultur* of totalization and a global *Realpolitik* of inexorable drift into totalitarianism, the role of Comparative Literature as intellectual discourse, as instrument of reading, and as discipline devoted to the contrapuntal juxtaposition and correlation of texts, cultures, and contending identities that might be just as comparable in their commonly shared attribute of deeming themselves incomparable, and that might consider their own formation, history, and privilege incommensurable, Comparative Literature has the obligation to break through the antinomian immunity that absolutes and totalizations would accord to themselves and attempt to negotiate the (il)logics of incomparability.

Thus, as functional analogue to Borges's ironic narrative in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and to Arendt's incisive diagnosis in the middle

of the last century, as critical discourse Comparative Literature might consider exercising what is arguably an ethical obligation to unmask, interrogate, critique, and allay the consequences of what Arendt called 'terms of a process' of an ideological totalitarianism that places itself and its real-world repercussions beyond the interference of experience and the lessons of reality. Comparative Literature, in other words, must negotiate among cultural productions and discursive formations that arrogate to themselves the immunities of incomparability and the impunity of exceptionalism. A logical starting point for this task might be the very commonality of immunity from comparison such cultures share in their respective mythoi of exceptionalism. Viewed as symptoms of a dialectical paradox, rather than granted the unimpeachable status of antinomy that they would embody in their vehemence, the cultures that define the beginning of the new century as comparatively intractable might be reminded that intractability is itself a tract. This could well be the threshold of *a negotiated comparative literature* that the discipline of Comparative Literature has to pursue at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the world has indeed become Tlön, when Orwellian doublespeak and the virtualization of reality contaminate the materiality of real-life predicaments, thereby extending to the ascendancy of ideologies of totalitarianism greater leeway than they have ever had since Borges penned his admonition and Arendt her diagnosis.

We have had some intimation of the discipline's potential for becoming an accessory, inadvertently or otherwise, to regimes of totalization and of antinomian impunity. Those monitory antecedents date from a decade-old essay by Fredric Jameson called 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity'. It formed part of his book *The Seeds of Time*.¹⁶ We could say that those seeds have now germinated and, as it turns out, as in the myth of Cadmus, the seeds turned out to be dragon's teeth. In that seminal essay, Jameson anticipated not only the antinomies of *Realpolitik*, but his essay also appears to have foreshadowed the seemingly incommensurable positions within the protocols of our discipline itself. *A negotiated comparative literature* that I am proposing would mediate not only the antinomies of *Realpolitik* and its concomitant *Realkultur*, but it would negotiate as well among what would appear to be mutually exclusive strategies that the practitioners of Comparative Literature I have just alluded to have postulated for the discipline a decade after Jameson's adumbration of our current predicament.

If anything other than the compensatory gestures for a disruptive lurch in the history of modernity, what Moreiras termed 'negative globality', could be said to bind the strategies for Comparative Literature I have noted above, it would be a dis-engagement from the life-world immediacy of literature as cultural production in specific sites of the world. While this might be less than felicitous as a commonality among those strategies, it could also be a shared intersection that could serve as starting point for negotiation. In fact, the predictable unanimity with which these strategists would protest that their respective roadmap for Comparative Literature is a dis-engagement from the life-world of cultural production might be an even stronger point of convergence that could serve as starting point of negotiation.

Traditionally, it has been the purpose of negotiation to assuage differences and to establish, if not commonality, workable imbrications or consensus on issues of divergence and disputed territory. But, as Jacques Derrida elaborately taught us, negotiation, as a place of 'disquiet' and of 'no leisure', constitutes a movement beyond dialogue or mere conversation to a locus where there is something at stake beyond mutual understanding.¹⁷ It is with this edge of negotiation that I would have us inflect what I have been referring to as *a negotiated comparative literature*. It would have to be a comparative literature that does not settle anything once and for all, but a restless place and disciplinary *habitus* that contests and can survive a susceptibility to contestation. Thus, I would not have us, even in the highly unlikely possibility that we ever could, oblige Moretti, Spivak, Damrosch, or any of our other colleagues, to agree on the strategies of Comparative Literature or with each other as comparatists. Implausible as this might seem, some contemporary intellectuals see this consensus as inevitable, an inevitability that is a desideratum for some (e.g., Habermas, 1984)¹⁸ and a dreaded outcome for others (e.g., Lyotard, 1985).¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, for example, in an over-valorization of consensus, would have had us bound to a theory of communicative action that engendered a discursively organized social formation, disciplinary or otherwise. Jean-François Lyotard, for his part, considered this sort of negotiated consensus as cover for injustice and what he pointedly called, in a contestatory conversation with Richard Rorty, who was then, and is even more so now, inclined toward the position of Habermas, 'conversational imperialism' (Lyotard, p. 581). Derrida, in a 1987 interview entitled 'Negotiations', where he aims to differentiate between 'dialogue' and 'negotiation', would refer to the sanctimony,

which is also inherent in the theory of communicative action as, '[t]his optimism, which is a little religious, also bothers me in the Habermasian ideology of communication. I am not speaking of a *dialogical* order that could function in other contexts but of an alleged ethics of dialogue' (p. 32).

The *negotiated comparative literature* I am advocating would have to be of 'a *dialogical* order that could function in other contexts', in Derrida's phrase, rather than 'an alleged ethics of dialogue'. And, rather than convoking the principal comparative literature strategists and asking them to settle their differences by forging a consensus, I would pose the question to them posited by Jameson in *The Seeds of Time*, to wit, 'why [is it that] intellectual or social strata in contemporary society have found the new ethical doxa congenial and useful?' (p. 35). The *negotiated comparative literature* I would foreground as salient disciplinary concern, then, would aim to negotiate the relationship between the reigning doxa of any given period and the discipline's apposite accommodation to that paradigm and its cultural *habitus* as *Realkultur*. Jameson's interrogation in 1994 was aimed to force the 'intellectual or social strata in [his] contemporary society' to negotiate the space of congeniality between its discursive practices and the 'antiessentialism'/'antifoundationalism' which, in Jameson's words, 'imply the conversion of an antinormative bias or philosophical habit into a kind of norm in its own right [... that] it has itself become something of a dogmatic foundation and has come to imply something of a new kind of human essence in its turn' (Jameson, pp. 34–35). In the previously cited passage from Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), Etienne Balibar had already diagnosed this spectral compounding in the case of race as a "second-position' racism, which presents itself as having drawn the lessons from the conflict between racism and anti-racism, as politically operational theory' (p. 22).

In our vexed time in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the content of the question and the terms of disciplinary practice to be negotiated would differ from those of the last decade of the last century, but the template for inquiry and the process for negotiating the qualitative nature of the space between the reigning doxa of *Realpolitik* and the coeval discourse of *Realkultur* in the ambit of Comparative Literature would be procedurally the same. The ultimate aim of negotiating these discursive spaces, once again, would not be to resolve the question of tactical or strategic differences once and for all and to settle into a disciplinary consensus of Habermasian

communicative action and its spectral public sphere. Rather, the purpose would be to foreground the diversity within and the divergences among these disciplinary strategies and, just as importantly, to train a light on the level of accommodation or dissonance between the *Realkultur* these strategies constitute and the *Realpolitik* that comprises them. This would indeed be a *negotiated comparative literature* whose object of comparison would be as much its own subject matter and field imaginary, as would the cultural/literary productions that are the objects of the discipline's comparatism. And the space between these two modes of reflective and transitive comparisons would indeed form the pivotal axis of the negotiation that would define what it means to do comparative literature or to function as the institutional formation referred to as Comparative Literature in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The procedure might be habile enough to be heuristic or, in Derrida's words, it could be of 'a *dialogical* order that could function in other contexts' as well. Hopefully, it might also have the virtue of interdicting the 'conversational imperialism' (Lyotard, *ibid.*) that was at the heart of the complicity among the cognoscenti of Borges's 'Tlön' and at the core of the totalization that engendered the totalitarianism the Argentine iconoclast warned against in the middle of the last century. If such a heuristics of negotiation was significant in the context of the dialectical predicaments at the center of the intellectual discourse and philosophical reflections of Habermas, Lyotard, Jameson, and Derrida at the end of the last century, it becomes even more imperative to pursue such negotiated comparativity at the beginning of our century.

The urgency with which we must face this necessity becomes all the more pressing when we consider that the new century has proved to be more revolutionary than simply a new beginning. By revolutionary here I mean a recycling, whether in upward spiral or vertiginous plunge, not into yet another ordinal sequence of racism or essentialism, as diagnosed by Jameson and Balibar. Rather, we have entered the new century propelled by the most vehement sorts of 'anti-antiessentialism' and 'anti-antifoundationalism' that would have us revolve within the centrifuge of the most retrograde fundamentalisms, recidivist ethno-nationalisms, and regressive forms of antinomian exceptionalisms that see themselves and their own world as beyond laws and as the embodiment of some unquestionable and unimpeachable Law with, to paraphrase Arendt, the privilege of immunity against reason or experience. These are far reaching antinomies of self-totalization and

terroristic totalitarianism that go by any number of names, e.g. jihadism, crusading evangelicalism, eschatological Pentecostalism, Zionism, Hindu nationalism – antinomian zealotries that arrogate to themselves a natural privilege and supernatural Law beyond normativity and beyond comparability. Antinomy as a non-dialectical category, which Jameson, after Kant and Hegel, had juxtaposed to the antitheses of contradiction (Jameson, pp. 6–7), emerges in the first decade of the twenty-first century as the black hole of difference and identity, where these are expediently sucked in and rendered equivalent and totalizable and, therefore, absolute in their capacity for ‘effortlessly turning into one another at the slightest pretext’ (Jameson, p. 7).

While negotiation with antinomy may not be logically possible, negotiating the discursive formations, including those in Comparative Literature, that are coeval, if not coterminous, with antinomian totalization becomes imperative. In an era dominated by the aura of the antinomian, Comparative Literature cannot afford to capitulate to the terror of totalization without becoming an accessory to, or complicit in, its totalitarianism, as I have already noted in my contribution to the ten-year report on the state of the discipline prepared by the American Comparative Literature Association.²⁰ As part of its engagement with the world, Comparative Literature must engage and actively negotiate its own strategies in their diversity and dialectical paradoxes, lest it leave itself vulnerable to the charge of side-stepping the intricacies of specificity and of the particular through strategies of ‘distant reading’ (Moretti), or succumbing to the anodyne wishfulness of neoliberalism and the purported ‘free’ market circulation of literary culture (Damrosch, ‘world literature’), or replicating the hegemonic discourse of the metropole in its translocation to a Southern Hemisphere and in the idealized utopia of ‘interplanetary’ (Spivak). A *negotiated comparative literature* would not, as I have noted already, aim to forge a consensus among these strategies and, in turn, construe its consensus with the *Realpolitik* in which it is embedded. It would, rather, ensure that none of the strategies the discipline generates becomes uncritically subsumed within a *Realkultur* that serves as handmaid to a *Realpolitik* of totalization and its totalitarianism, lest no one be left to note the degree to which Tlön has suffused and encompassed the world.

NOTES

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 431–443, first published in *Sur* 68 (1940), 36–46.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 471.
- 3 Djelal Kadir, 'Totalization, Totalitarianism, and Tlön: Borges' Cautionary Tale', in *Reescrituras*, edited by Luz Rodríguez-Carranza and Marilene Nagle (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2003), pp. 155–165.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 253–264.
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by J. Cumming (London: Verso, 1986), p. 7.
- 6 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 22.
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 8 Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000), 54–66.
- 9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of A Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 10 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 11 Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference* (Durham North Carolina and London: Duke UP, 2001).
- 12 Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, 'World History in a Global Age,' *American Historical Review* 100 (1995), 1034–1060.
- 13 Jonathan Arac, 'Anglo-Globalism', *New Left Review* 16 (2002), 35–45.
- 14 Robert K. Weninger, 'Worlds Apart? World Literature in the Age of Globalisation Planeterisation', *Comparative Cultural Studies* 2.1 (2004), 131–142.
- 15 Djelal Kadir, 'To World, to Globalize: Comparative Literature's Crossroads', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004), 1–9.
- 16 It forms the first chapter of Jameson's collection *The Seeds of Time*, pp. 1–71.
- 17 Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Rottenburg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 15–40.
- 18 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., translated by T. MacCarthy (Oxford: Polity, 1984).
- 19 Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty, 'Discussion', *Critique* 41 (1985), 581–584.
- 20 Djelal Kadir, 'Comparative Literature in An Age of Terrorism', in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).