

Introduction to “Comparing the Literatures: Contemporary Perspectives”

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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE—besides being the name of an academic discipline, field of research, and study program in institutions of higher education—stands for a great tradition of the humanities. Since its beginning around 1800, it serves as a ground for significant enterprises of literary studies in academic frameworks in Europe, North and South America, the Near and the Far East. This field involves classical philology and esthetics, critical theory, semiotics and narratology, translation studies, post-colonial theory, exile and migration studies, gender and queer theories, the visual arts, and eco-poetics, to name a few. It also reflects core questions regarding the experience (and the representation) of the world. Comparative literature serves also as a cultural paradigm, associated with multilingualism and cultural diversity, yet not free from blind spots—Western universalism, Eurocentrism, orientalist views, heteronormative assumptions. Its “death” as a discipline was announced a while ago—its “rebirth,” too. The very idea of comparison—the association of different case studies from the literatures of the world—continues, however, to challenge our research and teaching. Following David Damrosch’s book, “Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age,” we (Amir Eshel, Galili Shahar, and Vered Shemtov) invited colleagues and graduate students from our programs of comparative literature at Stanford University and at Tel Aviv University to reflect on the core issues of our field: its origins and histories, current questions, multi-perspectives and methods, and its contemporary implications in our institutions in North America and in Israel/Palestine. The essays thus reflect not just “case studies” in comparative literature but also the effort of saving the local—in a global age.

This effort, too, was associated with Damrosch’s book. Reflecting, however, on its origins, Damrosch recounts a dazzling trick. In one of his previous books, *Meetings of the Mind*, Damrosch

invented three interlocutors: the Israeli semiotician Dov Midrash, the multilingual aesthete Vic d'Ohr Addams, and the feminist film theorist Marsha Doddvic. All three are anagrams of Damrosch's own name. Each one presents opposing positions he considers and partly accepts. All of them mock "the blandly liberal Damrosch, who thinks he can persuade all the warring parties to get along together."

Blending the kind of irony we encounter at the turn of the nineteenth century in the work of the German romantics with his panoramic familiarity with the history and practice of comparative literature, Damrosch urges us to do two things at the same time: to acknowledge and respect the infinite diversity of literary production across cultures and locations while we simultaneously strive to discover similarities and moments of formal and thematic conversion. The spirit of Damrosch's move to both refract any stable notion of comparative literature and to work toward productive engagement and exchange accompanies all contributions to this collection. Any attempt to suggest that all contributors share a single vision of what comparative literature is or should be is bound to dissolve, just as Damrosch discovered, in his own name, his own position, and at least three others captured in the names of Midrash, Addams, and Doddvic. The essays gathered in this special double issue can be addressed as another way of revealing and naming the challenges, contradictions, critiques, and ironies of comparative literature as represented in his book.



Turning to one of the first moments in the history of comparative literature, Nir Evron's "Herder on Shakespeare, Nominalism, and Obsolescence" revisits Johann Gottfried Herder's 1773 essay on Shakespeare. Herder's critical essay is essential for our notion of comparative literature as a discipline, Evron argues, since it both recognizes the consequences of adopting a "culturalist and historicist self-image that it promotes" and models "the nominalist and culturalist outlook" which has been crucial in its history. Herder's meditation on cultural finitude in Shakespeare, Evron argues, originates in his "insistence that human beings are social and historical creatures"—an insight with far-reaching implications for comparative literature and all other humanistic fields of study.

Casting his gaze at an earlier point of departure for a comparative perspective, Iyad Malouf, in "Medieval Othering: Western Monsters and Eastern *Maskhs*," offers a manifold reading of "medieval Othering" while focusing on the figures of monster and *maskh*. While monsters had an integral role in defining the non-Christian Other in the West, *maskhs*, Malouf argues, played a similar role in what came to be known as "the East." Examining the meaning, function, and interaction of monsters and *maskhs* in the Middle Ages, the article shows, may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of "medieval Othering," a practice and a prejudice still operative today in cultural and political discourse across the globe.

Practices of distancing and exclusion are also at the center of Uri S. Cohen and Manar H. Makhoul's "Political Animals in Palestine-Israel." Employing the conceptual shift at work in ecocriticism and animal studies regarding "ecology" as a trope of "coexistence," they examine narratives which touch on the milestone year 1948 in the history of the modern Middle East. The animals of Palestine as they emerge in these narratives, they argue, offer us a glimpse into literature's capacity to examine the idea of equality: "the equal value of all life, human and animal." Animals emerge here as a powerful trope in the striving to lend an ear to untold or ignored aspects of 1948 as a historical trauma, to get closer to "the secrets of Palestine and its destruction."

Comparing literary works as they give voice to the language of animals may transcend our pure emotional reaction to the pain of the single sentient creature and open possibilities of genuine listening among the two parties of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The question of nationalism and national conflict is similarly driving Victoria Zurita's "Remedios in Valinor: Magical Realism, Transnationalisms, and the Historicity of Literary Value." Zurita confronts here two forms of "transnationalism"—regionalism and cosmopolitanism—as they appear in Damrosch's *Comparing the Literatures*. Assessing Damrosch's arguments on the comparability of magical realism and examining their implications for his book's larger aims, Zurita probes the assumption of some of the major voices in the "transnational turn," especially in the field of global modernisms, in their attempt to transcend the specificities of the literary works in question.

Sarah Stoll's "Kafka's 'Gehilfen'—The Castle in between Nature Theater and Yiddish Theater" turns to one of the major scenes of European modernism, Prague, and to one of this movement's canonic representatives, Franz Kafka. Focusing on Kafka's *The Castle*, Stoll suggests that we read the posthumously published novel as "a theater play in which the protagonist is trying to achieve a role that was never made for him." K.'s attempt to create his own reality is in Stoll's reading "the allegory of a minor, that means a revolutionary, writing." Relating to both world theater and to the Yiddish theater of its time, *The Castle* reveals itself here as a site of personal and communal struggle with cultural prejudice. Kafka's diary entries on the Yiddish theater lend Stoll's comparative interpretation further weight. She displays how prose, drama, and personal narrative grapple with and test the national creed.

Whereas linguistic marginalization characterizes the view of Yiddish in early twentieth century Prague, Michèle Bokobza Kahan's "The Female Novelists of the Emigration of the French Revolution: Presentation of a Literary Scene" draws our attention to gender as a site of conflict and literary production. Presenting novels of emigration during the French Revolution written by such women as Stéphanie de Genlis, Adélaïde de Souza, Isabelle de Charrière, and Claire de Duras, Kahan focuses on the notion of hospitality. Highlighting the link between emigration and hospitality, she suggests that the writers in question mobilized their literature to pursue professional recognition—to validate and bring about a recognition of their writing choices and practices. Employing Judith Schlanger's term "literary scene," Kahan presents the writers and works at the center of her article as helping us to negotiate an interpretative perspective which exceeds the binary of the "local" and the "global."

Comparative literature's capacity to examine narrative across geographic location, genre, and even discipline guides Haiyan Lee in "Apples and Oranges? An Idiosyncratic Comparison of Literature and Anthropology." From her standpoint as a specialist in Chinese literature, she considers the kind of knowledge literary studies produces. Moving between the personal and the theoretical, she suggests that anthropology can provide useful tools in making sense of politically and culturally distant texts in the age of world literature. She illustrates this provocative point by turning to flat characters in traditional Chinese fiction in light of new research in the anthropology of mind. Literary studies, she urges us to consider, should move toward the "new humanities" in order to become relevant to broader constituencies.

The biases of Western thought regarding genre take center stage in Teddy Fassberg's "Languages of Gods and the Structures of Human Literatures: An Essay in Comparative Poetics." Fassberg challenges the conventional, reductive notion of literature as comprised of merely two

complementary, comprehensive categories: poetry and prose. Probing the validity of this restrictive view as it emerges as early as ancient Greek and Roman thought, Fassberg then demonstrates that the “poetry” versus “prose” dichotomy is nowhere to be found in the neighboring ancient literary cultures of biblical Hebrew and early Islam. Fassberg then proceeds to argue that the manufactured difference between the two genres correlates to Greek and Roman concepts of divinity, specifically the language of their gods. Fassberg furthermore ties his theoretical move to Erich Auerbach’s argument in *Mimesis* regarding the separation and mixture of styles in antiquity.

In “Rethinking the Dictionary: Holocaust Dictionaries in Global Perspective,” Hannah Pollin-Galay and Betzalel Strauss challenge another restrictive view: the relegation of the dictionary outside of the literary field. Questioning this practice, they urge us in their article to discover in the dictionary a rich locus of literature and of comparative cultural interpretation.

Centering on Holocaust-Yiddish dictionaries, they reveal—in the succinctness of the dictionary entry and in the capaciousness of the dictionary as a cultural endeavor—“ethical, emotional, and even spiritual potency.” Exemplifying the methods of comparative literature, they include in their discussion a broad array of sources, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an interwar lexicon of Yiddish jargon, the Chinese *Erya*, and the Hebrew-Arabic *Ha-Egron*. Their examination leads then to the discovery of a productive tension within the genre: while the dictionary promises to organize and categorize language, it often reveals that which is unknowable in speech and in experience.

The notion of experience also guides Tal Yehezkely in “Airing Literature: Reading with the Sense of Smell.” While comparative literature thus far centers on language in its various iterations, the article urges us to explore forms of reading inspired by “both the sense of smell, and the phenomenon of smell.” The article begins by laying out its theoretical foundation. It formulates a comparative model deriving from the conceptual history of smell and from its attributes as a physical phenomenon. Yehezkely then proceeds to examine the peculiar materiality of smell as part of an atmosphere and the possible implications it might have when we examine what links or separates “literature” and “life.”

Literature’s ability to touch on “life” as a tangible, corporal category guides J. Rafael Balling in “Between Times: The Case of Yiddish Transness.” Balling here examines literature as it challenges normative concepts of gender. His article traces the literary undermining of any stable sense of time and place. Turning to Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story, “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” [“Yentl der Yeshive Bokher”], Balling uncovers the narrative’s capacity to suspend medical categorizations of transness. Bashevis Singer’s work is exemplary in this regard, Balling shows, since it mobilizes such rich and diverse sources as Yiddish demons, rabbinic writings, and early-twentieth century sexological accounts of gender variance. “Yentl” emerges in Balling’s reading as a powerful opportunity to overcome prejudice in regard to gender variance. The work invites us to imagine the possibility of accepting the productive intersections of temporal, linguistic, and geographical migrations.

The capacity of literature to imagine realities which far exceed normative modes of individual and communal life informs Adi Molad’s “The Circus Comes to Town: Reading Gershon Shofman’s Hebrew Literature in the Ring.” Through the lens of Gershon Shofman’s work, Molad examines the circus as a liminal space in which corporal, subjective, and communal norms solidify and refract. Since the trope of the traveling circus as a lush amalgamation of the eclectic and the unique is a metaphor for transcending domesticity and nationality, it lends itself to examine

this work of Hebrew literature as pursuing "a supranational theme that expresses the worldly in literature." Focusing on three circus stories by Shofman, Molad shows that physical power does not necessarily translate into national domination or political subjugation. The circus becomes in this article a powerful lens through which we can see how the literary imagination and our attempts to interpret the literary far exceed any limitation of a single national language or a single national creed.

This double issue ends with an essay by Dharshani Lakmali Jayasinghe entitled "When Translating Ultra Minor Literatures is Not Enough to Counter Epistemicide." Lakmali's annotated translation of a selection of quatrains by Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula Therato was published previously in Dibur's *Curated* magazine. The essay explores "some of the challenges that scholars working on what David Damrosch calls 'ultra Minor' literatures from the Global South must contend with, particularly the politics of organizing and compiling bibliographies."



In the final pages of *Comparing the Literatures*, Damrosch recalls one of the dialogical scenes from *Kitab al-Khazari* (*Book of the Khazar*) by the Judeo-Arabic thinker and poet Yehuda ha-Levi. "As a motto for comparatists," Damrosch borrows from the book a quotation related to the Khazar, the king, who admits his lack of pure faith and thus his need for study, inquiry, and knowledge: "Tradition in itself is a fine thing, if it satisfies the soul," the king says, "but a perturbed soul prefers research" ("The Kuzari," 5.1). Not belief (*i'tiqad*), but rather knowledge (*ilm*), not tradition (*taqlid*) alone but inquiry (*bahth*) are the measures of the comparative study that the Khazar is obligated to undertake. These are the measures of studies—not free of doubts and suspicion, the Khazar implies in his learning of different cultures—and of philosophies and religions. Our "motto" of comparative literature, to follow Damrosch's quotation from the *Book of the Khazar*, is also associated with the dialogues of Hebrew and Arabic, the dialectic of research and tradition, and the encounters of critical thought with acts of belief. Research (*bahth*) may itself become a fortune (*bakht*), a wealth of being, once immersed in conversations, in exchange, in the gathering of people, ideas, and words. A