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Remarks on Inclusive Comparison

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At the center of Joseph Slaughter's important address is the question of inclusion. *It appears in the phrase "inclusive comparison." The remark he makes in a footnote about "non-privileged (generally minor and/or minority) commentators in the world of letters who compared literature from marginal places to* the *literature from Europe" is particularly interesting as it speaks of pioneers of sort who dared to take seriously the "exhortation to compare" beyond established and conventional borders and bring into the literary conversation* other *literatures. I would like to develop a few reflections inspired to me by the notion of "inclusive comparison" by examining first the very concept of "comparison" and by considering the lessons to be drawn from the works of a couple of pioneers of "inclusive comparison" bringing in African literature: Abbé Grégoire and Blaise Cendrars.*

Comparison, Equivalence, Reciprocity

It is useful to remember the etymological meaning of the verb *to compare*. To recall its constitution from the Latin *cum* meaning "with" and *par* meaning "equal." *To compare* is therefore to put *on par with*, to create equality, or rather equivalence between two realities by putting them on the same level as a precondition to examining resemblances and differences between them. The rapprochement with translation as a particular instance of comparison can then be easily made: translation is equality, equivalence between two languages; it establishes between the language from which translation is made and the one into which it is realized, a relationship of reciprocity. As Antoine Berman, the French philosopher of translation, declares: translation is "putting in touch" two languages, and that is why it is, ultimately, an ethical gesture of *comparison*, understood as creation of equivalence.

If the human being is a literary animal in the sense that storytelling is the most fairly distributed thing in the world, to compare, that is to pursue the literary through all the languages and cultures of the world is the humanist gesture par excellence as its aim is the appearance, on the same stage, of the different but equivalent ways by which humanity expresses itself in the different manifestations of its faculty to tell stories. Such a humanism of literary equivalence as it may be called[1] is or should be the goal of comparative literature if we are to accept the narrative that traces the origin (or rather

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1 Of course, I have in mind here, the well-known declaration by Etiemble that "comparative literature is humanism."

an origin) of the discipline back to the date of March 12, 1830, when in a public lecture delivered at the "Athénée" of Marseilles, Jean-Jacques Ampère called for "a truly *comparative history* of arts and letters among all people."[2] President Levin, quoted by Joseph Slaughter, echoed such a call when he spoke of "nations in the world whose literature is still to be compared," saying that "our discipline will not have completely realized its potentialities or objectives until its network has embraced them all."

We should not read too much in phrases such as "all people" or "nations in the world." As Slaughter comments in his address, the all-encompassing internationalism thus expressed is merely speculative and hypothetical. Languages and literatures from the (formerly) colonial world are not really considered part of the virtual world of letters evoked by those phrases: the false choice between Swahili and Latin rhetorically presented by Levin and commented by Slaughter is an illustration. The colonial space, by definition, cannot be a space of comparison because it is built on asymmetry and *incomparability*. In such a space, the imperial language simply cannot be posed as one among others because the indigenous idioms cannot be considered as languages. To think otherwise, to dare *compare*, is indeed an act of decolonization.

Such an act, what Slaughter calls a "gesture of inclusive comparison," has been accomplished by pioneers who could then be called the true founders of comparative literature as humanism.

The *Divan,* the *Litterature des Nègres*, the *Anthologie Nègre*

Whence Hafiz as I dare suppose
A place beside thee have I won;
For when men's thoughts together run
Between the men a likeness grows

These verses are from Goethe's *West-East Divan*, the collection of poems in which he welcomed the Persian poet Hafiz, giving him hospitality in his work: placing himself *beside* him, *on par with* him. When he coined the phrase "world-literature," Goethe had mainly in mind the literatures of France, Italy, England, and ancient Greece, of course. But his salute to Hafiz across centuries and across the divide between such metaphysical entities as the West and the East manifests that the concept was for him naturally open in time and space, naturally inclusive, destined to embrace humanity in its totality because he was convinced that poetry "is the universal possession" of humans everywhere.

It has to be noted that the gesture of inclusive comparison, of establishing reciprocity, was repeated when in 1923 Indian poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal wrote a book of poems entitled *Payam I Mashriq*, *Message from the East*, that he presented as a response to the Western Divan of Goethe, a salute to the German poet in response to the one he gave to Hafiz. Goethe can be seen as a founder of

2 The narrative, told by Sainte-Beuve, is reported in Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *La littérature générale et comparée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994).

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comparative literature not just for having coined the phrase "world-literature" but for having initiated that back and forth of literary responses between his German poetic language he did not consider *central* and a Persian literary tradition he did not consider *marginal*.

When it comes to the "inclusion" of African oral literature, it can be said that the date that marked the birth of a "truly *comparative history* of arts and letters among all people" (to quote again Ampère) is the year 1808, when Abbé Grégoire published his work entitled *De la littérature des nègres ou recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature. Suivi de notices sur la vie et les ouvrages des nègres qui se sont distingués dans les sciences, les lettres et les arts*. The work, translated two years later into English as *An Inquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of the Negroes*, is that of a fierce advocate of equality responding to those who, like David Hume, challenged the "friends of Blacks" to prove that literary *talent* and *negro* could be used in the same sentence. For that reason, most of the work is devoted to the presentation of examples of people of color such as Alexandre Dumas or the Ghanaian born German philosopher Wilhem Anton Amo, who distinguished themselves in the letters.

Those names and others cited in the book could certainly have value as counter-examples to the kind of racist statements made by Hume. But they did not prove anything about African literature. Dumas expresses *French* literature and Amo is but another *German* philosopher who questioned Cartesian dualism of the mind and the body. Much more important is the general principle of literary equivalence that literature is a characteristic of the humanity of the human to be found among all people. Abbé Grégoire thus writes:

> France had in the past its trouveres and its troubadours like Germany had its Min-Singer and Scotland its minstrels. The Negroes have their own, called Griots, who also go to the courts of kings where they do what is done in all courts: praise and tell lies with wit. Their wives, the Griotes, play roughly the same role as Almeas in Egypt and Bayadins in India. That is another trait they share with the traveling wives of the troubadours.

Abbé Grégoire's invitation to *compare* and *include* find an echo in 1921 when French poet published *Anthologie Nègre* (*Black Anthology*), a volume of myths, tales, and other narratives collected by explorers and missionaries who transcribed and translated them into French. He only wrote himself a very short notice as an introduction to the volume in which he insisted on "the beauty and the powerful constitution [*puissance plastique*] of the languages" in which the texts collected were first expressed, and of which the translation, he declared, gave but only a pale idea.

Like Grégoire, Cendrars was an advocate of equality, an apologist for the literary productions of Africans. His is the tone of an apologist when citing linguistic scholars he emphasizes that the primary languages of these oral texts are "soft, supple, flexible to an almost limitless degree" and that "there may not be other languages in the world with a more determined character, and with more precision in their expression." Cendrars's *Anthology* was not an isolated work of advocacy but yet another manifestation of the engagement of poets and artists in France in the early twentieth century with African arts of which they forcefully affirmed the worth and value. Thus

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Apollinaire fought until the end of his life to see African art objects stocked at the ethnographic Museum of Trocadero be transferred to the Louvre in *comparison* with other works displayed there, and Picasso in his paintings saluted "art nègre" in ways analogous to the salute addressed by Goethe's *Divan* to Hafiz.

Joseph Slaughter is right to insist that comparisons are historical. That is why the question of the "inclusion" of African orality should also be an occasion to revisit the significance of gestures of inclusive comparison made by Abbé Grégoire or Blaise Cendrars. The Utrecht address also makes an important point against the view that the condition for the inclusion of African literature as "worthy of consideration" like "any other area of study" (Slaughter quotes here Povey's expressions) is its capacity to recast itself within the form of the European models. Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor's poetry could thus be considered from the point of view of a rapprochement with Paul Claudel. But what is the full story behind such a rapprochement? The Senegalese poet has often declared that he organized in his work the encounter between the verse of Claudel that is itself a way of recapturing the vital rhythm of the biblical verse and the Serer women's art of praising wrestlers. The Bible, Claudel, Serer praise poetry, Senghor: multiple encounters to express the meaning of comparison.

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