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Comparative Area Studies without comparisons: What can Area Studies learn from Comparative Literature?

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For the purposes of writing this chapter, I polled several colleagues and it transpired that, as a PhD student many years ago, I had not been the only one struggling to find the appropriate answer to a question about my profession which would come up in small talk with kind and benevolent strangers:

Q: What do you do?
A: I am writing a PhD dissertation.
Q: What is your PhD in?
A: Comparative Literature.
Q: And what do you compare?
A (with an apologetic smile): Actually, we don't compare anything …
Q: Oh, is that so? So what do you do?
A (even more apologetically): Well, we do other stuff, but … it's complicated.

I envied a physicist friend, who was fortunate enough to be able to say, with a lascivious smile on his face, that his dissertation dealt with *friction*, as this would immediately lead the conversation into a less inquisitive and more light-hearted direction (such as 'are there many jokes at the conferences you attend?'). For my part, I gradually learnt to reply that my dissertation was on the metatheatrical aspects of plot structures, or on postmodern hermeneutical protocols, or with other similar conversation killers, and to immediately turn the tables by retaliating with ‘and what do you do?’, hoping that the stranger would come up with an answer simpler than mine. For how to explain that my academic discipline, although having ‘comparative’ in its name, rarely, if ever, compares anything? That it deals with a huge number of questions, covers enormous ground and deploys a potentially unlimited number of methods, yet it leaves the impression of not being about anything in particular, and of not insisting on doing whatever it may be doing in a specific manner? Moreover, that despite the rapid growth it has experienced in the last hundred years – measured in terms of newly opened academic programmes, newly established journals and book series and the sheer number of new publications which claim to belong to it – Comparative Literature has from the very beginning perceived itself as a discipline in crisis and at regular intervals declared its own death? Being in crisis, at the very edge of extinction, yet perpetually reconstituting its object, reinventing its methods or appropriating those created in other fields of knowledge, and thus surviving, growing, *thriving* – all this seems to be the mode of existence of Comparative Literature. Instead of fortifying its borders and fighting for a terrain over which it would have the exclusive right to rule, Comparative Literature delights in ignoring borders, and in seizing – ever so temporarily – territories ruled by others. Thus it constantly reinvents itself, redefining the answer to the question of what knowledge is worth possessing, and what the best ways of obtaining it are. Admittedly, this is not an answer appropriate for small talk with kind strangers: it may be better to honestly admit that, since you missed the last annual convention of your professional association, you are not quite sure if your discipline is still what it was when you last checked. Your peers may have already packed their bags and set up camp elsewhere.

My thesis is that Area Studies scholars should stop worrying, and learn from Comparative Literature to love their place among other fields of knowledge. Protean forms of academic inquiry are no less respectable than constant and fortified ones. If one’s field of inquiry changes each time one asks a different question, and this brings about a new conceptuality, different methods and altered relations to other fields, this is all for the best – provided that the question points in the right direction.

Area Studies and Comparative Literature have occasionally been linked to one another in the past. Gayatri C. Spivak, for example, in her book *Death of the Discipline* – as the title indicates, one of those periodic *post mortems* for Comparative Literature, which conclude that the discipline has ceased to exist on the grounds that it does not look like it used to be a decade previously – defends the claim that Area Studies and Comparative Literature can and should work together.[1] In the context of reinventing her own discipline, Spivak calls for closer links between the humanities and social sciences in general, and for Comparative Literature and Area Studies in particular. Comparative Literature, she maintains, can supplement Area Studies, mitigate 'the arrogance of Area Studies where it retains the imprints of the Cold War'[2] and offer as its dowry what was 'the best of the old Comparative Literature: the skill of reading closely in the original'.[3] What is more, 'Comparative Literature supplemented by area studies' can transcend its traditional textual focus and begin to speak to us about questions and issues that concern us not only as readers of literature, but as human beings with varying ethnic, cultural, national, political and gender identities.[4] Thus, ironically, two academic fields, one of them constantly concerned with its own survival, and the other admittedly made redundant by the forces of globalization and by the end of the Cold War, could revitalize each other and perhaps forge an amalgam which would put forth what is the best in each. The purpose of this amalgam of Comparative Literature and Area Studies would be – to resort to a somewhat old-fashioned expression and to avoid reducing the problem only to the fiscal aspects of academic policies – to know the world outside its Western, Euro-American core.

At the time that Spivak voiced her call for mutual fertilization between Comparative Literature and Area Studies, much of what she proposed had already been taking place, and it seems safe to claim that one part of her proposition has been accepted. In its earliest periods, Comparative Literature had only European literatures as its normative horizon. It was created by scholars who would, in addition to their own, typically know three major European languages, which would bring their claims to a level of generality unattainable by those who studied only one national literature – again, typically their own. The tacit assumption was that only three or four similar and interconnected literary traditions could stand for literature as such. This hardly covered all European languages – there are more than forty of them – let alone global literary production in languages spoken and written in all other continents; yet, the sample languages were always only European. 'At the disciplinary core of Comparative Literature has always been the idea of Europe', maintains Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, 'I would even venture to argue that Comparative Literature is less a discipline of literature than a type of Area Studies, a counterpart to East Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Latin American Studies, etc.'[5]

Area Studies, by contrast, although retaining the same tacit European normative horizon, were always the study of the non-Western (non-European and North American) world.Academic programmes in European Studies, together with the accompanying academic infrastructure, came into being only recently, and when they did it was specifically as a study of the political, economic and legal aspects of the European Union, and not as an academic equivalent of East Asian or Middle Eastern Studies. Thus, Spivak's proposal could aim at the way Area Studies and Comparative Literature can supplement or complement one another: Comparative Literature would add the missing area to the catalogue of existing Area Studies, and thus not only fill the cartographic gap but also supply its own specific disciplinary insights (to which we will have to return later).

However, the Eurocentric normative dimension of Comparative Literature was hardly as indisputable at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it had been during preceding decades. Since the 1980s, the rise of post-colonial studies has been one of the two most important academic developments – the other being gender studies – which transformed the profile of all of the humanities and a significant section of the social sciences. Although post-colonial studies is a research field and not a discipline, its earliest disciplinary base, its very place of origin, was Comparative Literature, and this is where the pressure exercised by the ideas, concepts and aims of post-colonial studies has been felt most. The leading promoters of post-colonial studies – including Spivak herself – spearheaded the transformation of Comparative Literature so successfully that at the present time it is difficult to say where the former ends and the latter begins. A large part of work carried out in Comparative Literature today can be easily categorized as belonging to post-colonial studies; the part that cannot is certainly made to feel uneasy for ignoring this development. Post-colonial concepts and ideas by their very existence compel even those who would prefer to continue their work as if nothing happened in Comparative Literature since the 1980s to refrain, at the very least, from assumptions and conclusions characteristic of the older periods in our discipline's history. The (West) European normative horizon is either gone altogether, or made to appear insufficient, anachronistic or plain wrong. This is certainly a major achievement for a discipline which from the very beginning claimed to address the totality of human literary production; the price it had to pay for this success was a certain loss of a recognizable disciplinary profile. This loss – as all losses always are – is experienced as a crisis.

The old, traditional Area Studies were also affected by the development of the post-colonial studies agenda. While Comparative Literature had the advantage of being able to recognize it as one of its earliest aims, and to shake off the burden of the European normative horizon as a temporary, undesired and unavoidable phase – now overcome by the results of globalization, such as the migration of scholars, the smoother flow and availability of information and closer links between distant parts of the world – Area Studies had nothing similar to rely on. The loss of normativity seemed detrimental to it: for example, for several decades the notion of modernization served as the conceptual axis around which practitioners of Area Studies organized their research. Modernization was understood as westernization, which reduced everything deemed non-modern and non-Western to objects 'defined and grasped only in terms of [their] relationship to the West', as Timothy Mitchell put it.[6] The West was posed, claims Mitchell, as 'a model that cannot be replicated faithfully' (p. 164), and historical itineraries, political forces and cultural phenomena were included in the paradigmatic area studies narrative only in order to measure an area's suitability to, or divergence from, the narrative of Western modernity.[7] Thus all other parts of the world were 'made to appear as particular instances of the universal stories told in and about the West', concludes Mitchell.[8] When this normative horizon began to crumble under the pressure coming from various directions, including the post-colonial studies agenda, the core narrative was lost: instead of as a Western export, modernity is nowadays better understood if seen as a continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programmes, as Eisenstadt proposed;[9] mistaking modernization for westernization means assuming a priority of origin over process, of geography over history, Lewis and Wigen claimed:[10] the Western understanding of Western modernity is based on a particular historical and intellectual tradition that cannot claim universal validity, and the same (universal) idea can take different shapes in different places and historical contexts, as Chakrabarty maintained.[11] With the loss of the conceptual axis, the normative horizon enshrined in it was gone as well, and what was left tended to become fragmented into millions of pieces impossible to put together: without a paradigmatic story and the normative horizon to guarantee it, what exactly should we look for when examining areas?

Thus, Comparative Literature would not only supply the missing – European or Western – area and fill in the gap on the map, but would also bring a salutary, non-normative approach. There are many reasons to believe that this is easier said than done. Much work on dismantling this normative horizon has already been done in other disciplines that contribute to the Area Studies project, as the quotes from the previous paragraph testify: my sources were two historians, two geographers and a political scientist, and a list of similar quotes could be extended if the prescribed length of this chapter allowed it. Other disciplines do not need Comparative Literature to tell them that the old normative horizon only distorts the picture, as they can find evidence for this in their own libraries. Losing this horizon is an imperative if Area Studies are to continue their existence; yet, its disappearance is experienced as a crisis.

Comparative Literature could also contribute – as one of the disciplines that jointly carries out Area Studies research – its own disciplinary insight into the areas. Here, however, Comparative Literature stands for literary studies in general, as national literary studies cannot be excluded as unnecessary here. Spivak puts this question very precisely: 'How can I, as a reader of literature, supplement the social sciences?' – that is, as a literature specialist, but not necessarily as a Comparative Literature scholar.[12] This is a difficult question to answer, not least because the tradition of thinking about literature offers contradictory views, and because other disciplines have their own take on the benefits of knowing something about the literature written in an area. The easiest answer is the least satisfactory: areas 'have' their cultures – of which literature is not just a part, but the very centre – just as they have rivers and mountains, religions, histories and institutions; knowledge of an area cannot be complete without knowing what people have thought, written and read. At times, the usefulness of literature is somewhat more emphasized: Friedrich Engels claimed that he learned a lot about capitalism by reading Balzac's novels, and in our time Thomas Piketty praises both Balzac and Jane Austen for their insights into economic processes. Historical novels sometimes offer popular interpretations of a nation's history, but no historian would base their research on them; historical novels are more significant for studying popular interpretations of history, which tend to guide people in their choices, decisions and allegiances more than academic historiography ever will. The core of the problem, however, is that *literary works of art* rarely, if ever, reflect the reality of historical, political or economic processes: even if they claim to do so, they are always works of fiction and the imagination which are not bound by any laws of accurate representation. Moreover, only a small fraction of literature even pretends to do so. Poetry certainly does not, plays only occasionally and indirectly, and novels and stories more often, but by no means always. And to make things even more complicated, literature requires interpretation, and this depends on our possessing at least some basic disciplinary knowledge: a line spoken by a character in a play does not have the same meaning and significance as the same sentence found in a political programme, but relies on often very complex literary semantics, and can mean the exact opposite of what it means elsewhere. But the most problematic way of including the study of literature in the Area Studies agenda is the tendency of treating literature as *national allegory*. The creator of this label was Fredric Jameson, who claimed that all texts written in the third world 'are necessarily … allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as … national allegories.'[13] The first world has undergone the radical split between the poetic and the political, or the private and the public, claimed Jameson, and its literature has become the preserve of the former. 'Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*.'[14] In his criticism of this thesis, Aijaz Ahmad, Indian literary theorist and poet, wrote the following: 'I was born in India and I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So I said to myself: "*All? … necessarily*?" It felt odd.'[15] Western literature is 'all' and 'necessarily' about the poetic and private, while the rest – also 'all' and 'necessarily' – always writes only about the public and political, about their embattled nations, regardless of what the actual text may be about. No love poetry for the third world, then. However, Jameson is certainly right in one respect: this really is how non-Western literature is very often read and interpreted in the context of Area Studies, and sometimes even in other academic contexts in Western academia, and if a particular poem, play or novel cannot be easily interpreted as a national allegory, it is deemed to be of no interest for Area Studies whatsoever. The results of such interpretations are, quite understandably, of little value: if one approaches *all* third-world texts with the assumption that they are *necessarily* about embattled nations, one will find in them only what one has put there oneself. Third-world texts will be able only to reflect back to us our own assumptions and projections, and what they may really be saying about people's lives, experiences, histories, hopes and dreams will remain unknown.

Yet, literary theory offered several different and even conflicting answers to the question 'what do we learn from literature about reality and history?' The debate on representation, or reference or *mimesis*, has from the very beginning been one of the central topics in literary theory. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, literary theory's founding texts, initiated the long discussion about the relationship between literature on the one hand, and history and reality on the other. Closer to our own time, and in a century that witnessed a proliferation of different theoretical approaches to literature, two major directions crystallized: the conventionalists or formalists, who claimed that any reference to reality is only an illusion, a result of *semiosis* or a product of literary conventions; if novels and stories ever refer to anything, it is not to reality, but to other novels and stories. The opposite camp, the contextualists of various persuasions, believe that every text has its own context, which may be purely literary, as the conventionalists insist, but may also be extra-literary: historical, social, cultural and political. This context can be the dominant ideology of a specific time and space – as various Marxist schools of thought claimed, disagreeing about the content of this concept all along;[16] or structures of feeling, a concept created by Raymond Williams in order to refer to a set of perceptions, values and norms characteristic of a group of people in a specific historical period, and best materialized in art forms;[17] or the poetics of culture, as New Historicism maintains, understood as a network of various discourses that circulate in a society and become sedimented in literary texts.[18]

Aside from both camps, one branch of phenomenology assigns literature a role much more important than just 'reflecting', 'recording' or 'allegorizing': it maintains that, whatever else stories may achieve, they also create a meaningful society and make possible an ethical sharing of the common world, as opposed to the merely common physical environment. Telling a story is a communicative act through which a society establishes what it means to be human, to be a saint or a hero, honourable or happy, or to live with others, and this act constructs tacit, background understandings, which to all members of a society seem natural and universal.[19] Or, to put it differently: individuals become members of a particular society if they share the same tacit background understandings. These are preserved in, and communicated by, society's stories, which point to them, or present them to us, usually without precise and explicit definitions. Inspired by Heidegger's reinterpretation of the notion of the world – not the totality of entities, but the web of meanings that construct our self-understanding and the understanding of everything else around us – phenomenology sees cultures as the totality of significance that we share with one another: 'the world is always the one that I share with Others', as one of Heidegger's most memorable theses goes.[20] Cultures prescribe normative patterns of interpretation and conduct through their languages: different worlds can be intersubjectively shared only if they are articulated in languages, which bear and transmit tacit pre-understandings of something or other. We share a meaningful world because it has already been previously linguistically articulated: we get to know it not through innocent and fresh perception, but through becoming accustomed to the ways everything in the world has been previously understood and interpreted. Language records and stores these pre-understandings in its most developed forms, in speech genres such as paradigmatic story, habitual everyday expression and proverb, and literary genres such as myth, epic, history, folktale, romance, confession, prayer, chronicle, essay, novel, poem, play, newspaper article and so on. These genres not only offer an unrivalled opportunity to examine the worlds – webs of meanings – sedimented in languages, but also make it possible to see how these worlds come into being through contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities and uncertainties, and develop through processes of narration and symbolization in such a manner that the level of conceptualization is rarely achieved, and yet a specific world still emerges. Understanding a particular world – a historical one, such as the medieval world, or a synchronic one, such as the Chinese world – is only possible if one is familiar with the background understandings this world's language creates, stores and communicates to its speakers, and thus binds them in a society. They become members of the same collectivity if they share these meanings, and strangers and foreigners if they do not. Hence the language genres we are accustomed to calling 'literature' are not studied in the context of area studies only because areas have literatures as they have rivers and mountains – rivers and mountains become a particular area, distinguishable from another, when alongside them a specific tradition of storytelling takes root. *Traditio*, or handing down, passing on to a new generation a set of intersubjectively shared webs of meaning, created in and by the language genres listed above, is what can also be seen as a definition of an area.

The study of literature is the study of these speech and literary genres. It is *not only* about intersubjective articulation of a world through language, as it approaches these language genres from many different perspectives, but it does also include that. There is no other humanities discipline which has developed such sophisticated tools for the close reading of cultural texts, spoken or written, in the original language, as the study of literature. It is the most natural, necessary and unavoidable basis of Area Studies, and it is quite understandable that the first Area Studies academic programmes developed in the early twentieth century from *language and literature* academic programmes, as they still do evolve in this direction in our time. If the question is 'how can the study of literature complement Area Studies', the simple answer is – by doing what it has been doing so far, through close readings of cultural texts in the original language, and uncovering the pre-understandings of the world into which all members of a culture are initiated, and through this initiation taught to share a world and be bound together into a society.

However, this is not all. This justifies the place the study of literature has among other humanities and social sciences in the Area Studies project, but hardly convinces Area Studies scholars that they should stop worrying and learn from Comparative Literature to love their place among other fields of knowledge.

One of the negative starting points in this process of convincing should be the rejection of what I will tentatively name the *quest for essences*. Area Studies are reproached for failing to fully integrate various academic disciplines around a common thread. Such an integration, we are told, would result in the production of a full, complete, total presentation of an area. The assumption behind this reproach is that everything in a given area fits seamlessly together with everything else: the object under study is animated by a perfect coherence and integration, which Area Studies fail to translate into a logically coherent and integrated representation. At the core of this coherence and integration is an assumed, but not yet brought to daylight, essence of the area under study, which radiates into various aspects of reality and which must be present and detectable in them. Our academic disciplines deal with these various aspects, but they continue to analyse and explain them more or less independently of one another. As a result, instead of the essence of the Middle East, of this specific 'middleeasterness' which makes this area different from, say, Southeast Asia and 'southeastasianess' hidden deep beneath the phenomenal surface, we are only given a set of perhaps true, accurate, well-founded and evidenced insights, which still fail to describe the essence. Logic, coherence and integration must be proper to reality, it is assumed. If our account of an area consists of various elements that do not coherently fit together – though they do not necessarily contradict each other, as they may not fit simply because various disciplines approach it with interests in various processes, temporalities and elements belonging to different orders – and does not point to the essence proper to it, we have already failed to give a true account of it. For, as Hegel put it, the true is the whole.[21] The whole is guaranteed by an essence.

There is nothing anyone can raise against interdisciplinarity, save that interdisciplinarity is a very difficult thing to do. What goes under this label in many academic journals and publishers' lists is more often than not an application of the concepts, methods and interpretative protocols of one discipline in the 'section of reality' normally entrusted to another discipline. Sometimes it brings forward unexpected and valuable insights; sometimes it misses the point altogether, as we all know all too well. This is not a reason to stop trying, but neither is the challenge of being interdisciplinary effectively a good reason to look down upon the second-best and less glamorous multidisciplinary endeavours. The latter can be unsynchronized, out of step and incoherent, as they do not assume that logic, coherence and integration are proper to reality. Universal suffrage, liberal democracy, high Modernism in arts and sophisticated intellectual culture, on the one hand, and appalling levels of illiteracy and infant mortality, underdeveloped agrarian economy and minimal capital accumulation, on the other, are not supposed to be the emanation of the same essence, yet they sometimes come together. The account which points to this would have to be based on contingencies, different temporalities, discontinuities, contradictions, breaks and reversals; if nothing fits in with anything else, and the object under study does not seem to be animated by a perfect coherence and integration, but rather is incapable of being translated into a logically coherent and integrated representation, it might be better to stay closer to what one sees and can truthfully describe, than to continue the quest for essences and reproach the method for insufficient interdisciplinary integration. Perhaps there are no essences, just contingent and contradictory processes: the whole is the false, as Adorno put it.[22]

Closely related to the quest for essences is the *obsession with purity*. It comes in various guises: firstly as a variant of the quest for (areal) essences, which by definition must be pure and uncontaminated by features belonging to others. Secondly, as a methodological and disciplinary purity, which demands that every sphere of academic enquiry should have its own clearly demarcated domain and a method appropriate to it, and deems everything else a breach of disciplinary protocol and a methodological eclecticism, which *ipso facto* bears only invalid results. However, even before the twentieth-century globalizing cultural, political and economic processes irreversibly destroyed any uncontaminated areal purities – if they ever existed as such – the reality of inter-areal relations was *creolization* rather than a jealous guarding of some putative areal purity. This does not mean that globalization and the processes that preceded it obliterated all areal distinctions and specificities: globalization, as many other historical processes, produces contradictory results, dismantling some borders while simultaneously creating new ones, homogenizing and differentiating, integrating and disintegrating at the same time. Area specificities are preserved in the unpredictable results of creolization, which are never simple sums or regular syntheses of all elements involved, but incalculable and contingent hybrids brought about by unending permeation and, as a reaction which it provokes, attempts at purification. But a lot more important is the question of disciplinary and methodological purity, often raised in discussions about Area Studies. This kind of purity is the legacy of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century academic divisions, of the heroic period of the social sciences' and humanities' attempts to establish themselves as clearly distinct entities, and to divide human reality into domains appropriate to each of them. This process was far more complex than today's common departmental conflicts over resources and 'land grabbing', and to a certain extent the opposite of it, as it concerned each discipline's self-understanding and the search for their appropriate and unique methods: the point was not to appropriate what may have been the domain of other disciplines, but to exclude any reference to what may be others' territory, and to focus on one's own specific and unique interest and method. Literary studies, for example, strove to disregard everything that could have been deemed 'external' to literature, such as the social relations represented in a novel, as these belonged to Sociology, or ideas advocated, as these were the domain of Philosophy, or discussions regarding characters' emotions and motivations, as this was what Psychology dealt with, or the historical circumstances of the period represented, and of the time authors lived in, as these were better understood by History. What remained was the pure essence of literature, *literariness* in the terminology of Russian Formalists, or rhetoric in Anglo-American New Criticism, or structures of signification in various versions of structuralism. One of the main promoters of the term *literariness*, Roman Jakobson, famously claimed that traditional literary studies – the late nineteenth-century positivistic, historical, social or 'philosophical' criticism – behaved as policemen who came to the crime scene and, instead of arresting the criminal, arrested everything and everyone present.[23] Consequently, only a method that gave an account of *literariness*, rhetoric or structures of signification could be relied upon to preserve the purity of the object under study. Although Marxism and psychoanalysis, however marginal and suspect they may have been in literary studies, offered an alternative to methodological purity, a good two-thirds of the twentieth century witnessed ever more sophisticated efforts to devise a pure approach – to something, such as literature, that can hardly be isolated and purified from other human interests, such as history, politics, ideas and psychology. The last third of the century, however, brought about a plethora of *impure* methods, often borrowed from other humanities and social science disciplines, or sometimes resulting from the modifications and adaptations these methods acquired during their long trajectories through various disciplines: for example, New Historicism, developed in the 1980s, hybridized Foucault's discourse theory developed on the ruins of structuralism's purity, with the social interests of the *Annales* School in historiography, and Clifford Geertz's 'thick description' method, itself an adaptation of New Criticism's practice of a *close reading* of literary texts to phenomena studied by Cultural Anthropology. How very impure – created to be able to simultaneously address texts, language, culture and history, this method would certainly fail the test of 'what is your unique object and your method appropriate to it', to which Area Studies are sometimes subjected.

The moral of this story is not only that the disciplinary focus on essences and purity should be abandoned – as most disciplines engaged in Area Studies loudly advertise their anti-essentialism and openness to methods and theories developed in other disciplines – up until the point that the discussion turns to Area Studies, when the usual reproach regarding the lack of a clearly defined object and an appropriate method makes itself heard again. The point is rather to recognize how Comparative Literature successfully dealt with similar objections. In what follows, I will point out some similarities and certain differences between Comparative Literature and Area Studies, and put forward the thesis that the object of Area Studies is not readily available, but constructed in the process of research, and is dependent on it – that Area Studies should assume metaphorical rather than metonymical modus operandi, and that its methodological uncertainties are not a shameful insufficiency, but a source of strength.

To a certain extent, Comparative Literature can also be viewed as a field composed of disciplines, which are various national literatures.[24] This is an imperfect analogy, as national literatures, although dividing human reality into distinct entities – such as French or German literature – still share the effort of defining the exact object of their common interest, borrow theoretical concepts and approaches from each other and labour towards the same aim: understanding the anthropological constant of human groups producing oral and written texts considered to be literary, and distinct from non-literary language use. But the analogy is instructive in the sense that Comparative Literature is in the same position regarding its component 'disciplines' as Area Studies are regarding their components: what is it that Comparative Literature can give us, that is not already given by the sum total of its disciplines? Instead of collecting, rearranging and ordering the knowledge already present in national literatures, after several decades of trying to define its specific and unique object – among which at some point featured connections and influences between national literatures, migrations of motives, plots and so on – Comparative Literature became a testing ground for methodological and theoretical innovation, to the extent that all theoretical work became routinely classified as its natural 'subject'. This was not entirely accurate, as much theoretical discussion was still carried out within the scope of individual national literatures, but the fact that whatever was produced under the label 'theory' became instantly recognized as 'comparative' points to the fact that there was a free, unoccupied space between and above national literatures, which Comparative Literature was to fill progressively. The nature of this theoretical production was interdisciplinary by its very nature: beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, linguistic structuralism was appropriated by literary studies and transformed into a universal interpretative method suitable for all the humanities and some social sciences as well, thus reversing the process of disciplinary purification and confirming the claim that approximately every fifty years the humanities and social sciences agree on the need of having one universal method (the rise of structuralism occurred half a century after the demise of positivism, which at the beginning of the twentieth century played this role). In the 1970s and 1980s, Derrida's and Foucault's post-structuralism became almost hegemonic humanities and social science methods, reaching as far as legal studies and archaeology, and at the turn of the century the study of identities pioneered in Comparative Literature – gender, sexuality, race, meta-geography and so on – permeated almost all corners of academic inquiry. True, the impulses always came from somewhere else, be it a Swiss linguist whom linguistics quickly abandoned, or from the two French philosophers not taken seriously by Philosophy departments, but Comparative Literature still served as a laboratory and testing ground where various theoretical impulses were developed into fully-fledged theories with far-reaching implications, impossible for other academic disciplines to ignore. Comparative Literature became the theoretical laboratory for the humanities and social sciences thanks to, firstly, literature's ability to absorb and represent our shared experience of being human in all its varieties and dimensions, and secondly, by what Gadamer refers to as the *linguisticality* of this experience, the key meta-topic of the most important currents in twentieth-century philosophy, which made literature, the language art, a suitable domain for intellectual innovation, and which recognized language as the basis for theorizing.[25] With each and every theoretical turn, the object of Comparative Literature changed: there was not *an* object, natural, finished and hidden, waiting to be subjected to our investigation as soon as we devised the appropriate method to approach it. Rather, the object(s) came into being as the result of *questions asked*, that is, methods and theories that animated those methods. Thus Comparative Literature became not the sum of knowledge stored in national literatures, nor a space in which their specific achievements could be interconnected and compared, but a generator of questions which, it turned out, concerned them all, and demanded to be addressed, but could not initially be asked in any one of them. National literatures are limited by what is their primary and natural object: the canon of works to be read, commented upon, analysed, and thus preserved and transmitted within a larger whole, which is the life of a nation. They can, and have been able to, pay their tribute to the open set of questions regarding literary interest as such, which is generated by Comparative Literature – if prompted from the outside – but they do not usually generate such questions themselves. These questions, such as my example of exploring tacit, background understandings hidden in languages and literary genres that serve as language repositories, are normally beyond their focus: if a national literature specialist begins to ask the question of different background understandings, it means that she has already stepped out of her domain and has become a comparatist.

Area Studies should assume a similar position with regard to their component disciplines. They should not try to be a sum total of all disciplinary knowledge about an area – which is a fine thing, normally called 'an encyclopaedia of …', but not a very dynamic field of academic inquiry – or even imagine themselves as the mortar connecting disciplinary bricks into a larger whole. Area Studies should generate questions that no single discipline concerned with an area can ask, focused as they are on objects established by tradition and verified by practice. These questions can arise only if Area Studies are to change their understanding of interdisciplinarity, which is at present limited to asking a question arising from the framework and interests of one discipline, and requiring all other disciplines to provide their contributions to fleshing out the answer. To be able to do this, Area Studies must abandon the quest for their proper object, which can only lead back to the search for essences of areas, or expose Area Studies as inferior to the disciplines which do not have such concerns. The proper object(s) of Area Studies will appear, or keep appearing in different shapes and forms, as a result, not as a starting point: the object(s) will be brought about by various methods with which we approach an area, or various contexts in which we place it/them, and various questions we ask about it/them. The object of Area Studies will be revealed as knowledges that we could not have acquired by approaching an area from the perspectives of the disciplines studying it. Not being a discipline, Area Studies have the right to enjoy their protean nature, to delight in the impurity of their methods and results and to reject the demand to offer their knowledge as *a whole*: a whole in this context can only be imagined as 'an encyclopaedia of', neatly fitting and covering everything, guided by a pure method and letting an essence shine through – an impossible demand, which has been generating all the complaints about Area Studies' unfulfilled promises.

In this respect, the insights offered by Area Studies should be metaphorical rather than metonymical. Disciplines offer metonymical knowledge: a history of the Middle East tells us a part of what could and should be known about an area. It is assumed that there is a lot more to be known about the Middle East, but the discipline of History gives us only *pars pro toto*. The promise of Area Studies, we are told, was that they would be able to devise a method with which to put all these parts together and offer us a total, integrated knowledge of an area. Yet, all Area Studies seem to have been able to do is offer us several parts, all originating in various disciplines and sitting uncomfortably – in a non-integrated fashion – next to each other. The synthesis is missing, the specific object of Area Studies – as opposed to the specific objects of the disciplines involved in the project, which are not questionable – never appeared, not to speak of a distinct Area Studies method.

A metaphorical model of knowledge, on the contrary, would abandon all pretence that a total, integrated knowledge is possible: even disciplines can claim to be offering their knowledges as total and integrated entities only if compared with even less totalizing ventures, such as Area Studies. Examined individually, all disciplinary knowledge tends to be far from a whole – neatly fitted and all-encompassing – however pure the method and integrated the results: there is no Middle Eastern history book which professes to cover everything that could be imagined as Middle Eastern history; the 'part' all of them offer is only a part of the part. While a metonym, taken in this sense, rests on an assumed (spatial) overlap between a part and the whole, and on at least partial identification, a metaphor does not: it is based on dissimilarity between entities, which often belong to different orders (*love*, an emotion, and *rose*, a physical object). However, this dissimilarity reveals an unexpected, fresh and new connection between two things: by transferring, or carrying over – *metapherein* in Greek – a thing from one order to another, in which we choose to find its equivalent, a metaphor puts it into a new context in which its new dimension, feature or characteristic is revealed. And it is always only one dimension, feature or characteristic, never a presumed totality: what metonymy achieves by *extension*, pretending to cover the thing totally, metaphor substitutes with *intensity* of insight. Metaphorical insights are temporary, as metaphors wear off, and also partial, but in a different way: while metonymic knowledges are always revealed as insufficient horizontally (spatiality and extension), metaphorical knowledge does not promise any horizontal coverage, for it works vertically. Also, such a model of inquiry should never promise any kind of total comprehension: a succession of metaphoric insights never crystalizes into anything resembling total knowledge.

Is it, then, still a model of knowledge worth striving for?

I am fully aware that offering an example for such a model of inquiry can only deflate the description I proposed above; one would prefer to keep it as general as possible, leaving the reader to think of examples closest to its requirements, or even to imagine fictional ones. However, an example, however imperfect, cannot be denied here; although while writing this description I did not have in mind Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, it can serve as an illustration as good as any, having the advantage of being widely known and exemplifying many – although by no means all – characteristics one would want to see in productive and successful Area Studies' *metaphorical* works. We do not need to engage in recasting the debate about the shortcomings of *Orientalism* here; both Said's empirical errors and theoretical inconsistencies have been discussed at length.[26] For my purposes, however, neither empirical errors nor theoretical shortcomings devalue its main achievement. This book, despite its limitations, pointed to the several important practices of Area Studies: it demonstrated how we construct an area, how interests limit or distort cognition and interpretation of it, and how *impure* supposedly pure disciplinary knowledge can be. In the process, Said successfully cleared away the debris that blocked the way to the question: what is the Middle East as an area? He did not offer an answer, let alone a total knowledge of the area or of its essence; his rhetorical and theoretical exaggerations – especially the claim that Middle East specialists *misrepresent* the area – often screen off what is truly valuable in this book: it shows that for Middle Eastern Studies, there is not an object, natural, finished and hidden, but that their object appears as the result of questions asked. 'How should we rule them' is one of these questions, which made the object appear in the specific form for the authors Said is interested in. Said achieved this by thinking metaphorically: he equated the Middle East, a geographic and historical area, with phenomena of a different order, such as sexuality and madness, as presented by Foucault. 'The Middle East is like sexuality', the simile goes, it is not a naturally given, but a discursively constructed object. He thus revealed the similarities in dissimilar phenomena: his object, or the object of Area Studies in *Orientalism* is not the Middle East, but the ways of constructing it, and his method does not belong to any of Area Studies' component disciplines, but to Foucault's interdisciplinary genealogical perspectivism, created at the intersection of Philosophy, History, Sociology and Linguistics. This he achieved not by following a prescribed disciplinary or even Area Studies protocol, which define the object and the method, but by asking a simple question: why do people in power, or close to it, in Western societies say such things about the Middle East? Both the object of his investigation, and the method he used, followed from it. If *Orientalism* belongs to the corpus of Area Studies, and I hope everyone agrees that it does, then Area Studies were ever so temporarily redefined, moved and recreated by this book. Their object was reconstituted, and their method reinvented: Area Studies reinvented themselves, redefined the answer to the question of which knowledge is worth possessing and what the best ways of obtaining it are. Despite its many shortcomings, *Orientalism* is a landmark book. It is difficult to imagine anyone working in Area Studies in our time approaching an area without Said peering over their shoulder. It was followed by a number of works that specified, modified, furthered and improved Said's object and method, until they – as pretty much everything else in our academic environment – became a petrified set of claims beyond dispute, a dogma our undergraduates learn early on and never bother to question. All metaphors wear off eventually. Nevertheless, it permanently changed the profile of Area Studies by showing what unorthodox things can be done with it.

Orientalism is written from a non-disciplinary perspective, and it may be more than just a coincidence that its author's disciplinary background was Comparative Literature. He was not a Middle East expert, which to an extent explains the number of empirical errors he made, and he had a strong emotional and political investment in the matter, which perhaps accounts for the theoretical inconsistencies that would otherwise have been obvious to such a superior theoretical mind, as his was, had he been able to approach his subject without such investment. However, another kind of investment was more important here: Said's, and Comparative Literature's in general, investment in theory. For many years, before setting out to write *Orientalism*, Said worked on introducing European literary and cultural theory to Anglo-American audiences, and was one of Foucault's principal American promoters.[27] My point is not that Area Studies should look up to Comparative Literature for its theoretical inspiration – although the latter has offered its services to anyone who cared to listen – but that Area Studies could assume the same position with regards to academic disciplines contributing to the Area Studies project: to become not a sum total of areal knowledges, but a meta-discipline that inspires disciplinary efforts, a field of theoretical innovation and experimentation in which questions are asked, conceptual vocabularies proposed and new perspectives tested. This would also mean not only that Area Studies must accept being in a state of permanent crisis – metaphors, as we know, wear off quickly and new ones must be proposed all the time – but that Area Studies should strive to permanently subvert themselves, to undermine whatever threatens to become an orthodoxy in terms of Kuhn's normal science. Not having a method, always looking for its proper object and being in a perpetual state of methodological uncertainty in this context should be understood not as a shameful insufficiency, but as a source of strength and the main prerequisite of Area Studies' existence. This kind of uncertainty is what has made Comparative Literature survive, grow and thrive, reinvent itself and reconstitute its object(s). It could do the same for Area Studies. The best hope for Area Studies is that one day this will become a shorter name for the Theory of Area Studies. Their triumph will be announced the moment young Area Studies PhD students begin to find it difficult to give a simple answer to the question 'what is your PhD in', and decide to say briefly – 'it's complicated'.

Notes

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, 2003).
2 Ibid., p. 70.
3 Ibid., p. 6.
4 Ibid., p. 72.
5 Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, 'Questions of Japanese Cinema: Disciplinary Boundaries and the Invention of the Scholarly Object', in M. Miyoshi and H. D. Harootuinian (eds), *Learning Places. The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham and London, 2002), Kindle edition, location 8561.
6 Timothy Mitchell, 'Deterritorialization and the Crisis of Social Science', in A. Mirsepassi, A. Basu and F. Weaver (eds), *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World. Recasting the Area Studies Debate* (Syracuse, NY, 2003), p. 163.

7 Ibid., p. 164.

8 Ibid., p. 167.

9 S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000): 1–29.

10 Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 101.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2007).

12 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 37.

13 Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986): 69.

14 Ibid., p. 69 (italics in the original).

15 Aijaz Ahmed, *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York, 1992), p. 96.See also Michael Sprinker, 'The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson', *Public Culture*, 6 (1993): 3–29.

16 David Hawkes's *Ideology* (London, 1996) and Michèle Barrett's *The Politics of Truth. From Marx to Foucault* (London, 1992), in addition to Terry Eagleton's popular *Ideology. An Introduction* (London, 1991) offer good overviews of both the concept itself and its use in literary studies.

17 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1971), p. 64.

18 Although New Historicism avoided producing explicit and systematic theoretical accounts, Catherine Gallagher's and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago and London, 2000) offers the closest equivalent to a manifesto of New Historicism.

19 Charles Taylor develops phenomenology's – Heidegger's and Gadamer's – position on background understandings and conceptual schemes in 'Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes', in J. Malpas, U. Arnswald and J. Kertscher (eds), *Gadamer's Century. Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (London and Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 279–297.

20 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 155.

21 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), p. 11.

22 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London, 2002), p.50.

23 One of my teachers at the University of Belgrade, the late Svetozar Petrović, ironized this stance by maintaining that a scholar such as

Jakobson attempted to arrest the crime itself instead of the criminal, and that, when it comes to crime and criminals, arresting an eyewitness or two would not be such a bad idea.

24 I am following the convention, admittedly confusing for non-specialists, of referring to 'the study of national literature' and 'the study of comparative literature' – the proper names for the disciplines – as 'national literature' and 'Comparative Literature' respectively.

25 Having both the (human) world and self-understanding is possible due to our having language; our experience of the world and ourselves is always and only linguistic, to the extent that 'being that can be understood is language' (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1989), p. 474).

26 Robert Irwin's *For Lust of Knowledge. The Orientalists and their Enemies* (London: Penguin, 2006) is focused on Said's empirical errors, and rewrites the history of the field in order to expose them. Irwin also sums up the most important arguments in criticism of Said's theoretical model and list the most important contributions to it. A brief overview of theoretical criticism of *Orientalism* is offered also in Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said. The Paradox of Identity* (London and New York, 1999), pp. 74–86.

27 Especially in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975) and *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

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