

The Object of Comparison

Author(s): Jale Parla

Source: *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Globalization and World Literature (2004), pp. 116-125

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468105>

Accessed: 27-02-2019 15:47 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Penn State University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparative Literature Studies*

## THE OBJECT OF COMPARISON

---

*Jale Parla*

My title is inspired by a remark that belongs to Harry Levin, a revered teacher and one of the founders of the discipline of Comparative Literature in the States: regarding the subject of Comparative Literature, Levin never tired of repeating that it is not a subject but an object, “an attempt to pool the resources of the variously related literatures, to cross the linguistic barriers that confine them within the framework of national histories, and provide an area for the consideration of their common features and underlying forces.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time as Levin voiced his faith in Comparative Literature as a discipline that had the object of viewing literature as a world system, he directed his fellow comparatists’ attention to Goethe’s celebrated 1829 statement that “poetry is the universal possession of mankind,” and that “National literature is now an unmeaning term; the epoch of World Literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” (Levin, 73.)

Recently, another eminent comparatist, Franco Moretti, in an article entitled “Conjectures on World Literature,” reiterated Goethe’s call for *Weltliteratur* as he made a series of interesting, albeit controversial, proposals regarding the studying of world literature and the necessity of coming up with categories that *have to be* different. Moretti, problematizing what for Levin was an object, says that “world literature is not an object; it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That is not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started.”<sup>2</sup>

---

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2004.  
Copyright © 2004 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

Moretti makes his wager that consists of two parts—both quite radical. The first is “distant reading.” Since it is quite impossible for any one person, or even a group, to read “the great unread” of world literature, Moretti proposes that we rely on the readings and assessments of those who have already studied the works with which the West is not familiar. The second part of the wager is to come up with generalizations, perhaps even “laws” that might reveal a system, a system of world literature made up of *variations* (“Conjectures,” 64). Having surveyed what the critics of the various countries of the third world concluded concerning the “rise of the novel” in their respective cultures, Moretti believes he has enough evidence to confirm an observation by Fredric Jameson to the effect that the third world novel rose as a formal compromise. This observation Moretti raises to the status of perhaps a law, what he calls the law of formal compromise, and states that “If seen as a system of variations, the Western European novel is not a rule but an exception” (“Conjectures,” 61).

I had responded to this article in 2000, at a conference on world literature in Zurich where I objected to “the law of formal compromise” and argued that the rise of the novel necessitated a formal compromise everywhere. Recently, another response to Moretti’s article, this time by Jonathan Arac, was published in the same journal. Arac objects to Moretti’s proposal of distant reading by claiming that such theoretical endeavors that aim at establishing laws through generalizations do so at the expense of close scrutiny of the particular and are, therefore, uncritical. Arac’s reminder that neither Auerbach, nor Said did such things, as opposed to Frye, Lukacs, and Weber who did do such things, is expressed almost as a warning. Such theoretical ambition will not only end up encouraging totalizing generalizations; it will also lead to a “covert imperialism” by furthering the hegemony of the English language in the globalization and the comparison of literatures.<sup>3</sup>

So, Arac’s objections may be summed up around two points. One is that theorizing is hegemonic and uncritical because it neglects the specific. The other is that theorizing in the English language is doubly hegemonic because of the status of that language. He fails to note, however, that over-specificity of philological studies can be prohibitively highhanded, as has been the case in the Turcologists’ approach to the studying of Ottoman literature. The philologically oriented Turcologists have, until quite recently, monopolized Turkish studies by using the advantage of their mastery of Arabic, Persian, and of the Ottoman script, by having their students slave under transcription assignments (that take their places, bound, on the shelves

of the unpublished Ph.D. theses of the closed stacks of university libraries), and by turning the study of Turkish literature into a tedious learning of all the languages (Persian, Arabic, and Asian) that have gone into the making of "Ottoman." All this to prevent the intrusion of the unwanted novice. Therefore, Arac's assertion that "globalization erodes criticism in favour of theory" need not be true, at all. On the contrary, and I would admit paradoxically, globalization has encouraged criticism in Turkey by encouraging "interpretation, and explication du texte, and comparison" and by freeing Turkish literary studies from their restriction to the carefully circumscribed biographical (man and work) and philological (Ottoman and Old Turkish) curricula. Turkish comparatists, trained in other literatures, now dare to read and interpret Turkish poetry and the novel, without the ban and ridicule they would have experienced thirty years ago from the Turcologists. So, Arac's statement that "criticism deals concretely with the language of texts" is true depending on how one "reads" language, for language can be turned into a very uncritical tool as well.

The other objection that Arac voices against Moretti's proposal of distant reading is that it might result in reinforcing the cultural hegemony of the English language. Arac says that globalization pluralizes in a mono-medium, that is in the medium of the English language and adds: "English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global" (Arac, 40). This statement may meet the contentious demands of political correctness; nevertheless, it is problematic. English is incontestably the hegemonic language. But is it the same as the dollar? Currencies get devalued; languages, insofar as they house cultural products, we hope, do not. As intellectuals, our instinct is to resist cultural hegemony and that is a good instinct. As comparatists, there is more we can do. We may concern ourselves, for example, with what infiltrates into literature from culture, especially from a hegemonous culture. Supposing we placed our filter in the right spots, can we guarantee that only the good and the pure and the beautiful and the correct will sieve through it? I think not. But what we can do is expose the scum that collects on the sieve. In Moretti's proposal for a collaboration, I do not see the slightest trace of playing up to the hegemony of the English language, or conspiring for English to become the medium of culture, or unwittingly playing into the hands of cultural imperialism, or enjoying the privilege of having mastered that language.

As for English being the language of imperialism, alas, that is true. It is also true that it often dominates conceptually, instills its own preroga-

tives world wide, imposes its own rights and wrongs, violates by way of infiltration—leaves its scum in the form of neurotic sit coms, movies and texts of violence, future markets, speculative attacks—scum, not art. But that is where one task of the comparatist is hid: to unmask such hegemony and violation. This is an intellectual task. It does not harm to know English as one sets out for the task.

Moreover, in comparing, we do not only unmask, but we also show points of resistance against, or those of giving in to the conceptual hegemony of an imperial language. In a comparative study of Shakespeare translations into Turkish at the turn of the nineteenth century, which was also the first systematic attempt at translating Shakespeare's sonnets in Turkey, I had the chance of discovering an interesting instance of resistance.<sup>4</sup> The translator, a mathematician and one of the intellectual leaders of westernization of the Ottoman culture, rendered these sonnets into Turkish because he thought they were beautiful. Love, however, as understood by the Ottoman culture of 1880 did not exactly correspond to the conception of love in the Shakespearean sonnets—the sensuality of the language of love in Shakespeare's sonnets marred the beauty of love that the translator believed inspired the poet. So what did he do? He translated senses into ideas. Gluttony became saturation of the mind; limbs became existence; and so on. This was a very specific resistance in cross cultural influence. And only one example. I am sure there are millions more. Now, Moretti's proposal does not preclude the study of such influence by employing close reading. It does not preclude, or mean to preclude, the comparative study of formal/epistemological or stylistic/epistemological encounters between the different cultures of the globe. That is what Moretti means—as I understand it—when he talks about *variations*.

Collaboration, indeed, is indispensable if the comparatists wish to chart out the variations, because such charting will branch out into yet undiscovered or unexamined paths. Speaking of variations, Moretti had ventured to formulate another law in a Darwinian spirit. He had written in *Signs Taken for Wonders* that “literary texts are *historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria. The main problem of a literary criticism that aims to be in all respects a *historical discipline* is to do justice to both aspects of its objects: to work out a system of concepts which are both historical and rhetorical. These would enable one to perform a dual operation: to slice into segments the diachronic continuum constituted by the whole set of literary texts (the strictly historical task), but to slice it according to formal

criteria pertaining to *that* continuum and no others (the strictly rhetorical task).<sup>5</sup>

Comparatists have often been embarrassed by the choice between the two approaches to literature, the formal and the historicist. As the formalists choose the familiar formal analytic tools, such as archetypes, myths, motif, themes and lay the ground for comparison upon those, the historicists have ventured to compare content and context. The big dream, of course, has been to find *the* analytic frame that does justice to both. The writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Franco Moretti constitute a big step in the realization of that dream.

For Moretti, then, the problem is to perform the diachronic and the rhetorical tasks together. It can be performed simultaneously, on the same text, as Moretti has brilliantly demonstrated in his analyses of the modern epics, from *Faust*, through *Ulysses*, to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. And as I understand it, Moretti's proposal for "distant reading" has as its aim a practical way of combining the rhetorical and the historical approaches, since as he frankly maintains, it is impossible for one person to read the "great unread" of world literature ("Conjectures" 54). Unquestionably, this is a valid and a legitimate object. It is when one moves on to formulating laws that one steps on slippery ground.

In the "Conjectures," Moretti had tested an application of distant reading by extending Jameson's law of formal compromise to apply to the majority of the third world novel. Jameson formulated the law of formal compromise from his reading of Kojin Karatani's *Origins of the Modern Japanese Literature*, which pointed out to the tensions and internal contradictions that affected the narrative voice and destabilized it in the early examples of the Japanese novel. I had reached a similar conclusion in my study of the rise of the Turkish novel.<sup>6</sup> Moretti tests the observation in the accounts of the rise of the novel in Brazil, in the eighteenth-century East European novel, in the nineteenth-century South European novel, in Yiddish novels of the 1860s, in Arabic and Turkish novels of the 1870s, in West African novels of early twentieth century, and he finds that in all these places, the novel, at its beginnings, showed signs of a formal compromise that exhibited itself in the instability of narrative voice. "So," says Moretti, "the typical rise of the novel is Krasicki, Kemal, Rizal, Maran—not Defoe" ("Conjectures" 61).

I had taken issue with both Jameson and Moretti, and had maintained that, with the exception of that uncompromising morphological rebel, Cervantes, and his *Don Quixote*, I can think of no novel or novelist that does not betray the uneasiness of a formal compromise. Let us think of

*Moll Flanders*. As it stands on the slippery ground between the picaresque and the Puritan repentance narratives such as the *Pilgrim's Progress*, does not that book bear the unresolvable authorial tone—is Defoe ironic, satiric, or sincere? Therefore, the instability of the narrative voice cannot be confined to the rise of the novel in the third world countries; it was very much there in the rise of the novel in England and France as well.

Once the instability of the narrative voice is detected and demonstrated (a formalistic/rhetorical undertaking), however, then the reasons for such instability may be investigated (a diachronic/historical undertaking). Inasmuch as I departed from Jameson and Moretti regarding the application of the law of formal compromise, I find myself in agreement with another law that Moretti formulates in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, a law whose demonstration might provide the ground for collaboration through distant reading.

Inspired by the Darwinian model of evolution, Moretti speaks of two stages in literary evolution: variation and selection. He says that: "Chance alone will be active in the first stage in which rhetorical variations are generated; social necessity will preside over the second stage, in which variations are historically selected" (*Signs* 263). This process of literary evolution *does* correspond to the history of the Turkish novel. To illustrate, I will cite the example of the role Ahmet Mithat Efendi and Namık Kemal played in the pioneering of the Turkish novel, and how that role came to evolve within the 150 years that followed their practice.

Ahmet Mithat Efendi (1844–1913), the initiator and the popularizer of the novel form in Turkey, was an author of unsurpassed prolificacy in the Turkish literary tradition. He produced an impressive number of novels, translations, adaptations, plays, religious and political tracts as well as numerous newspaper articles. An ardent believer in the sanctity of work and the necessity of thrift, he considered himself first an educator of the people, then an entrepreneur, and perhaps lastly, a novelist. His novels exhibited an uninhibited indulgence in using discursive digressions on current topics such as commerce, religion, western technology as opposed to Ottoman civilization, comparison of western and Ottoman norms, and totalizing speculations on human nature and behaviour. In an almost frenzied effort to ensure the undivided attention of his readers, Ahmet Mithat interrupts his narrative to inform them on a topic he thinks significant, to moralize, to discuss his novelistic concerns and problems, or to offer autobiographical details. His narratives are thus pervaded with a sense of immediacy which

sometimes cannot even wait for correction in print but must make do with improvisation.<sup>7</sup>

Ahmet Mithat found the romantics such as Alexandre Dumas père, Lamartine, and Hugo better suited to his taste than the realists such as Balzac and Stendhal. He borrowed the plots of these writers, disguising the characters under Turkish names and transforming the settings into Istanbul localities. Just as he reformulated the major plots of the old folk stories, such as the plots of truancy, into the exemplary plots of his novels, so did he transform the techniques of old theatrical performances into the mimetic and diegetic aspects of narration. His consciousness of having come belatedly into the novel's medium is, indeed, striking. As he lays bare the device of almost every narrative convention that he uses, he installs himself, like a *meddah*, in his stories and inscribes himself as the author-figure at the same time as he tries to invent and fashion a readership that will benefit as much from the fable as from the moral.<sup>8</sup> This strategy allowed him to digress on innumerable topics from medicine to child rearing with a view to informing and edifying his readership, commenting on the state of *belles lettres* in his time, philosophizing on human nature and the ways of the world, comparing eastern and western morals—almost always to the advantage of the former—in short, to guiding, discussing, enlightening, and amusing an ideally invented readership.

Ahmet Mithat was thoroughly conscious that his authorial role was that of the innovator. And to fulfill that role, he wrote another surprising novel in which he exposed a narrative in becoming. In *Müşahedat* [Eye-witness events], a novel that was serialized during the year 1891 in the newspaper *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* [Translator of truth], Ahmet Mithat did something unprecedented in the novel genre by inscribing himself as the real and the fictive author of his story. In the prologue he wrote to *Müşahedat*, he explained that the inspiration for this “very original” idea came when he decided to write a naturalistic novel in the fashion of Emile Zola.<sup>9</sup> He said he considered naturalism a «pure» form of realism to which he had no objections. What he objected to in the naturalistic French novels was the insistence to portray the “ugly and lewd” aspects of life which he believed was not necessary to achieve realism. Granted, observation was a prerequisite for a realistic narrative, that could be achieved in other ways. So he invented this device of installing the author in the narrative as an observer, interpreter, and an active participant. He says that he found the result very satisfactory since this method of close observation provided him with verisimilitude without having to indulge in the portrayal of immoralities that

he found distasteful in the naturalistic novel. He also added that, to his knowledge, this was a very original conception, not tried even in the western novel. To my knowledge, he was justified in his claim.

The reason I attempted to make this all-too-sweeping introduction to Ahmet Mithat's contribution to the rise of the novel in Turkey is twofold: One is that the variety of Ahmet Mithat's techniques was completely ignored until recently.<sup>10</sup> The second is that one among the various techniques Ahmet Mithat employed became a marker in the subsequent development of the Turkish novel. This technique is that of the missing text. Ahmet Mithat used the motif of the promised but never told or partly told tale to whet the appetite of the reader, to keep the vistas of fabulation open (for the writer as well as the reader), to expand the horizon of narrative freedom, and to provide immediacy for author-reader dialogue. This technique will reemerge in the history of the Turkish novel every time a novelist attempts to take a new step to break from the tradition, or to give expression to a mimetic crisis that s/he feels needs a solution.

Ironically, however, a greater part of Ahmet Mithat's work had been seen as hasty executions of novelistic narratives that, at best, bore witness to the apprenticeship of an aspiring novelist, a novice who put the message before the medium, a careless craftsman who paid little attention to formalistic refinements such as unity, economy, and in-depth characterization. Therefore, his contemporary Namık Kemal, who had greater rhetorical skills in employing the classical Ottoman, generally got the credit for having pioneered the novel form in Turkey. The major Turkish novelists followed the example of Namık Kemal, setting the criteria for mainstream novel writing. This lasted until 1970's when the virtues of novelistic experimentation were rediscovered and Ahmet Mithat got the recognition that had not been accorded him for a whole century. Now, how much of that development was inspired by the Turkish cultural atmosphere? How much of it was due to foreign influence (especially that of post-modernism) How much was triggered by the resurgence of theory that became the vogue in Turkish literary criticism only after 1970's? All these questions would be well addressed by Moretti's paradigm of selection.

I have ventured the above discussion in order to argue that distant reading is not as distant as it sounds at a first hearing. Actually, there is no reason for us to shy away from distant reading (which I tend to think is perhaps a misnomer). What is distant in that reading is the reader, not the text. The project depends on trust, trust of one reader in another across

geographical and cultural space. It is easy, nevertheless, to imagine some practical difficulties such as the following.

The presence of “foreign interference” has an alienating effect upon scholars working on their native literatures. Local specialists, if they are educated within the native philological tradition (the said Turcologists in Turkey, for instance) are embarrassed by and, therefore, tend to dismiss as insignificant all kinds of discrepancies, tensions, and contradictions that they diagnose to be the outcome of foreign interference, or “foreign debt,” while western educated comparatists have a tendency to regard the same as traces of the author’s apprenticeship. So both groups contribute to the suppression of the more interesting narrative formations or hybrids. As far as the Turkish novel is concerned, “the formal compromise,” that is hybrids of formal influence (usually French or English), local subject matter, and traditional narrative forms, has been overlooked by the Turkish critics because novels that are such hybrids have been regarded as the work of the novice. Critical appraisal thus valorized those works that betrayed as little hybridity as possible at the price of neglecting the rich variations that novels of hybridity offered. Moreover, the censure “of foreign debt” I have talked of above may result in a compilation of a world literature that is no more than the unification of national canons—which, obviously, is not what Moretti has in mind.

Supposing that local specialists act with greater open mindedness in this regard, as they tend to do now in Turkey, they might still resent the fact that they should be seen as the viewers of the tree, the analysts of the particular, while their western European colleagues will theorize about the waves (the tree and wave metaphor is Moretti’s although, of course, nowhere does he imply first or second class assignments in this division of labor), which might result in wounded sensibilities and injured collegiate relations.

But assuming that vulnerability is overcome and that after years of collaboration, of conferences, seminars, symposiums, joint publications, and what not, we have managed to rewrite literary history and to map a morphology of world literature, what benefit will that have? Certainly the realization of an almost impossible dream—the dream of the comparatist from the very beginning and a whole wealth of new material to read, to learn, to teach. Therefore, let me end as I began, with a tribute to Harry Levin. As he talked about “thematics” in the 70s, a subject in which he then used to take great interest, Levin maintained that literature must be viewed “as a process, the component parts of which—even the works of Shakespeare—

are subsumed and surpassed by the workings of the whole, as we come to understand it. Needless to say, no one individual or self-limiting group could carry out such a program; it would demand international cooperation on a high level and in a hopeful future" (Levin 23).

*Bilgi University*

### Notes

1. Harry Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, ed. Walter Kaiser (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972) 22.
2. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–66.
3. Jonathan Arac, "Anglo-Golabalism?" *New Left Review* 16 (2002): 35–45.
4. Jale Parla, "Translating Senses into Ideas: Shakespeare Translations during Ottoman Westernization," *Dialogues of Cultures*, eds. Eva Kushner and Hoga Toru (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2000) 53–57.
5. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgaes, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1997).
6. Jale Parla, *Babalar ve Oğullar: Türk Romanının Epistemolojik Temelleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1990).
7. When describing a scene where the women, Peri and the Nanny are having coffee, he finds himself writing: "And Peri pushed the cup toward the old woman's beard" (*Çengi*, 33). Instead of correcting this slip of tongue, he chooses to exploit his mistake to create an occasion for a *meddah* exchange: "You say she cannot have a beard? Okay, then, she pushed it toward the other's chin." His frequent appeals to the reader with the question, "Are you surprised? Does that surprise you now?" and his frequent admissions that, as author, even *he* is surprised are not only indicative of his determination to do anything to keep the interest of the reader alive, but also of his consciousness that he is undertaking a new, a surprising enterprise. It is obvious that as he takes great pleasure from his own fabulations, he takes an equal pleasure from sharing these with the reader.
8. *Meddahs* were story tellers who told their stories in coffee houses to highly interactive audiences.
9. Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Müşahedat* (İstanbul: Kırkanbar, 1891) 2.
10. To be specific, the variety was ignored until the seminal work of Berna Moran, who was trained in and taught English literature at İstanbul University until his death in 1993 and who made the first formalistic readings of the Turkish novel. Moran pointed out to the experimental variety of the early Turkish novelists' narrative strategies in the three volumes of *Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1983–94).