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"Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d'autres?": Attention and Lists in Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT:

Taking a short quotation from *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais as motto, this article reflects on important issues of comparative literature, namely, questions of inclusion and exclusion in the delimitation of the discipline's boundaries. In the context of recent discussions on the shifting role and modes of attention in contemporary society (and following Bernard Stiegler), it argues that the issue can be seen in broad terms as a matter of attention and its techniques, and that comparative literature can be understood as both the practical and theoretical study of attention. Finally, it briefly considers the pivotal role of listmaking within the material productions of comparative literature (canons, syllabi, anthologies) as manifestations of this attentional identity.

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RESUMO:

A partir de uma curta citação de *Le Mariage de Figaro*, de Beaumarchais, tomada como lema, o presente artigo desenvolve uma reflexão sobre questões importantes da literatura comparada, nomeadamente, questões de inclusão e exclusão na delimitação das fronteiras da disciplina. No âmbito de discussões recentes acerca do papel e modos de atenção na sociedade contemporânea, propõe-se que o problema pode ser entendido, em termos gerais, como uma questão de atenção e suas técnicas, e que a literatura comparada pode ser assim tida como o estudo prático e teórico da atenção. Por fim, considera-se brevemente o papel central da lista nas produções materiais da literatura comparada (cânones, *syllabi*, antologias) enquanto manifestações desta identidade atencional.

KEYWORDS:

canon; anthology; crisis; catalogue; boundary

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

cânone; antologia; crise; catálogo; fronteira

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1. Why these things and not others?

IN THE FIFTH ACT of Beaumarchais' *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the play's namesake launches himself into a lengthy monologue; pondering on the seemingly random and chaotic nature of human recollection and thought, he asks the world a difficult set of questions: "Ô bizarre suite d'événements ! Comment cela m'est-il arrivé ? Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d'autres ? Qui les a fixées sur ma tête?" (258).[1]

Why these things and not others? The question is decidedly vast and general. Yet, I believe it to encapsulate particularly well the common thread uniting the crises and ruptures with which the field of comparative literature has contended over the past century. "Why these things and not others" is, in other words, a good starting point to think about such issues in a general way and across their distinctions. By analysing this shared, central, question, I do not mean to disregard them in their particularities, but only to attempt to hone in on something important about comparative literature as a discipline. In this article, departing from the problem of "why these things and not others", I will consider the nature of the question in the context of two concepts which are at the heart of its (our) practices: attention and listmaking.

Let us dissect Figaro's question briefly; it includes two different questions. "Why these things" makes one ponder on a justification for a particular grouping or assemblage with a high degree of autonomy: "these" things, and they alone, should be sufficient to explain why these and not others are now presented before us. "Why not others" adds a twist, by gesturing at things outside the assemblage, prompting us to make comparisons, detecting differences and similarities which disturb the very nature of the rubric "things". The troubling moment arrives when "those other things" (i.e. not "these things") are intuited to be similar enough to have warranted inclusion into "these things" after all. The question always requires two distinct answers – if answered honestly.

Starting from the second answer, and taking two notable examples, writers such as Gayatri Spivak or René Wellek illustrate well the "why not others" side of the question. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak (2003) aims to "[expand] the scope of Comparative Literature" into its "*proper*" form, that is, the bringing together of comparative literature and area studies "in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global South but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made" (13-15). Wellek's case, in his own words in a 1959 essay, similarly points to "those" things, asking:

> why should, say, the influence of Walter Scott in France be considered "comparative" literature while a study of the historical novel during the Romantic age be "general" literature? Why should we distinguish between a study of the influence of Byron on Heine and the study of Byronism in Germany? The attempt to *narrow* "comparative literature" to a study of the "foreign trade" of literatures is surely unfortunate. (162-163)

[1] "Oh strange sequence of events! How did this happen to me? Why these things and not others? Who fixated them in my mind?" This and all other translations by the author.

Such questions have always paved the way for (and kept the vitality of) comparative literature as a discipline, by addressing things erroneously outside its scope. Accordingly, leaving things out entails lack of "propriety" and risks "narrowness". Yet, such expansions also presume a risk (whether real or imaginary) of the dilution of what was already there, so that concern over the thinning of the discipline's identity becomes another recurring critical theme.

Accordingly, some have indeed argued for narrowness; Harold Bloom's *Western Canon* (1994) is a famous case of an answer strictly according to the first half of the question, one which "seek[s] to isolate the qualities that made these authors canonical" (1). Claiming to have no interest in "mimic[king] cultural wars", Bloom limits his preface and explanation of "the organisation of this book" to elaborating on his "choice of these twenty-six writers from among the many hundreds in what once was considered to be the Western Canon" (1). Bloom's disregard for "those" things can be taken as poor or thoughtless – it is not my goal to dwell into its many critiques but to underline the nature of the issue as a double-bind: just as readers of Bloom are urged to remember that one can never fully justify the anthological effort on the first half of Figaro's musing, so should any future collectors take notice of the necessity to put a limit to one's effort somewhere where the exercise can be finished; at that point, offering some justification for "these things" might become more urgent than arguing for further "others".

In both cases, justifications and theorisations serve the need to make choices (which can certainly be draped in political or ethical considerations seeking to masquerade them as non-choices). But all such arguments state the basic assumption that one must now forego something in order to address something else, a truism close in spirit to Richard Rorty's general evaluation of the "so called 'crises'" of comparative literature: in his words, they "move the apparently peripheral to the center and the apparently central to outer darkness" (66). When the time comes to draw a new canon, a new syllabus, a new anthology, the issue remains the same: overabundance and the tension, as William Marx described it, "entre le choix et la totalité":

> Est-il possible par exemple de concilier la tentation anthologique, d'une part, qui incite à étudier et à célébrer ce qu'il y a de plus beau et de plus remarquable dans la littérature, avec la mission épistémique, d'autre part, laquelle consiste à décrire le réel de la façon la plus précise et la plus complète (…)? (Marx, 2020)[2]

It is not surprising, but perhaps only inevitable, that for an extensive and careful scholarly project such as the Portuguese three-volume anthology *Literatura-Mundo Comparada, Perspectivas em Português*, Helena Buescu chances upon a formulation as close to Figaro's as one could get, while underlining its inevitability:

> Thus, the question of selection (*inclusion* vs. *exclusion*) is inevitable in this context, and arises not only to those responsible for the gesture and result of the anthology, but also to those who read or peruse it. The question "why this text and not another?" is often formulated in a much more direct way: "how is it

[2] "Is it possible, for example, to reconcile the anthological temptation, on one hand, which encourages studying and celebrating the most beautiful and remarkable aspects of literature, with the epistemic mission, on the other hand, which consists of describing reality in the most precise and complete way (…)?"

> possible to not include…?" Such questions are, as mentioned before, inevitable, with answers that are anything but obvious. (Buescu 2013, 77)[3]

And what happens with certain books or certain authors will tend to happen with truly destabilising objects, in a logical sequence which I do not believe to be so different in nature as to require a complete reworking of the basic assumptions of a discipline in "eternal crisis": "other" texts paved the way for "other" methodologies, alien formats and media, etc. The answer, in any case, always redounds to a "why not …", rejointed by further enlargement of previous horizons.

The remainder of this article is not dedicated to the delineation of a concrete answer to this issue – if there is any. Instead, I will be foregrounding two concepts which I believe are crucial in addressing it in the first place and, thus, in understanding comparative literature/comparative studies as a possibility: the notion of *attention* and the practice of *listing*. Both are intimately connected with the constraints of choice, inclusion *versus* exclusion, and totality; attention and lists act as *filters* to the Real. While the first is eminently theoretical, philosophical, or concerning psycho- or neurological phenomena, the second suggests the concreteness of technique, technology, and the materialisation of thought, as well as being ubiquitous in the academic production which substantiates theories like those described above: anthologies, canons, and syllabi, precisely. In the past two decades, both of these terms have undergone enough scrutiny to question such a sharp divide: can we not speak of techniques of attention? Are its ties to contemporary technological objects which seek to manipulate and engender it not evident? Regarding lists, enough theory has been produced since Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists* to elevate it above "mere" output: the requirements of making lists, as we now well know, come with their own philosophical and epistemological baggage.

2. Attention

It seems trivial to note that "why these things and not others" is a question of attention, which could be rephrased as "why pay attention to these things and not pay attention to others". Any proposal seeking to understand the preconditions for privileging certain objects of study over others must grapple, at some point, with the idea of attention. Saussy (2006) suggests it directly, when he proposes comparative literature as the study of the quality of "literariness", claiming that this object of study "has a lot to do with focusing, giving disproportionate attention to small things" (32). But what selection does not? The word disproportionate strikes us as unnecessary: attention seems to be all about disproportionality – whether warranted or not.

Once agreed that posing the issue of "why these things and not others" relates directly to the idea of attention, understanding what attention is (or at least agreeing

[3] Original text: "A questão da selecção (incluir *vs.* excluir) é pois neste contexto inevitável, e coloca-se não apenas a quem é responsável pelo gesto e pelo resultado da antologia, mas também a quem a lê ou percorre. A pergunta 'porquê este texto e não outro?' é muitas vezes formulada de modo mais directo: 'como é que é possível não incluir...?'. São perguntas como disse inevitáveis, com respostas que são tudo menos óbvias".

on one meaning) should be our first task, since answering the "why" requires us to think about the origins of attention, the means to capture and form it. As suggested above, we easily find echoes of the matter of choice and totality, or choice and dilution, in inquiries concerning attention itself:

> The language of "information overload" starts to feel relevant, and the language of "attention" becomes a way of expressing concern about filtering the flows. In this context, "attention" functions as a tool for managing the excess; to be attentive is to be able to hold on to what needs to be held, and to achieve this under conditions in which it feels increasingly difficult to do exactly this. (Burnett and Smith 2023, 9)

The deployment of attention as a filter against the impression of overabundance feels commonsensical: we understand it when we ask someone to pay attention to us amongst other distractions, or when we perceive the ability to pay attention itself as being under threat, for example, by social media. Were we inclined to be tendentious, we might draw parallels between this basic description and what we have vaguely portrayed as the permanent crisis of comparative literature: perhaps "increasingly difficult" conditions, which in Burnett and Smith refer to drastic developments in media consumption, map onto that sense of increasing disciplinary dilution, caused by a perceived "overflow" or "excess" of potential objects of study, potential connections, potential comparisons. It seems more interesting to me, however, to agree that some form of "filtering" permeates both attention techniques in general and the concrete disciplinary methods and *praxis* of comparative literature, as when, again, Saussy describes "world literature and translation [as] *filtering techniques*" (14). The theory of comparative literature would then task itself "with expressing concern about filtering" as well as with the development of appropriate filtering tools. Comparative literature becomes the study of attention itself, as a direct reflection on its techniques and dilemmas and as meta-reflexive analysis of its own production.

Most approaches to the idea of attention-as-filter assume that attention can undergo redirection if one so chooses – that attention is subject to will. Katherine Hayles' distinction between "deep" and "hyper" attention is one popular example of this view, accurately portraying a commonsensical and contemporary-minded approach to the subject. Her oft-quoted 2007 article describes the current ongoing transition – a generational shift – from deep to hyper attention: hyper attention is characterised by a rapid switching between different tasks, multiple information streams, high-level of stimulation, and a low-tolerance for boredom. Deep attention, on the other hand, is described as the ability to concentrate on a single object for a long period of time. It is also, in Hayles' words, associated with the Humanities: the example given is the reading of a Dickens novel – giving attention to one thing for a long duration. The two modes of hyper and deep attention not only contrast but are in permanent tension. According to Hayles, if the passage from deep to hyper attention constitutes a generational shift, then new tools must be developed to accommodate this shift as synthesis, rather than fully rejecting the latter.

Hayles' pedagogy-minded proposal has two problems if we wish to use it as a model to understand attention in comparative academic practices. It describes something which we might characterise as *active* attention, particularly where it concerns

the kind of attention which the Humanities supposedly prefer: "deep", committed, deliberate.

Firstly, we might ask ourselves whether comparative literature is well served by an *active* model of attention at all, which measures "depth" through an isolated focus on one single thing, for a long period of time. It seems to me that proposals in the style of William Marx's (which I take as representative of a generous and wide understanding of the discipline) point in a different direction, according to which the answer to "why these things and not others" demands us to become more prudent, modest, and doubtful – passive, even, rather than active. In this light, Marx first quotes from Paul Valéry, who once explained "que l'objet de ce cours n'est pas d'enseigner, mais d'éveiller (...) non pas de résoudre des problèmes, mais d'en énoncer", to conclude that comparative literature is "une démarche interrogative" (2020).[4] Here, the one thing to which attention must be directed for a long period of time becomes too elusive to assuage any concern.

Secondly, all the critics who argue for more openness, for a wider understanding of comparativism and its possible objects of study, might occasionally sound too urgent. But fear of dilution should not stop us from seeing such calls also as generous and, in this sense, one should be wary of being led towards any criticism of such calls which would cast them as "hyper", dispersing through too-many avenues, deficient or worse, to paraphrase Hayles, not characteristic of the Humanities. This is an old critique of comparative literature, which time has proved ill-advised – one of its main beneficial offers to the Humanities can perhaps be stated as the sincere belief in the possibility of depth in/through multiplicity.

A more productive understanding of attention can be found in Bernard Stiegler's work. Stiegler agrees with Hayles on the urgency of a generational shift in how attention is being manipulated by media development – if anything, Stiegler emphasises the perversion of such developments. However, mindful of the etymological connection between "attention" and the French "*attendre*", Stiegler describes a different process, grounded on Husserlian phenomenology, in which attention is not something that one *does*, but rather "the flow of consciousness" (2010, 18). It is an interplay of *primary retentions*, which belong "to the present of perception" (Stiegler 2014, 34) and *secondary retentions*, in which memory and imagination take an active role:

> In the flux of what appears to your consciousness, you make selections which are personal retentions; these selections are made through *the filters of secondary retentions* which are held in your memory and which constitute your experience. (52)

Secondary retentions are the filter of the continuum of experience, selecting and constituting experiences from the primary retentions, the "present of perception". The projection of "protentions" – anticipation – resulting from the accumulation of primary and secondary retentions is what constitutes attention.

For Stiegler, attention is not concerned with sustained dedication, but rather the cultivation of a perpetual state of open readiness, a "waiting for" which, "even if

[4] "the goal of this course is not to teach, but to awaken (…) not to solve problems, but to enunciate them. […] an interrogative approach".

it forgets it is doing so", attends to "the infinity of the object whose mirror image is projected back as infinite being" (2010, 96). His favoured image for this mode of attention is the weaving of a web or fabric, formed by the flux of primary and secondary retentions, and protensions upon which we delineate motifs and designs. Answering directly to Hayles, Stiegler argues that the depth of attention has nothing to do with duration, but rather with the length of the connections activated in this matrix. (80)

If there is any value to be found in the proposition that comparative literature might wish to dedicate itself to a mode of perpetual doubting and interrogation, a projection of its real object into a permanent "elsewhere" (as Marx put it, "la lecture (...) *par-delà* la littérature")[5], and, indeed, the promotion and cultivation of this state as a necessary element within the Humanities in general, then it must gently, but firmly, propose an answer to Figaro's question by recasting attention in a manner closer to Stiegler's proposal. In the final section of the article, I want to give shape to this theoretical argument, namely, to point to a mode of discourse which comparative literature privileges, and which is often at the outset of "why these and not others" accusations: the list. I argue that attention as understood by Stiegler can manifest itself via practices of listmaking, and that nurturing and understanding such techniques should be one of the main aims of those seeking to nourish the vitality of comparative literature.

3. Listmaking

A general observation on the relationship between lists and attention (besides the fact that both act like filters) feels commonsensical: listmaking during a meeting, for example, can be a form of paying attention to relevant information. In such cases, the list supports an active mode of attention to things outside the list itself: we pay attention to the meeting, not to the list. However, lists can also promote unique acts of attention, capable of engendering objects particular to listmaking. Two such views are here worthy of consideration.

In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost claims that "lists of objects without explication can do the philosophical work of drawing our attention toward them [objects] with greater attentiveness" (45). Bogost claims that lists (especially lists of *things*) call our attention to the fact that any *one* thing is composed of many things. Moreover, juxtaposing items without connecting them in hierarchical or chronological relations, democratises them into a sort of "flat ontology" (17). Not only would the list show the world's inherent complexity, but also that each item deserves a similar hierarchical status. The list, Bogost suggests, holds a levelling power, capable of dehierarchising a tendentiously ordered world by redirecting attention to its listed constituents.

In another approach, Jan Alber emphasises the formal nature of this effect, observing that solely by virtue of their unusual construction (among which is the same "disconnectedness" mentioned by Bogost), lists "draw attention to themselves as linguistic constructs" (355). Subscribing to a tradition which prizes the fact that

[5] "reading (…) beyond literature".

lists are "produites par des opérations essentiellement graphiques", and that a list, as such, "ne contient pas que des mots ou des items assimilables à des mots"[6] (Sève 2010, 23 and 17), for Alber the list becomes a method of disconnecting referent from reference, of drawing our attention to the artificiality of language.

The ensuing difference between Bogost and Alber is markedly stark: things *versus* words, referent or reference. Nevertheless, both agree that the list *itself* draws attention and promotes a particularly distinct mode of engaging with its contents. The list changes how we look at what is listed. One might hold that the linguistic artificiality of the list reveals certain qualities about its object; one might also agree that certain objects require a distinct mode of linguistic expression for their accurate representation – sides of the same coin, one might (rightly) rejoint. What happens, then, when the thing being listed is Literature?

These aspects of the technique of listing would alone carry interesting consequences regarding our discipline as the task of manipulating attentions, often by recourse to list formats. A third observation on listing brings it even closer to the discipline, albeit at a more immediate and superficial level: lists and comparative literature have a privileged relationship, mainly due to the tendency to substantiate the former's theory into list forms such as canons, syllabi, or anthologies. Such fortuitous propinquity arises, in my view, from several qualities of lists themselves, of which the most decisive might just be the sheer simplicity of the gesture of adding something to a list – so simple as to be almost gratuitous, even if the consequences might be tremendous. In a field whose critical discourse has had as a main concern the possibility of switching between the peripheral and the central, outside and side, this simplicity is both prone to complexity and yet highly desirable. Any technique which could simplify the theoretical struggles of inclusion would be welcomed with open arms.

Hugo Meltzl's 1877 "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature" showcases all such processes particularly well, by the surprising inclusion of the Hungarian language (and others) in the otherwise stable list of "major" languages for which comparative literature should care (45). Regardless of the particularities of his personal education and upbringing which justify this inclusion, the title page of the journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* – of which he was a founder – still holds power to surprise, when we look at the ten different translations, all together with the non-Indo-European Hungarian, in red uppercase, no less. It states the argument clearly, which needs no theoretical elaboration in prefaces or introductions, but is instead written into the very structure and technique of the list itself: the inclusion (or removal, for that matter) of another translation can be done simply by *doing* it, graphically, in the cover. In any list, the question "why these things and not others" is difficult to answer because it is so easy to pose.

[6] "produced by operations essentially graphical"; "does not contain but words or items akin to words".

Figure 1: Detail from the title page of the 1886 edition of Meltlz's journal. The languages are, in order, Latin, German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, English, Russian, Swedish, Dutch, Icelandic, and, finally, Hungarian.

Meltzl's "democratic" project of inclusion must rely on both halves of the attentional particularities of lists mentioned above. In an *operational* sense, it relies on that linguistic arbitrariness, which opens the door for the play of juxtaposition and combinations which, without the straightjacket of chronology, hierarchy, or causality, allows for open circulation between inside and outside. *Politically*, however, the "elevation" of Hungarian into the list of "major" languages takes place due to the ontological-flattening effect described by Bogost. In a sort of academic *sprezzatura*, it is an almost duplicitous double-gesture which, once again, makes dramatic statements with seemingly "simple" operations. One might pause and demand the missing justification, but we all understand the hidden agreement by which once two texts or two authors are entered into the same list, they tend to acquire a similar stature.

Such gestures and techniques comprise a crucial distinction between lists and, for example, narrative forms. Adding to an existing narrative requires a high effort of articulation, justification, framing, or contextualisation within the existing text – it is difficult to transplant elements at-will. Without such efforts we must accept that the new element will be seen as a digression, an *add-on*. Adding to a list requires none of this: we lack in lists "those subordinating relations—chronological, logical, or causal—which usually do much of the work in narratival or overtly rhetorical presentation of data" (Sammons 2010, 15). In a field which premised itself on the questioning of borders, the shifting orthodoxies of inclusion and exclusion, the deceptively simple form of the list substantiates what was a complicated theoretical argument, not by virtue of explanation but demonstration – hypotyposis. And the kind of discipline we are left with is naturally prone to anxiety: "il y a dans l'idée que rien au monde n'est assez unique pour ne pas pouvoir entrer dans une liste, quelque chose d'exaltant et de terrifiant à la fois"[7] (Perec 1985). Saussy, arguing against an understanding of comparative literature as "a field composed of examples", agrees,

[7] "there is in the notion that nothing in the world is unique enough to not enter some list, something both exciting and terrifying".

cautioning that "enumeration is a slender form of interpretation", since "with a horizon of universality, one has never finished enumerating" (12-14).

The list also produces a second form of anxiety: without those more familiar subordinating relations, it may induce an eerie impression, by which its items seem to crop up independently from one another, either all at once or, if following an order, seemingly arbitrarily. Indeed, even though the notion of list is close to the notion of sequence, lists are rarely used sequentially – this has been the case for most of their history. Marc Van De Mieroop, scholar of the philosophy of listing in Babylonia, compares the Mesopotamian catalogues with modern dictionaries, writing that "someone reading [them] cover to cover would end up looking as foolish as the Autodidact in Sartre's *La nausée*, working his way through the books in his town library alphabetically, author by author" (35). Helena Buescu's use of the term "perusal" is indeed fortunate: from the *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* to Heaney and Hughes' *The Rattle Bag* (1982), the function of an anthology concerns perusal or momentaneous reference more often than it does linear and sequential reading.

Accordingly, the caution against anxiety found in the preface to *The Norton Anthology* is not related to enumeration, inclusion, addition, etc., but rather to that disquieting effect of "everything-at-once" which presents no easy way in or out: "opening the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* for the first time, a reader may feel as overwhelmed by its selection of authors and works (from 'as many different languages as there are') as Evliya was by the cathedral library" (Simon 2012, xv). The spatial, architectural, metaphor is fortuitous, pointing to a different way of thinking about lists, not as techniques of accumulation, but of containment and framing.

Attending to etymology, one of the meanings of "list" – older than contemporary general usage – refers not to the written content of the list, the words as they are inscribed, and is instead synonym of "border" or "strip". It referred to the edge of the material support upon which a list would *eventually* be inscribed. "From here", Liam Cole Young notes, "come the 'lists' of battle" (23). We find it in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, for instance: "The very bottom and the sole of hope, / The very list, the very utmost bound / Of all our fortunes" (255).[8]

To think of the list as a border for its items, the fashioning of a list primarily as the fashioning of this border, entails our thinking of the process of making a new list not as a process of *in*-scription but of *circum*-scription. One is reminded of Stanley Fish's famous classroom exercise, in which a new literary object, a list-poem, appears out of thin air, not because its content was written down for this purpose, but because its *author* "drew a frame around the assignment" (Fish 1980, 323). Valentina Izmirlieva's definition of list in such terms is here worth considering:

> [the list] circumscribes a group of lexical units (...) and displays them in a fixed, syntactic sequence. The most visible effect of this arrangement is that the list (mis)represents a set of lexical elements as equivalent terms. It provides a site for the cohabitation of words and in that capacity alone predicates a kinship upon the words' referents. Stubbornly ignoring everything that makes its members

[8] See also Goody (1978, 80), for further elaboration on the graphical nature of lists and the etymological connection with the notion of border.

> different, a list is fixed upon the one thing that makes them alike, even if that is only their presence in the list, "the simple crime of contingency". (Izmirlieva 2008, 54)

Again, the list, thus, can state powerful arguments which remain discretely buried within the infrastructure of the text. At the same time, it serves as a justification for the whole of comparative literature as a discipline in its most intricate paradoxical nature – these things were put together because in some way they are alike; and they are alike because they were put together.

One wonders if this is why the "geographical" might be one of the sincerest forms of early (and everlasting) anthological and comparative efforts and discussions – the meaning of space or border is evident in such cases, as are the thought-provoking consequences of delineating them. The crude terms of physical borders shake the foundations of strict group identity, when circumscription reveals unprobed (even uncomfortable) depths in our lists. Ernst Robert Curtius, in 1948, was prescient in noting that, even if their own "crisis" called for renewed soul-searching, geographically neat concepts such as "Europe [were] dismantled into 'geographical fragments'". "Europe", he noted, "is merely a name" (6) – which is to say, a rubric, with its "physical" borders just as porous as its conceptual ones.

In a more recent geographical anthology, the borders of places like "the Mediterranean" crumble before imagination and expectation: in *Les Poètes de la Méditerranée*, Eglal Errera writes that "pour ces vingt-quatre pays, dont tous possèdent une façade, aussi étroite soit-elle, sur la *mare nostrum*, cette anthologie donnera à lire et à entendre dix-sept langues telles qu'on les écrit ou qu'on les parle aujourd'hui" [9] (2013, 18). Of course, unmissable inclusions like Portugal, Macedonia, and Serbia do not have a Mediterranean coastline (even a narrow one) in the strictest geographical sense; and few would be convinced of the inclusion of English poetry via Gibraltar or Akrotiri and Dhekelia. But circumscription *preceded* inscription. The anthology, simply by virtue of "providing a site for the cohabitation" of texts, *misrepresents* them as similar enough under the rubric to warrant both entry into the list in the first place and, more importantly, the ensuing exercise of comparison. Comparison becomes a question of providing for the vitality of this new site of cohabitation: a task of *curation*, in this case, of a particular imagination of Mediterranean literary identity, already projected before prefaces were elaborated to dispel confusions. It is this *ethos* which is contained in pronouncements such as Saussy's, that "the current 'space of comparison,' rather than requiring that different works or traditions be deliberately wired up to communicate, sees them as always already connected; the question is just how" (31). Meltzl too was aware of this principle: what David Damrosch underlines as one of the earliest instances of the ecological metaphor used to describe the ethics of comparative literature (6) – comparing endangered species to endangered literatures – is proposed by Meltzl precisely as the drawing of a border ("elaborate and strict laws" (46) – in ecological terms, a sort of natural park for literature to thrive in.

[9] "For these twenty-four countries, all of which have a coastline, however narrow, on the *mare nostrum*, this anthology will offer the opportunity to read and hear seventeen languages as they are written or spoken today".

Echoes of the listmaker being a steward of cohabitation can be found, for instance, in Buescu's description of anthologies as "gesture[s] of creating 'good neighbours', through an associative process which is never completed and thus always recommences" (75), or in the way by which Emily Apter articulates a fundamental precedence of "neighboring" prior to comparison (Apter 2009, 414), drawing heavily from Kenneth Reinhard's essay, which itself merits extensive quoting:

> Lacan's "Kant avec Sade" institutes a comparative literature otherwise than comparison, insofar as the essay pursues a mode of reading logically and ethically prior to similitude, a reading in which texts are not so much grouped into "families" defined by similarity and difference, as into "neighborhoods" determined by *accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter*. "Kant avec Sade" articulates a principle and practice of comparative literature in which the juncture of texts or discourses is predicated not only on historical congruencies, structural isomorphisms, or dialectical contradictions, but also on the critical act through which one text takes the place of, or "neighbors" on, the other. (Reinhard 1995, 785-6)

To think about the making of anthologies, syllabi, canons in the manner of listing-as-circumscribing, is to accept that, to a certain degree, all selection is arbitrary, that large gestures of circumscription can quickly appear mysterious. As an example, and wary of the strength of the hypotypotical list-argument, Hilda Schiff's *Holocaust Poetry* pre-emptively addresses a hypothetical reader's anxious rejection of her circumscription, asking in the introduction, whether "to leave out the account of the other side of the coin of this kingdom of malevolence, namely the terrible suffering of some of those who directly or directly brought about the Holocaust?" (xix) The question is merely rhetorical. Unlike the Mediterranean example above, which places idealised culture above geographical logic, Schiff draws another border: closer to strict isomorphism, it cannot but include all those who, in this space and time, have somehow suffered enough to warrant the status of victims – regardless of perpetrator. The business of comparative literature scholars is then to become stewards of new and privileged places of comparison, places which only circumscription-before-inscription makes possible, and to ensure that their vitality allows for cohabitation, and thus comparison.

Why, then, these things and not others? In the first place, to preserve the kind of attention which results from such gestures as circumscription; to refrain from *attending to* as deliberate selection and indulge, instead, in passive attention as *waiting for* such "accidental contiguit[ies]" to reveal hidden truths by themselves. Indeed, one must agree to pass on a certain degree of autonomy from the circumscriber to the anthology. As Jonardan Ganeri – another scholar of attention – suggests, "empathy, one's awareness of another in their otherness, is an attentional state" (4), to which Smith would add that "all instances [of attention], whether involving other persons or "mere" objects, partake somewhat of the phenomenological character of the second-person encounter" (2022). We see this impulse in the preface to the aforementioned *The Rattle Bag*, penned by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes:

> This anthology amassed itself like a cairn. (...) We hope that our decision to impose an arbitrary alphabetical order allows the contents to discover themselves

> as we ourselves gradually discovered them—each poem full of its singular appeal, transmitting its own signals, taking its chances in a big, voluble world. (19)

Anthologies can appear to amass *themselves*; their order was consciously chosen, and yet it is always arbitrary. This recognition of the anthology as an autonomous *other*, in which the comparatist's circumscription never crosses the boundaries of stewardship, is what allows them and any future reader to attune themselves to the complex and ever-shifting web of signals, which Stiegler would call the fabric of attention. In the end, "why these things and not others" is still a question of attention. But to think attention as the maintenance of this fabric's vitality releases the question from an inexorable anxiety caused by overabundance or wrongful selection, by showing how both it and the discipline can give centre stage to the accidental, to the strange admixture of personal and universal, of similarity and difference, that the ever-increasing fabric of comparative literature promotes. Buescu compares it to a library – no one is expected to read or know a library fully, but tending to it is the Humanities scholar's principal task.

4. Final Remarks on Two Issues

Two issues often result from this perspective: de-historicisation and de-authoralisation.

This notion of listing as the act of circumscribing, in which items have the impression of appearing all at once, free to mingle and float into accidental contiguities or fortuitous neighbouring, has one advantage, namely, of further dispelling the genealogical tree as the model for comparative literature's analytical framework, since it leaves no space for conceiving of a "trunk" equivalent to that elusive *tertium comparationis* which grounds comparison on the articulation of common ancestries. Without subordinating relations, genealogical models must be abandoned. However, even without necessarily having a comparative literature grounded on tracing historical patterns of distance and closeness, there is still a history to be studied that is more than the history of comparative literature. I will quote extensively from Marx's speech, which proposes a historiographical model particular to a discipline of lists and listing:

> L'histoire littéraire s'édifie ainsi sur des listes restreintes, et le plus souvent arbitraires, d'œuvres et d'auteurs, dont les carences et les béances donnent le vertige, canons multiples selon les domaines, variables selon les milieux, les classes sociales et les époques, et d'usages non moins divers. (...) Si la littérature comparée peut avoir une utilité, elle est justement de proposer une critique générale des canons et des corpus sur lesquels se fondent nos connaissances littéraires (…) afin de mettre en évidence les strates multiples et disparates dont se compose le corpus nommé littérature. (2020)[10]

[10] "Literary history is thus built on restricted, and most often arbitrary, lists of works and authors, whose deficiencies and gaps are dizzying, multiple canons according to fields, variable according to environments, social classes, and epochs, and of equally diverse uses. (…) If comparative literature can have a utility, it is precisely to offer a general critique of the canons and corpora on which our literary knowledge is based (…) in order to highlight the multiple and disparate layers that make up the corpus called literature".

The study of comparative literature concerns a specific mode of attending to the world of texts and its variety, and it substantiates it by adopting the discursive mode of the list, while actively reflecting on its inner workings, by studying said lists while seeking to continuously remake them. For this reason, it *must* ground this meta-reflexive practice on the wisdom and study of listing as a historically situated activity – the history described by Marx is an intrinsic part of this reflection. And the tradition of listing is long (perhaps older than other forms of writing, perhaps older than writing itself, as explained by Denise Schmandt-Besserat 1996); like any tradition, its practice requires a modicum of ancestor-reverence.

What I call de-authoralisation concerns an extreme view on what is meant by the notion that an anthology assembles "itself". This is a common effect of lists and their interpretations, owing to the ways by which list forms tend to articulate distinct modes of actancy and focalisation (further distinguishing them from narrative). Thus, Sève defines the list as "un texte dont l'auteur ou le producteur s'est retiré". "La liste, une fois « lancée » dans une certaine direction", he adds "tend à se prolonger toute seule" (38, 88).[11] Very often, listmakers benefit from this impression that lists are authorless: one thinks of law, statistics, economics, as loci where lists enjoy a privileged impression of objectivity –one can also think of lists like Meltzl's, whose theoretical arguments are often hidden under a seemingly simple and autonomous operationality. But every list is made by *someone*, and even if most anthologies are prefaced by apologetic and ambivalent admissions of authorship ("this is only our own perspective", "a different selection would have been possible", etc.) some – particularly if veering on the side of trying to underline a certain indisputable character to inclusions or their "canonicity" – do not. Schiff's Holocaust anthology, again, offers an illustration of this intellectual ablution, in commonly found terms: "while representative, this volume nevertheless has had to be selective rather than comprehensive if for no other reason than lack of space" (xv).

It is, in fact, the other way around: circumscription is already a fundamentally *spatial* technique, even if that space is only abstract or diagrammatical. Lack of space does not "choose" by itself; it provides the opportunity for the comparatist to engage in their *raison-d'être*: choice. What does comprehensiveness mean? The end of the discipline – with infinite space, no anthology, or anthologist, would be necessary. Attention is precious, and its manipulation should invite personal responsibility, even when (or especially when) such manipulation is supported by mysterious values such as beauty, intuition, etc. – in other words, the personal preference of the anthologist. This way of speaking – that lists "carry on" by themselves – is only that: a way of speaking, which in truth means that while its author must relinquish *authority*, but not *authorship*, they just do not yet know who will take on the task of stewardship. This is the key understanding of comparative literature as a discipline of attention: what is always at stake is the continued weaving of a communal web of attention, in which privileged forms, such as the list, allow for endlessly surprising reverberations, never predicted (but necessarily welcomed) by their authors.

[11] "The list could be defined thusly: a text from which the author or producer have excused themselves". "The list, once 'thrown' in some direction (…) tends to grow all by itself".

There must be a balance between the autonomy granted to objects of attention, without which that web of meanings is not free to show itself to its attendants, and the obvious fact that any selection is historically and personally situated. A nourishing paradox at the centre of our work: consciousness of de-historicisation and de-authoralisation as *pharmakoi* (Derrida, 1972) to the discipline, renders history and authorship unavoidable sites of reflection. Henri Deluy – in the introduction to the poetry anthology from the *Biennale Internationale des Poètes* in Val-de-Marne – summarizes the issue well enough. On the question of whether his book is an anthology or not, he arrives at a wisely tautological answer:

> C'est bien une anthologie, la preuve cette ouverture, car toute anthologie commande sa justification : il n'existe aucune anthologie sans présentation (tout moins depuis plusieurs siècles : depuis que les anthologistes ont pris conscience du genre et que le leur activité est mise en cause…)
>
> C'est bien une anthologie puisqu'il y a un anthologiste. Qui fait des anthologies ? (…) [L]e portrait de l'anthologiste reste à faire. Il existe des approches ; par exemple celle-ci, de Karel Teige (…) : *L'anthologiste est pour un quart pervers, pour un autre quart un petit chef, pour un troisième quart un raté, pour le dernier quart un idiot.*[12] (10)

In all its arbitrariness, reflection on said arbitrariness, and reflection on the crises ensuing from it, one gets the impression (as it is often remarked) that comparative literature is only circularly concerned with itself. In the same way, it often seems that canons, syllabi, and anthologies, say less about their contents than about their authors – they, as Deluy intuits, merely self-justify. This kind of arbitrariness should never be confused with "cosmic randomness": circumscriptions of a part of literature are not randomly selected segments of an ideal "universal" literature. Instead, these objects interest us and are worthy of discussion because in their arbitrariness lie all those apologies, hand-wringing, tendentiousness, and prejudice in which the comparatist lives, and in which we discover something about how we engage with literature and, therefore, literature itself.[13]

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[12] "It is indeed an anthology, as evidenced by this introduction, since every anthology demands justification: there is no anthology without a preface (at least not for several centuries, since anthologists have become aware of the genre and their activity has been called into question...). / It is indeed an anthology because there is an anthologist. Who makes anthologies? (…) However, the portrait of the anthologist has yet to be painted. There are some approaches; for example, this one from Karel Teige (...): *The anthologist is one-quarter pervert, one-quarter petty tyrant, one-quarter failure, and one-quarter idiot*".

[13] Soon enough, Deluy's second observation will prompt an urgent reflection: is 'accident' valuable enough to consider that "who makes anthologies?" can have as answer a non-human (artificial intelligence, for example)? Is personal and inscrutable preference similar indistinguishable from an outsider's perspective? Will this real death of the author provide for vital places of comparison? Will we have any proper interest in anthologies made by no one?

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