Comparing Literatures, Comparing Civilizations

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COMPARING LITERATURES, COMPARING CIVILIZATIONS

MICHAEL PALENCIA-ROTH

Last year, in my presidential address, I promised to deliver today what I called a sermon to the converted.* The more I thought about the subject, however, and the more I considered the membership of the ISCSC, the more clearly I realized that the Society has no congregation, no body of believers. Who are the converted? And what is it that we believe in? There are too many disparate viewpoints in this Society to allow anyone to say, "this is Society dogma, this is not." Despite our differences, however we all share in varying degrees a commitment to what may be called the "civilizational perspective." To put it in the simplest terms, this perspective consists first in refusing to be limited by the provincialism of a single discipline, culture or society and, second, in looking to the "civilization" as the basic unit of study, the constant point of reference and the goal of the analysis. This perspective is advocated no less by literary scholars than it is by our members who are historians, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, legal scholars, or students of comparative religions.

We share something else as well—the experience of being misunderstood or occasionally even ignored. Colleagues may be critical of our work or, worse, indifferent toward it. These attitudes are usually founded on ignorance. Such a state of affairs, though regrettable, is understandable. Something as large, as intellectually ambitious, and as vague-sounding as "the comparative study of civilizations" is bound to occasion mistrust. It is true that the field is large, but so are many other fields. It is true that ours seems to be an intellectually ambitious enterprise, but that ambition stems less from pride than from a profound awareness that disciplines, periods, events, texts or even nations cannot be adequately comprehended from a narrow vantage point and that,

if we wish to do justice to them, we had better set out to learn what we can about their relationship to the civilization in which they are embedded. It is true, also, that the word “civilization” sounds vague, but though the term perforce must be inclusive it need not be simply an *omnium gatherum*, an excuse for loose thinking. Civilizations almost always have in common a group of characteristics. These, to use a semiological vocabulary for a moment, are their signifiers. One of the ways of comparing civilizations is through an analysis of the signifiers in relation to their signifieds. The large signifiers may not change from civilization to civilization: urbanism, literacy, organized religion, metallurgy, hierarchizing social structures, agriculture.\(^1\) The specific signifieds, however, may change. It is important to keep the distinction in mind so we don’t compare apples and oranges or, worse, declare the apples of another civilization not to be apples because they don’t look like our apples. I shall return a bit later to a specific instance of the semiological confusion of apples in a civilizational context.

Although I will not venture to define “civilization” here, I do wish to say the following about the term. One of the earliest appearances of the word “civilization” in the English language may be found in Boswell’s biography of Samuel Johnson. The term seems to have been as controversial then as it is now. The year is 1772. “On Monday March 23,” writes Boswell, “I found him [Johnson] busy, preparing a fourth edition of his folio dictionary. . . . He would not admit *civilization*, but only *civility*. With great deference to him, I thought *civilization*, from *civilize*, better in the sense opposed to *barbarity* than *civility.*”\(^2\) On the one hand, the ISCSC must remain forever grateful to Boswell; because of him we are not now known as the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilities. On the other, this exchange is proof that the English term *civilization* is not value-free and never was. The Greeks and Romans had similar terms and oppositions. “Civilization” possesses ideological connotations and therefore implications for scholarship. Some of those implications I believe to be unfortunate. For example in paying more attention to “civilization” than to “barbarism,” scholars are hierarchizing the two terms, making barbarism lower and less worthy than civilization. This is a problematic opposition to which I shall also return later.
I know of no one in academic life who began with the intent of becoming a scholar of comparative civilizations. The prospect is too daunting and there is no clear starting point. Generally we come to comparative civilizational analysis because of a dissatisfaction with the way things are done in our own disciplines. My own undergraduate and graduate schools—which trained me in English, Philosophy, Germanics, and Comparative Literature—had pedagogical philosophies at odds with the issues and methods dear to members of the ISCSC. I did not want to teach in the confining way I had been taught, and fortunately, on leaving graduate school, I was allowed to design syllabi and curricula which surrounded literary texts with all sorts of other texts from various disciplines and, eventually, cultures. Through all this the ISCSC has functioned as a sort of post-graduate school. I have been taught not only by Spengler, Toynbee, Weber, Kroeber, and McNeill, to mention five scholars I have read, with varying intensity, during the past dozen years. I have been taught as well by a number of people in the Society: by the writings of Nelson and Quigley, neither of whom I knew personally, and by the scholarship and example of, and conversations with, Kavolis, Leites, Melko, Hord, Wilkinson, Wescott, Walter, and Dogbe, to name but a few of my teachers. To borrow a phrase from Cardinal Newman, the ISCSC is my idea of a university.

The title of my address, “comparing literatures, comparing civilizations,” announces an attempt at bridging fields of study which are not usually bridged. It’s risky even to try, for most attempts at mediating between countries and disciplines are bound to disappoint and even anger some persons. Both Comparative Literature and Comparative Civilizations, if I may personify the disciplines momentarily, should be able to cohabit peacefully. That up to this point they are not perceived to have lived comfortably or at least harmoniously together is due, in my mind, to the disciplinary bias of comparative civilizational analysis toward history. This is only natural, to be sure, for most of the great civilizationists from Spengler to Toynbee to McNeill are historians, with apologies to those members who are champions of scholars like Kroeber, Sorokin, and Weber.

Let us begin with some differences of attitude between civilizationists and literary scholars. No literary critic, the civilizationist thinks, can possibly do justice to civilizations the way
I can. No civilizationist, thinks the critic, can understand and analyze literature the way I can. The literary critic’s complaint, though shortsighted, has legitimacy for the following reason: the civilizationist, in striving for the civilizational comparison, has a tendency to over-abstract by reducing literature to its “facts,” or to perceived “facts”: birth and death dates, plots, general themes and characteristics, general properties of literary movements, which can then be fitted to some overarching conceptual and comparative scheme. Literary knowledge, however, is seldom so “factual,” seldom so clear, seldom so beyond doubt. (Neither is historical knowledge or civilizational knowledge, but that belongs to another discussion.) The civilizationist, for his part, has an equally legitimate concern: in the literary critic’s desire to remain faithful to what he perceives to be the truth about the text or the words under discussion he sometimes becomes mired in the minutiae of his analyses. When he does rise above them, he may tend to do so in ways that are not significant enough, in the eyes of the civilizationist. In other words, the literary critic does not abstract enough; he does not ask the civilizational questions.

There are critics, of course, who do abstract. These are the literary theorists, and I should like to pause here to comment on literary theory from a civilizational perspective. In their push toward universality theorists sometimes forget the cultural contexts from which theories arise and so fall victim to what I call the imperialist fallacy. That is the belief that a particular theory, because it arises out of one’s own tradition (or, worse, because it arises out of the colonizer’s culture), is not only “better” but “normative.” There are numerous examples of the acceptance of one’s own theoretical or literary tradition as normative, as well as of cognitive colonization.

Literary theorists can learn much from civilizationists. True, it may mean the death of literary theory as an imperialist discourse or discipline. No matter, for it will be reborn a healthier child—perhaps as literary hypothesis. What theorists perceive as a universal is often not a universal at all but instead a cultural abstraction. The imperialist fallacy operates similarly in many fields. For example, it operates with particular force in religion, though here, as elsewhere, there are degrees of imperialism. However tolerant some religions may be of other people and faiths, there is in all religions the attitude—stated or implied, conscious or
unconscious—that one's own religion either is better or is the only true religion. Now, it is an axiom of logic that two different objects cannot be identical to each other. Several distinct religions which claim to be the sole true religion cannot all be right. At most, logically, only one of them can be right or true, the others being necessarily wrong or false. This state of affairs does not particularly concern a true believer, but it led Bertrand Russell to profess atheism.

Years of work in civilizational analysis has led me to understand that, since different civilizations theorize differently and have different literary and cultural values, no theory based on the texts and traditions of a single civilization, however complex and enduring that civilization might be, can justify the claim to universality. In most instances, literary theorizing cannot go beyond the intra-cultural or intra-civilizational level. The poetics of a single culture, then, should not be universalized, just as contradictions and dissimilarities among cultures or civilizations should not be subsumed into some sort of transcultural domain where particularities no longer count. Such logical difficulties concerning the gap between the universalist theoretical claims and empirical realities led me—in a move parallel to Russell's—to a position of theoretical skepticism, even to an occasional admission of "atheorism." I no longer believe in theory. But I am not sure that I would wish to call myself an "atheorist," for the root of the term \textit{theoria} comes from theasthai and \textit{thea}, which have to do with observing or viewing, and an atheorist, therefore, would be someone who does not observe or see. Occasional blindness is one thing; permanent blindness is something else, and it would be ludicrous for an interpreter to proclaim himself to be always blind to that which he is interpreting. Appearances, however, can be deceiving, and theorists who see universality where none actually exists are deceiving themselves. Perhaps a skeptical theorist and an occasional atheorist should only use theory and theories as some agnostics and other thinkers are able to use religion, that is, for help in formulating questions, in thinking, in interpreting.

If literary theory may be said to betray a certain provincialism by universalist claims, the opposite can be said about many specific studies of literature, that is, that they betray their provincialism by their attachment to the particularities of specific genres, movements, traditions, periods, countries. This kind of
provincialism can perhaps best be appreciated by an appeal to history, and in particular to the civilizationist Toynbee. Rather early in *A Study of History*, Toynbee discusses the results of his search for, as he calls it, “an intelligible field of study.” The case study he focuses on is that of England. Working backwards from the Industrial Revolution through the establishment of parliamentary government, overseas expansionism, the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Feudal system, to the conversion of the English from the so-called “Heroic Age” to Western Christianity, Toynbee arrives at two fundamental truths. The first is that the further back he goes in history the less nationalistic is the history of England. The second is that, even at its most modern, English history does not take place in a vacuum. Despite its geographical isolation from other countries, England must, if it is to be understood, be studied comparatively, in relation not only to other nation states, such as France and Germany, but also in relation to that “intelligible field of study,” namely western Christendom or Western Civilization which encompasses more than England. For Toynbee the most intelligible unit of study, then, is the “civilization.” The best, most intelligible history, therefore, is both comparative and civilizational.

The same argument may be made for the study of literature; in the case of Comparative Literature as an academic discipline, however, it is astonishing to have to admit that *it has not been made*. Take the case of English literature; the further back one goes in it historically, the more difficult it is to speak convincingly and comprehensively of an insular and isolated national English literature, although some English departments persist in trying. Chaucer, for example, makes the most sense not as a national poet but as an international and western one, with roots in the Bible, in Greek culture (*Troilus and Criseyde* is set during the Trojan war), in Latin literature (Ovid primarily), in French and Italian literature. One could say similar things about Shakespeare, Milton, and Coleridge, for instance, to bring our list of English authors up to the start of the industrial revolution. What is true of English literature must be a true *a fortiori*, as Toynbee might say, of national literatures with less definite geographical boundaries.

As a discipline, Comparative Literature historically has been “international,” that is, it has concerned itself with comparing different national literatures. This is analogous to comparing
French history with German history. The discipline as a whole has not yet taken the next step, which is to study a national literature less in relation to another national literature and more in relation to the civilization from which it springs and draws nourishment. I would say, then, that the most "intelligible field of study" for any western national literature is not defined by its geographical boundaries or even by its language but first and foremost by the literary, intellectual, and historical traditions of Western Civilization itself. The best, most intelligible field of literary study is, in sum, civilizational. Furthermore, in order to be comparative at a more global level, Comparative Literature must go beyond intra-civilizational comparison and reach toward inter-civilizational comparison. This is no less the task for students of any European literature than it is, say, for those who study African literatures or the literary traditions of India, China, Japan, and the Americas.

As a discipline, then, Comparative Literature might do well to adopt a civilizational framework. This is the great lesson that the comparative study of civilizations has to teach Comparative Literature. No practitioner of Comparative Literature as a discipline can lay claim to studying literature per se unless he or she can adduce literatures from different civilizations or cultures. Too often, even when the boundaries of cultures or civilizations are crossed, the level of comparison remains at the national, literary level: English or French literature versus Chinese, Korean or Indian literature. The refusal to take the cultural dimensions into account, the refusal, therefore, to rise to the civilizational level, can lead to serious mistakes of procedure and result; it can lead, for instance, to considering differences among literatures to be literary differences only rather than cultural or civilizational differences as well.

India, for instance, has a strong dramatic tradition as well as a poetics of drama but India's poetics, especially in a classic work like Bharata's Natyashastra, centers on the emotions or on sentiment (the concept of Rasa) rather than on a dramatic structure which may be called "tragic." To me this is a cultural statement as well as a literary one, and an appreciation of India's literary heritage must take the absence of a poetics of tragedy into account, not as something to be criticized, but as something to be remarked on and explored. In the West, it is the theory of tragedy, in Aristotle's Poetics, which has survived as the major
theoretical text on drama. Because of this, the tendency in western scholars is to view all drama from the perspective of tragic theory, to look for Aristotelian ideas in a drama's form and content, and to expect dramatic heroes to be tragic heroes, possessing, for instance, certain flaws which lead to their downfall. While such a perspective may make some sense in the case of western drama, influenced as it was by the Greeks, it makes less sense as an interpretive point of departure or reference concerning non-western drama. To discuss India's dramatic tradition in the light of Aristotelian poetics is, I believe, a radical misreading of India's civilizational reality. Yet this is something which comparatists, both from the West and from India, have done. This approach may be called the establishment of presence; it exemplifies the imperialist fallacy or what Theodore Von Laue has labelled "cognitive imperialism."4

Scholars from non-western cultures have recently begun to assert their own traditions in strong and, I think, more effective ways than they have been able to do in the past. Korean scholars, for example, are beginning to reconceptualize Comparative Literature in an Asian and Korean context. At a conference held this past fall in Korea, Kong-uk Kim and Dong-il Cho discussed new directions for Comparative Literature. Professor Cho's remarks, in particular, are relevant. Korean scholars, he says, have to "go beyond merely fitting Korean literary forms into western genre theory" and toward a "general comparison of terms used in Korea with those of other nations." Literary theory, he comments further, "can no longer content itself with using western approaches as a basis." Furthermore, the literary histories of Korea, Japan and China have to free themselves from a domination of "western classification schemes."5 I assume by that an emancipation not only from genre criticism but also from the classical-medieval-Renaissance-modern periodization we use both in the graduate study of western literatures and too often in East-West comparison. What these Korean scholars are trying to do is to free themselves as much as possible from the establishment of presence, from a cognitive domination by the West.

As mistaken as the establishment of presence, as the naive application of Western literary theory or values to non-western traditions, is an opposite tactic also belonging to cognitive imperialism. I call it the discovery of absence, or the refusal to
recognize an apple by another name. For instance, it is possible to insist that the “book” is a western concept and that, therefore, non-western cultures have no notion of “book” because one cannot find in them the terms “Buch,” “book,” “livro,” “livre,” “libro,” or other related words with Indo-European origins. This argument was actually proposed to me in conversation in support of the view that the Aztecs had no books. Now, while it may be true that the Aztecs, for instance, did not have a western term “book” in their vocabulary, they had equivalent terms and—more significantly—they had terms which designated a complex set of relationships surrounding book-making and writing. The term “amoxtli,” in Nahuatl, is the dictionary equivalent of “book” and is etymologically related to “amatl” or paper made from the bark of trees. Incidentally, the Indo-European root of “book” is “Bhago,” which means “beech tree” and is related to the Germanic “boko,” or a beech staff for carving runes on. Aztec books, or Aztec amoxtli, are composed by aggregating “amatl.” “Literature” itself is designated by “tlacuilolli” which also means anything written or painted. A metaphor for writing is “in tlilli in tlapalli,” which means the red and the black, for “amoxtli” were written in red and black ink. People who read books or “amoxtli” were known as those who possessed “in tlilli in tlapalli.” A scribe was called either “cuilo” or “amoxtlacuilo” or “book-writer.” From a semiological perspective it is easy to see what had happened to my interlocutor: he had confused the relationship between signifiers and signifieds and had given to signifiers (book, etc.) the status of signifieds. On a more serious level, my interlocutor also advanced the notion that “literature” was a western concept and that non-western cultures which had no litterae, that is, letters or alphabets or words constructed of syllables, had no literatures; they had something else which he called discourse, basing his comments on some of Foucault’s ideas. He was not persuaded by my pointing out that the Chinese have no alphabet or syllables and yet not only have a written language but a long literary—let us use the term—tradition. And yes, the Chinese do have books, though such Chinese or Aztec apples do not necessarily look like our apples.

Such semiological confusion is not as rare as one might hope. I have had similar conversations with other scholars. What can prevent these kinds of arguments from even being advanced is the comparative study of civilizations. The more literary scholars
study of other cultures, the less prone will they be to generalize about certain characteristics of literature or to attempt to universalize their own cultural understanding. And when they do generalize, the generalizations will be, I venture to predict, more modest and more accurate.

Most of what has been said thus far focuses on the differences between Comparative Literature and comparative civilizational analysis and how the latter can be a corrective for the former. It must be recognized, however, that both disciplines draw inspiration from the same basic impulse: the urge to compare, to synthesize, to see things whole. Toynbee was aware of this. He comments on it in his essay of 1964 entitled “Janus at Seventy-Five,” and speaks with eloquence in A Study of History of the urge to synthesize. In his youth, says Toynbee, he used to visit from time to time the home of a distinguished professor of one of the physical sciences. The professor’s study, a large and comfortable room lined with bookshelves, changed in appearance over the years. At first the shelves were filled with books of general literature and general scientific works, in addition to books on the branch of the sciences in which this scholar specialized. Over the years, however, these books were relegated to the attic, and their places occupied by the relentless march of a half-dozen specialized journals—“gaunt volumes,” Toynbee says, “in grim bindings, each containing many monographs by different hands. These volumes were not books in the literary sense of the word, for there was no unity in their contents and indeed no relation whatever between one monograph and another beyond the very feeble link of their all having something to do with the branch of science in question.” The professor’s study became less and less inviting.

The model of learning that these periodicals symbolize is—says Toynbee—that of the Industrial System, with its “Division of Labor and its sustained maximum output of articles manufactured from raw materials mechanically.” Set against it—for Toynbee—is the integrative, synthesizing kind of study which comparative civilizational analysis implies and, indeed, requires. I would set Comparative Literature against it as well. To compartmentalize literature and history as relentlessly and as efficiently as, say, Henry Ford divided the labor of producing cars may result in the production of more highly specialized disserta-
tions and monographs. However, it is unlikely to result in better and more enduring monographs. The integrative vision of the long view is what the ISCSC is all about, and it is what Comparative Literature, in its best moments, is about as well.

Insofar as literary comparatists study the *longue durée* with the techniques and perspectives of literary analysis, they might be able to encourage civilizationists to pay greater attention to literary evidence and, just as importantly, to offer some guidance in how literary interpretive techniques may help in analyzing evidence usually considered to be non-literary. Let us grant that literary interpretation is a "softer" discipline than, say, the sciences or history. Let us admit that literary scholars are less certain about the status of their raw data and less certain also about what is methodologically valid in literary study. The epistemological questions tend to be different for literature than for history, to restrict the comparison to those fields for the moment. The arguments, therefore, or the methods of finding and presenting evidence, of interpreting, tend to be different as well. But literary and historical interpretation are not as far apart as might be expected. The last twenty years or so, especially, have seen a number of powerful attacks on the naive view of history as the disinterested discovery and presentation of facts and events. The nature of historical discourse is being questioned. Hayden White has written on metahistory and historical narrative as part of his project in the history of consciousness; Derrida has waged war on our entire (logocentric) interpretive tradition, including that of history; Paul Veyne has analyzed history as a form of fiction.

What have civilizationists contributed to this debate? As far as I know, very little. Partly it's a matter of conservatism, partly an instinct for self-preservation. Anyone who has worked long and hard to master and interrelate complex and disparate bodies of knowledge is unlikely to want to hear that his knowledge has no stability, that he is perpetrating myths, or that he is only writing novels anyway.

But there is more to the civilizationist's aloofness from the battlefield. Any civilizationist worth his salt is aware that the issues debated and presented as new questions in the past several years are, in fact, long-standing ones. In our own western historiographical tradition the question of disinterestedness, of truth in history, was faced—though not thoroughly explored—by the
West’s first comparative civilizationist, Herodotus. He is obliged, he says, to cite and write down—therefore to make into history—the evidence that is presented to him but, he also states, he is not obliged to believe it all alike.\(^{10}\) Herodotus usually lets us know which evidence he is skeptical of and which not. He is not the only example. Discussions of validity in interpretation, of the reliability of evidence, of problems of intentionality, of canons, of the fictionality of discourse, of the position of the interpreter in relation to the interpreted, of the transformative powers of the interpreter’s imagination—all this and more is not something recent. It is part of interpretive theory generally, part of a hermeneutical tradition which is not confined to Heidegger, Gadamer and Hirsch, to name three recent avatars, but which has its Greek sources in the pre-Socratics, in Plato and in Aristotle, its Hebrew sources in Joseph’s dream interpretations and rabbinical commentary, its Christian sources in Paul and Augustine, its more modern sources in 19th-century—mostly German—biblical interpretation.

What literary hermeneutics has to offer the civilizationist is, as I have said, training in sensitivity toward certain kinds of evidence and in the techniques of analyzing it and other so-called non-literary evidence. These techniques are less quantitative—less scientific if you like—and more “interpretive.” To advocate them is not, I think, to impose something alien on civilizationists. It strikes me as significant that Toynbee’s large one-volume *Study of History* (not the abridgement by Somervell), published toward the end of his life, relies to a considerable degree on art and on literature to make its points. It is as though he were affirming ever more strongly that the rehearsal of facts, of numbers, of data, of political events, can take us only so far in understanding civilizations, and that we would do well to consider that which reveals their souls, namely their artistic and religious documents. Though continuing to be critical of Spengler’s determinism and his reliance on organicism, Toynbee at least now shows himself to be perhaps in sympathy with some of Spengler’s literary emphases. That is, he uses literature, in particular Goethe’s *Faust*, designating it as the literary document which exemplifies the challenge-and-response factor in western civilization.\(^{11}\) In doing so, Toynbee gives the impression that it is the soul, the essence, the spiritual dimensions, of a civilization that finally matter the
most, its body, its accidents, to use scholastic terminology, being less important than it—or they—once seemed.

What Toynbee did in that late volume was to recognize the civilizational value of intuitive insight both on the part of creative artists and of thinkers. At intuitive moments the mind, suddenly freed from the constraints of sequential thought, leaps to a vision of the entire subject, to an interpretation which is whole. The rest of one's work consists, then, of filling in the details, of supporting intuition with reason and scholarship. This work is, as García Márquez has said of writing novels, "trabajo de burro." A Study of History was born from a vision; so, too, was The Decline of the West. I would even venture to guess that the most scientific of civilizationists, Sorokin, inspired as he was by Tolstoy, had such intuitive insights. Creative insights are not confined to civilizationists or artists. Let me remind you of what happened, for instance, to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, to Newton, and to Einstein. In sum, there is much in the great civilizationists that we would recognize as poetic, literary, artistic.

What does it mean to think of civilizationists themselves in the way we generally think of artists? For one thing, it makes us more aware of the artistic—as opposed to the "scientific"—aspects of their analyses. For instance, Spengler's procedure in his Decline of the West, despite the rigorous reductionism of his schematization, is metaphorical and associative, and his "organic" conception of civilizational development and change is nothing if not literary: the organic metaphor owes much to the poetics of German Romanticism. Knowing these kinds of things about Spengler and others, we can analyze them the way we usually analyze creative artists. What is the structure of their work? How do its metaphors function? Are there clusters of images, metaphors, terms, which reveal an unspoken dynamic at work, a hidden obsession which guides both matter and form? Just as importantly, we can ask what is not being said, we can look for what is being suppressed and try to find out why. Is it due to ignorance? Or does the suppression have something to do with a concern for symmetry, for coherence, for elegance of argument? What is the civilizationist's personal relation to his work, and his work to his times? I very much doubt, for instance, that Spengler would have written his Decline of the West in the Germany of the 1870s. I doubt that McNeill would have become a civilizationist—and, in particu-
lar, the kind of scholar he has become—had he not spent those intense days in 1939 as a graduate student in an easy chair in the White Library of Cornell University reading Toynbee in the inspired glow each of us has known—usually early in our lives—on discovering a writer of unquestionable significance and excellence, a writer whose words illuminate the world for us. Ordinary historians generally do not have this capacity to illuminate. The great civilizationists do, and one reason is because they are inspired as great poets or artists are inspired. Moreover, their visions, being powerful and well articulated, move us emotionally as well as intellectually. I suspect, also, that it is the visionary power of such historians as Toynbee and Spengler that has caused such strong negative reactions on the part of many “professional” historians. Partly, I think, it is a matter of jealousy, of not being willing to accept that there is another level of historical understanding to which they themselves are not privy.

If civilizationists are more literary than we might first suspect, what about civilizations themselves? As Roger Wescott has reminded me, civilization may in some senses be defined as literate culture, literature in this sense being construed as any and all documentation, from shopping lists to encyclopedias. Here literature becomes the manifestation of civility. Though I think that Wescott has defined literature a bit too broadly here (I would exclude shopping lists), he is undoubtedly right in pointing to the documents or texts of a civilization as the main guarantors of its identity, its effectiveness, and even its longevity. Seen in this light, texts are supremely important for civilizationists.

The presence of abundant documentation in an ancient civilization’s remains renders that civilization all the more valuable to civilizationists, sometimes out of proportion to its actual civilizational accomplishments. The Seleucid Monarchy, says Toynbee, for instance, was a much richer civilization than the Ptolemaic Empire which was born of the marriage of Hellenism and Egyptian civilization. Yet, because the Ptolemaic Empire left in the dry soil of Upper Egypt so many more documents than did the Seleucid Monarchy in its harsher environment, the study of the Ptolemaic Empire has flourished while the study of the Seleucids has languished. This state of affairs in scholarship, though understandable, is, says Toynbee, lamentable.
make civilizations accessible; they make them popular and sometimes more significant than they ought to be.

The problem of a civilization's accessibility to scholars is compounded when cultures have oral rather than written traditions. Insofar as civilizationists privilege texts, we privilege written over oral culture. We tend, therefore, either to neglect or to overlook oral societies and cultures. Civilizationists from Spengler to Toynbee, from Sorokin to Kroeber and Quigley, have largely ignored Africa except for paying some attention to Egypt and perhaps Ethiopia and West Africa. Why? The sub-saharan culture of Africa has been largely oral and has produced relatively few documents. Does this mean that oral literature is less worthy of study? If we think this way, we forget that Western literature was first oral literature, and that this was so even in the case of some of our most complex and intricate aesthetic constructs. Oral art is not necessarily simple art. We who are not classicists sometimes forget that the Iliad and the Odyssey existed for hundreds of years as oral documents first, and that they were written down not in order to be preserved as documents for posterity but in order to help the speakers in their recitations. The first written texts in the West were, more than anything, aide memoires. In fact, until around the 5th century B.C. books were relatively rare in Western civilization, and even then little can be said about their physical appearance and characteristics.¹⁵

As I understand it, sub-saharan Africa is now experiencing what 8th and 7th-century Greece experienced. Oral literature is being transformed—transcribed—into written culture at a pace which has been accelerating during the past two or three hundred years. The increase in textual production will make Africa an ever more fertile ground for civilizationists to till. But do oral cultures have to become literary before this will happen? Let us be clear: what is at issue here is not Africa's existence. Unlike the Americas, Africa has always existed for western consciousness. At issue is its legitimacy in civilizational analysis. Why have civilizationists devalued oral culture? Partly it is a problem of accessibility. It is difficult to study a culture if it produces little in the way of texts, and if we do not pay sufficient attention to other forms of documentation, such as material culture and non-textual aesthetic and religious forms. Partly, too, it is a matter of intellectual
prejudice. At the heart of the matter is the attitude behind the exchange between Johnson and Boswell, which discussed civilization by its negative opposition to barbarism. The attitude seems to be based on the following train of thought: if writing belongs to civilization, then not-writing (oral) must belong to non-civilization (barbarism). Since the object of civilizational study is stated to be civilization, we tend not to work much with "barbarism," with oral cultures. I hope that this situation will change.

This attitude is part of the domain I have sketched out earlier as that of cognitive imperialism. Though we do not like to admit it, most of us are cognitive imperialists in one form or another. It is a difficult attitude to avoid if we come from a dominant culture, are interested in cross-cultural analysis, and have been educated in the West. Up to now, the schools of comparison in both Comparative Literature and comparative civilizational analysis have drawn their inspiration and methodologies from western traditions of interpretation and history. In civilizational studies, this is as true of the comparative analyses of Herodotus, Las Casas and Voltaire as it is of Spengler, Toynbee, Kroeber, and McNeill. Now, there is nothing wrong in this; after all, one has to start from where one is standing. But there is something wrong in the view that insists that because this has always been so—or, rather, because it seems that it has always been so—this is then the only way to proceed.

We tend to explore other cultures from our vantage point, to make their data yield to our methodologies, and to maintain as the standard for judgment our own interpretive center and position. Usually that center is the European and/or American hermeneutic tradition. In all this we are sometimes beset by a double temptation: either to forget, consciously or unconsciously, that other cultures had "lives" before we discovered them, or to forget that other cultures might be interpreting us as well, that we might be the "Other" to them. Evidence of the first kind of forgetfulness may be found, for instance, in Midnight's Children, a magnificent novel by Salman Rushdie on the emancipation of India from British rule. Early in the 20th century the grandfather of the narrator and hero travels to Germany to pursue further medical training. While there he is shocked to learn that "India—like radium—had been 'discovered' by Europeans." Upon learning, further, that he himself is also the Europeans' "invention," he is "knocked forever into that middle place" between India and
Europe. In other words, in the eyes of Europeans, this character and his country had no life, no existence—not to mention legitimacy—before being brought into the horizon of European consciousness. An example of the second (that is, that other cultures may be interpreting us as well) may be seen in the work of that great 16th-century cultural relativist, Montaigne. Three American Indians brought to Rouen and the court of Charles the Ninth were asked their impressions of Europe. In the first place, writes Montaigne,

they thought it very strange that so many tall, bearded men, strong and well armed, who were about the king (they probably referred to the Swiss of the Guard), should humble themselves to obey a child, and that they did not rather choose some one of themselves to command them. Secondly, they have a fashion of speech of calling men halves of one another, they had perceived that there were among us some men gorged to the full with all sorts of possessions, and that their other halves were beggars at their doors, gaunt with hunger and destitution; and they thought it strange that these poverty-stricken halves could suffer such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.  

For too long we have obligated other cultures, other peoples, even other researchers, to be knocked into that middle place if they want to engage in cross-cultural work or life of any kind. It might do us westerners good if non-westerners studied the West more frequently, in the manner we westerners have been studying their cultures, and, as Montaigne suggested, obligated us to see ourselves "as others see us," to cite the title of the last special issue of the Comparative Civilizations Review. Perhaps eventually the discourse originating in other cultures will become strong enough not only to withstand the incursions made by western discourse into their cultures but even to change the discourse itself.

NOTES

1. Needless to say, even such rudimentary statements concerning the basic criteria of civilizations are controversial. In one of the sessions of the ISCSC meeting, Gordon Hewes ended a directionless discussion on the
criteria of civilization (in which, apparently, endless lists had been pro-
posed and debated) by simply declaring: "cities, writing, monumental
architecture . . . happen to be the criteria" (The Boundaries of Civilization in
Space and Time, edited by Matthew Melko and Leighton R. Scott.
Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987, p. 5). I do not think that
anything acceptable to everyone can be said here about what is and is not
a civilization. There are always exceptions to every rule or conception.
The real issue, however, is whether the exceptions are important enough
and numerous enough to alter the basic understanding one has of the
term.

The History Teacher, 20, no. 2 (1987), 270ff. Under the same title,
The World Revolution of Westernization, and subtitled "the Twentieth Cen-
tury in Global Perspective," Von Laue has published, at Oxford Uni-
versity Press (1987), a book on the many aspects and implications of "wester-
nization." See also R. M. Panikkar, Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of
the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945 (London: George
Allen and Unwin, 1959), passim. A good number of the essays published in
World Literature Written in English, a journal edited at the University of
Guelph and published under the auspices of the University of Toronto
Press, are written by scholars keenly aware of the problems of cognitive
imperialism (usually identified by related terms, such as "Eurocentrism"
or "cultural imperialism") and its effects on Third World or Non-
Western literatures, both as they are written and as they are interpreted.
See, for instance, Minecke Schipper, "Eurocentrism and Criticism: Re-
flections on the Study of Literature in Past and Present," WLWE, 24, no. 1
(1984), 16-27; Arun P. Mukherjee, "The Vocabulary of the 'Universal':
Cultural Imperialism and Western Literary Criticism," WLWE, 26, no. 2
(1986), 343-53.
5. "Discussion Topic: Revitalizing Comparative Literature Studies
from a Korean Perspective," in Newsletter of the Korean Comparative
Literature Association, No. 1 (Spring 1988), 6-7.
6. My thanks to Louise Burkhart for guiding me through the in-
tricacies of Aztec book culture. See Alonso de Molina, Vocabulario en
lengua castellana y mexicana (Mexico, 1571; rpt. Madrid: Ediciones Cultura
Hispánica, 1944), passim.
106-11.
William Heinemann, 1946), Book VII, section 152.
11. Toynbee, A Study of History (new edition, revised and abridged;

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol21/iss21/2