

COMPARISON AND TRANSLATION: A PERSPECTIVE
FROM ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

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ABSTRACT

What can scholars of comparative literature learn from other fields about theories and practices of comparison? This article turns to actor-network theory (ANT) and its explorations of translation, comparison, and similar terms. ANT, it argues, offers an intriguing angle on such modes of relation. In literary studies, comparison has often been subject to stringent critique, accused of imposing false equivalences and oppressive forms of homogenization. Perhaps, however, we can flip things around, reassessing critique via a stress on the complexities of comparison. ANT, as we will see, offers a relational ontology, in contrast to the ethos of negativity that has dominated literary studies in recent years.

KEYWORDS: actor-network theory, comparison, translation

What can scholars of comparative literature learn from other fields about theories and practices of comparison? Comparing, after all, is not limited to disciplines with “comparative” in their title, but would seem to be a ubiquitous aspect of thought. Even if scholars are not juxtaposing literary texts or connecting cultures, they are still comparing ideas and evidence, discriminating between more and less adequate forms of argument. One cannot, in this sense, *not* compare.¹ Admittedly, some fields have thought more deeply and extensively about comparison than others. In this article, I turn to actor-network theory (ANT) and its perspective on comparison, translation, and analogous terms. ANT, I argue, offers a novel and illuminating angle on such modes of relation. In literary studies, both comparison and translation have often been subject to stringent critique, accused of imposing

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false equivalences and oppressive forms of homogenization. Perhaps, however, we can flip things around, reassessing the role of critique by attending to the contingencies and complexities of acts of comparing and translating. ANT, as we will see, offers a relational ontology that speaks directly to this question, contravening the skeptical or negative ethos that has dominated literary studies in recent years.²

Originally developed in the context of science studies, ANT is an increasingly influential method and a common point of reference across fields ranging from architecture to zoology. Its name, however, has inspired a certain amount of controversy and discontent. The currently most influential representative of ANT, Bruno Latour, was eager at one time to ditch all the problematic aspects of the term: “that is, actor, network, theory, without forgetting the hyphen!”³ A few years later, he has reconciled himself to the name: is not ANT, after all, the perfect acronym for a “myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler”?⁴ At the most basic level, ANT is a form of relational thinking: one that requires close-up (myopic) investigation, exhaustive (work-alcoholic) description, and close to the ground (trail-sniffing) analysis. Let’s expand on this definition by considering its key terms, before turning to the relevance of ANT for debates in comparative literature.

What is an actor? For ANT, it is anything that makes a difference. My coffee mug makes a difference in delivering a stimulant to my befogged brain; its handle makes a difference by inviting me to pick it up in certain ways. A rock makes a difference by causing the water running downstream to flow around it rather than over it, while its overhanging side makes a difference in providing shelter for tiny water creatures. “Actor” thus refers to acting-as-agency, not acting-as-theatrical-performance. Agency, meanwhile, has nothing to do with consciousness, will, or intention (a common source of misunderstandings of ANT), let alone with autonomy or independence; rather, it refers to the coordinated actions that link human and/or nonhuman actors. In modernity, humans severed themselves from animals and things because they saw their own agency as qualitatively different in kind. ANT refuses any such *a priori* distinctions between different kinds of being (which is why it is sometimes called a “flat ontology”). All actors exist via their relations to other actors, and humans are no different in this regard; we depend not only on obvious support systems—food, air, early care-givers—but also on the less obvious: software, serotonin inhibitors, and shoes.

“Network” is another source of frequent confusion. A network, in ANT, does not imply a network-y shape, that is, a web of interconnected horizontal lines. Nor does it have any special affinity with the Internet, computers, or technical networks. Rather, a network simply is an assembly of actors that

share information and coordinate action. It has no necessary size, shape, or scale. A network can be made up of soccer players, a ball, the rules of the game, and cheering spectators, or of chemicals, postdocs, hypotheses, and a lab report. At the same time, a network is not so much something we find as something we make; it is the pencil rather than the object drawn; it is a means of checking how much “energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture.”⁵ Network, in this sense, is shorthand for including as many actors as feasible in our research, the researcher included, and tracing the complexities of their interactions.

Perhaps we can see now why “theory” is also a misnomer. The emphasis in ANT is on description rather than explanation, along with a willingness to be surprised by the actors and connections one is tracing. As we’ll see, Latour rejects the view that our commitment to preexisting theories will inevitably determine what we discover. Instead, the goal is to allow various objects of the room to express themselves by offering them as much attention and care as possible. For this reason, Latour has referred to ANT as a form of radical empiricism, with a nod to William James; more recently, his colleague Antoine Hennion has drawn out the parallels between actor-network theory and pragmatism. This attention to empirical detail and relational models is clearly evident in the classic texts of the field, such as Annemarie Mol’s *The Body Multiple*, an ethnography of the treatment of atherosclerosis in a Dutch hospital, as well as Latour’s *Aramis*, an investigation of a failed attempt in France to build a semipersonalized transit system.⁶

While ANT has been influential in diverse fields, its uptake in literary studies is only just beginning. This belated reception is not entirely surprising. At first glance, the empirical emphasis of ANT seems better suited to fields such as sociology or science studies than to text-based and interpretation-heavy disciplines. Meanwhile, its methods and practices are at odds with many of the prevailing assumptions in literary and cultural studies.⁷ ANT, for example, has little interest in the linguistic turn; does not talk about identity or representation; is perplexed by a certain theoretical vocabulary (fetish, ideology, structure); and is interested in making things *more* real rather than less real. Latour, especially, has become increasingly impatient with the rhetoric of social construction and the technique of distancing oneself from texts, attitudes, or persons in order to “trouble” or “problematize” their assumptions. In short, ANT is at odds with both traditional forms of ideology critique and with the various styles of poststructuralist critique still in vogue.

What ANT does offer literary studies are new ways of thinking about connectivity. An emphasis on relations is not new in literary studies (which has, over recent decades, challenged the idea of literature’s autonomy by

variously emphasizing intertextuality, discursive networks, ideology, etc.). What is different, however, is ANT's view of these relations: in particular, its emphasis on connection as co-creation rather than as limit or constraint. For ANT, mediation does not subtract from the object but adds to the object; that I discuss *Mrs Dalloway* with my fellow students, read articles about it, watch the movie of *The Hours*, buy a mug emblazoned with a Virginia Woolf quote, has the effect of making the novel more real, not less real. Art's power and presence are not attenuated by its relations, but made possible by its relations, which help bring it into view. (Our apprehension of this presence is not *illusio*, as Bourdieu would have it; it is not a projection, an ideology, or a metaphysics.) Meanwhile, any of the aforementioned actors—persons, texts, other art works, objects—may prove relevant to our description: nothing can be excluded in advance. In this way, ANT offers ways of thinking about acts of mediation, translation, and comparison that could prove highly pertinent to comparative literature.

We can begin by noting that actor-network theory and comparative literature share an interest in translation—indeed, ANT is frequently described as a “sociology of translation.” In comparative literature, to be sure, the focus is on the viability and value of *linguistic* translation—a topic that has once again come to the fore in debates about the merits of world literature as a reorientation of the field. For some critics, the expansion of comparative literature to encompass a larger corpus of languages and literatures means an inevitable ratcheting up of translation. David Damrosch, for example, has recast the idea of “world literature” to describe those forms of literature that gain in translation, in contrast to other works that lose power in another language and do not travel well. Damrosch seeks to correct and compensate for the bad reputation of translation, noting that a translation may improve upon an original text by allowing readers to partake of several cultural worlds. Translation, moreover, is a vital mechanism in the creation of transnational networks of influence among authors as well as readers. While stressing the need to safeguard and promote the study of foreign languages, Damrosch also urges his fellow critics to be less shamefaced and apologetic about resorting to translations, as an essential means of gaining access to texts beyond their domain of linguistic expertise.⁸

To its critics, however, translation is at best a necessary evil and at worst a form of deeply troubling cooption—one that levels cultural differences and mutes linguistic otherness while encouraging a touristic sampling and nonchalant appropriation of other literary and cultural worlds. In a certain line of thought—of which Pascale Casanova is perhaps the most eloquent and forceful explicator—translation practices find their ultimate explanation

and ground in dramas of exclusion and hierarchies of power. As Casanova points out, certain languages (Latin, French, and now English) accrue much greater prestige than others. Languages do not exist in and for themselves, but via structures of discrimination and distinction; the tenet among linguists that all languages are equal turns out to be utterly false in practice. “The ‘prestigious’ language,” she writes, “will (in a completely arbitrary way, through the simple fact of its ‘prestige’) exert its power and domination over other languages.”⁹ Such a language will be favored in translations: both as a defining feature of literary works that are held to be worthy of wider dissemination as well as the medium into which texts from other languages are most likely to be translated. Casanova continues: “Thanks to a circular causality that increases the self-evident nature of its position, the dominant language is the one that circulates most freely and easily throughout the world because it is understood by the greatest number of people . . . The language is ‘a travel permit,’ in a certain sense, in all directions.”¹⁰

Such critiques of the power dynamics of translation are widespread in both translation studies and comparative literature. Meanwhile, the recent English publication of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* has triggered extended reflections on the question of “untranslatability” and the ethical, aesthetic, and political risks of translation. In several influential publications, Emily Apter ties the increased reliance on translation to the broader logic of a global capitalism eager to market exotic identities and cultures while also striving to render them equivalent via a common currency. Translation thus serves as a form of social homogenization, part of a more general flattening out of cultural and linguistic differences that might hinder the free flow of capital. The recent turn to world literature, in this sense, is complicit with a socioeconomic logic of globalization that it fails to seriously engage or challenge. In response, Apter invokes an idea of untranslatability “as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literature endeavors.” Such a concept of untranslatability, she argues, could serve as a new theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature by resisting false equivalence and stressing the resistant or critical force of “non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability, and untranslatability.”¹¹

From the standpoint of actor-network theory, however, translation looks rather different. Here, to be sure, it is conceived more broadly to include not just acts of linguistic transposition but the countless mediations that bind together human and nonhuman actors, and, indeed, nonhuman actors to each other. Translation thus becomes a key metaphor for thinking about relations. It is not something imposed on the world—an act of aggressive encroachment on pristine otherness—but something that defines a world

that is always already composed of acts of connection, negotiation, and transformation. Translations are the means by which paths are connected, actions are coordinated, and meanings are transmitted. It is translation, for example, that allows the symptoms described by a patient, the blood vessels viewed under the pathologist's microscope, and the images produced in the radiology lab to be brought together under the shared term "atherosclerosis," as described in Anne-Marie Mol's aforementioned *The Body Multiple*. Such acts of translation are never faithful, transparent, or complete, in stark contrast to what Latour dubs "double click"—the fantasy of effortless and seamless information transfer that is promoted by computer technologies. Rather, we are always talking about transformation, deformation, alteration, and appropriation of various kinds. As Latour puts it, "Everything is translated . . . We may be understood, that is, surrounded, diverted, betrayed, displaced, transmitted, but we are never understood *well*. If a message is transported, then it is transformed."¹² There is always *interference*.

Translation, then, alters its object—here ANT is in accordance with arguments in comparative literature, including the often-invoked axiom "traduttore traditore:" translation as betrayal. This does not mean, however, that translation is just a vehicle of homogenization or false equivalence, echoing, in its imposition of sameness, the logic of capitalist globalization. Because translation occurs at every point in the network, the opposite is true; translation is associated with unpredictability, ambiguity, impurity, and increase in "noise." John Law, for example, riffs off the motif of translation as betrayal—as both sameness and difference—to discuss a series of ANT case studies, including an account of the transferral of Swedish brick-making technology to Nicaragua. He writes: "for a so-called 'transfer' takes place there is change. There is translation. There is the creation of new relations. So there is change in Nicaragua to be sure, *but also change in what is transferred*."¹³ No elements in the transaction remain unaltered and unscathed. From such a perspective, the idea of the untranslatable makes little sense. Indeed, we might say, translation lacks an opposite, because nothing can exist without the support of numerous coactors that mediate, appropriate, and alter it. It is no longer a matter of railing against translation as such but rather of gauging the uses and merits of specific translations—which involve losses and gains and misunderstandings, but also the possibility of new affinities and attunements.

This is not to deny the glaring imbalances in existing modes of translation, linguistic, or otherwise; that countless English texts are translated into numerous languages, while only four books in Hungarian and one book in Hindi were translated into English in 2013.¹⁴ This asymmetry is undeniable

and appalling. An ANT perspective, nonetheless, would point out that translation is ongoing and inescapable; it does not cease when a book is published. The vagaries of a work's reception—as it is transported into the variable life-worlds, vocabularies, and assumptions of differing audiences—give the lie to any illusion of sameness. A new English translation of *Anna Karenina*, after all, is likely to acquire very different resonances as it is read by a US professor, a Dutch housewife, or a Hong Kong lawyer. Rejecting a top-down model of power (in which opaque social forces impose meanings on hapless and passive recipients), ANT insists that meanings are mediated, altered, and sometimes enriched as they are transmitted from actors to other actors.

Meanwhile, that certain ideas, beliefs, texts, are more successful than others is not just a matter of brute force; it requires alliances, diplomacy, persuasion, compromise, negotiation, seduction, wheedling. (In an account of Brecht's translation into English, Andre Lefevere gives a good description of such compromises, as Brecht's work was modified to speak to the concerns of US audiences. Rather than lamenting this appropriation, Lefevere shows how it was needed to make Brecht legible in a new context. "A writer's work," he writes, sounding very much like Latour, "gains exposure and achieves influence mainly through 'misunderstandings' and 'misconceptions,' or, to use a more neutral term, refractions.")¹⁵ Networks are precarious and in need of the ongoing support of numerous actors in order to sustain themselves. Not all actors are equal, but all actors play their part and make a difference.

Here we can note some suggestive resonances between ANT and recent work in comparative literature, such as Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih's discussion of "minor transnationalism"; that is, forms of interaction within and across minority literatures and cultures. Questioning the usual academic language of center and margin, domination and resistance, Lionnet and Shih argue for different models of transnational connection. It is not that such connections are untouched by power relations but that comparative literature needs stronger yet more subtle and nuanced modes of comparison: ones that can attend to cross-fertilizations between minor literatures that are not scripted by the center; that are alive to the contingencies of cross-cultural interaction and lateral networks; that do not assume that translation is equivalent to homogenization; and that are not fixated on what they call a binary and vertical rhetoric of domination and opposition, assimilation and resistance.¹⁶

While their own reference point is Edouard Glissant, they might well agree with Latour's aphorism: "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds', but *well-attached*." In both cases, there is an emphasis on relationality as fundamental.¹⁷ We are always already entangled, mediated,

interdependent, intertwined; the language of exteriority and non-complicity expresses not just an unrealized idea but a fundamentally unrealizable one. Such relations are poorly understood via a modernist rhetoric that pits margins against centers, domination versus resistance. “Relational comparison,” Shih remarks in another essay, “is not a center-periphery model, as the texts form a network of relations from wherever the texts are written, read, and circulated.”¹⁸ Here ANT scholars would vigorously nod in agreement, while extending the point to enfold not only texts, but all human and nonhuman actors. From such an optic, then, relation and translation look very different: not as an oscillation between oppressive sameness and radical singularity, but as chains of association and mediation that have no predetermined politics, but that must be described in as much detail as possible by a trail-sniffing scholar open to contingency and surprise.

This openness to contingency should also inform our reflections on comparison. No one would deny, for example, that comparative thinking is heavily implicated in the history of colonialism. Much has been written on how temporal or evolutionary scales of comparison have portrayed non-Western cultures as backward or belated in relation to a European norm. (See, among others, Johannes Fabian’s account of the relations between time and cultural otherness, Edward Said on the relations between orientalism and primitivism, Homi Bhabha’s discussion of time lag, and Natalie Melas on the evolutionary assumptions underlying the history of comparative literature.)¹⁹ Comparison is commonly decried for being tied up with forms of judgment that reinforce patterns of racial and cultural dominance. What is less frequently noted, however, is that the ethical force of this objection pivots on acts of comparison, without which the racial hierarchies and geopolitical inequities lamented by the critic would remain invisible. Comparison and the perception of inequality are intrinsically connected. The poison, in this sense, also turns out to be the only possible cure.

Comparison is thus not a one-sided or intrinsic nefarious technology of power. Rather, it is a form of relational thinking that can be deployed to many different ends. Certainly, comparing can be used to impose preexisting categories on muted or marginalized others; to confirm the rightness of one’s view of the world; “to hector, proselytize, or hierarchize difference in the name of a dominant, ‘superior,’ identity.”²⁰ It can promote indifference to the specifics of context, wrenching texts, ideas, or actions out of webs of local meaning in order to assert their similarity, superiority, or inferiority in relation to other phenomena that are similarly denuded. But it can also deliver a sobering jolt to consciousness and a brake on narcissism, initiating a humbling sense of the limits of one’s own perspective. Without explicit or

implicit comparison, it is hard to see how one could ever escape, for even a moment, the confines of one's own experience and become aware of alternate ways of conceiving or inhabiting the world.

Friedman develops the point in her essay "Why Not Compare?" Conceding the various problems that bedevil comparison, she insists, nonetheless, that it is worse not to compare than to compare. Any form of theoretical thinking, for example, depends on conceptualizing, generalizing, and discerning patterns of similarity across differences. Meanwhile, she argues, "the refusal to compare can turn into a romance of the local, a retreat into the particular and identity based, a resistance to the cosmopolitan." By contrast, "comparison across cultures defamiliarizes what one takes as 'natural' in any given culture."²¹ Rather than reinforcing a culture's claim to a universally valid measure, comparison can unsettle it, driving home the difference—and sometimes the bewildering strangeness—of how others measure, assess, interpret, and evaluate. Meanwhile, Friedman goes on to argue, comparison does not simply decontextualize, but also recontextualizes: a double movement of alienation and re-embedding that can bring to light unexpected connections and illuminating parallels between phenomena separated in space and time.

It is noteworthy, in this context, that comparison across space—that is to say, across nations, cultures, or regions—has received far more attention in comparative literature than comparison across time. This imbalance may seem puzzling, given the historical framing of literary studies: the ubiquity of periodizing structures in the curriculum, job descriptions, grant applications, journal titles, and other aspects of scholarly practice.²² Yet it is precisely because periodization is so persistent that cross-temporal comparison is suspect: seen as evidence of dilettantism or insufficient professionalization. This taboo has been reinforced by the impact of New Historicism and other forms of what Wai Chee Dimock calls "synchronic historicism" that quarantine literary texts within a particular slice of time: usually the moment when they were first written or published.²³

Here actor-network theory offers a provocation to business as usual in its emphasis on the ubiquity of transtemporal networks. Latour's work scrambles and jumbles period distinctions (above all the distinction between tradition and modernity) in order to trace the flows of ideas, objects, and texts across time and to underscore their simultaneous copresence. "I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer," he remarks in *We Have Never Been Modern*; "my habits range in age from a few days to several thousand years."²⁴ Rejecting a narrative of progress that pits the new and the now against the outdated and obsolete, this view is also at odds with a Foucauldian

conception of history as a sequence of incommensurable epistemes. Instead, its vision of time emphasizes borrowing, blending, blurring, and juxtaposing: we are immersed in a swirling confusion of texts, objects, ideas, and images that have weathered the forces of time, surviving centuries of wear and tear. Presentness contains countless examples of resilient and persistent pastness; seemingly defunct or moribund texts can be rebooted; old ideas trigger fresh and startling constellations of meaning. Such a framework offers a boost to those interested in cross-temporal comparison in literary and cultural studies, willing to risk charges of anachronism in order to trace proximity and connection.²⁵

Latour persistently reframes matters of fact as matters of concern: underscoring how our orientations, interests, and commitments shape what we perceive and what we care about. Are we immured, then, in the prison-house of language, forever doomed to project our own assumptions onto the objects we study? Not quite. In the dialogue at the heart of *Reassembling the Social*, the professor questions the student's view that our frameworks, paradigms, or belief systems lock us into a particular viewpoint. "Don't believe all that crap about being 'limited' to one's perspective. All the sciences have been inventing ways to move from one standpoint to the next . . . Enquiries, survey, fieldwork, archives, polls, whatever—we go, we learn, we practice, we become competent, we change our views. Very simple really; it's called inquiries. Good inquiries always produce lots of new descriptions."²⁶ Care and attentiveness can produce new and enlightening accounts; our findings challenge as well as confirm our prejudices; certain writings can produce better versions of reality (yes, reality; a word Latour uses without scare quotes!) Meanwhile, the professor continues, it is not a question of avoiding comparison; but of being willing to engage one's interlocutors as *active makers of comparison rather than simply as objects to be compared*: "they too compare; they, too, produce typologies; they, too, design standards." Here as elsewhere, Latour urges scholars to listen attentively to the accounts of those they study, rather than treating lay actors as naifs in urgent need of Critical Theory 101.

How might this line of thinking relate to the idioms and interests of literary studies? We can see immediately that literature is a medium actively and intensively engaged in comparing. This may be especially true of contemporary examples of world literature that are "born translated," as Rebecca Walkowitz puts it, that anticipate, reflect, and comment on their own international circulation, but the point holds more generally.²⁷ Works of fiction, after all, commonly juxtapose and contrast characters; deploy analogies and metaphors to telling effect; make links to previous works and past traditions; choreograph parallels or stand-offs between differing moralities

and worldviews. Indeed, literature would seem to be a virtual machine for generating comparisons. Following Latour, then, our aim as critics would not be to abjure or forswear comparative thinking in order to pay homage to the “radical alterity” of the literary work. (Such a line of argument, it should be clear by now, makes no sense within actor-network theory.) Rather, it is a matter of juxtaposing, comparing, and confronting comparisons; positioning the literary text within pertinent frameworks, while allowing its own modes of comparing, measuring, and judging to speak back to these frameworks. In this way, we might get a little closer to Isabelle Stenger’s ideal:

Those you address must be empowered to evaluate the relevance of your interest, to agree or refuse to answer, and even to spit in your human, too human, face. . . . “Learning from” requires encountering, and encountering may indeed imply comparison, but there is no comparison if the encountered others are defined as unable to understand the point of the comparison. We are returned here to the Latin etymology of “comparison”: *compar* designates those who regard each other as equals—that is, as able to agree, which means also able to disagree, object, negotiate, and contest.²⁸

What might such an approach look like in practice? How might literary works disagree, object, negotiate, and contest? One way of pursuing this idea in the classroom is by juxtaposing literature and theory without allowing the latter to single-handedly define the terms of discussion. For example, in a graduate seminar on “Comparative and Transnational Studies,” I assign classic essays of transnational and postcolonial theory, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “Topologies of Nativism,” Linda Hutcheon’s “Rethinking the National Model,” Arjun Appadurai’s “Disjunctures and Differences in the Global Economy,” and the multiauthored “Creole Manifesto.” The cumulative effect of these readings inspires a skepticism about categories of race, ethnicity, and nation, to steer the class toward a language of becoming over being, of hybridity over identity, of transnational flows over rooted selves. Comparison becomes a matter of relativizing the force of belonging, questioning the desire for familiar identities, exposing the romantic-regressive underpinnings of the desire for home. The case seems compelling and conclusive.

We then turn to Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, which offers a rather different take on such issues. This difference is not an opposition: Hoffman’s memoir of a young Polish-Jewish woman who moves to Canada and then to the United States is certainly concerned with conflicting allegiances and

hybrid affinities. And yet it also explores the anguish of dislocation and the losses of migration, in ways that the theoretical essays fail to acknowledge. Describing her departure from Poland at the age of fifteen, Hoffman writes: "I am suffering my first severe attack of nostalgia, or *tesknota*, a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing . . . it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt."²⁹ The phrase "geography of emotion" is telling; Hoffman's attachment to the country of her birth is not just mental, but affective and visceral: not in the sense of unmediated, but in being emotionally overwhelming and impossible to shrug off. Nostalgia has often had a bad press in contemporary theory: *Lost in Translation* offers a rich and multifaceted description of what it means to be affectively tied to another country, or to the past, as being far more than an intellectual error or a "myth of origin." It offers, we might say, a phenomenology of attachment: one that does not so much refute as complicate and enrich the theoretical insights we previously encountered.

Meanwhile, Hoffman's memoir also invites a rethinking of what can become a rather glib, even facile, celebration of difference in contemporary theory. "For all our sophisticated deftness at cross-cultural encounters," she writes, "fundamental difference, when it is staring at you across the table from within the close-up face of a fellow human being, always contains an element of violation."³⁰ The affirmation of otherness is easily entertained as an intellectual proposition, she remarks, while proving to be much more painful and arduous in practice: when one is struggling to make sense of the motions and flavors of a radically different mode of existence, engaging with a fellow human being who is clamoring to be understood. And how much more so when one is a stranger in a new country, thrown into a world governed by unfathomable rules and opaque conventions! "It is only within an intelligible human context," Hoffman continues, "that a face can become dear, a person known. Pattern is the soil of significance, and it is surely one of the hazards of emigration, and exile, and extreme mobility, that one is uprooted from that soil."³¹ Speaking back to an academic language that favors disruption and destabilization, Hoffman suggests that such terms have limited purchase in grappling with the everyday rhythms of life as it is lived and with a persisting desire for connection, attachment, and meaning. By putting *Lost in Translation* into dialogue with examples of transnational and postcolonial theory, we can arrive at a more capacious understanding of the allure as well as the limits of home, nation, and nostalgia.³²

Such an approach, no doubt, is in line with what many of us already strive for, whether in the classroom or our writing: balancing the claims of

literature and theory rather than measuring a literary work against a predetermined set of philosophical or political tenets. One difference, however, is that a Latourian approach does not draw its rationale from the ethos of critique—whether located in the wary and vigilant stance of the scholar or the subversive energies of the literary text. In a well-known essay, Latour contends that critique is running out of steam, that the academic practice of distancing ourselves from prevailing assumptions in order to interrogate their concealed agendas has become ubiquitous to the point of banality. Such a style of thinking, meanwhile, is increasingly appropriated by conservatives all too eager to show, for instance, that climate change is nothing but an ideological ruse. Rather than demystifying and debunking, Latour urges us toward another project of composing and caring for. “Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it? Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who *adds* reality to matters of fact and not *subtract* reality?”³³

Here Latour is talking about the politics of science and climate change, but caring for the reality of phenomena is a task that applies equally to works of art, fictional worlds, and imaginary beings. “Every sculpture, painting, haute cuisine dish, techno-rave and novel,” he writes in *Reassembling the Social*, “has been explained to nothingness by the social factors hidden behind them.” A Latourian perspective has no interest in drawing back the curtain to reveal hidden causalities that weaken or relativize the force of works of art. It is equally uninterested in a favored alternative: “saving” and justifying works of art by revealing how they deconstruct, transgress, or rupture prevailing ideologies, as if this were their main rationale and reason for being. Works of art are neither lackeys of the status quo nor heroes of the resistance.

Both of these lines of thought presume the emancipatory force of the negative, whether exercised by the critic or imputed to the stealthy guerilla tactics and disruptive energies of a favored poem, film, or painting. And here, they are in accordance with an influential strain of twentieth-century philosophy and aesthetic theory. This history is far from homogeneous, and negativity can take on various shadings of mood as well as different methods; the forceful or vehement condemnations of ideology critique have given way, in recent times, to a more ironic posture of troubling and problematizing.³⁴ What these stances share, however, is the conviction that critique is the only imaginable path: that to be noncritical is to be consigned to the shamefulness of the uncritical. It is only by carving out a distance from what is given that change becomes possible; it is only via acts of critique that we can achieve

genuine insight and acquire a modicum of agency. The negative, in this sense, is flipped into a positive.

In actor-network theory, by contrast, the stress lies on the making of ties rather than the breaking of ties. Attachment is a key concept, defined as an affective state; a social principle, and an ontological fact. That attachment is an affective state means that we cannot “not care” about certain phenomena, and that such preferences set the tone for our engagement in the world. That it is a social fact means that we no longer organize social analysis around oppositions of structure versus agency or text versus context, but instead trace out the coalescing of actors into constellations, networks, and groupings. And that it is an ontological reality means that our existence is only possible via our reliance on countless coactors. Left to our own devices, we would swiftly sink into the abyss of nonexistence; relations are not just modes of regulation but inescapable conditions of being. “We need no longer distinguish between the restrained and the liberated,” observes Latour, “but instead between the well and the poorly attached.”³⁵ It is not that a Latourian model does not allow for disjuncture, disagreement, or detachment—the opposite is true—but that such acts of disassociation themselves depend on prior ties or bonds. We detach from something because we are more attached to *something else*: even if only to an image of the intellectual as a lonely or embattled figure-in-exile.

A stress on negation thus gives way to an emphasis on relation—and an insistence that the range, variety, and unpredictability of these relations are often poorly understood by current critical theories. Like William James, Latour is a philosophical comparatist attentive to both conjunctions and disjunctions: neither organic unity nor radical instability, then, but articulations of similarities and differences through which ties are formed.³⁶ The strength and durability of these articulations varies; some institutions, cultural patterns, or constructions of fact spin strong webs of support or compliance and are sustained over time, while other fail to attract sufficient coactors and plummet from sight. These coactors, we should recall, include both human and nonhuman participants. Modern science, for example, is neither a distillation of pure truth from the dregs of superstition, nor an arbitrary linguistic schema imposed on an inert and mute world. Rather, it is composed of extended networks of animate and inanimate agents that include atoms, blood cells, sunlight, gravity, and lab equipment as well as textbooks, Stephen Hawkings biopics, and sexist hiring practices. What look like substances turn out to be swarming aggregates; things become real by amassing allies, expanding ties, and thereby sustaining their existence.³⁷ The point holds equally well whether we are thinking of the law of relativity, Shakespeare’s first folio, or theories of gender as performance.

The consequences of this reorientation are significant. Accounts of literature and art invariably presume some larger view of the world, even if they claim to be purely formalist. However different they may be in their language, assumptions, and politics, such frameworks as New Criticism, Marxist aesthetics (Adorno), and deconstruction share a belief in the singularity of the literary work, as distinct from the overbearing sameness of larger forces. The artwork rejects, refutes, resists, or withdraws from these forces, whether they are located in a tawdry mass culture, the means-end thinking of bourgeois ideology, or the fantasy of presence in Western metaphysics. Theories of art have thus been closely associated with an ethos of againstness.³⁸

Actor-network theory refuses both sides of this art–society opposition. On the one hand, “society” gives way to an emphasis on associations and assemblages, some relatively stable, others much more contingent or short-lived, whose empirical features and connections must be traced. We are no longer battling a leviathan of oppressive homogeneity and normative sameness. By the same token, the art work can no longer be hailed as a beacon of radical autonomy, shining singularity, or resplendent otherness. No less than British prime ministers, coke cans, or gerbils, art works are entangled with countless other actors that make their existence possible. Identity and nonidentity are thus equally immaterial, given that actors are neither unified and self-contained nor avatars of negativity, but gain their meaning and force via their relations.

ANT thus draws us away from a negative aesthetics (whether couched in a Marxist-Hegelian language of opposition or a poststructuralist idiom of subversion) to a relational ontology that traces ties between actors. *Why do literary works matter? Because they create, or co-create, powerful and enduring ties across space and time.* The nature of these ties (social imaginaries, affective bonds, visions of art, redescriptions of reality) and how they made (techniques of invention, borrowing, dissemination) become the loci of our attention. The emphasis is no longer on scission or rupture, but on *entanglement*, a term that has also been productively explored by Ian Hodder and Sarah Nuttall, among others.³⁹ Meanwhile, as we’ve seen, the range of objects we can describe extends well beyond the usual suspects in literary studies. Obviously the novel *Madame Bovary* is a pertinent actor for literary scholars, as are associated literary memes of “impassibilité” and Flaubertian style. But so too, is the fictional character, Emma Bovary, who has achieved a hectic afterlife beyond the boundaries of the novel that created her. (Latour’s recent work contains stimulating insights into the realness of characters and other fictional beings.)⁴⁰ Flaubert is a potentially relevant actor, as are the social and literary circles of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. But so too are contemporary

syllabi, amazon.com reviews, the light in a café that caused Flaubert's novel to resonate in a new way, my friend's melancholy on reading the final pages. It is no longer matter of looking only at *texts*; or of explaining those texts by invoking the box of historical–political *contexts*; but of tracing hybrid and heterogeneous constellations of texts, persons, and things. This openness to the kinds of actors that make literature matter is, in my view, one of the most exciting contributions of ANT to literary studies.

Perhaps a brief example from Latour's friend and colleague Antoine Hennion may help clarify the point. In contrast to Bourdieu, who invokes the "love of art" in order to demystify it, Hennion is sympathetic to lovers of art. But how does this love come about? "Loving music is not simply a matter of a particular piece; it passes through a multitude of mediators, beginning with the present (the sound of an instrument, the atmosphere of a hall, the grain of a record, the tone of a voice, the body of a musician) and in the duration of a history (scores, repertoires and styles, genres, and more or less stable forms), as well as for each individual—a past, works heard, moments lost, desires unfulfilled, roads travelled with others, and so on."⁴¹ Not all of these actors, of course, can be dealt with in a single analysis; but the onus is on the critic to justify what counts and what is relevant to the network she is tracing. (No one else can make this decision for her!) Meanwhile, the music is a crucial and dynamic coactor, not just an epiphenomenon of other forces; that it is Bach rather than Beethoven, or Motley Crue rather than Metallica, matters enormously to a music lover. Music "does something else than what the humans gathered around it would like it to do, something other than what they have programed. This is why they listen to it; it is not their double, nor the mirror of their vanity."⁴² By valuing the work of art, yet seeing this value as dynamically coproduced, ANT's language of mediation helps to breaks down the sterile dualisms that pit aesthetics against social theories of art.

So where does all this leave us? On the "ideas of the decade" page of the American Comparative Literature Association, Shaden M. Tageldin remarks, in a phrase that echoes the assumptions of other influential comparatists: "Impasse and imposture—if not sheer impossibility—haunt the dream of translatability."⁴³ Actor-network theory would retort that translatability is not just a dream, but a reality: an ongoing and inescapable basis of mediation and communication between actors. It is not translatability that is impossible, but only "perfect translatability" (Latour's "double click)—a dream that we would indeed do well to relinquish. But why make this the benchmark for thinking about translation? Why invoke an unachievable ideal in order to lament, again and again, the inevitable failings of language in use? The

result, as Eve Sedgwick remarks, is a self-confirming anticipation of grim news and the impossibility of ever being surprised.⁴⁴

Thanks to its empirical focus and its emphasis on the contingency and variability of associations, actor-network theory leaves ample room for surprise. Meanwhile, its stress on relation offers an alternative to an ethos of negation and the assumption that critique is the most rigorous and radical style of thought. Instead of a reflexive critique of comparison, ANT insists on the inescapability of comparison and the need to weigh up its differing uses; instead of railing against translation, we are required to consider the and trade-offs of particular translations. And rather than stressing detachment, ANT insists on the inescapability of our attachments. (See, e.g., Hiro Saito's questioning of any notion of cosmopolitanism as a "lonely exile" and his counterclaim that cosmopolitanism is a matter of multiplying attachments to foreign humans and nonhumans.)⁴⁵ At the level of both method and mood, ANT thus offers a rather different approach to the critical frameworks that have dominated comparative literature in recent decades. It remains to be seen whether these intellectual strangers can become partners, whether—as I would like to hope—alliances will be established and networks will be created.

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Notes

1. Here, I am in firm agreement with Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Why Not Compare?," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Methods*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

2. See also the illuminating essay by Helene Buzelin, "Unexpected Allies: How Latour's Network Theory Could Complement Bourdieusian Analyses," *The Translator* 11, no. 2 (2005): 193–218. Buzelin's title is a tad misleading insofar as her essay shows how a Latourian line of thinking challenges the functionalism of Bourdieu's method. I am grateful to Marie-Alice Bell for bringing this essay to my attention after my own was completed. See also Wolfgang Schmidgen's helpful essay, "The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 11 (1995): 371–404, though Schmidgen does not reference ANT.

3. Bruno Latour, "On Recalling Ant," in *Actor Network Theory and After*, ed. John Law and John Hassard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 24.

4. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 131.

6.

7. Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 737–42.

8. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

9. Pascale Casanova, "What Is a Dominant Language? Giacomo Leopardi: Theoretician of Linguistic Inequality," *New Literary History* 44, no. 3 (2013): 379.

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10. *Ibid.*, 380.
11. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013), 4.
12. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 181.
13. John Law, "Traduction/Trahsion: Notes on ANT," published by the Department of Sociology Lancaster University at <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk>.
14. "Translation Database." *Three Percent*, <http://www.rochester.edu>. I am grateful to Aron Aji for this reference.
15. Andre Lefevere, "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature," *Modern Language Studies* 12, no. 4 (Autumn, 1982): 3–20.
16. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, "Introduction," in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Lionnet and Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
17. See also Walter Mignolo's brief reference to relational ontologies in "On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?" in Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*; Natalie Melas' discussion of Glissant on relationality in "Merely Comparative," *PMLA* 128, no. 3 (2013): 652–59; and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's references to relationality in "Transnationalizing Comparison: The Uses and Abuses of Cross-Cultural Comparison," in Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*. In some cases, however, these authors link discussions of relationality to invocations of a "single system of power"—which does not, of course, square with a Latourian or actor-network theory approach.
18. Shu Mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*, 96.
19. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Homi K. Bhabha, "Race, Time, and the Revision of Modernity," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004); Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a survey of a broader range of objections to comparison, see Friedman, "Why Not Compare?"
20. R. Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?," in Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*, 14.
21. Friedman, "Why Not Compare?," 38.
22. Eric Hayot, "Against Periodization: Or, On Institutional Time," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 739–56.
23. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (1997): 1060–71.
24. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
25. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 573–91. See also the discussion of shock and "afterwardness" in *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
26. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 146.
27. Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature," in Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*.
28. Isabelle Stengers, "Comparison as a Matter of Concern," *Common Knowledge* 17, no. 1 (2011): 63.
29. Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 4.
30. *Ibid.*, 209–10.
31. *Ibid.*, 278.
32. I do not mean to imply that less negative attitudes to home can only be found in works of fiction and not in theory. See, for example, Laura Bieger, "No Place Like Home: Or Dwelling in Narrative," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 17–39.
33. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2005): 232.
34. See my discussion of this shift in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), chapter 2.
35. Bruno Latour, "Factures/Fractures: From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment," *Res* 36 (1999): 23.
36. Kyle McGee, *The Normativity of Networks* (London: Routledge, 2015), 87.

37. Graham Harman, "The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy," *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2007): 41.
38. Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 129.
39. Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relations Between People and Things* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012); Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).
40. See Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), and the essays by Yves Citton and Patrice Manigler in the *New Literary History* special issue, "Recomposing the Humanities with Bruno Latour," forthcoming.
41. Antoine Hennion, "Pragmatics of Taste," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, ed. Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (Oxford: Blackwell's, 2005), 140.
42. Antoine Hennion, "From ANT to Pragmatism: A Journey with Bruno Latour at the CSI," *New Literary History*, special issue on "Recomposing the Humanities with Bruno Latour," forthcoming. In this essay, Hennion distinguishes his own use of "mediation" from ANT's use of "translation" in the context of science studies, while also underscoring their common concerns.
43. "Untranslatability," *State of the Discipline Report*, American Comparative Literature Association, <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org>.
44. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 130–31.
45. Hiro Saito, "An Actor-Network Theory of Cosmopolitanism," *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 2 (2011): 124–49.