

## Contrapuntal Comparison<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature has meant that non-European literary texts have been studied through either vague universalism or imperialist exoticism. What can correct, or complement, such orientalist knowledge is contrapuntal reading with local knowledge, to tackle cultural difference not as an anomaly but a fact to be analytically accommodated. Engaging previous theoretical work in literary studies and anthropology that have struggled with the Eurocentric foundations of scholarly disciplines, this paper presents a sample of contrapuntal reading by examining the 1976 English translation of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*, rendered by Leonard Nathan, in the light of the 9th-century scholar Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka* and the extended commentary written by his follower Abhinavagupta. This comparative sample clarifies how contrapuntal reading with local knowledge can balance Eurocentric and orientalist readings of non-Western literary traditions.

**Keywords:** contrapuntal reading, orientalism, Kālidāsa, *Meghadūta*, Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, Eurocentrism

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For much of its history, Comparative Literature was fundamentally a Western European area study, discussing writers within a common tradition, and comparability was not often seen as inherently problematic. Often there would be concrete *rappports de fait* linking the figures to be compared, or else writers who did not directly know each other's work could be compared and contrasted on the basis of a common cultural or theoretical matrix, whether Romanticism or Petrarchism or "the novel," itself defined in largely if not entirely European terms. With the development of East/West studies in the 1970s, the question of comparison became newly problematic, and since then, the need for viable theoretical frameworks has only increased, with the discipline's expansion to a much broader engagement with the world's literatures.

The variety of the world's past and present literary cultures poses enormous problems for any given literary-historical or theoretical framework. Almost all literary genres have been developed in a particular historical and cultural context, and when theorists have developed their ideas in close relation to literature, they have usually built on quite specific literary archives, whether the premodern English and Japanese poetry that Earl Miner used for his comparative poetics in the 1970s or the British Romantic writers so important to Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom before him. How should

we make use of such time-bound and culture-specific theories, even to look at later British or Japanese literature? Can we legitimately use them at all when we look farther afield, whether to the Americas or to Africa or to Oceania? The comparatists' longstanding import-export trade in literary theory may heighten rather than alleviate the problem of studying foreign literatures. If theories developed in Paris or Frankfurt are applied by Chinese or American scholars to Brazilian novels or Sanskrit poetry, how much will be distorted or lost altogether in such a triangular trade?

It has sometimes been argued by theorists themselves that it is a mistake to employ a theory beyond its home context. Jonathan Culler has remarked that the intertextual nature of meaning "makes literary study essentially, fundamentally comparative, but it also produces a situation in which comparability depends upon a cultural system, a general field that underwrites comparisons." He cautions that "the more sophisticated one's understanding of discourse, the harder it is to compare Western and non-Western texts" (268). Certainly, theory can be poorly or mechanically applied to new materials, but without some theoretical basis of analysis and connection, we are likely to be left with disjointed traditions or even micro-traditions, divided by nation, period, genre, gender, and class.

The challenges multiply when we seek to study works beyond the cultural sphere(s) of our upbringing and our institutional formation. How do we read a radically foreign text, without projecting onto it our literary preconceptions and our established theoretical frameworks? Local knowledge provides an essential check against the twin dangers of vague universalism and imperialist exoticism, but as comparatists we often reach beyond the boundaries of our home country and our native language or languages. However fully we draw on the work of lifelong specialists, we bring with us perspectives that are inevitably foreign, in some significant degree, to the works we are studying. Even the specialized studies we learn from are hardly repositories of unmediated local knowledge. Whether they are based in São Paulo or Nairobi, Beijing or Karachi, scholars of Kenyan fiction or Urdu poetry rarely read their materials without some critical or theoretical framework of their own, often one that has largely been developed in Europe or North America and on the basis of a very different literary archive.

The problem is particularly acute when we deal with premodern literature. For all of us today, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Appropriately for the theme of cultural transmission, academic readers have most likely encountered this line at the start of Salman Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands" rather than in its source, as the opening sentence of Leslie Poles Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*. Hartley set his novel in England in 1900; if just half a century had turned his own country into a foreign land, how much greater is the distance when we look centuries farther back? We can hardly erase all knowledge of the modernity in which we have grown up and been trained, despite our best efforts to recover the work's premodern values, and today's dominant theoretical discourses are of modern or even contemporary origin, based primarily on literature of the last two hundred years. How successfully can we employ a theory formulated by Derrida in Paris, or even by Partha Chatterjee in Calcutta—following his PhD studies in upstate New York—to analyze a poem composed in China or India a millennium or more ago? The problems of translation, circulation, and reception increase when a theory travels not just from Paris to the United States but out into very different cultural spheres.

At the same time, new kinds of material, and different material circumstances, provide exceptional opportunities to refine and revitalize a theory, testing its propositions and moving beyond its limits.

Inspired by East/West comparisons and by postcolonial studies, the opening of theory to the world beyond the West has now been under way for several decades, but it is still an incomplete project, not least because “theory” remains a discourse of largely European and North American provenance. A canon—or hypercanon—of theoretical books and essays by theorists based in Western Europe or North America circulates widely around the world, even among critics who reject the canonicity of “Great Books” in literature itself. As Revathi Krishnaswamy has argued, politically engaged comparatists have often been highly skeptical of “grand sweeping metanarratives theorizing literary productions across the (third) world,” such as those advanced in the United States by Jameson and Moretti. “But few, even among the skeptics, have called for redefining theory itself as a way out of comparative literature’s Eurocentrism. The result is what we have today: world lit without world lit crit” (400). She argues that the hegemony of Euro-American theory will only be broken when comparatists begin to attend seriously to a wider range of theoretical discourses elsewhere, and she gives the example of Tamil as a language with a long tradition of poetics that has been neglected within India itself as well as abroad.

In opening up comparison to a wider range of materials, comparatists need to attend to the critical difference of texts from outside the modern Euro-American world. Too often, the metropolitan critic finds in non-Western material a confirmation of the already known, whether the Orientalist tropes of the timeless East often seen in early comparative studies, or more recently the national allegories that Fredric Jameson found everywhere he looked in the Third World, or the critiques of neoliberalism that are often discovered today in global fiction by Western critics of neoliberalism. A tendency of this kind can be seen even in Krishnaswamy’s essay. She makes a strong case for the importance of studying bhakti poetry and poetics as an alternative to the elite Sanskrit tradition: “Composed by cobblers, weavers, cowherds, shepherds, untouchables, and women (among others), *bhakti* poetry drew on the oral traditions of folksong and epigram to articulate an incandescent iconoclastic vision of spiritual liberation” (410). Yet when she gives the example of the 12th-century woman poet Mahadeviakka, she emphasizes only elements that closely track the interests of modern secular feminism. Mahadeviakka, she says, “repeatedly complains of the restrictions placed on women both by the stifling demands of parents, husbands, and in-laws and by the fierce opposition from pundits and priests.” The Sanskrit tradition’s “conventional structure of love—longing, separation, and union between devotee and divine . . . becomes, in effect, nothing more than a flimsy veil for a more subversive message about social transgression and spiritual transformation” (411). The critical difference of *bhakti* poetry from Sanskrit tradition is almost too clear, but it doesn’t look so different after all from contemporary Western concerns.

Krishnaswamy observes that our ability to learn from alternative theoretical traditions is hampered by the long hand of old colonial preferences and repressions. Her example is the British Orientalists’ emphasis on India’s classical Sanskrit tradition, which they exalted at the expense of longstanding and still living traditions such as Tamil poetics. Their emphasis suited their vision of premodern Asia as the repository of timeless wisdom, leaving the modern cultures free for colonial control. As Krishnaswamy says, after Independence many Indian nationalists adopted a similar stance, bolstering a unitary India by privileging Sanskrit plus Hindi over India’s twenty other literary languages and the much larger range of local and Dalit traditions. Her argument here dovetails well with Frantz Fanon’s dissection in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the ways African elites carried on old colonial patterns long

after independence—a good example of the fruitful possibilities that are opening up for interactions among theoretical perspectives developed far from Paris and New Haven.

### Comparing the Incomparable

Since the turn of the millennium, comparatists have renewed their efforts to maintain their balance as they walk the tightrope of cross-cultural comparison. A particularly suggestive exploration of the problem is a methodological essay by the Belgian classicist Marcel Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable (Comparing the Incomparable)*. Detienne discusses the work of a group of anthropologists and historians that he formed at Johns Hopkins during the 1990s, dedicated to exploring aspects of ancient civilizations around the world. In his second chapter, “Constructing Comparables,” Detienne argues that instead of comparing only neighboring societies with close connections, comparatists should look farther afield. Rather than seeking parity or likenesses, the root meaning of terms such as “compare” and “Vergleich,” he proposes using a “contrastive approach” with which “one can discover cognitive dissonances; or, to put that more simply, one may bring out some detail or feature that had escaped the notice of other interpreters and observers” (*Comparing* 23).

A key moment for Detienne in developing his contrastive approach came when his working group began exploring foundational places and myths in several widely disparate cultures, looking at ways in which founding figures and sites have been used to establish a territory. For this purpose, he brought together a group of classicists and anthropologists working on early cultures of Africa, Japan, and the Americas as well as the Mediterranean world. The project got off to a good start, but then a problem was raised from the Japan side of the group:

It seemed easy enough to slip from “hard-edged” founding, complete with a founder, into a study of a whole series of journeys, processes, and ritual gestures that were involved in territorialization quite apart from or even before the actual act of founding. But we experienced a salutary heuristic shock when we discovered what appeared to be an instance of incomparability. One day, two Japanese specialists who had long remained silent as we fumbled our way forward, came to confess, to their chagrin, that, according to the most ancient texts, in Japan there simply was no founding, no founder. (25-26)

Detienne was surprised by the Japanologists’ regretful observation, but rather than inviting them to leave the group, “I thanked them warmly and told them that now we could at last begin to think about what ‘to found, to establish everlastingly’ really meant. Thanks to the provocation caused by that incomparability, a familiar category such as ‘founding’ was about to become cloudy, to fracture and disintegrate” (26). Detienne says that this experience led his group to practice a “plural comparativism” that could dispel “the misleading transparency of ‘founding,’” allowing them to undertake “a conceptual analysis of what ‘creating a territory’ might mean as it moves from one society to another” (27).

Detienne sees plural comparativism as an ethical as well as an intellectual ideal, the best means to avoid subsuming historical and cultural variety under the common sign of a universalism based on our own values projected outward. Detienne’s working group embodied his strategy for rooting out deeply

held prejudices. Rather than trying to create an *Annales*-style “school,” he chose people of differing backgrounds and perspectives, and they worked intensively together to gradually become a collective “nous-je.” His translator renders this neologism as “a we/I” (*Comparing* 27), capturing the pronouns but losing the underlying pun on Greek *voûç* (“mind”). It is not enough for the historian to excavate the collective *mentalités* of medieval peasants; the scholar’s own mentality needs to be reconfigured as well. Every comparatist “must be at once singular and plural,” but scholars cannot achieve this state on their own. “For ‘a’ comparatist to become plural, it is necessary to form a microgroup of ethnologists and historians who are colleagues or even accomplices and who are prepared to think aloud, together” (24).

Detienne returned to the attack on nationalistic scholarship in a considerably expanded second edition of his book (published in 2009, not yet translated), for which he added three chapters that dissect the efforts of French classicists and anthropologists in upholding the myth of an “incomparable” French nation somehow born in an equally exceptional ancient Greece. He ends with a section entitled “Au-delà du Vatican et de ses Champs élyséens: Retour sur l’art de construire des comparables” (“Beyond Vatican and its Champs Elysées: Return to the art of building comparables”; *Comparer* 169-173; translation added). There he acerbically discusses a meeting in September 2008 between Pope Benedict XVI and Nicholas Sarkozy, whom he refers to not by name but as France’s Pontifex Maximus. In their meeting at the presidential palace—the Palais de l’Élysée, which has become an earthly paradise for the visiting Pope—the two leaders agreed on the intimate connection between France and Catholicism, born in the marriage of classical Greek thought with Greco-Roman Christianity. Detienne closes his book with a plea for a comparativism of “dissonance” that can enable scholars to dispel such myths of origin and “to place themselves in perspective” in the process. Though he admits that “no comparative anthropology can be a panacea,” Detienne affirms that “a comparatism of an experimental and constructive type can contribute effectively to placing us at a distance from ourselves” (173).

Detienne’s formulation is appealing, but just how much distance can we actually achieve from ourselves? More particularly, does even an émigré scholar ever fully leave home? After years of teaching at Hopkins, Detienne himself had not entirely escaped the gravitational pull of his home country and his intellectual formation there. His description of his scholarly ideal sounds a good deal like what he would have imbibed in the 1960s in the overlapping circle of Parisian classicists and structural anthropologists, including Jean-Pierre Vernant, Nicole Loraux, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In advancing a worldly cosmopolitanism, he champions a kind of global nomadism, scouring the world for illuminating patterns of difference: “A comparatist seeking to construct his subjects must be able to move, without a passport,” he says, “always carrying with him or her a little bunch of questions, as if to sweep over as extensive as possible a field of investigation that is as yet without limits” (*Comparing* 24, 27). For all Detienne’s differences from his former associates, this formulation has clear affinities with the “nomadic science” that Deleuze and Guattari advanced in *Mille plateaux*, and it echoes Lévi-Strauss’s ironic description of his scholarly method: “I have a neolithic kind of intelligence. Like native bush fires, it sometimes sets unexplored areas alight; it may fertilize them and snatch a few crops from them, and then it moves on, leaving scorched earth in its wake” (53). You can take the nomad out of Paris, it seems, but you cannot necessarily take Paris out of the nomad.

## Comparison without Hegemony

A steady stream of books and articles has been devoted to this problem during the past decade. A valuable collection is Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman's *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, which begins with an opening salvo by Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?" Building on his *Theory in an Uneven World*, Radhakrishnan describes comparison as inevitably hierarchical. He posits that one of the terms of comparison always tends to dominate the other, and "in enabling a new form of recognition along one axis, perpetuates dire misrecognition along another" (19). This essay is followed by Friedman's pointed rejoinder, "Why Not Compare?" After listing arguments by Radhakrishnan and others against comparison, she observes: "We compare because if we do not, there are worse consequences than the political, decontextualizing problems of comparison. What are the ethics of not comparing? To refuse comparison is also a political act, one that can potentially reinstate hierarchies by not challenging them" (36). In his contribution to the volume, Haun Saussy returns to the problem of hegemonic comparatism: "We, like many anthropologists, are sharply aware of hypocritical universalism. The abhorrence we feel toward it makes us suspicious of the whole comparative enterprise." Quoting Radhakrishnan's assertion that comparison "perpetuates dire misrecognition," Saussy asks, "would it not be better to insist that comparison does its job poorly when it reduces too effectively, when it discards too much of the prior context that gave a work its meaning in the first place?" (67-68).

A running debate in these years has been the question of how broadly a comparison can extend. Radhakrishnan favors a localized comparatism grounded in a single national or imperial history, while Saussy, who works both in Chinese and European literatures, argues that postcolonialists cannot avoid "the demon of comparison" merely by limiting themselves to a single imperial matrix. He adds that cross-cultural comparison is more than ever needed when so many problems and possibilities extend far beyond the frame of the nation: "clinging to the nation as our unit of thought will not help in the task" (73).

For his part, Saussy draws the line at world literature. He says that "the discussion about 'world literature' has been one of the channels for exploring the issue—or, to put it less blandly, one of the subfields that perpetuate the problem" (69). In another contribution to the volume, however, Zhang Longxi defends world literary studies by advancing a version of Saussy's own response to Radhakrishnan. In his essay, as in his book *From Comparison to World Literature*, Zhang argues that it is when a comparison is done badly, whether within a region or across world cultures, that local context evaporates and that European values are introduced in the guise of universals ("Crossroads" 46-63). Zhang is not opposed to the idea of universals, in fact, but draws equally on Chinese and on Western traditions to underscore commonalities that can counter the stark confrontations of "East" versus "West" that he had critiqued two decades earlier in his *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*.

In a probing article entitled "Comparison without Hegemony," the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock has made a case for "capturing similarities and differences across a limited number of instances in order to understand the cases under discussion, to isolate from the incidental what is 'crucial' and possibly, though less likely, what is 'causal'" (191). His concern is with the danger expressed by Radhakrishnan and other postcolonialists that the cases discussed by the comparatist will rarely exist on the same

plane. Pollock observes that such disparities come about not just as a result of differences in cultural power or imperial histories but because our research tends to move outward from the better known to the less known. As Pollock says:

Under ideal circumstances of self-awareness the process here can be treated simply as a variant of the hermeneutic circle: B takes on its particular meaning only in the context of ABCD, but that context itself only becomes meaningful if we already know what A, B, C, D individually and somehow independently mean. Like the hermeneutic circle, the comparative circle can be a virtuous one, as I will suggest. Having identified B as an empire (or “empire”) through generalization from A, we may then correct our generalization by probing differences between B and A. (198)

Too often, though, “the ideal circumstances are not met and the virtuous circle becomes a vicious one when a particular is elevated into a ‘standard’” (198). Pollock gives the example of Hegel’s skewed discussion of Sanskrit epic on the basis of norms derived from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which Hegel saw as exemplifying “the true fundamental character of the epic proper” (200). Pollock advocates a constant awareness that “no given model of intellection can be held to be universal. Observing this limit . . . is critical if comparativism is to be saved from itself” (190). He concludes that “if comparison is necessary, the will to domination that sometimes seems built into the comparative method is certainly not” (202).

In a subsequent essay, “Conundrums of Comparison,” Pollock goes beyond advocating self-awareness. He proposes practicing a non-hegemonic comparison through what he dubs “methodological cosmopolitanism,” a multiple perspective that could set aside European terms altogether when comparing such forms as Indian *itihada* and Chinese *shi* (282). At a far remove from the search for similarities, such “differential comparison” involves

new modes of mutual estrangement, so to call it, made possible by off-center comparison. This is something that emerges from the reciprocal illumination of objects of analysis that can now be seen to be equally different, and neither deficient nor deviant; and, more important, often radically different the one from the other. Comparison unencumbered by delusions about the essential nature of things (what an epic or history or a nation really is) allows you to better capture the particularity, and peculiarity, of a given case. Better put: the true specificity of any given case emerges only against the backdrop of some other. (286)

An extended treatment of the epistemological problem of cross-cultural comparison has been provided by Ming Xie in *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry*. Xie argues that comparativists should frame their comparisons within a second-order reflexivity: “*comparison* in the traditional sense is usually interested in the practical results of its operations—that is, similarities or differences as such—whereas *comparativity* or the *activity* of comparing or thinking about how (not) to compare is more concerned with *how meaning is constituted*” (38-39). He uses “comparativists” not as a synonym for “comparatists,” as is commonly done, but to designate intensely self-aware inquirers whose comparisons can reveal “the unthought” in their own episteme as well as

what has not been seen within the foreign culture's self-understanding.

For Xie, “the unthought is akin to the untranslatable, in the sense that the untranslatable does not just signify the ‘failure’ of translating from one language to another. Rather, it signifies the untranslatable as the ontological condition of translation and knowledge” (44). Citing Kenneth Burke’s “perspective by incongruity,” Xie argues that “comparativity as an epistemological activity has far-reaching political and ethical implications as a mode of critical inquiry. Critical comparativity is not just about comparing existing ways of thinking but also, more important, comparing *against* them” (49). In the process, we can come to perceive the relativism of our own cherished relativisms, and we can arrive at “what may be called a *relativist universalism*—that is, a universalism that sees itself as contingent and contestable” (127).

Such relativistic self-awareness does not require abandoning our existing conceptual vocabulary, a quest that would be doomed to failure even if it were desirable. A change of terms will not necessarily create a meaningful change in literary studies, any more than when President Jimmy Carter chastised his inflation czar Alfred Kahn for warning that high inflation could lead to a new “depression.” Kahn temporarily solved the problem by substituting “banana” for the forbidden term, but objections were soon raised by banana producers, leading Kahn to replace the euphemistic banana with “kumquat.” A concept by any other name may taste as bittersweet.

### Reading Kālidāsa, Contrapuntally

A cross-cultural comparison can be performed on a single text, when we read a work in light of two different cultures' norms or theories. Even when we proceed from an initial basis in our existing frame of reference, it should be possible to develop a non-hegemonic mode of comparison by reading contrapuntally, to adapt Edward Said's term (xxv), not simply imposing our accustomed frame of reference but also not surrendering our perspective outright. A fully contrapuntal reading will go beyond a demonstration that, say, a Lacanian perspective on *The Story of the Stone* has revealed its long-hidden meaning or, conversely, the assertion that a foreign theoretical perspective inevitably distorts the true meaning that can only be understood in terms of Qing Dynasty poetics.

My test case for pursuing this question will be Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*, written sometime around 400 CE. One of the first Asian writers to be widely appreciated in Europe, Kālidāsa was a key figure in the South Asian contribution to the early development of both comparative and world literature. The pioneering Orientalist Sir William Jones translated his play *Shakuntala* in 1790, and several major narrative poems are also attributed to Kālidāsa. Prominent among them is the *Meghadūta* or “Cloud Messenger,” which takes distant communication as its theme. The poem is built around the separation of a Yaksha, a minor heavenly figure, from his beloved; the Yaksha has been banished for months from the Himalayan court of Kubera, god of wealth, and is languishing far to the south. Desperate to send a message to his beloved, he implores a cloud to travel across India, find her, and assure her of his undying devotion. The Yaksha then spends most of the poem's hundred and eleven stanzas sketching out the route the cloud must take, presenting a gorgeous panorama of a sensually charged landscape, before he finally pictures the cloud's meeting with his beloved.

The *Meghadūta* deals with universal themes of love and longing, but from the time of its first translation into English in 1814 by Horace Hayman Wilson, a disciple of Jones in Calcutta, Western

scholars have recognized the importance of local knowledge, given Kālidāsa's blizzard of references to place names, divinities, plants, birds, and epic traditions. Equally valuable are local theories of poetry. Starting with Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* ("Rules for Representation") two millennia ago, a host of Sanskrit poets and intellectuals discussed issues of poetics and poetic language, as noted in Chapter 4. Yet in 1814 Wilson had to rely on classical and neoclassical conceptions of poetry in framing his translation, as Western scholars had barely begun to gain access to Sanskrit poetics. It is possible today to approach the *Meghadūta* by counterpointing classical Sanskrit and modern Western theoretical perspectives, gaining a fuller understanding of Kālidāsa's poem than we can achieve from either vantage point alone.

In 1976 the American poet and translator Leonard Nathan published an eloquent translation of the *Meghadūta* under the punning title *The Transport of Love*. Nathan makes a sustained effort to stay close to the sense of the Sanskrit original, which is even printed on facing pages next to the translation. Both in his substantial introduction and in his detailed endnotes, Nathan offers a wealth of historical and cultural information, doing his best to bridge the gaps between Asia and America and between antiquity and the present. He also allows the text to preserve a measure of the untranslatable, retaining dozens of foreign terms, with a glossary at the end of the volume. Even so—in a pattern that would not have surprised Said in the least—Nathan gives his translation a simplistic and Eurocentric interpretive framing. Despite his extensive cultural references, he often reads Kālidāsa through the eye of an American New Critic, while he assimilates Kālidāsa philosophically to his counterparts in the ancient Mediterranean world, in a more sophisticated version of what Horace Wilson was already doing in comparing Kālidāsa to Ovid and Horace ("the elegant FLACCUS," as Wilson calls him; 145). Nathan's Neo-Platonist emphasis emerges early in his introduction, just when he claims to be showing Kālidāsa's stark difference from Western assumptions: "Behind Indian poetic expectation and the poems addressed to it were two major assumptions that we do not share. First, that reality was not to be sought through personal sensory apprehension of our changing empirical world, but beyond it to one that is permanent and ideal. . . . Poems, then, were a way of experiencing the reality beyond appearance" (3). India is not like the West, which "has largely treated the phenomenal world as a real one, no matter what lay beyond it" (4).

Instead of physical reality, according to Nathan, what Kālidāsa's poem conveys is a changeless social and religious world, virtually the timeless East that Sir Richard Burton would readily have recognized. Within this timeless order, Nathan invites us to relish the harmonies of "the ideal world, whose beauties are interchangeable or related through a profound correspondence of great to small, high to low, supernatural to natural" (9). In his commentary Nathan develops a New Critical reading of the poem as a balanced structure of ironies, with each image contributing to a well-wrought whole, elegantly playful and socially ordered. Though the opening stanzas describe the Yaksha as desolate, impotent, aching for love, shaken, and heart-broken, we are not to take his intense unhappiness too seriously, as he isn't a real character in any Western sense. In Nathan's reading, the Yaksha is an excuse for erotic reverie rather than a suffering individual. Instead, it is the most abstract entity in the poem, the cloud itself, that is the poem's true hero: "if there is any real character in the *Meghadūta*, it is the cloud, who, through the Yaksha's erotic imaginings, becomes a sort of magnetic center for the complex associations of all things in the world" (7-8).

The powers of love and of language join together in the message that the Yaksha dictates to the

cloud starting in Stanza 99, which Nathan calls “the tonal climax of the poem.” The Yaksha’s message expresses the classic Sanskrit trope of love in separation, a union that survives absence and is even intensified by it. “You should say this to her,” the Yaksha declares:

He, far off, a hostile fate blocking  
 his way, by mere wish joins his body  
 with your body, his thinness with your thinness,  
 his pain with your intense pain, his tears  
 with your tears, his endless longing  
 with your longing, his deep sigh with your sigh. (81)

Nathan’s framing prepares us well for this stanza but accounts less well for the rest of the message, which goes on to stress the *failure* of metaphor to embody a satisfying correspondence. Now the image of a cloud suggests loss of vision:

With red rock I’ve drawn you on a stone slab,  
 feigning anger, but however much I want  
 to portray myself fallen at your feet,  
 my eyes are clouded with tears that  
 well up over and over. So hard is this fate  
 that won’t permit even our pictured union. (83)

Throughout the *Meghadūta*, moments of order and harmony are disrupted by images of radical instability and uncertainty. While the poem often evokes the joys of love and fulfillment, it speaks as much about anguish, violence, and emptiness. At the very beginning, the Yaksha’s nebulous messenger is introduced not as a “magnetic center” of meaning and communication but as a figure of transience and of incomprehension:

What does a cloud—a mix of vapor,  
 flame, water, and wind—have to do with messages  
 made to be sent by beings fit to bear them?  
 But still the Yaksha implored it. Those  
 sick with desire can no longer tell  
 what will answer and what is dumb. (19)

In this stanza, the cloud sounds less like a Platonic Form than like a floating signifier.

A reader of Derrida will find many passages that seem tailor-made to illustrate deconstructive themes of the deferral and self-cancellation of meaning. Far from directly conveying the Yaksha’s “correspondence” to (and with) his beloved, the cloud’s journey becomes an experience of endless deferral:

I foresee, friend, that though you want to hurry

my message, there will be pause after pause  
 on each peak that blossoms with fragrant kakubhas,  
 and though peacocks, eyes moist with gladness,  
 make you welcome, their cries risen to meet you, I pray  
 you somehow find the will to move quickly on. (Nathan 31)

Here the Yaksha envisions a tantalizing double deferral: the cloud will continually pause on the fragrant peaks, only to deny the peacocks' satisfaction by moving on to the next peak, where it will once again pause, postponing the delivery of the ever-more-deferred message. This is a letter carrier's *différance* a millennium and a half before Derrida sent *La Carte Postale* to his publisher.

The cloud passes over a landscape charged with violence. In one stanza, the Yaksha tells the cloud to "offer yourself / to Shiva for the elephant's bloody hide / He wears in his dance" (39). Such moments are typically discounted in Nathan's balanced, harmonious reading. In Stanza 48, for instance, the cloud passes the field of the Kurus, "renowned as the battleground where Arjuna / showered his sharp arrows on princely chests, / as you pour jets of water on the lotus" (47). In his notes, Nathan discusses this evocation of epic violence only to deny that it signifies violence at all:

Kālidāsa's ability to bring everything into the complex of relations that make up the poem is tested severely in 48, when the cloud crosses the field of the Kurus; this is the battleground on which, in the epic *Mahābhārata*, vast armies slaughtered each other, leaving only a few heroes alive. So massive is the lore suggested by this allusion to the great epic and so well-known to his audience, that, had the poet brought it too far forward, he could have upset the poise of the established tone, which is not heroic. In fact, the heroic here, embodied in the deeds of Arjuna, the greatest warrior in the epic, is kept in the background, serving merely as a comparison for the impact of the cloud's downpour on vulnerable lotus blossoms. (100)

Possibly this scene of apocalyptic violence serves only to establish a delicate metaphor, yet it may be Nathan's insistence on harmonious poise, rather than Kālidāsa's poetic ability, that is being "severely tested here."

The social and the personal come together in the poem's conclusion, in which the cloud is supposed to reassure the beloved that the Yaksha is well and is pining away for her. The Yaksha tells the cloud to demonstrate his good faith as a messenger by citing a private story from the lovers' past. This is well and good, and yet the Yaksha chooses an odd anecdote for the proof:

And tell her I said this: "once  
 in bed, though clinging in sleep to my neck,  
 for some reason you woke crying aloud,  
 and when I asked why again and again, answered  
 with an inward smile: *You cheat, I saw you  
 playing with another woman in my sleep!*" (87)

Is infidelity really a good theme to bring to the distant beloved's mind? This anecdote threatens to

cancel itself out, as de Man might say, producing precisely the anxiety that the message is supposed to allay. Here again, Nathan's harmonious interpretation is severely tested, but he rises to the challenge: "the Yaksha adds a token of authenticity to the message by reminding his mate of an incident only the two could know. With superb tact he chooses a humorous one that might help in cheering her up" (110). Superb *tact*?

Having undercut his stance of fidelity in his very profession of faithfulness, the Yaksha reveals that the cloud may not actually be inclined to deliver this ambiguous message at all:

I trust, friend, that you'll do this for me  
and am certain your grave look does not  
forebode refusal. You silently grant  
the chātakas the rain they crave.  
For the answer of good men to those  
who ask their help is simply to do what's desired. (89)

Nathan has provided us a wealth of contextual information, but his undertheorized reading is far from theory-free, as he has given a Sanskritized inflection to the New Critical principles in which he had been trained. All in all, it is hard to feel that Nathan has really accounted for the poem's uncanny power, and an infusion of deconstructive insights can help us attend to important elements that escape Nathan's reading. Yet we should be wary of claiming that a naïve New Critical perspective has now been superseded by a rigorous deconstructive perspective, revealing Kālidāsa's secret preference (hidden in plain sight) for violence over order, infidelity over devotion, and deferral over consummation. If Derrida rushes in where Wimsatt would fear to tread, the result may be an anachronistically alienated reading.

For a more grounded understanding of the *Meghadūta*, we can draw on a classic work of Sanskrit poetic theory, the *Dhvanyaloka* ("Light on suggestion") of the 9th-century scholar Anandavardhana, which is folded within an extended commentary, the *Locana*, by his follower Abhinavagupta. This dual work several times draws examples from Kālidāsa, and it gives a wealth of insight into how Sanskrit poetry was being read a thousand years ago. What emerges from almost every page of the treatise is how intensely *social* this poetry was seen to be. Rarely do Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta suggest that the lyrics they discuss show a solitary individual, speaking in soliloquy to an absent lover or to no one at all. Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta envision a crowded social landscape when they interpret poems, and their overriding interest is in the speaker's ethical engagement with the surrounding social world, very much in keeping with the tale of the invention of poetry in the *Ramayana* discussed very much in keeping with the tale of the invention of poetry in the *Ramayana* (discussed in Damrosch 122-164).

Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta's eminently social poetics, derived from a thousand years of Sanskrit tradition, can enable us to consider the *Meghadūta* in a very different light from what we would expect in a Western poem. The Yaksha and his beloved are joined in their separation by the continuous chain of people and other beings whom the cloud will encounter on its way, and we as readers can identify with these intermediary figures as much as with the lovers at the two ends of the signifying chain. As the cloud sets out,

Women whose men travel far roads will look up,  
brushing hair from their eyes to see you crossing  
the sky, their hearts lifted remembering what  
you bring. (Nathan 21)

Memory is a crucial term here, according well with Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta's poetics. Their immensely influential theory of *rasadhvani* or "relished suggestion" explains, among other things, how audiences can enjoy representations of painful events without becoming overwhelmed by them. When the poem's speaker suffers grief at loss or separation, this grief will stimulate memories of similar events in our own past. Experiencing these remembered traumas in conjunction with the poetic scene, we listeners will feel compassion for the speaker and our own memories will be purified and freed from self-obsession. Through this process, self-regarding sorrow "becomes the flavor of compassion," as Abhinavagupta comments, "which differs from ordinary grief by its being experienced primarily as a melting of one's thoughts" (Ingalls et al. 115). The intense sociality of Sanskrit poetry yields at once an ethics and a poetics of compassion.

On this understanding, we can turn to the final stanza of the *Meghadūta*, in which the key term "compassion" appropriately appears in Nathan's translation:

Having done this favor for me (who asked more  
than I should have asked), whether from friendship or compassion  
for my lonely state, now wander, Cloud,  
wherever you will, your glory swelled by rain.  
And may you never—even for an instant—be  
parted, like me, from your lightning. (89)

Kālidāsa's floating signifier should not be understood as revealing a de Manian aporia, as though the cloud can never carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning but is doomed to suffer a metonymic effacement as it wanders across India. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that an externally derived deconstructionist reading has now been falsified by an authoritative Indian poetics. Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta were writing half a millennium after Kālidāsa, and they were great systematizers of a varied and even unruly poetic tradition. They were also theologians as well as rhetoricians. They had agendas of their own, not unlike the Confucian commentators who allegorized the erotic poems in the Chinese *Book of Songs*, or the biblical tradition that softened the radicalism of Ecclesiastes.<sup>2</sup> Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta downplay the tendency of passion to escape the boundaries of compassion, unlike Kālidāsa, who was complicating the ethical framework within which he was nonetheless still writing. Derrida—and indeed William Wimsatt—can help us understand dimensions of the *Meghadūta* not accounted for in *rasadhvani* theory, even as Sanskrit poetics provides a crucial check against a too direct application of contemporary theory to the dilatory drifting of a compassionate cloud.

A whole new landscape of comparisons opens up as we begin to look beyond the handful of countries long favored in comparative studies, and all the more if we look into the deep literary

traditions before our contemporary moment, employing the historical perspectivism already championed three quarters of a century ago by Erich Auerbach, to intercalate our own time and place with those from which the works we study have come to us. Whether individually or in collaborative groups, we can pursue a plural comparativism to create pluralistic studies that challenge and modify the aesthetic, political, and historiographic frameworks we bring to them. This is the best way to practice a contrapuntal comparison today.

## Notes

1. For further discussion of the issues explored here, see David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, especially chapters 7 (“Theories”) and 8 (“Comparisons”), from which the present essay is adapted.
2. For an illuminating comparison of the Chinese and biblical commentarial traditions, see Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*, Cornell UP, 2005.

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