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## Review of Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature*.

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**Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 226 pp. ISBN 0791436667.**

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"Comparative literature is humanism," proclaims René Etiemble in his 1963 book *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*. This is what Yokota-Murakami sets out to debunk in his recent study *Don Juan East/West*: both the humanist claim of universalism at the core of Etiemble's statement as well as the methodology of comparative literature. Yokota-Murakami's project is a torturous one: in his own words, "I should compare in order to un-compare"(x). Indeed, the very title sets up the comparison of European and Japanese versions of the archetype Don Juan, an expectation that part of the book fulfills, while the rest of the book critiques the methodology underlying just such a comparison. Thus, to some extent, the book reads rather like an unsuccessful research project, a project whose unfeasibility becomes obvious halfway through. Yet, precisely by focusing on the necessary failure of his initial project, the author succeeds in launching a powerful disciplinary critique of the very project of comparative literature.

*Don Juan East/West* begins with a brief review of the history of comparative literature as a discipline, which was launched in the latter half of the nineteenth century and in approach was largely influenced by comparative linguistics. Until the middle of the twentieth century, scholars primarily engaged in establishing the genealogy of related literary entities across the national boundaries of Europe, with "influence" and "sources" being the operative terms in their comparative study--this is known as the French school of comparative literature. With the critique of nationalist sentiment after the Second World War, the older concept of comparative literature based on European national literary traditions and their connections was widely felt to be inadequate. The postwar atmosphere of humanism and intellectual cosmopolitanism gave rise to the method of applying "theoretical concepts" to cultures within and beyond Europe, thus licensing comparativists to engage in transcivilizational comparisons--this is the American school of comparative literature advocated by Etiemble among others.

While the previous model of influence-tracing is obviously Eurocentric, Yokota-Murakami's main critique deals with the postwar model of transcivilizational comparison which, he argues, entails "a certain aesthetic violence" (10), "for it cannot be achieved except by a distortion of the object in accordance to the viewer's paradigm" (187). This paradigm, he asserts, is invariably Western, Don Juan being a case in point. Another point of critique of the "theoretical" approach is its decidedly ahistorical bent (in contrast, the influence-tracing model is historical, although admittedly narrow in scope). The basic assumptions behind such transcivilizational comparisons, Yokota-Murakami argues, are humanist, universalist and essentialist, namely that we all share certain essential human traits that underlie our literature regardless of our cultural/historical specificities. Throw a measure of Orientalism into the mix, and we have the "Eastern Don Juan."

In some ways, the choice of Don Juan as an example of critique is providential, although the author presents it as incidental. For what better case to illustrate the universalist/essentialist claim of human sexuality? Citing primary sources from Tirso di Molina, Molière, Pushkin and E.T.A. Hoffmann, as well as secondary works from a host of comparativists both European and Japanese (the latter castigated as "colonized" intellectuals), Yokota-Murakami lays bare version

after version of claims of Don Juan as the embodiment of the "human essence," the universal/eternal "male instinct," "paragon of masculinity," etc.. In fact, some of the humanist claims are so un-reconstructed that at times the text seems to be beating the proverbial dead horse. Not that the horse of humanist-inflected Eurocentrism is necessarily dead, but the target is a bit too easy, which in turn renders the instrument of critique correspondingly rather more blunt than necessary.

Were the author to have stopped at this critique of humanism and universalism, his project would have been no more (or less) than an extension of the West's own critique of the Enlightenment tradition, a critique that swung into full force in the 1960s, soon after the American model of transcivilizational comparative literature was introduced. Since this model furnishes the main target of disciplinary critique for *Don Juan East/West*, it is not surprising that Yokota-Murakami cites Derrida and Foucault frequently to support his own argument. Yet, rather than merely flexing theoretical muscle, the book historicizes sexual ideology in early modern Japan and thus opens up a new field of inquiry aided by theoretical reflection. Through a discussion of how Western romantic love and sexology discourse was introduced into Meiji Japan, Yokota-Murakami demonstrates succinctly the rapid though subtle changes in the Japanese conceptions of love, lust and sexuality, conceptions that are situated within the multiple contexts of Western cultural imperialism, the reemergence of Japanese militarism, and above all, the project of modernity in Japan.

The tools Yokota-Murakami employs at historicization are considerably more refined than those levied against Eurocentrism. They are primarily linguistic: the Japanese translation of Western works during the Meiji era (1852-1912), and specifically, the different semantic and cultural content of the Japanese words employed to translate terms such as "love" and "lust." Following the implications of a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (that language determines the nature of a culture in which it is spoken), Yokota-Murakami argues that the separation of "spiritual love" from "carnal love" of post-Enlightenment Europe was quite unknown to the pre-Meiji Japan. Engaged in a sort of Foucauldian archeology, Yokota-Murakami unearths the rich etymological meanings attached to different Japanese terms used to translate the Western notion of romantic love, Meiji neologisms which have become standardized and whose origins have therefore long been forgotten. By delving into Meiji-era Japanese dictionaries and tracing the changes of semantic meanings of "love" in the modernist "I-novels" early in the twentieth century, Yokota-Murakami shows how attending to semantic nuance can lead to crucial historical specificity, and he uncovers something truly fascinating: that in the introduction of the Don Juan figure to Japan, there was a process of displacement/erasure with regard to the construction of sexuality. The Don Juan in early Meiji Japan is a narrowly defined Romantic hero, with connotations of spirituality, sincerity, and morality. A certain, some would argue central, quality of Don Juan is erased in the process, a quality that is associated with the more expansive definition of sexuality, an excessive and exorbitant sexuality which incorporates passion as well as sorrow.

This alternative definition of sexuality is displaced from Don Juan to the *iro-otoko*, a celebrated libertine figure ubiquitous in premodern Japanese fiction, which by Meiji time had become closely associated with the undesirable "feudal past" of Japan. And as such it must be purged from the modernizing Japan. Thus, Don Juan's evil twin, now known as "lust," became

increasingly pathologized in medical/ scientific discourse, while Don Juan the Romantic hero, with his maximum contrastive power, connoting the desirable modern West, was introduced and celebrated. Yokota-Murakami thus concludes that sexuality as a conceptual framework "is a historical construct that came into being as a specific significative constellation around the turn of the century" (144).

In tracing the emergence of a "modern" sexual paradigm in Japan through a (paradoxically meta-) case-study of Don Juan in Meiji Japan, Yokota-Murakami ultimately argues against comparison itself: "comparative perception, which discovers similitude, inevitably involves exclusion. Exclusion is marginalization. The universal/ identical is maintained only through constantly relegating differences to the field of deviation, barbarism, perversion, illegitimacy, abnormality, and inhumanity" (187). This is when Yokota-Murakami himself may be charged with ahistoricism, in claiming that the postwar American school of comparative literature loses its own historicity and becomes the definitive paradigm for "the comparative perspective." One might well ask: what happened in the past three or four decades, after Etiemble reinvented the field of comparative literature? The answer is, quite a lot. Maybe not as much in the narrowly defined discipline of comparative literature, which, with the aging and cutting of programs in recent years, has arguably become narrower still, but certainly in the critique of Eurocentrism and the general debate over the "state of the humanities" surrounding such issues as canon formation, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. Some of the participants are indeed comparativists such as Yokota-Murakami himself, or Rey Chow, to cite another famous example whose recent work was reviewed in these pages in the last issue. Incidentally, the French or American schools hardly represent a stronghold on the center of comparative literature nowadays--indeed they have been rather derisively referred to as "the French hour," "the American hour" (Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 1993). And what of the comparative method? Is it inherently violent and exclusive, as Yokota-Murakami polemically argues, or only historically so? While exposing the historicity of such violence, the historicity of the pretense of universalism, as Yokota-Murakami does so well in *Don Juan East/West*, is there anything we comparativists can recuperate in the method? Or, to put it differently, what do we lose by giving up "the comparative perception" altogether?

Here is one answer from a comparatist who argues, nearly as polemically as Yokota-Murakami, that "cultures are more than just empirically comparative: they are intrinsically comparative," that they are "fundamentally beside themselves." In other words, this built-in comparativeness functions to "dislodge normalized, standardized, homogenized, habituated meanings" (James Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, 1982). Should we lose sight of it, we run the risk of believing, however briefly and unwittingly, that there is indeed a premodern Japan, or a Japan, or even an East and a West that have normalized, standardized, homogenized, habituated meanings.