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Teleiopoiesis, Telepoesis, and the
Practice of Comparative Literature

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins the second chapter of *Death of a Discipline* with a clear statement of both her text's subject and its mode of inquiry: "We are going to redo Comparative Literature, then, looking for our definition in the eyes of the other, as figured in the text" (25). Fittingly, one of the ways in which Spivak defines the practice of Comparative Literature is through the eyes of another, or rather through the language or figure of another, that is, through the use of Jacques Derrida's term *teleiopoiesis*.[1]

Derrida coins first the adjective *téléiopoétique* and then the noun *téléiopoièse* in *Politiques de l'amitié* (*Politics of Friendship*) to characterize the distinctive quality of an utterance (or "la prévision" [49]; "the prediction" [31]) from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "—Ach! Wenn ihr wüßfltet, wie es bald, so bald schon—anders kommt!—" (49) ("—Ah si vous saviez comme tout cela va changer—et vite, si vite!—" [49]; "Alas! if only you knew how soon, how very soon, things will be—different!—" [31]). What renders this utterance remarkable for Derrida is that "La phrase *parle d'elle-même*, elle s'emporte, se précipite ou se précède, comme si sa fin venait avant la fin" (50) ("The sentence *speaks of itself*, it gets carried away, precipitates and precedes itself, as if its end arrived before the end" [31]). In a sense, the movement of the utterance resembles that of an ouroboros in its turning back on itself. Yet, unlike an ouroboros, the beginning does not subsume the end: the serpent does not devour its own tail. Rather, the tail births the serpent itself: the end gives rise to the whole. It is this quality of the utterance that Derrida names *téléiopoétique*:

Par économie—et pour formaliser d'un mot cette économie absolue de la feinte, cette génération par greffe conjointe et simultanée, sans corps propre, du performatif et constatif—, appelons *téléiopoétique* l'événement de telles phrases, la «logique» de cette survenue, sa «génétique», sa «rhétorique», son «historique», sa «politique», etc. *Teleiopoiós* qualifie, dans un grand nombre de contextes et d'ordres sémantiques, ce qui *rend* absolu, parfait, achevé, terminé, accompli, fini, ce qui *fait* venir à terme. (50)

By way of economy—and in order, in a single word, to formalize this absolute economy of the feint, this generation by joint and simultaneous grafting of the performative and the reportive, without a body of its own—let us call the event of such sentences, the 'logic' of this chance occurrence, its 'genetics', its 'rhetoric', its 'historical record', its 'politics', etc., *teleiopoetic*. *Teleiopoiós* qualifies, in a great number of contexts and semantic orders, that which *renders* absolute, perfect, completed, accomplished, finished, that which *brings* to an end. (32)

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[1] *Teleiopoiesis* is my own transliteration of Derrida's *téléiopoièse*. Different ways of transliterating the term will be discussed later in the essay.

Thus, the term *teleiopoiesis*, like Nietzsche's utterance itself, expresses singularly —*d'un mot*—a singularity that encompasses multiplicity and contradiction. The utterance does so not only on a semantic level, but on a linguistic level as well: it functions both as a reportive and a performative, despite the fact that these two types of utterances contradict one another. A reportive, as the name implies, simply reports; it does not address the veracity of the statement, which may be true or false. In contrast, a performative "speaks of itself," bringing itself into being, rendering itself true.[2] Similarly, the term *teleiopoiesis* emphasizes not the end, a singular moment, but rather the processes at work: "*Rendre, faire*, trans-former, produire, créer, voilà ce qui compte" (50; "*Rendering, making*, transform-ing, producing, creating—this is what counts" [32]).

Although *teleio* (bringing to an end or completion) does not stem from the same root as *tele* (far), *teleiopoiesis* entails the crossing of distance:

Mais qu'on nous permette de jouer aussi avec l'autre *télé*—celui qui dit la distance et le lointain, car c'est bien d'une poétique de la distance à distance qu'il s'agit ici, et d'une accélération absolue dans le franchissement de l'espace par la structure même de la phrase (elle commence par la fin, elle s'initie à la signature de l'autre). (50)

But permit us to play too with the other *tele*, the one that speaks to distance and the far removed, for what is indeed in question here is a poetics of distance at one remove, and of an absolute accelera-tion in the spanning of space by the very structure of the sentence (it begins at the end, it is initiated with the signature of the other). (32)

In this passage, Derrida specifically evokes spatial distance, yet temporal distance is also central to his use of *teleiopoiesis*—recall he is discussing Nietzsche's notion of the philosophers of the future. In addition, *teleiopoiesis* accounts for the more metaphoric distance of alterity, as it is the signature of the other that initiates the utterance. The negotiation of these distances, their mediation, is the movement of *teleiopoiesis*.

A final and, for purposes of this discussion, key aspect of Derrida's notion of *teleiopoiesis* involves not the definition of the term, but rather the mode by which Derrida defines it. Derrida does not merely report on *teleiopoiesis*, but performs it. As Spivak notes: "Derrida brings the rich notion of *teleopoiesis* [sic] . . . into play many times in his book" (31). By engaging in *teleiopoiesis* as he describes it, Derrida calls attention to mediation: he both signals the mediated nature of his own practice and insists upon the importance of attending to such mediation. One example occurs in his footnote to the phrase "communauté de ceux qui n'ont pas de communauté" (56; "community of those without community" [37]). The footnote begins:

Ces mots, on le sait, sont de Bataille. Pourquoi les citons-nous ici? Pour témoigner, trop brièvement, pauvrement, de l'attention reconnaissante qui me porte ici vers des penseurs et des textes auxquels me lie une amitié de pensée à laquelle je serai toujours inégal. Sans espoir, donc, de jamais leur rendre juste ici. Ces mots de Bataille sont placés par Blanchot en exergue de *La Communauté inavouable* . . . ouvrage qui, dès ses premières lignes, on le sait, dialogue avec l'article de Jean-Luc Nancy qui deviendra un livre, *La Communauté désoeuvrée*. (56n1)

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[2] Collins's translation of *constatif* as reportive loses the echo in the French of the constative. A constative indicates "a use of the aorist tense, indicating that the action denoted has taken place, rather than emphasizing its initiation or completion" (*OED*). In deeming the phrase a constative, thus gesturing to the aorist, which expressly de-emphasizes initiation or completion, Derrida again underscores the process itself, rather than its beginning or ending.

It is well known that these words are Bataille's. Why do we quote them here? In order to bear witness —too briefly, shabbily—to the grateful attention that draws me to those thinkers and texts to which I am bound without ever being their equal. Without hope, then, of ever giving them their due here. These words of Bataille are chosen by Blanchot as an epigraph to *La Communauté inavouable . . .* , a work which, from the very first lines, is in conversation with an article by Jean-Luc Nancy, which later became a book: *La Communauté désoeuvrée.* (37n15)

Derrida's mode here reflects one of the essential movements of *teleiopoiesis*: in charting the course of the phrase "communauté de ceux qui n'ont pas de communauté" and in examining the relations among Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, and the texts in which they employ the phrase, he mediates the distance—spatial, temporal, and to the other—among his objects of study and between them and himself. Moreover, he highlights the mediation necessarily involved in doing so.

This call to attend to mediation both as practice and as process is one reason that *teleiopoiesis* serves as an ideal figure through which to redo Comparative Literature.[3] It is this emphasis on attending to mediation that is apparent in several of Spivak's definitions of *teleiopoiesis* as "part of the general technique of the new comparative literature" (34). Let us examine two of them here. The first is "to affect the distant in a *poiesis*—an imaginative making—without guarantees, and thus, by definitive predication, reverse its value" (31). *Poiesis*, here, seems to encompass not only a text, but also the act of reading, particularly since three paragraphs earlier Spivak refers to a practice of "distant reading" (30), evoking in part Derrida's description of *teleiopoiesis* as "une poétique de la distance à distance." This distant reading involves reading through space, through time, and through (to) the other: "This is imagining yourself, really letting yourself be imagined (experience the impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another culture, perhaps. Teleopoiesis [sic]" (52).[4] Nonetheless, distant reading is only "part of the general technique of the new comparative literature," and it must be coupled with "a care for language and idiom" (5), that is, with what semantically appears to be its opposite: close reading. As in her use of *teleiopoiesis*, Spivak both performs close reading and discusses it. She states that "[a]nyone who believes that a literary education should still be sponsored by universities must allow that one must learn to read" (71-72). For, although she notes that "the literary is not a blueprint to be followed in unmediated social action," she asserts that "if as teachers of literature we teach reading, literature can be our teacher as well as our object of investigation" (23). Thus, the practice of Comparative Literature, like

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[3] Other aspects of *teleiopoiesis* also render it useful as a trope for redoing both the practice of Comparative Literature and the discipline of Comparative Literature itself. For example, Spivak suggests "transforming the philosopheme [*teleiopoiesis*] into a disciplinary allegory" (31). She then does so by indirectly invoking *teleiopoiesis* (appropriately, prior to her discussion of it) in her assertion that "the *discipline*" needs "to acknowledge a definitive future anteriority a 'to come'-ness, a 'will have happened' quality" (6). Specifically, like Nietzsche's utterance, the discipline needs to direct itself "toward those readers of the future" (31). This orientation toward the future necessarily entails an orientation toward the end—the death of the text's title—or rather toward the processes of the bringing to an end, for in *teleiopoiesis*: "*Rendre, faire,* transformer, produire, créer, voilà ce qui compte" (Derrida 50). This example also illustrates how Spivak carries out one of the movements of *teleiopoiesis* as she employs it as a trope, underscoring again the practice, the mediation.

[4] Note that in keeping with the movement of *teleiopoiesis* Spivak once again begins at the end, defining the term before naming it. Thus, like Derrida, Spivak calls attention to mediation via both the content of her definition and her formulation of it.

the word *teleiopoiesis* itself, consists of two seemingly opposed and contradictory processes. However, close reading and distant reading are similar in that both reveal mediation: close reading reveals the mediation of the object itself, while distant reading reveals the mediation of the practice.

The second definition identifies *teleiopoiesis* with "[c]opying (rather than cutting) and pasting" (34).[5] The movement of copying and pasting is not a process of mere reproduction, but rather one of production. This distinction stems from the one Gilles Deleuze draws between the notion of repetition as simple replication or reproduction of the "Same" and the notion of repetition as supplementation or differentiation.[6] Spivak's copying and pasting is precisely this second type of repetition, one that does not reproduce the same, hence masking mediation, but rather produces difference, thus calling attention to mediation. The distinction between copying and cutting also relates to the acknowledgement of mediation: in copying, the object is doubly present, rendering mediation visible, whereas in cutting, the object is absent, therefore masking mediation. Thus, the metaphor of copying and pasting, with its tangible referents, clearly illustrates the distance and mediation essential both to *teleiopoiesis* and to the claim I am making in this essay: the practice of Comparative Literature must rigorously and critically attend to the mediation inherent both in its modes of inquiry and in the objects of inquiry themselves.

In keeping with the double nature of *teleiopoiesis* to both report and to perform, the remainder of this essay consists of two close readings, each of which demonstrates the necessity of calling attention to the mediation present in all texts and in all modes of inquiry. My first example is that of the term *teleiopoiesis*

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[5] For an extended discussion of Spivak's use of copying and pasting as a metaphor for *teleiopoiesis*, please see Eric Hayot's essay in this forum, "I/O: A Comparative Literature in a Digital Age."

[6] Deleuze describes the differences between these two notions of repetition thusly: "La première répétition est répétition du Même, qui s'explique par l'identité du concept ou de la représentation; la seconde est celle qui comprend la différence, et se comprend elle-même dans l'altérité de l'Idée, dans l'hétérogénéité d'une «apprésentation». L'une est négative, par défaut du concept, l'autre, affirmative, par l'excés de l'Idée. L'une est statique, l'autre dynamique. L'une est répétition dans l'effet, l'autre dans la cause. L'une, en extension, l'autre intensive. L'une ordinaire, l'autre, remarquable et singulière. L'une est horizontale, l'autre verticale. L'une est développée, expliquée; l'autre est enveloppée, et doit être interprétée. L'une est révolutive, l'autre, d'évolution. L'une est d'égalité, de commensurabilité, de symétrie; l'autre, fondée sur l'inégal, l'incommensurabilité ou la dissymétrique. L'une est matérielle, l'autre, spirituelle, même dans la nature et dans la terre. L'une est inanimée, l'autre a le secret de nos morts et de nos vies, de nos enchaînements et de nos libérations, du démoniaque et du divin. L'une est une répétition «nue», l'autre une répétition vêtue, qui se forme elle-même en se vêtant, en se masquant, en se déguisant. L'une est d'exactitude, l'autre a pour critère l'authenticité" (36-37). ("The first repetition is repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept of representation; the second includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation.' One is negative, occurring by default in the concept; the other affirmative, occurring by excess in the Idea. One is conjectural, the other categorical. One is static, the other dynamic. One is repetition in effect, the other in the cause. One is extensive, the other intensive. One is ordinary, the other distinctive and singular. One is horizontal, the other vertical. One is developed and explicated, the other enveloped and in need of interpretation. One is revolving, the other evolving. One involves equality, commensurability and symmetry; the other is grounded in inequality, incommensurability and dissymmetry. One is material, the other spiritual, even in nature and in the earth. One is inanimate, the other carries the secret of our lives, of our enchainments and our liberations, the demonic and the divine. One is a 'bare' repetition, the other a covered repetition, which forms itself in covering itself, in masking and disguising itself. One concerns accuracy, the other has authenticity as its criterion" [24]).

itself, in which mediation becomes visible only when the word is examined in its multiple (con)texts. The second example is Yucef Merhi's 2002 installation piece, *Telepoesis*, in which mediation and distance are, in a sense, physically present, yet even so there is more mediation at work than that which appears on the surface.

Mediation is indeed at work in the very term *teleiopoiesis* itself. The Greek term τελειοποίησις never appears in Derrida's text.[7] Instead, Derrida presents a Latinized French version of it, *téléiopoièse*, thus beginning with the end, with the translation, not the original. His English translator, George Collins, renders the term as *teleiopoesis* and Spivak renders it as *teleopoiesis*. In a sense, both of these English versions are incomplete, or modified. The discrepancy between them results from a mechanical practice, a mediation: the Latinization of the Greek term in transliteration. Yet the consequence is a change not only in orthography but also in meaning. Let us begin at the end, as it were, with the second half of the transliterated Greek compounds: *poiesis* is "creative production, especially of a work of art" (*OED*), while *poesis* is the "Greek and Latin word for *poesy*, formerly sometimes used by English writers" (*OED*). As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, the more flexible *poiesis* is essential to both Derrida's *téléiopoièse* and Spivak's *teleopoiesis*, for *poiesis*—"an imaginative making" (31)—includes not only poetry—*poesis*—but also reading as a creative, productive act. Returning to the beginning, the difference between the two adjectival or adverbial combining forms that serve as prefixes—*teleio* and *teleo*—also results from Latinization. Yet once again the orthographic change affects the meaning. *Téléiopoièse* references the adjectival stem *teleio* deriving from the adjective *teleios* (complete), and therefore translates as the making of things complete. However, *teleopoiesis* is more ambiguous: it may refer either to *teleios*, or to the noun *telos* (end or completion), and thus may translate as the making of ends.[8] Hence, in contrast to Derrida's *téléiopoièse*, Spivak's *teleopoiesis* may in fact perform its own *teleiopoetic* reversal, emphasizing the object or product, not the process.

I am not suggesting that either Collins or Spivak mistranslates Derrida or that the Latinization of half of the term and the de-Latinization of the other half of the term (which of course appears doubly Latinized in its French version in Derrida's own text) reveal some underlying agenda on the part of either one; rather, I wish to call attention to the fact that there is a slippage of language resulting from mediation. It is of little importance where the slippage actually occurs—from the Greek to the Greek, from the Greek to the Latin, from the Greek to the French, from Derrida's French text to Collins's English translation of it, from Derrida's French text to Spivak's English text, from Derrida's English text to Spivak's English text, or from Spivak's English manuscript to the pub-

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[7] His first reference to *teleiopoiesis* as a noun rather than as an adjective arrives via the transliterated *téléiopoiós* [τελειοποιός], a term which focuses attention on the agency involved: *teleiopoiós* is the one who makes things complete whereas *teleiopoiesis* is the act of making things complete. I am indebted to my colleague Owen Cramer for his input regarding my discussion of the Greek terms and their Latinizations.

[8] Since the intervocalic sigma (σ) and iota (ι) both have a tendency to disappear in Greek, one could argue that the sigma, although primary, is effaced in the oblique cases of the noun and that, thus, the Latinized *teleo* actually refers to something like *teleos* (τέλεος), the possessive of *telos* (τέλος), end.

lished edition. What is important here is that the slippage of language can occur in *any* of these places, underscoring the necessity of calling attention to the mediation of all texts.

Mediation also lies at the heart of Yucef Merhi's 2002 installation piece for the Museo del Barrio Bienal entitled *Telepoesis*. In effect, the piece physically stages the practice of Comparative Literature that Spivak describes: distant reading coupled with close reading. Thus, the piece provides a compelling visual image of the mediation present both in texts themselves and in the practice of Comparative Literature. Let us begin with the awareness of mediation in the artwork. The piece consists of two objects: a digital telescope trained on a poem[9]—hence one referent of the title, *Telepoesis*. The poem is printed on a plaque, which has been placed atop the Conservatory Garden's main gate in Central Park, located in front of the museum. As in the close reading that is part of the practice of Comparative Literature, the poem serves as the focal point, as an object of scrutiny and investigation. Yet unlike a close reading typical in the practice of Comparative Literature, the artwork clearly addresses the mediation within itself. Working back from the second half of the piece, the written text, the first visible frame of mediation is the black plaque, on which the poem appears in gold; the text is distinct from its background, and the plaque is distinct from the gate and the park. In the middle of the work, a second frame of mediation results from the lens of the telescope, which circumscribes that which the viewer/reader sees. Returning to the first half of the piece, a third frame is that of the telescope's very presence as a solid physical object between the poem and the viewer/reader.

An awareness of mediation is also present in the process of viewing/reading, the bringing into being of the piece (in this sense, its *teleiopoiesis*). In addition to the telescope, a tangible apparatus, there is actual physical distance (approximately 300 feet) between the viewer/reader and the object. This distance or *tele* is intimately linked to the act of viewing, itself a *poiesis*, a creative production—another referent of the title. The act of viewing entails the spanning of space, and thus it is a *teleiopoiesis*, an instantiation of *une poétique de la distance à distance.* Yet, it is not only the telescope that mediates the distance, but also the viewer/reader, for s/he has the ability to adjust the lens of the telescope and also "to derange the telescope vision," to determine its point of focus (Merhi, email to the author). Viewed as a performance of *teleiopoiesis*, part of the practice of Comparative Literature, Merhi's *Telepoesis* calls our attention to the mediation inherent in all texts, to the mediated nature of the processes of distant and close reading, and to our own agency in these processes. To return to Spivak: "the proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative. Here we stand outside, but not as anthropologist; we stand rather as reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself" (13). Here is the practice of the new Compara-

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[9] Merhi composed the poem himself specifically for the project. It reads: "there is a secret garden/outside of these words/where hummingbirds/surpass time/stroking the wind/like fleeting stars." In referencing that which is outside of it, the poem draws attention to its own frame. Merhi writes: "my intention was to create a Borgian [sic] circularity where the poem makes reference to the place where the poem was placed" (Merhi, email to the author).

tive Literature, "looking for our definition in the eyes of the other, as figured in the text" (25), attending to mediation.

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