

## Review of Three Essays in *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* by A. Owen Aldridge

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### ABSTRACT

The review examines three essays from *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* by A. Owen Aldridge. Harry Levin's "France-Amérique: The Transatlantic Refraction" examines the intellectual and cultural dialogism between America and France. The author discusses the interpretation of American history, literature, and identity through French perspectives and how such interpretations create a kind of "refraction" or transformation of the original meanings. Martin Jarret-Kerr's "The Conditions of Tragedy" explores the dehumanization tendencies and anti-novel in modern French literature, especially in Robbe-Grillet's work. The essay investigates the relation between tragedy and personality in addition to Christian thought. Walter J. Ong's "Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision" explores the role of Darwinism and modern scientific thought in shaping the imagination of modern man and influencing poetry. This reflection has its consequences on poetry in terms of cyclical patterns in modern poetry. Those three essays show different approaches to comparative literature, addressing transatlanticism and cultural change.

**Keywords:** Transatlanticism, Cultural Exchange, American Literature, French Intellectualism, Cultural Refraction.

## Section One: Introduction and Summary

### 1.1 Introduction

The review investigates three essays published in A. O. Aldridge's *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* (1969). The essays under revision are: Harry Levin's chapter "France-Amérique: The Transatlantic Refraction," Martin Jarret-Kerr's "The Conditions of Tragedy," and Walter J. Ong's "Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision."

Despite the fact that the essays deal with different topics, they collectively reflect modern thought and its impact upon mid-twentieth-century comparative literature. Levin's essay focuses on Franco-American dialogism and transatlantic refraction in the interpretation of American literature. Martin Jarret-Kerr explores the rejection of traditional tragic structure and its influence on modern French literature. Ong's essay examines the influence of Darwinism and scientific thought on modern poetic imagination and the cyclic repetition in literature.

The review then summarizes the main discussion of those essays, evaluates their contribution to the field of comparative literature, and provides critical comments on their limitations.

### 1.2 Summary of the Essays

#### 1.2.1 Harry Levin: "France-Amérique: The Transatlantic Refraction"

The essay traces the history of Franco-American literary and cultural exchange. Levin argues that the French view of America, both historically and intellectually, is shaped by French intellectual traditions. As a result, American literature and society were sometimes misunderstood and reshaped according to European expectations.

Levin discusses how French intellectuals played a crucial role in introducing American studies into academic fields and shaping European opinions about America. The author explains that French observations frequently emphasized exaggerated or symbolic aspects of American culture rather than presenting its full reality. Reciprocally, American writers were deeply influenced by French criticism, literary movements, and artistic experimentation.

The essay also investigates major literary figures and the transatlantic exchange of ideas in modern literature. Levin believes that such exchange represents both distortion and enrichment because cultures adapt foreign ideas to fit their own perspectives. By the end of the essay, the author argues that the Franco-American relationship is based on continuous reinterpretation rather than imitation. Therefore, the "transatlantic refraction" reflects cultural dialogism as ideas move between different intellectual traditions and societies.

### 1.2.2 Martin Jarret-Kerr: “The Conditions of Tragedy”

Jarret-Kerr’s essay explores the conditions that form tragedy in modern literature. The author gives emphasis to the rejection of the traditional structure of tragedy within what is called the “French anti-novel.” Jarret-Kerr discusses Robbe-Grillet’s critique of sentimentality and metaphor in the works of Sartre and Camus. The author believes that objectivity and dehumanization are characteristics of the new literary form. The essay shows the contrast between tragic conceptions in Christianity and Greek thought, which emphasize the role of divine forgiveness, fate, and personality. Jarret-Kerr concludes his essay with the belief that tragedy continues only when it remains connected to the common nature of humanity.

### 1.2.3 Walter J. Ong: “Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision”

In his essay “Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision,” Ong examines the impact of Darwinism and scientific thought in shaping modern poetic imagination and the concept of repetition in literary works. Ong believes that the crisis of modern poetry lies in its response to the vicious circle of time presented by the aesthetic moment and epiphany, as can be found in the works of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Walt Whitman.

The author gives three poetic interactions with modern evolutionary thought. The first one is nostalgic, i.e., it shows nostalgia for mythic cycles. The second shows response and concentration on the aesthetic moment; this kind of interaction goes with linear change. Ong ends his essay with a question about poetry and its future in cosmology.

## Section Two: Review and Conclusion

### 2.1 Review of Harry Levin’s “France-Amérique: The Transatlantic Refraction”

France transcends the traditional perception of America as merely a place associated with the feudal system. Instead, it portrays America as a land of promise and “a place of asylum and melting-pot of races” (Levin, 1969, p.277). America is viewed as a “young” place and as an “antithetical and complementary” culture. French intellectual circles were able to recognize the misunderstanding surrounding American literature and figures such as Faulkner, Melville, and Hawthorne. Moreover, Poe “has been taken to the bosom of French poetry” (Levin, 1969, p. 277). Levin attributes this tendency to the French attraction toward “uncivilized and primitive places” such as America.

America also made a significant contribution by attracting French intellectual attention, particularly through the liberation of “formal verse” by Walt Whitman. The study of American novelists by Claude-Edmonde Magny influenced French fiction in *L’Age du roman américain* (Levin, 1969, p. 279). In this sense, American literature,

since its emergence, appears to possess a dual cultural identity, namely American and French: “there is one American literature for Americans, and another for French” (Levin, 1969, p. 279).

This is understandable considering that American literature derived some of its genres from French literature, such as the “analytic genre.” Some American authors, like Hawthorne, regarded French literature as essential to American literature because it helped in “cultivating [one’s] taste while satisfying [his] appetite” (Levin, 1969, p. 281). World War I broke the barriers between American and French literature. Nevertheless, there remained a “point of intersection between two literatures [which] was Paris during its brilliant period of l’Entre-deux-guerres” (Levin, 1969, p. 279).

There was a significant interaction between the two literatures which, as Levin explains, demonstrates the intercultural exchange and innovation of American literature, whose only “debt to France [that] was of borrowing method” (Levin, 1969, p. 282). The mutual attraction between the two cultures stems from their oppositional nature. American culture has had a centrifugal movement, whereas French culture has demonstrated a centripetal tendency. Consequently, American literature became worthy of international recognition, including the Nobel Prize, as happened with Faulkner and Hemingway.

### 2.1.1 Critical Comment on Levin’s Essay

Although Levin gives an accurate description of the French perception of American literature, his argument tends to show “cultural refraction” as a cultural distortion of the original meanings on the French side. He argues that French readings always “refract” American texts through philosophical traditions and cultural adaptations. Actually, such readings can be seen as a kind of independent reading that has different meanings while maintaining its own values. In this case, what Levin calls “refraction” is an act of rejuvenating American literature through French critical, philosophical, and cultural lenses.

On the other hand, the essay overlooks the American writers’ experience of living in France and their interaction within the European social milieu and the reflection of such experience in shaping their critical and intellectual ideas. However, such an overlook does not reduce or diminish Levin’s contribution to literary field, but it widens the horizon for a more balanced view of agency on both sides of transatlantic cultural and literary exchange.

### 2.2 Review of Martin Jarrett-Kerr’s “The Conditions of Tragedy”

Martin discusses the conditions responsible for creating tragedy. The first condition is “dehumanization,” which is presented in an exaggerated form in the French “anti-novel” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 296). Therefore, Robbe-Grillet criticizes Sartre and Camus for being sentimental. Their sentimentality, according to him, results from their use of metaphor.

This use of metaphor has two references: either “capitulation” or “falsehood.” Martin provides an example: when one speaks of the majesty of a mountain nestling in a valley, one writes anthropomorphically. However, this ultimately leads to tragedy and to the “illicit creation of a God” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 298). If one begins by using metaphor, one may eventually believe in God because God is “no more than the most generalized form of the pathetic fallacy” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 298).

Robbe-Grillet wants the reader to examine the world objectively and to “defy the clutter of our animistic or protective adjectives” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 298). This tendency authenticated cinema because it turns away from “the universe of signification (psychological, social, functional)” and focuses more on what exists rather than on “the romantic heart of things,” as Roland Barthes describes it.

The hero appears shattered and lost. He exists merely to show that man is only a “behavior-pattern at a given moment.” Feelings such as hate and love are considered “sloppy metaphors.” Therefore, the artist’s task is not to provide interpretation but “to create an object” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 299). In *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet describes every event, person, and object with mechanical precision.

Thus, his novels become predictable. He becomes a point of debate for Marxist critics such as Roland Barthes, who supports Robbe-Grillet in rejecting tragedy. Tragedy, according to this perspective, stimulates human misery and encourages “wisdom and purification.” For Robbe-Grillet, however, “nothing is more insidious than tragedy.” Ernst Fischer questions how these “anti-novels” correspond with new ideas and to what extent individuals in such novels are reduced to the “black box of cybernetics” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 298).

The right-handed boundary of tragedy is represented by unreal suffering and sorrow. For instance, the actor in *Murder in the Cathedral* says: “I know I am being murdered on the stage, but not once have I really felt dead” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 299). Martin argues that tragedy must function within two boundaries. Robbe-Grillet rejects tragedy together with the concept of personality. Yet, there remains an impersonal element even in classical tragedy. Critics have focused excessively on Shakespeare’s characters while neglecting the central Aristotelian principle.

Eliot and Dr. Leavis criticize Shakespeare by claiming that “a great tragedy should be impersonal” and that individual psychology should disappear within a “great tragic generality.” Shakespeare was nevertheless a genius in “lifting the naturalistic without too much distortion.” His plays remain “concrete and psychologically convincing” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 300).

Martin concludes that this “depersonalizing of man” represents the left boundary of tragedy. The right-handed boundary, according to the Christian concept, is often overlooked because Jesus Christ died to bear human burdens. In this context, tragedy occurs to a “tormented soul that believes that there is no time left for God’s forgiveness” (Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p. 301). This is evident in *Dr. Faustus and Macbeth*.

There is also a difference between Greek tragedy and the Old Testament. The wars in the Old Testament are bloody but not tragic because they are viewed as just or unjust. The Peloponnesian Wars, however, are tragic because behind them lie “obscure fatalities and misjudgment.” Mr. Steiner argues that a “tragic rift” is inseparable from human life. Christian tragedy is one of “possibility,” whereas Greek tragedy is one of “necessity.”

W. H. Auden argues that if the Greek concept of tragedy is applied to *Moby-Dick*, it would produce a result similar to Shakespearean tragedy. The hero is extraordinary, and once he chooses, he must pay for his decision through death. Death functions not only as punishment for the hero’s hamartia but also as a means of maintaining universal law. If Greek pessimism means “despair of the world, of fate, of gods,” such pessimism becomes necessary to fulfill the concept of catharsis.

In contrast, Indian drama seems distant from tragedy and closer to fairy-tale comedy. Martin gives the example of *Shakuntala*, who marries King Dushyanta. Due to a curse, he forgets her. When he finally remembers her, she has ascended to heaven, but reconciliation is eventually achieved through supernatural elements. In both tragedy and comedy, there is pain that evokes emotional response.

Common features include the idea that “puny man must respect what is greater than he is; puny man is valuable for his freedom.” Regarding the future of tragedy in the West, Martin believes that tragedy will continue as long as artists do not move against “the grain of common human nature.” Humanity will always remain trapped within a “vicious circle of struggling with the infinite reality.”

### 2.2.1 Critical Comment on Jarrett-Kerr’s Essay

Jarrett-Kerr presents a thorough analysis concerning the refusal of traditional tragedy in the French anti-novel, especially in the works of Robbe-Grillet. His argument concerning the removal of metaphor and dehumanization enriches critical studies as it makes a connection between literary techniques and the philosophical shifts that swept Europe after World War II. It is insightful in presenting the role of Robbe-Grillet’s mechanical narrative, which challenges the expectation of moral meaning and psychological depth.

However, the analysis focuses on the French anti-novel without providing enough literary textual engagement beyond *La Jalousie*. The claim that dehumanization is a typical feature of the era would be strengthened by further examples from Nouveau Roman writers. Such examples might include *Tropisms* by Nathalie Sarraute or *La Modification* by Michel Butor.

Moreover, Jarrett-Kerr makes a contrast between Christian “possibility” and Greek “necessity”; such a contrast weakens the philosophical and theological debates about tragedy. Modern theorists such as Terry Eagleton and George Steiner explained that both traditions have internal tensions which, in turn, refuse such binary classification.

A deeper argument about the interaction between the Christian notion of grace and tragic form would add critical depth to the argument. Thus, Jarrett-Kerr might include works of Flannery O'Connor and Graham Greene as examples.

Despite such limitations, the essay is a contribution to the academic field and helps in understanding the attempts of modern critics to redefine and reshape tragedy in relation to modern experimentations.

### 2.3 Review of Walter J. Ong's "Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision"

The modern age and Darwinian Theory have strongly influenced "the poetic and artistic imagination." The central point is the necessity of repetition. In poetry, repetition appears through rhyme, rhythm, and plot structure. T. S. Eliot writes in "Burnt Norton": "And the end and the beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end" (Ong, 1969, p. 309).

Poetry reveals a deep preoccupation with repetition, which is closely connected to the natural cycle of the year. Literature becomes linked to natural cycles because "the crucial importance of this myth has been forced on literary critics by Jung and Frazer." According to Frye, there are four phases associated with the seasons: "dawn/spring and birth," "zenith/summer, marriage or triumph," "sunset/autumn, sacrifice and the hero in isolation," and finally "dark/winter and death." These cycles, from birth to death and from fertility to sterility, reflect the human attraction to periodicity (Ong, 1969, p. 311).

Walter raises an important question concerning the nature of cycles in light of modern scientific discoveries about cosmic and organic evolution. In reality, there is no exact repetition because every cycle contains differences from the previous one. A season may return, yet it may bring floods, storms, or other unexpected conditions. "They are not really exact cycles, but approximations of cycles which gradually alter" (Ong, 1969, p. 314).

In the physical universe, nothing repeats itself exactly. Even the Earth moves in an elliptical path that continuously changes. On the human level, every individual is unique, and even identical twins do not share the same consciousness. In a technological world where "skiing in the middle of one's own summer" becomes possible, the poet's role turns into an "anti-cyclic phenomenon" (Ong, 1969, p. 316).

Modern poetic objects, such as the "Ford," symbolize escape from the crowded modern world.

Modern poets experience a crisis similar to that of Milton and Joyce: a crisis of "cosmological problems" from which they attempt to retreat. Consequently, attention is directed toward "the aesthetic movement... creativity and epiphany" (Ong, 1969, p. 317). The glorification of the aesthetic moment, as represented in Joyce's epiphany, seeks to avoid the implications of existence within an evolving universe.

Poets can be classified according to their response to the universe. The first group remains occupied with “the imagery of the old cosmic mythology,” such as D. H. Lawrence and Dylan Thomas, who are deeply concerned with fertility. For Lawrence, sex and death are linked to nostalgia for the past and ancient chthonic symbols like the serpent.

The second group, represented by Emily Dickinson, attempts to solve the problem of time through concentration on the aesthetic moment in order to prolong it and escape temporality.

The third tendency accepts “linear-type change” as a condition of poetic activity, particularly in American poetry rather than British or Irish poetry. Whitman declares that the “universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.” He focuses on the present moment and expresses optimism toward the future.

In the past, the poetic world was established through “archetypal images which art and poetry favor.” Today, however, there exists a “mutual refusal between the poet and the world.” Ong concludes by asking: “What will poetry be like ten thousand or one hundred years from now? Will man be able to live with the pure and innocent dream?” (Ong, 1969, p. 326).

### 2.3.1 Critical Comment on Walter J. Ong’s Essay

Ong’s essay provides an insightful argument about Darwinian evolution and how it plays a crucial role in changing poetic imagination and form. Also, his division of poetic responses into evolutionary thought, nostalgia for mythical cycles, emphasis on the aesthetic moment, and acceptance of linear change is fruitful in understanding modern literary figures like Eliot, Joyce, and Whitman. The link between scientific thought and literary works helps offer a better understanding of the modern literary mode.

However, the discussion sometimes moves forward quickly and shifts from historical evidence to certain poetic examples without enough close reading. For example, Ong’s citation of Eliot’s *Burnt Norton* shows how linear time collapses, yet it does not illustrate how the formal device of the poem legislates that collapse. More engagement with structure, syntax, and diction would make the analysis more sufficient.

In addition, the author relies heavily on the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye, which limits the analysis to a certain span of time, as later scholars moved to question the cosmological nature of cyclic myth. If Ong engaged with postcolonial perspectives or Western ideologies, he would widen the scope. For instance, the way poets such as Derek Walcott or Okot p’ Bitek respond to linear history, myth, and evolution deepens Ong’s main argument and enriches his Anglo-American scope.

Despite these limitations, the essay is relevant to the literary field and provides an intersection of myth, science, and literary modernism. It opens the door for further questions rather than closing it.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the three essays in *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method* by A. Owen Aldridge provide integrative approaches to comparative studies in the twentieth century. Levin's "France-Amérique: The Transatlantic Refraction" reveals the complexity of the Franco-American cultural and literary relationship. The essay demonstrates that the cross-cultural exchange of ideas between Europe and America is shaped by adaptation, reinterpretation, and intellectual influence rather than direct imitation. Levin illustrates how the meanings of American literature and ideas are transformed through French philosophical perspectives and traditions. At the same time, American literature was significantly influenced by the French literary and critical legacy. Ultimately, the essay highlights transatlantic cultural relationships and exchanges as processes built upon cultural dialogism and reinterpretation. Transatlanticism demonstrates both the richness and the limitations of cross-cultural understanding.

Jarrett-Kerr's "The Conditions of Tragedy" offers a binary division between Greek "necessity" and Christian "possibility" to show the redefinition of tragedy in light of modern philosophical skepticism. He explores the rejection of traditional tragic structure in the French anti-novel, especially in the work of Robbe-Grillet. Robbe-Grillet's work pushes literature away from the illusion of personality and meaning that do not match the evolving universe. Such attempts illustrate cultural anxiety about the human condition. His essay adds depth to the comparative literature field in showing the negotiation between past and present in dealing with tragic structures that reflect human suffering in the modern world.

Ong's essay "Evolution, Myth, and Poetic Vision" shows that modern poetry is part and parcel of the modern age and cannot be comprehended in isolation from evolutionary and scientific thought that redefined the modern world. His classification of poetic response into aesthetic moment, nostalgia, and acceptance of linear change offers a useful framework for understanding the literary works of Joyce, Whitman, and Eliot. He shows that the crisis of modern poetry lies in the rejection of a non-evolving world. However, his Anglo-American focus limits the applicability of his claim to non-Western works. Yet the essay ends with an open-ended question about the future of poetry in an evolving cosmology to widen the horizon for further discussion not only in literature but also in ecology.

Together, the three essays show the importance of the comparative field in dealing with cultural dialogism, genre transformation, and the relationship between literature and science. Those 1960s essays provide an insightful bridge between historical



comparative methods and current arguments in transatlantic studies, science-literary interaction, and theory.

## References

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