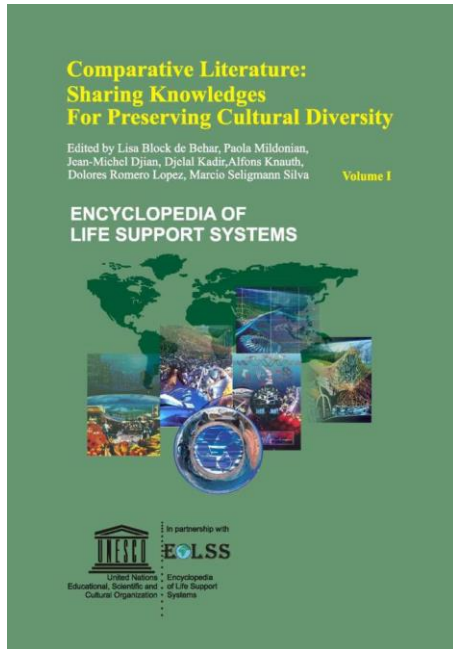


COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: SHARING KNOWLEDGES FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL DIVERSITY



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CONTENTS

Preface

xvi

VOLUME I

Introduction: Language, Literature, and Human Sustainability **1**
 Djelal Kadir, *Department of Comparative Literature, Pennsylvania State University, USA*

1. The Nature of Knowledge
2. Language and the Specificity of the Human
3. Literary Uses of Language
4. Critical Reflection on Diverse Modes of Literary Expression
5. Comparative Literature As Meta-Narrative
6. Literature as Perpetual Present

Comparative Literature and the Plural Vision of Discourse **4**
 Zhang Longxi, *City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

1. Introduction
2. Aesthetic Historicism, French Influence Study, and American Parallelism
3. The Discourse of Triumph and of Crisis
4. A Global Perspective and Plural Vision
5. Conclusion

The Notion of Comparing and the Meeting of Fragments **14**
 John T. Kirby, *Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA*

1. The One and the Many
2. The Ages of the Verbal Arts
 - 2.1 The Three Ages
 - 2.2 Classics and Classicizing
3. Unity and Fragmentation
4. Toward a Semiotics of Number
 - 4.1. One, Two, Three
 - 4.2. Questions to Ponder

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives of Literature **30**
 Anders Pettersson, *Department of Scandinavian languages and comparative literature, Umeå University, Sweden*

1. The concept of literature
2. Oral literature
3. Literature in ancient civilizations with writing
4. Literature in classical literary cultures I: China
5. Literature in classical literary cultures II: India, Europe, and Arabic culture
6. Changes in European societies and literatures around 1800
7. Modern literary culture: from around 1800 to the present
8. Literature: its mode of operation and its value
9. The study of literature
10. Conclusion

Languages and Cultural Dialogues **48**
 Remo Ceserani, *University of Bologna, Italy*

1. Introduction

2. Cultures.
 - 2.1. Definitions of Culture
 - 2.2. Culture and Civilization
 - 2.3. The Differentiation of Cultures
 - 2.4. Popular Culture (Folklore): Peasants, Women, and Children
 - 2.5. Cultural Models
 - 2.6. Ethnocentrism. Equality and Cultural Relativism
 - 2.7. Conflicts
3. Languages
 - 3.1. The Tower of Babel
 - 3.2. The Discussion on the Origin of Languages. From the Perfect Universal Language of Eden to the *Confusio Linguarum*
 - 3.3. From a Monogenetic to a Polygenetic Hypothesis on the Origin of Languages
 - 3.4. The Return of the Monogenetic Hypothesis According to Recent Biological and Archaeological Research
 - 3.5. Theoretical Definition of Language
 - 3.6. Sociolinguistics
4. Dialogue
 - 4.1. A philosophy of Dialogue: from Plato to Martin Buber
 - 4.2. Dialogue in Narrative form: Mikhail Bakhtin
 - 4.3. Dialogue among Cultures and Languages. The gift of Tongues Bestowed on Jesus' Apostles
 - 4.4. Translation
5. Conclusion

Hermeneutics Need and the Inevitability of Comparing

66

Reingard Nethersole, *Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa*

1. Understanding and Comparing as Basic to the Human Condition
 - 1.1. Hermeneutics, a Definition
2. Brief History of Interpretation
 - 2.1. Reconstruction of Meaning: How Do We Read?
 - 2.2. Construction of Meaning: How Do We Communicate?
 - 2.3. Deconstruction of Encrusted Meaning: How do we shape understanding?
 - 2.4. The Hermeneutical Circle
3. Brief History of Comparative Literature
 - 3.1. Recognizing Otherness (the Stranger)
 - 3.2. World Literature and the Trade in Cultural Goods
4. Reading the World – Connecting Cultures
 - 4.1. Fore-understanding and pre-judgment
 - 4.2. Horizons of Understanding
5. Globalism: From Disjuncture to Conjuncture

The Tradition of Comparison of Arts

84

Marcio Orlando Seligmann-Silva, *UNICAMP, Brazil*

1. The humanistic *doctrine of ut pictura poesis* and the issue of the competition between the arts
2. Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone
3. The French classicism: transforming painting into scripture
4. The sensualistic rhetoric, the crisis of the universal logos and of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition.
5. The birth of the Aesthetic theory
6. The Laocoon or the critic of metaphor "literalization"
7. Conclusion: from romanticism to the mediatic turn

Plastic Arts and Literature

116

Anne-Marie Christin, *Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7, France*

1. Introduction
2. The Iconic Origins of Writing

3. From the Ideogram to the Alphabet
4. Figures of the Alphabet
5. From the Art of Memory to *Ekphrasis*
6. From the Era of the Manuscript to that of the Printed Book
7. The Return to Ideograms
8. Literature and Painting in China and Japan

Relations between Literature and Music in the Context of a General Typology of intermediality **133**

Werner Wolf, *University of Graz, Austria.*

1. Introduction: The Multiplicity of Musico-Literary Relations as a Typological Challenge
2. Extra- vs. Intracompositional Intermediality and Scher's Typology of Musico- Literary Relations
3. Variants of Extracompositional Intermediality and Their Relevance to Word and Music Studies
4. Variants of Intracompositional Intermediality and Their Relevance to Word and Music Studies
5. A General Typology of Intermediality Illustrated With Musico-Literary Examples
6. Beyond Typology: Perspectives of Musico-Literary Research

Literature and Film: Modernity – Medium – Adaptation **156**

Steven Ungar, *Department of Cinema & Comparative Literature, The University of Iowa, USA*

1. Introduction
2. Toward a Critical Convergence of Modern Literature and Film
3. Adaptation in Theory and Practice
 - 3.1. From Text to Film
4. Conclusion: No End in Sight

Literature and the Other Arts: The Point of View of Semiotics **173**

Winfried Nöth, *Universität Kassel, Germany*

Lucia Santaella, *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil.*

1. Introduction: The Semiotic Framework
 - 1.1. The Semiotic Framework of Verbal and the Other Arts
 - 1.2. Three Semiotic Matrices of Literature and the Arts
 - 1.3. Literature as a Secondary Sign System *par excellence*
2. Poetry, Language, and Music
 - 2.1. Orality of Speaking and Singing
 - 2.2. The Musical Substratum of Speech and Poetry
 - 2.3. Rhythm, Language, and Literature
 - 2.4. Poetry, Music, and their Sister Arts
3. Aesthetics of Writing, Visual Form, and Literature
 - 3.1. The Poetics of Writing, East and West
 - 3.2. Visual Poetry between Literature and the Graphic Arts
 - 3.3. Ideographic Writing: Diagrams of Thought
4. Literature and the Visual Arts
 - 4.1. Differences between Literature and the Visual Arts
 - 4.2. Common Ground between the Verbal and the Visual Arts
 - 4.3. Intermedial and Transmedial Relationships
5. Conclusion

Literature, Exact and Biophysical Sciences **190**

Isabel Capelo Gil, *Faculty of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal, Portugal*

1. Science and literature: theoretical debates.
2. Debating the claim to truth: past to present trends
 - 2.1. Science in literature: from *Sophia* to the Two Cultures
 - 2.2. Science and literature as value-systems
3. Elective affinities: Literature and the sciences

- 3.1. Writing science
 - 3.1.1. The writer as scientist
 - 3.1.2. The scientist as a literary character
4. Conclusion

Narrative in History / History in Narrative **209**

Franco Marengo, *Department of Linguistic Science and Comparative Literature, University of Torino, Italy*

1. Introduction: narrative and history in the allied paradigms of historicism and realism
2. The alliance breaks up
3. “Postmodern” – and its critics
4. Conclusion: literature and the present-day aporias

Anthropology, Comparative Literature, Ethnic Literature and Cultural Diversity **217**

David Treuer, *Associate Professor of English, The University of Minnesota, USA*

1. Introduction
2. Anthropology as the Study of Man
3. Myth and Folklore–The Writing of Culture and Cultural Writing
4. Culture and Counter-Culture
5. Comparative Literature, Ethnic Literature, and the Canon
6. The Death of the Author and the Life of the Culture
7. Text as Native Informant and Anthropologist

Literature and Psychoanalysis **229**

Stéphane Michaud, *University of the Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, France*

1. Introduction
2. Freud and literature
3. Reading with Freud
4. Freedom of allegiance
5. Final remarks

Literary Imagination: Criticism and Research **235**

Micéala Symington, *Université de La Rochelle, France, France*

1. Introduction
2. The Romantic movement
3. Literature, Imagination and Literary Symbol: The Imagination as a Means of Highlighting or Constructing Symbols
4. Literature, Imagination and Image: How the Imagination is linked to the Representation of the Absent Object
5. Imagination, imaginary and anthropology
6. The Imaginary and Mythcriticism
7. Psychoanalysis
8. Imagination and critical power (the Surrealists).
9. Imagination and cultural codes.
10. Imagination and transgression, imagination and reading.

Epistemological Frontier Criss-Crossings **246**

Vladimir Biti, *University of Zagreb, Croatia*

1. The rise of disciplinary knowledge: setting epistemological frontiers
2. The emergence of Literary Studies: redrawing of frontiers
3. First challenge: the idea of Comparative Literature
4. Second challenge: the project of Cultural Studies
5. The Frontier as a shared/sharing condition of identity formation

Comparative Literature, Criticism and Media **262**
 Lisa Block de Behar, *Universidad de la República, Uruguay*

1. Comparative Literature, an Institutional Activity
2. The Color of Theory
3. Falls, Between Myths and Histories
4. Falls, Ends and Prophecies Between Poetics and Politics
5. Comparative Literature as a Natural Disposition
6. More than Comparative Literature, Comparative Reading
7. Comparative Literature in Relevant Times

Index **285**

About EOLSS **291**

VOLUME II

Literature and Mass-Media-The Spectacle of Writing **1**
 Biagio D'Angelo, *Universidad Católica Sedes Sapientiae, Lima, Peru*

1. At First Sight
2. The Ubiquity of Literature, or Writing, Lies and Videotapes
3. On Photography —Off Photography
4. From Opera to Soap Opera
5. A Museum of Mimesis: The Popular Archive
6. A New (Visual) Literacy

The Impact of Media on Literature **19**
 William Egginton and Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Johns Hopkins University, USA.*

1. Introduction
2. Current Media Theory and Media Studies
 - 2.1. Origins of Discipline
 - 2.2. New Media Theory
3. Historical Examples
 - 3.1. Oral Transmission
 - 3.2. Pictography
 - 3.3. The Andean Khipu
 - 3.4. Manuscript
 - 3.5. Print
 - 3.6. Theater
 - 3.7. Photography
 - 3.8. Moving Image
 - 3.9. Radio and Television
 - 3.10. The Digital
4. Conclusion

Criticism and Media **32**
 Norberto Cambiasso, *Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina*
 Alfredo Grieco y Bavio, *Buenos Aires, Argentina*

1. Media, Modernism and the Social Conditions of Art: A Diagnosis by Meyer Schapiro
2. Towards Literary Formalism: Partisan Review
3. Mass Culture and its Discontents: Clement Greenberg
4. Critical Theory and Culture Industry
5. Theories of Pure Art in a Mass Society

6. The Autonomy of Art
7. Organicism in Literary Criticism
8. The Institution of Literary Criticism: F. R. Leavis
9. The Fetishism of Text: the New Criticism
10. Functionalism and the fallacy of Gesellschaft
11. The 'Other' American Sociology: The Loss of Individual Autonomy
12. The Decay of the Aura and Reproduction Technologies: Walter Benjamin
13. Avant-Garde as an Alternative to Modernism
14. The Celebration of Mass Culture: Marshall McLuhan
15. The Decline of Modernism
16. The "New Sensibility" and the Children of Marx and Coca-Cola
17. Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Advanced Capitalism
18. The Imperial Pretensions of Culturalism and the Devaluation of Nature

Criticism and Education

52

Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli, *Philosophy of language and General Linguistics at the University of Bari Italy*

1. Introduction: The Context of Education Today
 - 1.1. Homologation and Reproduction of the Identical
 - 1.2. The Contradiction between Development, Competition, Employment and Protection of The Environment
 - 1.3. Innovation as Destruction
 - 1.4. Education for a Free-Time Society
 - 1.5. Criticism and Adaptation in University Education
2. Two Meanings of "Global Communication"
 - 2.1. Global Semiotics and Education
 - 2.2. Education of the Semiotic Animal to Responsibility
 - 2.3. Global Semiotics and Criticism
3. Criticism, Responsibility and Dialogue from a Semioethic Perspective
 - 3.1. Modeling, Communication and Dialogue
 - 3.2. Otherness, Listening and Hospitality
4. Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs In the Educational Process
 - 4.1. The Field of Global Semiotics
 - 4.2. The Typology of Human Modeling is Pivotal in Education Theory and Practice
 - 4.3. The Evolution of Cognitive Processes and Language
 - 4.4. Education to Organic Conceptual Competence
 - 4.5. The Bond among Sign, Body, Mind, and Culture
 - 4.6. The Natural Learning Flow Principle
5. Literary Writing
 - 5.1. Education to Inventing
 - 5.2. Language, Speech and the Play of Musement
 - 5.3. Criticism and Education from a Global Perspective
 - 5.4. Writing and Literature
 - 5.5. Education and the Critique of Dialogic Reason
 - 5.6. Literary Communication in the Era of Global Communication from the Perspective of Comparative Literature

Alternative Forms in the Distribution of Literature

82

Sergio Di Nucci, *Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina*

1. Ends and Means: Under the Empire of the Book
2. Past and Future Alternatives: The Forms of Sensoriality from Oral to Hypertext
3. The Persistence of Oral Traditions
4. 'Alternative' and 'sub-literary': The uses of illiteracy 'Special interest' Literature
5. 'Alternative' as Marginal: From Counterculture to Counter-Canon
6. When Books are banned: Samizdats and other Desperate Alternatives
7. Blogs and the Forthcoming End of the Book Era

Cultural Development Information and Knowledge 97
 Martin O'Connor, *Centre d'Economie et d'Ethique pour l'Environnement et le Développement (C3ED), Université de Versailles, France*
 Serge Latouche, *Université de Paris-Sud (Faculté Jean Monnet), France*

1. Introduction: Culture and Development
2. Land, Labour Power and Economic Progress in the "West"
3. Doubts about "Development" as the Universal Destiny of Humanity
4. Culture and the "Informal"
5. Outlook: Hopes for Humanity

The View of Nature in Japanese Literature 117
 Hajime Abe, *Faculty of Humanities, Toyo Gakuen University, Nagareyama, Chiba, Japan*

1. Introduction
2. Four Types of the View of Nature
3. The State of the View of Nature in Pre-modern Japanese Literature
 - 3.1. The Ancient Age (to 794)
 - 3.2. The Classical Age (794-1185)
 - 3.3. The Medieval Age (1185-1600)
 - 3.4. The Early Modern Age (1600-1867)
4. The Response to Modernization
 - 4.1. The Meiji Period (1868-1912)
 - 4.2. The Taisho and Early Showa Period (1912-1940s)
 - 4.3. The Postwar and Economic Growth Period (since 1950s)
 - 4.3.1. The Experience of Unfamiliar Nature
 - 4.3.2. The Recognition of the Indigenous Human-Nature Relations
5. Conclusion

Towards a Sustainable Civilization and Society: A Socio-Cultural Ecological Perspective from Japan 144
 Koyu Furusawa, *Dept of Socio-Economic (Ecological) Networking, Faculty of Economics at Kokugakuin University, Tokyo, Japan*

1. Introduction
2. What is sustainability?
 - 2.1. The Awakening of a Symbiotic and Harmonious Society
 - 2.2. Characteristics of 20th Century Civilization
 - 2.3. A Critique of the Previous Development Pattern
 - 2.4. Two Approaches Toward Sustainability
3. A historical perspective on Japanese agriculture and resource management
 - 3.1. Sustainable Agriculture and Civilization
 - 3.2. Socio-cultural Evolution - Ecological Life in the Rice Plant
 - 3.3. Violence of Modern Agriculture Blending with the Green Revolution
 - 3.4. Organic Agricultural Movement and Alternative Direct Marketing
 - 3.5. Alternative Activities - Changing the Consumption Pattern
4. Transformation of Modern Development
 - 4.1. Critique and Turning Point in the Modern Japanese System
 - 4.2. Questions About the Modern Production System
 - 4.3. The Need for More Comprehensive Perspectives for a Sustainable Society
 - 4.4. Socio-economic Sector and Sustainable Society
5. Conclusion - making a new global strategy

Cultural Justice 169
 Marion Maddox, *Religious Studies, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand*

1. Justice as Cultural

2. Justice between Cultures
 - 2.1. Rights for Groups, or Only for Individuals?
 - 2.1.1. Group Rights and Affirmative Action
 - 2.1.2. Group Rights and Cultural Difference
3. Cultural Justice and Colonial Societies
 - 3.1. Cultural Justice and Citizenship
 - 3.2. What Rights Do Cultural Groups Need? Critiques of Differential Cultural Rights
 - 3.3. Cultural Justice and Non-Ethnic Cultural Minorities
4. Culture, Justice, and Globalization
5. Conclusions

Impacts of Contemporary Developments on General and Comparative Literature 184

Dolores Romero López, *Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain*

Alckmar Luiz dos Santos, *Universidade de Santa Catarina, Brazil*

1. The Search for Interdisciplinarity
 - 1.1. The Scientific and Technological Process
 - 1.2. The Resistance of the Literary Field
 - 1.3. An Intermediate Proposal: Interdisciplinarity
2. The Impact of Technology and Literature's Interdisciplinarity
 - 2.1. Technology at the Service of Literature
 - 2.2. Digital Literature
 - 2.3. Literary Theory about Literature in Hypertext
 - 2.3.1. Collectivity: The Collaborative Writing
 - 2.3.2. The Death of the Author
 - 2.3.3. The Rupture of Linearity
 - 2.3.4. The Demystification of the Canon
 - 2.3.5. The Democratization of Art
 - 2.4. A New Paradigm for a New Humanism?
3. Conclusions and Challenges

Technologies and Literatures 201

Amelia Sanz, *Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain*

1. Which Technologies for a Globalized World
2. What's Really New?
 - 2.1. Substituting or Overlapping Supporting Materials
 - 2.2. Accessing to Literatures
 - 2.3. The Anxiety of Reading and Writing
3. Which Literatures and Which Technologies for a Sustainable Development?
 - 3.1. Technological Migrations
 - 3.2. A Risk or an Issue for Canonical or Marginalized Literatures
4. Which Technologies for a Globalized Literature
 - 4.1. Cognitive Challenges
 - 4.2. Identities Challenges
5. Conclusion

The Relevance of Distinctive Kinds of Supporting Materials 210

Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, *Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain*

1. Socio-Cultural Dimension: Knowledge Preservation and Different types of Supporting Materials.
2. The Economic Dimension of Text Supporting Materials
3. The Institutional Dimension: Textual Mass Production and Control
4. Textual and Global Issues: the Local within the Global
5. The Environmental Dimension: Preservation of our Natural Capital
6. Conclusion

Interactivity and Open-Ending (Literary Works) 223

María Goicoechea de Jorge, *Department of English Literature, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain*

1. Introduction
2. Definitions
3. Interactivity and Reading
4. Narrativity and Open-Ending
5. Conclusion

Virtual Trips 234

Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, *Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain*

1. The Epistemology of the Journey: Narrating our Life Stories
2. Journeys, Representations and Technology
3. Embodied or Disembodied Communication, Identity and Intercultural Awareness
4. The Educational Dimension of Virtual Trips and Other Forms of Net Technologies
5. Conclusion

Translatio Studii and Cross-Cultural Movements or Weltverkehr 250

K. Alfons Knauth, *Ruhr University of Bochum Germany*

1. Terminology and Basic Conception
2. The Traditional Concept of *Translatio Studii*
 - 2.1. *Translatio* as a Cultural Figure
 - 2.2. Political, Cultural and Religious *Translatio*
 - 2.3. The Threefold Concept of *Translatio Studii*
 - 2.4. *Translatio Studii* as Cultural Tradition
 - 2.5. *Translatio Studii* as Cultural Transfer and Colonialism
 - 2.6. *Translatio Studii* as a Shift of Hegemonic Culture
 - 2.7. Symbolic Configurations of *Translatio*
 - 2.8. Linguistic *Translatio*
3. The Redefinition of *Translatio Studii* in the Context of Cross-Cultural Movements or *Weltverkehr*
 - 3.1. Principles of Modern, Postmodern and Postcolonial *Translatio*
 - 3.2. The Figure of the Reverse World and its Prefigurations
 - 3.3. Intercontinental Shifts and Fragmentation
 - 3.4. The Figure of the Internet
 - 3.5. The Network of Cross-Cultural Institutions
 - 3.6. Methods and Media of Cross-Cultural Learning
 - 3.7. Literary Multilingualism as a Paradigm of Cross-Cultural *Translatio*
 - 3.8. Restrictions of Cross-Cultural *Translatio*
 - 3.9. Cultures as Mutual Translations and Metaphors

The Weltverkehr or World Traffic of Books: Modern Anthologies of World Poetry 268

Monika Schmitz-Emans, *Ruhr University of Bochum, Germany*

1. "Weltliteratur" ("World literature"). Goethe and a programmatic concept of literature
2. *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern (Voices of the Peoples in Songs)*. Herder's collection of poetry and folk songs
3. Constructing 'world poetry' in the 20th century I - Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Museum* (1960, 1979/80)
4. Constructing 'world poetry' in the 20th century II - Harald Hartung's *Luffracht (Air Freight)* (1991)
5. Inventing 'world poetry' in the 20th century III: Joachim Sartorius' *Atlas* (1996)
6. Constructing 'world poetry' in the 20th century IV: Raoul Schrott's *Die Erfindung der Poesie (The Invention of Poetry)* (1997)

Index 289

VOLUME III

Contemporary *Weltverkehr* or World Traffic of Comparatist Scholars: World Congresses of the International Comparative Literature Association (Icla) 1Fridrun Rinner, *Université de Provence, Aix-Marseille Aix-en-Provence, France*Roland Issler, *Rhenish Friedrich Wilhelm University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany*

1. The Notion of Cross-Cultural *Weltverkehr* (World Traffic and Communication) and its Meaning for Comparative Literature
2. Basic Principles of the ICLA / AILC Activities
3. Medial Aspects of *Translatio Studii* and the *Weltverkehr* (World Traffic and Communication) of Books and Scholars: The ICLA / AILC Congress Proceedings
4. Geographical Aspects of *Translatio Studii* and the *Weltverkehr* (World Traffic and Communication) of Scholars: The ICLA Congress Venues
5. Linguistic Aspects of *Translatio Studii* and the *Weltverkehr* (World Traffic and Communication) of Scholars
6. Personal Aspects of *Translatio Studii* and the *Weltverkehr* (World Traffic and Communication) of Scholars: The Multinational and Transnational Character of ICLA / AILC Members
7. Theoretical and Thematic *Translatio Studii* through the ICLA / AILC Congresses
8. Pedagogical Aspects of *Translatio Studii* and Cross-Cultural *Weltverkehr*
9. Conclusion

Africa and the *Weltverkehr* / World Traffic of Tongues, Books, and Scholars 24Susanne Gehrmann, *African Literatures and Cultures at Humboldt-University, Berlin, Germany*Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, *University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria*

1. Introduction
2. Historical Sketch of Intercultural Relations between Africa and the World
3. Intercultural Mediators from and for Africa
4. Intertextuality and Comparative Scholarship in African Literatures
5. The World Traffic of Writers and Scholars: Migration, Exile and Transnational Scholarship
6. International Recognition of African Literatures: Awards and Prizes
7. Book-fairs, Publishing and Circulation of African Literatures
8. Concluding Remarks

Literary Multilingualism I: General Outlines and Western World 41K. Alfons Knauth, *Ruhr University of Bochum, Germany*

1. Introduction
2. Traditional Mono- and Multilingualism
 - 2.1. Purism and Barbarism
 - 2.2. Babylonian Confusion
 - 2.3. Medieval and Humanistic Diglossia
 - 2.4. Intertextual Multilingualism
 - 2.5. Intratextual Colingualism
 - 2.6. Macaronic Mixtilingualism
 - 2.7. Occidental and Oriental Multilingualism
 - 2.8. Courtly Multilingualism
 - 2.9. Pentecostal Multilingualism
 - 2.10. Modern Diglossia
 - 2.11. National and International Multilingualism
3. Post/Modern Multilingualism
 - 3.1. Simultaneism and Globoglossia
 - 3.2. Primitivist and Futurist Multilingualism

- 3.3. Panlingualism
- 3.4. Onomatopoeics
- 3.5. Futurist Multilingualism and Fascist Monolingualism
- 3.6. Postwar Internationalism
- 3.7. Poetic Holography and Zerography
- 3.8. Fictional Holography and Zerography
- 3.9. Conflictive Multilingualism
- 3.10 Mass-Media Multilingualism
- 4. Conclusion

Literary Multilingualism II: Multilingualism in India

65

Amiya Dev, *Calcutta University, Kolkata, India*

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Indian Multilingualism
- 3. Indian Bilingualism
- 4. Bilingual Texts in India
- 5. Conclusion

Culture, Civilization, and Human Society

78

Herbert Arlt, *Scientific Director, INST, Vienna, Austria*

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Basics
 - 2.1. Methodology
 - 2.2. Multiple-Identity
 - 2.3. Processes
 - 2.4. Places
 - 2.5. Differences
 - 2.6. Shared Languages
 - 2.7. Pluralism
 - 2.8. Violence
 - 2.9. Knowledge
- 3. Cultural Histories
 - 3.1. Nature
 - 3.2. Beginnings
 - 3.3. Military Revolution
 - 3.4. World Wars
 - 3.5. World Conferences
- 4. Memory
 - 4.1. Languages/Signs
 - 4.2. Archives/Libraries
 - 4.3. Geographica
 - 4.4. Education
 - 4.5. Museums
 - 4.6. World Wide Web
 - 4.7. White Spaces
- 5. Time
 - 5.1. Concept: Time
 - 5.2. Timetables
 - 5.3. Epochs
- 6. Today in the Clothes of Yesterday
 - 6.1. Science
 - 6.1.1. National Academic Disciplines
 - 6.1.2. Orientalism
 - 6.1.3. Open Society
 - 6.1.4. Mythology
 - 6.2. Education

- 6.2.1. Learning Basics
- 6.2.2. Advanced Education
- 6.2.3. Academic Education
- 6.3. Politics
- 7. Languages and Concepts of Culture
 - 7.1. Encyclopedia of Multilingual Cultural Sciences
 - 7.1.1. The Words
 - 7.1.2. The Contents
 - 7.2. Culture Concepts of the EU Member States
 - 7.3. Culture Concepts and UNESCO
- 8. Cultures and Civilizations
 - 8.1. Civilization: Different Concepts
 - 8.2. Civilizations as Forms of Organizing Cultures
 - 8.3. Civilization and Power
- 9. Human Societies
 - 9.1. Different Meanings
 - 9.2. Surviving, Mobility, Exchanges
 - 9.3. Lifestyles (Nomads, Agriculture, Town)
 - 9.4. Culture
- 10. Powers and Everyday Life
 - 10.1. Organizations of Human Beings (Tribes, Slaves, Feudal States, Modern States)
 - 10.2. Culture and States
 - 10.3. UN and UNESCO
- 11. Conclusions
 - 11.1. Material
 - 11.2. Methodology
 - 11.3. Agora
 - 11.4. The Future
 - 11.5. Cultures, Civilizations, and Human Societies: Interactions

- 1. Introduction
 - 1.1 Materialist theory of cultural history as non-linear
 - 1.2 Sensuous nature of materialist theory of knowledge: hearing and speech
- 2. Brief history of concept of cultural unity from Herder to Lenin
 - 2.1 Problems with postulating "unity" as a goal
 - 2.2 The question of sources
 - 2.3 Problems with a historicist approach to culture
 - 2.4 The difficulty of translation
- 3. Historical definitions of cultural diversity
 - 3.1 Rousseau and the romantic tradition
 - 3.2 Reasons for diversity
- 4. Contemporary definitions of culture
 - 4.1 Cultural relativism versus cultural hegemony
 - 4.2 Culture as process
 - 4.3 Prevalence of visual-spatial root-metaphors in Western science
 - 4.4 Preserving ancient cultures in museums and research institutes
 - 4.5 Tourism as a means of preserving memory of a culture
 - 4.6 Simultaneity of the dissimilar
- 5. Hybrid cultures
 - 5.1 Minority and majority cultures
 - 5.2 Individual self-determination and cultural determinacy
- 6. Promoting a culture of mutual respect for cultural difference
 - 6.1 The problem with cultural "centrism"
 - 6.2 Confronting the "abject" as basis for culture of respect

Culture in Contemporary Civilization

132

Kathleen Thorpe, *University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

1. Introduction
2. The Role of Custom and Tradition in Contemporary Civilization
3. High and Popular Culture
4. Multicultural and multi-ethnic societies
5. Cultural diversity and globalization
6. Culture and Identity in Modern Civilization

Cultural Interaction

144

Herbert Arlt, *Scientific Director, INST, Vienna, Austria*

Introduction

1. Knowledge
 - 1.1 Reproduction
 - 1.2 Innovation
 - 1.3 Formations
 - 1.4 Change of Conditions
 - 1.5 Importance of Virtuality
 - 1.6 Constitution of Cultures
 - 1.7 Destruction and Development
2. Monuments
 - 2.1 Static
 - 2.2 Mobility
 - 2.3 Depth of knowledge
 - 2.4 Pop art
 - 2.5 Multitude
3. Tones, Images, Narrations, and Scripts
 - 3.1 Tones
 - 3.2 Images
 - 3.3 Narrations
 - 3.4 Scripts
 - 3.5 Usage
 - 3.6 Interaction
4. Forms
 - 4.1 Old Form of Trade
 - 4.2 Markets
 - 4.3 Meetings
 - 4.4 Performances, Installations
 - 4.5 WWW
5. Distributions
 - 5.1 Education
 - 5.2 "Super market"
 - 5.3 TV
6. Frames
 - 6.1 Tribes
 - 6.2 Feudal Systems
 - 6.3 Nations
 - 6.4 Transnational Organizations
7. Perspectives

Cultural Integration and National Originality of Cultures

167

Maria Wuketits, *University of Vienna, Austria*

1. Introduction
2. Some Basic Issues
 - 2.1. Culture

- 2.2. Ethnicity
- 2.3. Nationality
- 2.4. Culture, ethnicity, and nationality as identity forming factors
- 3. Cultural Integration and Differentiation
 - 3.1. Universalism and particularism
 - 3.2. Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism
 - 3.3. Forms of cultural integration and differentiation
 - 3.3.1. Homogenization
 - 3.3.2. Syncretization
 - 3.3.3. Polarization
- 4. Culture in the Paradigm of Globalization
 - 4.1. Globalization - fashion, reality, or both?
 - 4.2. Globalization and culture
 - 4.2.1. Toward a global culture?
 - 4.3. Nationalism
- 5. Conclusion or the Current Utopia

Ecolinguistics

185

A. F. Fill, *Department of English, University of Graz, Austria*

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Theoretical basis of ecolinguistics
- 3. Ecology as Metaphor – the Haugenian paradigm
 - 3.1 Societal language contacts
 - 3.2 Linguistic and biological diversity
 - 3.3 Endangered Languages
 - 3.4 Individual language ecology
- 4. Language, Nature and environment – the Hallidayan paradigm
 - 4.1 Ecological critique of the language system
 - 4.2 Eco-critical discourse analysis
 - 4.2.1 The discourse of advertising
 - 4.2.2 Euphemizing discourse
 - 4.3 Critique of eco-criticism
- 5. Applications and future trends
 - 5.1 Applications in Haugenian ecolinguistics
 - 5.2 Applications in Hallidayan ecolinguistics
- 6. Conclusion

Cultural Knowledge for The Present and The Future

205

J. J. Slater, *Curriculum & Instruction, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA.*

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Cultural knowledge
- 3. Educating for dominant cultural knowledge
- 4. Community
- 5. Ecological solution finding
- 6. Conclusion

Social Programs of Poverty Alleviation

223

Graham Room, *Professor of European Social Policy, University of Bath, UK*

- 1. Introduction
- 2. Programs of Poverty Alleviation: An Overview
- 3. From Poverty to Social Exclusion: The New Agenda for Program Evaluation
- 4. A Framework for Program Evaluation
- 5. Individuals and Households
- 6. Individuals and Communities
- 7. Individuals, Communities and Countries

8. Conclusion

Virtues	251
<i>Rosalind Hursthouse, Philosophy Department, University of Auckland, New Zealand</i>	

1. Philosophical Background
2. Basic Normative Virtue Ethics
3. Familiar Virtues and Vices
4. New Virtues?
5. The Future

Index	265
--------------	------------

About EOLSS	275
--------------------	------------

Preface

Comparative literature: Sharing knowledges for preserving cultural diversity

Genesis and the importance of the theme subject

The inclusion of a section devoted to comparative literature in an encyclopedia on-line seems more than opportune—urgent. This is due among other circumstances to the impact of the transformations related to the increasing production, collection and diffusion of knowledge in an overwhelming present, accelerated by the incessant development and improvement of technological support. The unforeseeable unfolding of materials, the need to organize with precision its ungraspable affluence, the interminable contents that come from usual or unexpected places on the planet – anonymously or with proper names of difficult identification— deserve the effort to order them based on well- thought and out of rigorous criteria, adjusted to the purposes and procedures that an encyclopedia propitiates and requires.

In fact, the inclusion of a section of comparative literature dealing with literary studies in different and distant languages and cultures, with productions where different verbal, visual, auditory forms coincide or differ, finds in the wide range of encyclopedic categories, in the universality of their attributes, in their proper taxonomy, the natural field for a discipline that defines itself precisely by different versions of that same universal character.

There are many reasons to support the inclusion of this discipline in the space of EOLSS. It was Tania Franco-Carvalho who proposed its inclusion when she started her presidency of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA/AILC) and who promoted it with fervor until her death in 2006.

Insofar as comparative literature can embrace and conciliate differences, it is certain that the broad range of literary works contributes to sustain and strengthen cultural diversity which is a treasure of the human society. As a powerful medium of communication, entertainment, education, etc. it has an enormous influence on the other media of human expression and communication, as stated in the outline of this initiative.

Given this valuable plurality of activities, the inevitability of the comparative action and its importance to the vital functions, it is not surprising to see the consecration of an emblematic poet, writer and thinker utterly committed to the *Weltliteratur*, to universal literature, even in the realm where nationalist traditions were the strongest.

If in the XVIII century the monumental *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers* was presented by Jean Le Rond D’Alembert as the work of a society of “*gens de lettres*”, it is not surprising that comparative literature should be included in this new encyclopedia. With advanced aims and remarkable technological resources, EOLSS shares common aspects with traditional encyclopedic enterprises. In the particular case of comparative studies, the innumerable topics approached seem an outlandish aspiration, but it is feasible among the goals of an encyclopedia. The international vision inherent in literary comparatism, the global

interest of these investigations, the circulation of ideas, of poetic imagination and fiction, multiply as the different origins criss-cross. The practices of translation (to mention what it possibly is a paradigmatic example), the cultural contrasts that this task implies, the transformations, the displacements are movements that proliferate in the present and that comparison privileges.

The literary condition and the diversity of the knowledge that the sciences, arts and crafts favor give place to relations that comparison animates, revealing the bounds between disparate times, regions, languages, works forms, and disciplines, contributing to its consolidation. Like other inventions of human ingenuity that overcome distances and times, the invention of poems, of letters, of books, participates now in the profuse information to be found online, in growing sites, increasingly accessible from ever more small devices.

The presence of comparative literature in the encyclopedia offers the joy of gathering in the same object –printed or digital— knowledge and wisdoms, imagination and memory, of putting them into play, of discovering and confirming, in the overflowing variety of human creation, surprising affinities and oppositions that, preventing the isolation of the works, of their authors and scholars, prolong them, hopefully, towards a secure and sustainable future.

Description of the organization of the chapters

The theme of **Comparative Literature** is divided in six different sections or topics:

1. *Language, literature and human sustainability* formulates basic definitions of this field of study from theoretical, linguistic, historical and hermeneutic perspectives, considering the inevitability of comparing as inherent to human condition and as a way to connect cultures.
2. *Relationships among literature and other artistic activities and discourses* deals with the tradition of comparison from a general perspective and considering each one of them (plastic and visual arts, music, film and other arts), within a framework where aesthetics, semiotics and intermediality are at stake.
3. *Comparative literature and other fields of knowledge* deals with the relationships between the specificities of this disciplinary field and the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and psychoanalysis, as well as with specific epistemological challenges of the discipline and of literary research.
4. *Comparative literature, criticism and media* deals with comparative practices as a restitution of unity as well as a way for preserving literary diversity, with criticism, the spectacle of writing, the impact of media on literature, and with education as well as journals, reviews, alternative forms of literary distribution and censorship.
5. *Comparative literature in the age of global change* deals with the impact of technology on literature, especially comparative literature, with the relevance of different kinds of supporting materials, with interactivity, and changes that foster a globalized world where virtual trips make it possible to establish new intercultural relationships.
6. *Translatio studii and cross-cultural movements or Weltverkehr* deals with the traditional and contemporary forms of these cultural movements, with the traffic of

tongues, books, scholars, writers and with different forms of literary monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism in the Western World as well as in Africa and India.

Conclusions

Given the incidence of literary studies on the preservation of cultural assets, on the observation of their differences and coincidences, within the permeable framework of a present that favors the growth of these studies, it must be remarked that comparative literature is at the center of *transcendental* situations and actions. It *transcends* because of the importance of practices which have not been just curricular and because, by nature, it goes beyond boundaries, it extends. It is meaningful in itself and thanks to the interest of those who compare books, authors, languages, cultural communities all these entities transcend. They begin to exist, they come to life, they come into play in dialogues that tighten bounds, giving place to shared jurisdictions, to crossroads, to *common places* (in the Aristotelian sense of the expression). If literature encompasses all times (its various pasts are actualized in the present and projected towards the future), the same happens with the space which, by technological means that are multiplied and perfected with ever surprising speed, register, preserve, diffuse and multiply texts.

Just like biological reproduction ensures the continuity of a species, technological reproduction propitiates both this continuity and the sheer production of artistic or cultural works. If, since antiquity, there has been such a close relationship between art, science and techniques that they could not be told apart, the procedures available today thanks to state of the art technology contribute to the development of a discipline that requires them. Moreover, a reciprocal need is verified between the media and comparative openings which also require their apertures to achieve their reach, their dispersion, their strengthening. A temporal persistence crosses the history of cultures, of languages, of a literatures and a spatial extension, through the regions of the planet, through the accidents of a region, dimensions which, without forfeiting national expressions, conciliates them from a global perspective. This could be a way of avoiding the concentration of circles that, due to ignorance, indifference, or pride, exclude the productions originated in less known, less recurrent cultures, so often omitted.

Even the power that Internet unleashes, its mechanisms cannot always counteract forgetfulness or neglect. They exist and favor the possibility that literature as a component of culture, as the fountain of creativity and progress, should have a pivotal role in shaping the character of individual human beings and human society. We can glimpse hope in the possibility of ciphering in space, in perfect and repeated reproductions, the opportunity of overcoming flagrant or involuntary obstacles, exclusions, disregard, omissions. According to the new customs, norms, and interchanges that the Internet encourages, it might be possible - even without the intervention of governments, media or academia - to apply a welfare of sorts in which there would be no discrimination based in legal restrictions, in traditional prejudices - cultural or racial-, in the preponderance of figures of accepted authority, in the complicity of groups and lists, of privileged nomenclatures, those self-appointed gatekeepers who, instead of interceding, intercept.

With the incorporation of works originated from the best known and from the remotest places of the planet, works produced by different means – visual audiovisual, verbal, auditory, artistic and crafted, habitual and exceptional -, that digital turn that affects us all open up new perspectives for the sharing of knowledge.

There is a constant crisscrossing of texts linked to other texts, both within the framework of an encyclopedia and in the wider and boundless environment of the Internet. By intermediating, by conjugating differences between the different productions, by translating and introducing new and vital forms of saying, of thinking, of being different, they give place to a plurality of identities, to dialogisms, polyphonies, multilingualisms. So conceived, comparative literature makes of the interchange of knowledge – increasingly wider, more varied -, of the contrasts of diversity, reversibility or reciprocity of interests, of mutual understanding, a wide space for an emergent and necessary encounter.

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Lisa Block de Behar

Editor