COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: SHARING KNOWLEDGES FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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About EOLSS
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-Carvalhal 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