

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, CRITICISM AND MEDIA

Lisa Block de Behar

Universidad de la República, Uruguay

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Contents

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

Acknowledgements

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical sketch

Summary

The statute of comparative literature has been a subject of debate from the moment its practices were formalized into a discipline. However, comparing is an action inherent in human beings, one that neither thought and knowledge, nor imagination and dreams can avoid. An original tendency toward diversity disperses cultures, languages, communities, literatures, arts and the sciences that study them. Comparative practices aim at counteracting that dispersion, attempting to reconstitute a previous, inner unity, which is missed both in science and in different literary achievements.

1. Comparative Literature, an Institutional Activity

For several decades there has been considerable activity in the area of Comparative Literature, both in terms of publications and of Chairs, Departments and University programs where it has become a well-established discipline; furthermore, discussions that challenge this academic field, doubting it as an established discipline, actually reinforce it.

Whereas this state of affairs favors the possibility to reconsider this subject, it alternates at present with the access to knowledge on-line or through the channels of an encyclopedia, offering a point of entry to surfers, readers, and scholars who trust the contributions of the social sciences and humanities with the main purpose of guiding humanity towards a secure and sustainable future. This is not the first time that the intent to extend life and culture in time or space by means of the encyclopedic organization of knowledge has predominated, according to procedures that organize the vastness of its contents without avoiding the difficulties of an elusive definition: "I've never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is," says Peter Brooks asking if "Must

we apologize” for this? (1995). He is not alone in his uncertainty and, as comparative practices became institutional, Brooks’ impression has borne witness to puzzlement in the face of the dispersion and divergence of their object and methods, considered from the perspective of that division and diversity.

Why and whence so much uncertainty? Whereas the definition of literature has been widely discussed and its statute and future questioned, its production is linked not only to the greater prestige of writing and recording but also to cultural monuments of vast and noteworthy traditions.

Despite lamentations and prophecies, literature enjoys better health than the criticism that announced its extinction, and it continues to uphold the references that help to consolidate it. In fact, in the expression *comparative literature*, the adjective does not provide greater concision but rather it adds an additional conflictive aspect and displaces the more problematic question to *comparative*.

It might seem redundant to point out that the sheer fact of comparing, to confront coincidences and differences, implies in general a natural, primary gesture which yields a knowledge that consolidates its premises of plurality and diversity; it gives place to the analysis and understanding of a world that, despite marked tendencies towards an increasingly dominant globalization, is manifold and multifarious. The very origin of *com-pare* underscores a duality: (at least) two parts, a pair of objects substantially or superficially different. Derived from *comparare*: “to couple together, to form in pairs,” from *com-* “with” + *parare* “to make equal,” at the very least a recognized difference is necessary, in order to assimilate those common and opposed traits.

In “*Actualité de la littérature comparée : Refus du pouvoir absolu de la littérature et reconnaissance des sphères*,” Jean Bessière (2008) said that, when it comes to comparing, one would have to speak of literatures instead of a single literature, since this singularity would weaken a literary activity strengthened only by the double stakes involved in comparison: variety, diversity, complexity, plurality, and above all an opening to the study of topics that involve disparate worldviews, works, and times. Without pretending to proclaim slogans, it would be necessary to insist that exclusivity is irrelevant if it means exclusions; that definitions are not interesting if they are *finite* or involve a single jurisdiction. If one had to assign a field to comparative literature, that exterior and contradictory space would lay between or beyond national literatures or, like a contradictory juridical fiction, in an extraterritoriality that takes place: a more imprecise than conventional place where similarities and differences are equally put into play. Globalization and information technology gave rise to further new problems. It is universally believed now that solutions for these problems lie not in the isolated disciplines but in the regions of intersection among them.

The breadth of such an endeavor, its unaccountable targets, and the challenge of deleting limitations require, more than in other subjects, definitions that direct reflection and counteract the temptations of simplification, of futile picturesque impressions, of opportunisms of power. These slips break away from a knowledge that, in its origins, was closer to philology, to linguistics and other related humanistic disciplines than to other eventualities, among them politics, which both divides and decides. The act of

comparing requires vast and varied knowledge, approached from different perspectives on the analysis and interpretation of works, authors, periods, societies, and mainly the diversity of languages which – after the loss of the presumed original unity—only manifest themselves idiomatically, historically, situated in a time and a place. This very fate lends every tongue (as the proper and private faculty of a community) to translation and, approaching the particularities of one language to those of others, it attempts to suspend them and to reconstitute or redeem the unity/universality of its origins. Instead of the use of the historical mother tongue and the subjection to its eventualities, Haroldo de Campos (1955) yearned to articulate the *mothertongue*, an *idiomaterno*, a language at the margins of time, close to eternity, an edenic, adamic language, that may have existed before time, Babel and languages. Apropos translation, a task that is also a renunciation, Marina Tsvetaeva affirmed the attraction that the variety of languages exerts on poetic creativity, a vocation that the poet discovers in departing from the restrictions of a single and exclusive mother tongue, and it does not matter whether it is the poet or the language that declares:

“Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That’s why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French, he cannot be a French poet.”

A yearning for “comprehension” which, like the word itself, conciliates reunion and understanding, approximation and intelligence, universal knowledge and the imaginative incidences of multilingual practices, such as those which abound in “*El poeta araña y el hilo de la vida. Un centón ‘filológico’*” (Knauth 2006). Both wise and witty, these practices place their stakes on poetry between play and humor -- and win.

Literary comparison is located at the crossroads of different languages, either between different peoples and nations that speak the same language, or between those who speak different languages within the same nation in a given period or in several periods, attending to traditional forms or to the experimental quests of the literary and artistic endeavors, among other unforeseeable oppositions. In a conversation with Eckermann, Goethe remarked that “poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men.” As if he were speaking with our contemporaries, he added:

“National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model.”

2. The Color of Theory

Among cultural transformations, which do not take place at the margins of history, comparative literature allows for a theoretical approximation that attends to verbal and visual works alike, to their integration and interchanges, to biological, ethnic, sociological, urbanistic, political, theological, multicultural and aesthetic phenomena, stemming from old and new sources, without overlooking their differences. Insofar as it introduces those antecedents that research requires or the precision that justifies

academic responsibilities, the raise of comparative literature has expanded even further the confines required by disciplinary convention.

The advent of mass media, rapid communication, and information-processing technology has brought about the unprecedented merging and overlapping of cultural traditions branded as the postmodern condition. Academic institutions are responding with a new emphasis on cultural studies, or on language-learning within the framework of an understanding of the political, social, and literary world within which the language operates.

Beyond cultural studies and their militant discourses, the relationship with biology is becoming increasingly interesting, and to say that they are *vital* would be redundant. An experience and exhibition at The Walters Art Museum, in collaboration with the Zanvyl Krieger Mind-Brain Institute at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (2010), accounts from a neuroaesthetic perspective for the need to study as concomitant entities the “Beauty and the Brain: A Neural Approach to Aesthetics,” revealing an integrative concern that prevails nowadays, together with the expectation that neurology might provide the instruments to develop a budding investigation. Similar to other fields or disciplines, comparative literature allows for a second degree of knowledge, for speculations closer to theoretical inquiries than to relationships of a different nature. The willingness to recognize or to establish links between works, authors, and times is conducive to thought, to analysis, criticism, to the construction of a unity from a model, of a concept that might encompass the universal and the accidental variations that particularize it.

No knowledge can do without thinking, but unlike other kinds of knowledge, comparison entails a theoretical vision, or more than one, tending towards a universality that can counteract the stifling strategy of particular groups and interests, with the aim of contemplating a world that is still wide but, thanks to Internet, is less and less foreign.

Since information processes consolidates and promotes criteria of cultural diversity, of transnationality, the criss-crossing of disciplines and the real and virtual means of communication that involve them, the interaction between authors, works, dissimilar traditions, their instantaneous rather than accelerated and increasingly available diffusion, have transformed the academic landscape. Despite being universal the field of comparative literature, *l'état de choses* concerning the balance of priorities and delays, the influence of political and economic factors, of sects, of people, those *small worlds* (the title of a novel that deals with these topics) fragment knowledge channeling its currents, its drifts and its stagnations.

Comparative Literature today is not just a set of practices (e.g., comparing texts in different languages, comparing literary and “non-literary” texts, comparing literature and other arts) but also a perspective on literature as an activity involved in a complex web of cultural relations. Comparative literature has gradually become the comparative study of critical theory, as well as of the literary texts themselves, and this is what makes possible an osmotic relationship of comparative literature with the study of national literatures: all national literatures, today, share general problematics and

theoretical concerns for the discussion of which comparative literature may be a meeting-ground, in theory as well as in practice.

However, the unlimited dimensions of such an undertaking on the one hand, and on the other the extravagance of a whole world at hand or of pocket miniatures – as one speaks of pocket books but much smaller—contrast too much. Doubly *digitalized*, the horizons that started out as frontiers but which, being planetary, are no longer boundaries; the unforeseen events fostered by circulation, the numerous but not always auspicious interactions, signal the infrastructural excesses of communication that habit makes invisible, the ubiquity of material and virtual translations and immediacy, that alibi of *disintermediation* produces rather than lack of mediation, always illusory, just an evident lack of delay, since mediation, even when scarce, always takes place. Through repetition, intermediation becomes *immediation* or it becomes senseless, losing direction, reason and presence. Immediate insofar as it is instantaneous, it startles; by surprise, by anonymity, it manages to conceal the media which, invisible, immediate, are veiled but still remain in a medium which is in the middle but which, hidden among other media, remains unnoticed.

These mediatic excesses endanger the comparison-comprehension of distributed materials, of innumerable broadcasts that cannot contain the multiplying productions, the consecutive fragmentation, the dispersion of the fragments, the overlapping and collision of areas, the displacement of the confusion in conflicts, slips and abuses which extend beyond borders, about which fiction and reflection warn us nowadays. Comparative literature attempts to channel these warnings found in criticism (not necessarily academic), appealing to its own intermediary function, without emphasizing its exercise.

Once the object of veneration, categories are ritually attacked (“categories be damned”), as are chronologies or theories, which have fallen into oblivion. Diminished or remembered only “now and then” (Hillis Miller’s title, 1991), associated to the discredited *vertiges et prodiges* of analogy (Bouveresse, 1999), demonized in books, in jokes, in police chronicles, the resistance to theory or the decadence of its statute in scattered and arguably productive studies *soi-disant* cultural, led to other decadences.

This is no longer the old “*Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Invenzione*” or the debates between history and theory but an instance in which the decline or disaggregation of theories and their methods vanish in the face of the expansion of other studies. A journalist recently said “Dogmas no more” and, inadvertently, proclaimed yet another one. For years, methods and theories have been neglected, and even before their principles raised objections and their systems were buried, without subscribing to the canon and its controversial decrees, Sherlock Holmes declared with calm and precision:

“Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

¿Facts or things? ¿Facts or theories? ¿Theories or interpretations?

Perhaps there might have been too much insistence on the impossibility of knowing facts, of the concepts that define them or the interpretations that transform them, but in

spite of this insistence, in spite of the different versions, the truth is that facts exist, as lies do, mainly if facts are adapted to preaching and to ideologies. However, and regardless of the remote and common origin of ideas, systems do not radiate in the same way in treatises (by Nietzsche, by Wittgenstein and their epigones) and in fiction, and when Proust deplores the theories that can be noticed in literary works he compares them to those gifts from which the price tag has not been removed. There are numerous examples of this increasing mistrust or reciprocal hostility between reality and theory, between imagination and logic, even though, almost indiscernible, there is no lack of alternatives between hostility/hospitality, at once conflictive and reciprocal, laid out in a single work: “Los sueños tenían razón;” dreams had reasons, or they were right – and so was the poet.

3. Falls, Between Myths and Histories

Falls were not scarce in the Bible, in myths or in history. Not long ago, (not only) in Germany, there were several falls: of cities, of truths, of a wall that didn't make a century shorter but precipitated it between successive falls, some of them still to come. A single century consented to the greatest atrocities perpetrated by totalitarianisms that pretended to be diametrically different, but which were similar when they committed them, like the same image reflected on two mirrors. Later, there were economic mergers, political, cultural mergers, open passages between regionalized countries, favored by imperceptible satellite communications, by the progressive mutation of reality into virtuality and of society into spectacle, of anonymous, unidentifiable entities, without physical seats but in powerful sites. In a story that takes place in the future, where the narrator, tired of utopias, irrupts into a time without chronology or history, events don't happen, or nobody cares if they do. Neither does it cause alarm that human beings, deprived of their proper names, have abolished the printing press; museums have disappeared, as have libraries, men and books. The narrator anticipated the advent of a fantastical world, an entity without identity, without languages, voices, stages, borders, memories, past, illusions. Just as in our world, in actual reality or allegedly, reality and actuality are not distinguished in the fleeting present that cannot tell them apart. Foreseen by a philosopher between the two great wars, the falls recorded by a century marked by two crosses were decisive, and that duplicated stigma was not understood according to the mystic and tragic allusions with which events resgnified them.

At the very beginning of the 21st century, the whole world witnessed an attempt which, given the unforeseeable brutality of the crime, seemed unbelievable even though it was not the first one: the criminals crashed the airplanes imitating the cowardice of those who, using a mythical horse, an artifact filled with soldiers, brought down the towers of a trusting town.

“O Troy Town! [...] O Troy's down/Tall Troy's on Fire!” lamented Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It is hardly news that not only legends consent to fraud, to the deceits of scam and the damages of lies. “Occidentalism” and other –isms that preceded it, destroy the hopes of unity-universality that were in their origins the inspiration of comparative literature. Later, profoundly classical, it would return in the statements of writers who, like Édouard Glissant, without deviating from the observed diversity, confirm:

“l’objet le plus haut de la poésie était le monde : le monde en devenir, le monde tel qu’il nous bouscule, le monde tel qu’il nous est obscur, le monde tel que nous voulons y entrer. (...) Pour moi, la poésie et la politique étaient intimement liées par cette référence au monde” (2007: 77).

In the face of so many vicissitudes, the prevailing theory at present seems to state that theories do not prevail, as if conspiracy theories started by conspiring against theories, and there is no lack of tautologies or mirrored phrases that separate reality from their conceptual images.

Neither the enforced adaptation of a work to theoretical disquisitions nor the neglect of reflections that contribute to their in-depth knowledge, ensure the universality of methods that implement a hermeneutics which actualizes, acceding to a truth that is safe from the particular accidents that history, geography, biology, portray in detail. In celebrating the attention that comparative literature pays to the theoretical work “produced in other languages and cultures, and what holds the diverse endeavors of comparatists together,” as Peter Brooks remarks, a “lingua franca” of sorts develops. It is a jargon that articulates a grammatical morphology in which the prefix *inter-*abounds, in an age when art itself has become *entertainment* (like the redundant information about global, social, or personal disasters that fill the leisure time of the users and deform or conform opinions *sub-specie* of news). Some particularities of the lexicon among which criss-crossings, cross-roads, cartographies, routes, and border crossings abound, sketch a disciplinary field that is itself a crossroads, and at the same time regards this crossroads as its specific object in an intellectual landscape that lends itself naturally to comparison, or perhaps, cannot avoid it. Rather than keywords they are topics—confusing in the same utterance the importance of places and subjects—targets and contexts that comparative literature studies in a contemporaneity that extends, instantaneously, in several directions, in several senses, consenting to the paraphernalia of notions from linguistics, rhetoric, from other disciplines that are increasingly indispensable, even to refute them, both in hermeneutic practices and in the heuristic procedures required by literary, aesthetic, cultural analysis.

4. Falls, Ends and Prophecies Between Poetics and Politics

Like the end of a spectacular performance, among the *grandes finales* which the 20th century has abundantly provided, besides the much announced and revoked end of poetry, besides the debates concerning the decadence of art or the asserted end of history so loudly and often prophesized, some stunning talk about the failings and even the death of theory is being heard. Numerous bells are tolling. A debate, an agony that prolongs a variegated diversity risks the universality required by thought, reducing the general references required by comparison to an old and worn nationalism that dares not speak its name, disclosing a version of a preposterous romanticism. As happened in the past, this reduction privileges notions of nation and birth, of political and biographical incidents, of parochial concerns (in both the secular and ecclesiastical sense of the word), categorizing and studying social differences according to biological or ethnic features, races, or genders, without recalling Byzantine discussions of angelical antecedents: no sex or one sex; two, three but for now, no more?

Political strategies discuss or discriminate the pertinence or property of nationalities or identities, economic compartments paralyze sectors of society, relegating and neglecting them, no attention paid, their voices unheard. A law of gravity that seems to apply beyond Physics legislates over the globe in an age of serial falls, as if the pride of knowledge that caused the first Fall had once again fragmented the trunk of the Edenic tree into firewood and knowledge into splinters, whereas a falling tower scattered an allegedly perfect language into different tongues. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unspeakable destruction of the towers in New York triggered a series of other falls --and not even this iniquity was new. In attempting to rethink critical paradigms in the humanities after 9/11, with special emphasis on language and war, the problem of créolization and the mapping of languages “in-translation,” shifts in the world canon and literary markets, and the impact of enhanced technologies of information translation, I have tried to imagine a program for a new comparative literature using translation as a fulcrum (Apter 2006: 244).

Years ago, after the end of World War I, after the defeat of Germany and the imposition of a territorial punishment, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* echoed from its very title the tremendous blows the country had received. We have already alluded to this book, first published between 1918 and 1922, very soon translated into Spanish and considered, rather adversely, as “the noisiest intellectual feat of the past few years.” In the prologue to that translation, Ortega y Gasset starts by saying that:

“In the past few years we hear everywhere a monotonous lamentation about the failed and finished culture. Philistines of every tongue and every denomination bend with fake grief over the corpse of that culture, which they have neither engendered nor nurtured.”

Spengler’s volumes have deserved animated discussions; even though this is not the place to continue them, it is worth noticing the suitability of a title that duplicates the fall – accidental, occidental—as if, by infelicitous play on words, the fall was located only in the West. The terms of the title reciprocally translate each other and become intermingled in a unity that unites Occident (the point where the sun sets, about to disappear) with decadence. This presumption is illustrated by Lat. *Occidere*, “fall down, go down,” as if the history of words determined the history of events rather than just naming them, or the existence of *cases* which, not by chance, are also a fall. The Lat *accidere*, “happen, fall out, fall upon,” from *ad-* to + *cadere*, “fall” (in Spanish, *ocaso*, *acaso*), from the *casus*, “a chance” and “a falling,” from *cas-*stem of *cadere*, “to fall, sink, settle down, decline, perish.” It’s useful to remember, just in case, to keep these lexical coincidences, among others, recorded in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

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Biographical sketch

Lisa Block de Behar is professor of Communication Analysis at the Universidad de la República (Uruguay). She earned a Ph. D. in Language and Literature at the École des Hautes Études (France) and is the author, among others books, of *Medios, pantallas y otros lugares comunes* (Katz, 2009); *Jules Laforgue ou les métaphores du déplacement* (L’Harmattan, 2004); *Borges. The Passion of a Endless Quotation* (Sunny, 2002) and *A Rhetoric of Silence and Other Selected Writings* (Mouton, 1995). She was awarded a Humboldt Prize in 2001.