

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: SHARING KNOWLEDGES FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

**Lisa Block de Behar**

*Universidad de la República, Uruguay*

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## 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 (or at least hopefully) 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. (See *Introduction: Language, Literature and Human Sustainability*)

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,*” [Present time of comparative literature: Refusal of absolute power of literature and recognition of spheres] 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’*” [The Spider poet and the thread of life. A philological cento] (Knauth 2006). Both wise and witty, these practices place their stakes on poetry between play and humor — and win. (See *Translation Studii and Cross-Cultural Movements or Weltverkehr*)

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* [the state of the arts] 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. (See *Comparative Literature in the Age of Global Change*)

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*” [Contest between Harmony and Invention] 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.

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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.