

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND OTHER FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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### Summary

Comparative methodology was consolidated between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the age of the first globalization. It was an offshoot of empiricism and expressed the desire to give systematic order to the data of scientific experience, whether it be mathematical logic, biochemistry or the human sciences. This order was intended to replace the taxonomies of Aristotelian logic and rhetoric.

However, in having to consider the laws of the unfolding of history, Vico denounced the inadequacy both of ancient rhetoric and modern science, from whose cooperation was to rise a new science, philology, capable of assisting the *truths* of philosophical knowledge with its *method*. Therefore, philology would become the forebear of more recent comparative criticism.

Traditional comparative literature developed rather in the heart of French positivism on the model of the other sciences. It had a factual view of literary phenomena. It studied influences and analogies between documented facts and drew an evolutionary picture of literary movements, currents and genres.

Introducing the notions of literariness, function and system, the formalists were the first to try to define the specific nature of the literary fact. But they left two fundamental problems unsolved, as was immediately pointed out by Tynjanov, Bakhtin, and Wellek: the problem of history and that of interpretation, which, starting from Nietzsche, is central to every kind of knowledge. The conflict of interpretations spread through

reader-oriented theories of hermeneutic-phenomenological, sociological and structuralist derivation. But it was mainly the contributions of post-Lacanian psychoanalysis (the rhizomatic theories) and anthropology (particularly performance studies) that provided a variety of extremely flexible tools for the deconstructing practice of postmodern criticism.

Literary symbolism is now interpreted in an interdisciplinary perspective and comparative criticism is guided by an aesthetic of complexity that always aims at an understanding of the Other. These multiple comparisons, which are played out on differences, have a profound ethical and political significance.

## 1. Comparison and Knowledge

The general title of the thematic sector: *Comparative Literature: sharing knowledge for preserving cultural diversity*, is an interpretation of the original proposal made by the EOLSS Commission: *The role of Comparative Literature in human life and welfare*.

It is *an* interpretation – *not the only one* possible, but certainly the one most deeply rooted in the current reality of this discipline. Its use is intended to restrict the vast ethical, political and philosophical perspective opened up by the notion of *human life and welfare*. The positive role of that part of literary criticism that goes under the name of Comparative Literature consists in working in accordance with the diffusion of knowledge, respecting the diversity of cultures which should find one of its most complex and nuanced manifestations in literary languages. This proposal, although epistemologically sustainable, does not entirely resolve the deontological instance which involves life and well-being – that is, the happiness of man. This disturbing and intriguing object remains in the background.

Indeed, a reflection can be made *on how and what* is compared, but *why* we compare is taken for granted. This second question (*why*) is in the hypothesis of comparative criticism, but is not assumed directly in its theses.

Nevertheless, recognizing that comparative criticism has a primacy in the field of linguistic and literary disciplines and at the same time emphasizing the importance of literary knowledge at a time of profound crisis, some questions of substance (1) and method (2) arise:

(1) They concern:

- a. The nature and role of the literary experience and its controversial ethical and educational responsibility, already present in platonic philosophy;
- b. The means (media, institutions and persons) of which comparative criticism can avail itself for a diffusion intended to ensure the multiple diversities of a mixed, highly mobile, multi- and trans-cultural world that also (and not contradictorily) conforms more and more to a global perspective;
- c. The consequent need to redefine the role of tradition, not as an abstract notion, but through the dynamics of the most diverse cultural traditions in their relationships with these four elements: diversity, sharing, preservation, diffusion.

The diversity/sharing, preservation/diffusion pairs are complementary: they lead to centrifugal and centripetal processes rooted in the reality of the globalized world; enunciating them, however, is not enough to resolve the contradictions of a discipline that is expected (if possible) to reassign a socio-cultural role to the literary experience.

(2) But questions of no little importance also arise on the level of method. They concern *the specificity of the 'comparison'* in the context of literary criticism, philology and linguistics, but also the human sciences and information and communication technologies. Comparison can refer to extremely generic or rigorously specific cognitive processes. So the difficulty in the term comparative literature has always lain in the qualifier 'comparative', and certainly ignorance of this difficulty or uncritical adoption of the label have not improved the knowledge and growth of the discipline. Thus, the rapid (albeit controversial) development of comparative literature in recent decades does not exempt field scholars from continually considering its interpretive procedures – in didactics and in research – or from questioning the reason for its past and present epistemological choices.

It is no easy task. If comparison is not to be considered as a generic activity but as one method among others to produce knowledge, comparative criticism must take on different methodological models: it must face the 'reality' of 'literature' and renounce all specificity of criticism: in short, comparatists must engage themselves in a practice of suspicion that is as profitable as it is troublesome.

Some difficulties deriving from typical interpretive procedures also extend to the study of national literatures; today not only comparative literature, but also national literatures are still indebted to positivist historicism and/or idealist historicism, historical materialism and the sociology of literature, formalism (Russian, but not only) and structuralism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, the hermeneutics of reading and understanding and its multiple applications, from the phenomenological proposals of the aesthetics of reception (Iser, Jauss) to the more behavioral and sociological reader-oriented analysis (S. Fish), from genetic to rhizomatic theories (Deleuze and Guattari *Mille Plateaux*, 1980).

All these critical readings are based on comparison, or rather, on different (often opposing, and in any case not always assimilable) comparative methods. If the awareness that comparative literature has developed in their analysis seems livelier, this is due not only to the variety of the texts it examines, but also to the more extended and prolonged methodological comparison it engages in with other disciplines (linguistics and philology, but also philosophy, the exact sciences, the natural sciences and the human sciences) and with other languages and other aesthetic experiences in the domains of music, figurative arts and, more generally, visual arts.

Comparing is not only a very common and widespread human activity nor the free choice of a point of view. The comparatist does not stop at textual analysis, but always questions what goes beyond the literature, the *articulations of the context* and the cognitive result that is produced by the comparison of *different epistemological environments* and between *different languages*. He/she consequently proposes tools that are more suited to a radical interpretation of the 'crisis' of literature in the current world,

in its relations with the sciences, technologies and arts. He/she emphasizes the need to profoundly renew and decipher definitions, positions or counter positions, starting from the most changeable, such as the *literature / culture* pair that was so active up until 20 years ago (A. Marino *Comparatisme et théorie de la littérature*, 1988); this pair has now become extremely complex and intriguing, but not so much to the benefit of a dialectic clarification of the two terms, as to their necessary retreat from postmodernism and their necessary development into what has been called post-literature.

The post-modern in its interest in parody, pastiche and mimicry has been exercised in the specific discourse of the various visual arts, in the rhetoric of literary discourse and in the breaking of the paradigms of musical discourse. What now goes under the label of post-literature expresses the needs of a period marked by an aesthetic of complexity and profoundly implicated in the interdisciplinary dialogue. It is a world that moves between multiple contingencies, multiple languages and multiple means of diffusion and communication; it is marked by plasticity, metamorphosis and comparison between different and interfacing disciplines, and it continuously demands a synthesis between text and context, body and mind that can be verified only in an empirical environment.

Two basic aspects of comparative literature are confirmed in it: *empiricism* and the necessary broadening of research into the relations between text and context, the emphasis of *contextual roles*. The history of comparative literature as a discipline shows that it has always been open to these solutions.

## 2. Margins of the Crisis

(1) Since a plurality of semiotic systems governs our knowledge and our individual and collective imagination, literature no longer occupies the heart of cultural polysystems, and certainly does not seem the most suitable tool for 'globalizing' the knowledge, dreams and thoughts of contemporary man. Numerous languages and stimuli, multiform and in constant change, tend to undermine the specificity of the *literary field* that was clearly defined by the sociology of literature in the mid-1970s, and had been active since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the dialectic pertinences of the different artistic fields (Bourdieu *Les règles de l'art*, 1992). The languages of communication, along with those of persuasion and pleasure, have long ceased to belong to literature. Literature has difficulty retaining its place even in the educational system, which is moreover one of the most conservative, besieged as it is by technological knowledge and action. On the other hand, some of these observations could also be extended to the exact sciences, which in turn are forced to cede the field to technology.

These observations are concerned with the quality of life in the globalized world, with human welfare, which is not only an ethical, political and economic problem, but also an anthropological one and closely concerns the fate of man and the planet. It is no mere chance that many leading economists – in particular those from the south of the world, such as Amartya Sen, Jagdish Bhagwati, Néstor García Canclini, André Urani, Hassan Zaoual and Alvin Y. So – attribute to culture (and consequently to literature) a fundamental role in an integrated economic project. For some time international control bodies have no longer been rating the progress of a country on the sole basis of its GDP, but on various parameters that contribute to social happiness and quality of life (Zupi

2004). The economy is now inclined to value the dynamics of the non-profit and extends its attention to the role played in society by sentiments like affinity, compassion and cooperation. Emotions and affections that have always not only been represented, but have an active function in the aesthetic experience of literature, music and the arts, are found to be far from extraneous to the dynamics of economics. After all, this has been shown since the eighteenth century in the tradition of economic studies: Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is now cited by many economists, in particular the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, as much as, if not more, than the *Wealth of Nations*.

(2) Nevertheless, in its specificity, be it methodological or disciplinary, comparative literature also reveals its own peculiar 'weakness', which must however be regarded as promising: the territory of comparative criticism seems less and less defined, but also less circumscribed. Comparison with the human sciences makes the tools of literary comparison more complex and more refined, but also helps us to penetrate the more obscure areas of aesthetic experience. The frontiers between literature, visual arts and music are redefined, but so are the functions and purposes of anthropology, psychology and historiography. And not only is the relationship of these fields with human language critically reviewed, thanks to the complexity of the linguistic act on which literary practice rests, but so are the rules of their individual descriptive languages. This is, moreover, an experience that in many cultures comes from afar and enjoys an openness that allows it to be adopted in a dialectic and productive form in the multiculturalism of the current world.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Paola Mildonian** Chair Professor of Comparative Literature at Ca'Foscari University (Venice) from 1980. She has written over a hundred essays on the following topics: methods and issues in comparative literature; classical tradition in modern and postmodern literature; theory and history of literary

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