

The Center and the Margins

ABSTRACT: In this article, we propose a reflection about two recent histories of literature, the *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* (2010) and the *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* (1993–2010). In the first, which is spatially/topographically oriented and has a revisionist purpose, Portuguese literature emerges as (geographically) decentered and (temporally) fragmented. The second offers, from a critical standpoint, a summary of all the knowledge accumulated through the historiography of Portuguese literature. Apropos of both, we question the possibilities of connection among space, history, and literature.

KEYWORDS: literary geography, lusophone literatures, the center and the margins.

Literary history has been experiencing a process of critical review in recent decades, with renewing trends originating from various sectors. In one of the latest issues of the electronic journal *Acta fabula*,¹ there is an intense reflection about the renovation projects of literary history in France, in particular about *The French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (McDonald and Suleiman), wherein the rereading of the history of French literature is suggested from a world/global perspective, taking into consideration its interaction with other international cultures from the Middle Ages until the contemporary world of “francophony.” It is a revolutionary history that breaks away from the nationalist logic and the idea of continuity that constitute the background of traditional literary histories, thus emphasizing circulation and exchange across the planet.²

This tendency toward reading and interpreting literary works in a transnational/global perspective is one of the major guidelines of literary historiography in the United States. For instance, Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, editors of *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007), claim that American literature is transnational, something that is visible in the multiculturalism of a presumed homogeneous American canon. Additionally, they assume that one cannot justifiably study American literature in isolation in the era of globalization. Bearing this perspective in mind, they root their analysis

in its connections with West Africa, Eastern Europe, Iran, Iraq, India, China, Mexico, and Australia.

These new histories fit into the transnational turn, which characterizes the main reforming guideline of present-day literary historiography. On the other hand, the debasement of the "great narratives" of modern times (Jean-François Lyotard) and the spatialization of time and of historiography in postmodernism (as mentioned by Fredric Jameson) have been reflected in the primacy conferred to the spatial dimension, particularly in the fields of postcolonial studies and comparative literature. It is in fact legitimate to speak about a (re)invention of "literary geography," resulting from the shift of literary studies from a temporal framework (i.e., literary history) toward a spatial model whose scale has become worldwide/global.

This connection, which relegates to a secondary position the traditional temporal/chronological perspective, has a productive effect, as observed by Moretti: "Geography is . . . an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth" (3). Upon this assumption lies his proposal to create a "literary geography": "Making the connection between geography and literature explicit, then—mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible—will allow us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us" (3).

To some extent, this proposal corresponds to the "production of space" (2000), as theorized by Henri Lefebvre. Literary history, inasmuch as it is linked to the representations of space, which are coded practices bound to knowledge and power (political, economic, and epistemological), plays a key role in the production of literary spaces and the corresponding representations. Indeed, romantic geopoetics and historical poetics used to link literary production to the national spaces and even came to establish a literary cartography for Europe that opposed northern literatures to southern literatures. The recent reappearance of the concept of world/global literature is connected with the process of globalization, and in particular with the internationalization of the literary market.

The *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*,³ an innovative exercise of literary historiography, fits mostly into this framework, starting with its revisionist purpose, which is accomplished through the use of a geographic/topographic model.⁴ In this work, the Iberian Peninsula is conceived as a(n) (arranged) literary space, with a complex plurality of cultures, languages, identities,

nationalities, and populations (including nomadic, refugee, and migratory), in its connections with other spaces such as the American, European, African, Mediterranean, and Atlantic.⁵ The result is a kind of map of the literary space of the Iberian Peninsula:

- Cities, cultural centers, and enclaves:
 in Castille, (metonymy for) Spain;
 in the “historical nationalities” (enclaves) and in their cultural
 centers: Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia.
- Cities, cultural centers, and peripheries (*extrapeninsular and insular*):
 the construction of the literary city in lusophone Africa;
 the south of Spain;
 the Canary Islands;
 the Atlantic lusophone islands: Cape Verde, Madeira, and the Azores.

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this comparative history is not as much “to trace a thorough itinerary of the different literatures” as it is to provide an understanding of the Iberian Peninsula as a complex and dynamic network of interrelations (2010, xi). Hence, great relevance is assigned to the issues of multilingualism and spoken language, to the connections between the time frames and the literary intersystems: “a decentralized and ‘multipolar’ approximation to the question being elaborated, resulting in the configuration of a literary map with defined contours by the end of six chapters” (xii).

It is nonetheless necessary to observe that the histories of national literatures, focused on a narrative (more or less teleological) ranging from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era, with their representative authors and their national canon, are deliberately absent from this work. That is the case of the Portuguese literature discussed, for instance. The geographical map has thus taken over history and replaced it. History can only be found in fragments, *apropos* of some themes, without the possibility of being arranged into an organic unity. Nothing here allows for a “history of Portuguese literature,” except for its absence. This changes everything, because it leaves a clear path for an “unthought” itinerary through Portuguese literature, in a transnational framework.

In this comparative history of the Iberian Peninsula, the choice for the primacy of geography involves the will to cross national boundaries. Therefore, it focuses on the study of the cultural centers (cities, enclaves, or peripheries), enabling a detour from the perspective of national territories and relegating “na-

tional literatures" to a secondary position. On the other hand, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are assigned far less relevance than the earlier periods (i.e., the Middle Ages) and the transnational perspective⁶ that preceded the forging of nation-states.

The innovative aspect of this work thus lies in its choice of a spatial explanatory model (geographic/topographic) over the chronological time of the traditional narrative (causal, organicist, and teleological), relying on a hypertextual-type discourse organization.⁷ The collective authorship of this new literary history underscores its heterogeneity, privileging multiplicity and microhistory to the detriment of the entirety of "great narratives." It thus comes close to what David Perkins has coined "postmodern" literary history: "Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense, it is not history" (60).

Indeed, the new comparative literary histories avoid a unified history and seek to associate the literary cultures with heterogeneous spaces, which is why they could be accused of not producing history. According to Perkins, this is a central issue concerning the possibility of literary history as a discipline and the great dilemma faced by every literary historian: "We must perceive a past age as relatively unified if we are to write literary history; we must perceive it as highly diverse if what we write is to represent it plausibly" (27).

In a famous study, Roland Barthes wondered about the feasibility of connecting history and literature ("Histoire ou littérature?"), and René Wellek went as far as to question the possibility of literary history as a discipline.⁸ Now, considering the new spatial models of literary historiography, we can redirect the question: to what extent is it possible to reconcile geography and literature; or, is literary geography possible? In other words, can literature be conceived without history?⁹

The examples of postmodern literary history to which Perkins refers¹⁰ are further characterized by a national framework of reference, identifiable for the connoisseur of the traditional literary histories. However, in the spatial model, the "nation" (the center) is deliberately marginalized in the name of the attention devoted to the "margins." In the Portuguese case, central attention is paid to the extrapeninsular peripheries (the national islands and Cape Verde; lusophone Africa). We are thus deprived of the temporal and national references that underlie the constitution of the history of Portuguese literature.

Without downgrading the merit of the spatial perspective, we must keep in

mind that literature has traditionally organized itself historically and on the discourse plane of literary history (national). Indeed, the matrix of literary history, of eighteenth-century origin, is linked to the "national literature" and structured around the idea of nation and national history. Literature itself emerged in connection with the European nation-states. Portuguese writers, like writers in other countries, have since Romanticism embraced the patriotic mission of founding a literature and a culture focused on the nation. Thereafter, and until approximately two decades ago, Portuguese history would become the central topic of Portuguese literature, which is particularly visible in a vast set of literary groups and movements that attempted to portray Portugal and offered solutions to regenerate the country from the decadence with which it was diagnosed (in particular, since Herculano). In recalling Romanticism, suffice it to mention the *Geração de 70* (group of rebellious Portuguese intellectuals committed to social and artistic reform), the *Neogarretismo* (literary revival inspired by author Almeida Garrett), the *Saudosismo* (literary movement inspired by nostalgia), the Portuguese Renaissance, the Lusitanian Integralism, and so forth.

Most of the time, these groups reacted sharply in periods of political sensitivity and played significant roles in widespread movements (often leading them) associated with political and economic crises and threats posed by foreign powers. In the 1890s, for example, formative events included the Ultimatum, the Republican revolution of 1891, and the crisis of the liberal state and its public finances. Aftershocks of such events and their effects on the literary community extended into the first decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, the First World War and the crises of the First Republic, among other factors, explain the increasing strength of the nationalism propagated by such literary figures.

In turn, modern literary studies, dominated by the discourse of literary history, became institutionalized in higher education and secondary education under the banner of the romantic concept of national literature, connecting itself in its origin and evolution with the concept of national identity, and in its ideological commitments with the modern nation-states. Literary history has thus contributed toward the modeling of the "awareness of national identity" (Moisan 1990, 66) in terms of ideology, ethics, civism, and morality. Therefore, the teaching system became harmonized with the nationalization of literature and intensified it. In Portugal, from 1895 to 1974, the syllabi and textbooks of secondary teaching reveal increasing nationalism and patriotism, as education

was deemed a factor in national regeneration. In this view, national literature, with its literary canon of great authors, proved to be a powerful instrument of socialization and training of young citizens according to the official image of the nation. From that perspective, literary history presented itself as a narrative that offered a kind of self-portrait of the nation (Neubauer). It was the connection established between literary history and national identity that defined the discipline's purpose throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹ Thus, despite the successive attempts at renewal, leaning more toward either literature or history, the model of literary history remained stable (national, based on a chronology and on a canon).

The culmination of these efforts is present in the recent *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* (expected to include nine volumes), edited by Carlos Reis and with specific editors for each volume.¹² The work is not intended, as claimed by the editor, to replace the traditional literary histories but rather to "undertake anthological-type collections" in order to provide the reader with "contact with different critical approaches on authors, works, periods and generations" so as to produce a "polyphony of critical voices that will stimulate the readers-students to utter their own critical discourse."¹³ This work is characterized by a spirit of remarkable openness while at the same time retaining the traditional periods, with their canonical authors. Therefore, it affords, within its own parameters, the range of critical thinking about the history of the literature produced over a century and a half.

The distance between *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* and *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* is immeasurable. The absence of Portuguese literature from the latter work contrasts with its tridimensional presence in *Critical History*. These polar examples attempt to illustrate the (im)possibilities of literary history and of the comparative geography of literatures. The spatial/topographic model of *Comparative History* shows us what "literature" (in a broad sense) might have been, but in a different political framework, implying the existence of a "literature" independent of nation-states. In reality, however, that was not the case. Despite its weaknesses, it is in literary history (with its diversity) that literature and Portuguese literature in particular find their space. We are left to ponder that a combination of the two models, geography with history, might offer an account of the unity and diversity, the identity and plurality, the continuities and ruptures, the national/local specificities as well as their

interaction with other literatures, with other ages and spaces—indeed, a model that would provide an account of the margins without transforming them into a new center.

NOTES

1. *Acta fabula*, January 13, 2012, <http://www.fabula.org/revue>.
2. See Jean-Louis Jeannelle, "Le global, le national & le planétaire," *Acta fabula*, Dossier critique: "Histoires littéraires," <http://www.fabula.org/revue/document6741.php>.
3. Edited by Fernando Cabo, Anxo Abuín González, and César Domínguez, 2010, vol. I.
4. This work is part of the comparative histories of the International Comparative Literary Association, the first of which was published in 1967; nearly thirty volumes have been published since (http://www.benjamins.com/cgi-bin/t_seriesview.cgi?series=CHLEL; accessed September 3, 2011). Its main goal is to create a transnational perspective for the literary cultures of vast regions. Its spatial orientation emerged in 1986 and characterized the latter volumes.
5. See Feldman 134–5.
6. In his review of this work, David Gies stresses this preference for prenatal eras: "Is this volume weighed more heavily on premodern languages and literatures than on more modern issues (which seem to leak in near the end)? Perhaps, but this might be a result of the fact that there existed more cross-fertilization of linguistic systems, more natural comparativist writing during a time when political and geographical borders were more fungible" (55).
7. The spatial/topographic model of this history is inspired by Mario Valdés and the work *Literary Cultures of Latin America: The Comparative History* (3 vols.), edited by Valdés and Djelal Kadir, which postulates the possibility of creating new literary and cultural spaces.
8. "Is it possible to write literary history, that is, something that is simultaneously literary and a history?" (Wellek 315).
9. "Is it conceivable to think of university scholarly study (*Wissenschaft*) of literature 'after history'?" (Bahti 1992, 292).
10. *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (Emory Elliott et al., 1987) and *New History of French Literature* (Denis Hollier, ed., 1989).
11. In the transition period from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Gustave Lanson maintained a belief in the scientific renewal of the humanities and the application of scientific rigor to literary history but further emphasized its civic, moral, and national dimension (1965, 56).
12. Vol. 1: *The Middle Ages*, by Aida Fernanda Dias; Vol. 2: *Humanism and Renaissance*, by José Augusto Cardoso Bernardes; Vol. 3: *Mannerism and Baroque*, by Maria Lucília Gon-

çalves Pires and José Adriano de Carvalho; Vol. 4: Neoclassicism and pre-Romanticism, by Rita Marnoto; Vol. 5: Romanticism, by Carlos Reis and Maria da Natividade Pires; Vol. 6: Realism and Naturalism, by Maria Aparecida Ribeiro; Vol. 7: From the End of the Century to Modernism, by José Carlos Seabra Pereira; Vol. 8: Modernism (unpublished); Vol. 9: From neo-Realism to Postmodernism, by Carlos Reis.

13. These quotes are taken from the "Introduction" by Carlos Reis, included at the beginning of each volume.

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