

## Comparative Literature in Brazil in the 1990s

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There have been studies in Comparative Literature in Brazil since the mid-twentieth century, when even a handbook in the style of Van Tieghem or Guyard was published by Tasso da Silveira (1964). Comparativism also was already present in the critical and theoretical reflections upon literature since nineteenth-century Romanticism. Nevertheless, the discipline's boom has occurred only since the 1970s, thus coinciding with the transformation that the discipline has undergone internationally, following the long hegemony of the Formalist perspective. At this moment, in which the discipline evolved from a cohesive and unanimous discourse to one that is more pluralistic, decentered and historically defined, it flourished with great vigor in Brazil and came to hold a special position within the scope of the discourses on literature. Since then, comparativism has continued conquering more space in the Brazilian academic milieu and has yielded important fruit. However, before we discuss the role that Comparative Literature has been playing in this context, we will proceed to a few comments upon the transformations that the discipline has experienced on the international level.

Initially marked by a historicist perspective based on scientific-causalist principles stemming from the historical moment and context in which it was formed, and subsequently by a predominantly formalist outlook (which, however, coexisted with dissonant voices of significant relevance), Comparative Literature celebrated its first century of existence amid intense debate, albeit sustained by certain pillars of distinctly ethnocentric coloring. Among these pillars, which remained almost unshaken until the 1970s, it is

impossible not to recognize a claim to universality for which the cosmopolitanism of comparative studies was often mistaken, and the apolitical discourse preached above all others by the so-called "American School," which dominated the field in the middle of the twentieth century.

Although these two types of discourse present superficial variations, they contain a strong common denominator—the hegemonic character of their construction—and it was upon this fundamental fact that a good deal of criticism toward traditional comparativism was based. In the name of a pseudo-democracy of letters, which proposed a general history of literature or a universal poetics aimed at developing a common instrument with which to approach the literary phenomenon regardless of specific circumstances, what comparativists (of predominantly Euro-North American origin) did was to extend to other literatures those parameters instituted from reflections on the European literary canon. The inevitable result of all this was the overestimation of a given system and the identification of this system—the European—as universal. Similarly, the idea that literature ought to be approached from an apolitical perspective, a notion we currently understand to be impossible, only served to camouflage the reaffirmation of one system's supremacy.

The challenge to this universalizing posture and the demythification of the proposal of apoliticization, which became a keynote of Comparative Literature during the 1970s, had different effects both on the hegemonic centers and on the focal points of comparative studies that might be considered peripheral. But a similar phenomenon could be verified in both contexts: the increasingly greater approximation of comparativism to issues of national and cultural identity. On the Western European/North American axis, the essential concerns were displaced onto ethnic or sexual minority groups, whose voices were heard with increasing strength, seeking public discussion for alternative forms of expression. Elsewhere in the world there were claims for a displacement of the gaze, so that one might focus upon literary questions from one's own *locus*. Preoccupation with literary historiography, theory and criticism remained relevant in both of the aforementioned contexts, but it came to be directly associated with everyday political praxis. Theoretical discussions about the search for universals ceased to have meaning and were replaced by localized questions that began to dominate the subject's agenda: problems such as the relationships between local and imported traditions, the political implications of cultural influence,

and the need for a revision of both the literary canon and the criteria for periodization.

This decentering that took place within the scope of comparative studies, now much more attuned to contextualized issues, greatly expanded the international and interdisciplinary character of Comparative Literature, which came to embrace a complex network of cultural relationships. The literary work or series could no longer be approached from an exclusively aesthetic perspective; as cultural products, it was necessary to take into account their relationship with other fields of knowledge. Besides, elements which until then had functioned as safe references in comparative studies, such as the concepts of nation and language, had been dethroned, and the traditionally established dichotomy between National and Comparative Literature was seriously upset. The linear perspective of historicism gave way to a multiple, mobile vision, able to account for specific differences, and it became imperative that literary series or sets be seen from a plural perspective that would consider such aspects.

The shift of gaze that occurred at the core of comparativism, which resulted from an awareness of the ethnocentric character that had dominated it in its previous phases, bestowed new life upon the subject. The result was a great effervescence in precisely those places that were situated in the periphery and that had now become fundamental sites in the international debate. In these places, including Brazil, where there is no sense of incompatibility between National Literatures and Comparative Literature, the other, dominant Eurocentric model has been increasingly questioned, and traditional paradigms have given way to rich and flexible alternative constructions, whose main preoccupation resides in articulating the perception of local cultural products in relation to the products of other cultures, especially those with which the former had maintained ties of subordination. When critics such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha challenge the systematic process of "inventing" other cultures, the repercussions are enormous and give rise to claims for the constitution of a literary history based on local tradition, the recovery of which became indispensable in places such as India, Africa and Latin America. The political element of comparativism is now not only consciously assumed, but even emphasized, and an imperative need arises for a review of the literary canon.

Central to Comparative Literature's current situation, the "question of the canon," as it has been designated, constitutes one of the most vital instances

of the struggle against Eurocentrism currently being fought in the academic milieu. To discuss the canon amounts to little more than an attempt to curb a value system instituted by the ruling groups that have legitimized individual opinions with a globalizing discourse. Courses on the "great books," for example, so frequently offered in Comparative Literature, have almost always been restricted to the canon of Western tradition (in reality, to the tradition of a few powerful European countries that maintain cultural politics of a hegemonic stamp), and have always been based on premises that either completely ignore all production outside of a certain restricted geographical radius, or touch only tangentially upon such production by including a symbolic number of its manifestations as a sort of concession. Reactions to this stance have arisen in many forms depending upon their origins. In countries at the "center," it is obviously the so-called "minority groups" who once again ask the main questions while, in peripheral contexts, the question of the canon has become a constant one, sometimes situated on the front lines of the process of cultural decolonization.

Large, complex and varied, the question of the literary canon exceeds the objectives of the present paper, as it could not be treated with the necessary care. But it should be mentioned that the question extends from the exclusion of the vigorous literary production of minority groups in the hegemonic centers and the stifling of a significant literary tradition in recently colonized countries such as India, all the way to problems of the specificity or non-specificity of the literary element, standards for an aesthetic evaluation, and the establishment of frontiers between constructs such as National Literatures and Comparative Literature. With the deconstruction of the pillars upon which traditional literary studies once stood and the lack of definition that established itself between referential limits, the traditional canon or canons no longer possess a foundational base, thus affecting the entire structure of literary historiography, theory and criticism. How to construct canons, whether on a national or international level, that account for differences voiced by each group or nation, and how to attribute to these new constructs a sufficiently flexible character that would allow them constant reformulations, are questions being raised today about such rapidly shifting ground.

Comparativism would appear to leave such questions nearly always unanswered, especially after the development of so-called Postcolonial and Cultural Studies, which attacked the field's ethnocentrism with a vehemence hitherto unseen. Criticism of this element, expressed by means of a

supposedly liberal discourse that at bottom concealed its authoritarian and totalizing content, had already started during the time of Wellek and Etiemble and, if we observe the spectrum of Comparative Literature, we shall see that during its evolution it always flourished with great variety. In most cases, however, this criticism manifested itself by means of a binary opposition, which paradoxically continued to hold the European element as its point of reference. Aware of the fact that it is no longer a question of a simple inversion of models nor of the substitution of what had been considered central by its peripheral antithesis, current comparativists who question the hegemony of the colonizing cultures abandon the dichotomistic paradigm and engage in an exploration of the multiple paths that have been opened up as a result of the contact between colonizer and colonized. Consequently, they see themselves before a hermetic, albeit useful, labyrinth generated by the de-hierarchization of those elements involved in the comparative process, and their greatest task lies precisely within this open construction, this voyage of discovery devoid of definite markers.

Profoundly marked by a process of colonization, which is still alive today from both a cultural and an economic standpoint, literary studies in Brazil were always undertaken following the European models, and a brief glance at questions such as the ones that have been considered here shall suffice as evidence of this. The practice of comparing authors, works or literary movements had long existed in the country, albeit from a traditional viewpoint, based on the French school's celebrated studies of sources and influences, which, beyond this, were carried out quite unilaterally. It consisted of a distinctly hierarchizing system, according to which a source or primary text, taken as a reference in the comparison, was wrapped in an aura of superiority, while the other term in the procedure, in its restricted condition as debtor, was regarded at an obvious disadvantage and relegated to secondary status. Since every time this method was employed in the study of Brazilian literature the source text was a European (or, more recently, North American) work, the situation of inequality resulting from the procedure immediately became explicit. The inevitable result was an accentuation of dependence and the incontestable ratification of the still dominant state of cultural colonialism.

This type of comparativism found in Brazil a soil that stimulated its flowering, having already been sown by powerful allies in the fields of history and literary theory, to wit: an alien and inadequate historiography, as well as



a method that might be designated as the application of presumably universal theoretical models. In the first case, one needs only recall the issue of the establishment of literary periods, which was always based on movements or schools of European origins, and which regarded local manifestations as their extensions, reduced to a sort of pale reflection of foreign models. And in the second case, the dogmatic application, as much in criticism as in the teaching of literature, of postulates of European literary currents to any literary work, without taking into consideration the specificities that characterized it and the differences between its historical-cultural context and the one from which such postulates sprang. Such formulations, incidentally, had emerged for the most part from serious and profound reflections made in reference to the Western European literary corpus, yet in becoming generalized they worked to legitimize the identification, so dear to Europeans, of their culture with the universal.

Encouraged by Deconstruction, with its emphasis on the notion of difference and the re-evaluation of historical perspective, which once more called attention to the importance of context, this practice, which achieved its zenith during the golden years of French Structuralism, began to be questioned in Brazil at the end of the seventies. The questioning of such crystallized notions as authorship, copy, influence and originality undertaken by French post-structuralist philosophers had a useful effect on the Brazilian academic milieu, leading comparatists to restructure many of the concepts and categories that supported the discipline, including those of sources and influences. As a result, the second text in a comparison was now no longer merely the "debtor" but also the one responsible for revitalizing the first text. Rather than being unidirectional, the relationship between the two texts acquired a sense of reciprocity, consequently becoming richer and more dynamic. What soon prevailed in a comparativist reading was no longer the issue of similarity or continuity, always disadvantageous to the second text, but instead the element of differentiation that the second introduced in the intertextual dialogue established with the first.

Although the change in outlook that took place in the heart of comparativism originated once again in the European milieu, it came at exactly the right moment in studies of Comparative Literature in Brazil. What had once characterized itself as an imperfect copy of the model established by the culture of the "center" came to be regarded as a creative response, while the deviation from the norm became valued for the desecration that it performed upon the artistic object. What had been until

that time indispensable criteria of originality and antecedence were overthrown and the value of the Brazilian contribution came to exist precisely in the manner by which it appropriated European literary forms, transforming and conferring new vigor upon them. The terms of the preceding hierarchic system were evidently merely inverted in the process, with the text of the dominant culture still ending up as the richer of the two.

The other tendency of contemporary thought that contributed to the questioning of a Eurocentric world vision—the revalorization of the historical perspective—also found fertile ground in the field of Brazilian literary studies. While Marxism and Historicism always had great prevalence, and issues such as economic dependence could always be found at the heart of any cultural or political debate, the idea that literary manifestations constitute networks of relations and may only be sufficiently understood if approached from a global perspective that accounts for these relationships both rekindled the flame of ancient disputes that had been dampened by the reign of Structuralism and opened up ample and fruitful possibilities for a new type of comparativism. Accordingly, it was not enough to insist upon the importance of Brazilian differences: it also became necessary to study the relationship between them and the system of which they are part—the literature of the country in its various registers—and investigate the meaning they acquire in the general panorama of the Western literary tradition.

It is by means of the study of the differences resulting from the process of appropriation of foreign forms and of their relationship to the Brazilian literary and cultural system as a whole that comparativism acquires meaning in Brazil, evolving from a mechanical and unilateral study of sources and influences to a discipline dedicated to the examination of literary phenomena and capable of unleashing a true dialogue between cultures. As Claudio Guillén once said, comparativism is “a resolutely historical discipline” (Guillén 27); since Brazilian literature, by virtue of the very historical circumstances that engendered it, carries the dialectic between the local and the universal as a sort of mark, it is in this plurality, in this non-disjunctive syntagm, that it should be understood. No doubt Brazilian literature is strongly influenced by European literatures and assimilates a series of aspects from them as well as from other literatures. But it substantially modifies these aspects at the moment of appropriation. This, for example, was what took place with Brazilian Modernism, which originated, on the one hand, from the transculturation of the many European avant-gardes and, on the other

hand, from a critical rereading of the literary tradition of the country, especially of the historical period designated as Romantic.

In response to its own colonial condition, Brazil had already developed during this time a strong tradition based on the search for identity. However, as much in literature as in essay writing, comparativism in Brazil generally remained tied to the French model of sources and influences or the North American formalist perspective, both of which gave it a sterile quality and solidified its situation as dependent. However, with the changes made from the 1970s to the present date, it appears to have been reborn from the ashes, and is today one of the centers of greatest activity in Brazilian studies. Associating itself with the search for identity, no longer seen from an ontological perspective, but rather as a construction open to questioning and renewal, Comparative Literature in Brazil seems to have taken seriously the need to focus on literary production from its own perspective, and has been seeking true dialogue on an international level. Thus, questions such as those of the canon and literary history have acquired a new countenance and theoretical and critical models have been relativized, giving way to a more effective reflection.

All of these topics, which examine Brazilian differences, reveal the inadequacy of transferring paradigms from one culture into another. The very idea of a "national literature," conceived within the European academic environment and based on notions of unity and homogeneity, cannot be applied without problems to the hybrid reality of a country like Brazil. Any monolithic conception of Brazilian culture is currently being questioned and frequently substituted by alternative proposals that seek to account for its hybrid nature. Such proposals, diversified and subject to constant critical scrutiny, indicate the many directions being taken by comparativism in Brazil, in perfect consonance with the general tendencies observable in other regions that were also previously considered peripheral. Comparative Literature today, especially in these places, is a wide and mobile field, with countless possibilities for exploration. It has gone beyond the totalizing hopes of its earlier stages, and is on the rise as a transcultural dialogue based on the acceptance of differences.

### Works Cited

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