

# #05

# COUNTERPOINT. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE METHODS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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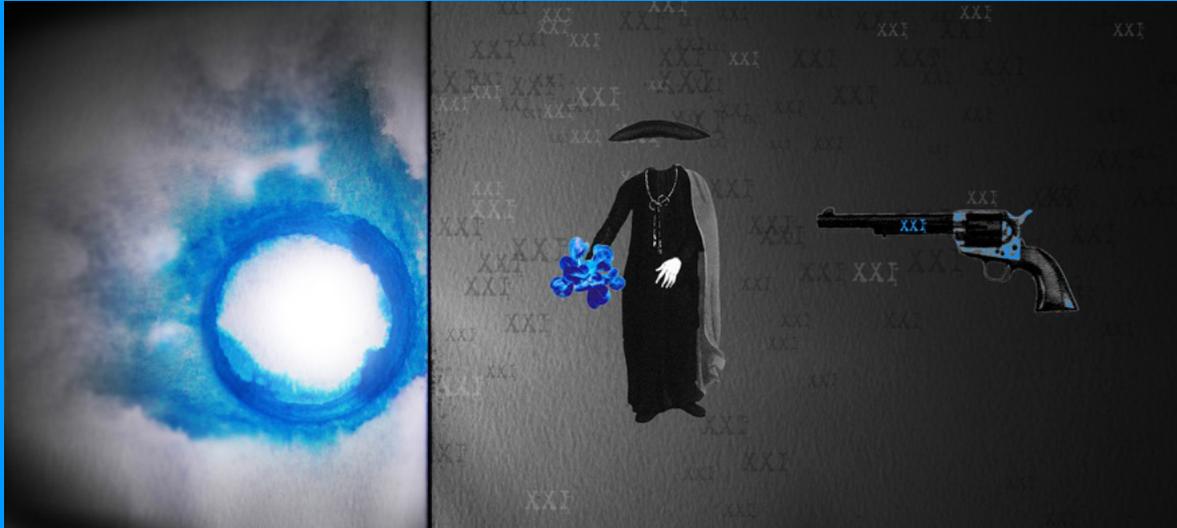
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**Abstract** || This essay offers a critical review of the different stages along the elaboration of a theory, a methodology and a canon for what we nowadays call literary studies. Thus, the first step of this journey consists on the recording of the sources of this path which appears, as a symptom of modernity, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As we carry on with our analysis –second step–, the problems –oftentimes antithesis– which can be appreciated in the coined categories is shown from different angles. The third step –the decisive one– stems from an attempt to evaluate critically this course as well as the discovery of certain openings that, in our opinion, host the magisterial lessons of a theoretical thinking that seems to have stagnated from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The title “Counterpoint” illustrates the character both antithetical and synthetic of our topic.

**Keywords** || general literature | comparative literature | canon | method | comparison.

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...the poem, rising from the well of mud and stars, will silently witness that there was nothing in it that did not truly exist elsewhere, in that rebellious and solitary world of contradictions.

R. Char

## 0. The origins of Comparative Literature. The problem of origins

Everyone would more or less agree on the fact that talking about a book can be very boring. Even so –and on a similar justification depends the future of our work–, the reading of a text is always perverted by an infinity of events and experiences, which are at the same time perverted by the very same reading, giving rise to conversation, a human practice that has been mysteriously expiating our feelings of impurity for quite long.

In the first place, it must be admitted that someone has written something because he has read something (even if just a spelling book); on the other hand, the reader is someone who collects in his mind relatively alien images and adds them to his own collection of existential fetishes, which he arranges and disarranges continuously, in an obsessive manner, while waiting for some kind of sense or another such satisfaction. This perversion between reader and writer, life and writing, though, does not want, should not and cannot be corrected, given the fact that, aside from being highly pleasurable, it marks the starting point of what constitutes properly a literary work, that is, the titanic fight between fiction and reality, such as in “I won’t leave you until I know your real name”. Even if lately the literary conversation has become somewhat boring, I think it is beneficial to stay in the consciousness of dialog.

It does not seem insignificant that Comparative Literature has been born as the result of a controversy. Much less so, if we think that this discipline, relatively new as an institution, has become one of the most effective critical mechanisms for the literary discussion in the last century. Even when it has tended to stagnate –original sin of all sorts of knowledge- it has been from itself, or at least by repositioning itself in the controversy, from where it has been able to intervene again in the historical development of literary studies.

If we wanted to define the controversy, we would see how it constantly becomes blurred; in this sense, the problem posed by Comparative Literature is not the assumption of a canon but the reconfiguration of a new level of discussion when all established values have dissolved. Notwithstanding this “zero degree”, in order to be able

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to speak of Comparative Literature we have had to assist to its institutionalization, which presupposes a tacit agreement on the term “Literature”. In order to establish our objective correlative, we could say that the historical origin of the controversy –conscious of the schematic character of the time line– is given by the fragmentation of a homogeneous linguistic space, the Latin language, and the rearticulating of a given socio-political space, Europe.

The problem with Comparative Literature such as it has reached us, i.e., as something more than Comparative History, has its origins in the term *Weltliteratur* coined by Goethe in 1827. In effect, the term proposed by Goethe is an answer to the sociopolitical and linguistic juncture mentioned before, since it was thought of as a way to tackle territorial conflicts and the problem of certain languages which, to be understood in all their complexity, must be seen through the kaleidoscope of a common history and common language of culture.

If we go back with this way of understanding the literary phenomenon, we can propose analogous considerations on Classical Antiquity, and we could ask ourselves to what degree Latin literature becomes independent of its Greek counterpart –specially knowing that the first Latin “literary work” is a translation of the *Odyssey* and remembering the linguistic worries of Cato the Elder-; or to what degree that same Greek literature is subsidiary of other Semitic and Indo-European traditions. In this sense, the origins of Comparative Literature –like all origins– suppose a mutual consent, and the versatility of any analysis depends on its capability to constitute itself in a determinate fact. From this perspective, in order to speak of Comparative Literature we would find ourselves constantly compelled to reflect on what notion of literature answers to *Weltliteratur* or, at least, to look for a more suggestive objective correlative.

What is determining for the later development of Comparative Literature and its academic status is the fact that it has constituted itself as a problem only as far as the consciousness of a perennial conflict, i.e., the spurious birth of all literature, has existed, and not only with regard to other literatures but even with regard to other forms of art (suffice to think about the pictorial origins of the linguistic sign). This consciousness makes it essential to always have the backdrop of a theoretical reflection, of the constitution of an adequate scene for each act of comparison, but it also demands from the comparatist attention to the multiple reverberations that have given a visible body to words.

## 1. Historical development of the controversy

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The lessons of professor Abel-François Villemain, in 1828, are usually cited as the first institutional moment of Comparative Literature. However, *this* Comparative Literature appears since its very origins –and as will be confirmed by J. Texte at the end of the 19th century and J. M. Carré in the mid 20th century– determined by the History of Literature. From this moment on and until the crisis proclaimed by R. Wellek, Comparative Literature will be permanently perturbed by the historicist paradigm which, in its turn subsidiary of positivism, will postulate the definition of proper features for each modern nation-state using literature as a binding element. Thus, historicism not only presented a catalog of consummated facts, but from a certain state of affairs intended to carry out a concrete project –moment in which it ceased to be merely illustrative– becoming the sanctioning dogma of the national borders. In this context, and even if in some occasions it allows for mutual knowledge between nations, literature turns into a very effective means of uniting a collectivity and the common values that support it. Hence the permanent dependence –under the historicist perspective- of Comparative Literature with respect to a national literature (or literatures), defined from the suspicious assumption of a national purity.

However, in the same period and in the same excerpt where he proposes the term *Weltliteratur*, Goethe proclaims the death of national literatures noting the unfathomable character of sources and influences. This problematic articulation between source and influence will be solved, in this first institutional period, by the elaboration of picturesque comparisons which go beyond the field of literature to shape the uses of the peoples.

Several years after professor Abel-François Villemain's lessons, which confirmed his historicist roots, Jean-Jacques Ampère at the Sorbonne gives his lesson entitled *Histoire comparative des littératures*. As will be noted by R. Wellek in the fifties, the thought line marked from that point on will be determined by Taine's triad: *race, milieu, moment*. The positivist superstition applied to sciences of the spirit –which consists in believing that a tree can be “treated” the same way as a being such as man-, will lead into sculpting in a pitiless way the place of literature on the pillars of a handful of Indo-European languages.

Under the appearance of a supposed superseding of the classical poetics and the universal certitude of the scientific paradigm, at the end of the 19th century J. Texte will produce an orderly program of development for the Compared History of Literature. The first moment would deal with generic and theoretical questions; the second, given

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a “scientific” language, would direct our attention to popular literature to find the lines of force that would allow us to distinguish clearly the peculiarities of the monuments of modern literatures, a third moment in which there is an abyss between the popular and the cultivated, and were the modern becomes a Neoclassical mirage. The fourth moment, once put together the catalog of titans of each nation –France, England, Germany, and, with good will, Italy and Spain–, would consist in the constitution of the canon through the assumption of a General Literature or *Weltliteratur* (Texte, 1902).

However, if we look closely at that outline, we will find that Texte’s point of arrival corresponds to Goethe’s starting point. That is, the methodological problem cannot arise from generic questions, but from the obvious difficulty of understanding the relations of an object of study with multiple dimensions. In its turn, the consciousness of the imbrications between diverse traditions predates the modern myth of national literature and it is precisely what compels to the research of other languages and literatures, not in an exclusive manner but as a counterpoint which, while not being a mere addition of its parts, allows for the recognition of each of them in the continuity of their relations. The canon, then, even if a lesser evil of the institutional reality, is still a caricature of *Weltliteratur*.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century we can explicitly recognize a first moment of crisis in the historicist-positivist model of Comparative Literature. Benedetto Croce, in his 1903 essay entitled *Comparative Literature*, openly rejects the positivist orientation of literary studies. For Croce, “The comparative method is simply a method of research and therefore cannot determine the limits of a field of study” (Croce, 1998: 32).

The basing of a Comparative History of Literature on General Aesthetics not only limits the notion of literature to a handful of nations from Central Europe, but it cuts off the critical possibility of rethinking the meaning of literature within the scenario of modernity, since it would belong to the immanence of historical processes. In its turn, Croce’s *storicismo assoluto* –influenced by the Philosophy of History– understands history not as a catalog of isolated and static facts, but as a stage for an interpretation of the spirit.

If on the one hand Texte announces inquisitorially the danger run by Comparative Literature when separating itself from Linguistics, Ethnography and History, on the other hand Croce warns that Linguistics –and human sciences in general– informs but does not endow with an intuition of the true functioning of language. For Croce what is determinative in the field of literary studies is not the command of any given data; from the wider perspective of his Aesthetics it is intuition –correlate of the creative genius– which

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allows for a true understanding of the artistic fact, that is, the most elevated of knowledge, which consists on the unit undifferentiated of that which is real (what we perceive) with the image of all that which is possible. According to Croce and on the same line as Goethe's proposals, the problem of sources and influences –decisive when it comes to establishing the designation of origin of a literature– will never be settled once and for all.

On the other hand, the objective of comparison, understood within a theoretical level as opposed to a practical one, would not be literature properly but the spirit of the time or *Zeitgeist*. However, notwithstanding this diversification of the object of study as opening to the art scene in general, the sharp separation proposed by Croce between the theoretical and practical fields and the dissolution of the literary status –operation which dissolves in its turn any *Weltliteratur*– leaves the methodological problem in itself unresolved, i.e., to find a path which will allow to effectively perceive whether a particular work belongs to a determinate state of the art. The Crocean critique of the scientific method warns of such nonsense as giving epistemological status to “Germanness”, but it also puts us in the difficult situation of recovering a projection background that preserves the critique.

Almost twenty years after the appearance of *Literature Comparative* by H. M. Posnett and the same year in which Croce's essay was published, Ch. M. Gayley asks the question *What is Comparative Literature?* In this distance between the works of Posnett and Gayley we can appreciate not just the passing of time, but the transition from a declarative position to an interrogative approximation. Notwithstanding the skeptical connotation of all questions, Gayley's interrogation installs itself at the center of its own object, that is, controversy. Even if Gayley is still proposing an orderly list of tasks for comparison –just like Texte would–, he points out that “the comparison is not only established between different national literatures, but between any elements that take part in literary history or between any stages of the history of an element” (Gayley, 1903: 40).

The comparison, as methodological possibility of a *Weltliteratur*, must allow for its own critique at the same time that it enables the vision of its object, as a correction of the shortsightedness inherent to any point of view. Even if Comparative Literature helps access the literary phenomenon in all its complexity, it cannot stagnate in its own decantation. In that sense F. Baldensperger's warning becomes especially relevant, not only about a deterministic point of departure, such as in the case of Taine, but also with respect to a deterministic point of arrival, such as F. Brunetière's who applied the idea of “progress” to literature. Determinism, as Baldensperger points out, “operates on apparent results, not on true factors” (Baldensperger,

1998: 59).

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According to the blocking view proposed by Gayley both as theory and critique, and with the clear conscience that the assumption of genres, nations and races does not constitute neither its starting point nor its goal but its emporium, comparison will continue to be an authentic method inasmuch as it does not replace its object of study which, even if it bothers many, is still appearing in the complexity and transience of the relations of a given work with its cultural context both inexhaustible by any epistemological claim.

Given the debate which at the beginning of the 20th century reveals the insufficiency of the scientific paradigm, Baldensperger's warnings on the superstitions about origins and progress, as well as P. Van Tieghem's observations in the thirties, which confirm the need to open the comparative fields through notions ampler than Petrarquism, Romanticism, Symbolism, etc. –notions that develop as a corollary to the problem of sources and influences–, it seems astonishing that in the fifties J. M. Carré and M. F. Guyard would still be presenting Comparative Literature as a branch of Comparative History of Literature; or that in the eighties, even if with a touch of irony, P. Brunel (1994) devotes himself to terminological puns between Comparative Literature, General Literature and Universal Literature –without dealing with the problems of the translation of terms that very often correspond to idioms– and to the search of an author genealogy as arcane as that of the Old Testament .

However, from the schematic character of the notion of the “image” of the other, introduced by Guyard but subsidiary of the tender observations of M. de Staël and the 19th century *tableaux*, appears H. Dyserink's take which proposes comparison as a way of approaching the problem of otherness and as demystification of national identities. In that same line, D. H. Pageaux, incorporating semiological and structural notions, transforms the comparison into the mechanism to decipher cultural identities, where the “literary image” is understood as a group of ideas about the foreigner inserted in a process of literaturization as well as socialization” (Pageaux, 1994: 103).

The development of “Imagology”, for which “it is convenient to identify the great oppositions that structure the text (to simplify: I-narrator-culture of origin *versus* characters-represented culture-the Other” (Pageaux, 1994: 105), constitutes the last breath of a canonical way of understanding Comparative Literature as a science which must provide quantifiable results.

After the resounding failure of the European project, which evolves from the barbarity of the French Revolution to the barbarity of World

War II and reveals itself as the result of artificially inflated nationalisms, one might ask whether there really ever existed a properly national literature, whether the starting point is not the comparison in itself, i.e., the need to apprehend the object of study's identity as a relationship.

The American critics –lead by Wellek and Remak–, warn us however of the already mentioned failure, compel us to pay attention to the supposed historical innocence of their critique to the European picture. In that regard, and searching for the line of continuity between both blocks we can find it in the definitions of Comparative Literature proposed by Gayley –quoted above- and Remak:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the borders of a particular country and the study of the relations between literature and other fields of knowledge or opinion such as the arts (*i.e.*, painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, social sciences (*i.e.*, politics, economics, sociology), religion, etc. In brief, it is the comparison of a literature with other or others and the comparison of literature with other areas of human expression (Remak, 1961: 89).

The object of comparison is a literature which appears precisely as epistemological possibility when it is capable of overcoming the borders of a particular country and its own conceptual borders. Gayley (1903) and Remak's (1961) definitions are to be understood within the spectrum of the crisis in the comparativist discipline as a permanent appeal to understand the literary studies as an instance of aperture. Conscious of its overlapping with other fields but protective of its institutional place, Comparative Literature must center “not so much in the acquisitions of a comprehensible metalanguage, a systematic poetic, but, preferably, in what I have previously suggested: the possibility of comparing literature with anything” (Culler, 1998: 117). This versatility as put forth by Culler with some irony is, as he himself states, the only chance of survival of literary studies in the institutional frame of universities, versatility that can only be found in an agreement which keeps its tension and which in the present case would be given by the relation between a Literary Theory, which tries to establish a general notion of literature, and a Comparative Literature, which seeks to permanently widen its own limits by modeling itself in its chronological evolution.

## 2. Situation of Comparative Literature

Historicism as criterion and certainty of human “sciences” was as early as 1905 overshadowed by the Theory of Relativity. Given the total skepticism proposed by Deconstructivism about the link of language and reality –which suggests infinite plays within the closed universe of some signs which are incapable of modifying the status of reality–, in

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the sixties H. G. Gadamer employs the concept of “play” understood as an opening to the comprehension of the world, –comprehension which within M. Heidegger’s philosophy, from which stems the notion, constitutes not a merely speculative instance but an articulation of the acting. Not ignoring the contributions of Linguistics (of the notion of text in particular, which, insofar as topic and comment, works as a hinge between the clarity of the work as construction and the opaque background of the acts), Gadamer brandishes the work of art as the maximum hermeneutical instance –where the literary work is presented as *eminent text*–, and from here develops a critique of scientism applied to the work of art. Gadamer uses the notion of play in order to illustrate the ineffectiveness of a method whose most important premise should be the consciousness of a “knowledge that we do not know” (Gadamer, 1977: 143 et seq).

Faced by the need for abstract certainty for any act of interpretation – certainty which is most of the times more authoritarian than rational–, the “aesthetic conscience” is incapable of understanding its object of study, which resists to be restricted into any kind of a priori. Already in the twenties, in his book *The Inverted Perspective*, the Russian mathematician and philosopher Pavel Florensky proves that the space of the aesthetic “consciousness” and the “time” of Historicism in no way exhaust the description of man’s space-time: “The perspective image of the world is but *one* of the ways to draw” (Florensky, 2005). However, even when this perspective acquires a subversive character, the work of art does not only put in evidence the insufficiency of the scientific paradigm, but it also puts forth the need to take back to its own function the very same notion of method.

At the point where we have left the controversy, notwithstanding the opening of the literary phenomenon, the methodological conflict begins to blur. In this sense it is vitally important the revision carried out by Gadamer of the notion of method applied to the work of art.

In the same line, the notion of “horizon” comes up at the end of the seventies, introduced by Jauss and the Aesthetics of Reception in the field of literary studies. The notion has its foundations on a conception of history no longer thought of as an imperturbable and immediately given line, but as a horizon, that is, as distance where something shows.

The metaphor of the horizon, when taking into consideration Rousseau and Pichois’ pleas on a certain metaphorization of categories, and remembering the interesting link established by Ricoeur between the metaphor and the use of models in the field of mathematics, is given

by a way of understanding history not just like verifiable facts but as a current fact.

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Gadamer and Jauss' considerations on the notion of horizon are pervaded by this conception of history, which comes from the distinction made by Heidegger between knowledge of time or historical science (*Historie*) and the happening in itself in the present time (*Geschichte*).

For Heidegger historical science is a moment derived from temporal occurrence, and in that articulation is where all the comprehension takes place in effect.

Starting from that distinction, the notions introduced by the Aesthetics of Reception cause a hermeneutical turn in literary studies, where the central notion of horizon regulates the condition of literary *fact* as object of historical knowledge but subject to a present moment which appears focused in the reading act.

The *current* reception of literary works, be it Homer's *Odyssey* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the very status of literature are modified by the possibilities of their own interpretation, always determined by a concrete situation. The authentic "epistemological consciousness" comes thus not so much from the dominance and the exhaustion of the object of study but from the consciousness of the limits of that objectifying knowledge and the constant renovation within a determinate context.

Faced with the problem of method, we can observe that the ridiculous certitude where scientific discourse falls asleep competes with the deep torpor of a timeless theoretical knowledge.

The need to replace the epistemological status of literary studies is confirmed by the notion of "intertextuality" contributed by Julia Kristeva in the sixties. Despite, the chasm separating structuralism from hermeneutics, which consists in the strict distinction between *langue* and *parole*, intertextuality allows for the consideration of the literary text as something more than a confinement of meaning behind the bars of the signs.

Starting from the notion of "dialogism" coined by Bajtín, point of departure of Kristeva's considerations and where the hierarchy proposed by Saussure is inverted, the vivid imbrication between signifier and signified becomes the only guarantee of access to the literary fact, only effective possibility of the existence of literary studies. As the Russian thinker points out, the concrete word has never had a neutral value but is created by the crossing of many voices and the path it covers from connotation to denotation is the place where its real value is at stake. In this context, the literary work appears as one more moment of reality, of the textual-temporal evolution that constitutes us, (as increment or as *eminent text* in

hermeneutical terminology); a moment where that reality increases in the polyphony of the different human voices and productions which constitute the external tissue that safeguards us from the rough outside. The counterpoint, then, is revealed as our method or path not in order to gain access to an unfailing knowledge, but to find ourselves in that which we can become, to find ourselves in our lonely though shared world of contradictions.

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