

Comparative Literature, Literary Theory and the Anxiety of Omission: Spanish Contributions to the Debate*

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This article analyzes comparative literature's institutionalization together with literary theory in Spain. Special attention is paid to the benefits and constraints of this alliance, which is tantamount to a discussion of the new paradigm championed in the 1980s. The paucity of comparative literature's presence in theoretical research is identified as a sign of literary theory's Euro-American orientation.

Key words: comparative literature / literary science / Spain / university curricula

In memory of Claudio Guillén

Comparative literature has been sentenced to death several times in recent years (Bassnett, Spivak). Yet, this perspective should be questioned because it seems strictly limited to American academia. In other countries, where either the discipline does not cherish a long-established tradition or such a tradition has been so far nonexistent, comparative literature has exciting future prospects. This paper reflects on comparative literature's university institutionalization in Spain. Although it may appear a rather restricted case, the fact is that the Spanish example has the advantage of having introduced the discipline into the university curriculum in association with literary theory. This association is precisely the solution proposed ever since the 1980s by new-paradigm advocates in response to the crisis of comparative literature. Studying the Spanish case may very well highlight the benefits and constraints of an alliance between the two disciplines.

I divide my presentation into two main parts. The first presents a brief overview of the epistemological evolution of comparative literature,

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which, as is well known, has led to an acute crisis felt almost exclusively in negative terms. However, it is argued that this crisis is merely an inherent characteristic of the discipline's (utopian) horizon; that is, the study of world literature. The second part examines more closely the institutionalization that comparative literature enjoys at Spanish universities, focusing on the tension generated by the aforementioned association with literary theory. Finally, attention is turned to one of the dangers of this association; namely, comparative literature's meager presence in theoretical research. This phenomenon has an international scope and the way it is experienced by comparatists has been described as an "anxiety of omission."

1. Comparative literature: Epistemological evolution, crisis, and location

One hundred and seventy-five years after its institutional foundation, comparative literature is a vigorous discipline that arouses interest in today's students. New scholarly journals are being published, new professorships are being awarded, and the demand for literature on the subject is steadily on the rise. In Spain alone, nine textbooks (Guillén, *Múltiples moradas* and *Entre lo uno y lo diverso (Ayer y hoy)*, Romero López, Vega & Carbonell, Morales Ladrón, Pulido Tirado, Gnisci, Gil-Albarellos Pérez-Pedrero, and Abuín González & Domínguez) have been published and the academic journal *Extravíos* (Wanderings) has been launched during the past ten years. Therefore, such a statement as the one made by Susan Bassnett – "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead" (47) – seems misleading as well as inaccurate.

Bassnett's statement may only be applied to one of the main centers of comparative literature, the US, where the discipline is experiencing serious difficulties due to the loss of its institutional and intellectual position. Some of the causes of this situation include the role of literary theory in English departments or the impact of cultural studies, which have become the champion of interdisciplinarity. A culturalist bias has been detected that makes comparative literature – as Michael Rifaterre has posited – go "so far as to distance itself from the literature that gives its name to the discipline" (66). The esthetic dimension of literary texts has been consigned to oblivion and analysis is driven by explorations of identitarian politics. Meanwhile, other countries such as mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, India, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Greece, Italy, the former East Germany, Slovenia, Portugal, and Spain are emerging as promising sites for comparative literature. Thus, one may speculate that location is a determining factor in how the discipline operates.

The birth of comparative literature in the 19th century was bound up with European nationalist processes searching for the cultural roots of their nation-states' identities while assessing their own contributions to the international arena. Literary comparison was used to determine the degree of national autonomy. This national autonomy has been measured on the balance of imports versus exports. Thus, we are dealing with the binary model of *rappports de fait*, with its underlying conception of (European) literature as a civilizing force; and the one that René Wellek so bitterly criticized in 1958 in his paper entitled "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" for its epistemological inconsistencies:

An artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences, a motivation by cultural nationalism, however generous – these seem to me the symptoms of the long-drawn-out crisis of comparative literature. (290)

Twenty-five years later, the emergence of a new paradigm took place, briefly described by Douwe W. Fokkema as comprising four dimensions: (1) a new conception of the object in literary research, (2) new methodology, (3) new awareness of the scholarly relevance of literary research, and (4) new social justifications for studying literature. Although it is well known that the new methods Fokkema refers to originated in literary theory, there has been no review of the possible link between comparative literature's most recent crisis and the massive increase of new paradigms in literary theory during the last thirty years. However, the quotation of John Donne's famous verse used by Gerald Gillespie ("La Literatura Comparada" – Comparative Literature) to introduce his panorama of American comparativism is perhaps the most fitting: "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."

One thus understands why so many 21st-century proposals vying for the future directions of comparative literature have turned typologous, a sort of archi-comparison of postures of comparative perspectives. Some good examples of this quest for typology are Gillespie's essay entitled "Rhinoceros, Unicorn, or Chimera? – A Polysystemic View of Possible Kinds of Comparative Literature in the New Century" and Eva Kushner's "Towards a Typology of Comparative Literature Studies?" Gillespie argues how Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystemic theory and Earl Miner's *Comparative Poetics* may help comparative literature free itself from simplistic models full of generalizations, common to certain ways of practicing literary theory. Furthermore, Kushner believes that three types of study will fulfill the mandate of comparative literature in an intercultural setting: (1) comparative history of literatures applied to both European and non-European groups of literatures, (2) analysis of the nature of the interliter-

ary process as carried out by Dionýz Ďurišin's interliterary theory, and (3) identification of those traits that characterize all poetics universally, a task most seriously undertaken by Miner. When one notices that Kushner's typology matches the classification of the three types of supranationality (supranational genetic phenomena, supranational non-genetic phenomena that occur due to similar socio-historical settings, and typological phenomena) proposed by Claudio Guillén in *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* (Between the One and the Other), the soundness of his judgment and the merit of his vision are once again evident.

This brief overview of comparative literature's epistemological evolution allows consensus to be reached regarding the discipline's problematic nature, and whether or not it indeed has a distinctive and enduring trait. A permanent crisis – Charles Bernheimer has stated that “Comparative literature is anxiogenic” (1) – has been endemic to comparative literature and hence interpreted as indicating its low epistemological status. This status derives from the alleged lack of both a specific object of study along with any specific methodology because comparison in itself could not qualify as a method.

However, the permanent crisis of comparative literature, its feeling of ontological insecurity, is simply the result of the adaptation of its epistemic faculties to a changing object. Comparative literature is the only discipline in literary studies that focuses on literature without restriction; that is, world literature (or *Weltliteratur*). This marks a radical difference between comparative literature and (1) literary criticism, focused on specific works of national literatures, (2) literary history, with its organic conception of national literatures, and (3) literary theory that, in spite of its thirst for universals, bases its generalizations on theories and literary texts from the Western world. *Weltliteratur* as a variable component of literature and literary life is a historical phenomenon that changes according to spatial, temporal, and even individual contexts. Its loose definition may lead to literary agnosticism and therefore explains why so many epistemic failures are attributed to comparative literature. But the discipline's recognition of the vastness of its object is precisely the major premise of what María del Carmen Bobes Naves has called the *critique of literary reason*, because “neither quantitatively nor qualitatively may one adopt a strict criterion that allows literary theory to delimit the object of study – literature – or what its empirical boundaries are among close phenomena”. This is the reason why the author finds an alternative in “pointing out features of frequency or intensity” (18).

These features of frequency have been correlated to three levels of increasing difficulty in comparative research: (1) an additive level, (2) a selective level, and (3) a synthetic level. From an additive point of view, world

literature is judged on the basis of the mechanical addition of literatures in the world without any workable system. Comparison is not facilitated and the history of world literature is constructed as a sequence of national literatures. From a selective point of view, the principle of addition is overcome by way of elementary uses of comparison. The aim is to identify the advanced level of literary development, which results in the creation of an interliterary (international) canon, similar to the intraliterary canon of national literatures. Here, longstanding assumptions about the civilizing power of literature are at their most visible. However, from a synthetic point of view, world literature is constructed around phenomena determined by genetic and typological links that model the interliterary process. Borges's story "La Biblioteca de Babel" (The Library of Babel) is an appropriate metaphor for these levels of understanding world literature. Like the library in the story, *Weltliteratur* has been imagined as either a potentially infinite library (additive and synthetic points of view) or as a prototype of every possible literary text (selective point of view). Although the selective point of view is akin to both positivistic and certain culturalist trends, the synthetic perspective lies closer to New Comparativism (Abuín) in recognizing the changing nature of its object of study, the result of new data from interliterary correlations. An exact definition of *Weltliteratur* is therefore impossible. Otherwise, it would be a stagnant system, and hence dead. This is why for Guillén comparative research is a *project*, a concept anybody interested in comparative literature should always bear in mind:

[N]owadays the comparatist has found that the object of research may or should emerge, like a newborn baby, from his own experience, initiative, and imagination. One must delimit the field of study among the vast number of potentialities of literature. ... When starting, when leaving, when going ahead, the comparatist cannot rely on casual and visible observations. His object of research, as its definition or demarcation, is but a project. There are other incentives for publishing new textbooks of comparative literature, but I think this is potentially the most fruitful, the radical function of a project. ("Sobre la continuidad de la Literatura Comparada" 103)

Weltliteratur's conflictive nature – both in ontological (what is world literature?) and epistemological terms (is knowledge of world literature possible?) – places comparative literature in a critical position. It is a site of endless enquiry, of perpetual questioning, as to whether the relevance of interrogation is scholarly or social (Fokkema 379). A correlation exists between this conflictive nature and methodology and is seen from two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, comparison is trusted regardless of its gnoseological value. On the other hand, comparison is rejected

either categorically – because comparison cannot delimit a field of study (à la Croce) – or partially, whenever comparison is reduced to the model of *rappports de fait* (à la Étienne). In general terms, one may state that critical reflection on comparison has been replaced in comparative literature by an acritical adoption of literary theory trends. This is, of course, not the best way of (positively) thinking of the discipline's crisis.

2. Comparative literature and literary theory in Spanish academia: exclusion or disciplinary negotiation?

I now examine three contexts with varying degrees of influence on the dialectical relationship between comparative literature and literary theory: (1) academic institutional context, (2) epistemological-methodological context, and (3) disciplinary context. Some of the reasons for dealing with these three contexts have been outlined in Section 1. The challenge here is to uncover the clues leading to comparative literature's emergence and evolution as a discipline-in-tension between historicist and theoretical poles and how this tension has been mastered. Keeping this aim in mind, I focus on the institutionalization that pairs comparative literature with literary theory in Spain.

The inclusion of both academic institutional data (first context) and scholarly data (second context) may appear striking if one thinks that the former has only a low incidence on comparative literature methods. However, academic institutional factors do affect the epistemological-methodological context. Moreover, a clear-cut distinction between both contexts is naïve, especially when considering that a text-centered approach to literature has been surpassed in favor of a social context approach. For literature as a social institution, producers, consumers, and mediators are equally important.

In this regard, one cannot but notice that comparative literature is the most recently incorporated discipline within literary studies. This is one of the reasons why we constantly hear the warning cry and why the discipline's academic institutional situation in Spain has been, and remains, unstable. A professional society of comparative literature was not established until 1977. It was only thirteen years later that a university degree combining literary theory and comparative literature was approved (Royal Decree 1450/1990). The degree curriculum is based around a number of core modules. Two of them have a strong comparative orientation: *Comparative Literatures* (12 credits), under the responsibility of either the former Area of Literary Theory or the existing national philologies, and

Basics and Methods of Comparative Literature (8 credits), under the responsibility of the Area of Literary Theory.¹ According to the Royal Decree, the aim of the degree is “to provide students with a coherent program of theoretical and practical aspects of literature, considered both in itself and from *comparative perspective*” (emphasis mine).

Ten years later, the Area of Literary Theory changed its name to the Area of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature (Agreement of 3 April 2000 of the Academic Committee of the University Council) in response to Royal Decree 1888/1984, so that areas of knowledge might be changed in accordance with “either significant progress of scholarly, technical, and artistic knowledge in general, or social needs in Spain.” This means that prior to 2000 the government organization responsible for university education in Spain regarded comparative literature neither as “progress of scholarly knowledge” nor as a “social need.”

The fact that 48 of the 54 core credits of the university degree in literary theory and comparative literature are under the responsibility of what is now called the Area of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature is an indication of the area’s commitment to cross-disciplinary learning and practical, science-based education. The Area of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature opts for plurilingual and multicultural training, so that students are provided with the tools to comparatively analyze original-version literary texts, which differs markedly from traditional single-language research. This is an important and critical role with the opportunity to contribute significantly to multiculturalism because secondary education tends towards a strong nationalist bias, often offering only a single (and optional) international subject within the curriculum (Contemporary World Literature).

The association of comparative literature with literary theory in Spanish university education has extended from the academic institutional context to the epistemological-methodological one, as can be seen in the following statement by Guillén:

In Spain, in spite of some authoritative individuals, conferences, and scholarly literature, comparative literature has not been recognized as an autonomous discipline because the Education Department has not approved the corresponding area of knowledge. The discipline’s position is inferior and subservient. Comparative literature has come under literary theory’s jurisdiction and is entrusted to professors of literary theory. This is a local aberration. (“Sobre la continuidad de la Literatura Comparada” 105)

Regardless of whether or not comparative literature is an autonomous university area of knowledge in Spain, the fact remains that Guillén’s opin-

ion appears based upon a specific way of working on literary theory that has nothing to do with a dialectical relationship between this discipline and comparativism: “Theoretical and comparative moods are different insofar as theoreticians in Spain limit their examples to Spanish literary texts” (“Dependencias y divergencias: literatura y teoría” 59). This variant of literary theory lacks empirical evidence, a danger Guillén has already seen in *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*:

When I speak of tragedy or rhyme, I am referring to concrete and various expressions that emerged at specific times, places, and languages. This is not the case with some theoreticians, who claim the universal validity of their schemes, *ex principiis*, as if we were dealing with mathematics or literature from the moon. (30–31)

As can be seen, Guillén is not against literary theory, a discipline he has excelled in. What Guillén questions is the Spanish academic institutional context for its lack of comprehensive and systematic training in several foreign languages and their literatures. Therefore, this context may lead to an inconvenient co-opting of comparative literature by literary theory: “For theoreticians that teach core seminars, including comparative contents in their syllabi is not humanly possible, especially with regard to foreign languages and literatures” (*Entre lo uno y lo diverso [Ayer y hoy]* 16).² Thus, the balance between theoretical and comparative contents for the university degree in literary theory and comparative literature may be unduly shifted if professors teaching *Comparative Literatures* either opt for a traditional nationalist perspective or are unable to demonstrate competence in several literatures.

In spite of Guillén’s rejection of the way comparative literature has been institutionalized in Spain, he pins his hopes on a collaboration with literary theory: “We should be confident that they [literary theoreticians] will promote collaboration between comparatists and theoreticians of high intellectual value” (*Entre lo uno y lo diverso [Ayer y hoy]* 16). This collaboration has proven effective in many departments. As Darío Villanueva has pointed out, many tenure-track associate and chair professorships in comparative literature have been awarded in recent years (Abuín González, Domínguez, & Tarrío Varela 293). However, the essential question here that begs resolution is how we should implement the dialectical relationship between literary theory and comparative literature. This epistemological tie between both disciplines has been defended by some other authors in Spain. Although the first university textbook on literary studies to include a chapter devoted to comparative literature was the one edited by José María Díez Borque in 1985, the chapter in question was written by René

Étiemble, making Villanueva the first to advance this epistemological tie in 1994 in his *Curso de teoría de la literatura* (Course in Literary Theory). This university textbook was conceived as an introduction to literary theory for undergraduate courses, specifically designed in accordance with the new university programs (Villanueva, “Introducción” 11). Both the epistemological and pedagogical goals of literary theory and comparative literature are established in the introduction:

The authors of the *Curso de teoría de la literatura* share – from their specific points of view – the firm belief that the main aim of this textbook is to promote a tie among literary disciplines – through teaching and research – from literary theory, criticism, and comparison of several literatures to the way we teach literature. This should be carried out in the strictest manner possible. Thus, new achievements by literary theory of the highest quality will enrich the pedagogy of teaching literature. (13)

Villanueva develops this principle in his chapter entitled “Literatura Comparada y Teoría de la Literatura” (Comparative Literature and Literary Theory), in which he concentrates on the basics of the dialectical relationship between both disciplines:

This is the key to a different concept of comparative literature that should not exclude the first one – the positivistic – and makes it possible for the discipline not to exclusively serve literary history, but also provide literary theory with indispensable services. Whenever literary theory lacks empirical evidence, it turns into literary metaphysics, wherein universals dominate and veil everything else. However, particulars are the real important issues – and as many as possible, so that the building of a renewed poetics may be solidly erected. (115)

Therefore there is no contradiction between Villanueva’s and Guillén’s positions. Both authors are against a literary theory lacking empirical evidence, and both argue that comparative literature is the necessary ingredient in the establishment of this empirical foundation. Villanueva had already advanced the need for a dialectical relationship between both disciplines in his programmatic paper “Teoría literaria y enseñanza de la literatura” (Literary Theory and Teaching Literature) and in his book *El polen de ideas* (The Pollen of Ideas). The following sentence might well serve as a motto for the book: “there is an absolute dependence . . . among the four disciplines [literary theory, criticism, history and comparativism], insofar as any of them cannot reach a full development without the others” (16). The most recent benefits of this method are revealed in *Valle-Inclán, novelista del modernismo* (Valle-Inclán, A Modernist Novelist) and *La poética de la lectura en Quevedo* (Quevedo’s Poetics of Reading).

If one compares the information found here with the ways comparative literature has been defined, one sees that institutional and epistemological discussions on the convenience of the association of the discipline with literary theory are part and parcel of the history of comparativism as a method in tension between historicist and theoretical poles. This brings me to the third context. When Paul Van Tieghem drew the distinction between *littérature comparée* (comparative literature) and *littérature générale* (general literature) in the first programmatic textbook of the discipline, the blurring of the lines between these fields of study was the major source of difficulty in the relationship between comparative literature and literary theory. The former would deal with binary contacts, and the latter would study similar phenomena in several literatures (175). This restriction to binary contacts explains why comparative literature has been subservient to a historicist method. *Rapports de fait* were the only object of study, historically proved genetic similarities between literary texts from two literatures.

In this regard, it is most telling that János Hankiss read a paper entitled “Théorie de la littérature et littérature comparée” (Literary Theory and Comparative Literature) at the very same conference where René Wellek underscored the crisis of comparative literature. For Hankiss, comparative research should not be exclusively restricted to genetic similarities, but also applied to typological analogies, because these analogies are the sound basis of literary constants, providing the empirical evidence for literary theory. As has been seen, this view has many adherents in Spain and abroad. In 1979 Jonathan Culler stated that comparative literature should question the principle of national literatures as legitimate units for the study of literature. In this way the discipline would gain the recognition and support of both universities and professional societies. Yet literary theory is largely committed to a corpus of analysis restricted by national boundaries.

3. Conclusion

Nobody can deny the development and renewal of comparative tools and methods through cooperation with literary theory. In fact, for comparative literature, literary theory is an object of study in itself (Scholz). I am referring to East-West Studies, which have progressively gained broad acceptance both at the AILC/ICLA conferences and in programmatic textbooks (Pageaux, Tötösy de Zepetnek, Machado & Pageaux, or Gnisci, to mention but a few). However, the same cannot be said of literary theory, where the presence of comparative literature is extremely limited. Thus, what is actually a theory of *one* literature becomes purposely confused with

what is presented as theory of *literature*. The same happens in Spain, where textbooks on literary theory disregard findings from comparative literature, save for a few notable exceptions, some of them reviewed here (one may add to Villanueva's textbook three new ones by Casas, Llovet, and Cabo Aseguinolaza & Rábade Villar). Francesco Loriggio has argued that this situation is faced by comparatists as "the conceptual equivalent of their lack of field" and hence experienced as an "anxiety of omission" (258). However, contrary to Loriggio's opinion, I believe that the discipline's meager presence in literary theory is not the strong suit of comparative literature, but more precisely a sign of Guillén's fear when he wondered whether "both disciplines are now working together in our departments of literary theory" (*Entre lo uno y lo diverso (Ayer y hoy)* 15). In any case, perhaps the time has come for literary theory – and not for comparative literature – to be concerned about this omission.

NOTES

¹ The Spanish university system is organized around schools, departments, and areas of knowledge. These areas always work within the limits of a single department. Areas of knowledge may organize their seminars for several schools and departments. However, the composition of these areas is not interdisciplinary.

² It is most telling that Guillén did not make any reference to the situation of departments of comparative literature in the US when dismissing the institutionalization of the discipline in Spain. As is well known, American comparative literature departments were true hotbeds of literary theory. In the prologue of the second version of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, Guillén stresses the value of Edward W. Said's findings: "The second approach I should stress is the most valuable one, that of postcolonial studies, which owes everything to another important figure, Edward W. Said" (*Entre lo uno y lo diverso [Ayer y hoy]* 22). It is interesting to contrast Guillén's opinion on postcolonial studies with what Francesco Loriggio says about the situation of some comparatists that have excelled in literary theory:

Even scholars who have achieved a high profile while teaching comparative literature – an Edward Said, a Paul de Man, a Geoffrey Hartman, for example – have written and published, and write and publish, on behalf of literary studies or of one particular theoretical stance, not simply as comparatists. To go back a few more decades, René Wellek's *Theory of Literature* is not entitled *Theory of Comparative Literature*. (259)

It is crucial to understand the way in which Guillén conceives of literary criticism:

The target of what I prefer to call literary criticism has been essential and fully comprehensive. The confluence of three approaches to reading and research has been considered fundamental: the close reading of texts, their exact position in literary history, and the proper use of theoretical concepts. Therefore, criticism, history, and theory as not sufficient, but necessary requirements, of the work to be done. (*De leyendas y lecciones* 8)

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Primerjalna književnost, literarna teorija in zaskrbljenost zaradi izključenosti: španski prispevki k razpravi

Ključne besede: primerjalna literarna veda / primerjalna književnost / literarna teorija / Španija / univerzitetni programi

V zadnjih letih so primerjalno književnost pogosto označevali kot mrtvo vedo. Splošna veljavnost te diagnoze pa je vprašljiva, saj se zdi, da je ta položaj omejen na ameriško akademsko okolje, ki je primerjalno književnost razdelilo med dve šoli, francosko in ameriško. Po drugi strani pa primerjalna književnost mnogo obeta na drugih območjih, kjer veda še ni močno razvita oziroma prej še ni obstajala.

Cilj tega prispevka je preučiti, kako se je primerjalna književnost institucionalizirala v Španiji. Čeprav se zdi, da gre za omejen primer, je imela Španija to prednost, da je vedo umestila v univerzitetni študijski program preko povezave z literarno teorijo. Tako je bilo zadnja desetletja veliko razprav o koristih in omejitvah te povezave. Omenjene razprave so enakovredne razpravam o koristih nove paradigme, ki sta jo v osemdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja predstavila Pierre Swiggers in Douwe Fokkema. Članek posebno pozornost namenja dejstvu, da je prisotnost literarne teorije v primerjalni književnosti izredno močna (kar je posledica njene interdisciplinarnosti), prisotnost primerjalne književnosti v literarni teoriji pa izredno omejena. Komparativisti ta pojav doživljajo kot zaskrbljenost zaradi izključenosti (angl. *anxiety of omission*).

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