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Questionnaire on Literature and Comparative Studies

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1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

As a scholar and teacher, my approach to Comparative Literature was not straight, but mediated by a bordering discipline, Literary Theory, my field of research since my MA at the University of Bologna and then during my PhD at the University of Bergamo. For me and other scholars of my generation, the role models at the time (the late 1990s) were Mario Lavagetto – professor of Literary Theory in Bologna – and Remo Ceserani. The latter, professor of Comparative Literature in Pisa and then in Bologna, was also a tireless mediator between the often backward Italian academic environment and the ideas or debates coming from abroad, especially from the United States. As a matter of fact, the pivot of my research and teaching activity is still Literary Theory, that I practice far from any dogmatism or methodological orthodoxy: flexibility, open-mindedness and thoughtful eclecticism are the skills required by the cultural and epistemic horizon in which we move. And despite the crisis of Theory as an academic discipline, I think one cannot do Comparative Literature without a sharp theoretical awareness. It would be like doing thematic criticism, for example, without having the slightest idea (or without even asking) what a theme is. So, along this line, without theory one would inevitably regress to empirical, impressionistic research habits, which easily turns into the "know-it-all" (in Italy we call this science "tuttologia", i.e., speaking of anything without really knowing it).

From this point of view, the cultural and institutional history of the discipline is very instructive, especially in its contradictions. To a large extent, modern Comparative Literature has taken shape in individual critical practice, as some great scholars have taught (or rather shown) through their concrete example – Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, in Italy Giacomo Debenedetti. In the Italian critical tradition, after the interdict pronounced by Benedetto Croce, who condemned the comparative literary studies prevalent in his time, the history of the discipline has been particularly faltering and tortuous, characterized by an ambiguous system of relations with the national literature. Before taking institutional root in the universities, Comparative Literature developed mainly through the individual work of scholars coming from other fields such as Italian Studies, French Studies, Roman Philology, Aesthetics and so on (Mario Lavagetto, Remo Ceserani, Francesco Orlando, Franco Brioschi, Mario Domenichelli, Piero Boitani, etc.), scholars who then became *de facto* comparatists. At the same time, these scholars taught us to approach the literary tradition with a flexible yet rigorous method, to conceive a strong idea of literature as a system, and to compare different topics and objects within a firm theoretical framework and by sharp analytical tools. The lesson I have learnt from them is to consider Comparative Literature not as a mechanical comparison between authors or texts from different national traditions (this is the classic pattern of some old Italian jokes: there is an Italian, a Frenchman and an

Englishman on a plane that crashes...), but rather as an approach, a point of view, a heuristic stance that enables a distinctive, broader and more penetrating perspective on the phenomena that we study. It is in this spirit that, in more recent years, I have followed and (prudently) taken up the new trends in Comparative Literature in Italy and around the world.

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

This is an old and challenging question, already tackled by Erich Auerbach in *The Philology of World Literature*. To a certain extent, it is one of the core problems of Comparative Literature in itself: how can we handle the relationship between the part and the whole, the analysis and the synthesis, or "entre lo uno y lo diverso", in Claudio Guillén's terms? Is there a point of convergence between the panoramic gaze of the comparatist, who crosses borders and traditions, and that of the philologist, who meticulously investigates individual texts in increasingly specialised sectorial research?

In this respect, my point of view is quite radical: I do not think it is possible to study texts and literary traditions whose language we ignore, for the language issue, as you say, implies also historical frameworks and cultural backgrounds. To miss out on this richness, in exchange for wide thematic or intertextual overviews, is a game I am not keen on. That is why I observe with a certain diffidence some international debates about World Literature. Obviously, not all authors and artworks are the same and you can accept nuances and exceptions depending on their textual status, linguistic and stylistic features, ways of production and circulation through different media, including translation policies. Likewise, not all approaches are alike and some kinds of research (e.g., content-related, or broadly cultural, not to mention the quantitative tools of digital humanities) may rely on translations, if not completely disregard the text as such. But for my part, since I believe in the specific quality of literary language and I have often faced writers with strong, even idiosyncratic stylistic personalities (Gustave Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Vladimir Nabokov – at least the English writing Nabokov…), I cannot imagine my work without a direct access to the original text – or at least without the possibility to check on it. (I also tend to be radical as a teacher: when a student comes to me enthusiastically proposing a study about, let's say, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, the first question I ask is: do you know Russian?).

As we know, some translations can be better than the original works, but I sincerely do not believe in creative misunderstandings arising from reading, interpretive or translating mistakes – at least not in a general and abstract way. It means that I will refrain from rambling in Turkish, Armenian or Japanese literature. That will be for another life.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

My research interests have shaped me as a modernist scholar. A large amount of my studies focuses on the Western literary tradition (written mainly in the languages I know) between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, especially in the field of the novel. Usually, when I go back to previous centuries, I try only to recover a cultural filiation or the historical path of a theme in relation to the topics I am studying (for instance, working on Stendhal's elaboration of romance, I have recalled his medieval imagery and retraced the evolution of the *topos* of the "eaten heart" starting from courtly literature). But also concerning pre-modern literatures, my stance is very similar to the one I take towards the language issue: I believe in a specific skill that cannot be improvised. For my part, I have always preferred to study modernity because I am convinced that any investigation of cultural history, even remote from us, should start from the great questions of our time. This does not mean collapsing the distinction between past and present, but rather preserving the past's otherness with respect to our historical positioning, which should always be thematised even when we claim to adopt a neutral and "scientific" method. One of my points of reference on these issues is a page from *The Historian's Craft* by Marc Bloch, where he writes that "misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present". Then he tells an anecdote: "I had gone with Henri Pirenne to Stockholm; we had scarcely arrived, when he said to me: «What shall we go to see first? It seems that there is a new city hall here. Let's start there». Then, as if to ward of my surprise, he added: «If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life»".[1]

That being said, it is true that the prevailing interest in modern or strictly contemporary literature can become a problem, especially when one loses the sense of historical evolution and fails in the essential work of historicization. Undoubtedly, one of the present and future challenges posed to comparatists is to broaden their point of view not only horizontally, on the geographical and transnational axis, but also vertically, in a medium- and long-term perspective. As always, their task will be to reconnect distant fields, finding a meeting point between scholars of modernity and those of more traditional disciplines.

[1] Marc Bloch. 1992. *The Historian's Craft*. Transl. Peter Putnam. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 36.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

As Gayatri Spivak points out in *Death of a Discipline*, the task of Comparative Literature is to cross borders, but to cross borders can be a very serious problem. We must always keep this in mind, even when we cherish the irenic utopia of a World Literature in which all literatures and cultures can talk to each other, while the ecumenic comparatist acts as a cultural mediator or a peacekeeper. Power relations are always unbalanced and asymmetrical, as shown by linguistic hegemonies, translation policies and dynamics of texts circulation on a global market (see Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*). That being said, I think that the broadening of the corpus beyond the Western canon is nothing but a good thing, even if we cannot forget the problems of linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge that I mentioned earlier. Likewise, I think that between Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Subaltern Studies, etc., a virtuous alliance can be established, as so many instances demonstrate. But this alliance will really take place as long as we move away from the pernicious antithesis between content description and formal analysis, as if one could disregard the form in which any cultural element is expressed, or as if, on the other hand, any literary work could be reduced to the surface of style, without any thematic or ideological concern. So, to answer the question: no, I do not think one can practice Comparative Literature without close reading and without asking aesthetic questions. As I said before, the great challenge is to find the balance point between analysis and synthesis, and maybe simply to adjust the scale.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I must confess that I cannot find a really outstanding model in the current panorama of methods and critical theories. There certainly are some research fields that I consider helpful for my theoretical toolkit – Fictional Worlds Theory, Visual and Intermedial Studies, some issues in Postclassical Narratology – but nothing I can rely on as a stable foundation or framework. On the other hand, over the last few decades I have observed with some suspicion a phenomenon fostered by current epistemological scepticism and weak theoretical paradigms: I mean the proliferation of methods, schools or merely critical labels that rapidly turn into veritable brands. Nowadays, once a month, some new "Studies" crop up and yet another epoch-making "turn" is patented, with the usual sequel of projects, conferences, "seminal" essays, and possibly some academic positions to be funded. Sometimes it seems really hard to distinguish serious proposals from academic marketing, just to increase your credit in the intellectual research market. I often recall the warnings of Remo Ceserani, when

he used to talk about "the supermarket of critical methods", a postmodern metaphor to convey that methods have lost their heuristic power and "have become tools or utilities, routines to be indifferently performed, distinguished only by the label, or the patented griffe".[2]

In my opinion, the first thing we should do for the future of our studies is to seriously master the methods and theoretical paradigms we have at our disposal, the new and the old ones. Sometimes we rush to throw into the critical dustbin the movements we consider classic or even out of fashion, from Structuralism to Semiotics, from Hermeneutics to Reader Response Criticism. One of the updating procedures we should periodically carry out is to reconsider certain authors, books or theoretical models and honestly take stock of the situation, to screen the still useful issues from those that are irrevocably outdated. At the same time, we should historicise not only literary artworks or phenomena, but the critical models themselves, tracing them back to their cultural, ideological and political frameworks. That is the only way to resist the sirens of the new critical trends and keep us away from the supermarket of methods, looking for the latest commodity or trendy product. We should also remember that literary theory and criticism are (or should be) intelligently ancillary disciplines, meant to clarify the texts and to provide us a better understanding of the literary tradition. It is therefore legitimate, as a tactical resource, to adapt our paradigms and methods to the specific object we are investigating, which takes priority over research labels and academic affiliations. If we work this way, we will not become unsuspecting consumers but serious, curious and open-minded scholars, endowed with the strategic eclecticism we learned from our masters.

[2] Remo Ceserani. 1999. *Guida allo studio della letteratura*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, p. XIX.

Helena C. Buescu
Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at the University of Lisbon, Portugal

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

For personal reasons, I have always lived in the immersive context of Comparative Literature, well before considering an academic career and, especially, a PhD. When this time came, and having taught for a number of years French Literature, Classical and Romantic/Realist, and written an MA dissertation on Mme de La Fayette, I quickly understood that I would much rather prefer to continue my research in an area that would never foreclose my interests in terms of national literatures, approaches, authors, and individual works. Consequently, I began doing some research and found out that the area closer to my interests would be Comparative Literature. However, this was an area that did not exist previously in Portuguese universities, and which therefore was not officially recognized as a PhD area of study. With the support of my supervisor, Maria Alzira Seixo, and the whole Department of Romance Literatures at the University of Lisbon, I began my research on landscape description in three different national literatures, hoping that by the time I had to hand in my thesis the administrative process would be complete. So it happened, even though only a couple of months before I finished my PhD thesis.

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

I agree that "the language issue" is indeed a problem, or shall I say a challenge. One must be aware of the limits and even dangers when using translations, because unfortunately not all translations have the same level of proficiency. But it can be done, with a special attention to the cultural background (and research!) of the works one is dealing with. The main question, to my view, is to understand that one cannot approach a work from a different language and historical culture in a supposed naïve way, as though everything would be self-explanatory. Research and contextual reading are always necessary, but in this case they become of paramount importance.

I would also point out two different and to my view decisive questions that must inform a critical self-awareness of the comparative scholar as such. First and perhaps foremost, the philological understanding has to be a central part of the work we do. Unfortunately, in the last decades philology has in most cases been discontinued from university curricula, at least as a subject matter. It is not unusual, therefore, to see the main part of university training as discarding the discipline of

philology but, even worse, as discarding (and therefore making it invisible) the cognizance and the knowledge that comes from understanding just *how different* is a work that comes from a different culture and language.

The second question is that Comparative Literature (and other disciplines as well, but in Comparative Literature this becomes more perceptible) needs a convergent effort coming from other disciplines to address these problems: I would underline hermeneutics, of course, but also history, which allow one to build a knowledge of the different as different, therefore building (and not cancelling) the dialogue between that which is already known by us, and that which is new. So, philology, hermeneutics, and history are, to my view, the pillars of a true and informed comparatist position.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I see this with regret. And I think they are both a sad consequence of neglecting the disciplines I just mentioned, especially philology and history, which offer the interested scholar the means of frequenting the difference not only between spatially removed languages and cultures, but also different historical times. Reading a text from medieval literature, written in a language that we come to recognize as also our own, brings with itself the awareness that there is much separating us from the Middle Ages, and therefore that we have to approach the said text as offering us a quality of separation that we must recognise and embrace, in order to promote the hermeneutical understanding. I value contemporary case studies, but I am also very much aware of how much what we term "contemporary" is permeated by the non-contemporary. This is for me the true richness of our culture, giving rise to cultural and literary fruitfulness, for only by frequenting the "old" may we appreciate the "new", which is built on what has (apparently) passed.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Short answer: no. Close reading and asking aesthetic questions are two main features of Comparative Literature and, to my view, also of all literary disciplines. Comparative Literature cannot be adequately densified if the subject who reads (the *tertium quid*, to put it in comparative terms) is banished from the reading and is not challenged by each and every text. My view is that Comparative Literature must be unfalteringly centred on the text. Otherwise, it becomes a false discipline, in which

description has replaced any reflective argument. Besides, there is no Comparative Literature without critical awareness of how our historical and theoretical position, as well as our encyclopaedia, always inform the way we read and interpret different texts. We are lucky, moreover, to work on a field such as the humanities, where new knowledge gains by being superimposed to the previous one, and becomes a decisive tool to highlight and transform it.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

My view is that we are in a critical and dynamic moment, which is certainly reconfiguring the field. Of recent trends, there are some which are, I think, on their way out: for instance, post-colonialism and world literature are close to having exhausted their capacity of innovation and challenging, and it is not difficult to see that what is now being written under these headings is more and more distant from an ability to promote exciting and productive new approaches. Instead, there is a tendency in these fields to just repeat and adapt what has already been said, without further ado. There are other fields that offer a possibility of renewal, and in which I think future work may offer exciting perspectives. One of these is, to my view, ecocriticism, which has not exhausted all its possibilities. I would like to add that it does seem that a renewal of philologically informed approaches is on its way, and, if so, I am sure this will bring about a deeply interesting repositioning of what it means to be doing Comparative Literature today.

Astrid Erll
Professor of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I had a comparative research question before I became aware of comparative literature as a field. In my doctoral dissertation (*Gedächtnisromane*, 2003), I wanted to compare German and English prose texts of the 1920s that addressed the experience of the First World War. This was in the late 1990s. I duly searched for books on "how to compare" – unsuccessfully though. I suppose that this problem persists four young comparativists to this day.

However, Rita Felski's and Susan Stanford Friedman's *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013) became an important landmark for more systematic questions about the logics, ethics, politics, and transnational dimensions of comparison. These concerns in fact resonate with the field in which my dissertation found its home: memory studies. In British and German war writing of the *interbellum*, national frameworks of memory (as in Maurice Halbwachs's "cadres sociaux de la mémoire") are clearly palpable. But beyond this, other frameworks such as social class, gender, and political orientation shape literary war memories. And of course, there are transnational dynamics, the "travel" (Erll 2011) of memories: Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1929), for example, became a narrative template for Helen Zenna Smith's [Evadne Price] *Not so Quiet … Stepdaughters of War* (1930), and enabled her outraged articulation of the female experience of the First World War (see also Erll 2025).

Some years later, I wrote my *habilitation* about memories of colonialism in Indian and British media cultures (see Erll 2009), I realized that comparing memories within "national containers" (as I had by and large done in *Gedächtnisromane*) did not do justice to the entangled histories of colonizer and colonized, where historical experiences and archives are shared (while often contested), and forms of representation travel. Creating "containers for comparison" runs the risk of masking transcultural traffic. Most modern histories are therefore better studied in their "connective" rather than in a "comparative" logic, to use Marianne Hirsch' and Nancy K. Miller's (2011) distinction. This insight lies at the basis both of relational approaches to comparative literature (Goldberg 2011) and of what emerged in the 2010s as "transcultural memory studies" (Erll 2011; Erll 2023).

But as I realized in my subsequent project on the mnemohistory of the *Odyssey* (Erll 2018), tracing connections across vast stretches of time poses a challenge for relational approaches. Literary mnemohistory does not happen on what Genette calls "the sunny side of hypertextuality" (Genette 1997, 9). Instead of explicit linkages, we find potentialities and resonances. Exact points of connection remain difficult to pin down. Classical reception studies offers important insights for comparativists working on "frail connections" (Greenwood 2010, on ancient Greek and

modern Caribbean literature) or "striking literary similarities" (Haubold 2013, on Mesopotamian and archaic Greek literature).

The question of comparison has returned with full force to the field of memory studies in recent debates about Holocaust-comparisons. What are the epistemological and ethical dimensions of comparing the Holocaust with transatlantic slavery, or of understanding the war in Gaza as a Holocaust? Some of the most nuanced and engaged interventions into the debates about "comparing comparisons" have been made by comparativist Michael Rothberg (2020), whose concept of "multidirectional memory" (Rothberg 2009) offers a fundamentally new take on comparisons in memory culture. Memory studies' concerns, however, are not so much about comparison as an academic practice than as a phenomenon of public discourse. People compare histories of violence all the time, both in the form of oversimplistic equations that will lead to unproductive "victim competitions" and in ways that help engender productive "differentiated solidarity" (Rothberg 2011). The "agency of the aesthetic" (Rigney 2021) cannot be overrated in this context. Literature and the arts can explore original and nuanced comparisons between different histories of victimization and their effects through time. The novels by Caryl Phillips, for example, with their thinking-together of histories of slavery, racism, and the Holocaust, are an important form of "comparative (memory) literature".

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

I am rather agnostic here. I think that close readings will require language as well as cultural competence and that "creative misunderstanding" in studies revolving around a handful of novels would be difficult to justify. But for digital "distant readings" of large corpora, in particular, we need to draw on translations (see Moretti 2013). In the ideal case, both modes of doing comparative literature are brought together in meaningful ways (critical: Moretti 2022).

Another question are AI translations, which will rapidly pose more and more challenges to the field of comparative literature in the years to come, including questions of authorship – challenges that even the important *The 2023 Manifesto on Literary Translation* by PEN America could not yet foresee.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I think that current interest is not so much on contemporary literature *per se*, but on the contemporary *relevance* of literature. My students and doctoral candidates at Goethe University Frankfurt tend to be interested in older literatures, if and insofar these are "actualized" today – rewritten, adapted, remediated, and controversially debated. In this way, Homer enjoys great currency in my department of Anglophone literatures. Students engage in "reading backwards" (Erll 2024) through the popular novels by Pat Barker, Madeline Miller, and Margret Atwood (or even through TikTok content) – and these are their entry points to consider the English history of translating Homer, the poetry of H.D., James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Why should the opening of the Western literary canon imply that we abandon questions of aesthetics? There are myriad Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic etc. works that are highly aesthetic (if based on different aesthetics) and require careful close readings. Opening the canon is a political act. But it should not narrow down our focus to political questions only.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I work at the intersections of comparative literature (and media culture) and memory studies. From this vantage point, I would like to see literary history conceptualized in fresh ways that make it attractive (again) for emerging scholars. One way could be to think more deeply through "reading backwards" as a way of moving through literary history, which accentuates the transnational and transtemporal travels and relationalities of literary works: literary history as mnemohistory.

On a different note, I think there is much more to be said about the neurobiological and cognitive dimensions of (memory) literature. I would like to see closer collaboration between literary historians and cognitive psychologists. Andrew Elfenbein's *The Gist of Reading* (2017) is an impressive case in point, and the work, for example, by Lovro Škopljanac (e.g. Antonini et al. 2024) brings a fascinating empirical dimension to the understanding of readers, reading, and the memory processes involved.

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Matthieu Letourneux
Professor of French Literature at Paris Nanterre University, France

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

The university curriculum for literary studies in France generally includes courses in Comparative Literature from the *Licence* (BA) level upwards. In my Master's degree, I chose to specialize in Comparative Literature and prepare two dissertations in this field (on the art of the short story by Marcel Schwob and Robert Louis Stevenson in the first year, then on the adventure novel in the second year). I followed this up with a doctoral thesis in Comparative Literature on the adventure novel. My thesis supervisor was Pierre Brunel, who had established mythocriticism in French comparative studies, and who played a major role in my training and enabled me to take part in many works in this field. Subsequently, however, it was more the methodologies of cultural studies, cultural history and literary theory (narratology and fiction theory) that influenced me. In comparative literary studies, it was transmedia research that contributed to my thinking, namely the work by researchers at the crossroads of comparative literature and media studies. Today, my teaching position is not in comparative literature, but my work largely focuses on comparative corpora (with an emphasis on European and American exchanges), encompassing both literary and media fields (film, comics, press, radio, material objects...).

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

To be honest, the detailed study of translation practices is not central to my research. Indeed, I work on large corpora and, being interested in the international (and transmedia) circulation of stereotypes, architextual models or fictional characters and universes, I rather consider translation practices in a global perspective. For me, translation issues are clues to cultural practices: what circulates *en masse*? How does the translation of popular fiction adapt to the architextual, media, commercial and cultural ecosystems of the host country? Do the logics of language translation and of intersemiotic translation intersect? What do major translation movements tell us about cultural exchanges between countries? These kinds of serial translation phenomena are what interests me the most in this perspective.

One striking example is the importation of American dime novels into Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century by the German publisher Eichler. He bought entire series of dime novels (Buffalo Bill, Nick Carter) and decided to distribute them throughout Europe. Very quickly, his publications were imitated by

German series, which were in turn translated and distributed in Europe, and local imitations flourished in every country. A process of negotiation was thus put in place, on a national and European scale, with the American model, involving publishers, translators, authors and distributors, and making the issue of translation one of the key moments in a global cultural process. Studying translation choices (in reality, very free adaptations) highlights one of the levels of this negotiation, which is also apparent in formats, imitations, media discourse and so on.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I believe that studying contemporary productions is an excellent way to escape the stifling weight of the canon and classic works in literary studies. Comparative literature must embrace not only the contemporary but also a whole range of aesthetic textual productions neglected by literary studies: mass literature, press and magazines, songs, fanzines, amateur internet productions... In this field, exchanges are far more numerous and intense than in legitimized literature, making it an excellent area for analysis in comparative literature. This is true in both the contemporary era and literary history.

This is particularly striking in the field of research dedicated to the production of media culture, which has changed so much since the 1980s, and which increasingly involves thinking on a global scale. Bestsellers, their adaptations, and new forms of writing (both professional and amateur) on the internet and social networks all need to be seen in the context of the international circulation of works, series, genres and conventions. Such a perspective implies considering the confrontation between cultures and languages, as well as the effects of domination and resistance. Such perspectives require us to reinvent some of our tools of literary analysis, by decentring the cultural questioning (since the canon then finds itself at the margins of the questioning). And from this decentring, it is possible to historicise contemporary phenomena, and to rethink literary history entirely on the basis of this new cultural paradigm.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

It seems to me that aesthetic inquiry lies at the heart of literary concerns. However, it must be understood as an inquiry based on a broad definition of aesthetics, focusing on the emotional and rhetorical effects sought by the text's creators, or induced by the texts themselves, or even by the contexts (cultural, media, commercial) of

production, distribution, and consumption. From this perspective, aesthetic inquiry can encompass objects of very different natures, far removed from the canon (such as, once again, the press, popular literature, media culture, advertising...). It may indeed engage methods of analysis closer to distant reading. Yet such objects and perspectives also lend themselves to close reading – though a close reading that seeks less to highlight the uniqueness of the work than to understand how it is shaped by a range of similar productions, which aligns with a comparative approach *par excellence* that perceives literature as a cultural phenomenon.

In reality, the apprehension of large corpora, including from a broad cultural perspective, in no way precludes aesthetic questioning or close reading methods. Firstly, because most of the productions of media culture involve an aesthetic relationship (in the sense understood by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, i.e., to put it briefly, a relationship involving the evaluation of a depragmatised pleasure), and because this relationship is based precisely on conventions, stereotypes or identifiable narrative structures which can be perceived at the global level of the series of texts. Secondly, because this global perspective is better understood when we compare it with the concrete appropriation practices of authors, who always singularise at the margins (and thus contribute, on their own scale, to modifying forms, tastes and what they reveal to us about social discourse).

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Once again, the studies that intersect comparative literature with media studies, cultural studies, or cultural history seem to me the most compelling. They also appear to address an important challenge for our disciplines. The need for literary studies to break away from a narrow conception of literature and open up to a culturally oriented inquiry (and thus to a broader definition of literature) seems to meet both a disciplinary and a social requirement: definitions of literature and culture are undergoing profound change, and literary disciplines, which claim to make the relationship with literature and culture their object of study, cannot ignore this transformation. This shift impacts our contemporary questioning, but also, retrospectively, our way of examining our history.

The methods of comparative literature can be seen as a formidable tool for engaging in global cultural questioning. The global turn taken by history (and its variants – connected history, decentred history) and by part of sociology benefits from being enriched by methods of text analysis, at the same time as they feed into the reflections of comparative literature. They have the advantage of reintroducing questions of cultural power relations, and thus of understanding the international circulation of works, genres and forms in terms of domination and marginalisation – in this respect, the arrival of cultural studies methods in French research, applied here to the relationship between cultures, is revolutionising the questions being asked. This is true not only in the case of postcolonial studies, but also in the way contemporary culture is thought of, including in Europe, in terms of power relations played out on an international scale.

Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser
Professor of Comparative Literature at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I studied at the Department of General and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia. It was in the period 1982-1986. Later I finished MA and PhD studies in Comparative Literature and my whole academic career was in the frame of this discipline. I still work as a senior researcher in the Department for Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature at the Institute of Macedonian Literature at the same university.

The most influential and relevant authors during my education were: Mikhail Bakhtin, Hugo Dyserinck, Claude Pichois and Andre M. Rousseau, Earl Miner, Iv Shevrel, Dyonis Djurishin, Claudio Guillén, Antun Ocvirk, Frank Wolman, Zoran Konstantinovic, Aleksandar Flaker, Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Armando Gnisci and many others, and of course, my professors Milan Gjurcinov and Vlada Uroshevic. After many years the books by Totosy de Zepetnek, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosh, Franco Moretti also gained the attention of my colleagues. In the last few decades, I can summarize that we have passed several levels of the methodological approaches in comparative studies: firstly, there was the classical research of the reception, influences and parallels; afterwords the interest was concentrated on the inherent literariness of the works and that was the period of structuralist and poststructuralist dominance. After that, came the era of different types of cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, etc. The classical form of imagology was renewed into the identity and/or intercultural studies. Also very popular to this day are the areas of traductology and intermediality. Research on the connections of modern cultural phenomena with the ancient mythological and folklore heritage, as well as the archetypal approach, are still of great interest.

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

I really like Susan Bassnett's understanding that comparative literature is nothing more than following the noble work of literary translators who create world literature. The phenomena of translation as intercultural re-creation lighten the tension between globalization and different cultural identities. At first sight, literature seems to separate peoples and nations because it relies upon a specific linguistic

medium. On the contrary, it has the deepest supra-national value, that rests somewhere between translations, somewhere among or deep inside cultures and languages, in the sphere of the essential human categories. According to various literary theoreticians the *raison d'être* of literature is perhaps to reach this untranslatable component. The translators struggle to reach the (almost) untranslatable components of any national literature and to transfer them to another linguistic culture. It seems a paradox, but that way literature becomes an instrument for overcoming the Babylonian curse and enriching the common heritage.

Of course, on the practical level, it is undeniable that the scholars "doing Comparative Literature" must have at least double optic – that means that they have to know thoroughly at least one more language and national culture than their own. Transculturality is so common in the contemporary world so that it becomes a regular characteristic of the humanities. Misunderstanding could be a challenge, because it broadens creativity, and if we consider the translated literary work as a new artwork, then it gains new qualities in the process of being adopted in another linguistic and national culture. According to Itamar Even-Zohar the translated works are a very important part of the literary poly-system, and they have special functions for the variety and complexity of the target culture.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

It seems to me that not only in academia, but especially in primary and secondary schools, the programmes of teaching and studying classic works should be changed and made more attractive for younger generations (maybe through film adaptations, cartoons or other specialized educational publications, etc.). It is normal that some kinds of discourses and some themes will not stand the new trends, since the literary field is changing constantly. Contemporary literature is more provocative for Comparative Literature scholars than many well-known canonical stories and poems. I do not think this is wrong.

On the other hand, in contemporary case studies the basic parameter should be the aesthetic quality of the text, not just its freshness or convenience for drawing critical conclusions in the spirit of certain theories. Something that bothers me is the fact that some theoretical approaches force a very narrow circle of works and there are a lot of theoretical studies written and inspired by only three or four novels, for example. The literary system is dynamic, so the process of canonization of literary works is constant: through this process the most influential contemporary books become classics. I always look towards the future with great expectations regarding young authors. But, of course, in order to have the capacity to make a significant step towards new poetics, themes and forms, young authors must have a solid knowledge of classical literature. So, the conclusion is that there should be a balance between classic and contemporary work in Comparative Literature education.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

I think that aesthetic questions remain crucial for literary studies, and in that context in Comparative Literature, too. Literature can be analyzed in many ways, but the most important thing is to be observed as literature, as a special type of artistic creation. Broadening the Western canon gives the chance to recognize the identity differences, but this makes sense only if it is done on aesthetic premises. The political and ideological issues are provocative for Comparative Literary scholars but only in combination with proper literary and aesthetic analyses. The traditional Western canon can be revised only by transnational curriculum consisting of literary works of high quality, which means of an aesthetic value. Comparative Literature does not promote a proportional and mathematically inclusive canon in which authors and works will be considered only as representatives of their national cultures and languages. Although there is a certain stigmatization of literature written in languages which are not widely spoken and there is evident dominance of English written works, the transnational corpus must be formed on an axiological base. And this is possible only when using the method of close reading of the chosen texts. This is not just a hermeneutic analysis or perception of the style and structure, but it is a specific reader's response, in great part connected with the feeling of content and enjoyment. So, the old-fashioned model of reading in literary studies with interest and enjoyment cannot be abandoned. The opposite model of distant reading, proposed by Franco Moretti for the comprehension of the concept of World Literature, is provocative for literary history, but for the real academic engagement with literature the two models must be combined.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I have tried to summarize my cultural and Comparative Literature interests over the past ten years. Then I discovered the book *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* by the German theorist Doris Bachmann-Medick (2016 in English, and in German in 2006), in which seven significant turns are analyzed in a rather systematic way for the studies of culture, namely: interpretive turn, performative turn, reflexive turn, postcolonial turn, translation turn, spatial turn, iconic turn. In addition, the religious, neurological, and digital revolutions are also indicated as current types of "turns". I found myself dealing more or less with several humanistic turns in my own research. First of all, and perhaps most consistently, with the problems of the spatial turn, to which I have dedicated several papers and academic actions (debates, conferences), but soon after I was carried away by the

problem of the ethical, affective, translation, digital and other so-called twists and turns. So, I am asking myself whether and to what extent these important interdisciplinary cultural orientations are reflected in Comparative Literature and to what extent they model and transform it.

From the time of the emergence of these cultural upheavals, Comparative Literature definitively breaks with positivist literary analysis and turns into an in-depth, contextual and, by its very essence, complex study of literary phenomena, so that the concepts of comparative literary studies and comparative cultural studies are more or less identical. In other words, I think that the classic discipline of Comparative Literature turns into Comparative Cultural Studies. In this frame, I see great potential in inter-art research, in the connection of popular culture research with mythology, archetypal and other folk-studies, geo-criticism, new media, etc. Lately, the most provocative topics are: eco-criticism, AI, post-humanism, etc. Why? Because the old-fashioned humanistic disciplines are evidently in crisis and give way to interdisciplinary approaches.

Marcelo Topuzian
Professor of Spanish Literature at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

Si bien estaba ya obviamente anoticiado de la existencia de la disciplina durante mis estudios de grado (en la Universidad de Buenos Aires en los años 90), entre ellos solo encontré cursos de literaturas extranjeras (francesa, inglesa, alemana, norteamericana, etc.) y distribuidas por períodos (medieval, del siglo XIX, del siglo XX) que no tomaban el comparatismo como centro de su agenda de manera explícita, aunque lo practicaban, más o menos "salvajemente" según los casos. Esto cambió muchísimo en los años siguientes, creo que por demanda de los propios estudiantes, aunque los nombres de las materias hayan seguido siendo los mismos. Hoy ya existe incluso un curso de Teoría de la Literatura Comparada en el grado de la misma carrera.

Realmente terminé de familiarizarme con la Literatura Comparada mucho después de doctorarme, y ya a cargo de un curso de Literatura Española Moderna y Contemporánea en la misma universidad, dada la necesidad de encontrar formas de incorporar de manera razonada, entre sus contenidos, textos de las literaturas catalana, gallega y vasca. Por esto mismo, fueron cruciales en mi acercamiento a la disciplina libros y autores vinculados con los estudios comparados de las literaturas en la península ibérica o los estudios ibéricos, como Joan Ramon Resina, Santiago Pérez Isasi, Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Joseba Gabilondo, César Domínguez, Arturo Casas (fueron especialmente importantes en este sentido los dos volúmenes de *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, de la editorial John Benjamins; también el volumen 9 de la *Historia de la literatura española* de Editorial Crítica dirigida por José-Carlos Mainer, a cargo de Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza). A ellos habría que sumar la obra de teóricos españoles del comparatismo como Claudio Guillén y Darío Villanueva, por supuesto. Luego, dada mi formación y especialización previa en teoría literaria, me llamaron especialmente la atención las zonas de la literatura comparada que buscaban, en razón de sus objetivos, provocar cambios de orden teórico-metodológico en la práctica usual de los estudios literarios. Entonces les presté atención a las reflexiones de la primera década de este siglo sobre literatura mundial. En el marco de lo que veía en ese momento como un giro historicista generalizado de la investigación en literatura, me interesaba la posibilidad de pensar nuevas formas de historia literaria global o trasnacional. Por eso leí con mucho interés en ese momento las obras de Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova y David Damrosch, y luego las de Alexander Beecroft, Eric Hayot y Mariano Siskind.

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be

addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

Dado lo peculiarmente ibérico de mi acercamiento a la literatura comparada, el problema que se presenta especialmente en los cursos que dicto es el del acceso de los y las estudiantes argentinos a textos en catalán, gallego o vasco. En este caso, dado que la carrera de grado en la Universidad de Buenos Aires no otorga formación en estas lenguas, se vuelve obligatorio proporcionarles traducciones al castellano, aunque también ponemos a su disposición las versiones originales, para quienes deseen cotejarlas o hacer el esfuerzo de enfrentar su lectura directa, o simplemente para que los y las estudiantes sean más materialmente conscientes de que están leyendo un texto traducido y lo tengan en cuenta en sus lecturas. El equipo de cátedra y de investigación del que formo parte cuenta con especialistas que manejan, por lo menos, el catalán y el gallego, y gracias a eso se vuelve posible encarar proyectos colectivos de investigación que puedan adoptar un perfil comparatista. Sigo pensando que no hay manera de que el trabajo de crítica e investigación se lleve a cabo sin un manejo docto y lo más inmerso posible en ella de la lengua original de los objetos de estudio, incluso (o especialmente) cuando lo que se estudia es la traducción. En esto, entonces, creo que hay una obvia diferencia entre lo que ocurre en la enseñanza de grado, por un lado, y en el posgrado y la investigación, por otro.

En cuanto al trasfondo cultural, su conocimiento cabal es siempre un desiderátum, un ideal, incluso para los habitantes nativos de un espacio literario determinado (sobre todo cuando toca hablar del pasado); todo lo que se pueda hacer para documentarse al respecto parece poco. Pero no creo que haya un diferencial "metafísico" – respecto de este tema – entre el investigador extranjero y el nativo.

El "malentendido creativo" no es más que una forma lúdica, y quizás no la más feliz, de explicar en qué consisten los aportes al conocimiento de la literatura de una perspectiva comparatista. Es muy esperable, si no imprescindible, que un cambio en la perspectiva de estudio de los textos, que se sirva de ellos en la conformación de objetos de investigación de una escala mayor a la local o nacional, dispare o visibilice valencias de sentido inadvertidas o apenas embrionarias bajo la mirada de lectores a los que es ajena esa intención comparatista, sean o no críticos o académicos. Las lecturas no pueden incluirlo todo, y por eso también es esperable que dejen de lado aspectos que, desde un enfoque más local, pueden parecer indisociables, indispensables o necesarios.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

Tiendo a pensar que esto es consecuencia de la importancia otorgada al trasfondo cultural a que se refería la pregunta anterior. Parece una extraña consecuencia del giro historicista de los estudios literarios de las pasadas décadas, con su énfasis correlativo en las cuestiones contextuales más inmediatas a la producción, pero

también a la recepción de los textos, que los investigadores más jóvenes se sientan más cómodos con textos con cuyos contextos se sienten más íntimamente familiarizados, es decir, con la actualidad. No quiero caer en el lugar común acerca de la "decadencia de las Humanidades" que cifra esta deriva en el rechazo del esfuerzo de erudición que conlleva la reconstrucción cabal de un contexto histórico, sobre todo si es lejano en el tiempo o en el espacio. Se trata, más bien, de cómo los investigadores intentan compatibilizar en su propia producción los requisitos de validación promovidos por la disciplina, que pueden ser, si no estrictamente contradictorios entre sí, sí a menudo demasiado exigentes si se los confronta a estudios que no se inscriben en la literatura comparada. No estoy, por lo tanto, seguro de que estemos ante los efectos dentro de la disciplina de un "presentismo" como característica o índice ideológicos de nuestro tiempo.

Correlativa, en cierta forma, de lo anterior, es la exigencia, en las investigaciones doctorales, de estados de la cuestión cada vez más eruditos, que en el caso de los clásicos pueden alcanzar un volumen realmente inmanejable, por más esforzado que sea el doctorando. Paradójicamente también, ha crecido una visión desacralizante de los clásicos, que los sacó de la ilusión o apariencia de accesibilidad inmediata basada en su conformación eminentemente filológica (es decir, centrada en su carácter de monumentos lingüísticos dentro de una lengua nacional), y por lo tanto los historizó y contextualizó, enfatizando las distancias que nos separan de ellos, y así los volvió casi inaccesibles para la investigación, dada la dificultad que hoy exige salvar esas distancias.

Algunos investigadores que ostentan el grado máximo alcanzable en la erudición acerca de un clásico y su contexto histórico deploran la perdida de interés sobre sus objetos, que a veces puede conllevar la desaparición del puesto que ocupan tras su jubilación y con ello la desaparición de todo un campo de estudio de la institución en que se desempeñan, y, al mismo tiempo, castigan o ridiculizan acercamientos a los mismos objetos que juzgan superficiales, resultado de lo que para ellos es simple "moda teórica" o militancia académica. Habría que poder mantener actitudes un poco más balanceadas.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Esta pregunta ni se puede empezar responder en cuatrocientas palabras, que es el límite fijado por la encuesta. Mi respuesta más inmediata y espontánea es que sí, la disciplina de la literatura comparada es suficientemente elástica como para que se pueda practicar de maneras ostensiblemente diferentes y hasta contradictorias. Esto puede dar pasto a las seculares acusaciones de inconsecuencia teórico-metodológica, pero creo que sirve también para evidenciar cuán sostenido a lo largo del tiempo es el impulso comparatista: quizás la literatura comparada sea, ante todo, una fuerza,

una compulsión por no dejar intactos objetos de estudio que, de otro modo, parecen acabados en sí mismos. Por supuesto, esa fuerza también se institucionaliza y reinstitucionaliza periódicamente, afianza y discute sus protocolos y operaciones de lectura, se realiza en obra crítica e historiográfica palpable. En síntesis, sí, la literatura comparada se puede practicar sin hacer lectura atenta y sin plantear cuestiones de orden estético.

Sin embargo, lo que más me interesa es impugnar la exclusión que parece suponer la pregunta: la lectura atenta o cercana y las preguntas estéticas no son incompatibles con cuestiones de orden ideológico o político. Es más, el privilegio de uno u otro de estos planos o niveles de análisis ni siquiera implica el desprecio de los demás. Es cierto que los y las estudiantes o jóvenes doctorandos probablemente lleguen mejor equipados de antemano para la discusión política o ideológica (al menos, así es seguro en la Universidad de Buenos Aires, donde trabajo), por lo cual es comprensible que nuestra tarea formativa fundamental sea familiarizarlos lo más posible con los recursos de la lectura atenta y los problemas suscitados por el propósito y la percepción artísticos de los materiales con que trabajan. Pero el arte y la literatura son incapaces de no suscitar cuestiones ideológicas y políticas, leídos de cerca o de lejos. La política es combate sin garantías, a menudo en canchas inclinadas, y el arte y la literatura intervienen en él de maneras no muy estentóreas, más bien sutiles e indirectas, cuando no hay ya o todavía lugar en el discurso político *tout court* para las reivindicaciones que realizan.

Un último señalamiento, igualmente simplificador por falta de espacio, concierne al tipo de política invocada por el estudio de objetos distantes del canon literario occidental tradicional. La imposición sobre ellos de agendas políticas prefijadas, gestadas a menudo a partir de necesidades muy locales, pero "universalizadas" a fuerza de poderío académico, editorial e institucional, se ha venido volviendo crecientemente odiosa para los investigadores que no provenimos de, ni trabajamos en, los centros hegemónicos de formación académica, en Estados Unidos o en Europa.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Considerándome, en tanto especialista en literatura española, un fan y al mismo tiempo un *outsider* del comparatismo, es decir, haciendo la salvedad de que no me siento para nada sancionado institucionalmente para hablar como comparatista, debo decir que lo que me parece más interesante durante los últimos veinte años es cómo problemas, conceptos, prácticas y métodos que podían considerarse propios o inspirados por la literatura comparada se convirtieron en rasgos de la investigación literaria o cultural en general, sin mayor aclaración. Este es el mayor logro reciente de la disciplina: volver crecientemente improcedente el tratamiento no trasnacional, o cerrado a la traducción y a las relaciones interculturales, de cualquier asunto literario clásico. El romanticismo, el modernismo, las vanguardias, la novela, etc., etc. ya no se pueden pensar como objetos de estudio en sí teóricamente aislables de sus acaeceres concretos por todo el mundo. Y esto se puede leer con interés incluso en el trabajo de investigadores que no son comparatistas literarios "nacidos y criados". Por

esto me seducen e interesan especialmente las obras críticas e historiográficas que se animan a abandonar la compulsión a lo monográfico propiciada por la hiperespecialización de la investigación académica de la literatura y la cultura, y se atreven, con buena dosis de valentía, pero también con un esfuerzo enorme, a la larga duración y a la máxima extensión geográfica alcanzable. Pienso, por ejemplo, en el *tour de force* de Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel y sus tres enormes volúmenes sobre las vanguardias artísticas, que ni siquiera tienen la literatura en su centro – al contrario –, pero son un modelo en cuanto a la visión de conjunto y comparada que hoy me parece nuevamente cada vez más necesaria en el ámbito de unos estudios literarios que se quieran históricamente relevantes.

Dicho esto, me interesa particularmente como esto vuelve sobre la teoría literaria. Es decir, me interesa considerar cómo la necesidad de repensar comparativa y globalmente la historia de la literatura y del arte exige perentoriamente, sin abandonar el trabajo minucioso con fuentes y datos de investigación empírica, la elaboración de nuevas categorías y conceptos que sirvan a ese objetivo y al mismo tiempo deconstruyan, implícita o explícitamente, los andamiajes teóricos eurocéntricos (en realidad generalmente francocéntricos, o germano-anglo-francocéntricos) que, surgidos muchas veces de los mismos agentes que la historia literaria decía estar estudiando y analizando críticamente, les dieron a los objetos de investigación los sesgos tan característicos de la literatura comparada de la segunda posguerra. Por eso, aunque ya tienen unos años, me siguen pareciendo interesantes los intentos de teorización generalista y a la vez desplazada de autores como Eric Hayot y Alexander Beecroft, que para mí siguen en esto la línea abierta por comparatistas no centrales como Antonio Cândido o Ángel Rama.

Johannes Türk
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1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I was in my second year as a student of medicine at the Freie Universität Berlin when I realized that I was more interested in the humanities and changed to comparative literature and philosophy. In the traditional modern university, philosophy was the field at the head of the faculty that included the philologies. Unlike law, medicine, and theology, this faculty promised what one could call a general humanist education. And literature and the arts, more recently joined by film, seemed in a historical perspective the major medium in which human experience had found its expression. Asking fundamental questions about human experience, its history, and concepts to grasp them on a general level therefore seemed to find its natural objects in literature, the arts, and philosophy. I had a close relationship with literature and had learned two modern languages, English and French, fluently at school, but also through exchange programs during high school. I loved reading, theatre, and art. Even if I was not aware of this background, I think it informed my choice. In Berlin, friends told me that comparative literature at the Freie Universität offered a curriculum that would correspond to a more ambitious and theoretically informed approach to literature that also cut across several national literatures. The Institut für Allgemeine and Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft [Institute of General and Comparative Literature] in Berlin was founded by Peter Szondi.

The profile of the field was then still developed along the two axis its name indicates: on the one hand, the "general" side in which semiology, anthropology, aesthetics are studied, on the other hand the "comparative" side, which means the study of several national literatures as well as of different art forms. The Institute was one of the most interesting intellectual places I have come to know. It was the first to invite Derrida to teach in Germany in the 60s and attracted the most interesting students. During the first phase of my studies, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Gérard Genette, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Starobinski, Jean-Luc Nancy, Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, and Ernst Cassirer were the most important authors I encountered. Later they were joined by some contemporary scholars such as Joseph Vogl, and during a stay at Yale, Shoshana Felman and Peter Brooks. On the side of literature, it was Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, Baudelaire, Kafka, Valéry, later also Georges Perec. In the aftermath of the second world war, the Franco-German cultural exchange was important and shaped in many ways the interests at the Institute of Comparative Literature.

2. One of the thresholds of "doing Comparative Literature" is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of "creative misunderstanding"?

Octavio Paz opens an essay on translation with the anecdote about someone who prays using a translated text, if I remember well a translation from Sanskrit. Once he receives a translation that is more correct in the academic sense, the gods, who always used to appear to him as a result of the words from a mistranslation, no longer appear. Some texts that German Romantics published as translations from Sanskrit were translations from the English translation. The English translations might have included misunderstanding or have been based on an insufficient knowledge of the cultural context. These are some examples that illustrate that a translation is not a pure medium in which a self-identical content is rendered; rather, it transposes an original that itself might be constituted of content that has been transposed from other cultures and languages. It therefore seems important to think of an original as no more than a direction of provenance. The idea of origin is the projection of a pure beginning that can help orient our search for a better understanding. We might need it as a regulative idea in order to have a standard we can use to reject wrong meanings that would contradict the meaning of a text, that is too remote or even outright abusive. In his introduction to David Heller-Roazen's lecture "Reading Chances" in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Department of Comparative Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, on October 24, 2024, my friend Eyal Peretz has described comparative literature as a discipline that resembles piracy because it crosses different forms of knowledge, contexts and languages.

On a pragmatic level, it is therefore important to always be aware of the degree of competence one has and why it is necessary in some cases and in others it is not. And it is vital to include a reflection of the limits of one's knowledge as an essential part of our work. I can for example teach a text whose original was written in Russian, a language I do not speak, and consult experts that do know the language and also reflect on the limits of my access to the text if it relies on linguistic factors. At the same time, I think that national languages as historic origin of texts have too much prominence, a prominence that is due to the institutional fact that the philologies were the foundational disciplines of the study of literature. The form of a text can often relate to influences from a different literature or from a remote historical period and that influence is as important as an origin of the text as the specific language in which it was written. Texts are inherently anachronistic heterogeneities.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

Foregrounding contemporary case studies entails a high risk. Until a few decades ago, most scholars were very hesitant to take that risk, primarily because historical distance seemed to guarantee a more objective viewpoint. To find and sufficiently capture a context and to assign it to a given artefact is more difficult and prone to error in relation to contemporary artworks. Hindsight also was the precondition for a more stable assessment of the importance and the relative status of a work of art. In addition, periodization was problematic and incomplete because seemingly different works could represent two different styles, but they would also, viewed from a different angle, show similarities that would lead a later generation to see them as two facets of the same movement or style. In German literature, Kleist, for example, would have represented something radically new for many contemporaries. But his work only became recognized as that of a major writer almost a hundred years later, and the question how he can be positioned in the Romantic period puzzles scholars until today. We can therefore say that the humanities were operating in an epimethean sense.

Today, what becomes more important is the promethean, that is forward-looking dimension of contemporary art and literature. Literary scholars increasingly see artists and writers as their equals, which is to say engaged in thinking and understanding through their own medium rather than as providing objects in need of explanation and conceptual illumination. Only a few twentieth-century thinkers have engaged more extensively with contemporary arts, among them Barthes, Foucault, and Deleuze. They were interested in Modern artists who had theoretical aspirations, worked in proximality to aesthetic theory and saw their works as a contribution to art theory as much as to art as a historic process. That is why the book on Bacon (*Francis Bacon – Logique de la sensation*) or the reflections on the work of art in *Différence et Répétition*, both by Deleuze, still seem relevant.

What, then, has changed to allow for the investment in contemporary art? What seems clear is that there is a looser relationship to both history and theoretical rigor. History, while in flow, has become vague so that the investment and time seem no longer necessary. A concept with a fine intuition, promising to capture what is original in a style, is enough to be published. Theory has become regional. If the present and its production has also broken loose from the binding force of precursors, or if that always seemed the case and there was merely more patience to wait until phenomena inserted themselves into the flow of historical forms is unclear. Or has historical distance itself turned out to be a mere surface effect that withdraws objects from their intelligibility, quarantines them so to speak until a later point?

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

The broadening of the corpus is only one part of a wider phenomenon. David Damrosch has shown through analyses of publications recorded in the MLA Bibliography that on the one hand, there is an explosion of the canon, that is, there are publications on a large number of authors that were little known. On the other hand, the number of authors that form part of the canon shrinks. Instead of 16 Romantic writers, on whom several articles are published every year, only 8 are left. There is a smaller and less varied kernel with a large number of satellites around it. The domain of shared intelligibility is smaller; the discursive dimension in which debate, argumentation, refutation and articulated difference is possible became narrower. And it is now surrounded by works whose rationale can only be shared on a political basis in a wider sense. But they cannot become objects of pluralistic debate. There is just a small denominator in a wide field of differences without an internal measure.

Canonicity enabled discourse and pluralism but at the expense of the exclusion of a large amount of works. Once it disappears, that is, explodes and does not evolve merely by shifts and slow inclusions of additional texts, consensus and dissensus seem to lose their meaning. For many of these works, close reading or a debate on aesthetic features is precluded. One can either be convinced of their value through an argument external to these works, or one can follow the invitation to explore the singular works. Out of this scenario grows an opportunity for comparative literature if we think of it as "piracy": it can search for new forms of intelligibility, transversal lines that connect seemingly disparate material. It can also try to rigorously understand the situation and develop a conceptual response to it. Or it can revert to observing, as Franco Moretti has, the relationship between canonic and non-canonic literature on a quantitative level. In my view, however, the link to the experiential reality, to lived life, the invitation of artworks to speak to us and accompany us through an adventure, is essential for our engagement with literature.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Looking at the contemporary world, I see a disarticulation. The field of comparative literature falls apart into many spheres that no longer communicate and that no longer try to show in an encompassing manner how their claims relate to the field as a whole and to its past. At conferences, we have on the one hand groups such as the proponents of deconstruction or discourse analysis that cling to their heritage and present work that rehearses terminologies that Derrida or Paul de Man in one case, Michel Foucault or Friedrich Kittler on the other hand coined. And we have postcolonial studies, that tries to turn a fundamental critique into a series of approaches but is at risk of losing transformative power by suggesting to discredit a large amount of works, approaches and analytic tools on the basis of their complicity in a system of global dominance and exploitation. They bring important and not fully perceived historical dimensions to our attention, but often they do not explain why, beyond condemnation, this should be relevant or interesting and what it implies for what other forms of criticism read. More recently, the Anthropocene in environmental studies or concepts of the posthuman have tried to translate the vast impact of

the thematic constellation they make visible into importance in the field. All of these are important new movements, but their innovation is primarily thematic.

At the same time, Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a central challenge as well as a historically transformative reality. It produces and models texts and images as well as their interpretation and invades domains of life and politics. Because AI produces knowledge and perceptions, it is not just a tool: the more people use it, the more does it create historical feedback loops. In a decade or so, our way of perceiving the world will largely be shaped by content originating in AI. Already now, algorithms are programmed that make ChatGPT more "ethical", debates have emerged about how "woke" AI is. Simultaneously these ethical standards are, as Roberto Simanowski claims, part of a western ethical and political world and cement a colonial dominance on the level of technology. In addition, AI algorithms work on the basis of probability, which will erode quality and innovation. Simanowski has done interesting work on these aspects. Comparative Literature has a lot to contribute here because languages in their relation to being are at the core of this field. The relationship between the human and technology needs to be examined again in this new context. In addition, I would say that Sylvia Wynter's work is an important legacy still to be explored, as she suggests that we as humans find ourselves in stories capable of re-foundation of the human.

These are some scattered points. One possible way forward would be to rehabilitate the "general" in General and Comparative Literature: to systematically account for language and arts in their relation to the historic moment, and to find a rigorous conceptual field in which to rearticulate the relationship between different texts, artworks, forms of knowledge, languages, and human experience.

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