

Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian, Alison Boulanger (eds.)

**Comparing Literatures:  
Aspects, Method, and Orientation**

Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the  
European Society of Comparative Literature (ESCL-SELC)



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# Introduction.

## Comparative Literature-World Literature: Spreading Knowledge and Representations between Cultural Curiosity and the Risk of New Globish Stereotypes

*Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian (Université de Lille)*

From one conference to another, the same doubts and laments seem to re-emerge.<sup>1</sup> The legitimacy of comparative literature is questioned for often opposite reasons: is it too centred on a very limited cultural area, *i.e.* mainly European? or does it tend to be too globish when it expands its views to world literature? For a bi-annual conference of the European Society of Comparative Literature, the question seems even more acute, since most contributors came from European countries and many worked on languages and literatures from the European area.

As often, oppositions are not as clear-cut as they may seem in the first place. While Emily Apter criticizes some institutional forms of World Literature studies and “harbour[s] serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability,” considering that many celebrations “of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ [...] have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities,’” she definitely sides with one of the main assumptions of World Literature studies, *i.e.* the necessary “deprovincialization of the canon” (Apter: 2). A great promoter of these studies at Yale, David Damrosch echoes Apter’s reservations and underlines the risk of “reducing [a foreign text] to a pallid version of some literary form we already know” when its foreignness is not properly taken into account” (Damrosch: 1). He reminds his reader of the possible shortcomings of cultural transfers. For, as he admits, giving a new

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Tomiche or Du.

life to a literary text in a new language and in a new culture “can involve both losses and gains” (Damrosch: 1). However, despite the awareness Damrosch shares with Pascale Casanova that cultural transfers can be unequal and might be dictated by the laws of commerce and by imperial cultural domination, whatever form it may take (Casanova, 2008; Casanova, 2015), he makes a leap of faith, driven by the “conviction that works of world literature have an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of cultures that produced them” (Damrosch: 2). The humanistic assumptions that lie behind this conviction are obvious, indicating that between the cultural networks of the past so-called “republic of letters” and the new networks of this global era, there is a continuum.

Though some great works may seem untranslatable because their meaning is linked to a given time and a given place, others can be meaningful beyond a “homegrown audience” and can find “a compelling immediacy” that paradoxically can go with a sense of “persisting foreignness” (Damrosch: 3). What if the role of comparative literature was precisely to conciliate both the impressions of immediacy and of foreignness described by Damrosch and to make the reader aware of the limitations of both? Should we not embrace the so-called limitations of our discipline at last and consider them less as insufferable flaws than as a productive and stimulating caveat? To take pains to understand a specific culture, the possibilities offered by its language, and the implicit assumptions and hierarchies at the heart of its own culture is certainly a necessary step to promote real understanding and overcome the dangers of globishness. At the same time, if we wish indeed to consider literature as a “fund of cultural knowledge” (Damrosch: 1) that is valuable and illuminating, beyond space and time, cultural transfers and translations—for all their necessary limitations and even their misinterpretations—play a crucial role in ensuring cultural dialogue, even if it can be at the price of a certain dose of loss and even of frustration.

The period during which Goethe coined the successful expression of *Weltliteratur* is useful to understand both the ideals and the pitfalls at the heart of the subject. Nothing is entirely new under the sun and many of our contemporary debates on subaltern



literatures echo the strategies and the doubts of the German writers at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, with the exportation and dissemination of the Herderian formula in Europe: against the cultural imperialism of a dominant language and literature, French at the time, the differentiation of small literatures was achieved by finding new resources in oral culture and by equating national literature, national culture and national language. The ennobling process of collecting ballads and tales as popular forms of epics was adopted not only by other European writers during the century to give legitimacy to their political claims, it was exported and adopted a century later by other nascent countries during the decolonisation, as Pascale Casanova underlines (Casanova 2008: 321-324).

But are not these forms of differentiation and revolt against dominant cultures partly illusory, as they answer global demands for niche products? Germaine de Staël's assertion at the beginning of *Corinne ou l'Italie* (Chapter IV) can indeed be understood both ways:

The art of civilization tends continuously to make all the men similar in appearance and almost in reality; but the spirit and the imagination take pleasure in the differences which characterize the nations: men resemble each other only by affectation or by calculation; but all that is natural is varied.<sup>2</sup>

In the opposition the writer draws between civilized uniformity and natural variety, the balance seems at first to tip on the side of the latter, through the many pleasures that nature offers over the implicit boredom provided by unified cosmopolitanism and civilization. "Affectation" and "calculation" denote artificialness and search for profit and appear as mildly derogatory. But of which nature is this pleasure exactly? In a novel which represents on the one hand the Grand Tour of a melancholic member of the British

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. "L'art de la civilisation tend sans cesse à rendre tous les hommes semblables en apparence et presque en réalité; mais l'esprit et l'imagination se plaisent dans les différences qui caractérisent les nations: les hommes ne se ressemblent entre eux que par l'affectation ou le calcul; mais tout ce qui est naturel est varié." Germaine de Staël, *Corinne ou l'Italie*, book I, chap. IV: 39.

Elite and on the other the patriotic and lyrical flights of a female Poet Laureate, the answer may seem grimmer. By the rejection of Corinne by Oswald's father and by Oswald himself, the young woman who symbolises Italy and its poetical voice can only seem to offer a colourful but momentary entertainment. The vocabulary of the picturesque and of the sublime associates the intense admiration for Italian culture with decay, because the Peninsula, as Corinne sings, is no longer at the heart of the European world. Its admirable originality is linked in the novel to its marginality and its subalternity is symbolized by the heroine who is supposed to give voice to Italy itself, before sinking into despair and dying.

Fortunately, there are far happier experiences of literary diversity and of cultural rebellions against a dominant culture, but the danger of mere picturesqueness or of mere exotism remains. However, Goethe's own poetic and literary enterprise, as described by F. Strich, may offer an answer to the conundrum (Strich: 19-27). It is well known that Schiller and Goethe abandoned the Herderian ideals of the *Sturm und Drang*, and reverted to a kind of new Classicism that meant a breach with the exclusiveness of national inspiration. After having reappropriated and discussed Shakespeare's legacy in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795, adapted and translated Voltaire in 1802, Goethe found inspiration outside Europe in Hafez, in the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819). As Strich demonstrates, there is no stringent opposition between national literature and world literature for Goethe, as he overcomes the divide by discovering the universal in national poetry and contexts and, conversely, by finding sources of originality and singularity in the many manifestations of the universal itself. Encounters with other literatures are inspiring, both by referring to the contexts in which they were born, as Goethe did in his notes and introduction to the *West-östlicher Divan*, and by reappropriating and recontextualising these works, in a sense that they can convey a new meaning outside what the authors intended in the first place, as he did in the poems themselves.

Can Goethe's legacy provide us with a method? To which extent is it necessary to plunge into the mindset, the mores and the language of a given context? According to a philological approach

to literature, the context is considered traditionally as a means “to elucidate the total import of the text which is the primary cause and ultimate target of literary scholarship as well as the chief instrument of its verification” (Remak: 247). However, if the proof lies primarily in the text and its context, we must also ask ourselves to which extent it is allowable to recontextualize a work and adapt its reading and message to another culture. The issue has been amply discussed when unequal intercultural relations have given birth to acculturation and cultural appropriation. These can be defined when “a relatively more powerful group was in sustained contact with a less powerful one” (Jackson: 86) or when “majorities attempt to reshape minorities in their image,” (Jackson: 87) and “aspects of the culture of the subordinated group, making them [their] own” (Jackson: 88). In these cases, re-contextualisation erases “the complex, networked nature of social life” (Jackson: 105) and petrifies living practices into fake traditions. The uproar concerning the translation of Amanda Gorman’s poems into Dutch or Catalan demonstrates how political the recontextualization of a literary work can be. Although the poetess herself did not challenge Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s right to translate her work, the translation by an author of an altogether different background and identity was seen by some as a betrayal of the poetess’s moving experience of subalternity.

The problems we are facing are not only linked to the act of translating and adapting contemporary works and texts between two cultures of unequal power or prestige. A similar problem arises when dealing with the literary canon itself: each retranslation begs the question whether a masterpiece of the past should be adapted or not to the present times. The debates are still rife as prove the disagreements between, on the one hand, Danièle Robert in France who wished to respect the *Terza rima* of the Divine Comedy, and its complex and multi-layered language, as far as it was possible, and on the other, Lies Lavrijsen who, in a Dutch translation, decided to simplify the poet’s style and adapt it to a new young public while expunging historical allusions that seemed possibly offensive to the translator.

These recent disputes point out the many ambiguities of translation itself, as it can be defined, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, not only as turning “into one’s own or another language” but as transferring “from one set of symbols into another.” So it can be understood both as the capacity to express the same ideas “in different terms and especially different words” and thus to paraphrase. It can be seen as an explanation or an interpretation, and even as a transfer or a transformation. Each definition shows how it can be removed from the original and even replace it when the words and the references become too obscure to be understood spontaneously by a non-scholarly by a non-scholarly or a foreign audience.

Among the difficulties that are due to specific contexts, the understanding of the knowledge embedded in literary texts is one of the hardest to address. Christine Baron defines the term *savoir* that cannot strictly be equated with science:

What we call knowing (*savoir*) is the way in which knowledge (*connaissances*) takes shape. This knowledge has a scientific basis but it also has marked social and cultural characteristics. These characteristics are the object of public debate which in short, in its principles, its dissemination, its application, concerns forms of living together. It is in this sense that the word “knowledge” can be understood in its articulation with literary texts.<sup>3</sup>

Baron follows Pierre Macherey and his conviction that poems and novels are not read for the cognitive knowledge they may contain. Fiction and poetry as such may seem out of the boundaries of science, although the divide was certainly less of strong before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: even the erotic novel *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748) came to represent the debates between Cartesians and Newtonians, announcing some of Diderot’s considerations in his *Principes philosophiques de la matière et du mouvement* (1770, published in

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<sup>3</sup> “Ce qu’on appelle savoir est la manière dont prennent corps des connaissances qui ont un socle scientifique mais qui ont également des caractéristiques sociales et culturelles marquées, qui sont objet de débats publics, bref qui concernent dans leurs principes, leur diffusion, leur application, des formes du vivre ensemble. C’est en ce sens que le mot ‘savoir’ peut être compris dans son articulation avec les textes littéraires,” Baron: 51-52.

1792).<sup>4</sup> In their very representations however, writers are indebted to paradigms (Séginger, 69-79) and to the intellectual networks to which they belong. These networks disseminate the scientific ideas or build the common references of a well-informed intellectual, and as such they belong to the realm of comparative literature. But not to mention the question of influences, Foucault demonstrated in *Les Mots et les Choses* that images are not mere ornaments, they may refer to strong beliefs before they become hackneyed and lose their evocative power; up to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century resemblances themselves were considered as tokens of an existing link between plants and beings inside the terrestrial microcosm, or as means to re-establish the correspondence between the macrocosm of celestial order and the mutability of the sublunary world (Foucault: 33-59). Similes and metaphors make sense inside a given paradigm: amongst the European atheists Man was represented as a machine until the mechanist model was eventually replaced by a biological one.

We ourselves are witnessing a change of paradigm in the contemporary literature we are reading and studying. Our research itself is affected by the ongoing practical reorganization of our institutions and the changing expectations these institutions have concerning the meaning and the uses of knowledge and culture. Such changes also have had epistemological consequences of which we could only give a glimpse, during the 8<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Society of Comparative Literature that took place in Lille (26-30<sup>th</sup> August, 2019).

We asked ourselves how the status of literature, the processes by which it is created, produced, disseminated, had been modified, whether the way in which literature takes its place within society had changed, and if so, in what way. We also examined, as seen above, the effect of economic globalization over cultural globalization: does the birth of a “world literature” mean that literary creation is becoming uniform, or on the contrary does it arouse an antagonistic tendency towards expressing and highlighting local and regional cultures? We asked what

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<sup>4</sup> See Wolfe: 312; Aram: 377.

globalization meant for cultural exchanges. How is the relation to the other, to the foreigner built, at such a juncture? In this light, it was useful to gain perspective by relating such questions to more ancient periods which were noted for their openness to the world, and their willingness to accept new paradigms, such as the Renaissance, birth-period of the “Gutenberg galaxy,” a time when widescale maritime explorations, with attendant cultural discoveries and cultural antagonisms, sowed the seeds of a still-ongoing debate about hierarchized and de-hierarchized, centralized and de-centralized exchanges. In ancient no less than in recent times, the development of new technological possibilities has had a radical impact on the questions which are debated within the humanities.

Of all the papers delivered in the course of this Congress, we offer the following sample in the hope that it will aptly reflect the issues under debate. Thus, in the first section, where Lieven D’huilst considers how to map translation and translation history, and Joseph Pivato compares the importance of foreign languages in literature studies throughout American and Canadian academia, both researchers make a case for the vitality of plurilingual exchanges, at a time when they are under threat from the hegemony of one main language. As Lieven D’huilst writes in conclusion, “At a moment when global science threatens diversity in thinking, historians of knowledge may very well be the true guardians of the interconnected diversity across the world” (D’huilst: 32).

The next section, where the question of translation plays a much less conspicuous part, is a no less passionate plea against uniformity and the indifference it fosters, whether it takes the form of an illusory, surface unity in the English language (as shown in Boulanger’s paper on Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*), of ubiquitous and supposedly universal set-phrases in propaganda (denounced by Proust and Woolf, as Barbakadze shows in her paper), or of an unruffled, bland critical consensus (which Szmidi’s paper takes issue with). While indifference is a very real threat to language, literature and literary criticism, all three can find new vigour in resisting uniformity. Thus Nabokov’s protagonists function as unquiet spirits, calling attention to unexpected and fertile

differences; Proust and Woolf, lone wolves, resist the urge to howl with the pack, undermining the consensus of their time. Such authors have counterparts in the world of literary criticism, as shown by Szmidt who (along with other critics) pleads for vigorous debate, even if it results in quarrelling over differences. Rather than seek convergence and resemblance, which can result in shallowness, and in a complete inability to conceptualize difference of any kind, authors, readers and critics alike should be on the alert for difference. This tenet will not appear particularly revolutionary to fellow comparatists, as comparative literature tends to establish convergence only to further a relish for divergence—to quote Nabokov’s fictitious poet and professor of literature John Shade, “Resemblances are the shadows of differences” (Nabokov, note to line 894: 208).

The fruitfulness of difference, in the final section, is taken up by three articles devoted to the relationship (or rather rivalry) between verbal and visual representation. Sandro Jung examines successive editions of *Robinson Crusoe* in its original English, as well as in French-, Dutch- and German-speaking editions, focusing on the illustrations which were chosen (and, sometimes, specifically commissioned) for those editions, inasmuch as they played an instrumental part in framing and directing interpretation of the tale. Where the original London edition suggested a thrilling tale of adventures in the wild, successive Continental editions firmly established *Robinson Crusoe* as a narrative of religious conversion and repentance—a reading which imbued the wilderness, and the civilizing efforts of the shipwrecked Robinson, with moral implications. A similar overlay of anthropocentric and ethical implications is to be found within the lush descriptions of nature that abound in two novels by Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, examined by Jobst Welge in the next article. In both Jung’s and Welge’s articles, the power-struggle between nature and culture is mirrored by a twin conflict between image and text—an issue which becomes even more central in the ultimate article of this volume, when Orsolya Milian examines the shifting relationship between painting and verbal interpretation or re-creation, in this case between Brueghel’s *The Blind Leading the Blind*, which has

inspired many conflicting interpretations (and sometimes baffled all efforts at interpreting), and two of the ekphrases it gave birth to.

All these papers, in other words, harp on a power struggle, whether it is the struggle of difference against a hegemonic current or the struggle of a reputedly inferior art-form against the discourse that frames its interpretation. Say not the struggle naught availeth, however, since the successive articles in this volume show, on the contrary, how lively and fruitful this vital fight can become.

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