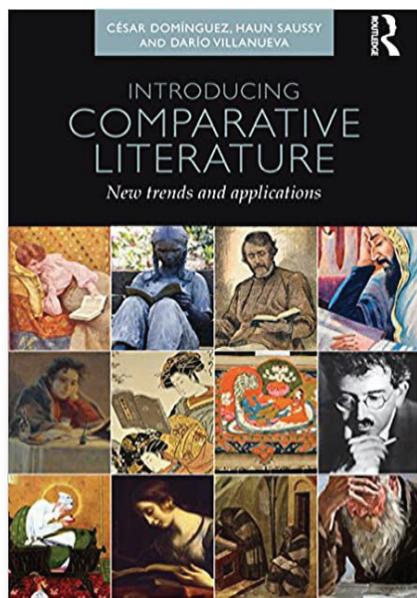


THE CRISES AND CRAVINGS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, Darío Villanueva. *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

This slim volume offers a useful and succinct overview of the field's essential tenets and directions, combining a historical perspective with a view towards its future. It comes to offer a positive response to the feeling of crisis and loss of momentum in what the authors call "exciting and demanding discipline", as no handbook of its sort has been published in English for twenty years. Even though authorial responsibility has been evenly distributed in the nine chapters, the book definitely reads as a focused, coherent effort rather than a selection of essays. The three authors are definite authorities in the field, Domínguez and Villanueva teaching comparative literature and literary theory at the University of Santiago de Compostela, and Saussy, who is a former president of the American Comparative Literature Association, based at the University of Chicago. Saussy's research has involved mostly Chinese literature, Domínguez's many interests include cosmopolitanism,

ecocriticism, and small/minor literatures, and Villanueva, currently the director of the Royal Spanish Academy, has published extensively on Spanish and Spanish American literature from comparativist angle.

Chapter 1 offers a brief historical survey of comparative literature as a discipline and discusses its place within literary studies as educational focus in many universities around the globe shifts to financially profitable fields. It also aims to respond to what is a common criticism against the discipline, namely

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its Eurocentric tradition: “The basic cosmopolitanism of comparative literature has allowed it to surpass the limitations of cultural studies, and to correct its own Eurocentric biases. At the same time, it has helped in framing debates about the canon and opened itself to new models of canonicity.” (18). Indeed, the feeling of crisis seems to have accompanied comparative literature throughout its development: as early as 1958 René Wellek, at the second conference of AILC/ICLA, gave a lecture on “The Crisis of Comparative Literature”.

The following chapters address approaches to comparative literature that the authors find especially relevant today. Chapter 2 reviews the theory of *interliterary process* proposed in the 1980s by Slovak scholar Dionýz Ďurišin as an attempt, among other things, to postulate world literature as the proper object of study of comparative literature. While several deficiencies of interliterary theory become evident, the fact that it merits discussion in an overview of this sort should be especially encouraging to scholars based outside the world academic centres. Knowledge of Ďurišin’s theory seems to be rather occasional in Bulgaria so this chapter would be especially valuable to Bulgarian scholars, even if the prospect of acquainting oneself with the work of a Slovak theorist through the mediation of a Spanish professor is somewhat ironic. Chapter 3 responds to the already-mentioned stigma of Eurocentrism borne by comparative literature by moving from postcolonial concepts to Walter Mignolo’s concept of *decoloniality* and the associated school of thought, especially influential in Latin America. It is worth noting that the relevance of this specific school for the study of comparative literature seems to need more argumentation, as most of its work has not been directed towards literature itself.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to one of the key concepts associated with the discipline, namely world literature, “always an object of desire, a future completeness, a standard of unattainable achievement” (56). The contrasting visions of Goethe and Marx/Engels as to the content and implications of *Weltliteratur* continue to illuminate today’s debates overshadowed by a predominantly suspicious attitude towards claims of literary universality. The processes of transculturation bring about yet another angle to the idea of world literature. Chapter 5 follows as it were organically from the previous one, as it discusses why it is themes and images that most often get compared, rather than other aspects of the literary text. The importance of context, reading mode, and productive misreading are pointed out in instructive ways, for instance through a revealing anecdote of I. A. Richards’s dismay at how Chinese students reacted to the ending of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* – immediately perceived as tragic by Western audiences but having a very different effect on an audience reading in the didactic mode. Thus the dynamic of difference and similarity is highlighted, leading to the valuable observation that comparative literature “can profitably alternate between the culturally totalizing and the functional modes” (73), that is, it can choose to focus on either difference or similarity with equal success, revealing various relations between texts.

Translation is certainly a whole sphere of human activity which is closely associated with comparative studies in more than one ways, and chapter 6 examines some of these. “Our concern in comparative literature”, the authors write, “is not particularly with the accuracy of translations, but with what they do on arrival, how a work (or even the rumor of a work) excites readers and writers in the target language” (80). In other words, the meeting ground of comparative literature and translation is what Bulgarian scholars regularly name *reception*. Expectedly, Lubomír Doležel’s concept of *transduction* and Itamar Even-Zohar’s *polysystem theory* are discussed – or rather mentioned – in this chapter. A more elaborate survey would have been appreciated. The notion of untranslatability is approached with an optimistic outlook: “If a pun, a book title, a line of verse, or the like is said to be untranslatable, it too can be explained, only not rendered in a form quantitatively analogous to the original’s. It is worth remembering that in translating we are not always constrained, as opera singers are, to get across the meaning with exactly the same notes.” (83-4). Chapter 7, by far the most practically oriented, proceeds from here to examine the possibility of building transnational literary histories. The bulk of this chapter discusses the ambitious efforts of AILC/ICLA and its formidable multi-volume series *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*. Some of these volumes are better known than others but it is the sheer systematic ambition of the series that is truly impressive, for all the obvious challenges that it faces even if restricted to European languages. Literary maps and nodes are discussed in this chapter, as the authors agree that in comparative literary history space-oriented approaches have proven to be more experimental and illuminating than time-oriented ones.

Chapter 8 then briefly explores a topic that is obviously huge, interartistic comparison. While this may not seem as an obvious territory of comparative literature, it has contributed to the development of the discipline since its 19th-century foundation, and its growing importance in today’s world does not need much argumentation. “The reciprocal illumination of the arts”, in Oscar Walzel’s neat expression, is seen as a possible direction for the further development of comparative literature, and special attention is paid to the cinematic qualities found in pre-cinema texts, for instance those of Shakespeare. Finally, Chapter 9 serves as a conclusion, putting the issues already discussed in the contexts of globalization and digital technology. A glossary and a list of further readings follow, reminding a possibly too exacting reader that this work is meant as a handbook suitable for BA and MA students who might be just beginning their exploration of comparative literature.

Domínguez, Saussy, and Villanueva have certainly managed to stitch together an impressive amount of information in these 165 pages, including bibliography. The reader of the book will have gained a good idea of the discipline’s development and its perspectives today, with the elegant touch of including concepts and theories that have probably not gained the deserved attention so far. At the same time, this amount of information is presented in a

way which is neat enough not to perplex or intimidate. Truth be told, the writing itself could have been more engaging. For the most part, it is somewhat dry, although this shortcoming is perhaps inevitable in a rather short handbook of this sort. Still, it is worth noting that for a brief informative handbook, this one has the tendency to diverge in topics that might be of marginal relevance. As one reads, one may notice way too many paragraphs that seem to demand an introductory remark which is actually used here and there in the text, "Now we can come back to comparative literature".

Also, for all the informative quality of the book, I personally was left on at least two accounts with the taste of something lacking. Intertextuality, especially in Gérard Genette's version, seems to possess evident relevance for the comparative study of literature. Genette's hypertexts are only mentioned in the context of interartistic comparison yet certainly they should play a role in establishing parallels and networks within literature proper. Arguably, once a hypertextual link is revealed, it by itself invites a parallel reading of two or more texts, and that may as well involve comparativist methods. Then again, literary geography, an approach mostly associated today with Franco Moretti, has not found a place in the book even as the potential of literary maps is discussed. Some of Moretti's methods are occasionally mentioned but the implications for comparative literature of distant reading, of maps, graphs, and trees deserve more attention. Still, it is probably not fair to demand too much inclusiveness from a book that makes an obvious point of keeping brief and succinct. To anyone who would like to launch or revise their study of comparative literature, this should be a valuable guide. As a number of Bulgarian scholars demonstrate interest in the field, *Introducing Comparative Literature* could find a responsive audience here.