

NATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: A BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVE¹

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ABSTRACT: In Brazil, comparativism between cultures and literatures was already present in literary works that pre-dated the consolidation of *Literatura Comparada* as a discipline and teachers and researchers of national literature have always resorted to comparativism: comparing writers and works, ways of writing, ways of approaching literary themes and periods etc. In other words, comparativism is not only practised in the discipline of Comparative Literature, but also in other national literature disciplines. In this paper, I will also argue that “comparables” (always in the plural) are not only *orientations*, as the historian Marcel Detienne believes, but *structures that contain at least two different objects, and theories or ideas that relate them to each other*.

KEYWORDS: comparativism in Brazil; history of comparativism; construction of comparables

RESUMO: No Brasil, o comparatismo entre culturas e literaturas já estava presente em obras literárias que antecederam a consolidação da *Literatura Comparada* como disciplina e professores e pesquisadores de literatura nacional tem sempre recorrido ao comparatismo: comparando escritores e obras, modos de escrever, modos de abordar temas e períodos literários etc. Em outras palavras, o comparatismo não é apenas praticado na disciplina de Literatura Comparada mas também em outras disciplinas de literaturas nacionais. Neste artigo, também argumentarei que “comparáveis” (sempre no plural) não são apenas *orientações*, como o historiador Marcel Detienne acredita, mas *estruturas que contém pelo menos dois objetos diferentes, e teorias ou ideias que os relacionam entre si*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comparatismo no Brasil; história do comparatismo; construção de comparáveis

It has been said that within comparative literature studies we often end up discussing the terms *Littérature Comparée* and *Comparative Literature*³, although projects comparing literatures had been carried out long before these terms were created and in many languages other than French and English. In the case of Brazil, I would add that comparativism between cultures and

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³ Cf. S. S. Prawer. “O que é literatura comparada?” In: Eduardo Coutinho & Tania Franco Carvalhal. *Literatura Comparada; textos fundadores*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1994. P. 295-307. P. 302.

literatures was already present in literary works that pre-dated the consolidation of *Literatura Comparada* as a discipline.

In Brazilian literature, we can say that comparativism began in the 19th century, not coincidentally referred to as the century of nationalism. Following independence, writers sought to valorise *local colour*, supposing that this would be a demonstration of commitment to Brazil and of distancing from the former colonial power. Because of this, one of the most famous poems from the 19th century “Canção do exílio” (“Song of Exile”), by Gonçalves Dias, is, at the same time, an example of nationalism and comparativism, contrasting two countries and emphasising the supposed advantages of Brazil in relation to Portugal: “Our skies have more stars,/ Our meadows more flowers,/Our forests have more life,/Our lives, more loves”. Furthermore, Gonçalves Dias follows the practice of directly citing foreign authors, which was fashionable in Romanticism, using an epigraph by Goethe in this poem.

Antonio Candido (2004, p. 230-231) has already pointed out that, in the 19th century, epigraphs, widely used by European authors, underlined the authorial origin of the text with which they were dialoguing. Candido has also noted that this practice of explicitly making reference to the author in question contrasted with periods prior to the 1800s, when the poetics of imitation and emulation predominated. While this kind of poetics was the dominant model, the incorporation of references to authors and works was not clearly underlined, not least because it was presumed that the public were familiar with what was mentioned in the text – in other words, amongst other things, the allusions or citations of other authors that the poet wanted to draw on, including them in his own discourse.

In post-colonial Brazil, as in other countries in Latin America, there was a clear set of rules to be followed by aspiring writers: including in texts explicit references to the national population, flora and fauna, or to other aspects that could serve to connect the work in question to a previously existing, external national reality, assuming that the work in question would be representative of its place of origin. In 1873, however, in an essay entitled “Reflections on Brazilian Literature at the Present Moment – the National Instinct”⁴, Machado de Assis came up with arguments that, although they accept the idea of *local colour* as a possibility, contend that it did not constitute an adequate pre-requisite, for a writer to be seen as Brazilian, that he had to deal with aspects of his country, and much less that he was obliged to describe national places, inhabitants and the natural environment: “A poet is not national simply because he includes in his verses a plethora of names of local flowers and birds. This produces a nationhood of vocabulary and nothing more.” (Assis [1873] 96)

Machado considered wrong an opinion that was circulating at the time regarding local colour: “This is that the only works of true national spirit are those that describe local subjects, a belief that if correct, would greatly limit the resources available to our literature (Assis [1873] 88).”

In Machado’s view, it is not necessary for the writer to be concerned about conveying his country through detailed descriptivism, because, even without mentioning national territory, all writers inevitably bring to their respective works the hallmarks of the place where they were produced. To address this question, Machado compares his country’s nationalist agenda with four Shakespearean tragedies, in which neither the main characters (Hamlet, Othello, Julius Cesar, Romeo and Juliet) were English, nor the setting of the action England: the Brazilian writer argues that Shakespeare did not need to include English local colour, because, even when writing about other places, he continued to be an “essentially English” writer (Assis [1873] 89).

It is important to also stress here that Brazilian critics in the 19th century used to regularly make comparisons between national writers and works and what they thought to be

⁴ I quote the English translation by Robert Patrick Newcomb.

their foreign counterparts, a practice which, according to Antonio Candido, lasted until the late 20th century, as one of the criteria for characterising and evaluating national writers:

...Joaquim Norberto evokes Walter Scott in order to justify the transformation of the Native Brazilian into a noble knight; Fernandes Pinheiro qualifies the *Cânticos fúnebres* (*Funeral Chants*) by Gonçalves de Magalhães comparing them to Victor Hugo's *The Contemplations*; Franklin Távora references Gustave Aymard and Fenimore Cooper to discredit José de Alencar. (Candido, 2004, p. 230)

As was to be expected, the Romantic authors also reacted to these comparisons. José de Alencar, for example, when he saw the comparison of his novel *The Guarani* to the work of James Fenimore Cooper, protested:

Someone said, and it is being repeated around and about, that *The Guarani* is a novel in the style of Cooper's. If that were the case, it would be a coincidence and not imitation; but it isn't. My writing resembles that of the illustrious American novelist as much as the leas of Ceará resemble the banks of the Delaware.

Moving from writers to teachers, I refer again here to the most famous phrase of Antonio Candido's essay, when referring to comparativism in Brazil: "to study Brazilian literature is to study comparative literature". Here I attempt to interpret this phrase in a way that goes beyond the meaning that Candido had in mind in 1988, at the Congress of the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature.

In Brazil, teachers and researchers of national literature have always resorted to comparativism: comparing writers and works, ways of writing, ways of approaching literary themes and periods etc. In other words, comparativism is not only practised in the discipline of Comparative Literature, but also in other national literature disciplines. At the University of São Paulo, for example, according to Sandra Nitrini (2018, p. 10), the "Lery-Assu" Project, devised and established by Leyla Perrone-Moisés on the Postgraduate Programme in French Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy, Arts and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo, in 1978, "brought together the theory of intertextuality and that of Brazilian anthropophagy as a way of studying cultural and literary relations between Brazil and France." And Antonio Candido, who taught many generations of other teachers and critics in Brazil, and founded the Department of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the University of São Paulo, was a student of Roger Bastide at that institution.

Bastide, a member of the "French mission" who came to work at the University of São Paulo in the 1930s, published a text in 1954 entitled "Sociology and Comparative Literature" with the aim of defining the comparativist field, using a different perspective to those then being proposed in France and the USA. I will not spend time now talking about Gabriel Tarde, or *transculturation*, a concept that would go on to be widely used in South America,⁵ but simply mention that Bastide (2006, p. 269) advocates putting the problem of Comparative Literature "in the terrain of social globality", as I will go on to discuss.

The references to the ideas of Oswald de Andrade (*Cannibalist Manifesto*, 1928) and the concept of *transculturation* (Fernando Ortiz Fernández, 1940), at different times, seem to bring to Comparative Literature processes of digestion and transformation derived from literary and cultural circulation between different societies.

⁵ Cf. COUTINHO, Eduardo. Revisiting Transculturation in Latin America: The Case of Marvelous Realism. In: JOBIM, José Luís. *Literary and Cultural Circulation*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017. P. 121-142.

I believe that even more “traditional” classroom activities, like examining references to other literatures, are far from being an exclusive characteristic of the Brazilian context. I would add that literary writers themselves (Brazilian or not) find it difficult to keep their references within their respective national territories, even when they think they are doing so. The subtle irony of the Argentine writer Jorge Luís Borges, in his famous essay “The Argentine writer and tradition” (1951), returns to the issue raised by Machado de Assis:

...I don't know if it is necessary to say that the idea that a literature must define itself by the differential features of the country that produces it is a relatively new idea; equally new and arbitrary is the idea that writers must draw on themes from their countries. Without expanding on this, I believe that Racine would not even have understood a person who had denied his right to the title of French poet for having drawn on Greek and Latin themes. I believe that Shakespeare would have been astonished if they had tried to restrict him to English themes, and had said to him that, as an English man, he had no right to write Hamlet, a Scandinavian theme, or Macbeth, a Scottish one. *The Argentine cult of local colour is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject for being foreign.* (Borges, 1957, p. 156, my emphasis)

Anyway, I am interested in talking a little more about the meanings of making comparisons between authors. So let us consider what Jorge Luís Borges says in his essay *Kafka and His Precursors*. In this text, Borges examines a group of texts by Zénon, Han Yu, Kierkegaard, Léon Bloy and Lord Dunsany, which are seemingly heterogeneous but which, according to Borges, have a certain Kafkaesque idiosyncrasy in common, which would not be perceptible if Kafka had not existed. In the opinion of Borges, then, it was Kafka who created his precursors, because his work changed the perception of all those other authors, modifying our perception of the past (and of the future). But we could also consider that thinking of Han Yu as a precursor of Kafka means seeing the Chinese writer in a different way than we would do if we were not familiar with the Czech author. To put it another way, if the work of Han Yu (768-824) were considered important by literary historians and critics only for being a precursor of Kafka, his importance would stem from the existence of Kafka (1883-1924), an author that Han Yu was never aware of.

Borges creates a theory (that all the listed authors – Zénon, Han Yu, Kierkegaard, Léon Bloy and Lord Dunsany – were precursors of Kafka) to give meaning to this group of writers. In other words, it is Borges who is choosing a *corpus* of writers with different national origins to give them a common significance: that of being precursors of Kafka.

In some ways, by drawing attention to the constructive aspect of the historicisation of works and authors, Borges moves towards a certain positivist vision of the History of Literature, one which presupposed the existence of “literary facts”, which, so to speak, were in this view structured in a predetermined order. Perspectivisation of the past, based on precise questions (such as: – Who were Kafka's precursors?), and the possibility of producing interpretations of literary history that connect authors and works in a particular way (for example: authors in whose work an element of Kafka could be detected) means moving away from Positivism and questioning the use of “influence” as a criterion for literary evaluations. It also means stating that the return to a literary past in a present moment that has a different perspective on that past, linking it to aspects or issues that did not exist or were not visible previously, can transform it into something else.

If the way of linking the past and the present creates an image of historical relevance only for the authors who allegedly had an “influence” on other authors in other countries, the evaluation of writers and works tends to benefit more those who have behind them a more robust political-cultural soft power structure.

Could it be that, in addition to the already well-known and relevant European authors, there were authors and works in the past, from Latin America and other parts of the world, of superior quality? The Cuban poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar has stated that the problem was not the lack of good writers in Latin America, but the lack of wider circulation of their works, which prevented them from being more widely known. It is therefore also important to critically analyse recent proposals to include the circulation of works as an evaluation criterion.

Within what is known in the English-speaking world as *World Literature*, circulation is becoming a factor when attributing value to a given work. To determine which works make up the corpus in this field, David Damrosch (2003, 4) has proposed that, as a criterion, we include “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language”. However, as I have previously stated (Jobim, 2017), even when the greater or lesser value of a work is attributed to its degree of circulation beyond its place of origin, few critics accept the fact that the circulation of a work beyond its place of origin depends not only on its supposed intrinsic value, which would be “recognised” in the other places where it circulated, but also on a series of other factors, such as: the relative importance of the theme of the work for the new places where it is reinserted; the dominant interests in the place where the work is reinserted, according to which it may be considered relevant or not; the obstacles or assistance available for comparative cultural analysis of the local, regional, national and international literary and cultural systems, with their respective hierarchies and practices; etc.

The very migration of ideas, transforming the original meanings of one place into “something else”, when they are inserted into a new geo-cultural area, should merit special attention. The idea of *circulation* is always of relevance, not only in its linguistic sense, but also in the sense of intercultural translation, given that it is literally necessary to make sense of what presents itself as “strange”, “different”, “unintelligible” and needs to be understood in a new environment.

Furthermore, there is today in literary studies a lack of more adequate terminology to designate circulation, movements, dynamics and mobilities. I believe that the problem of the spatialisation of concepts referring to circulation, movement and mobility is a genuine challenge. In some ways, this spatialisation is derived from 19th-century nationalisms, with their quest to delineate spatial borders, their obsession with territorial control, and their construction of “us”-versus-“them” identities. At least until my generation, the history of humanity as taught at high schools valorised wars, conflicts and disputes, in a context in which the apparatus for shaping citizens was highly focused on two aspects: nationalism and individualism.

There is obviously a contradiction between a process of shaping an individual whose radicalisation of individuality means being entirely inward-looking, and the actual aspects of the context in which this process takes place, since we know that individuals are affected by the networks of meaning that constitute the public culture where they are inserted, the elements of which interfere directly in the meaning of their lives, whether they are aware of it or not.

Since world literatures are profoundly imbricated in these networks of meaning, which even influence the supposedly unique interpretations of individuals’ experiences – in turn also related to symbolically mediated, common interpretations of the human condition–, what Ottmar Ette calls the *multi/polylogical knowledge* (Ette, 2016) found in world literatures can contribute to a greater understanding of the human condition, beyond national borders and hermetic individualities, particularly as regards the thematisation of common points, bridges, connections and forms of dialogue, facilitating trans-area and transcultural movements.

The historian Marcel Detienne (2009) has stated that, to create comparables, it is not sufficient to distance oneself from the familiar, or to contend that the familiar, the obvious, what constitutes common sense, is always derived from a culture, in other words, it is a construction that has become part of everyday life, a choice like any other, but just with a longer history of

continuity than others. In his view, comparables are *orientations*, which can be brought to light and analysed only when apparently incomparable societies and cultures are confronted with each other.

We know that *comparing* implies, among other things, attributing similarities and differences, but we do not always think about the criteria for these attributions or even about the geo-politics of these attributions. Our Chinese comparativist colleague, Zhang Longxi (2015, p. 37), for example, has already drawn our attention to the problem of using European criteria in comparative work, as if they were universal, to evaluate non-European cultures, but has also pointed out that the current emphasis on cultural difference and on the supposed internal validity of disparate value systems can lead to the denial of the possibility of intercultural understanding. In his opinion (2015, 48-49), another perspective is needed, one derived from the idea of a dialectic relationship between unity and diversity, an important principle in Western thinking but also in traditional Chinese philosophy. We could reach the conclusion that difference and affinity – the specific and the general, the diverse and the universal – are mutually complementary, with emphasis placed on one or the other, depending on the circumstances, since, for Longxi, difference and affinity do not have value in themselves or by themselves, which is why it does not make sense to ask, without a specific context, if we should put emphasis on difference or on affinity, in comparative studies (Longxi: 2015, 48-49).

At this point, I would like to emphasise what results from the encounter between History and Comparativism. The first question refers to “comparables”. In my view, “comparables” (always in the plural) are not only *orientations*, as the historian Marcel Detienne believes, but *structures that contain at least two different objects, and theories or ideas that relate them to each other*. Consequently, it is precisely the production of meanings that will be achieved (among other things) from affinities, analogies, similarities, or from differences, contrasts, dissimilarities, in at least two objects, that will establish comparativist judgments. Therefore, what is at stake in comparativism is not just the objects (different works and authors, for example), but the production of meanings from which both the qualities attributed to each object and the relationship between them are created. This production of meanings, for various reasons (its rootedness in certain systems of thought, its epistemological limitations, its ability or inability to account for its objects) also has a historical meaning.

It is therefore important to critically analyse what is at stake in this production, to work on the assumption that it attributes to the compared objects a series of qualities that are in fact created in the very act of comparing, an act that also presents elements of a particular historical transmission of meanings from the past with effects in the present. In fact, there is no point external to historical temporality from which we can observe and compare the world’s objects, via an experience free of social, historical and cultural conditionings, since, in real life, where the comparables are inserted, time and space always have meaning.

To end this very brief overview, I would like to make a final observation about the academics linked to Comparative Literature in Brazil, who, as we have seen, are not necessarily working in this discipline in the strictest sense. In fact, it can be noted that many of these academics work, in their respective universities, in departments of national languages and literatures, something which has its consequences. Recently, for example, as a result of the Ministry of Education’s demand for internationalisation, one of the consequences was that “external” agendas, so to speak, ended up having an importance that perhaps they did not have in other eras, since teachers and researchers in this field, by becoming part of external projects, end up giving in to agendas and perspectives that they would not otherwise adopt, if they could choose.

What frequently happens is that Brazilian teachers of “foreign” languages and literatures travel, among other things to do post-doctoral placements, to the countries that produce the literature and speak the language of their discipline. In these countries, they establish two basic

types of connections: 1. With academics who work in the “foreign” universities in Portuguese-language and Lusophone literature disciplines – especially Brazilian; 2. With academics who work in the “foreign” universities in “foreign” language and literature disciplines.

In the case of the former group, it is common for academics who in Brazil work with “foreign” literatures to collaborate with colleagues in Brazilian Literature in other countries, even when it is not in that discipline that they primarily work in Brazil. In the case of the latter group, it is common for academics to try to create connections with Brazil, choosing topics such as *James Joyce in Brazil*, or *Machado de Assis and France*. In projects of this type, in the case of both Joyce and Machado, ultimately what is studied is how the European writers were received in Brazil, whether via the circulation and reading of an author (James Joyce in Brazil, for example), or via the appropriation of European works and writers in a Brazilian work (Machado de Assis and France, for example). This line of enquiry, furthermore, is nothing new, since we have the historical example of the French case of Fernand Baldensperger’s activities at the *Institut de Littérature Comparée* at the Sorbonne, who directed projects like *Henry James and France*. This type of comparativism basically focuses on the dissemination of some European literature in a place other than that of its origin, taking the category of *influence* as fundamental, and one of its most notable examples in Brazil is the work of Eugênio Gomes entitled *Influências inglesas em Machado de Assis* (English Influences on Machado de Assis) published in 1939.

Also inherent in this type of comparativism is the assumption that the matrix is located in Europe, from where supposedly authors and works are disseminated to other continents, in one-way traffic. One of the problems of this type of perspective is that its proponents, most of the time, restrict themselves to gathering explicit and implicit references and mentions to foreign authors and works in the writings of a Brazilian author, but they forget something fundamental: to ascertain the role that these references and allusions play. What do I mean by this? I mean that a mere inventory of what appear to be “foreign” citations in a national work of literature cannot satisfy a well-trained comparativist critic. Why not? Because, as I have previously stated (Jobim, 2015), the circulation of elements from European literature in other continents does not mean that they will have, in those other places, the same meaning that they had in their place of origin. The reasons why these European elements (and not others) were incorporated must be sought not in their origins, but in the place that imported them, because it was the interests and the needs of the “importers” that justified that certain elements were imported and others rejected. Furthermore, the incorporated elements take on new meanings, when they integrate into the new context, in which they correlate with different elements to those present in their place of origin. Thus, in 1954, Roger Bastide (2006, p. 269) proposed that the problem of Comparative Literature be placed “in the terrain of social globality”, because “Only then will the reasons for the choices, the transformation of foreign styles, the channels of passage and the processes of metamorphosis be really clarified (Bastide, 2006, p. 269).”

If we take as an example the greatest Brazilian writer of the 19th century, Machado de Assis, we can note in his work the presence of the science of the mind cultivated in Europe in that century, a science that was adopted by various of his contemporaries, but criticised with humour by Machado in more than one narrative. In the case of this Brazilian writer, as I have already observed in other works (Jobim, 2015), the supposed “importation” of elements of the work of Théodule-Armand Ribot, *Les maladies de la memoire* (1881), did not result in a reiteration of what already existed in Europe, but in the creation of literary texts in which Machado de Assis incorporates ideas from *Les maladies de la memoire* in order to criticise them, coming into direct confrontation with the terms in which Ribot was understood or wanted to be understood in his original European environment. Therefore, when Machado de Assis appropriates elements of the said work, he creates a devastating humorous interpretation of Ribot’s theses on memory, contesting the point of view of the French psychologist, and using

Ribot's ideas for different ends to those of the French original. So, it is difficult to accept today that type of lame comparativism, based on an at best naïve notion of *influence*, to construct comparables.

In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that, in the case of Brazil, comparativism does not and has never functioned as something disassociated from the disciplines of national literatures since, as we have seen, before being the focus of the work of scholars, comparativism was practised by literary authors, and then, when it entered Arts Faculties, began to be practised in departments of national literatures, before being considered an autonomous discipline.

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