

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE SEEN FROM BRAZIL

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RESUMO: No Brasil do século XIX, um certo viés do comparatismo baseava-se em uma visão que comparava e contrastava nações. Isto pode ser comprovado no mais famoso poema nacionalista do século, a “Canção do exílio” de Gonçalves Dias. Neste poema, ele compara o Brasil à sua antiga metrópole, Portugal. No entanto, em 1873, Machado de Assis produziu uma série de argumentos contra a onda nacionalista e antecipou questões que só seriam tratadas mais tarde por Hugo Meltzl (1846-1908), o fundador da primeira publicação dedicada à Literatura Comparada: *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* [1877-1888]. Mesmo no ambiente interdisciplinar do século XX, deve-se notar que as associações de Literatura Comparada são organizadas por nacionalidade até hoje, a despeito da existência da Associação Internacional de Literatura Comparada. No caso da Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada, ela surgiu nos anos oitenta e foi definida por Antonio Candido como uma “entidade que representa uma fase nova da disciplina em nosso meio”.

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Literatura Comparada; História; Brasil

ABSTRACT: In 19th century Brazil, a certain vein of comparatism based itself on a vision that compared and contrasted nations. This may be seen in the most famous nationalist poem of the century, Gonçalves Dias’ “Song of Exile”. In this poem, he compares Brazil to its former metropolis, Portugal. Nevertheless, in 1873 Machado de Assis produced a series of arguments against the nationalist wave and anticipated issues that would only be addressed later by Hugo Meltzl (1846-1908), the founder of the first publication dedicated to comparative literature: *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* [1877-1888]. Even in the cross-disciplinary environment of the 20th century it should be noted that comparative literature associations are organized by nationality to this day, despite the existence of the International Comparative Literature Association. In the case of the Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada, it emerged in the 1980s and was defined by Antonio Candido as “an organization that represents a new phase of the discipline on our soil”.

KEY WORDS: Comparative Literature; History; Brazil

Let us begin our journey with a question that students of comparative literature are often forced to face: “*comparative* literature? And what (or whom) are you comparing?” If the

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question were posed in postcolonial Brazil, the answer might be easier to come by than it is today. How so?

The 19th century was the century of nationalism. It should thus come as no surprise that a certain vein of comparative literature from that period should have based itself on a vision that compared and contrasted nations. In Brazil, this sort of comparatism gets its start with postcolonial literature itself – as may be seen in the most famous nationalist poem of the century, Gonçalves Dias’ “Song of Exile”. In this poem, he compares Brazil to its former metropolis, Portugal:

*Kennst du das Land, wo die Citronen blühen,
Im dunkeln die Gold-Orangen glühen,
Kennst du es wohl? – Dahin, dahin!
Möcht ich...ziehen.
Goethe*

My land has palm trees
Where the *sabiá* bird sings;
The birds that warble here
Do not warble as they do there.

Our skies have more stars,
Our meadows more flowers,
Our forests have more life,
Our lives, more loves.

As I ponder, alone at night,
More pleasures I find there;
My land has palm trees
Where the *sabiá* bird sings.

My land has charms
Such that I find not here;
As I ponder, alone at night,
More pleasures I find there;
My land has palm trees
Where the *sabiá* bird sings.

May the Lord keep me from dying
'Till I return there at last;
'Till I delight in the charms
That are not to be found here;
'Till I once again espy the palm trees
Where the *sabiá* bird sings.
(Dias 105)

The poem is entitled “Song of Exile,” but when Gonçalves Dias wrote it, he was not exiled: he found himself in Portugal of his own free will, studying law at Coimbra University. The adverbs *aqui* and *cá* (translated as “here”) refer to Portugal, whereas *lá* (translated as “there”) refers to Brazil. The *exile* of the title refers to the distance separating the author from his land and his desire to return: “May the Lord keep me from dying/ ‘Till I return there at last.” The poem’s epigraph is a stanza from Goethe’s poem *Mignon*, which speaks of a paradise where lemon and orange trees bloom. There is a parallel with another place replete with special qualities: Brazil.

The text is structured as a comparison between what may be found *aqui / cá* (here, in Portugal) and *lá* (there, in Brazil). The end result is to highlight the bounties of Brazil. Note the use of “more” in the comparative constructions: “Our skies have *more* stars,/ Our meadows *more* flowers,/ Our forests have *more* life,/ Our lives, *more* loves”.

One may also look to the use of first-person pronouns, both in the singular (“*I*”) and in the plural (“*our*”). The singular form (“*I*”) highlights the subjectivity of these declarations and their relationship to the individual who claims to feel better at night in his own land, and who expresses a desire to not die in Portugal. But the plural form (“*our*”) emphasizes an imagined national community, as defined by Benedict Anderson (p. 14). The nation is *imagined* because not even the members of the smallest nations can hope to meet or hear of the majority of their compatriots, let alone know them to any degree – and yet the image of their communion thrives in the mind of each, as they imagine themselves to share the same *nationality*.

This interplay between pronoun forms establishes a relationship that also takes in the imagined recipient of the poem. It may be possible to say that this plural form addresses the potential collective subject that is the “Brazilian people,” which may have

contributed to make the poem a sort of national anthem subsequently reappropriated by many other authors, both contemporary to Gonçalves Dias and in his wake.

Ultimately, this movement hews quite close to Clifford Geertz's description of the work of the anthropologist. The constant flux between "being here" and "being there" (or being "lá" and being "cá") somewhat inevitably recalls the defining thought experiment behind Gonçalves Dias's verses.

Here we have stumbled across a true "epistemology of distance," one that has dominated Brazilian social thought. Sergio Buarque de Holanda first began developing *Roots of Brazil* while in Germany. Gilberto Freyre produced the final draft of *The Masters and the Slaves* in the United States while teaching at Stanford University, having traveled through the Deep South and been taken aback by the differences between the experiences of slavery in both countries – through his lens, at least.

The same phenomenon – inaugurated by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who wrote *Facundo* (1845) while exiled in Chile – would shape the rich tradition of the essay in Spanish-speaking Latin America. In the next century, Octavio Paz would discover the figure of the *pachuco* during his time in Los Angeles, and, through the *pachuco*, lay out a sketch of the Mexican dilemma in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950).

Here, however, we might point out that comparatism between nations, a framework crucial for comparative literature in the 19th century, was already present in the literature of the time in Brazil: one has only to look to the comparison between Brazil and Portugal in the poem by Gonçalves Dias.

This may be one of the reasons why Brazilian critic Antonio Candido reflected that to study Brazilian literature was to study comparative literature. Building off of Candido's observation, we propose that to study any other national literature also implies a study of comparative literature, as the norm in literary production is for genres, topics, ways of writing, authors, works, etc., circulate beyond national frontiers.

In dialogue with Candido, Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama extended this concept to the whole of the Latin American experience by way of the concept of "narrative transculturation." His synthesis of the historical process would retrace the movement described by his Brazilian colleague:

Almost from the beginning, Latin American writers [...] preferred to give themselves different cultural lineages: Italian and classical literature in colonial times; French and British after Independence (they never quite saw France and England as the new colonizing metropolitan

centers that they really were); and most recently, North American letters, the current top dogs. (Rama 3)

Rama underscored their attempts to escape from Iberian cultural determination. For our purposes, however, the most important element here is the fundamental, fertilizing flow between a variety of traditions – the first step towards inventing a literature based on emulation.

Carlos Monsiváis (11) envisioned a similar process: “In the first half of the 20th century, to speak of culture in Latin America is to revisit the *corpus* of Western civilization, plus national and Ibero-American contributions.” Oddly enough, Monsiváis refers to the nations of Iberian America as if they did not belong to Western civilization. Latin American culture calls out for a comparative perspective, necessary for tackling its constant oscillation between what belongs to it and what does not. This epistemological ebb and flow is particularly fruitful when characterizing comparative literature in non-hegemonic perspectives.

In the 19th century, however, there emerged the practice of associating authors and texts to territories. The very criteria by which the literature of the time was evaluated came to rest on the correlation of a series of territorially delimited referents (the people, the landscape, local fauna and flora, etc.) and their representation in literature.

This sort of attitude has legitimized texts that allegedly correspond to the reality of the time in the territories represented in such works, and has over- or undervalued works by using the degree to which they represent said “reality” as a yardstick. The end result is often the naturalization of stereotypes and stigmas, or the production of an oversimplification of social and historical complexity. In any case, the assumption of the existence of a territorial referent that precedes textual production was fundamental for the production and interpretation of literary texts, at a time in which comparative literature was seen as the study of the relationship between literatures produced in those national territories.

In the middle of the century of nationalism, however, a Brazilian writer produced a series of arguments against the nationalist wave and anticipated issues that would only be addressed later by Hugo Meltzl (1846-1908), the founder of the first publication

dedicated to comparative literature: *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* [1877-1888].³

In 1873, Machado de Assis (1839-1908) published the essay “Reflections on Brazilian Literature at the Present Moment – the National Instinct” in New York. In the text, among other things, he criticized the nationalist penchant for “local color,” rejecting the doctrine by which “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 134).

As we have written elsewhere (Jobim & Rocha, 2016), in 19th-century Brazil, Machado de Assis was addressing the writers and critics of his time, who believed that postcolonial Brazilian literary production ought to work towards expressing the essence of the emerging nation. At the time, that would have been principally through the description of landscapes, inhabitants, customs, local fauna and flora, and other elements included under the umbrella of “local color.” Without denying the validity of this sort of postcolonial literary project, Machado de Assis does question the validity of its exclusive posture. As he saw it, it was not only limiting to demand a blind focus on “national subjects,” but it was also unnecessary; even when speaking about topics apparently outside the scope of the nation, authors would approach them from a perspective that bore the marks of the works’ context of origin. Machado de Assis moves to bolster his argument with examples of foreign authors:

...I would simply ask if the author of the *Song of Hiawatha* did not also write the *Golden Legend*, which has nothing to do with the land that gave birth to it, nor with its admirable composer. And I would ask further if *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Cesar*, and *Romeo and Juliet* have anything to do with English history or take place on British soil, and if, Shakespeare is not, in addition to being a universal genius, also an essentially English poet (Assis 135).

If the place of origin remains present even when the writer’s object is temporally or geographically “distant,” then what stance should he take? For Machado de Assis, the explicit presence of “local color” is purely superficial. One should demand something else entirely:

³ See more in: Jobim, José Luís & Rocha, João Cezar de Castro. From Europe to Latin America: Ways of Reframing Literary Circulation. <http://www.brill.com/products/journal/journal-world-literature>, 2016.

What we should expect of the writer above all is a certain intimate feeling that renders him a man of his time or space. Some time ago, a notable French critic analysed Masson, a Scottish writer, and said that just as one could be Breton without constantly speaking of the broom, a shrub, so could Masson be a good Scot without ever mentioning the thistle, and he added that there was in Masson a certain inner Scottishness, which was distinct and superior for not being merely superficial (Assis 135).

Though comparatism had been present in Brazilian literature and criticism in the 19th century, by near the mid-point of the following century, literary critic Álvaro Lins tried to explain the alleged lack of comparative literature study in Brazilian criticism. In a 1941 essay, he argued that such work “would find here an environment of prejudice and hostility [explained] by our position in relation to older, stronger literatures”. Later on, Lins justifies this prediction by writing that in central nations, comparative studies work in two senses: they track received influences, but above all indicate *transmitted* influences. In Brazil, by contrast, such studies “w[ould], for the time being, have but a single side: that of the influences we have received”. Lins, perhaps unconsciously, was echoing a stance taken by Tobias Barreto, a pioneer in the systematic study of comparative literature in Brazil. Tobias Barreto oversaw a hotly sought-after “course on comparative literature” in Recife, in 1886, in which literature produced in Brazil was nowhere to be found on the syllabus. Barreto believed that “comparative literature could only exist in cultured nations, as only they possessed works able to withstand the unforgiving contrasts of cultural exchanges” (Faria 23).

In the preface to the first edition of his *Formation of Brazilian Literature*, Antonio Candido would return to Tobias Barreto’s vision, in a sense, as he laid out the idea that “self-centered literatures” – those wherein it is possible to, using exclusively texts in the language of the place, “construct a worldview [while] experiencing the most sublime literary emotions” – and “other-centered literatures” – those, like Brazil’s, “thus fated to lean on the experience of other letters” (Candido 7). This vision also ignores the vicissitudes of geography. Harry Levin, a comparatist who led Harvard’s comparative literature program for four decades, perfectly echoes his Brazilian colleague’s position: “American literature (...) has neither the aesthetic richness nor the historic range to comprise a discipline by itself” (Levin 67). How, then, to “compare it” to literatures that, given their “historic range,” might boast an apparently enviable aesthetic wealth?

The limitations of this comparative angle may be appreciated more fully if we recall the controversy around the publication of Eugênio Gomes’ book *Influências*

inglesas em Machado de Assis [English Influences in Machado de Assis] (1939). In the text, Eugênio Gomes (considered by Antonio Candido to be “the first comparatist, strictly speaking, in Brazilian literature” [Candido 19]) mapped out a vast network of influences *chosen* by Machado de Assis, principally from English-language sources. This is a perfect example of the sort of work traditionally ascribed to the field of comparative literature: the exhaustive, erudite tracing of similarities across different authors. The controversy around it, started by authors such as Sérgio Milliet and Sergio Buarque de Holanda, was no less traditional. They challenged the validity of Gomes’ work “because the study of sources and influences *did not help us* [, as it would only] further emphasize our separation, our dependence” (Almeida 34, italics ours). Just as Álvaro Lins retraced Tobias Barreto’s steps, there seems to be a touch of Sílvio Romero present in this discussion. None of the parties is challenging the canonical position of Machado’s oeuvre – on the contrary, they deny external influences precisely so as not to diminish it. This leads us to a vision in which *to be influential* (i.e., to allegedly serve as an original source for literary practices to be imitated) is seen as superior to being *influenced* (i.e., a follower or imitator of said source), a stance that now rings quite naïvely, when one considers a broad array of other factors at play in literary and cultural circulation.

The underlying principle behind the debate over *Influências inglesas em Machado de Assis* is precisely the same concept that led Sílvio Romero to cast aspersions on Machado de Assis’s work — the latter, according to Romero, possessed “by the demon [that is the] imitation of the English and the Germans” (Romero 80). The critic’s argument was founded on a very simple formula. Since humor wasn’t a characteristic inherent to the Brazilian “physiology,” much less encouraged by the mesological conditions present in the tropics, Machado’s works were to be condemned on the basis of their artificiality.

In this sense, a look at the papers presented at the meetings of the Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (ABRALIC) may reveal the continued presence of elements from the past. For example, at the organization’s 10th conference, held in 1988, the opening talk set out “a *legitimate* form for comparatism in Brazil (...) in order to determine what is specific to the literature produced *here*” (Carvalho 16, italics ours). The adjective *legitimate* betrays the “eternal return” of the search for characteristics allegedly inherent to a nation’s literature – which, once identified, might be compared with those of the literatures of other nations.

To escape from the model of national comparisons is no simple task, even when the comparatist seeks to do precisely that. Within the German tradition of Romance studies, for example, Auerbach observed that German scholars, when studying neo-Latinate cultures, worked with traditions expressed in foreign languages. Hence, “there was little danger that they would be carried away by a patriotic involvement with their own national character” (Auerbach 5) But the career choices of the German Romanist Karl Vossler may show that things weren’t quite so simple. Initially specializing in French literature, Vossler became a pioneer in the modern study of Spanish literature for a less-than-academic reason: he simply didn’t wish to value the culture of the “enemy” through the study of their literature. In any case, Auerbach saw in this characteristic of German Romance Studies the potential for finding common ground, whereupon European cultures might congregate and overcome the narrow bounds of nationality.

Indeed, a simple consultation of traditional studies is enough to reveal that the nation continued to occupy a relevant place within comparatism. One important result of this durability has to do with the ideal underlying the study of influences — generally structured as the tracking of the reception of a given author in various countries. Something like a look at the circulation of a *German* poet in France, wherein one studies his influence on French literature.

It should be noted that comparative literature associations are organized by nationality to this day, despite the existence of the International Comparative Literature Association. In the case of the Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada, it emerged in the 1980s and was defined by Antonio Candido as “an organization that represents a new phase of the discipline on our soil” (Carvalho). ABRALIC’s first conference was held in 1988, in Porto Alegre.⁴

If we compare Candido’s reasoning regarding the formation of ABRALIC with previous arguments, we may see that he took a similar tack when approaching the formation of Brazilian literature, seeking to separate “literature as a system” from “literary manifestations.” The former would imply a framework more organically incorporated into society, in which producers, receiver, and channels of transmission were continually present — a configuration absent in the latter case. Candido’s comments on ABRALIC are notably similar:

⁴ More information and the annals of subsequent conferences may be found on ABRALIC’s website.

I believe that the Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada, ABRALIC, closes out a phase that began with spontaneous manifestations and later developed into individualized practice before obtaining institutional recognition. [...] But something important, and I would say decisive, was lacking: the specific professional consciousness that is acquired and reinforced by exchanges, specialized publications and associative life, marked by meetings, symposia and conferences. This is what was begun with ABRALIC.

In the Brazilian case, it is far from clear that the foundation of ABRALIC indeed marked such a beginning. Some colleagues argue that the association ought to be called ABRALIT (Brazilian Association of Literature), since it has indeed become the largest umbrella organization for literature professors and researchers in Latin America, beyond the specific field of comparative literature.⁵

We have argued elsewhere (Jobim et al, 2006) that ABRALIC, as with other associations from other countries, pays tribute to the place in which it finds itself; there is undoubtedly a broad spectrum of elements at play in the context into which the association is inserted, and which constitute the territorial boundary that circumscribes ABRALIC's scholarly production and that of its associates. The choice of subjects to be dealt with, the criteria of relevance one turns to, the theoretical approaches, the authors and works one chooses to study – all of this is tied to place.

In this context, there is no denying the fact that the Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada has an institutional discourse indelibly tied to Brazil as place, and that this must set it apart from other such Associations that speak from other places. Not only is work on Brazilian literature marked by Brazil, but so is work on so-called “foreign literatures,” since the very adjective “foreign” has its meaning tied to a locus of enunciation that sees such literatures as external, belonging elsewhere. In other words, to teach English literature in Great Britain is not the same thing as teaching the same literature in Brazil, nor does it raise the same issues (Jobim, 2006).

Because of all of this, studying the development of comparative literature in a variety of spatially and temporally diverse national and international contexts is a fundamental task in constructing a broader understanding of the discipline.

⁵ This is a recurring topic; Marisa Lajolo, for example, at ABRALIC's 2005 “Encontro Regional,” spoke of the “metonymic inadequacy of our largest national association.” Her objection went as follows: “The [association] that brings us here today – ABRALIC – is named for *one* of the many contemporary approaches to literary studies, comparative literature. The *whole* takes its denomination from *one of its parts*. In this, aren't we both erasing the various approaches to literary studies and removing the specificity of comparatism itself? Why, then, do we have no ABRALIT, much like ABRALIN (the Brazilian Linguistics Association)?” (Lajolo 31)

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