

LITERARY AND CULTURAL CIRCULATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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RESUMO: Breve abordagem de alguns aspectos importantes para a circulação literária e cultural, no contexto da Literatura Comparada

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Circulação literária e cultural, Literatura Comparada

ABSTRACT: A brief account of a few aspects of importance to literary and cultural circulation, in the context of Comparative Literature.

KEY-WORDS: Literary and Cultural Circulation, Comparative Literature

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In 2017 I have published a book (both in English and Portuguese) of essays about literary and cultural circulation, featuring contributions from the two colleagues here on this special issue, professors Helena Buescu and Zang Longxi. They consist of versions in English and Portuguese of essays exploring this topic, both in the form of case studies (analysing works and authors from various literatures and cultures) and discussions of theoretical issues relating to circulation. I am therefore going to give a brief account of a few aspects of importance to literary and cultural circulation, in the context of Comparative Literature, and would ask you to consider my intervention as an invitation to read the essays in those two books.

To begin with I would like to clarify that studies of literary and cultural circulation today involve considering at least two things: 1) the transnational capitalist system within which literary works and cultural goods circulate; 2) the various modes of appropriation and transformation in operation in different parts of the world, which to some extent determine the meanings that literary works and cultural goods will have in each one of those places.

In terms of the transnational system, it can be said that the current stage of what was termed “globalization” a long time ago has overcome the obstacles of national borders, and has managed to consolidate a kind of hegemonic vision, which establishes and justifies actions undertaken in our everyday lives and is consubstantial with the meanings derived from the systemic order, providing the wider frame of reference which our daily actions are part of.

Bearing in mind that, as we know, hegemonies can have the effect of erasing historical meanings that previously existed, meanings that were or still are socially important, I would state that the first major challenge for comparative work, today, is a greater commitment to producing a type of knowledge that goes beyond the naturalization of prevailing meanings, including a historical perspective that allows us to better understand not only our present, but also the choices previously made, which have led us to where we are today. In terms of comparative theoretical work, I borrow my words from Marcel Detienne: “The choices made, consciously and unconsciously, by differing cultures are the comparables with which the comparatist works (Detienne, p. 186).” But what do I mean by this?

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I mean that comparatists do not work in a vacuum, but rather in a given social and historical context, to which they are not immune, however critical they may be of this context. The construction of comparables is thus based on certain values, methods and criteria. For example, when we construct our comparison using the notions of *influence* and *source*, we are paying a heavy debt to a certain vestige of colonialism still to be found in the meanings attributed to those terms. After all, those notions already implied a kind of *absolute origin*, generally associated with the colonial power, which would give rise to successive appropriations, as well as a hierarchy: the *influencer* or the *source* would be considered superior to those who drink from the source or those who are influenced. Today we know that this way of thinking is very naïve, even if we use its same basic frame of reference, because, as far as literature and culture are concerned, *absolute origin* is difficult to defend, and even colonizing cultures imagined as an *absolute origin* were, in fact, cultural crucibles that were connected to other *origins*.

Therefore, by using those notions, even when we detect that an author has appropriated a certain literary or cultural element that previously existed in another place, it is necessary to bear in mind the following points, amongst others: a) that the supposed *origin* of this element in most cases, if we dig deeper into the layers of history, can also be attributed to other places and other times; b) that appropriation does not necessarily mean the reiteration of what has been appropriated, in the terms in which that element existed in its supposed origin; appropriation can even mean a critique and an alteration of the meanings that the element “originally” had, as I have shown elsewhere, when discussing Machado de Assis’s appropriation of the ideas of one of the founders of psychology in France, Théodule-Armand Ribot: instead of reiterating them, Machado critiqued and deconstructed them via humour (JOBIM, 2015).

In terms of the circulation of meanings, even when we are dealing with meanings derived from European perspectives, for those who live here it is necessary to bear in mind that those meanings are transformed when they come into contact with the cultures of the Americas. Of course, this is nothing new to us, since back in the 19th century the writer José de Alencar said:

We must not forget that the sons of the New World receive the traditions of the indigenous race and live in contact with almost all the civilized races that contribute to those lands, brought over by emigration.

The workers responsible for the transformation of our languages are those representatives of so many races, from the Saxon to the African, who on this lush land create an amalgam of blood, of traditions and of languages.

(Alencar, 1958, p. 314)

As far as the contemporary circulation of literature and cultural goods in Latin America is concerned, George Yúdice, in an article tellingly entitled *We are not the world*, prefers to talk about intercultural networks of dissemination and reception, although he underlines the asymmetric nature of these networks. In his opinion, we cannot talk about what US culture signifies for Latin Americans without examining its modes of dissemination: films and TV programmes, the popular press, the dominant aesthetic culture, the mainstream intellectual journalism of the USA (*The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, etc.) and their counterparts in Latin America. Yúdice believes that academic culture, for better or for worse, has relatively little influence on the representation of North American culture in Latin America, with the result that until now what has been disseminated by the mainstream media is, almost exclusively, what reaches the reading and viewing public of Latin America. Conversely, however, the cultural flow from Latin America to the USA, with a few exceptions, is not mediated by equivalent institutions responsible for dissemination:

decisions about which Latin American films should be exhibited, which books should be translated, which social and political movements should be represented etc. are taken, Yúdice argues, by North American initiatives and by the university system, which, in this respect, holds considerable power, not only in its links with the state's policy-making apparatus, but also in alternative spheres, like those in which policies of solidarity and multiculturalism interact (YÚDICE, 1992, p. 204).

Although, since the 19th century, there has been a tendency to speak from a disciplinary framework in which the study of literature is divided on the basis of nationality, at least in Europe and in the Americas, it is important to bear in mind that, at different times in those same territories, as well as on other continents, neither the same things happened nor at the same time.

If, in the past and still in the present day, we have concocted what we could term a “nationalist” comparatism, whether involving national literatures or authors from different national literatures, it is thus necessary, among other things, to understand *how* and *based on what assumptions* the comparisons are made, given that the choices made by comparatists are also part of a given social and historical context.

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The point of view that I defend, in the book that I have just published, is that the circulation of literary works and cultural objects (films, music, paintings and so on) from one place to another has consequences. The meanings that the work had in its place of origin are not the same as those that it will have in the other place that “imported” it. Therefore, attributing a “universal” character to a work may hide the particular, specific reasons why it was well or poorly received, in different places.

As regards one of the most translated and well received Brazilian writers abroad, Machado de Assis, I remember hearing the publisher Anne Marie Métailié, when she came to Brazil to take part in an event sponsored by Itau Cultural, say that her French publishing house, Métailié, which has translated and published Machado, did not select and publish Brazilian authors according to the same criteria that would be used in Brazil; she considered that it was necessary to bear in mind what would be important for the French public, and publish authors and works that dealt with themes that could be of interest to potential book buyers in France.

I was recently in France to take part in the colloquium “*Espaces et littératures des Amériques: mutation, complémentarité, partage*”, which the coordinator of my panel at ABRALIC 2017, Professor Rogério Lima, also participated in. There in Paris, in the Quai Branly Museum, I went to the exhibition *Picasso primitif*, where I saw again, amongst other things, the masks that inspired Pablo Picasso and his contemporaries, and this exhibition provided me with a second example of what I am talking about here.

We know that many masks originally used in indigenous rituals in Africa, Asia and Oceania were bought by European dealers, artists and museums between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. In the museums, studios and shops of Europe, those masks were transformed into something different from their origins, and even gave rise to an art form that Europeans called, among other things, “primitive” or “black”. Picasso made his artistic appropriation of those masks very clear in 1964:

When I discovered black art, forty years ago, and I painted what is called my African period, that was to set myself in opposition to what was called ‘beauty’ in museums. At that moment, for most people, an African mask was nothing more than an ethnographic object. When I went for the first time with Derain to the Trocadéro museum, my throat was overcome with a smell of mustiness and abandonment. I felt so depressed that I wanted to get away from there immediately. But I was forced to stay, to examine those

masks. All those objects that men had created with a sacred, magic purpose, so that they served as intermediaries between them and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, thus trying to overcome their fear, by giving it colour and form. And I then understood that this was the very meaning of painting. It is not an aesthetic process; it is a form of magic that intervenes between the hostile universe and us, a way of taking control, by giving our fears a form, as we do to our desires. The day I understood that, I discovered that I had found my path. (Le Fur, 2017, p. 32)

We can thus see a trajectory in which objects brought from Africa are taken from their previous location, transported to another place, to a museum in Paris, where they are looked at by European artists, who appropriate them in order to transform them into something different from what those objects were in the continent they came from.

Unfortunately, today there are still many critics who do not bear in mind that the value of a work does not depend only on factors intrinsic to it, that are supposedly “recognised” or not as a mark of quality in any part of the world. In fact, the valorisation of, and the importance attributed or not to a work, depend, to a great extent, on the dominant meanings in the places where it will circulate, and which will in some way determine *if* and *how* it will be appropriated. The very fact that it circulates in one place, but not in another, can be a consequence, for example, of the subject matter or the form of the work not being considered relevant in one place, although they are in another.

The local, regional, national and international contexts in which the work circulates can also influence its reception. There are cases where the same work can have different evaluations, depending on *where* and *how* it circulates.

According to Theo D’Haen (2017), the international circulation of authors does not only depend on the national reputation that they might have, a reputation based on “national” reasons, of course, but also on other factors, such as what D’Haen calls “regional constellations”. Thus, within the category referred to as Scandinavian Literature, what he terms a “constellation” or group is created, with spatial and temporal boundaries, which serves to support writers from Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

Why is Scandinavian Literature characterised by the international circulation of Andersen, Ibsen, Strindberg and Hamsun? Theo D’Haen, without discussing the individual merits of each of these writers, draws our attention to the power to disseminate that is derived from a “regional constellation” in which the mutual support of several geopolitically close countries can promote the circulation and valorisation of male and female authors. He argues that the same thing happens with other “regional constellations” of “minor” literatures, such as Slavic, Balkan or Baltic literatures.

Sometimes, according to D’Haen, the problem is the difficulty in creating or being part of a bigger constellation. In his opinion, this is one of the problems facing Dutch literature. Although Dutch literature is geographically situated in the heart of Europe, he argues that it suffers the consequences of being surrounded by three major European literatures (those of England, France and Germany) and therefore it has not had the conditions needed to create a “regional constellation” policy, because those three major literatures aspired to be stars in their own right and not to form part of larger constellations, within which they would be subsumed.

With regard to major political and economic trends today, I have already argued (Jobim, 2017) that the tendency to create “constellations”, in other words, overarching groupings or regional blocs (like the European Union or the MERCOSUL) is a reality, as is the fact that the construction of these “constellations” comes up against various forms of resistance, often derived from interests consolidated in the previous nationalist context, interests that are challenged by the creation of new forms of political, economic and cultural organisation, or of new transnational institutions.

Those in favour of these overarching structures stress the need to create new, more wide-ranging frames of reference, the boundaries of which go beyond those of former national structures, and which are derived from forms of mutual understanding shared by all the communities involved.

We need to bear in mind, however, that it is not only in geopolitically adjacent spaces that transnational structures can be created, as the existence of the Commonwealth, an entity composed predominantly of former British colonies, proves, or the formation of blocs based on a common language, among other examples. A case we are all familiar with here is that of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), which, as well as supporting government strategies in countries on different continents, can be a platform to promote and disseminate literatures and cultures supposedly created in a shared language, but can also serve other interests.

The construction of comparables, therefore, cannot fail to take into account this new frame of reference, in all its dimensions and contradictions. This, in my opinion, is the greatest challenge faced by Comparative Literature today.

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