Comparative literature in Mexico

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The essentially multicultural nature of Mexico has been considered by many as an extraordinary potential for comparatism, given not only its rich prehispanic past, but also the conflictive historical contact with Spanish culture in the colonial period, which in so many respects moulded Mexican culture for about three centuries. The same is true of most Latin American countries which, having the Spanish language in common, differ considerably in their prehispanic cultural background, making this vast multicultural arena extremely diverse despite the fact that Spanish is the dominant language throughout the Hispano-American countries of the continent. For a long time, the debate ran high—and still runs high—as to whether it was legitimate to work comparatively with texts in the same language. Our awareness that the intercultural approach—and not only the plurilingual one—is essential to comparative literature studies may well, and soon, lift the interdict and put an end to the debate. For Latin American literature, given its rich multicultural nature, may be fruitfully explored from the comparative perspective.

Djelal Kadir says that “the history of literary and textual culture in Mexico is inevitably comparatistic” (4); he has focused on the “genesis of comparative literature” in the encuentro between two worlds as well as the European roots of comparative literature in Madame Recamier’s salon, an intellectual space where Latin American figures like Simón Bolívar or Fray Servando Teresa de Mier were also present. And so, for a very long time, Mexican literary criticism felt the need for prestigious filiations that would give value to
our writers; thus Joaquín Arcadio Pagaza was proclaimed the Mexican Virgil; Florencio del Castillo was considered the Mexican Balzac. Nonetheless, these decreed affinities betray more an “anxiety of origins”—to use Lois Parkinson Zamora’s significant concept—than a truly comparative approach to the authors in question. It is clear that, despite its potential, this cannot be considered Comparative Literature, for no matter how great the potential may be, it is not actualized until the critical consciousness examines and analyzes texts from an intercultural perspective.

The origins of the discipline in Mexico date back to the second half of the twentieth century; in the 1950s and 1960s, more serious work was done in the field of comparative studies, but they were scarce, mostly isolated studies. Important names come to mind: Luisa Josefina Hernández, Margarita Quijano, Oscar Zorrilla, Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, to name a few. But comparative literary studies, as formal academic programs, are fairly recent. In the late 1980s, a group of comparatists, Federico Patán, Flora Botton, Dieter Rall, Angelina Muñiz, with me as leader of the group, devised a graduate program in Comparative Literature, which started in 1989 at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM. Ever since, this has been the only full-fledged graduate program in the country.

This academic enterprise was marked, from the start, by extremely fruitful encounters with distinguished scholars from the US, Canada and Europe. They came to Mexico and taught memorable courses: Lois Parkinson Zamora, Mario Valdés, Daniel Chamberlain, Jean Bessière; in particular, Parkinson Zamora’s and Valdés’s contributions to comparative literature in Mexico have been seminal.

With our combined efforts we also launched a journal of comparative literature, the only one of its kind in Mexico: Polígrafías. Revista de Literatura Comparada, which publishes articles in the four main languages of the continent: Spanish, Portuguese, English and French. Four numbers have been published so far, with a very wide range of theoretical and comparative topics. Polígrafías has an editorial board comprised of academics working at UNAM, complemented by an international advisory board. Our Mexican group has made incursions in many and diverse comparative territories: literary theory, literature and the arts, literary translation, the baroque in the Americas, nineteenth century Latin-American, French and English literatures. Scholars from the classics department have been interested in our program and have produced erudite comparative studies.

Many of our best comparatists have studied with Lois Zamora Parkinson, Mario Valdés and me; perhaps their work carries the imprint of our teachings. I can only think of José Ricardo Chaves’s excellent studies on nineteenth century French, English, Spanish and Latin American literatures—Andróginos. Eros y ocultismo en la literatura romántica (2005)—, or Alfredo Michel’s splendid work on Shakespeare and the culture and science of the Renaissance; Irene Artigas and her forthcoming book on ekphrasis in English and Spanish speaking poets, Galería de palabras; or Daniel Rinaldi, a classicist and a comparatist scholar, who has written an erudite study on the myth of Phaedra—which he called by the beautiful name of Fedriana (doctoral thesis presented in 2006)—and its many rewritings throughout the century; or Gabriel Weisz’s book on literature and anthropology—Los dioses de la peste (1998). And of course there is the extensive work that Dieter Rall has done on German culture in México and Laura López’s work on Francophone literatures, Federico Patán’s studies of Mexican and American literature, or Rosa Beltrán’s book—América sin americanismos (1997)—which is again a happy encounter between the US and Latin America. Excellent literary translators who specialize in the
Even the literature from which they translate include scholars such as Claudia Lucotti, Nair Anaya, Eva Cruz, Marina Fe, Julia Constantino and Ana Elena González Treviño.

Needless to say I am not going to give the full list of the diversity of comparative studies in Mexico, but from these examples the lines of research cut across disciplines and literary traditions: classicists working comparatively, scholars exploring Latin American literatures and their prehispanic roots, their European encounters; the way in which Spanish, having come to America from Spain, was renewed by Rubén Darío and brought back to Spain revitalizing Spanish poetry. We continue to enact what Kadir calls “our praxes as comparatists, namely, the pursuit of the differential in the common search for the generalizable universal through the particular” (17). But he makes a strange programmatic claim:

It is the rich history of these complex layerings and the intricate figures of their palimpsests that can be most instructive for the enterprise of comparative literature, an enterprise that is obliged by the Mexican primal scene of comparability to become at once political and archaeological in its methodology (14).

No comparative enterprise can be obliged, least of all with a so-called political and archaeological method, which remains unexplained and unillustrated as to its possible functioning. I, for one, believe that the paths are many and diverse as evinced by the varied lines of research that have been pursued by Mexican comparatists for the last two decades.

NOTES


ABSTRACTS

A partir de quelques appréciations critiques, cet article propose un bref parcours de la littérature comparée au Mexique, allant des origines de la discipline à l’état actuel des études comparatistes. Il se concentre en particulier sur la façon dont la spécialité comparatiste a été intégrée aux études de troisième cycle de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l’UNAM, ainsi que sur la façon dont la discipline poursuit son évolution grâce à tout un groupe de collaborateurs.

A partir de algunas apreciaciones críticas, este artículo propone un breve recorrido de la literatura comparada en México, que va de los orígenes de la disciplina al estado actual de los estudios comparatistas. En él se detalla especialmente la manera en que la especialidad
comparatista se integró en los estudios de postgrado de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la UNAM, y cómo la disciplina prosigue su evolución gracias a todo un grupo de colaboradores.

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