

Guest Editor's Interviews

Comparative World Literature as a Tool to Reconsider World Literature

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Abstract: In this interview, Helena Carvalhão Buescu develops her unique approach to comparative world literature, as she has proposed to reframe the concept. Within the scope of her approach, translation is given a new place in comparative literature, widening the horizons of literary experience.

Keywords: world literature, comparative literature, comparative world literature, translation, peripheral worlds

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Guest Editor's Remarks

Helena Carvalhão Buescu's relevant work both as a literary theorist and as a comparatist has a special importance to the topic of "world literature and its discontents." She has received distinguished literary and critical awards in Portugal as well as growing international accolades as a writer and scholar. Recently the University of Lisbon awarded her the title of Professor Emeritus, and on that occasion, an international colloquium was held in honor of her achievements, "Comparative Literature Then and Now."¹

Buescu's intellectual horizon is broad and encompasses topics from the literatures of Portuguese expression to world literature,² not forgetting her insightful contributions to literary theory and comparative literature. Broadening horizons, indeed, may be seen as the motto behind her work—its true driving force.

For instance, in this interview, she proposes: "we might want to talk, more accurately, of the worlds of world literature." The acuteness of this remark has to be stressed: if the concept of world literature, as developed by David Damrosch,³ is already an attempt at enriching dramatically the scope of literary canons, Buescu radicalizes the assumption by giving pride of place to the

unsurmountable plurality implied in the notion of the “worlds of world literature.” The disquieting epistemological effect produced by the possibility of envisaging worlds, and therefore languages other than the hegemonic English, is a trademark of Buescu’s theorization.

There is, however, a fundamental question related to this concern: how to achieve such a utopic moment of acknowledgment of an irreducible diversity as an intrinsic value attached to literary experience? Buescu’s critical gaze offers an alternative:

When one considers how current reflections on world literature as a discipline consider “the world,” one is left with a discomfited awareness that it very much looks like a “world in English.” This paper [...] stems from this awareness, as well as the conviction that it is possible to view the problem otherwise—and that this change of perspective will enrich and diversify literary studies. (20)

Let us then conclude this brief introductory note by returning to Buescu’s lesson in this interview: “I prefer to talk about ‘comparative world literature,’ instead of just simply ‘world literature.’” —a perfect definition of the project behind this special issue of *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*.

JFLC: The concept of world literature has broadened the repertoire of the project of a literary canon as inclusive and encompassing as possible. How do you evaluate the achievements propitiated by, as well as the impasses implied in, the concept of world literature?

Buescu: The revision of the concept of world literature, in the last 20 years, has indeed broadened the scope of the literary canon(s). Its principles, inclusion and a greater balance between traditionally considered literatures of the center, and those coming from the several peripheries we may consider (geographically, culturally, and historically), have gradually called the attention of scholarly academe to the fact (somehow blindsighted until recent years) that the world of world literature is a vast terrain where we may find great works, written in a variety of languages, places, and times. One of the first consequences of this variety is that we might want to talk, more accurately, of the worlds of world literature, because indeed there seems to be no uniform representation of a single world. And it is perhaps the right thing to point this out to begin with.

Still another consequence is the fact that there is an increased awareness of the predominance of English, and of literatures written in English, in the formation of a world canon. If this was an obvious fact, it was also obvious that its weight was not considered as a problem until recently. Looking at world literatures from the point of view of the discipline of World Literature, however, we are able to discern how English-ness, as the major criterion for canon formation, diminishes the scope of what we may talk about. Not only in terms of language, but also in terms of literary traditions, cultural perspectives, historical scope, to sum up: diversity.

There are some epistemological consequences we should carefully consider: actually, if we want to get out of the small (in a wide perspective) ghettos limited by the use of a single language, the only way to do it is by highlighting the importance of comparative literature. If not, we are indeed reduced to several ghetto-ized literatures, able to talk to others that share the same language, but not to other literatures written in different languages. This is the reason why I prefer to talk about “comparative world literature,” instead of just simply “world literature.” We should avoid language criteria that build on linguistic uniformity, and instead consider as a risk but also as an opportunity the possibility of “talking to (and with) strangers,” and discover what kind of affinities the awareness and practice of transversal dialogues between different languages may push us to understand.

This is of course a major transformation of hermeneutics, as we have to travel from sameness to dissimilarity. And, as a different language brings with it a different description of the world, and a different historical map, the result of such a position is that we will inevitably learn not only from our relatives, but also from those who are distant. The art historian Aby Warburg talked about “good neighbors” in his library, when all of a sudden, he rearranged his books and discovered what kind of unexpected relations stemmed from books and themes that he used to consider apart. The same goes for different traditions, literatures, and languages. The process of “good neighboring” has been at the center of literary studies for quite a while now⁴: it is called comparative literature, and it is the main tool (perhaps the only one) to enable us to work on dissimilarities, not only similarities, as an actual richness in our practice of world literature.

One of the greatest downsides to comparative world literature, as I understand it, comes from institutions that are strongly embedded in the market, especially the editorial market. In an era where prizes, visibility, and cultural prominence govern what is sought and published, as well as what is circulated, good intentions usually fall short of the theoretical aims that comparative world literature pursues.

JFLC: José Saramago is the only literary author who, writing in Portuguese, has received the Nobel Prize. However, Portuguese is the 9th most spoken language in the world, with approximately 234 million speakers. How do you understand this circumstance?

Buescu: Portuguese is spoken by many speakers all over the world, and in several continents: Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. The huge numbers that propel it towards the top of the most spoken languages come mostly from Brazil, even though the future seems to indicate that the countries in West and East Africa where Portuguese is spoken will be one of the fastest developing regions in the near future. José Saramago received the Nobel Prize at a moment when Portuguese literature received higher appreciation, after getting rid of political downsides in the mid-1970’s. He certainly is a very interesting author, and he has revolutionized the literary landscape in Portugal. His is an interesting case, as one of his greatest influences actually comes from South American literature, especially the novel. In a sense, Saramago may be considered one of the

clearest examples through which world literature infuses the national canon, transforming and renovating it.

However, Brazilian and African literatures written in Portuguese do have a global dimension that comparative world literature still needs to discover and develop. It is quite obvious to me that in the near future we will certainly see international prizes such as the Nobel Prize, and others, finally realize how immensely rich the Portuguese speaking literatures over the world are. In that moment, institutional recognition will surely come their way. It is a true pity, in my opinion, to perceive the losses that come from the way how world literature neglects great literatures such as Brazilian, Angolan, and Mozambican. The universe of world literatures written in Portuguese (in its different varieties) is a perfect example of how within the same language we have to recognize differences and a wonderful diversity, be it historical, cultural, or symbolic.

In this situation a certain number of characteristics that I discussed previously come into plain view. On the one hand, the predominance of English in the global market erases the visibility and the ability of awareness of other languages and literatures, even though they are, as in the case of those written in Portuguese, present in several continents, and they represent the sheer diversity that constitutes the world. On the other hand, and paired with this disability, the translation market, and the editorial market, both play a distinctive role in the difficulty to raise an awareness of the different literatures written in Portuguese all over the world. If translations are few, as indeed they are, and if publishing houses do not invest in authors and works coming from these literatures or, when they do, problems in their transversal circulation arise, it goes without saying that very few names and titles coming from literatures written in Portuguese, be they European, Brazilian, or African, will be able to achieve a more balanced result than the one we are confronted with today.

So, much as it pains me to say this, I have to acknowledge that perhaps only when a Nobel Prize or such officially recognizes the richness of Brazilian literature, and of Angolan or Mozambican literatures, will the scholarly and readers' world be able to appreciate how much there is to be gained from widening the world canons to include these literatures in their centrality.

JFLC: Fernando Pessoa is an author who has received a worldwide reception usually not experienced by writers whose literary language is Portuguese. His case recalls the reception of the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges. How would you explain their cases?

Buescu: I am not sure there is an "explanation," or perhaps I am unsure about the appropriateness of such a term. I think both Pessoa and Borges (an interesting proposal, if one makes a connection between them, actually) enter into "out-of-the-box" categories, each one different from the other. They are both modernist writers, and perhaps modernist poetics provide that "out-of-the-box" productivity, as ruptures and discontinuities are at the center of the idea of poetry and of literature to which both Pessoa and Borges, as good modernists, adhere to.

Let me go back to the unexpected but extremely interesting proposal of linking both authors,

even though at first sight they seem so different. Actually, Fernando Pessoa, even if he has used other genres, is basically a poet—even when he writes in prose (for instance in his famous *The Book of Disquiet*), he does so from a lyrical stance. On the other hand, Jorge Luis Borges, even if he too used other genres, is mainly known as a writer of fiction, especially with his amazing and surprising short stories. What in my view connects both authors, and perhaps this is at the heart of their having gained such an international recognition, and the fact that both are at present at the very center of what we might term a world literature canon, is their commitment to an unrealistic poetics, to the recognition that chaos inhabits both the exterior world (Borges) and the interior one (Pessoa).

Both authors do not conform to the mainstream canons and literary procedures in their own times, they opt for a poetics that clearly deals with irregularities and “estrangement.” Borges does so by anticipating what decades later would come to be recognized as magical realism in the South-American context: his stories always deal with fictions that do not deny realism, but include in it forms of non-reality that are, and to say the least, surprising and unexpected. He therefore opens the door to a wider realistic world, through dreams, imagination, a non-realist realism, and confronts the reader with worlds that may seem like our own but are definitely other. Pessoa, on the other hand, marks a remarkable caesura with theories of the self that see it as a continuous and uniform entity. Pessoa’s proposal of more than 50 heteronyms, as he calls them, in his own poetry, signals the fact that it is no longer possible to construct an even and self-contained entity traditionally termed “individual”: the self is plural, a “theatre of being,” as he calls it. The heteronym is not just another term for pseudonym: it does not substitute an even self but corresponds to the split and subsequent autonomy of distinct parts of oneself, so that we readers may recognize different “types of literature” as belonging to different heteronyms. This marks the formal ending of a unified self as portrayed in literature. And it is also an anticipation of what the 20th century has then developed as a characteristic of contemporary poetics (and disciplines, as for instance, psychoanalysis).

Both authors came from peripheral literatures (if we consider the global English canon), but they became highly read and respected all in more central literatures, because they were able to enact radical ruptures that the previous canon formations did not include, at least as systematic approaches. But by so doing they also called the attention to peripheral literatures, such as Argentine and Portuguese, that were able to incorporate such daring novelties as those that Pessoa and Borges created. However, this should not blind us to the fact that there are several authors writing in Portuguese, and belonging to different literatures, such as Brazilian, Angolan, Mozambican, for instance, who did not receive a similar international attention. It goes without saying that Brazilian authors such as, for instance, Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and many others, even though they are gradually receiving more critical attention, should clearly have a central place in a world literary canon less pre-occupied with “English-ness,” and therefore more inclusive.

JFLC: You received the distinguished Vergílio Ferreira Literary Award as an acknowledgment of your work in the field of Comparative Literature in 2022.⁵ Portuguese-speaking countries, however, are traditionally not at the center of the literary canon. How do we think of comparatism from this perspective?

Buescu: As I mentioned earlier, we should always conceive of world literature as “comparative world literature,” in order to avoid the “ghettoes” that originate from the use of one common denominator (a common language) as the only criterion to practice world literature.⁶

Translation is, in this context, a central issue that we have to weigh in. If we are to process and acknowledge the language question simultaneously as a given and as a factor that we have to somehow transcend, we only have two ways: either learn as many languages as possible (major comparatists, especially in the past, have learned as many as 14 languages, for instance, René Étiemble!), or try to master at least 3 languages, maybe 4, and then rely on quality translations, that will put us in contact with cultures and literatures we might otherwise never have been able to be read. Not everybody wants to acknowledge the power of translations (of GOOD translations, I emphasize), but it actually is a central part of a comparatist’s work, and the ground on which we comparatists may find a commonality in diversity. In every language (especially those who are not at the center of world literature’s picture, as is the case with literatures written in Portuguese) there should exist an institutional venture on translations, so that those readers who are not born in a given language may become readers of translated texts. The loss is far greater if we must ignore what we cannot read in the original language. A whole world disappears by doing so. And, curiously enough, the worlds that disappear are always those considered “peripheral worlds”: they translate from literatures of the center, but are much more seldom translated into those said literatures and languages. This is a vital point if we want to take into consideration how literatures written, for instance, in Portuguese, from Europe, South America, Africa, and even Asia, may not only enter into a dialogue between themselves, but also with other literatures that use different languages to express themselves.

Comparative world literature still has another productive consequence in regards to historical scope. We live in an era of enhanced presentism, where even something that has been written in the preceding century is actually considered (wrongly, in my view) as something that does not correspond to present standards and may therefore be blissfully ignored. This situation is still more patent when the time lapse between our present moment and its considerations and past moments and their characteristics grows. In literary studies, we have been tending towards a narrower presentism, and this is what Walter Benjamin considered, rightly so, as an “impoverishment of experience.” Comparative world literature may act as a countermeasure to such an impoverishment, making us aware of differences not only through geography, but also through time and history.

JFLC: In a 2014 interview, you proposed that comparative literature favors a “negotiation between

several items of the literary experience—the national literary experience, the non-national, as well as the negotiation among several instances” (Mariano and Cabral).⁷ Could you expand on this definition?

Buescu: I previously talked about translation, both from a theoretical perspective and from a very practical one. Comparative world literature may make us, readers and critics, aware of the immense richness that lies beyond the limits of the small world that we are able to access by reading in the original language. This is even more crucial if we take into consideration the diversity of geographical and historical inscription of different literatures that share the same language, like those written in Portuguese, in its different varieties. Of course, looking at them, and looking at their provenance, in Europe, South America, East and West Africa, and Asia, we may take the leaps that make the different continents and regions somehow come together, through the common use of a common language. This is of course vital, and the richness here comes from the fact that one language is a definite way of erasing the limits (and limitations) of national boundaries. That is the beauty of all comparative literature, by the way. Let us take just one example: by comparing the 16th-century epic poem by the Portuguese national poet Luís de Camões, *The Lusiads*, with the 20th-century novel by the Angolan Pepetela, *Mayombe*, we are definitely able to understand how the epic genre transforms itself into a novel about the revolt and the fight against colonialism. Not only different historical moments coalesce in this diversity, but also geographically, culturally, and politically both literary works take a stand in the history of both Portugal and Angola. And one thing is certain: the ability to reread the 16th-century epic against the background of the 20th-century novel makes us interpret it in a different way, not because it erases past interpretations, but because it adds to these interpretations new insights and new understanding.

Comparative literature does negotiate between the national and the non-national. But comparative world literature highlights the visibility of other components, such as regional clusters, for instance. We may look at Brazilian literature, or a Brazilian literary work, and interpret it in the context of a Portuguese-speaking context. But we can also look at the same literary work, simultaneously or not, in a regional context, and frame it against (and with) other literary works written in a different language, for instance Spanish, on the South-American continent. Both descriptions and both interpretations will certainly have a hermeneutical validity, and by understanding that through comparative literature we are not limited by national boundaries, and may add other kinds of relations, either through a common language (as in the first example) or through a regional inscription (as in the second), we are certainly aware of how these leaps are a fundamental tool for further interpretations.

But other instances come into the picture, other than language and geography. Through comparative world literature, and through translations, we are also able to perceive and appreciate unexpected links that do not come necessarily from commonalities, but from unforeseen coincidences. What has moved the great Portuguese poet Camilo Pessanha to translate, in the early

20th century, 8 Chinese elegies from the Ming dynasty, and make them resonate ever so intensely in his own poetry? The coincidence between Portuguese and Chinese poetry, between different languages, so apart from one another, between historical and cultural times (14th to 17th centuries, on the one hand, and the 20th century, on the other), and between different literary traditions (Classic Chinese poetry and Modernist poetry) only underlines how relations may surprisingly come from such huge forms of distance. And, therefore, how different cultural, literary, and historical worlds may after all coalesce.

Comparative literature is a vital way to understand how relations are not necessarily made from similarities, but also come from dissimilarities. This awareness enhances the world diversity, on the one hand, as well as the human ability to negotiate differences and seeming incompatibilities.

Interviewed by João Cezar de Castro Rocha

Notes

1. See cecomp.letras.ulisboa.pt/events-detail.php?p=491.
2. On that topic, see Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Inocência Mata, editors, *Literaturamundo comparada: perspectivas em português: Mundo em português*. Tinta da China, 2017.
3. See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.
4. On this important notion, see Helena Carvalhão Buescu, *Experiência do Incomum e Boa Vizinhaça. Literatura Comparada e Literatura-Mundo*. Porto Editora, 2013.
5. “Created by the University of Évora in 1997, the annual Vergílio Ferreira Award aims at distinguishing the literary narrative and/or essay work of a relevant Portuguese language author. This prize is awarded on 1 March, which marks the anniversary of the death of its patron and author of ‘Aparição.’” See www.uevora.pt/en/UEvora-experience/Merit/premio-vergilio-ferreira.
6. On this theoretical issue, see Helena Carvalhão Buescu, *Grande Angular: Comparatismo e práticas de comparação*. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2001.
7. In the original: “Eu penso que a Literatura Comparada hoje oferece justamente um campo fecundíssimo de negociação sempre renovada: negociação entre vários itens da experiência literária – a experiência literária nacional, o não-nacional, tanto a negociação entre as instâncias.”

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