

Thought in Motion: Helena Buescu's *The Experience of the Uncommon and Good Neighborhood: Comparative Literature and World Literature*

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Abstract: An analysis of Helena Buescu's book *The Experience of the Uncommon and Good Neighborhood: Comparative Literature and World Literature*, published in Portuguese by Porto Editora, is undertaken as the best way of introducing her work to an international readership. A pride of place is given to the broadening of the concept of world literature as well as to the importance of translation.

Keywords: Helena Buescu, world literature, comparative literature, concept of literary canon, translation

CLC: I1 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2023)01-0038-05

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202301004

An analysis of Helena Buescu's book *The Experience of the Uncommon and Good Neighborhood: Comparative Literature and World Literature*, published in Portuguese by Porto Editora, is perhaps the best way of introducing her work to an international readership, considering its encapsulation of how her thinking evolved over time and how her theoretical interests were adapted to new debates.¹

In the foreword, mostly devoted to recognizing her indebtedness to colleagues and friends, Buescu describes the content of the book as "questions about literature that have most engrossed [her] over the past few years" (7). The cursory nature of the remark belies the fact that such questions are indeed a *fil rouge* (an expression the author herself is fond of using) of her entire body of work; namely, the issues of cultural memory, the writerly specificities of the literary text, and the very notion of comparativism. These can be found across the essays reunited in the book, where present concerns are tackled through a revisitation of the past.

The book is divided in three parts. The first is entirely devoted to one essay: "On Enthusiasm: Humanities, Comparative Literature." The second part collects four essays: "Observing in

Portuguese”; “Inventing Reading: The World Literature Project in Portuguese”; “A Poem in the World: Herberto Helder, Camilo Pessanha, Manuel Gusmão”; and “The Republic of Letters and the World Republic of Letters.” The final part mirrors the first in consisting of a single essay: “Literature, Canon, and Teaching.”

The first essay deals with contribution comparative literature can make towards the crisis in the humanities, specifically in how it establishes a relationship with the past in terms of repetition, sedimentation, and imaginary choice. The beginning for her argument is an interview given by Seamus Heaney to the Portuguese newspaper *Público* where the Irish poet describes the goal of all arts as repairing what is damaged. She then draws a comparison with a famous line by 19th-century Portuguese poet Cesário Verde, expressing the anguish and impossibility of seeking to perfect all things. This introduces the topic of cultural memory and how it is refashioned through the activity of literature teaching, initially by repeating and preserving a textual heritage.

The figure of the teacher, Buescu argues, includes a “personal engagement” that must conjugate “affection and knowledge” that facilitates the transformation of literature into lived experience (11). This interest in education, not as a system but as an activity, resurfaces with greater visibility in the final essay of the book, and also points to Buescu’s characteristic mode of agile theorizing, where contemplation is inherently active. The following section of the essay, however, moves back to the necessity of a “philological consciousness” (13) in recovering the sedimented knowledge that lays at the foundation of this process of continuously bringing the past to the present, evoking Benjamin’s angle of history as an apt tutelary icon.

The final section brings these considerations to a direct treatment of comparative literature’s particular role in the humanities, for the pendular movement that can be detected in the first two sections, between past and present, is at the heart of Buescu’s conception of the discipline. Seizing on *New Literary History*’s 2005 issue devoted to the crisis in humanistic subjects, she highlights in the articles published therein a convergence on the topic of the slowness of knowledge—yet another declination of the flow of time—which she understands as something that goes beyond “objects chosen as nodal points around which knowledge is built” (17). This is the moment upon which the “deformative” character, or the imaginary choice, of comparative literature taking a special role, for the radical openness of the discipline, founded upon a sprightly critical movement between texts, strikes the vein of motion that can be found amidst a form of knowledge that relies on the deep structure of time.

The middle section brings together texts that are more directly concerned with world literature, indeed the field wherein Buescu has been working most visibly in the past decade and a half. The first piece of this group, “Observing in Portuguese,” is based on a lecture given in the prestigious Next Future program of the Gulbenkian Foundation in 2010, which aimed at conceptualizing relationships between past, present, and future in criticism and arts. This speech was almost wholly responsible for introducing world literature as an academic discipline in Portugal to wider audiences, and it laid the groundwork for hosting Harvard’s Institute for World Literature at the University of Lisbon in 2015, a seminal event entrenching the field in the country. This essay

testifies to Buescu's ability to engage non-specialists, but it is also evidence of the development of some of the most important ideas about the tension between national, language-centered, and world literature. As she recognizes, the Portuguese case has certain specificities that require critical attention, namely a colonial dimension that is not entirely described by perspectives based on other European experiences. In a global culture where English operates as disingenuously neutral *lingua franca*, this lecture evokes the polemic sparked by the 2007 manifesto published in *Le Monde des livres*, signed by a plethora of French-language authors, criticizing a lack of awareness of knowledge produced outside of the sphere of dominant languages. Buescu transposes this point to the Portuguese-language space. It is also in this lecture that she gives wider currency to her translation of the discipline's name into Portuguese, *literatura-mundo*, a coinage that establishes closer parallels with French rather than Anglophone discussions.

This and other concerns are further developed in the second essay in this section, "Inventing Reading: The World Literature Project in Portuguese," laying the theoretical underpinning of the research project—Comparative World Literature in Portuguese—Buescu leads to the present day. Signaling the prominence for the field of world literature of Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Emily Apter, among others, Buescu calls our attention to a more diffuse 20th-century lineage, referencing critics such as Richard Moulton, René Étiemble, Claudio Guillén, or Sarah Lawall as important for the gestation of current understanding of the term. Buescu establishes the need for localized forms of world literature, or, indeed, the fact that every attempt at transcending national traditions into a broader cosmopolitan perspective must address the locality from whence it emerges.

The main goal of the above-mentioned project was putting together an anthology of literary texts, comprising six 700-page volumes divided in three pairs. The first gathered literary texts written in Portuguese; the second, European literatures, with the exception of Portuguese literature; and, finally, literary texts from the wider world. It is also at this stage that Buescu seizes on Aby Warburg's "law of good neighbors," the famous organizing principle of his library, in order to describe the guiding rules of the texts brought together in the anthology (qtd. in Gombrich).

At this juncture it is inevitable to add a personal note: after the publication of this essay, I had the privilege of joining Buescu's project in 2016, helping her in accomplishing the task of collecting, translating, and editing the anthology, whose last volumes were published in 2020. Therefore, I can provide an assessment on how this theoretical grounding held up to its implementation. Furthermore, such a testimony is in keeping with the material aspect of Warburg's principle, the physical element at the root of its process of knowledge creation and transmission. This was something I saw up close that was put in practice in the form of discussions on the inclusion and exclusion of texts, the crafting of thematic clusters, the painful but inevitable need for cuts as we reached character limits.

Buescu's plan, as laid out in the chapter under analysis, included the necessary methodological safeguards to adapt to unforeseen theoretical and practical problems as they appeared, such as a shift from theme-centered categorization to chronological structure in the final stages of the

anthology, as we moved to the ambitious undertaking of collecting and translating texts from China, India, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world. This led to new challenges, such as a long lack of linguistic expertise in Portugal, as well as the fact that we were dealing with an understanding of the literary text that presents crucial differences in comparison with European perspectives. The “good neighbor” had to give way to more traditional theoretical frameworks, but its empirical spirit survived as a form of praxis-driven knowledge production in the field of World Literature.

The following essay is a case study of Buescu’s approach to world literature, without being presented as such. A study in three Portuguese poets reaffirms the importance of the comparative method in World Literature. Herberto Helder emerges as the most important of the trio, since Buescu seizes the term “happy mistake,” used by Helder to describe his practice of translation as rewriting that invigorates the target language, in his case, Portuguese. This occurs through the incorporation of elements brought over from source texts belonging to different understandings of poetry. This expression becomes a lodestone of Buescu’s writings over the past ten years, together with Warburg’s “good neighbor,” and, once again, we can observe a form of dynamic thought, a resistance to rigid models or classifications. It is also noteworthy that Buescu takes concepts from Warburg and Helder that describe practices, respectively library management, and translation. While both are entirely part of humanistic conventions and can themselves be subjected to theoretical thought, they irreducibly still are very much praxis. Dynamism, motion, and activity are once again at the heart of her writing. Dynamism, motion and activity are once again at the heart of her writing.

The other two poets discussed are Buescu’s longstanding interests, albeit for different reasons: Camilo Pessanha, a 19th-century symbolist; and Manuel Gusmão, a contemporary author who was a professor at the University of Lisbon and Buescu’s teacher and friend. Regarding Pessanha, she takes up one of his most famous sonnets “Who Polluted, Who Tore My Linen Sheets,” fittingly reading it as a successful attempt at capturing the impossibility of seizing the past in a perfect manner, in the vein of Verde and Heaney as we saw before. In 2018 Buescu prefaced the first translation of Pessanha’s most important book, *Clepsydra*, which is a recommended reading material for those who are interested in the canonical Portuguese poet. As to Gusmão, the selected texts also take up on Verde’s legacy, further cementing his place in Buescu’s constellation of poetic references.

The fourth and final essay of the middle part of the book revisits Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*, which has already been mentioned in previous essays but takes the central place here. Readers may be familiar with the crux of the argument, since it is a re-elaboration of the author’s chapter in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, aiming at a Portuguese audience. As in the Gulbenkian lecture, Buescu revisits her roots as a specialist in French literature, suggesting that Casanova’s proposal, by seeing any form of cosmopolitan readership as the product of a competitive struggle for cultural primacy, bypasses other forms of cosmopolitanism that emerge from alternative models, especially those conceived as forms of resistance and critique of such

competitiveness. Taking on insights from Mads Rosendhal Thomsen and Angel Rama, Buescu argues for a more nuanced notion of world literary systems, taking into account variable centers of production and canonization, as well as differing strategies in the reception and circulation of texts that reflect dissimilar cultural contexts.

The final chapter of the book touches on two concerns that are central to her career: the concept of the canon and the activity of teaching. While the former is central to debates in world literature and to the anthologizing act, the latter, as we have seen, is integral to Buescu's research, not only as an "output," as modern administrative parlance would put it, but as an inseparable element of (re)producing knowledge in the context of the university. In this text originally published in 2011, this interest takes on a wider scope as it addresses pre-university education. Buescu was responsible for the restructuring of the syllabus for the Portuguese Language curriculum approved and monitored by the Portuguese Education Ministry in 2014. This is an area of her activity that may have little immediate international resonance, but an immense national impact, since it provides an underpinning for generations of young Portuguese students and their experience of the literary text. Befitting the tone of the book, this chapter is both an indication of the research leading up to that civic undertaking, mostly in terms of reassessing national literary history and its institutionalization through school curricula, as well as an attempt to bring discussions and concepts from the spheres of comparative and world literature to that goal.

I have left for my final words a key concept in the title of the book, in the hope that an analysis of the essays would be more illuminating of its implications than a direct approach: the experience of the uncommon. From the opening pages to its conclusion, this is a unifying thread that places Buescu in the intellectual lineage where she belongs: Auerbach, Said, Steiner, and Gumbrecht. It can be summarized as a description of a mode of reading, and one at which the practice of comparativism is especially adept: the experience of the uncommon is the place of joy in reading literature.

Note

1. The book was originally published in Portuguese. This translation and all others that may appear in the present text are my own.

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