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## Contributions of World Literatures in Portuguese to the Academic Field

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**Abstract:** As one considers the concept of comparative world literature, one may ponder on how widening the perspective from an all-English area of studies to other languages promotes different worldviews and descriptions of the status quo. In this article, we take into consideration the perspective of literature written in Portuguese, be it European, Brazilian, African or even Asian, in order to demonstrate how rich such other points of view are for the discipline. We also engage the concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), proposed by Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, as a central tool to consider cosmopolitanism and the dialogue between different literatures.

**Keywords:** comparative world literature, literatures in Portuguese, defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), textualism

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This paper stems from the awareness that current debates on world literature (or comparative world literature, as I choose to term it, I think more accurately) leave us with a disconcerted description of what this discipline considers as “the world” to be viewed. It is my belief that it is possible to consider “the world” as much more than just “the world in English” that we usually see discussed—and I personally consider that widening it will correspond to a richer and fuller picture of what we look at as world literature.

This is by no means a novel idea within criticism, not even for literature itself. A perfect example of how literature is aware of the ability to recast itself in a more complex worldview is to be found in several writers, of many different epochs. I will limit myself, to begin with, to pointing out a few examples coming from literatures written in Portuguese, to highlight this topic.

As a matter of fact, the recasting of national literature and history from a viewpoint that takes into consideration other viewpoints may be found in one of the most important Portuguese novelists, Gonçalo M. Tavares, whose counter-epic *A Voyage to India* is a cunning rewriting of the

canonical Camões's epic *The Lusiads* (1572). Tavares effectively draws from different traditions of the epic tradition, including the *Mahabharata* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, thus incorporating in his text both non-Western sources and Modernist practices of problematizing the past by bringing it to the present. The main character, Bloom, travels from Lisbon to India, in a parody of Western colonial narratives of searches for material wealth or spiritual enlightenment in a half-mythical Orient. Concerning the book's relation to *The Lusiads* specifically, Camões's fiction of the "Island of Love" in the poem's tenth and final canto is of particular importance. Camões's mythical island, where all desires can be fulfilled, is part of the tradition of utopian discourse (Buescu, "Utopia"); Tavares, on the other hand, has a scene set in a brothel outside Paris towards the end of *A Voyage to India*, which builds a counter-utopia in which the fundamental optimism of Renaissance humanism is turned into a disenchanting postmodern worldview. The only saving grace may be the copy of the *Mahabharata* that Bloom brings back from his journey to India, as well as the rich intertextualities that testify to literal and purely literary circulations of texts that allow the present to confront the past, including its colonial aspects and their consequences. This line of writing in Portuguese literature has had a more evident strand concerned with the prolonged colonial history of Portugal in Africa: the works of Maria Velho da Costa, António Lobo Antunes, and, more recently, Dulce Maria Cardoso's *O Retorno* and *Eliete: A Vida Normal* testify to it.

Exploring other dimensions of East-West relations, with an eye to nuance in what the terms may entail, the works of the Brazilian writers Milton Hatoum or Raduan Nassar and, more recently, Tatiana Salem Levy engage with Arab and Jewish heritages and that country's history, acknowledging the mediation of Europe as a historical colonial power. As to the possibilities that emerge from engaging critically with the canonicity of *The Lusiads*—a work itself quite singular in its criticism of empire—we can find strong displays of this line of productive rereading in the work of Pepetela, specifically the novel *Mayombe*, an account of the Angolan independence war, and his short stories enmeshing Portuguese literary heritage with African folk tales and religious traditions, which we can also find in Mozambican writer Mia Couto. So, in this more than brief overview, we find the world coming into Portuguese language and literatures written in Portuguese, in a truly cosmopolitan way. We might also mention other striking examples, such as the Mozambican novelist João Paulo Borges Coelho, to highlight the fact that the worlds written in Portuguese have actually met, in different but visible ways, the world at large.

Upon consideration of such examples, I would like to recall two central notions that, to my view, may never be far from our reflections about comparative world literature: on the one hand, the notion of *scale*, as proposed by Nirvana Tanoukhi in its consequences for conceptualizing world literature; and on the other the notion of *viewpoint*, by no means in itself a new notion, whose consequences for our consideration should be underlined. Both notions have clear epistemological consequences, as they underline differences between different source and target languages, in the context of our inquiries of world literature and, obviously, translation.

From all this there is one first conclusion to be drawn, at this moment: comparative world literature in English does not present the same characteristics and does not draw the same world

picture as comparative world literature in Portuguese—and there is no reason to argue that this should not be so, or that a single description of world literature must, or even should, be achieved.

On the contrary: the case of the world picture coming out of the consideration of a Portuguese-language vantage point is indeed quite different—and the same applies to the French, Spanish, Dutch, or even German languages. One further point to be taken into account here is that it might seem that we are dealing only with post-colonial entities, and therefore with European languages as they spread outside Europe. Of course, the post-imperial condition shapes a great number of previously colonial and colonizer countries. But we should not be blind to the fact that this also applies, and in a truly decisive way, to languages coming from other parts of the world, e.g. Putonghua (Mandarin), Cantonese, or a great number of Indian languages. We take our example, therefore, from a Portuguese-speaking description of what might be a different kind of comparative world literature, knowing that this is much more than just saying it is an alternative description.

Outside of Portugal, Portuguese is the official language in a number of countries and/or regions spread throughout almost every continent: Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe, Guinée-Bissau), America (Brazil), and Asia (Goa in India, Macao in China, East-Timor). There are also significant Portuguese-speaking migrant communities in many other countries. Around 270 million people have Portuguese as their mother tongue (it is the 8th most spoken language in the world). According to estimates by UNESCO, Portuguese and Spanish are the fastest-growing European languages after English, and Portuguese shows the highest potential for growth as an international language in South America and southern Africa. For these reasons, the study of world literature from a Portuguese-speaking perspective also brings new and broader public attention to this area of studies and presents to these wide public numerous texts that have never been translated into Portuguese before. Therefore, the study of comparative world literature from a Portuguese-speaking perspective also and primarily involves doing so *in* Portuguese, hence recognizing the array of texts written in Portuguese which stem from very different national and regional literatures and literary systems around the globe, as I have previously shown, and being able to combine them with the collection of texts that were and are translated into Portuguese. This is a first instance by which we may understand how we are indeed able to “read otherwise”: a perspective that, in the project I currently coordinate at the University of Lisbon, stems from Portugal, but also takes into consideration, as it should, the Portuguese language around the globe, and gives birth to dramatically different descriptions of comparative world literature than the one we are used to working with—especially an American one, and in English.

The use of a common language (although diverse and rich in its regional manifestations) points to the fact that the expansion and the geographical roots of these different literatures in Portuguese have to be taken into account when one looks historically to how a non-English world becomes apparent in a worldview. Furthermore, the recognition of a post-colonial and of a post-imperial debate also highlights how literatures in Portuguese may contribute decisively to a non-Eurocentric view of Europe, as I have previously intimated. The European colonial and imperial

past becomes part of Europe's present, and the historical divide between center (the colonial capital) and peripheries (the colonies) is rearranged in a new way, thereby producing a different view of Europe: a world-view of Europe. This is a crucial point to be made: we do have to relativize the idea that Europe is only seen through the lens of European thought or history—that is simply not true, and it is also an impoverished way to look at the world and its regions. A world-view of Europe does present us scholars with a significant picture of how history has evolved, and how “Europe” has never solely been about “Europe.”

Still another important characteristic to consider in this context is how comparative world literature, considered from a post-colonial and post-imperial perspective, allows us to understand how languages in Europe were always one of the factors cosmopolitanism rested upon, as argued by Mads Rosendahl Thomsen. In fact, a cosmopolitan view of Europe (but also other world regions) should not depend exclusively on touristic traveling or enlightened thinking—it must also struggle with historical, political, and cultural factors, such as colonial endeavors, the migration of European languages to other continents, travel literature in its various shapes, or the movements of exile and migration, always central to the construction of Europe and its history.

Hence, the contribution of literatures in Portuguese to the current debates on world literature must be considered multiple: on the one hand, it makes clear that the scope of the debates must indeed be broader than just those that occur in English; on the other hand, it maps out the extension and geopolitical breadth of such linguistic and cultural spaces, therefore giving way to different objects of reflection, of different national and regional scopes (Portuguese, Brazilian, Angolan, Mozambican, Cape Verdean, East Timorese, and so on and so forth); and, last but not least, all this rebounds on Europe, which in the case of Portuguese has been the geo-historical center from which it has stemmed, therefore combining both European and non-European roots and developments. This is to my view a significant contribution to how world literature may be currently viewed: it implies a change of perspective that, in my opinion, enriches the discussion, which until now has been too much connected to the American debates and (perhaps especially) institutional positions in the academe, leaving aside the fact that a non-American and a non-English perspective on world literature may in fact open new and distinctive outlooks on the question. The case of literatures written in Portuguese, worldwide, recasts the traditional Herderian description of one language, one literature, one nation, much as what happens with English (or other European languages, for that matter). This realization helps us understand just how much a comparatist approach to world literature may in fact contribute to a more complex and richer view of (more than) national literatures.

The case of literatures in Portuguese, as specific points of entry into world literature, manifest how the Herderian triad may be rewritten historically, geographically, and politically. This is all the more significant as we remember that one of the recurrent criticisms of world literature is based on a supposed bracketing of the historical fabric and context of literary phenomena, as well as of its endangering the textualist approach. Therefore, it is not only circulation which is at stake when we look deeper into comparative world literature. Much theoretical reflection has taken

place in the last decades, and it seems impossible that the current practice of world literature could do away with both theory and history, as specific grounds of its epistemological awareness, as well as textualism and close reading, in the consideration of literary practice.

I would further like to argue that, when we take this view, the current debates around world literature also become debates about modes of reading, different modes of reading. That is, the essential item at stake is not the *nature* of a supposedly different discipline, but the way it promotes and invites different ways to activate what we do with texts: reading them. David Damrosch already defined world literature as a “mode of reading” in his seminal book, *What Is World Literature?*—a mode of reading that he rightly connected with translation and, therefore, with the texts’ ability to survive (and change) outside their original system of production. The project I currently coordinate at the Centre of Comparative Studies, at the University of Lisbon, stems from a similar conviction, adding perhaps a stronger determination in trying to characterize such reading not just as another instance of what is usually being done but as a challenge to read in a *different way*.

It is an *invention of reading* that may be said to have two main characteristics: i) a comparative approach; and ii) a constitutive awareness of what the Russian Formalist Shklovsky termed “defamiliarization” (*ostranenie*). The ability to compare sets of different, even dissimilar texts, from literary systems that do not necessarily belong to the same worldview, challenges our established modes of reading. It makes us try to *read otherwise*, and therefore to invent ways of approaching and reading texts that try to respond to strangeness, to defamiliarization, and to what *does not* belong to the same family to begin with. We have to be able to invent new forms of reading, and to accept that these new forms of reading change the nature of the texts that we are approaching, enabling us to capture what I sometimes like to refer to as their *wrongness*: new modes of reading affect the texts in unpredictable ways, as they deal with what remains unresolved in their interpretation.

Estrangement allows one to develop the ability to compare different, even dissimilar, texts from literary systems which may not even subscribe to the same worldview or cultural/historical contexts, challenging our established reading modes. It makes us attempt new ways of reading and, as such, invent new ways of approaching and reading texts that try to respond to strangeness, defamiliarization, and that which does not belong in the same family, to begin with.

Highlighting these concepts stresses an awareness that comparative readings generally attempt to establish comparisons based on similarities and conformities—but they also make the reader practice a different sort of reading, especially in tune with the elements in a text which seem to place it apart from others.

As readers, we must be watchful for “things that don’t work” (or that did not work) in a given context—and in the comparison between different texts. Only great texts, and truly hermeneutical challenges, are capable of surprising the reader. In contrast, books and texts that fully correspond to our initial expectations, fulfilling them in the most “exact” way, are generally minutely “correct”—and always forgotten.

We must, therefore, approach texts which, through their relationship with other dissimilar texts, showcase their nonconformity and question our established reading practices. What we used to find in similarities we must now be ready to accept as dissimilarities, and still be able to establish connections while recognizing their potential mobility.

This is an experience we can relate to what Aby Warburg called “the law of the good neighbour” in the constant reinvention of his library (Buescu, *Experiência*): something which is never complete and which offers challenging new perspectives each time we move a book from one shelf to another.

Recognizing that there are readings which produce and promote “things which didn’t work” in a given text relates to what the Portuguese poet Herberto Helder called “happy mistakes” when describing the work he did with his translations/versions/reproductions of foreign poetry into Portuguese. We can, of course, connect this to the theory of misreading developed by Harold Bloom, although, in Helder’s view, this is a misreading or mistake which does not limit itself to voluntary dialogue (and conflict) between two poets or two textual realities. Appropriately, we can describe it as an idea of misencounters, elements which stand out (or are made to stand out) as dissonances in the bodies of texts. It is not surprising, therefore, to understand why this hermeneutic process is at the center of some of the current debates around comparative world literature.

To sum up, I consider that one always has to view how the concept of world literature proposes a cosmopolitan reading that has to have consequences for literatures that are connected through different uses of a common language, such as those written in Portuguese. It is what I have called a “prismatic view” (Buescu, *Experiência*) of literature, which underlines the fact that the national paradigm is both a historical reality one has to account for, and a condition that entails dialogue and a cosmopolitan outlook, geographically as well as historically.

Some of the implications of such a reflection may be seen in the following terms and questions:

Do we read world literatures differently if coming from a semi-periphery instead of the center of the literary system (we are reminded of Pascale Casanova)?

Do we read it differently if we approach it from a language different from standard globalized English?

Do post-colonial and post-imperial Europe and the world in general map different dynamics of the literary world(s)?

These are some of the implications of such reflections: they correspond to the idea that being aware of literary phenomena that do not share immediate or past conformities is in itself one of the most interesting questions raised by world literature.

To read *otherwise*, as in the understanding of what kind of dissonances are at work in a given set of texts; or in the conjunction of discordant traditions; or in the recognition of a complex

dynamics of cosmopolitanism that highlights its critical standpoint—therefore becomes a common response to a common problem. It is quite clear, though, that this common response may be given through quite different configurations, and this is perhaps something that all comparatists and world literature critics must keep in full sight.

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