

**COMPARING LITERATURES: ASPECTS, METHOD, AND ORIENTATION EDITED  
BY FIONA MCINTOSH-VARJABÉDIAN AND ALISON BOULANGER**

*Comparing Literatures: Aspects, Method, and Orientation*, Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian, Alison Boulanger (eds.), Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2022. Paperback: £27. ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1428-3

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In her introduction to *Comparing Literatures*, Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian reminds us that the phenomenon of globalisation can be traced throughout literary history. This edited volume of essays addresses how we can profit from the richness of global, comparative approaches to literary studies within the context of institutions that increasingly undervalue humanities departments. McIntosh-Varjabédian identifies in Goethe's encounter with 'the universal in national poetry' (10) a potential method to deal with the enduring challenges of an increasingly globalised society. She hovers over some of these provocative questions before introducing an edited volume of essays brought together by the different ways they engage in a 'lively and fruitful [...] power-struggle' (16).

The anthology is divided into three parts, the first of which addresses 'Translation as Mediation between Languages and Literatures'. Lieven D'hulst's opening essay takes the cue from the term 'mediation' to explore the 'comparisons, connections, networks, and systems' (37) that structure, but are often absent from, translation studies. For D'hulst, translation is an exchange of knowledge, not just language, and his essay is animated by the urgency to highlight how understudied the historical 'knowledge mediators' (31) of interlingual experiences are. He examines how technological methods such as statistics and bibliometrics might reconstruct these exchanges, providing new approaches and methods with which to study the history of translation. D'hulst also asks us to acknowledge the idiosyncratic survival of local knowledges that have not been subsumed or effaced by the hegemonic structures that have shaped the history of translation. His work is complemented by Joseph Pivato's essay, which sees Canada's multilingualism as a model for revitalising Comparative Literature departments that are currently disappearing. Pivato examines a series of recently published anthologies of texts for Comparative Literary studies to illuminate how the pressure of a monolingual, Eurocentric market shapes their content. He attributes the disappearance of Comparative Literature departments to the decreasing scope that the discipline has taken, as the examined anthologies concede to 'American points of view' (48). Alongside the lack of richness in texts studied in translation, this English-language monopoly in Comparative Literature departments makes them expendable. As a remedy, Pivato promotes the 'Canadian approach' to comparative literature—'supporting the study of different languages' (56)—to revitalise every avenue of the practice.

Part Two of the volume is titled 'Making a Difference in Language, Literature and Literary Theory'. The first essay is Alison Boulanger's study of 'Nabokov's Languages', which sees in *Pale Fire* (1962) 'a comparatist's paradise' (72). She undertakes a reading of the poem 'Pale Fire' through the fictional language Zemblan and the 'unusual web of languages' (62) it is generated from. The first part of the essay is a prismatic, multilingual close reading of the poem that activates the richness of Nabokov's design while the second part shifts focus to the intertextual (and inevitably intercultural) roots of the work. She analyses how the circulation and dissemination of literature that links 'old and new' also intermingles 'languages and cultures, playing an instrumental part in their development' (68). The intricacy of her analysis enacts Nabokov's own project: to make the reader 'inhabit his or her own language like a foreigner' (71).

Tamar Barbakadze reads Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf against each other to explore the various ways their prose registers the misuse of language that occurred during World War I. She implicitly engages with comparative literary analysis rather than making this the subject of her essay, thus exemplifying the diverse approaches to critical studies in this collection. In Woolf's prose, war is preserved *in* the words themselves; for Proust, the memory of war hangs pendulous over language to demonstrate the multiple, irreversible ways the war changed quotidian life. Barbakadze traces the ways in which language was co-opted by ideological causes, exploring what happens during the process we might too easily and unthinkingly gloss as Orwellian. Neither Proust nor Woolf look for a way to translate the immediacy of war into a linguistic experience. Instead, their language is 'in tune with [war's] destructive scale' (86).

The final essay in the section is Olga Szmidszt's analysis of the role of evaluation in literary criticism, which, rather simply but boldly, sees the disappearance of judgement from criticism as detrimental to critical practice. She uses a scene from the film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) by the Spanish director Luis Buñuel to read the 'inherited problems' in literary criticism, such as its being burdened by 'rituals', 'protocols', and an aversion to offering 'judgement or evaluation' (90). Like Boulanger's defamiliarisation of language, Szmidszt defamiliarises the 'default' practices literary critics revert to. To do so, she undertakes a bilingual analysis of literary critical terminology in Polish, German, and Russian, to demonstrate how different meanings of the terms have shaped each tradition's approach to the role of the critic. She then takes us through a history of the place of evaluation in literary studies, its intersection with economics (a recurring and refreshing feature of the volume), and why she believes the critic is forced to withdraw from judgement. Szmidszt threads together the fallacy of a lost golden age of literary studies and the questions raised by 'professorisation' to ultimately encourage critics to take 'a risk' (99). She calls for a new way to evaluate world literature as a global literary project as the first step to overcome the crisis of contemporary criticism. Embracing this spirit, Szmidszt offers one of the most immediate, engaging, and refreshing analyses of literary criticism in this volume.

Oscillating between the epistemological issues faced by literature departments, to close scrutiny of texts across different languages and media, Sandro Jung opens the final section—'Mediating between Images and Wor(l)ds'—with his essay on 'The Transnational Reach and Interpretation-Shaping Power of Book Illustrations and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1720'. His analysis illuminates how images transmit their own form of knowledge that is intertwined with, but ultimately separate from, the text. He foregrounds the hybrid material identity of the codex to trace the different ways it generates meaning through image and composition. To do so, Jung follows the illustrations through their many transformations: from global printing-houses to global editions that interact with one another. Publication becomes less of a discrete, self-contained occasion, but rather a process that interacts with global readers, printers, markets, and technologies. Jobst Welge also returns to the concept of knowledge transmission with which D'hulst opened the volume but examines it within the context of 'European Adventure Fiction of the Amazon'. His analysis is premised on the fact that the Amazon is culturally constructed by various external perspectives and thus necessitates a comparative approach. By comparing Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, Welge reads global literary transmission intratextually to reflect on the necessity of comparative literature as a critical practice.

The closing essay is by Orsolya Milián, who also combines multimedia and translation studies for an analysis of 'Brueghel in Ekphrastic poetry'. She traces how the Dutch painter has permeated American and German literary culture by comparing how William Carlos Williams and Gisbert Kranz respond to, and therefore shape, Brueghel's painting through their poetry. By reading an 'inter art connection' (150) across languages and

media, like Szmidt, Milián reminds us that translation is more than the exchange of vocabulary between languages. It is a rich ‘remediation’ (159) that is laden with culture and history. The obstacles, possibilities, and rewards of comparative and global literature lie close to the surface of this analysis of ekphrases.

This collection packs an ambitious variety of topics into a slim volume. It rewards those looking to introduce themselves to the discipline of Comparative Literature by providing a broad overview of possible avenues of thought that are rich in detail, if not a little scattered in their subject matter. Its most engaging feature is found in the self-reflexive analyses of literary criticism that are interspersed among more ‘traditional’ readings of multilingual texts and authors. This focus on method reminds readers and critics alike that the survival of the discipline is at stake in how they conceptualise their practice.