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Questions in Literary Theory: Jean Bessière's Contribution to Comparatism

Theory and action may not ultimately be dissociated, because man does not think of himself, nor does he think at all, other than through things and through people.

Jean Bessière, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 1999

The words in epigraph are an example of an essential characteristic of Jean Bessière's way of thinking, that of giving a central role to theory and to a type of thought which, in its development and in its practice, links Philosophy to Literature. It is therefore in the perspective of examining certain theoretical concepts applied to comparatist praxis that I wish to present his contribution to the understanding of Latin American diversity, which is the source for comparatism as it is practiced in this region.

In an article published in *Litterature comparée. Théorie et pratique* (1998)¹, (edited by Andre Lorant and Jean Bessière and based on the Acts of the International Colloquium held at the University of Paris XII - Val de Marne in 1993), I had the chance to reflect upon the "conceptual and methodological changes" in Comparative Literature in the second half of the century which has just ended, and to underline the contribution of theoretical discourse to traditional textual analysis, which was examined with regards to the appropriations on which its development feeds, or with regards to the borrowings which shape it.

I attempted on this occasion to highlight the convergence and the complementarity of literary theory and comparative studies, such as they are described in those works, published in 1989, which are fundamental with

1 *Op.cit.* Paris, Honore Champion, 1999.

regards to the renewal of our discipline: the *Précis de littérature comparée* (Pierre Brunei and Yves Chevrel), *Théorie littéraire. Perspectives et problèmes* (Marc Angenot, Jean Bessière, Douwe Fokkema and Eva Kushner) and *Littérature comparees* (Yves Chevrel). To these three volumes, which express the convergence with which we will be dealing, we may add the volume *Comparatisme et théorie de la littérature* (Adrian Marino), published in the preceeding year, 1988, as well as the book entitled *Comparative Poetics. An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Earl Miner, 1990), the volume *La littérature générale et comparée* (Daniel-Henri Pageaux), which appeared later, in 1994, plus a series of articles, written by well known comparatists such as Henry H.H. Remak and Gerald Gillespie, and published in specialized academic journals.

Wishing to explain the "meaning of the parallel" between the two forms of thought on Literature, I took a particular look at the conceptual transformations to which the diverse literary disciplines have not been indifferent. Within this framework, Comparative Literature has followed the general trend of theoretical metadiscourse which has characterized literary studies when they have felt the need for a basis which gives them a greater degree of objectivity and more precision in the results of their analyses. Thus, in adopting operative notions provided by diverse literary theories, comparatism has been able to renew its fundamental concepts by rethinking them on a new basis, as we all know. Suffice it to mention the notion of intertextuality, the concept of the horizon of expectations for aspects of literary diffusion and reception, the progress made through theories of translation, etc.

Let us stress the fact that the bringing together of theory and comparatism, which I would like to discuss, may be easily identified in the work of Jean Bessière. From the volume entitled *Dire le littéraire*, published in the series called "Philosophic et langage" at the Pierre Madraga publishing house in Belgium, and which bears the subtitle "theoretical view points," to his most recent work, *La Littérature et sa rhétorique*, published by the Presses Universitaires de France (1999), not to forget *Enigmaticité de la littérature* (1993), the reader may follow, in Bessière's writing, the development of a way of thinking which defines itself as a "philosophical inquiry into language" while making use of diverse elements of literary theory.

Moreover, in "Apories of theory, apory of Literature," the first chapter of *Dire le littéraire*, the author develops an exhaustive demonstration of the specificity of Literature and of its critical particularity. According to him, the

"theoretical presuppositions of contemporary poetics and the loss of the specificity of Literature within the approach to Literature demand that its consequences and interpretation be taken note of (20). This interpretation leads him to underline the fact that "theories approach the apory of Literature through a game of internal reversion. No poetical function may be expressed — and it is through poetical function that Literature explicitly identifies and encloses itself — without an opening towards that which is the veritable centre of Literature: language." For Bessière, Literature is "a strict relativization and an exact historical circumstance, indissociable from the cultural status of 'writing and reading'" (24). For Jean Bessière, "writing and reading are part of the literary fact" (1988, 7), but the status of writing "supposes a deferred reading" becoming thus "decontextualised," in the words of the study he presents in *Littérature et théorie: Intentionnalité, decontextualisation, communication*, of which he is the editor, This means that for him the work must always be considered in relation to the context of its reception. This is what he explains in another study, "Theorie et critique littéraires contemporaines: cultures nationales et theses transnationales. Paradoxes de la pensée de l'universel et du culturel" which complements the aforementioned work and is part of the volume *Fronteiras imaginadas*. When dealing here with the notion of "transfer," he says that "in the case of cultural and national criticism, literary and critical transfer may only be envisaged according to the contextualisation of the Other in a national and cultural context, and in the case of transnational theory, only a decontextualised expose of theory can come into play" (25).

His studies follow the progress of our time, or rather, current questions stimulate him to continually reconsider the central object of his intellectual preoccupations: the literary. In other words, without losing sight of the fundamental question of "the literary" (the term is used in order to avoid the damage of the term "literature") and that of the "discourse about the literary," Bessière examines the facts of post-modernist and post-colonial criticism. He does this by examining the questions of multiculturalism, interbreeding, theoretical transfers in order to comment on "the deadlocks of cultural references and the provisional representation of universality." We can therefore underline the current nature of his criticism, which finds a new source of interest at each step and which, because of its access to other literatures, widens its scope to many fields. J. Bessière's essays, which are rather theoretical in appearance, are always based on the criticism of literary works. Thus, in every study, the reflection focuses on a different book, a new

author. This approach produces a permanent relationship between literary theory and criticism. Besides the interest for "the literary," history and philosophy also play a decisive role in this reflection, by constituting an essential basis from which the thought unfolds.

Indeed, Bessière is aware of a reality which has meaning for all of us: the world-wide situation of so-called literary studies is in a phase of complete transformation resulting from the modifications which have come to universities because of many different kinds of change: economical, linked to the field of communications, to media, to the proliferation of languages and of ethnic groups, to the electronic revolution, to globalization, etc. On the one hand, we must reconsider the very notion of Literature, and on the other hand, we must reflect upon the new forms of teaching and the new fields of research which are open to comparatists. Within this framework, Jean Bessière's critical works make suggestions for both of these tasks.

As a comparatist in Brazil, I can attest to the development and to the institutionalization of our discipline in my country and in neighbouring countries, particularly in Argentina and in Uruguay, and Jean Bessière himself has had the occasion to accompany this process, as President of the AILC/ICLA. To examine the collaboration which he has established with regards to comparatist studies in these three countries is thus of great interest.

In this perspective, at least two fields of inquiry are essential: first of all, we must try to establish which aspects of his work closely concern Latin American literatures. Then we must explain how this contribution helps us to find new bases for defining the types of comparatism that are put into practice in South America. In order to briefly outline some answers to these questions, I will be referring to some of Jean Bessière's writings whose subject is the South American reality or which have been built upon this reality.

The first is an article entitled "Critical Transfers, Incommensurable Theoretics and Appropriation of Critical and Theoretical Discourse Beyond Transnationalism," which was presented in Porto Alegre during the International Seminar on "The Critical Thresholds of Comparatism" in June 1999 and published in *Culturas, contextos, discursos. Limiares criticos no comparatismo* (1999). A second text, entitled "Contemporary Criticism, Pertinence of Literature, In Reaching the Cultural Limits of Literature," was presented at the "Abralic" Congress (Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature), in Florianopolis in 1998 and published in *Leituras do Ciclo* (1999). Lastly, the article "Literary Contexts, Identity of Literature, Representations of Literature" was published in the *Actes de las IV Jornadas Nacionales de*

Literatura Comparada (San Miguel de Tucuman, Argentina, 1998), whose general tide is *Literatura: Espacio de contactos kulturaks*.

Our commentary will be presented in chronological order, that is to say, following the order of publication of the writings which we have just mentioned. An initial observation may already be made: these three articles show a strong interest in defining the word "Literature" and consequently, in defining the practice of Comparative Literature. Secondly, we may identify in all three articles a very close relationship between what is conceived as being "literary" and the cultural context in which it is developed. In the three essays we have mentioned a strong relationship between the concept of "literary" which is in play and the cultural context in which it is constructed may be identified.

Therefore, in order to define Comparative Literature, the author first asserts "that it is the study of any and all literary questions within a multilingualistic and/or multicultural context" (Bessière 1998, 18).

This definition, as broad as it may appear, helps us to understand the various literatures of the New Continent in light of linguistic and/or cultural diversity. Subsequently, a functional approach of this type stresses the fact that an exclusively esthetical perspective will not easily be able to explain the totality of literary phenomena. According to Bessière, "the question is no longer to understand Literature in terms of that which is identical or different, or in terms of a minimal definition through poeticity, which is not even characteristic of Literature as such: for example, the rhetorical effect of political discourse certainly supposes a form of poeticity— or in terms of the linguistic character of Literature — characterization through the linguistic *medium* only allows us to refer back to the observations and the analyses which language requires."

Such a consideration leads the way to an even vaster definition of Comparative Literature in Bessière's work; this definition already addresses methodological issues. According to Bessière, "the question is not, in consequence, that of the comparison of literary objects, of their forms, of their semantics, of their cultural implications, but rather — and I stress this point — *that of the various representations of discourse and of the way in which these representations give way to the representation of so-called literary discourse*" (Bessière 1998, 20).

The point here is to recognize that comparatist practice must be linked to a redefining of Literature with regards to its practices and representations. The former are expressed in cultural terms, whereas the various

representations express what Literature is, as the author maintains, "according to its belonging to other types of discursive representation" (Bessière 1998, 210).

In the last of the articles, which was presented during the Colloquium in Porto Alegre, a more complex question arises, that of the identification of the meaning of the words "theories" and "criticism" and their use within a framework based on the conception of critical thresholds and of the possibility of appropriation and of transfers beyond transnationalism. Within this framework, Jean Bessière makes use of the multiplicity of the heritage of theory and tries to distinguish between literary theory and criticism which "offers a classificatory or explicative hypothesis" and that which deals with "the systematic and functional description of a given literary entity" (1999,15). In his opinion, if the former may be considered to be transcultural or transnational, the latter, on the contrary, are indissociable from "historicism and impossible to translate or to transfer from one to the other." Therefore, we may conclude that in the second case, "contextualization prohibits displacement."

These basic distinctions are important (and I would even say indispensable) in order that we may understand the meaning of Comparative Literature in Latin America, given the simultaneous existence of the two possibilities of theoretical thought and of critical praxis, which is to say, that which constitutes a model for several cultural contexts whose pertinence we must certainly evaluate, and that which is, let us say "untransportable," inherent to the original context in which it is conceived.

The discussion which has taken place during the colloquium, and which may be found in Jean Bessière's article, leads to an important conclusion: there is *no "unified theory of comparatism in Literature"* (1999, 19).

The author remarks that "the observation of the diversity of contexts must not only lead to a debate which would situate the question of comparatism within the alternative of knowledge (as distinct from ignorance) and of atomism." Finally, we must observe that "theory and criticism — and this means a redefining of the relationship between praxis and theory or criticism — are indissociable from the fact that they are formulated and used within diverse contexts, through specific agents which arrange their thoughts in two ways: through the background of lives, of cultures ; and through the literary objects which are part of these backgrounds and of these cultures, that theory must help to articulate."

As we see, the distinctions established by Jean Bessière are relevant to a question which is essential to comparatism in Latin America: that of the transfer of critical theories originating in Europe or in North America. In this area, theoretical transfers are subject to debate. Jean Bessière helps us to reflect upon and to find paths other than those which we have already followed (1999, 29). Within this framework, theory plays an extremely important role: it becomes an instrument of articulation between the various literatures. It can, therefore, be read "as the critical design of the possible totalisation of diverse literatures and national cultures." According to Bessière, "the terms and notions of post-modernism and post-colonialism translate, in fact, a characterisation of diverse literatures, in their diverse national and cultural contexts, according to critical models which make them alike and interdependent, whatever the specific genealogies of these contemporary literatures might otherwise be, within diverse cultures and diverse nations." Thus, "to the aim of cognitive universality, strictly contemporary literary theory and criticism add the transnational aim, which turns the diverse national literatures, in diverse cultures into a same literature-world" (1999,14).

This notion of "literature-world," which is central to the author's reflection, enables us to envisage the concept of general or world literature in a renewed way, since it indicates that literary theory and criticism are the elements which materialise the links between diverse literatures, in a "transnational" perspective. The design of this literature-world can be read in two forms: "from the perspective of a criticism of the world-economy and of the interdependence of the Nation States, to which this literature-world corresponds, and from the perspective of a kinship of literatures, which is the realisation of literature through different literary expressions" (1999,15).

Before concluding, I would like to underline another aspect of this question which shows us how much the knowledge of and the familiarity with the various Latin American literatures, acquired through his interest in comparatist colloquia which have taken place in South America, has contributed to Jean Bessière's way of creating new perspectives.

It is sufficient to note that in the study previously quoted, the author uses the work of the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, *Geografía de la novela*, to remark that the diverse literatures are read here "according to their own critical terms, but also, as the title of the volume suggests, according to their common geography" and that allows us to think that the critical transfers which Fuentes proposes in his book "illustrate the specific function of the multicultural play" (1999, 42).

If the fable of the Sphinx, as it is presented by Jorge Luis Borges, helps the author to walk the path which leads "from the enigma to enigmaticity," in his book, *Enigmaticité de la littérature* (PDF, 1993), then defining comparatism while taking into account the Latin American perspective has certainly given him material for a way of thinking which deals with the relationship between comparatist theories, criticism and practices, and in which the latter are bound to the recognition of the literary specificity of each country.

Because, as he stated in his Presidential report to the General Assembly of this 16th Congress, "the identity of a discipline is found in its practices and what they imply."

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