

## The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature

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**Aldo Nemesio,**  
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**Abstract:** Aldo Nemesio argues in his article "The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature" for the comparative method as follows. Contemporary literary research is based on parameters and methods which do not appear to have evolved similar to other fields of inquiry. If the study of literature is concerned with literary behavior, for instance, the object of study cannot limit itself to a single author or to a limited number of authors and what surrounds them closely. Also, national boundaries are too narrow: what happens within the boundaries of a culture can be understood only if we relate it to what happens elsewhere. A comparative investigation tries to understand the working of those human activities that are related to writing, distributing, and reading objects which -- in ways that differ in different cultures -- are called literature. Literary studies have a longer history than most contemporary sciences: for this reason, literary studies are probably hampered by old habits and constrictions. A long-standing tradition and an established prestige is a hindrance to advantageous change. The most important task of contemporary literary scholars consists in overcoming the awe of their own traditions.

**Aldo NEMESIO**

## **The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature**

The procedures followed by scholars studying literature are often unsatisfactory: the control over a cognitive project as a whole is often lost. The literary scholar seems to be collecting data -- which is a preliminary operation -- without making use of them. Like a diligent ant gathering large amounts of food it will never eat, the contemporary literary scholar seems intent upon writing footnotes of a book he will never try to read. I propose that at the outset of a research project it is necessary to render explicit the questions the scholar will try to answer, what methods will be used and why, and the reasons why he/she thinks that it may be worthwhile answering such questions. More, the work of people concerned with the study of literature seems casual. For instance, much research is devoted to only one author, often on the occasion of an anniversary. Now, there is no reason to think that our observations will be more valid, urgent, appropriate, useful, or interesting if the author of the texts we are concerned with was born or died or the texts were written fifty, one hundred, or two hundred years ago. This seems to be celebration and not research producing knowledge. It does not seem to make any sense to determine one's research program by looking at the calendar. The widespread habit of limiting the scope of a research project to a single author often leads to a confined understanding of the author and his/her texts, which, in turn offers marginal results. I am aware that the average literary scholar considers these results satisfactory. But for what purpose are they satisfactory?

Often, the research strategies and methods of the literary scholar are repetitive. A new operation that is analogous to previous ones is often considered worthwhile: it is on these premises that many texts concerning literature are produced and accepted. I propose instead that in a concrete project that tries to produce knowledge, any statement needs verification. But there is a point where it is unnecessary to repeat the same operation on new data, because the result has already been established: rather than additional confirmation of what is already known, it is the exploration of what is still unknown that deserves priority. Contemporary literary research seems to be based on habits that originated in the past and that bear little resemblance to research projects as they are intended now in other fields. If our main aim were the proposal of some objects as cultural models, then it would be useful to our purpose to try to attract our society's attention toward these objects and the persons who produced them. It would be reasonable to perform our actions on the occasion of anniversaries, because we would not be doing research, but celebration and propaganda. Celebration aims at confirming certitudes and at strengthening bonds of solidarity among the participants. It does not produce knowledge, but it confirms what is already known. Legitimizing by means of the power of words has been for many centuries the main job of the man of letters.

For these reasons, it is often a disappointment to attend a conference concerning literature. One often finds that the boundaries of the conference are inadequate in relation to the questions one would like to ask. Focusing one's attention on a single author may lead to acts of celebration, in which all the participants feel they are part of the same group because they share the memory and the appreciation of the same text (I am aware that there are, in many ways, differences in the construction, tone, and approach in conferences from culture to culture in the context of regions such as North America, Europe, Asia, or Africa). But all this has little to do with the questions one should ask when doing research on literature, because in this case one's main task is to attempt to understand human literary behavior by means of the examination of samplings of several texts produced by several authors. This comparative investigation tries to understand the working of those human activities that are related to writing, distributing, and reading objects which -- in ways that differ in different cultures -- are called literature. Work concerning single authors is a preliminary operation we must perform in order to have enough data on which to ground our literary research. Without data, we cannot do anything. But it seems that too much energy is spent on gathering data without taking the next step: making use of them in a research project. The discovery of data is often considered as the ultimate aim of literary research.

In addition, following long-standing traditions, instead of examining literary texts in order to study human literary behavior, scholars of literature often make use of texts in order to propagate their own

evaluative cultural models and values. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in using the study of literature to foster and to propagate one's ideas. On the contrary, it may be an effective strategy. But it is not an act of literary research. Therefore, although the number of people concerned with literature is high, many aspects of literary behavior are still unknown. This is disappointing. Human beings usually find pleasure in talking about what they think they know well. And it is easy to believe one is well acquainted with the texts of a single author. This leads to forms of literary "entertainment," in which -- in the absence of any real intention of producing knowledge -- an author and his/her texts are used as the rules and the pieces of a game. In this case, one plays Shakespeare or Melville almost in the same way one plays bridge or chess. The texts and the personality of the authors are known to the participants and the game consists in moving a new piece -- that is, introducing a new detail about the author and the text -- or in reorganizing preexistent pieces -- that is, producing some new global interpretation. All this may have healthy psychological consequences, because each player feels reassured by being a member of a community with which he/she shares the same culture and several interests. These effects on the human mind are one of the causes of the success of those who favor the forming of a strong literary canon -- that is, a set of texts that, at a certain point in history, many members of a cultural sector take as a positive model from their point of view. But if human literary behavior is the object of our study, we should not limit the scope of our research to a single author or to a limited number of authors and what surrounds them closely. Also national boundaries are too narrow. Usually, studies on literature are qualified by an adjective that indicates language and nationality: for instance, we talk about Urdu literature, French literature, Chinese literature, German literature, or Italian literature. But when we do so, we follow habits that have little to do with literary research. Studying the literature of a nation is usually a political act searching for common cultural models of/for a large group of people one wants to distinguish from others on the grounds of linguistic or, generally speaking, cultural grounds. On the contrary, if we study human literary behavior, it makes little sense to base the choice of the data we analyze on where they were produced or what language they use. What happens within the boundaries of a culture can be understood only if we relate it to what happens elsewhere, that is, what is prescribed in the comparative method.

Limiting the scope of one's research to a "national" literature is due to political reasons and is also favored by professional laziness, let alone the fact that the homogeneity of a literature -- the prerequisite of the notion of a "national" literature -- is a highly suspect proposition in the first place. If we accept the notion of national literature for research and study, we encounter a series of predictable operations that can be easily performed by a researcher acting alone. If we cross the border, we need well-organized teamwork, because we have to deal with large selections of texts in a project that, in turn, requires skilled competence in different languages and cultures. Again, we are at the comparative method. It is curious that teamwork is normally outside the mental horizons and practices of most of contemporary scholarship of literature. Scholars of literature thus show their difference from their colleagues working in other fields. This is probably owing to their having acquired the habit of being employed as vehicles of national certainties, preserving the memory of canonical texts and of their values: with this aim in mind, a research team is clearly unnecessary. Even today, in most university humanities faculties examinations -- that is, the filters people who aspire to gain professional status in literature must pass through -- in the rule are not constructed to test the students as to what they learned with regard to their research skills, but rather what they remember about some texts. Collective memorization spreads certainty and increases cohesion, offering many people the same experiences. But it does not produce knowledge.

Scholars who ignore elements of the literary canon prevailing inside their group are normally exposed to negative evaluation. It appears that the professional identity of scholars and critics of literature consists of maintaining and developing the collective literary and thus cultural memory by means of reassuring rituals of celebration. The task of the "man of letters" consists of producing metatextual narratives of a serial type, bringing into play the same characters (the texts of the canon) under similar situations. This way, literature is considered as raw material to be used to produce metatexts. By research one often means reading books alone -- and without any sampling technique -- in order to recount one's reflections on the books read. Unlike other areas of research, here we do not have a scientific methodology reinforced by a community sharing at least some methods or goals. Further, the organization of the work done by scholars of literature inevitably determines their

behavior. For a scholar working alone it becomes difficult even to know what happens in his/her field. The most common activity is a direct approach to texts that are often taken as material to be used for a meta-narration or private reflection. Controversies are relatively rare, because what is produced is not necessarily compared to other studies, but is read within the boundaries of its internal logic. I would like to add here that the new media and the possibilities offered by the world wide web and the internet suggest the hope that scholarship in and of literature may change radically, sooner rather than later.

According to the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, from January 1981 to July 1991, over 6300 articles concerning Shakespeare's texts were published: that is approximately six hundred items per year or almost two articles every day. Clearly, this production of texts concerning Shakespeare is going beyond the reading ability of the average scholar studying English literature. This is not an exception: in the same period we find approximately 1650 items concerning Chaucer, 1180 concerning Dickens and so on (1130 on Eliot, 1070 on Melville, 940 on Pound, 880 on Hemingway, 770 on Blake, and so on). If a published article owes its *raison d'être* to its communicating pertinent results of research, it seems most unlikely that in ten years so many significant achievements were made on the subject of Shakespeare's texts. In addition, while one normally expects that the production of an article be preceded by a careful reading of all relevant literature, it is hard to believe that this was really done by the authors of that extraordinary number of pages.

Publishing a text is an act that requires responsibility, scholarly and social. By publishing, we ask our potential readers some of their time and usually also some of their money, promising that it will be worthwhile. It is, to some extent, an act of arrogance that should not be done too often. The production of so high a number of texts probably indicates that the aim of many of the authors was not knowledge, but celebration, entertainment, or satisfaction of vanity. A game can be played an unlimited number of times, giving pleasure. On the other hand, in order to perform an act of celebration, it is unimportant to be informed about preceding studies, because what matters is calling attention to the celebrated text. But writing for celebration may lead to isolation: as it is not necessary to read the other celebratory texts, so it will not be necessary, for those who will write in future, to read the text which is written now and so on. Also, from this point of view, doubts arise about the advisability of publishing these texts. Probably it would be more appropriate just to write them, as an individual act, or to read them on the occasion for which they were written. Probably it is vanity that makes people forget that writing and publishing are different actions that have different causes, aims, and costs.

Literature is not written and/or produced with the aim of being studied by scholars. Those who play with a text or read it for the purpose of experiencing pleasure behave reasonably as readers. But a scholar of literature should not act just as a common reader, in the same way as a botanist does not limit his activity to admiring flowers or a biologist does not restrict herself to remembering with interest the individual cases he/she observed. Such inconsistencies and considerations of scholarship of literature lead me to look for alternatives in literary scholarship and thus I tend to search out the ways of research in other fields. Most probably, there is something we should learn. Literary studies have a longer history than most of contemporary sciences and for this reason, literary studies are probably hampered by old habits and fears. A long-standing tradition and an established prestige may be a hindrance to change. Probably the most important job of contemporary literary researchers consists in overcoming the awe of their tradition. I also propose to follow the comparative method that, at least in my opinion, appears to hold the most promise.

Author's profile: Aldo Nemesio works in textual semiotics, the theory of literature, and Italian literature at the University of Torino. To date, he published the volumes *Le prime parole. L'uso dell'incipit nella narrativa dell'Italia unita* (1990), *I linguaggi della conoscenza. Studi letterari e comunicazione scientifica* (1994) and the collected volume *L'esperienza del testo* (1999), and he contributed articles to *Esperienze Letterarie*, *Lettere Italiane*, *L'Osservatore politico letterario*, *Paragone*, *Strumenti Critici*, *Studi italiani di linguistica teorica e applicata*, *Studi Piemontesi*, *Il Verri*, and *Versus*. His current research interest is in empirical research in textual studies. E-mail: <[aldo.nemesio@unito.it](mailto:aldo.nemesio@unito.it)>.