

Comparative Literature in Spain Today: A Review Article of New Work by Romero, Vega and Carbonell, and Guillén

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Pablo ZAMBRANO

**Comparative Literature in Spain Today:
A Review Article of New Work by Romero, Vega and Carbonell, and Guillén**

While comparative literature is being challenged in many ways in its traditional and historical homes such as the USA, France, or Germany, other "peripheral" countries such as Portugal, Mexico, Argentina, China, or Spain are now beginning to make valuable contributions to its reformulation and rebirth. However, the situation of comparative literature in Spain cannot be called a "rebirth"; in fact, I would call it a birth. For more than one hundred years Spain was heedless of the development and various reformulations that comparative literature has been undergoing since the late nineteenth century. To my mind, the causes explaining this lack of interest in the discipline need to be linked to historical and social reasons such as the gradual process of international isolation following the decline of the Spanish Empire, a process that would eventually lead to the 1936-39 Civil War and Franco's long fascist regime. After Franco's death in 1975 Spain started a short but deep "counter-process" of radical cultural change and international opening ending up in the incorporation into the European Union. I think that this new international and cultural context over the last two decades explains the recent "emergence" of comparative literature in Spain. That is, the development of the discipline by increasing university degrees in comparative literature and literary theory, new journals such as *Exemplaria: Revista Internacional de Literatura Comparada* (University of Huelva), the growing number of members of the SELGYC: Spanish Association of General and Comparative Literature, and the creation of specific panels on comparative literature within traditionally restrictive national associations such as AEDEAN: Spanish Association of English and American Studies.

Despite suspicions still shared by scholars restricted to national literatures within the impregnable fortresses of some departments, I firmly believe in a bright future for comparative literature in Spain. There are several reasons for my optimism: First, the contribution of an increasing number of scholars such as Darío Villanueva (Universidad de Santiago) is greatly helping to introduce in Spain new literary theories which are in principle comparative, such as Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, Siegfried J. Schmidt's empirical approach, and others (see Villanueva's *Avances en... Teoría de la literatura*, 1994). This kind of theoretical contribution is complemented by an increasing number of publications which have a pragmatic and practical objective, namely textbooks and manuals. Second, Spain is currently undergoing a much-debated process of self- and re-definition. The ever-procrastinated answer to the historical question "What is Spain?" is now being faced -- perhaps for the first time in the country's history, especially from the perspectives of multiculturalism, multinationalism, and multilingualism. It is, in short, the recognition of the "Other" in a country whose plural nature has been officially silenced over the last five centuries. Historically, however, Spain was and still is one of the most multicultural countries in Europe. In this sense, it is an excellent culture not only for traditional comparative approaches but also -- and above all -- for the testing and implementation of new approaches. Third, Spain's imperial-colonial past in Latin-America and its powerful links to the past and present of Europe make Spain one of the most important cultural bridges between America and Europe. Moreover, the new European context of economic and political union between different but related countries is becoming a fact. This condition should be fully exploited by comparative approaches to literature and culture and Spain appears to have seized the opportunity to do so.

It is within this optimistic context for comparative literature where the publication of Romero's, Vega and Carbonell's, and Guillén's books can be gauged and should be read. Dolores Romero's *Orientaciones en literatura comparada* (Madrid: Arco, 1998. Soft cover, 261 pages) and María José Vega and Neus Carbonell's *La literatura Comparada. Principios y métodos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1998. Soft cover, 265 pages) are in most instances translations of previously published texts (in most cases in English). That the volumes are such compilations of translated texts is clear in the case of Romero's volume but not in Vega and Carbonell's case; they appear as authors. However, both volumes greatly contribute to introduce in Spanish a selection of classical articles on the theory of Comparative Literature as well as such previously unpublished material as Gilbert Chaitin's "Otriedad. La literatura comparada y la diferencia." Since it is a compilation, the Vega and Carbonell volume can be used as a

textbook but it is not a manual despite the statement on its cover. There is still a need for a concise and sophisticated manual in Spanish -- as well as in other languages, indeed, as Yves Chevrel (Sorbonne) has urged comparatists for years -- intended to really help our students and guide them not only through necessary theoretical discussions and descriptions on the nature and history of Comparative Literature but also through literary texts as the primary source of any theory.

As a kind of theoretical history of comparative literature, the Vega and Carbonell volume is very well structured. The book is divided into three main parts. Each part includes a selection of representative texts (all of them translated into Spanish by Vega and Carbonell themselves) preceded by a condensed but precise and useful introduction. The first part is devoted to the origins and consolidation of the so-called "old paradigm." The selection covers texts by Croce, Texte, Gayley, Baldensperger, and Van Tieghem. The second part, "The Crisis and the New Paradigm" -- includes classical texts by Wellek, Remak, Fokkema, Ruprecht, and Laurette. The third part is an introduction to some of the newest tendencies of Comparative Literature such as the systemic approach and others. The authors selected for this section include Chaitin, Chevrier, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, Gnisci, Snaider, Lanser, Lefevere, and Tötösy. Apart from these three main parts, there is a final section including a very useful updated bibliography. As a compilation, the Vega and Carbonell volume shares many links with Romero's book. However, as Romero states in her prologue, the aim of her book is to probe into the current state of comparative literature in order to show the Spanish reader a panorama of the discipline at the end of our century. In this sense, Romero's compilation is an extension of the third part of the Vega and Carbonell volume. The book is also divided in three main sections, although this division responds to methodological rather than chronological reasons. The first section presents three very well-known notional contributions by Praver, Marino, and Bassnett. The second section, devoted to some theoretical orientations, includes texts by Culler, Remak, Swiggers, Fokkema, Gillespie, Kushner, and Tötösy. Under the title "Didactic orientations," the third section offers articles by Chevrel and Fokkema. A concise bibliography is included in the final part. The only reproach that can be made to this valuable compilation is the poor quality of some although not all of the translations as some are very English in style and tone.

The Romero and Vega and Carbonell compilations of translated canonical texts of comparative literature were complemented in November 1998 by an exceptional book: Claudio Guillén's *Múltiples moradas* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1998. Soft cover, 481 pages). Guillén's critical mastery is his unsurpassed ability to make the reader constantly accompanied by the pleasure of texts. To some extent, the publication of this new book is a sort of privileged panoramic view of Guillén's career as one of the greatest comparatists of our century. Although all essays have been previously published, *Múltiples moradas* is more than a mere compilation since all material has been re-elaborated and rewritten by Guillén in order to integrate it in a single and coherent volume. "How to think about multiplicity, the multiplicities we are and those that surround us?" is the opening question of Guillén in his preface (13). The study of our current complexity as a consequence of our historical experience is -- I believe -- the key to the understanding of the seven essays in *Múltiples moradas*. The book is divided into two main sections. The first one consists of four excellent studies covering the topics of "Literature and Exile," "Literature and Landscape," "Literature and Epistolarity," and "Literature and Obscenity." Little of importance can be added to the impressive reading and critical basis of these four essays. In his beautiful study of literature and exile, Guillén leads us through texts representing the (self-) isolation of exile by Ovid, Dante, Du Bellay, Shakespeare, and others, rounding up his discussion with two Spanish poets: Rafael Alberti and the Nobel Prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez. Although little attention is paid in general to Spanish literature, Guillén is very much aware -- as his personal experience attests -- that the literature of Spain has essentially been a literature of exile, above all after the end of the Civil War in 1939.

I find the chapter on literature and landscape one of the most attractive in the volume. Guillén firstly defines the important concepts of *ergon* and *parergon* which will illuminate his study of the evolution of landscape in literature and painting from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. His reflections on the poetry of Wordsworth and Baudelaire are among the best I have ever read. However, I really miss the presence of Flaubert and *Madame Bovary* in his reflection on Realism. Much could be said about the links between Flaubert's representation of landscapes in his novel and his criticism of Romantic aesthetics, as in the passage referring the first sexual encounter between Emma

and Rodolphe (2nd part, chapter 9), and how it affects the supposed realistic representation of life in the novel. As *Madame Bovary* is considered one of the most important novels of nineteenth-century literature, I am persuaded that Guillén's insightful critical ability would have been another pleasure for the reader. The same applies to his study of literature and obscenity, where, again, Flaubert's novel is undoubtedly a landmark.

The second section of the book includes three essays dealing with the concept of national literatures, national stereotyped images, and the idea of Europe. Notwithstanding their historical perspective, these three contributions -- especially those concerned with the concept of national literatures and the idea of Europe -- are proof of Guillén's *engagement* with the political, social, and cultural processes that contemporary Spain and Europe are experiencing. As I said before, the traditional definition and articulation of Spain as a cultural and political unity is currently being reformulated through the action on the one hand of the Catalanian, Basque, and Galician nationalisms and, on the other, the regionalist movements now emerging as a mimetic reaction to their demands. It goes without saying that this process is also affecting long-established cultural concepts such as the ideal of a well-defined Spanish national literature. Undoubtedly, the growth of peripheral nationalisms in Spain is, to a certain extent, a necessary act of catharsis which is beginning to help banish old stereotypes or re-consider the Spanish literary canon. But, at the same time as Claudio Guillén reminds us (311), this growth is the source of what he calls "desvaríos provincianos" (provincial ravings): a conscious narrow-mindedness on the part of some politicians and intellectuals firmly devoted to the creation of artificial nationalities based on historically false myths and new stereotypes. Unfortunately, Guillén's statement that "una sociedad multilingüe es de entrada menos limitada y provinciana" ("a multilingual society is at first less limited and provincial"; 320) is being called into question in Spain by an increasing number of local policies carried out in the name of a renewed sacred concept of nation. Evoking -- as Guillén constantly does -- Edgar Morin's "Penser l'Europe," I would also say that once again Spaniards are "thinking Spain." Hopefully, Guillén's book and arguments will make an impact in Spain to "penser l'Europe" instead. As can be easily deduced, the interests prompted by the reading of Guillén's new book are many. I sincerely consider the publication of *Múltiples moradas* one of the greatest intellectual events of the last few months in Spain. Along with Guillén's classic *Entre lo uno y lo diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada*, it is one of the few essential contributions of international scope in Spanish and one of the mainstays of the promising development of comparative literature in Spain.

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