

Comparing Anew: A Review Article of New Work by Kushner, Zhang, Halio and Siegel, and San Román

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## Recommended Citation

Pireddu, Nicoletta. "Comparing Anew: A Review Article of New Work by Kushner, Zhang, Halio and Siegel, and San Román." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1334>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1334)

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture** 

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 5 Issue 1 (March 2003) Book Review Article**

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/8>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1>>

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**Nicoletta PIREDDU****Comparing Anew: A Review Article of New Work by Kushner, Zhang, Halio and Siegel, and San Román**

In this book review article I introduce Eva Kushner's *Itineraries in Comparative Literature: The Living Passion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001), Yingjin Zhang's (Ed.) *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel's (Ed.) *Comparative Literary Dimensions: Essays in Honor of Melvin J. Friedman* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2000), and Gustavo San Román's (Ed.) *Onetti and Others: Comparative Essays on a Major Figure in Latin American Literature* (New York: State U of New York P, 1999).

At first glance, these four critical studies seem to have very little in common. Touching upon such diverse literary corpi and issues as the European Renaissance, Chinese literature and culture, canonical figures in the history of Western literature, and the aesthetic production of a post-World War II Latin American novelist, the content of the volumes stretches considerably in space and time. However, the comparative approach they all declare to adopt offers a fertile starting point for a wider discussion of the present status of comparative literature and of the main debates it continues to generate in the domain of literary theory and criticism. In addition to providing us with insights into a rich array of authors and cultures, these works, taken as a whole, confront us with diverse approaches in comparative methodology. While on the one hand they make us sensitive to the need to think of comparative literature as a more complex practice than the construction of hierarchical relationships between mainstream texts, on the other hand they also invite us to mitigate certain extreme positions which would like to liquidate any trace of influence and exchange between different literary traditions across national and linguistic boundaries, in order to turn comparative literature into theoretical discourse tout court.

Eva Kushner's *Itineraries in Comparative Literature* is a collection of essays written by the author over several decades of engagement with the discipline. The five parts that compose the volume provide us with a good overview of a rich critical activity ranging from theoretically-oriented discussions of the evolution of comparative literature and literary history (in chapters "Legacies and Renewals" and "Changing Perspectives in Literary History") to more applied contributions in such fields as early modern studies (in chapter "History and Early Modern Subjectivity"), the legacy of Northrop Frye (in chapter "In Memory of Northrop Frye"), and the role of myth and imagination in literature across space and time (in chapter "Comparative Imaginings"). The rationale of the volume as a whole is to offer instances of an ethos which, as we read in the "Foreword" by Wladimir Krysinski, can be defined as "understanding through comparison" (vii). In her approach to literary studies, indeed, Kushner claims to have pursued an interest in "interrelatedness" (4) among languages and cultures without taking for granted "the oneness of the humanities" (4). Her essays on the status and use of the comparative approach question facile assumptions of universality and superficial interdisciplinary practices while proposing a constructive standpoint from which to define an identity and some methodological procedures for comparative literature.

If Eurocentrism and commonalities among national literatures are no longer an acceptable framework for the comparatist's practice, Kushner also alerts us to the equally hegemonic approach to the so-called "other literatures" that tends to consider non-European cultures less developed cultural forms with respect to their Western, allegedly normative counterparts, or to absorb them within an easy cosmopolitanism ultimately governed by the same Eurocentric parameters it is supposed to transcend. The responsibility of the comparatist in the twenty-first century, at home in a global village that has rebalanced "the relationship between, on the one hand, the particular, the regional, the local, and the at least seemingly isolated, and, on the other, the universal" (15), lies in a methodology able to incorporate "respect for diversity and for the differentials of specific objects" (16). This, for Kushner, does not amount to "disorder and lack of system" (16) but rather to "quite disciplined inquiries into

the manner in which symbolic objects, particularly literary works, serve as icons of their cultures" (16). Indeed, challenging a position that is becoming increasingly common in comparative literary studies, Kushner does not intend to diminish the role of literature in the discipline, while remaining open to the need for theoretical retooling in comparative analysis. As she welcomes the cross-fertilization and interdependence of literature and of other cognitive domains, the author invites us not to "equate literary studies with the study of the entire cultural universe" (21), and, rather, to be sensitive to the "intercultural" (22) nature of literature as such. Literatures "exist together as a system" (22), and within this system the comparatist should concentrate on ways in which investigations of literary interactions can preserve pluralism and avoid imposing "a given concept of poetics" (23). In other words, Kushner endorses the specificity of literature but does not equate it to a claim to self-sufficiency and isolation. She advocates, for instance, exchange between comparative literature and cultural studies, but she also maintains a vision of literary studies as centered around the study of literature as the "ground upon which the dialogue of cultures takes place" (43).

With regard to Kushner's volume, on the one hand one may wonder what benefit can be drawn from the republication of discussions dealing with questions that, in some cases, may sound by now a little dated or tackled in a way which, in the light of more recent theoretical developments, may result somewhat naive, as in the case of certain reflections on deconstruction or postmodernism. On the other hand, however, it is precisely the "telescopic" quality of the volume as a whole, and its diachronic structure that can provide an interesting overview of the reflections that have animated the theoretical discussions of the last few decades. Kushner's articles as a whole engage with a remarkable variety of critics and theoreticians who dealt with questions of literary history and comparative literature, from Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Wellek, and Frye to Todorov, Lyotard, and Culler, to name a very few. The author herself, indeed, locates the aim of her work in the attempt to offer a synthesis of the development of the discipline, to be taken for its historical value. Very often, the fact that the original date of certain essays is rather removed from us does not hinder Kushner's interventions from demonstrating their farsightedness. Indeed, they raise theoretical and methodological questions destined to become central to current debates within comparative literature. For instance, Kushner's insistence on the need to avoid imposing Western universals in East-West relationships condenses a paramount issue that, not accidentally, represents the main gist of the volume *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature*, edited by Yingjin Zhang. This collection of essays intends precisely to reexamine the practice of Chinese comparative literature by focusing on the different responses that the discipline has generated in China and the United States.

The editor's introduction, "Engaging Chinese Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies" provides a useful overview of the problems arising from the encounter of Chinese literature and Western literary methodology, of the resistance that East-West comparativism has generated in Chinese studies, and of more recent re-readings of Chinese texts through the lens of current critical approaches able to open up the canon and to renovate the field. This introductory discussion results appropriate both to the specialized sinologist and to the literary scholar with a mainly Western background but willing to become acquainted with the challenges of East-West comparative studies. Zhang highlights the contrast between the defendants of a notion of comparative literature as a traditional study of influences, themes and literary movements -- an approach that seems to be widely institutionalized in mainland China (for a discussion on the status of comparative literature in China today, see Xiaoyi Zhou and Q.S. Tong, "Comparative Literature in China" in CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 2.4 [2000]:) <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb00-4/zhou&tong00.html>> -- and a growing openness to Western theoretical concepts. This latter standpoint, in its turn, is a source of additional tensions. The application of Western theory to Chinese texts is often perceived as the imposition of an alien conceptual paradigm upon an allegedly subaltern literature that would otherwise have no voice in the West (2). Yet this very interaction between

Western critical tools and Eastern cultural objects has also fostered border-crossing as a constructive methodological approach transcending the alleged irreconcilability of sinology and theory without erasing the differences between those discourses (7).

One way of achieving this synergy of literary and theoretical studies is that followed by the so-called "Chinese school of comparative literature," which, since the late 1970s, has attempted in various ways to refashion the study of Chinese literature through methodological approaches able to promote national characteristics but also to foster an intercultural perspective (for a representative text of this approach, see Peng-hsiang Chen, *From Thematics to the "Chinese School" of Comparative Literature*. Taipei: Bookman Books, 1992). For its part, however, the volume maps the premises and the gradual development of a different kind of critical engagement, which, as Zhang explains, aims at reconfiguring Chinese comparative studies by eliminating strictly nationalistic and political agendas, and by transcending the East-West polarity. As instances of "Chinese Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies," the essays in the collection are said to acknowledge "the increasing importance of culture in comparative literature studies" (5) and to exemplify a critical practice open to Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, and favoring the convergence of different perspectives and disciplines (of interest may be here the website of the ACCL: Association of Chinese & Comparative Literature <<http://www.acclit.org>>). The three parts of the volume -- "Discipline, Discourse, Canon," "Gender, Sexuality, Body," and "Science, Modernity, Aesthetics" -- delineate a transition from more theoretical questions of canon and interdisciplinarity in Chinese comparative studies (essays by Zhang Longxi, David Palumbo-Liu, Mark E. Francis) to instances of feminist revisions and subversive gender discourses exemplified by representative works from the traditional literary scene to contemporary mass culture (essays by Anne Marie Hsiung, Helen Chen, Greta Ai-Yu Niu), through a re-envisioning of Chinese modernity at the crossroads of the aesthetic and the scientific discourse (essays by John Yu Zou, Feng-Ying Ming, Yingjin Zhang, and Michelle Yeh).

The multifaceted diachronic and synchronic panorama that takes shape confirms not only the polycentric nature of the global cultural and critical scene alluded to in the book and contextualizing this new approach to Chinese studies, but also the multiple possibilities of this new conception and practice of comparative literary and cultural studies applied to the Chinese reality. For its part, the concluding essay by Eugene Eoyang further reflects upon polycentrism and decenteredness. In line with Longxi's claim about the danger of taking the comparative approach as a juxtaposition of literary works or discourses (34), and with Palumbo-Liu's caveats against the risk of ascribing a universal value to the Western perspective and of reducing Chinese texts to mere allegories of Western cultural phenomena (48), Eoyang reminds us that no literature or culture, be it Western or Eastern, can exist outside plurality, national and disciplinary boundary crossing, and interchanges. Comparative literature hence becomes for him the locus of a constant exile or displacement. However, those conditions are not to be seen as synonyms for alienation but, rather, as promoters of dialogue and non hegemonic inclusiveness against self-sufficiency and assimilation of otherness to sameness. Therefore, without ignoring the marginality of Chinese studies on the international scene, the volume as a whole highlights the need and the opportunity for Chinese comparative literature -- and for comparative literature at large -- to participate in what Palumbo-Liu presents as "the debates about culture and its transnational negotiations" (48).

If, on the one hand, the argument of Kushner's *Itineraries in Comparative Literature* about the need to preserve the specificity of literature (albeit not its autonomy) with respect to cultural studies may sound too restraining to the supporters of an all-encompassing notion of cultural text as the comparatist's object of study, on the other hand, *China in a Polycentric World* -- despite (or, perhaps, precisely because of) its sophisticated, multifaceted standpoint -- can be said, at times, to thwart the very basic expectations of what a comparison is supposed to be. Granted that comparative literature is by now more than a study of themes, parallels, and influences connecting different national literary texts or corpi, it may be equally problematic nonetheless to consider the mere application of a

Western theoretical approach to a Chinese text a satisfactory instance of comparative study, as some of the essays would suggest. Furthermore, when we shift from the initial declarations of intent to actual textual analyses, we realize how difficult it is to eschew from the thematic approach that it seems so important to overcome. But, actually, is it really so crucial (and even possible) to eradicate themes, parallels, and influences (and literature altogether) from the turf of comparative literature in order to revamp the discipline and make it allegedly adequate to the current debates on the status and function of the humanities? A look at *Comparative Literature Dimensions: Essays in Honor of Melvin J. Friedman*, edited and introduced by Jay L. Halio and Ben Siegel, and at *Onetti and Others: Comparative Essays on a Major Figure in Latin American Literature*, edited by Gustavo San Román, may suggest further reflections.

The miscellaneous volume *Comparative Literature Dimensions* contains essays on topics that delineate Melvin Friedman's scholarship in various areas of literary studies, as reflected in the book sections: "Theories of Literature: James Joyce and Others," "Fresh Glances at James Joyce," "New Views of Samuel Beckett," "Perspectives Ethnic and Cultural," and with a bibliography of Friedman's works. Keeping Joyce's critical writings as a reference point, Haskell Block discusses how the Irish writer's observations on comedy owe a great deal to a rich genealogy of theories from Aristotle's and Dante's to Kant's, Schiller's and Hegel's, down to Meredith's. After Clayton Koelb's essay on the role of history in Robert Graves's short story "An Imperial Tale" -- seen as a new perspective from which to reconsider Graves's earlier novel *I, Claudius* -- the focus goes back to Joyce in Zack Bowen's Bakhtinian reading of *Ulysses*'s open-endedness, in Michael P. Gillespie's analysis of the aging process in *Finnegans Wake* as conducive to mutability and fluctuation, hence to interpretive pluralism, and in Margaret Rogers's musical recreation of the rhythmic and linguistic patterns of "The Washerwoman" section in the Anna Livia Plurabelle portion of *Finnegans Wake*. For their part, James Acheson, Raymond Federman, Livio Dobrez, and James Liddy offer us several insights on Samuel Beckett's works, a topic chosen in homage of Friedman's pioneering endorsement of Beckett's importance at a time when he was not yet well established.

The issues raised in this section of the book range from newly identified sources for Beckett's allusions in *Happy Days*, to interrogations of the status of fiction coping with a speaking and writing subject that erases its own words, and the role of Beckett in the transition from the Irish dramatic movement of Synge and Yeats to the younger generation of playwrights like McGuinness and Friel. In the last and more heterogeneous portion of the volume, essays revolve around such diverse topics as the construction of masculinity and the male figure's narrative power in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (Richard Pearce), multiculturalism and ethnic assimilation in Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* and in Anne Nichols's *Abie's Irish Rose* (Owen Aldridge), the persisting persecution complex in Céline as a starting point for a theory of paranoid writing (David Hayman), writing as a vehicle for overcoming both the literary status quo and the horror of state violence in the works of the contemporary Argentinian novelist Luisa Valenzuela (Debra Castillo), and the exploration of the concept of "authenticity" in relation to notions of "identity" and "negritude" in the ethnic writings of Wilson Harris, Salman Rushdie, and Derek Walcott, among others (Mark Williams).

If we consider the essays beyond their individual aims and impact in their respective fields, and, rather, in the light of the volume title and of our overarching question about the identity of comparative literature, we should recognize that only some contributions are truly comparative in nature, insofar as they deal with relationships between two or more texts, authors, and/or literary, linguistic, and cultural traditions. What can be said to designate the comparative character of the volume components as a whole is above all the fact that the Festschrift touches upon a variety of authors and themes, which, however, are often juxtaposed rather than engaged in a reciprocal and well focused interaction. For its part, the adjective "comparative" in the collection *Onetti and Others* appears as more consistently justifiable. The purpose of the volume is precisely to investigate systematically the links between the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti and other Latin American

and Western authors, tackling questions of influence, intertextuality, gender, and translation. The panorama offered by the sequence of articles successfully highlights Onetti's international dimension, substantiated by commonality of concerns and themes in Onetti's production and in that of other figures synchronically and diachronically linked with the Uruguayan writer, biographical connections and literary exchanges, or differences that allow us to grasp the specificity of Onetti's poetics.

Situating Onetti against the backdrop of Latin American fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, Donald Shaw emphasizes the originality of Onetti's work and proposes to see his 1950 novel *La vida breve* as a pivotal initiator of what is traditionally considered the 1960s Boom. The Boom is also central to Steven Boldy's and Philip Swanson's essays, which focus respectively on the relationships between Onetti's *Terra de nadie* and Fuentes's *La región más transparente*, and on the deconstruction of realistic motifs in Onetti's and Donoso's "new novels" (on the Boom, see, e.g., Gene H. Bell-Villada's "The Canon is el Boom, et. al., or the Hispanic Difference"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/2/>> in Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America, Ed. Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz, thematic issue of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.2 (2002): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/>>). Mark Millington concentrates on the connection of space, identity, and otherness in Onetti and Borges; Paul Jordan discusses possible links between Onetti's first novel *Tiempo de abrazar* and the last work of his predecessor Roberto Arlt, *El amor brujo*; and Gustavo San Román analyzes the different characterization and narrative voice in Onetti and his contemporary Felisberto Hernández. Three subsequent essays compare Onetti's voice and literary strategies to women writers -- Armonia Somers (in María Rosa Olivera-Williams's article discussing the marginality of the female writer with respect to Onetti's masculine rhetoric), Luisa Valenzuela (who, according to Linda Craig, shares with Onetti a depiction of the prostitute only to transcend his rigid construction of gender roles in the name of a more ambiguous vision of sexuality), and Clarice Lispector (in Hilary Owen's treatment of the diametrical opposition between Lispector's and Onetti's respective visions of the feminine and masculine principles as well as of their standpoints on sameness and difference). The coincidence of name and role between Conrad's Stein in *Lord Jim* and Onetti's Stein in *La vida breve* then constitutes the starting point of Peter Turton's article on a supposed direct influence of Conrad upon Onetti, whereas Sabine Giersberg analyzes the thematic and formal impact of the Ecclesiastes upon the Uruguayan writer. The volume closes with Peter Bush's discussion of the literary and political implications of translating Onetti's *Cuando ya no importe* for the Anglo-Saxon world, in a tug of war between faithfulness to the original and the constraints of conventional English linguistic patterns. Right after Onetti's 1974 arrest by Uruguayan authorities, the Italian writer Italo Calvino denounced Onetti's loneliness in the hands of his political persecutors in a world of rapid communications and international indignations ("rapide comunicazioni e indignazioni internazionali" in Italo Calvino, "Onetti arrestato a Montevideo," in Saggi. 1944-1985, Ed. Mario Barenghi. Milano: Mondadori, 1995. 2, 2252). The volume *Onetti and Others* succeeds unquestionably in making Onetti overcome the barriers of his own national context, ascribing him greater visibility and a multifaceted image through a comparative approach grounded in rich and enlightening evidence, and supported by a variety of critical perspectives although not always theoretically sophisticated.

At a moment when comparative literature is truly going global, a reading of these four volumes confirms the need to open up the borders of the literary and cultural arena and at the same time suggests some caution in the comparative practice. Polycentrism, which is now a must in literary studies, should not be taken automatically as a license to talk about anything, nor should it turn into a sort of imperialism aimed at systematically discarding what appear as more "traditional" forms of comparative studies only because of their conservative nature. The risk involved in the liberating design to abolish all literary frontiers and disciplinary boundaries may be that of gaining authority to speak of objects of study of which we do not always have enough knowledge, not only from the linguistic point of view (which should remain a prerequisite for any serious comparative work) but also from a broader cultural perspective. It is indeed not always clear whether, by assuming a global

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perspective, we can eschew the dangerous move of legitimizing critical standpoints before becoming sufficiently attuned to cultures different from ours, and simultaneously silencing voices that could speak with more competence about those cultures. At the same time, in the name of literary and theoretical globalization in comparative studies, we may also neglect what can still be said about literary and cultural traditions that are better known, and end up liquidating with facile value judgments studies which may be deemed obsolete because revolving around more established corpi or relying upon influences, themes, and parallels, and which in fact can reveal important new results. This does not mean, of course, to urge a simple return to acritical comparative close readings or a closure to innovation tout court. It is, rather, a suggestion about the desirability of a balanced view on the identity of comparative literature, able to avoid unilateral prescriptive attitudes. Acceptance of pluralism, which these four books all seem to advocate, should hence apply not only to the object of study of comparative literature but also to the delineation of the aims and methodologies of comparative literature as a discipline. As a warning against the risk of monopolizing a particular conception of comparative literature, the international and polycentric perspective that emerges from the readings makes us sensitive not only to a vast array of literary and cultural issues, but also to the variety of ways in which comparative literature is practiced in the world at large. Some points which certainly offer much food for further comparative thoughts.

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