

Comparative Literature as a Messenger of Diversity: New Books by Cassola, Durisin and Gnisci, and Kushner and

Pageaux

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## Recommended Citation

Pireddu, Nicoletta. "Comparative Literature as a Messenger of Diversity: New Books by Cassola, Durisin and Gnisci, and Kushner and Pageaux." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1146>>

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**PURDUE**

UNIVERSITY PRESS <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>>

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture** 

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 4 Issue 1 (March 2002) Book Review Article**  
**Nicoletta Pireddu,**  
**"Comparative Literature as a Messenger of Diversity:**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/7>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.1 (2002)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/>>

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## Nicoletta PIREDDU

### **Comparative Literature as a Messenger of Diversity: New Books by Cassola, Durisin and Gnisci, and Kushner and Pageaux**

This review article is about the following volumes: *Dialogues des cultures. Actes du XIe Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée / Dialogues of Cultures: Proceedings of the XIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Ed. Eva Kushner and Daniel Pageaux (Bern: Peter Lang <<http://www.peterlang.com>>, 2000. ISBN 3-906764-70-2, 225 pages), Arnold Cassola, *The Literature of Malta: An example of Unity in Diversity* (Sliema: Minima Publishers <<http://minima.hanut.com>>[inactive], 2000. 99909-999-2-9, 221 pages, bibliography, index), and *Il Mediterraneo. Una rete interletteraria*. Ed. Dionyz Durisin and Armando Gnisci (Roma: Bulzoni <<http://www.bulzoni.it>>, 2000. ISBN 88-8319-470-5).

Since the tragedies of 11 September 2001 questions have been raised more insistently about the relevance of the literary world for a reality that has managed to surpass any fictional construction. Articles in academic journals and messages in literature-oriented discussion lists have brought to the foreground the sort of inferiority complex affecting literature with respect to cognitive domains that allegedly can boast of a substantial impact upon the urgent problems of real life. How can we working in the domain of literature -- authors, critics, publishers, scholars -- alleviate the troubles of the world through our profession? The ultimate answer, more often than not, seems to lie in the need for literature to rethink its mission. Literature can claim its right of survival by renouncing its primary identity and transcending its own object, as though nothing properly and primarily "literary" could, by definition, be convincingly "committed," "political," or "ethical" in itself without the additional support of a strong extraliterary discourse. Within the framework of this debate, a reading of the three books *Dialogues des cultures*, *The Literature of Malta*, and *Il Mediterraneo* can be particularly enlightening. In addition to refreshing a strictly academic discussion by providing innovative perspectives on the role of literary studies, they can offer a poignant answer to those larger ethical questions. The authors of and in these volumes show us how literature continues to be intrinsically political and relevant above all to the complexity of globalization, and even more so now that the recent horrors seem to have replaced the freedom to go towards the other with a fear of the other.

From the arguments in the three works, it is not simply literature and its study, but comparative literature in particular that emerges as a privileged medium to rethink the approach to other cultures. Comparative literature can and should teach us to question the self-sufficiency of ourselves as singular individuals and embodiments of a linguistic, national, geographic, religious identity, and to rethink ourselves and the other without losing our autonomy or dignity. The authors and contributors to the three volumes thus help us understand that it is not only with economic or political measures that a relationship with another culture can be established or improved. This can happen also, and above all, by means of communication through literature and language. Comparative literature becomes the catalyst for a dialogue which, even when it may appear difficult or impossible, must be sustained by a sort of Pascalian wager, the wager of succeeding in better understanding one another and in attaining mutual respect.

*Dialogues des cultures / Dialogues of Cultures* is a collection of papers originally presented at the XIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in 1985 in Paris. As the editors explain in their introduction, the gist of the volume is not so much to impose a common vision or methodology as to explore different ways in which literary and cultural frontiers can foster dialogue, creativity, and change, and to provide pragmatic and inductive answers. Authors in the two sections of the volume -- devoted to forms of dialogue between the Eastern and the Western traditions and to inter-European literary relations, respectively -- argue that the international dimension of comparative literature has transcended clearly its traditionally Eurocentric perspective and now encompasses the literature of the whole world. However, they also recognize that the question of literary relations and dialogue can no longer be conceived within the framework of precise geographic and political boundaries defining monolithic cultural realities. Rather, it is neces-

sary to rethink the comparative approach in a dynamic way, taking into account the pervasive phenomena of transnationality, multiculturalism, and plurilingualism.

The authors of the papers in the volume tackle such issues as the shift from the image of the West as bearer of culture to the acceptance of an intercultural exchange between East and West (in Bernard Hue's study of the French intellectual debates between the two wars), the epistemological and political implications of Shakespeare's Turkish translations during the westernization of the Ottoman Empire (where translation, as explored by Jale Parla, emerges as a process of appropriation and of ideological manipulation of a text as an authoritative pretext to legitimize the norms of the local cultural context), but also, at the same time, the progressive and transgressive effects of translation in the case of the model of self-affirmation that Rousseau's *Confessions* fostered in late nineteenth-century Japanese autobiographical literature (as Janet Walker discusses). Already from these selected references, we can grasp the presence of an alterity as integral part of the cultural, literary and linguistic identity of the authors or periods examined in the essays. Moreover, the emphasis on this intrinsic otherness is meant to pertain to both West and East, although the volume as a whole seems to concentrate more on the non-Western as a recipient of Western canons, rather than portraying it in equal measure as a source of inspiration and as an original provider of literary and cultural models.

Studies in *Dialogues des cultures* are not only about influences and reception (as in Liljana Pavlovic-Samurovic's treatment of the presence of *Don Quichotte* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Serbian prose; in Liliana Zancu's essay on Baudelaire's impact on Stuart Merrill and Tudor Arghezi; or in the case of Aragon's assimilation of German romanticism according to Ana Maria Delgado), but also with "convergences" (as in Debaprasad Bhattacharyya's study on the conceptual meeting points between the Indian concept of *rīti* and the Western concept of style; in the interaction of different novelistic forms in the making of baroque fiction in France, according to Maria Alzira Seixo; or in Tolstoy's and Ivo Andric's philosophy of history analyzed by Dragan Nedeljkovic), and "continuity" (for instance in S. Ade Ojo's study on the African novel and European characterization) between diverse cultures and literatures. By going beyond the mechanism of influence at the roots of literary relations, the volume thus endorses implicitly a non-hierarchical reconceptualization of the comparative approach in line with what Armando Gnisci illustrates as the principles of "literary democracy" and of "European decolonization" (*Il Mediterraneo* 18). The argumentation makes us aware of the risk of interpreting certain cultures as devoid of autonomy and of annihilating them in an allegedly reciprocal exchange. At the same time, it investigates what a real dialogue between cultures is, warning the critic against the danger of saying everything and anything about the "other" without having the tools for such an operation.

Therefore, the question in the title of Mona Abousenna's opening essay, "Cultures in Conflict or in Dialogue?" -- a *leitmotif* in the whole collection -- invites us not only to meditate upon the necessity of the intercultural model (well exemplified in Thomas Bleicher's essay on the paradigmatic reciprocal relations between European and Arab literature), but also to be sensitive to the complexity of questions it entails in each circumstance. In this respect, the conclusion of Hiam About Hussein's study on the contemporary Egyptian writer Tewfik El-Halim offers a symptomatic answer: "Les rapports culturels n'auront rien de conflictuel tant que chacun saura traiter l'autre en partenaire égal et non en subordonné" (101). These remarks can be equally insightful if connected to the linguistic choices at stake in the practice of comparative literature. The volume contains essays written in English, French, and German. Although, of course, far from representative of the linguistic plurality of literature at large, the presence of three different languages can remind us that there are and there should be alternatives to the more and more common tendency to adopt English as the esperanto of comparative literature criticism. Precisely because it has become impossible to think of culture and of literature outside transnationality, multiplicity, and creolization, it is equally appropriate to open up to linguistic plurality, to learn and to preserve more languages, rather than reducing all communication to one.

The dialogical and intercultural model emerging from *Dialogues des cultures*, as well as the privileged position of the comparative approach in this framework, seem tailored to the historical and current reality of Malta as Arnold Cassola discusses it in *The Literature of Malta* and further

confirm their effectiveness for an analysis of Mediterranean culture like the one proposed in the volume *Il Mediterraneo*. Cassola, in his *The Literature of Malta*, allows us to rediscover, or to familiarize ourselves for the first time, with the uniqueness of a literary production in six languages (Arabic, Latin, Sicilian, Italian, Maltese, English) belonging to three distinct linguistic families (Semitic, Romance, and Anglo-Saxon). Chapter by chapter, Cassola retraces the main stages of this phenomenon, delineating gradually the establishment of a national literary corpus in Maltese, from the first poetic achievements of Petrus Caxaro and Giovanni Francesco Bonamico to the migration theme in contemporary Maltese fiction, touching upon such issues as different representations of the Muslims, the nineteenth-century Maltese claim to an international dimension through the adoption of English, and of English romantic poetic models, as well as the endorsement of Italian and Manzoni's historical novel, to name a few.

To linger on the interaction and cross-fertilization of languages in these texts is extremely fascinating. But only if we enrich the linguistic dimension with an attention to the larger cultural question that goes hand in hand with it, are we able to appreciate fully what Cassola presents explicitly as the success of Maltese literature in bringing together ways of life, values, and creeds often deemed incompatible. With mere textual evidence -- so precious especially for the reader who is new to Maltese literature -- without theorizing at length on the issues presented (which is not the aim of the book), the author succeeds in demonstrating how in a complex microcosm like Malta -- a land of emigration, conquests, immigration, and continual exchanges -- literature has accomplished a syncretism and a cohabitation which, as Cassola underlines, failed in so many other places when pursued through political means. Cassola does not overlook the concrete problems entailed by the Maltese melting pot. Conflict is as present in the social texture as dialogue is in the literary corpus. However, the problems of the real world become for Cassola also a way of reflecting even more on the important role of literature and culture in the effort to overcome strife, and to preserve the peculiarities of a nation or region while remaining aware that "no country can live on its own or consider itself superior to others" (iii). The role of culture -- as Cassola reiterates -- is that of fostering understanding rather than imposition. A multi-cultural society is such only if it succeeds in treating diversity as a source of enrichment, and if it harmonizes differences rather than assimilating them. Therefore, the Maltese connection between different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural heritages cannot correspond to the model of the bridge, insofar as the bridge implicitly acknowledges a preexisting isolation, nor to that of the hub, because this for Cassola would be tantamount to accepting the center-periphery dichotomy (iv). Hence, we are back to the non-hierarchical intercultural model that I mention earlier with regard to *Dialogues des cultures* and that in the case of Cassola is best synthesized by the European Union's motto "Unity in Diversity." With its literary and cultural harmonious blend, Cassola's Malta can offer an exemplary testimony of what the idea of Europe can accomplish starting from the recognition of its own plurality.

At the same time, however, the Maltese focal point of a dialogue between different cultures is not only a living embodiment of an ideal European Union but also a microcosm of what Dionyz Durisin and Armando Gnisci illustrate in their edited volume *Il Mediterraneo. Una rete interletteraria* with their study of the Mediterranean basin according to the concepts of "interletterarietà" (interliterariness), "centrismo interletterario" (interliterary centrism), and "comunità interletteraria" (interliterary community) (on Durisin's notion of interliterariness see Marián Gálik's "Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature" in *CLCWeb* 2.4 (2000): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/8/>>). With respect to the idea of Europe which, despite its undefined boundaries and components, seems to remain anchored to a precise continental reality, the Mediterranean as an entity evokes, historically and geographically, a network of cultures belonging to three different continents, a hybrid space where Europe has always encountered and continues to encounter the cultures of Africa and the Orient. Therefore, as Malta shows us in Cassola's volume, the Mediterranean justifies and requires a comparative approach. For their part, the essays collected in *Il Mediterraneo* -- the result of a collaborative research project between the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Science and the Comparative Literature section of the Department of Italian Literature and Performing Arts of the University of Rome "La Sapienza" -- bring to the foreground important methodological and epistemological implications

that can be drawn from a study of the Mediterranean and can be extended to the comparative and intercultural investigation of any other literary space as a middle ground between national literature and world literature.

First of all, in Durisin's definition of the Mediterranean as interliterary centrism the geographic element remains crucial. It is only by adopting a precise territorial criterion that it is possible for Durisin to study the distinctive features of Mediterranean literatures and their evolution through intercontinental relationships with neighboring cultures (Durisin "Le relazioni intercontinentali nel processo letterario e culturale mediterraneo," 29-39). Although the phenomenon of interliterary centrism is not represented exclusively by the Mediterranean, as Milos Zelenka underlines ("Il centrismo mediterraneo nella letteratura céca" 90), the intercontinental element that characterizes the Mediterranean civilization at all stages of its expansion makes the Mediterranean a particularly relevant instance of centrism precisely because of its persistent cultural heterogeneity. A good portion of the essays, indeed, are devoted to the presence of the Mediterranean tradition in specific national literatures and cultures, from Portugal, Italy, and Greece to Eastern Europe and Russia (see essays by Dorovský, Koprda, Ilinskaia, Skoviera, Zelenka, Pospíšil, Celnarová, Prozogina, Riauzova). In its own migration, the Mediterranean culture can thus be considered, as Gnisci claims, "figura concreta della letteratura mondiale" ("a concrete figure of world literature") (Gnisci, "Premessa in memoria di Dionýz Durisin" 17), since, as an important step in the expanding interliterary process, it anticipates the most comprehensive and ultimate interliterary community, precisely world literature.

The Mediterranean as a new geographical and cultural unit requires, as Ján Koska observes, a pluralist and dialogical vision of literature as encounter and exchange ("La letteratura mondiale come processo di appropriazione letteraria" 23). This entails -- in line with what we saw in *Dialogues des cultures* -- the need to abandon the traditional comparative study based upon influences, which is, allegedly, still charged with an evaluative nuance and is caught in the tug of war between dominating and subaltern literatures (see Durisin "Convergenze tra le ricerche italiane e slovacche sull'interletterarietà" 176-77). The most appropriate role for the comparatist who has to deal with the gradual evolution of literature towards more general forms is, rather, that of the messenger and bearer of a double diversity, the diversity of the other culture and of his/her own.

This reformulation of the task of the comparatist thus underscores the full meaning of the prefix "inter" in the adjective "interliterary." It defines a relationship founded upon equality and reciprocity, and able to preserve different identities. It is from this new perspective that comparative literature can introduce a communicative and collaborative dimension, which Armando Gnisci defines as "reciproca ospitalità" ("reciprocal hospitality") ("La letteratura comparata come forma di decolonizzazione" 43). By promoting "*un sapere dell'incontro*" ("a knowledge of the encounter") (42) in which linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions remain alive and circulate, comparative literature can begin to work -- according to Gnisci -- as a discipline of decolonization. It can help non-Western cultures disenfranchise themselves from the imperialism of Western thought. Yet, it can no less foster a process of self-criticism and transformation of the Western intellectual tradition leading, for instance, to Europe's decolonization from itself (44) and to a rediscovery of ourselves as part of a general *métissage* (45).

Thoughtful and stimulating as it is, the overall picture that we get from these three works might at times be perceived as somewhat utopian and Gnisci himself, for example, does not exclude this possibility. It will ultimately be up to each reader to take a position with respect to this issue. However, in the light of prophetic statements like the following one by Cassola, which foreshadows the disaster that has inaugurated the twenty-first century -- "Tolerance and the respect of diversity must be the hallmark of all, if we do not want to experience anew the tragedies that Europe and the world have been through during the twentieth century" (*The Literature of Malta* iii) -- even supposedly utopian nuances can spark the desire to transform a dream into a concrete cultivation of reciprocity through literary practice. *Dialogues des cultures*, *The Literature of Malta*, and *Il Mediterraneo* do not only convince us that comparative literature is anything but a discipline in crisis. They also trail new critical paths and assign far more encouraging and promising tasks to

comparatists than what we had read in the "Bernheimer Report" (*Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

Reviewer's Profile: Nicoletta Pireddu teaches Italian and comparative literature at Georgetown University. In her research and publications, Pireddu focuses on literary theory and on European literatures and cultures from the nineteenth-century to the present. She is the author of *Antropologi alla corte della bellezza. Decadenza ed economia simbolica nell'Europa fin de siècle* (2002), a book on the relationships between decadent aesthetics and the anthropological discourse in turn-of-the-century European culture, with emphasis on the connections between beauty and gift-economy and of numerous articles on decadence, modernism, and postmodernism. E-mail: <[pireddun@georgetown.edu](mailto:pireddun@georgetown.edu)>.