

The center and the margins

Carlos M. F. da Cunha

Abstract

In this article, we propose a reflection about two recent histories of literature, the *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* (2010) and the *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* (1993-2010). In the first, which is spatially/topographically oriented and has a revisionist purpose, Portuguese literature emerges (geographically) decentered and (temporally) fragmented. The latter offers a summary of all the knowledge accumulated through the historiography of Portuguese literature, from a critical standpoint. Apropos of both, we put to question the possibilities of connection between space, history and literature.

Literary history has been experiencing a process of critical review since a few decades, with a variety of renewing trends originating from different sectors. In one of the latest issues of the electronic journal *Acta fabula*¹, there is an intense reflection about the renovation projects of literary history in France, in particular about *The French global: A New Approach to Literary History* (McDonald and Suleiman), where the re-reading of the history of French literature is suggested from a world/global perspective, taking into consideration the cultural interaction that it engaged in with other cultures at an international level since the Middle Ages until the contemporary world of "francophony". It is a revolutionary history that breaks away from the nationalist logic and the idea of continuity that make up the background of traditional literary histories, thus emphasizing circulation and exchange across the planet².

This tendency towards reading and interpreting literary works in a transnational/global perspective is one of the major guidelines of literary historiography in the USA. For instance, Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Bell, coordinators of *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007), claim that American literature is transnational, something which is visible in the

multiculturalism of a presumed homogeneous American canon. Additionally, they assume that it is not justifiable to study American literature in isolation in the era of globalization. Bearing this perspective in mind, they root their analysis in its connections with Western Africa, Eastern Europe, Iran, Iraq, India, China, Mexico and Australia.

These new histories fit into the *transnational turn*, which characterizes the main reforming guideline of present-day literary historiography. On the other hand, the debasement of the "great narratives" of the modern times (Jean-François Lyotard) and the spatialization of time and of historiography in post-modernism (as mentioned by Fredric Jameson) have reflected in the primacy conferred to the spatial dimension, particularly in the field of post-colonial studies and comparative literature. It is in fact legitimate to speak about a (re)invention of "literary geography", resulting from the shift of literary studies from a temporal framework (i.e., literary history) towards a spatial model whose scale has become worldwide/global.

This connection, which relegates to a secondary position the traditional temporal/chronological perspective, has a productive effect, as observed by Moretti: "Geography is (...) an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth" (3). It is upon this assumption that lies his proposal to create a "literary geography":

"Making the connection between geography and literature explicit, then—mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible—will allow us to see some significant relationship that have so far escaped us" (*ibid.*).

To some extent, this corresponds to the "production of space" (2000), as theorized by Henri Lefebvre. Literary history, inasmuch as it is linked to the representations of space, which are coded practices bound to knowledge and power (political, economic and epistemological), plays a key role in the production of literary spaces and the corresponding representations. Indeed, romantic geopoetics and historical poetics used to link literary production to the national spaces and even came to establish a literary cartography for Europe which opposed northern literatures to southern literatures. The recent reappearance of the concept of world/global literature is connected with the process of globalization, and in particular with the internationalization of the literary market.

The *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*³, which is an innovative exercise of literary historiography, fits mostly into this framework, starting with its revisionist purpose, which is accomplished through the use of a geographic/topographic model⁴.

In this work, the Iberian Peninsula is conceived as a(n) (arranged) literary space, with a complex plurality of cultures, languages, identities, nationalities and populations (nomadic, refugee

and migratory), in its connections with other spaces such as the American, European, African, Mediterranean and Atlantic⁵. The result is a kind of map of the *literary space* of the Iberian Peninsula:

***Cities, cultural centers and enclaves:**

- in Castille, (metonymy for) Spain.
- in the "historical nationalities" (enclaves) and in their cultural centers: Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia.

***Cities, cultural centers and peripheries (*extra-peninsular and insular*):**

- the construction of the literary city in the lusophone Africa;
- the south of Spain;
- the Canary Islands;
- the Atlantic lusophone islands: Cape Verde, Madeira and Azores.

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this comparative history is not as much "to trace a thorough itinerary of the different literatures" as it is to provide an understanding of the Iberian Peninsula as a complex and dynamic network of inter-relations (2010: xi). Hence, great relevance is assigned to the issues of multilingualism and spoken language, to the connections between the time frames and the literary inter-systems:

“a decentralized and ‘multipolar’ approximation to the question being elaborated, resulting in the configuration of a literary map with defined contours by the end of six chapters.” (*id.*: xii).

It is nonetheless necessary to observe that the histories of national literatures, focused on a narrative (more or less teleological), ranging from the Middle Ages to the Contemporary Era, with their representative authors and their national canon, are deliberately absent from this work. That is the case of the Portuguese literature, for instance. The geographical map has thus taken over history and replaced it. It can only be found in fragments, apropos of some themes, without the possibility of being arranged into an organic unity. Nothing here allows for a "history of Portuguese literature", except for its absence. This changes everything, because it breaks new ground for an "unthought" itinerary of Portuguese literature, in a transnational framework.

In this comparative history of the Iberian Peninsula, the choice for the primacy of geography has to do with the will to cross national boundaries. Therefore it focuses on the study of the cultural centers (cities, enclaves or peripheries), which enable a detour from the perspective of national territories and the relegation of "national literatures" to a secondary place. On the other hand, the relevance assigned to the 19th and 20th centuries is far inferior in comparison with the preceding periods (i.e., the Middle Ages), which favors the transnational perspective⁶ by going back to ages preceding the forging of nation states.

The innovative aspect of this work thus lies in the fact that it chooses a spatial explanatory model (geographic/topographic) over the chronological time of the traditional narrative (causal, organicist and teleological), relying on a hypertextual-type discourse organization⁷. The collective authorship of this new literary history underscores its heterogeneity, privileging multiplicity and micro-history to the detriment of the entirety of "great narratives". It thus comes close to that which David Perkins coined as "post-modern" literary history:

"Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense, it is not history." (60).

Indeed, the new comparative literary histories avoid a unified history and seek to pinpoint the literary cultures to heterogeneous spaces, which is why they could be accused of not producing *history*. According to David Perkins, this is a central issue concerning the possibility of literary history as a discipline and the great dilemma faced by every literature historian:

"We must perceive a past age as relatively unified if we are to write literary history; we must perceive it as highly diverse if what we write is to represent it plausibly." (27).

In a famous study, Roland Barthes wondered about the feasibility of connecting history and literature ("Histoire ou littérature?"), and René Wellek went as far as to question the possibility of literary history as a discipline⁸. Now, considering the new spatial models of literary historiography, we can redirect the question: to which extent is it possible to reconcile geography and literature; is literary geography possible? In other words, can literature be conceived without history?⁹

The examples of post-modern literary history that Perkins refers to¹⁰ are further characterized by a national framework of reference, identifiable for the connoisseur of the traditional literary histories. However, in the spatial model, the "nation" (the center) is deliberately marginalized, in the name of the attention devoted to the "margins". In the Portuguese case, central attention is paid to the extra-peninsular peripheries (the national islands and Cape Verde; the

lusophone Africa). We thus become deprived from the temporal and national references that underlay the constitution of the history of Portuguese literature.

Without downgrading the merit of the spatial perspective, we must keep in mind that literature has organized itself historically and on the discourse plane of literary history (national). Indeed, the matrix of literary history, of eighteenth-century origin, is linked to the "national literature" and structured around the idea of nation and national history. Literature itself emerged in connection with the European nation states. Portuguese writers, as in other countries, have since Romanticism embraced the patriotic mission of founding a literature and a culture focused on the nation. Since then, and until approximately two decades ago, Portuguese history eventually became the central topic of Portuguese literature, which is particularly visible in a vast set of literary groups and movements that attempted to portray Portugal and offered solutions to regenerate the country from the decadence that it was diagnosed with (in particular since Herculano). Suffice to remember Romanticism, the *Geração de 70* (group of rebellious Portuguese intellectuals committed to social and artistic reform), the *Neogarretismo* (literary revival inspired by author Almeida Garrett), the *Saudosismo* (literary movement inspired by the feeling of nostalgia), the Portuguese Renaissance, the Lusitanian Integralism, etc.

Most of the times, they reacted sharply to extremely sensitive political contexts and in connection with widespread movements (often leading them) of reaction to political and economic crises and threats posed by foreign powers, as in the decade of 90, with the combination of the *Ultimatum*, the Republican revolution of 1891 and the crisis of the liberal state and the public finances, which for the most part explains the cultural and literary nationalist trends that extended into the first decades of the 20th century. Likewise, the First World War and the crises of the First Republic, among other factors, explain the increasing strength of that nationalism.

The modern literary studies, dominated by the discourse of literary history, have become institutionalized in higher education and secondary education under the banner of the romantic concept of national literature, connecting itself in its origin and evolution with the concept of national identity, and in its ideological commitments with the modern nation states. Literary history has thus contributed towards the modeling of the "awareness of national identity" (Moisan 66) in terms of ideology, ethics, civism and morality. Therefore, the teaching system became harmonized with the process of nationalization of literature and intensified it. In Portugal, the syllabuses and textbooks of secondary teaching until 1974 (already since 1895) reveal increasing nationalism and patriotism in school training, as education was deemed a factor of national regeneration. In this view, national literature, with its literary canon of great authors, proved to be a powerful instrument of socialization and training of young citizens according to the official image of the nation. From that perspective, literary history presented itself as a narrative that offered a kind of self-portrait of

the nation (Neubauer). It was the connection established between literary history and the issue of national identity that defined the purpose of this discipline throughout the 19th and 20th centuries¹¹, since its foundation. Thus, despite the successive attempts at renovation, leaning more towards either literature or history, the model of literary history remained stable (national, based on a chronology and on a canon).

The culmination of these efforts is present in the recent *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* (expected to include nine volumes), coordinated by Carlos Reis and with specific coordinators for each volume¹². It is not intended, as claimed by this author, to replace the traditional literary histories, but to "undertake anthological-type collections" in order to provide the reader with "the contact with different critical approaches on authors, works, periods and generations" so as to produce a "polyphony of critical voices that will stimulate the readers-students to utter their own critical discourse"¹³. This work is characterized by a spirit of remarkable openness, whilst at the same time retaining the traditional periods, with their canonic authors. Therefore, it is able to afford, within its own patterns, the type of critical thinking about the history of the literature produced over the course of a century and a half.

There is an immeasurable distance between the *Critical History of Portuguese Literature* and the *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*. The absence of Portuguese literature from this work contrasts with its tridimensional presence in the *Critical History*. These extreme examples illustrate the (im)possibilities of literary history and of the comparative geography of literatures. The spatial/topographic model of the *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* shows us what "literature" (in a broad sense) might have been, but in a different political framework, which would imply the existence of a "literature" independent from the nation states. In reality, however, that was not the case. Despite its weaknesses, it is in literary history (with its diversity) that literature and Portuguese literature in particular find their space. We are left with the issue of knowing what might result from the combination of both models, geography with history, offering an account of the unity and diversity, the identity and plurality, the continuities and ruptures, the national/local specificities as well as their interaction with other literatures, with other ages and spaces – indeed, a model that would provide an account of the margins, without transforming them into a new center.

¹ *Acta fabula*, 13.1, 2012; <http://www.fabula.org/revue>.

² Cf. Jean-Louis Jeannelle, "Le global, le national & le planétaire", *Acta Fabula*, Dossier critique: "Histoires littéraires", URL : <http://www.fabula.org/revue/document6741.php>.

³ Coordinated by Fernando Cabo, Anxo Abuín González and César Domínguez, 2010, vol. I.

⁴ This work is part of the comparative histories of the *International Comparative Literary Association*, which began being published in 1967, with nearly 30 volumes published thus far (cf. http://www.benjamins.com/cgi-bin/t_seriesview.cgi?series=CHLEL; accessed on 3/9/2011). Its main goal is to create a transnational perspective of the literary cultures of vast regions. Its spatial orientation emerged in 1986 and characterized the latter volumes.

⁵ Cf. Feldman 134-5.

⁶ In his review of this work, David Gies stresses this preference for pre-national eras: "Is this volume weighed more heavily on pre-modern languages and literatures than on more modern issues (which seem to leak in near the end)? Perhaps, but this might be a result of the fact that there existed more cross-fertilization of linguistic systems, more natural comparativist writing during a time when political and geographical borders were more fungible." (55)

⁷ The spatial/topographic model of this history is inspired by Mario Valdés and the work *Literary Cultures of Latin America. The Comparative History* (3 vols.), coordinated by Valdés and Djelal Kadir, which postulates the possibility of creating new literary and cultural spaces.

⁸ "Is it possible to write literary history, that is, something that is simultaneously literary and a history?" (Wellek 315)

⁹ "It is conceivable to think of university scholarly study (*Wissenschaft*) of literature 'after history'?" (Bahti 292).

¹⁰ The *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (Emory Elliot *et alii*, 1987) and the *New History of French Literature* (Denis Hollier ed., 1989).

¹¹ In the transition period from the 19th to the 20th century, Gustave Lanson maintained the scientific renovation of the humanities and the application of scientific rigor to literary history, but further emphasized its civic, moral and national dimension (56)

¹² Vol.1: The Middle Ages by Aida Fernanda Dias; Vol.2: Humanism and renaissance by José Augusto Cardoso Bernardes; Vol.3: Mannerism and baroque by Maria Lucília Gonçalves Pires and José Adriano de Carvalho; Vol.4: Neoclassicism and pre-romanticism by Rita Marnoto; Vol.5: Romanticism by Carlos Reis and Maria da Natividade Pires; Vol.6: Realism and naturalism by Maria Aparecida Ribeiro; Vol.7: From the end of the century to modernism by José Carlos Seabra Pereira; Vol.8: Modernism (unpublished); Vol.9: From Neo-realism to post-modernism by Carlos Reis.

¹³ These quotes were taken from the "Presentation" by Carlos Reis, which is included in the beginning of each volume.

Works cited

Bahti, Timothy. *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1992.

Barthes, Roland. "Histoire ou littérature ?". *Sur Racine*. Paris: Seuil, 1979 [1960], pp. 137-57.

Cabo Aseguinolaza, Fernando, Abuín González, Anxo e Domínguez, César (ed.s). *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, vl. I. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2010.

_____, Editor's preface. Cabo Aseguinolaza, Fernando, Abuín González, Anxo e Domínguez, César (ed.s) ix-xii.

Dimock, Wai Chee e Buell, Lawrence (ed.s). *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007

Feldman, Sharon. "Introduction: The Iberian Peninsula as a literary space". Cabo Aseguinolaza, Fernando, Abuín González, Anxo, Domínguez, César (ed.s) 133-7.

Gies, David T.. *Review* of Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín González e César Domínguez, ed.s. *Recherche Littéraire/Literary Research*, vl. 27 – Summer 2011, 51-5.

Lanson, Gustave. *Essais de Méthode, de Critique et d' Histoire Littéraire*, ed. e pref. de Henri Peyre. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1965.

Lefebvre, Henri. *La production de l'espace*, 4^a ed. Paris: Anthropos, 2000 [1974].

González, Anxo Abuín e Varela, Anxo Tarrío, ed.s. *Bases metodológicas para unha historia comparada das literaturas na Península Ibérica*. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2004.

McDonald, Christie e Suleiman, Susan (ed.s). *The French global: A New Approach to Literary History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Moisan, Clément. *L' histoire littéraire*. Paris: P.U.F., 1990.

Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900*. London/New York: Verso 1999 [1998].

Perkins, David. *Is Literary History Possible ?* Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins U. P., 1992.

Reis, Carlos (ed.). *História Crítica da Literatura Portuguesa*, 8 vl.s. Lisboa: Verbo, 1993-2010.

Valdés, Mario e Kadir, Djelal (ed.s). *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, 3 vol.s. New York: Oxford U. P., 2004.

Wellek, René. *Teoria da Literatura*. Lisboa: Edições Europa-América, s/d.

Bio-synopsis

Carlos Manuel Ferreira da Cunha is an Associate Professor with habilitation at the University of Minho (Braga, Portugal; carmel@ilch.uminho.pt), where he teaches Theory of Literature and Cultural Studies; some of his publications include: *The (im)possible worlds of Vergílio Ferreira* (2000; Lisboa: Difel), *The construction of literary history discourse in 19th century Portuguese literature* (2002; Braga: Centro de Estudos Humanísticos/Universidade do Minho) and *The geography(ies) of literature: from national towards global* (2011; Guimarães: Opera Omnia). He is currently studying into the issue of world literature and preparing a critical history of literary history in the 20th century (in Portugal).