CLASSIQUES
GARNIER

LOMBARDI (Chiara), « Towards a Contemporary Humanism. The Role of Comparative Literature », *Le Comparatisme comme approche critique. Objets, méthodes et pratiques comparatistes / Objects, Methods, Practices*, Tome 3, *Objets, méthodes et pratiques comparatistes / Objects, Methods, Practices*, p. 233-251

DOI : 10.15122/isbn.978-2-406-06530-2.p.0233

La diffusion ou la divulgation de ce document et de son contenu via Internet ou tout autre moyen de communication ne sont pas autorisées hormis dans un cadre privé.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier, Paris.
Reproduction et traduction, même partielles, interdites.
Tous droits réservés pour tous les pays.

RÉSUMÉ – L'article interroge le rôle de la littérature comparée dans l'élaboration d'un humanisme renouvelé.

ABSTRACT – The article interrogates the role of Comparative Literature in the elaboration of a renewed humanism.

TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY HUMANISM

The Role of Comparative Literature

In the development of the European and, in general, the Western idea of literature, humanism is a fundamental notion for textual reception and exegesis. Beyond the historical and literary context we refer to when we speak of humanism, however, nowadays the concept of humanism has taken on many different meanings regarding human beings, education and culture[1].

Going beyond the positions of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger[2], the past years of debate have shown a renewed interest in humanism (which has often been revisited under the labels of "neo-humanism", "contemporary humanism" etc.), in relation to different social factors such as globalization, the September 11th attacks, the economic crisis, and a more blurred European identity[3]. September 11th, in

1 See the following authors: R. S. Crane, *The Idea of Humanities and Other Essays Critical and Historical*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1968; Edgar Morin, *La Complexité humaine*, Paris, Champs Flammarion, 1994; Tony Davies, *Humanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997; Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004; Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* [1946], Paris, Gallimard, 1996; Martin Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* [1947], Frankfurt am Main, Klosterman, 2000. Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers* Brief über den Humanismus, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999.

3 Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006; Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006; Matthew Abraham, "Edward Said and After. Toward a New Humanism", in *Cultural Critique*, vol. 67, 2007, p. 1-12; Ihab Hassan, "Janglican. National Literatures in the Age of Globalization", in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 34, nº 2, 2010, p. 271-280; Peter I. Barta, *The Fall of the Iron Curtain and the Culture of Europe*, New York, Routledge, 2013.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

particular, represents the absolutely tragic event that made humanity completely rethink itself, its history, its culture and its modalities and strategies of representation. As Dominique Janicaud argues in *L'homme va-t-il dépasser l'humain?*, humanity cannot stop questioning itself, its role and its responsibility in the world; it does so through the lens of humanism[4].

At the same time, the opening of geographic boundaries may represent a cultural challenge as it encourages a more immediate and direct communication between "authors" and "consumers", with the exchange of their traditional roles (nowadays, within social networks, we are all simultaneously "authors" and "consumers"). Economic reasoning, besides, has grown so powerful and pervasive as to influence the artistic and cultural fields by conditioning aesthetic values through the common logic of selling. If we cannot limit these tendencies, we should nevertheless keep on discussing the sense of literary and artistic traditions, as well as the reshaping of canons, especially in order to orient teaching and research in the humanities. Another problem is constituted by the societal tendency to undervalue the humanities, and to reduce the funding for research and projects in the field, something which grounds the necessity of finding new strategies and modalities of work in the humanities[5].

Instead of giving a precise definition of humanism, therefore, I think we would do better to consider, as Tony Davies suggests, "why and how [...] meaning *matters*, and for whom[6]". Perhaps we should ask ourselves, in the footsteps of Edward Said, "how [we may] view humanism as an activity in light of its past and of its probable future[7]".

In general, we feel the necessity of (re)thinking and (re)shaping a shared humanistic culture, starting from the meaning and value of the past. From this point of view, Comparative Literature studies – implying a dialogue not only between literatures, but also between different arts, cultures and disciplines – have had and continue to have, as we hope, a fundamental role in enhancing our cultural heritage and its

4 Dominique Janicaud, *L'homme va-t-il dépasser l'humain?*, Paris, Bayard, 2002, p. 13.

5 The question has been widely discussed as "The Fate of Disciplines" in the monographic issue of *Critical Inquiry*: James Chandler and Arnold I. Davidson, eds., "The Fate of Disciplines", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, nº 4, 2009.

6 Tony Davies, *Humanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 6.

7 Said, op. cit., p. 7.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

relationships with human beings, while remapping geographical and historical borders[8].

As we read in the miscellaneous volume dedicated to Manfred Schmeling, *Komparatistik als Humanwissenschaft*:

> The question of the human as a subject-matter of comparative literature can be specified in different ways. How does literature shape the human(e), in which ways does literature design "man" as an individual or a species? In which way do studies of literature contribute to the theoretical discourse upon the human? Which ethical dimensions are inherent to its techniques and methods of representation? The question of the humane, its conditions and cultural manifestations can be seen as the central challenge of other scholarly discourses employing comparison, especially culture studies and history of law. It is, among other things, a motivating factor of a differentiating and comparative view of science itself, its initial questions, its methods and models of depiction[9].

In one of the volume's most persuasive essays, Jean Bessière analyzes the relation between literature and the "humane", trying to overcome the contraposition between universalism and relativism. More specifically, he highlights the opportunities provided by Comparative Studies for the connecting of cultural differences with the universalism of humanism, and the self-reflexivity and autonomy of the work of art with the real world as with society and life[10].

In general and as shown by the quotation above, many of the questions raised by the debate about "humanism today" or "contemporary humanism" cross problems connected with World Literature, such as the relationships between what has always been considered the center of Western culture and the so-called peripheries (especially post-colonial cultures). Other primary issues include the relationships between ethics and esthetics, or between literature and human science, history and law, etc.

Starting from these premises and questions, I aim to explore the notion of a contemporary humanism, focusing on the cultural and

8 See Hassan, op. cit. and Remo Ceserani and Giuliana Benvenuti, *La letteratura nell'età globale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2012.

9 Monika Schmitz-Emans, Claudia Schmitt and Christian Winterhalter, eds., *Komparatistik als Humanwissenschaft*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2008, p. 26-27.

10 Jean Bessière, "Littérature comparée, humanisme, réflexivité, lieu commun", in Monika Schmitz-Emans, Claudia Schmitt and Christian Winterhalter, eds., *Komparatistik als Humanwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 265-274.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

methodological role of Comparative Literature in defining and studying the concept. By concentrating on different languages, texts, genres and forms in their relationships and synchronic or diachronic transformations, Comparative Literature represents – as I will try to demonstrate – the dialogic discipline *par excellence* for reading both the present and the literary tradition, and, in general, the *human*.

CONTEMPORARY HUMANISM AS "ANTI-HUMANISTIC HUMANISM"

The traditional concept of humanism is connected to a precise historical period, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and to the revival of the classics under the stimulus of scholars such as Francesco Petrarca, Giovanni Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Pietro Pomponazzi and many others. Thanks to the achievement of philology, the classics were no longer considered merely as moral lessons, but were rediscovered through new methodologies and approaches. This conception of humanism involved the emancipation of the classics from the religious sphere, but also entailed – as Eugenio Garin, Oskar Kristeller and Ernst Cassirer argued in the twentieth century – the development of a philosophy (or a religion) of man bent on glorifying civic life under the banner of knowledge. From the historical notion of humanism we move on to an idea of humanism as an ideology celebrating man and his artistic and literary production, and believing in history and in progress as deployments of spiritual freedom[11].

This latter concept of humanism had already been strongly undermined, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, by the positions of authors such as Leopardi, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Conrad and Woolf, up to Beckett, Grass and others, whose works generally challenged the positive value of human rationality, progress and history. From the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud and Lacan – despite their

11 See Eugenio Garin, *Der italienische Humanismus*, Bern, Franke, 1947; also see Ernst Cassirer and P. Oskar Kristeller, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1971.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

differences – stems the idea of history as the deployment of irrational instances acting without any positive purpose and often against humanity itself[12]. These positions form the notion of *anti-humanism*, a concept that was destined to be supported, tragically, by the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century (the World Wars, Nazism, the Holocaust, the absolutist regimes, etc.). These events radically changed the concept of the human being, of reason (Kantian reason *in primis*) and of dignity, implying the necessity of new definitions of the *human*, connected to language, culture, nature, body and beauty, and especially in relation to art and literature[13].

As is well known, in *Minima Moralia* T. W. Adorno stated that after Auschwitz it was barbaric to write poetry; nevertheless, he admitted the possibility of expressing "perennial suffering" in the form of narration, showing "in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature[14]". What we may gather from the failure of Eugenio Garin's notion of a traditional humanism as an ideal community[15], thus, is a new agreement between writers and readers, involving the need to redefine (or, if necessary, to demolish) certain boundaries, and to create a new human "common denominator" based on our cultural heritage (as stated by Vargas Llosa[16]).

It is, therefore, from the convergence between *humanism* and *anti-humanism*, and from the necessity of being "critical of humanism in the name of humanism[17]", that art and literature may express their civil value through self-critical positions. Said encouraged the following:

> […] a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past from Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and

12 Here it is fundamental to consider Lyotard: Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Paris, Galilée, 1988. English trans. by Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.

13 See, among others, Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

14 Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment", in *Esthetics and Politics*, London / New York, NLB, 1977, p. 188.

15 Eugenio Garin, *Der italienische Humanismus*, op. cit.

16 Mario Vargas Llosa, "*È pensabile il mondo moderno senza il romanzo?*", in Franco Moretti, ed., Il Romanzo, vol. I (La cultura del romanzo), Turin, Einaudi, 2001, p. 3-15.

17 Said, op. cit., p. 10.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

> still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused[18].

Although Said recognizes in European humanism the potential danger of identitarian thinking, he nevertheless claims an *anti-humanistic humanism* based on literary language's fundamental capacity to create dialogue, positive "disturbance" and conflicts of ideas, and at the same time to fight against strong ideologies[19]. As Mitchell explained,

> Humanism for Said was always a dialectical concept, generating oppositions it could neither absorb nor avoid. The very word used to cause in him mixed feelings of reverence and revulsion: an admiration for the great monuments of civilization that constitute the archive of humanism and a disgust at humanism's underside of suffering and oppression that, as Benjamin insisted, make them monuments to barbarism as well[20].

If we cannot give up on literature and art, what becomes more and more important is to rethink the role of humanism in a wider dialogic cultural field, by finding new critical spaces of connection between philology (taken literally as "the love of words") and philosophy (taken literally as "the love of thoughts[21]"). This assumption implies the central role of texts and language on the one hand, and of reading on the other. Philology is "a science of reading[22]", as Said recalls in the chapter entitled "Return to Philology" referring to Giambattista Vico, Nietzsche and Poirier. Accordingly,

> A true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us. In this view of language, then, words are not passive markers or signifiers

18 Id., p. 11.

19 This is a position that has been reasserted by post-colonial scholars and discussed and thematized by John M. Coetzee in many of his novels and essays. See Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing History", in *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 197-221; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007.

20 William John Thomas Mitchell, "Secular Divination. Edward Said's Humanism", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, nº 2, 2005, p. 462-471, here, p. 462. Also see Matthew Abraham, "Edward Said and After", op. cit.

21 Edward Said, op. cit., p. 57-58.

22 Id., p. 58.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

> standing in unassumingly for a higher reality; they are, instead, an integral formative part of the reality itself[23].

Not only are words a historical product well-confined in a geographical space, but words also live – as linguistics and semiotics have demonstrated – in a wider system of relations and meanings. This assumption gives humanism a plural identity. Literary language, besides – as it is polysemic, complex and opaque in its meanings – reveals powerful energy in struggling against prejudice and identitarian thinking:

> Humanism is about reading, it is about perspective, and, in our work as humanists, it is about transitions from one realm, one area of human experience to another. It is also about the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment. That deployment of an alternative identity is what we do when we read and when we connect parts of the texts to other parts and when we go on to expand the area of attention to include widening circles of pertinence[24].

MAN, LANGUAGE AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Let us consider, furthermore, that the word *humanism* comes from *human* and implies – as stressed by Lévinas – "the recognition of an invariable essence named 'Man[25]'". I would like to refer this *essence* to two important cultural points that stem from the classical and biblical tradition: first, the sentence "*Homo sum. Nihil humani a me alienum puto*" ("I am a human being, and nothing that is human I consider foreign to me"), pronounced by the character of Cremete in the Latin comedy *Heauton Timorumenos* by Terence[26]; second, the saying "*Ecce homo*[27]", pronounced by Pontius Pilate in showing the scourged body of Christ to the Judeans. Behind the expression *nihil humani a me alienum* we

23 Id., p. 59.

24 Id., p. 80.

25 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1963. English trans. by Seán Hand, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, London, The Athlone Press, 1990, p. 277.

26 Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, Act I, line 77 (translation mine).

27 *The Bible*, Gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 5.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

may gather, obviously in the broadest sense, the might of literature to recount and represent the wide human score, from nobility to abjection, and from greatness to foolishness and wickedness.

Nevertheless, the concept of *man* and the *human* should not bring us to "essentialism", but to the importance of language ("the concrete universality of language[28]"), with particular reference to the literary language and its strategies. In *Janglican: National Literatures in the Age of Globalization*, Ihab Hassan puts it very effectively:

> […] the literary imagination, though it may require a local habitation and name, spurns walls, boundaries, borders; it infiltrates the human heart everywhere as well as black holes in space; its horizon is the edge of the universe. Literature remains the best way – the best way short of love – to inhabit the life of another. How else could literature, could any art, affect us to the root of our being[29]?

From this point of view, Bakhtin's studies on Rabelais and the *carnavalesque*, and on Dostoevsky's characters, represent a fundamental point of reference. The Russian novelist is celebrated for the "polyphonic", "dialogic" construction of his "heroes": we may only think of Myskhin in *The Idiot*, the dreamer in *White Nights*, the main characters of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*[30]. Behind the astonishing figure of Holbein's Christ, for example, *The Idiot* reveals the image of the scourged, suffering and human Christ just as in the *Ecce Homo* figure. Bakhtin analyzes the style and, in particular, the narratologic function of a shifting and polycentric point of view ("the dialogic angle"), in order to bring out the dialogical forms of Dostoevsky's novels[31]. In general, literary language is always a *meta-language*: every word is accompanied by more than one meaning, "like a shadow[32]".

Another important concept that emerges in Bakhtin's theories is the notion of "outsideness", which means: "to be *located outside* the object

28 Ihab Hassan, *Janglican*, op. cit., p. 278.

29 Id., p. 277.

30 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Michael Holquist, ed., trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1981. Also see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Caryl Emerson, ed., trans. by Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

31 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, op. cit.

32 Id., p. 182.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

of [one's] creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture[33]". In "Response to a Question of *Novy Mir*", the author defined *outsideness* as the most powerful factor in creative understanding: "It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more)[34]." *Outsideness* involves more than one level of distance, from cultural, intercultural and geographical difference to historical and linguistic difference (*heteroglossia*).

Intertextuality is a crucial form of *outsideness*, if we assume that every work of art expresses at full its meaning(s) from distant perspectives, throughout time, and especially – we may infer – in the acts of reading and (re)writing:

> If it is impossible to study literature apart from an epoch's entire culture, it is even more fatal to encapsulate a literary phenomenon in the single epoch of its creation, in its own contemporaneity, so to say. We usually strive to explain a writer and his work precisely through his own time and the most recent past (usually within the epoch, as we understand it). [...] Yet the artwork extends its roots into the distant past. Great literary works are prepared for by centuries, and in the epoch of their creation it is merely a matter of picking the fruit that is ripe after a lengthy and complex process of maturation. Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work's future life in subsequent centuries; this life appears as a kind of paradox. Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in great time and frequently (with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time [...][35].

Based on the theory of intertextuality as it has been developed from Mikhail Bakhtin to Julia Kristeva[36] and Michel Riffaterre[37], Comparative Literature emphasizes the dialogic vitality of artistic and literary texts throughout *great time*, and develops their capability of "creating spaces of estrangement and

33 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Response to a Question of *Novy Mir*", in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 7.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel", in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 34-36. Also see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.

37 Michael Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation. On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 11, nº 1, 1984, p. 142-162.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

being inventive producers of untimely reflection[38]". Graham Allen defined intertextuality in the following way: "A kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic. Such language is a socially disruptive, revolutionary event[39]." In this way, Comparative Studies prove very fruitful both in the identification and analysis of narrative modalities of representing the "human(e)", and in orienting the reader on thematic, conceptual and linguistic levels, by working between anthropology and philology (focusing, for example, on the treatment of myth, history, utopia, beauty and the body, etc.). If contemporary humanism implies a different way to see the world, Comparative/World Literature implies looking at the literary universe "from a different viewpoint[40]".

WORLD LITERATURE AND SELF-CRITICAL LITERARY STRATEGIES

The self-critical modalities Bakhtin analyzed in Dostoevsky's work (dialogism, polyphony, intertextuality, cultural and narrative "outsideness", ambiguity, irony, etc.) constitute at the same time the principal focuses of Comparative Literature and the most persuasive narrative strategies of contemporary world authors. We may think, among many others, of Philip Roth, Paul Auster, Agota Kristof, J. M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Doris Lessing, Ian McEwan, Orhan Pamuk, Michel Houellebecq, Cormac McCarthy, Javier Marías, Abram Yehoshua, Antonio Tabucchi, Claudio Magris, Walter Siti, and others.

The first example I would like to provide is from Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires*. The novel is introduced as the "story of a man" ("*l'histoire d'un homme*[41]") set in "miserable and troubled" times ("*des temps malheureux et troublés*[42]") – *inhuman times*, we might say:

38 François Hartog, "The Double Fate of the Classics", in Chandler and Davidson, eds., op. cit., p. 964-979.

39 Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 45.

40 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", in *New Left Review*, vol. 1, 2000, p. 54-68, here, p. 68.

41 Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, p. 7.

42 Ibid.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

> *Ce livre est avant tout l'histoire d'un homme, qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du* XXe *siècle. Généralement seul, il fut cependant, de loin en loin, en relation avec d'autres hommes. Il vécut en des temps malheureux et troublés. Le pays qui lui avait donné naissance basculait lentement, mais inéluctablement, dans la zone économique des pays moyen-pauvres; fréquemment guettés par la misère, les hommes de sa génération passèrent en outre leur vie dans la solitude et l'amertume. Les sentiments d'amour, de tendresse et de fraternité humaine avaient dans une large mesure disparu; dans leurs rapports mutuels ses contemporains faisaient le plus souvent preuve d'indifférence, voire de cruauté*[43].
>
> "This book is principally the story of a man who lived out the greater part of his life in Western Europe, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Though alone for much of his life, he was nonetheless occasionally in touch with other men. He lived through an age that was miserable and troubled. The country into which he was born was sliding slowly, ineluctably, into the ranks of the less developed countries; often haunted by misery, the men of his generation lived out their lonely, bitter lives. Feelings such as love, tenderness and human fellowship had, for the most part, disappeared. The relationships between his contemporaries were at best indifferent and more often cruel[44]."

In this *incipit* we do not find the desolate description of a *royaume perdu* (quoting from the title of the first part), because the characters' defeats are treated in a completely unrhetorical way. The Djerzinski brothers' story is recounted through the blended languages of physics, history, sociology and psychology, but the ironic point of view implicitly undermines the meticulous and almost scientific register. Michel and Bruno are not heroes withstanding the decline; the characters reflect the *monologism* of the main contemporary forms of communication which emphasize the extremes, by representing, for example, the world in which they live through the ironic filter of sexual and/or rational distortion, thus creating a breaking point between fiction and reality. It is therefore at the stylistic level, and precisely through the conflict of styles, that the novel succeeds in hitting the forces of decay in contemporary society: capitalism and reification; homologation; lack of human feeling; different ideological forms of control and power over individual thinking.

Other interesting examples concern the use of intertextuality in the works of Paul Auster, Javier Marías, and J. M. Coetzee. Auster's *The New*

43 Ibid.

44 Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, English trans. by Frank Wynne, New York, Vintage, 2001, p. 3.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

York Trilogy – and the short story *City of Glass* in particular – presents a postmodern reinterpretation of *Don Quixote*, key to the reading for this entangled novel which starts with Marco Polo, passes through the myths of the Tower of Babel and the New World, includes Kaspar Hauser and Humpty Dumpty, then *Moby Dick* and *Gordon Pym*, while at the same time parodying the graphic novel and the detective story. *City of Glass* features the detective-story writer Daniel Quinn who, following in the old Stillman's footsteps, bumps into the character of Paul Auster who has embarked upon an essay about *Don Quixote.* According to the thesis of the "fictitious" Auster, behind the Arabian manuscript by Cid Hamete Benegeli are concealed four different people: Sancho Panza, Sanson Carrasco, the bachelor from Salamanca, Cervantes and Don Quixote. The novel claims to be "an attack on the dangers of make-believe[45]" and to represent "a man who has been bewitched by books[46]", at the same time stressing the irresistible allure of make-believe and books. It is for this reason that Auster finds in Don Quixote its most powerful and emblematic symbol: "The idea was to hold a mirror up to Don Quixote's madness, to record each of his absurd and ludicrous delusions, so that when he finally read the book himself, he would see the error of his ways[47]." The novel's last twist brings us to believe that it was Don Quixote who "orchestrated the whole thing himself[48]" and "engineered the Benangeli quartet[49]". Skilled in the art of disguise, "darkening his skin and donning the clothes of a Moor[50]", Don Quixote is imagined to have sold off the manuscript in the marketplace at Toledo, in order "to test the gullibility of his fellow men[51]". As for the idea of "Cervantes hiring Don Quixote to decipher the story of Don Quixote himself[52]", Auster concludes that there is "great beauty in it[53]". By playing on the different possibilities and combinations provided by intertextual "mosaic" (to use Julia Kristeva's term), and by revealing the artificial nature of

45 Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, New York, Penguin, 2006, p. 97.
46 Ibid.
47 Id., p. 98.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

literature, the "real" Paul Auster challenges the role of authorship and of literature in general, urging a critical response from the reader.

More tragically in the work of South African writer J. M. Coetzee, the act of reading – and beforehand, obviously, the act of writing – absorbs and reflects the enormous responsibility implied in human relationships. In itself, writing always symbolizes the controversial relationship between the Self and the Other as each character embodies the ambiguous power of language, and in general of literature (mostly in its intertextual blending), as an *embodiment of otherness*[54]. Furthermore, writing after the horror of twentieth-century history – especially after the Holocaust, and in particular as regards South Africa – means for Coetzee to observe the extreme tension between the duty to witness and the right to silence, and to write at the limits of saying, which implies *reporting from the far edges*, to quote Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*[55].

Let us think, moreover, about the novels written by Javier Marías. Their titles explicitly refer to other authors, and above all to Shakespeare: *Corazón tan blanco* quotes Macbeth[56], *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* translates a passage from *Richard III*[57], *El hombre sentimental* alludes to *Othello* not in the title but in relation to the operatic version by Giuseppe Verdi, because the main character is an opera star. What is most relevant, however – as Marías pointed out in the last pages of *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* –, is that the intertextual hint may be misleading; or better, that it should be misleading. In this way, intertextuality may stimulate questions that stem from the reference texts but lead in another direction, to unexplored contexts. What the reader expects to find is belied, so that new suggestions and meanings may be faced. *Corazón tan blanco*, for example, is relevant because the pattern of the instigation to murder inspired by Macbeth is blended with the theme of voyeurism and confession.

In this novel, all the characters seem to act under compulsion, and any denial always implies an offense and a sort of violence:

54 As I have developed in Chiara Lombardi, "Under the Gaze of Orpheus. J. M. Coetzee and the Writing of the Disaster", in *Interférences Littéraires*, vol. 4, 2010, p. 163-182.

55 John M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1999, p. 15.

56 See William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1, 3, 64-65.

57 See William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5, 3.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

> *[…] por qué hacer ni no hacer, por qué decir sí o no, por qué fatigarse con un quizá o un tal vez, por qué decir, por qué callar, por qué negarse, por qué saber nada de lo que sucede, porque nada sucede sin interrupción, nada perdura ni persevera ni se recuerda incesantemente, lo que se da es idéntico a lo que no se da, lo que descartamos o dejamos pasar idéntico a lo que tomamos y asimos, lo que experimentamos idéntico a lo que no probamos, volcamos toda nuestra inteligencia y nuestros sentidos y nuestro afán en la tarea de discernir lo que será nivelado, o ya lo está, y por eso estamos llenos de arrepentimientos y de ocasiones perdidas, de confirmaciones y reafirmaciones y ocasiones aprovechadas, cuando lo cierto es que nada se afirma y todo se va perdiendo. O acaso es que nunca hay nada*[58].

> "[…] why do or not do something, why say 'yes' or 'no', why worry yourself with a 'perhaps' or a 'maybe', why speak, why remain silent, why refuse, why know anything if nothing of what happens, because nothing happens without interruption, nothing lasts or endures or is ceaselessly remembered, what takes place is identical to what doesn't take place, what we dismiss or allow to slip by us is identical to what we accept and seize, what we experience identical to what we never try; we pour all our intelligence and our feelings and our enthusiasm into the task of discriminating between things that will all be made equal, if they haven't already been, and that's why we're so full of regrets and lost opportunities, of confirmations and reaffirmations and opportunities grasped, when the truth is that nothing is affirmed and everything is constantly in the process of being lost. Or perhaps there never was anything[59]."

Instigation does not concern only the murderer, as it does in Macbeth – whose hero says that if he had died an hour before the murder of Duncan, he would had lived "a blessed time[60]" – but everyone. Every word is, potentially, guilty. It is, therefore, more and more difficult to distinguish a guilty character from an innocent character, and a guilty word from an innocent word. It is not by chance that in *Corazón tan blanco* the main character, Juan, works as a translator: if every word can be guilty, every form of communication may be considered a sort of translation, and every translation a sort of betrayal (both words etymologically come from the Latin "tradere"). Our mind is weak ("brainsick" is the Shakespearian word over which Juan thinks), and our heart is inclined to receive the poisonous seductions and instigations that are poured inside it.

58 Javier Marías, *Corazón tan blanco*, Madrid, De Bolsillo, 2002, p. 202-203.

59 Javier Marías, *A Heart so White*, English trans. by Margaret Jull Costa, London, The Harvill Press, 1995, p. 179.

60 See *Macbeth*, 2, 3, 91-92.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

Finally, I would refer to Philip Roth's extreme dislocation of point of view, which is embodied by characters that are ghosts (*Exit Ghost* contains a clear Shakespearian allusion), or seriously ill and maimed (the poliomyelitis in *Nemesis*), dying (*Indignation*), or even dead (from *The Counterlife to Everyman*). Characters speaking from a non-realistic or marginal position are provided with an oxymoronic but extremely effective function, that of describing and unveiling human life by jeopardizing its integrity, and of giving the reader a stronger and more touching message by removing themselves from their traditional position. At the same time, this phenomenon stimulates reflection upon literature's propensity for doing this.

WHY COMPARATIVE LITERATURE?

In conclusion, we may say that contemporary humanism is based on this Adornian *via negationis* in writing and in reading the texts, and on the idea that human culture is not monolithic, but multifaceted and dynamic, and that its knowledge implies a long-range gaze through *great time* and the new perspectives of contemporaneity. This dynamism concerns the making of the texts (in the broadest sense: not only written texts but every cultural product and human work of art), their historical and symbolic "stratigraphy", the talent of an author, and what we consider as the aesthetic "value" of a work of art in its relationship both to tradition and innovation. T. S. Eliot writes in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. [...] What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it[61]."

Literature itself, as Roland Barthes[62] and Paul Ricœur[63], among many others, have argued, is nothing but a woven fabric ("*un tissu*

61 T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* [1932], in *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1953, p. 23.
62 Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1973.
63 Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit III. Le temps raconté*, Paris, Seuil, 1983-1985.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

d'histoires racontées[64]") according to a metaphor that recalls the Ovidian myth of Arachne's tapestry[65]. Comparative Literature studies this dynamism and cultural complexity, but how[66]? In stressing the potentialities of the discipline on the one hand, and its crisis on the other, and in describing its status in the various academic environments, many distinguished scholars – from René Wellek (1963) and Claudio Guillén (1985) up to Franco Moretti (2000), Jonathan Culler (2006), Alain Montandon (2006), César Dominguez (2007), Spivak and Damrosch (2011), Ipshita Chanda and Bilal Hasmi as the editors of a recent, fruitful volume dedicated to *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2012)[67] – have been discussing Comparative Literature's method and the risk of its weakness. As Chanda and Hasmi put it, Comparative Literature is "a method of reading texts", whose aim is "to understand the process of creation and the locus of travel, i.e. the reception of the text, across time and space"; at the same time, the discipline "maps the dynamics of interpretation through a history of the reception of the text[68]". Comparative Literature's methodology, therefore, should not be limited to finding or analyzing a text or group of texts that are supposed to lie behind it, although this may be considered the starting point[69]. Neither could the discovering of an "intertextual mosaic" be the only goal and pleasure of any research in Comparative Literature. If a text has to reveal more than one meaning because of its complexity, then the act of reading, based on

64 Id., p. 356.

65 See Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book VI.

66 See Edgar Morin, *La Complexité humaine*, op. cit. and Edgar Morin, *La France est une et multiculturelle. Lettre aux citoyens de France*, Paris, Fayard, 2012. Also see Chiara Simonigh, ed., *Pensare la complessità. Per un umanesimo planetario*, Milan, Udine, 2012.

67 René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963; Claudio Guillén, *Entre lo uno y lo diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada*, Barcelona, Editorial Crítica, 2005; Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", in *New Left Review*, vol. 1, 2000, p. 54-68; Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006; *Alain Montandon*, "Comparative Literature in France. A Status Report", in *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol. 3, nº 1-2, 2006, p. 69-76; Gayatri Spivak and David Damrosch, "Comparative Literature / World Literature", in *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 48, nº 4, 2011, p. 455-485; Ipshita Chanda and Bilal Hasmi, eds., "Comparative Literature", in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 42, nº 3, 2012, p. 465-488.

68 Chanda and Hasmi, "Comparative Literature", op. cit., p. 466.

69 Michael Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation", op. cit., p. 142. Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, op. cit., p. 121.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

a historical and philological background, should bring to light the full *signification* implied in the text itself and beyond any author's intention. It is important to consider what the text says and what remains implicit, its imagery and its ambiguity, the various figural levels, its relationships with the tradition and the cultural context or *épistémè*, according to the definition of Michel Foucault (who also stressed language's multiple "modes of being[70]").

The linguistic and rhetoric form, as anticipated, is fundamental in order to explore all these levels and connections without running the risk of developing a superficial inquiry. It is only through language, and by conceiving and exploring language as *meta-language* – and not on a merely thematic level – that intertextuality unfolds its potentialities at full, by giving a key (or more than one) to a text or a topic thanks to the (often implicit) dialogue with another text or other texts and linguistic forms. It is what Roland Barthes emphasizes in referring to the "infinite text", and what Paul Auster employs exponentially in his novels. Furthermore, in reading a text and in dealing with intertextual dialogues, the reader has to distance himself. From this point of view Bakhtin's notion of *outsideness*, explored above, may correspond to the concept of *distant reading* provided by Franco Moretti: "Distant reading: where distance [...] is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genre and systems[71]."

In *Perché leggere i classici*, Italo Calvino writes: "a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say" ("*un classico è un libro che non ha mai finito di dire quel che ha da dire*[72]"). From the importance of understanding what a book may express throughout time, and how it succeeds in changing our "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*[73]), stems the necessity of highlighting resonances (and dissonances) between texts and cultures, and correspondences between languages, styles and images, in order to open up new perspectives on reading and writing.

70 Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* [1970, London, Tavistock/Pantheon], English trans. by Alan Sheridan, London / New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 299-300.

71 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", op. cit., p. 57.

72 Italo Calvino, *Perché leggere i classici*, Milan, Mondadori, 1995, p. 7.

73 Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturegeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*, Konstanz, UVK, 1967, p. 31.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

This may, *vice versa*, also help us to realize which works are to be considered "great works" or "classics", and consequently, to discuss a "canon" that should be able to survive. In this respect, we should not disregard authors who wrote beyond European boundaries, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Derek Walcott, J. M. Coetzee, Gao Xingjian, Patrick White, Taha Hussein, Seamus Heaney, etc. Nearly all conferred with the Nobel Prize, these intellectuals and writers are among the most original readers and interpreters of the European classics, and considered "classics" themselves in world literature.

Given these premises, Comparative Literature does not fancy to impose itself on the other disciplines or national literatures. It should, in fact, coordinate and foster the collaboration between other humanities. It is what Mario Biagioli wishes for in "Postdisciplinary Liaisons: Science Studies and the Humanities", as he tries to persuade scholars in humanities disciplines to work and collaborate like scientists, in order to improve their methodology through reciprocal interaction and exchange of knowledge:

> […] the sciences produce cross-disciplinarity within groups, not individuals, by bringing differently specialized researchers together around a problem. In these scenarios, the keyword is collaboration (not discipline or field), with each collaboration potentially instantiating a different and temporary cross-disciplinary setup[74].

To build and share a humanistic culture today, therefore, is a fascinating work in progress which asks for a plurality of methods, discourses and approaches that would be able to cross over boundaries and limitations, while at the same time improving creative imagination and critical thought[75]. In this contest, and in its relation to human sciences, arts and literatures, Comparative Literature has a pivotal role. Its subjects and methods give a fundamental contribution to the building of an autonomous, critical and long-lasting culture (it is the concept of *life-long learning*), and represent a reference point for the relationships between school and university, supporting scientific projects and popular events. Finally, if "philology is, or should be, the discipline of making sense of

74 Mario Biagioli, "Postdisciplinary Liaisons. Science Studies and the Humanities", in Chandler and Davidson, eds., op. cit., p. 820.

75 Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, op. cit.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.

texts[76]" – as Sheldon Pollock writes in "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World", – we should not forget that this *sense* does not emerge only from a historical context, but also from a wide textual and cultural system of relationships and influences that the act of reading should bring to light in order to express the complexity of the world: "If mathematics is the language of the book of nature, as Galileo taught, philology is the language of the book of humanity[77]." The challenge of Comparative Literature, therefore, is to bring together philology and hermeneutics, and to improve the dialogue between the classical heritage and the multi-faceted cultural features of the contemporary world, in the effort of trying to read and decipher this *book of humanity*.

Chiara LOMBARDI
University of Torino

76 Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World", in Chandler and Davidson, eds., op. cit., p. 934.

77 Ibid. For a reconsideration of philology today, in its relationship with Comparative Literature and other humanities, see also Siraj Ahmed, "Notes from Babel. Toward a Colonial History of Comparative Literature", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39, nº 2, 2013, p. 296-327. Also see Jerome McGann, "Philology in a New Key", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39, nº 2, 2013, p. 327-346.

© 2017. Classiques Garnier. Reproduction et diffusion interdites.