The first question upon which we would like to briefly reflect, and which we would also like to address in regard to the orientation and purpose of our experience as a teacher of literature, is: what is the usefulness and function of a discipline of Comparative Literature when considering the present level of knowledge and the present context of academic teaching of human sciences? The arguments that can be put forward here should touch on the difficulties and the perplexities that are today found in the teaching of literature, at a time when the general notion of literature seems to be affected by a crisis that is not circumstantial, national or local, but, according to the diagnosis of thinkers like Theodor Adorno and George Steiner, comes from its foundations and permeates the forms of contemporary culture of Western civilisation. Their arguments, in different interpretative contexts and logic, seem to coincide with the thesis that verbal language, stripped of its vitality by bureaucratic applications and discredited by the brutality of violence, racism and the anti-humanism of its use in the experience of war, the holocaust and the totalitarianism of the 20th century lost its communicative trustworthiness and became ontologically suspect. Steiner, in particular, with the authority that comes from being a professor of Comparative Literature, does not need to occupy himself with reflections on strategies, trends and limits on the pedagogy of the literary phenomenon in order to lucidly diagnose the crisis hitting the teaching of literature which is causing its progressive institutional demise and the loss of its central role in the processes of social acculturation and of the aesthetic formation of historically situated human experience. In some ways, the indicators supplied by
national and international reports that have been published regarding the level of the reading and writing skills of Portuguese high schools’ students partially, if not entirely, show the effects of the apparent regression of the cultural and educational importance attributed to literature and the institutional reproduction of its knowledge. The signs are increasing, the most recent relating to the political option to reduce the amount of the literary component in the teaching programmes of modern languages in the high school level of education. It all seems to indicate that the present “depressive conception of the teaching of literature” (Seixo, 1999:11) is worsening and is having imponderable effects in both the field of theoretic knowledge and the aesthetic understanding of literary phenomenon as well as in the overall quality of education for a critically informed and culturally participative citizenship. For these reasons, we are of the opinion that the Faculties and Departments of Letters of Universities should “resist”, without having to succumb to malevolent corporative strategies of an arrogant alienation towards the signs of the times, and irrespective of the professional or scientific nature of the courses they offer, i.e. should assume the particular function of preserving the specialised study of literature, which largely defines the specificity of the nature of the knowledge they produce.

It is in the spirit of the twofold “resistance” to the institutional downgrading of literary knowledge and to the decline in the overall and specialised responsibilities in the teaching of aesthetic reading that, in our view, is urgent and justifiable to reinforce the perpetuation and transmission of that type of knowledge within the scope of the courses whose aim is to provide a cultural literary training to future teachers of modern languages. Not exactly as a desperate, sceptical attitude regarding the effects of such training, neither, on the contrary, as an obstinate, indifferent exercise against the signs of its crisis, but above all, and in accordance with the different functions and abilities of
its protagonists (teacher and students), to face it as if it were a “ritual festival” (Coelho, 1976:45). It is therefore in the pedagogical perspective of reinforcing literary culture, i.e., from the view of improving the “idiomatic knowledge, practical and vital experience, sensibility, taste, capacity to discern, fantasy, critical spirit” (Idem, 45-46) of those who deal with the aesthetics of a text, that we think it is pertinent to reflect on the difficulty of knowing what Comparative Literature is.

The recognition of the processual quality of the literary system, i.e., its construction, transformation and its critical re-evaluation in the axis of historical time, allows us to introduce the second point of our paper regarding the correspondent processual quality of the academic discipline of Comparative Literature.

The three reports, known by the names of the chairmen of the commissions responsible for their elaboration, respectively Levin, Greene and Bernheimer, chronologically presented (1965, 1975 and 1993)\(^1\) to the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), allow us to note: (i) the constructive, processual, critical, dialectical and even “anxiogenic” character, (Bernheimer, 1995:1), of Comparative Literature; (ii) the progressive and complex interlinguistic, intersemiotic and interdisciplinary moulding of the object (and corresponding method) of the discipline, from its original international binary perspective, methodologically formulated by Paul Van Theighem, to the contemporary eclectic and transnational study of the “literary activity involved in a complex network of cultural relationships” (Koelb/Noakes, 1988:11); (iii) the common and diverging premises in the configuration of the areas of research that comparatists have been concerned about, areas that correspond to the subspecialisations within the discipline and which, in the context of

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\(^1\) The aim of these reports was to define academic standards and, consequently, to set out the principles, the criteria and the organic conditions for the teaching of Comparative Literature in American Universities. (Bernheimer, 1995: 21-47).
the American academe\(^2\), until the publication of the Greene report, in 1975, and Robert J. Clement’s monograph, in 1978, made up five discreet approaches to the supranational study of literature, i.e., (we closely followed Clement’s numbering): (1) themes / myths, (2) types / forms, (3) movements / periods, (4) inter-relations between literature and other arts, (5) critical theoretical and practical confluences in the comparative approach to literature\(^3\). If some of these approaches and dimensions are still pursued as specialised comparatists' practices, such as the study of themes and myths, for instance, or the focus on the diffusion and reception of aesthetic transnational movements (e.g. Romanticism), there are other areas of research that have been the object of profound reconfigurations, transformations or assimilations as a result of the emergence and development of new theoretical, cultural, philosophical, political and ideological approaches to the study of the literary phenomenon. The destabilisation of literary studies caused by the rise of “cultural studies”, the relativisation of concepts such as high literature vs. popular culture, the criticism of cultural eurocentrism, the multicultural revision of European and Anglo-American hermeneutic hegemony, the recomposition of the canon due to the influx of texts founded on the differences of sexual identity or due to the emergence of new national literatures in a post-colonial context, the ever-increasing importance ascribed to translation studies are, among other elements of the diagnosis of the situation in the field of the discipline, considerations that are addressed in the 1993 Bernheimer report. These considerations, meeting the

\(^2\) An academic context that, regarding the understanding of the disciplinary objective, diverges from the European academe metonymically represented by the French comparatist school. Regarding the nature of these divergences, which do not radically differ from Van Tieghem’s distinction between comparative and general literature, see Remak, Henry (1973), Comparative Literature. Its definition and function, in Comparative Literature, Method and Perspective., pp. 47-8; Guillén, Claudio (1985), Entre lo no y lo Diverso. Introducción a la literatura comparada, pp. 82-84; Brunel, P./ Pichois C./ Rousseau, A.M (1988), Qu’est-ce que la littérature comparée?, pp 28-29.

\(^3\) By understanding common practices as those followed by the “French school”, or, as in (4), characteristically followed by the “American school”, Clements attaches to this inventory what he considers to be the triple arrangement of the transnational study of literature in accordance with the progressive, intercultural approach: (1) western civilisation, (2) east/west intercultural relationships, (3) the (Goethean) concept of world literature (Clements, s.d.:7)
developments verified in some departments of American Comparative Literature, had in turn repercussions and led to reactions by comparatists in the international academic community.

Very synthetically, with no intention of being exhaustive and adopting the diachronic criterion suitable for the narrative content of this paper, which intends to trace back the constructive dynamics of Comparative Literature as an academic discipline, we will begin by alluding to the so-called “studies of sources and influences” that configure the so-called “French school” of Comparative Literature. Included in the historiographic and positivist paradigm of the general study of literature, this old conception of the practice of Comparative Literature should be seen as a derivative of Literary History, methodologically conducted by the principle of causality in the linear and direct assessment of the interrelationships and contacts between literary phenomena of discreet linguistic and cultural systems. In this sense, it should be emphasized the methodological differences between (i) studies of influence, i.e. those studies that pursue an analysis of the influx of a certain agent or transmitter in the literary communication process – a writer, a group of writers, a literary movement – on a foreign literary system and its further reception within this system (e.g. Montaigne and the influx of his work in Britain); (ii) studies on the critical impact of a given literary work in a given literary culture (Van Tieghem named this twofold research as doxology) (Tieghem, 1939: 117-142), and studies about literary success, which have to do more with the socio-historical reception of a literary work than with the qualitative effects generated by it in a given literary system; (iii) studies on literary sources (the constituent, according to Van Tieghem, of chronology) (Idem, 141-151), i.e., the research of the foreign literary origins incorporated in the work of a writer (e.g. Goethe

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4 On the methodological principle of causality in the verification of literary phenomena, see. Van Tieghem, Paul (1939), *La Littérature Comparée*, pp 21, 189, 190.
and his assimilation of European literatures); (iv) studies on the fabrication of images about national or collective, social identities (object of *imagology*), or, in the words of Werner Sollors, “the study of the image of a human subsystem by another subsystem in written literature – especially if the subject is seen as real […] and if it is also ethnically solid” (Sollors, 2001:156) (e.g. the image of Japan in the narrative work of the Portuguese writer Wencelau de Fernandes). Mention must also be made of the important role of mediators (whose study is pursued by *mesology*, in Van Thieghem’s terminology) (Thieghem, 1939: 25-40), i.e., instances of a varying nature (individuals, social environments such as literary salons, magazines or literary journals and, above all, translations) that make a link and ensure the contact, the knowledge and the assimilation of the foreign element. All the writings that have been and continue to be elaborated within this comparative paradigm (*influences, sources, success*) can be represented by the formula, of variable extension, X and Y (the copulative having multiple meanings) proposed by Brunel, Pichois and Rousseau (1988:59-64). Without renouncing some of its founding principles, this “school” has evolved to overcome the limitations of the positivist method in verifying fact relationships and has adopted more general perspectives (hence the name Littérature Générale et Comparée, as the discipline has officially been known in French academic circles since the 60s) in order to meet the demands placed on it both by literary theory and by the widening of its own field of research. As a consequence, it began to address the study of the relationship between literature and other arts and to face the challenges of the theoretical and methodological principles of “cultural studies”.

Also related to the above-mentioned paradigm of the comparatist “French school”, although it is not exclusive to it, the important, but problematic, area of *thematology* (another expression coined by Van Tieghem) or *Stofgeschichte* must be
mentioned. One must understand, however, that the category of the *theme* is, within the ambit of literary studies and for its different theoretical forms, a problematic category. The thematic configuration of a text is not done – as Werner Sollors explains (Sollers, 2001: 158-179) – singularly and *a priori* by eliminating the functional correlations that it maintains with other themes, neither does it get suffocated in the hegemony of a single hermeneutic perspective in detriment to others that are equally legitimate through the coherence of their theoretical and ideological assumptions. It is essential, above all, to emphasise the relevance that the methodology of the study of themes has had and still has for Comparative Literature\(^5\) as an inter- and supra-national discipline with a vocation to deal analogically and serially with vast textual constellations. Finally, and also associated to the problem of the hermeneutic function of the concept of *theme*, especially as the latter operates together with or subordinate to the anthropological notion of *myth*, it must be mentioned that literary myths – not exactly the anthropological ones of a religious bent – make up an area of methodical study (*mythocritic*) of Comparative Literature\(^6\).

The attention lavished on Comparative Literature, practically since its institutionalisation as an autonomous academic discipline, whether in relation to the study of oral and popular literary creations – a repository of mythical and symbolic

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thought – or in relation to authors that are minor or decentralised in relation to traditional canons, should be taken into consideration in order to establish a relational nexus, somewhat problematic, but stimulating, of literary studies with the emerging, expanding “cultural studies”, which are in the process of being fully recognised in the Anglo-American academic world.

Starting from a widened conception of culture and rejecting the distinction between “high culture” and “popular culture”, cultural studies have been methodologically oriented by a more sociological rather than an aesthetic concept of culture. Levelling disparate discursive types and symbolic heterogeneous assets for the purpose of critical assessment, their analytical scope ranges from opera to horror films, and their object of research addresses minority subculture or socially segregated forms of expression. By rejecting absolute values and placing particular emphasis on historical, political and social circumstances that generate symbolic, aesthetic and literary assets, cultural studies have been influencing the theoretical revision of the cultural approach to the literary phenomenon, namely by means of its subareas of gender studies and post-colonial studies, and redefining the concept of literary canon.

The origins of cultural studies are associated to the theoretical work originally carried out at Birmingham University from the middle of the 1950s by a group of authors whose aim was to explain the socio-economic basics of the cultural

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7 Wellek and Warren, when regarding in their Literary Theory the scope of comparative literature studies, state that it designates primarily “the study of oral literature, especially that of folk themes and of their migration – knowing how and when they entered “superior”, “artistic” literature. (Wellek/Warren, 1976:54). This ethnographic component of comparative literature can be seen, for example, in Teófilo Braga’s introduction to his book on folk Portuguese short stories. After classifying them thematically and formally in accordance with a triple typology (mythical, facetious, and examples), Teófilo Braga states that “the importance of these elements of folk tradition is a result of their comparative study […].By means of the comparative study of short stories, that are common to the Yellow, Semites and Arian races, ranging from savage tribes to European civilisations, one discovers the importance of this ethnic document, making it an important chapter of collective psychology.” (Braga, 2002:21-23).

8 See the definition and the importance that Van Tieghem ascribes to “minor” and “minimi” authors in the general history of literature (Tieghem, 1939: 194).

9 In relation to the conceptual notion, the academic debate and the different theoretical approaches on the formation of canon, see Yvancos, José Maria Pozuelo (2001), O Cânone na Teoria Literária Contemporânea, in Floresta Encantada. Novos Caminhos da Literatura Comparada, p.411-457.
phenomenon (Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson). They presented a new politically and philosophically tinged approach by means of a Marxist or neo-Marxist concept of a still predominantly literary or textualist understanding of this new area of studies. This single, organic way of focusing “popular” culture – to which the explicit recognition that the working classes’ forms of sociability and ideological thought shape its own cultural worldview – reproduces a conception, likewise single and organic, of a notion of “high” culture put forward by an eminently literary group (if one sticks to British tradition) of essayists / poets / writers such as Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis (although this lineage can be traced back to the Romantics).

On opening up their field of research to the empiric analysis of mass communication phenomena and to a set of other areas with a focus on the contexts and means of cultural production, cultural studies became an epistemological challenge to literary studies and, more concretely, to Comparative Literature as an interdisciplinary field, conjoining the study of the aesthetic dimension of the literary phenomenon with the socio-cultural dimension of its production and reception. In the perspective of cultural studies, literature, as a discreet semiotic system, must necessarily bear and point out traces that emerge from an anthropological, historical, social, ideological and aesthetic cultural background that configures other semiotic systems with which the former co-exists and with which it can co-relate. The model to follow up in the institutional debate on the relationship between cultural studies / literary studies should therefore be cooperative, “able to confront a common problem without simultaneously losing sight of the specificity of the different practices” (Ribeiro/ Ramalho, 2001:74). The amplitude of the

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10 In relation to the organic and textual understanding of the cultural phenomenon as viewed by cultural studies, see, respectively, Kushner, Eva (1996), Études littéraires, études culturelles: soeurs jumelles ou frères ennemis?, in Actas do II Congresso da APLC, p.39; Ribeiro, António Sousa / Ramalho, Maria Irene (2001), Dos Estudos Literários aos Estudos Culturais?, in Floresta Encantada. Novos Caminhos da Literatura Comparada, p. 77.


challenges placed before literary studies by cultural studies can therefore be fully understood, if, for instance, one considers the reading of Os Lusíadas in the era of multiculturism and post-colonialism. Such reading is inevitably exposed to judgments of interpretation influenced by other cultural values (Muslim, Hindu or even Christian) that are critically alien in relation to the epic content and the cultural worldview of European Renaissance humanism and Portuguese national heroism.

Another relevant disciplinary area of Comparative Literature is that of translation studies. Firstly, it must be remembered that translation is included in the Van Teighem’s paradigmatic manual as one of the activities pursued by comparative study. It is viewed as one of the instances that operate as an “intermediary” function in the interlinguistic transfer of literary texts (which the author designates as mesology studies) (Thieghem, 1939:161-167). In fact, since the initial reflections of systemization on its method and its object of supranational study, Comparative Literature has considered “literature in translation” as functionally determinant for the understanding between discreet literary systems. It was, however, with the advent of the polysystem theory, originally developed through the works of Itamar Evan-Zohar – following the theoretical positions of the Russian formalists – that translation activity began to perform a central role within comparative literature studies, both on the level of its theorization and on the level of the analysis and empiric description of translated literature. Recognizing the textual heterogeneity, the dynamics, the oppositions (central-peripheral, high-low, primary-secondary, canonic-non-canonic) that define and structure

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the functioning of the literary system, the polysystem theory supplied the conceptual framework and led to the emergence of a theoretical translation paradigm of culturist orientation, disconnected from the linguistic and functional theories of translation based on the concepts of equivalence, equivalent effect and faithfulness to the original text\textsuperscript{15}. It must be emphasized, therefore, that the systemic study of literature lead to the understanding that translation is not an exclusively linguistic activity, but a complex multifunctional practice influenced by historical and cultural determinants and regulated by ideological, political, commercial criteria, etc. This makes it easier to explain: (i) the strategic relevance that literary texts that are translated into another language have in this type of studies; (ii) the revealing role of translation, whether diachronically or synchronically considered, in the workings of the receiving culture’s literary system; (iii) the structural conditions that drive forward translation activity within a given culture at a certain historical situation\textsuperscript{16}; (iv) the determining modulation exercised by translated literature in the history of national literatures; (v) the mediation role of translation in the “development of a network of literary transactions and interactions” (Barrento, 2001), resuming, from a multiculturalist perspective, the utopian project, so dear to Comparative Literature, of Weltliteratur.

In relation to the ever-increasing importance that culture and translation are taking on in the present-day configuration of the discipline of Comparative Literature and on the intercultural and transnational multiform practices that have come from their methodological and epistemological procedures, it is convenient, in the epilogue of this paper, to recall that comparative research and criticism maintain indisputable links with

\textsuperscript{15} On the two dominant epistemological paradigms applied to the study of translation, see. Flor, João Almeida, (1994) Da Tradução Literária à Literatura Traduzida, in Actas do Congresso Internacional sobre o Português, pp. 403-413. As an introduction to the disciplinary content of Translation Studies, see Bassnett, Susan (1991) Translation Studies.

\textsuperscript{16} Itamar Even-Zohar refers to three types of driving forces of the translation phenomenon, i.e., when a literature is in the initial process of evolution, when it is aware of its peripherality and when vacuums or changes of an aesthetic nature occur in it. (Even-Zohar, 1990:45-51).
literary theory. In fact, as Claudio Guillén stresses (Guillén, 1985:88), these links can be seen in Paul Van Tieghem’s manual and in the definition of General Literature proposed in it. Of a wider ambit than Comparative Literature, General Literature, in Van Tieghem’s view, is oriented to the study of literary phenomena of a supranational character (genres, subgenres, styles, schools, periods). As it methodologically moves away from a historiographic approach and as it conceptually exhibits a greater degree of confluence with the reflection pursued by literary poetics, General Literature partially tends to be identified with the field of knowledge of Literary Theory. It is therefore understood that, since its original disciplinary conformation, Comparative Literature, in its amplified methodological version designated as General Literature, equated, even though embryonically and not deliberately, its articulation with Literary Theory. In fact, as a consequence of the crisis of the “fact relationships” positivist studies and due to the criticism of the historiographic paradigm, the theorising modelling of Comparative Literature was intensified between the 1950’s and the 1980’s, after which new paradigms (culture, translation, etc.) began to emerge. The theoretical recognition of a supranational dimension of the literary system (which in some ways corresponds theoretically to the workings of the secondary modelling system and to the operability of the literary polycode) not only turns away from the “mononationalist” approach to comparative studies founded on the collation of “concepts of national literature”, but also favours the “understanding (that the) eventual national / regional particularities [are] outlined on this wider background of [theoretical] partaking” (Buescu, 2001:85). Such theoretical modulation of literary comparatism can, for instance, explain the absence or the diffuse manifestation of the utopian narrative genre in Portuguese literature, in contrast, for example, with its continuous recreation in English literature. This disparity in the cultivation of the utopian genre in both literary cultures should
therefore be understood not only from an historical and cultural perspective, but also in the light of the generation, constitution and genealogical definition of that literary form.

Due to a lack of time and space, I have to bypass the important comparative area of inter-art studies. Nonetheless, I think that the series of questions I have proposed to address in this paper are enough to make clear that the polymorphic nature of Comparative Literature, relying both on its paradigmatic transformations and on its interdisciplinary functional vocation, is a clear testimony of its productive epistemic past and a guarantee of its open future as on going academic discipline17.

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17 Final note. A monograph by José Cerqueira de Vasconcelos, published in 1921, must be mentioned in the history of Comparative Literature in Portugal. Its content is rather erratic and it lacks a clear theoretical and methodological definition of the object of Comparative Literature, but it has the particularity to announce on the frontispiece that it is “in conformity with the new studies of the complementary high school courses”. See Vasconcelos, José Cerqueira (1921), Estudos da Literatura Comparada. (As a issue of consideration for the educational policy of the government of the Portuguese 3rd Republic, it should be noted that both the monarchical decree-law nº. 3 of 3 November 1905 and the republican decree-law of Sidonio Pais’s government nº. 5002 of 27 November 1918, defining both the syllabi of the high school curricula, stated that the “knowledge of foreign literatures in their closest relationship with ours” and the study of “the relationship of the history of foreign literatures with that of Portugal” are subjects to be taught in the Portuguese last two high school levels, the VI and VII years).


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