

**EUROPEAN TRAVEL WRITING, IMPERIALIST
DISCOURSES AND ANALOGY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
ARGENTINIAN LITERATURE**

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With “The Argentinian Writer and the Tradition”, a short text included in an early book of essays entitled *Discussion* (1932), Jorge Luis Borges explicitly intervened in the long debate over the characterization of the Argentinian national literature. In this way, once Borges had denied the primary role attributed to the gaucho tradition or the Spanish heritage within the elaboration of Argentinian literature, he claimed that the whole of the Western culture was the true tradition into which Argentinian culture should be inserted. Arguing that the Argentinian culture’s relationship with Western countries was analogous to the links developed by Jewish and Irish cultures, Borges emphasized how, even if Argentinian literature may belong to the Western tradition, it did so only through the consciousness of its difference and separateness, through an irreverent perspective that had become definitively productive. Such a solution to the polemics about the national character of Argentinian literature, deeply rooted in the parameters of Borges’ own poetics, displays nevertheless multiple consequences concerning the entire field of Humanities and, especially, comparative literature: Borges’ thesis not only illustrates the complex conditions created by colonial situations, but also indicates the necessity of approaching even local traditions from a global perspective that could establish those dialogues and contacts which complete their meaning.

Since its foundation as an autonomous discipline, comparative literature has paid particular attention to the negotiating and interconnecting processes between literatures and cultures that challenge the role of the nation state’s limits as the ultimate field of enquiry. In spite of the general intertwining of the literary and the

national that determined the development of modernity throughout European and Latin American regions, “to limit oneself to it would be to downplay the power of other ‘imagined communities’ based on, say, language or geographic regions rather than nation”.¹ The transcendence of national borders may thus include the study of cultural communities and collective identities whose evolution moves beyond the artificial delimitations produced by political structures, as well as the examination of global dynamics participating in the conformation of national discourses traditionally assumed to be natural or transhistorical. With regard to Latin American regions, derived from the complex confluence of diverse cultural heritages (that is, above all, Amerindian, European and African traditions) and determined by the different forms of colonialism and imperialism that characterized its history, societies in this way appear as a heterogeneous object of study requiring the revision of many of the critical paradigms proposed by Humanities research. Deeply influenced by theoretical paradigms corresponding to postcolonial studies, the development of comparative literature in places such as Latin America, India and Africa is based on an exhaustive critique of the ideological values associated with the Eurocentric canon, as well as on a permanent relativization of social and cultural models linked to the construction of the West.²

Together with such amplification of the geographical parameters of the classic literary corpus, comparative literature has consciously proposed a constant transgression of disciplinary borders, looking for a definitive neutralization of the boundaries between different kinds of knowledge. As opposed to the hyperspecialization and segmentation of information that characterize other disciplines, comparativism confronts the exigencies of a contemporary episteme through the

¹ Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon, “Rethinking Literary History-Comparatively”, in *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, eds Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, I, xxviii.

² In spite of its retreat from European studies, “nation” appears as a functional concept in postcolonial contexts to such an extent that, as Susan Bassnett has pointed out, Comparative Literature has focused on “the way in which national culture has been affected by importation” (Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 8). The convenience of introducing such a notion comes from the complete awareness of its constructed nature, that is, of its imagined character, a product not only of the elaboration of autochthonous elements but also of the adaptation of foreign discourses.