

**BEN HUTCHINSON: Comparative Literature. A Very Short Introduction**  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xviii + 140 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-880727-8

Oxford's popular *Very Short Introduction* series offers concise introductions to a wide range of subjects, and Ben Hutchinson, professor of European literature at the University of Kent, has authored such an introduction to comparative literature. Writing an introduction to a discipline as comparative literature, or rather an "indiscipline" as the author of the book points out at several places, is a challenging task. It requires an overview of a very diverse field and the ability to compress a lot of sometimes conflicting strains of thought into a comprehensive picture. That is the reason why Ben Hutchinson, as is probably the case with any 21st century practitioner of the discipline, is not able to define it without going into what may appear to an outsider as tedious diversions from the main focus. Forced to provide a compact definition, he offers a very general understanding of the term: "the reciprocal study of at least two forms of writing" (2). One can hardly do more justice to the definition of a discipline which has neither a clearly defined object nor a unique method of research.

The first chapter, called "Metaphors of reading" and devoted to defining the field, may be disappointing for those who expect an unequivocal exposition of comparative literature or of the comparative method in the study of literature. Comparison undoubtedly plays an important role in comparative literature and Hutchinson excellently explains that literature exists comparatively. Indeed, every reader is a comparatist. Hutchinson talks even of an urge, an instinct to compare. He makes clear the intention of his book: "The aim of this *Very Short Introduction* is to render this comparative impulse conscious" (5). Comparative literature originally developed on the basis of national literatures. Hutchinson transcends this ground and

describes the discipline as the international relations of culture or the interlinguistic relations of culture. If "nation" was the fundamental term for comparison in the past, it is "culture" at the present time. Moreover, Hutchinson offers several metaphors – "crossroads", "marketplace" and "melting pot" – to show the concepts the discipline lives by.

In the next chapter, "Practices and principles", Hutchinson tries to approach the definition of comparative literature from another angle, i.e. by explaining what a comparatist does. He dwells on a series of conceptual pairs: topics vs. methods, periods vs. regions, close vs. distant reading, canon vs. counter-canon, genres vs. styles, and writers vs. readers. In this way, he covers many areas of the comparative study of literature that developed over the 20th and 21st centuries. Of course, one can find areas which do not get even a cursory mention: images as studied by imagology, for example. Hutchinson repeatedly points out the dynamic character of the discipline. Chapter three, "History and heros", thus represents an inevitable step. He manages to offer a highly readable history of comparative literature as an academic discipline. The chapter four, "Disciplines and debates", elaborates on the previous two chapters. It discusses the relation of literary theory, cultural studies, postcolonialism, world literature, translation studies and reception studies with comparative literature. Hutchinson also spells out the role of Orientalist scholarship in constituting the discipline. One must give him credit for repeatedly overcoming the Eurocentric master narrative. Nevertheless, I miss a reference to the project of comparative poetics, as, for example, that of Earl Miner. Hutchinson does mention that "Asian critics have never needed Europeans to tell them

how to compare” (47), but, unfortunately, he is silent about one of the most radical projects in comparative literature which claims that the European conceptualization of literature differs from the traditional Chinese, Indian and Arabic literary criticism which developed independently of the West.

The final chapter, “The futures of comparative literature”, presents an optimistic view of the potential development of the discipline, as Susan Bassnett also writes in her blurb endorsing the book. After decades of pessimistic scenarios talking about a crisis or predicting the death of the discipline, Hutchinson’s enthusiasm is encouraging. The reason for this optimism lies in the confidence that comparison is ubiquitous and all knowledge is necessarily comparative. Thus his exposition of comparative literature comes full circle. He sees the value of comparative literature in political education, understood as education to transnationalism, and aesthetic education, as proposed by the German poet and thinker Friedrich Schiller. This Schiller-inspired model of comparison is one “in which free ‘play’ of literature embraces all peoples equally, regardless of national history and linguistic status” (117). This is a very humanistic and idealistic message which I personally find appealing. However, as Hutchinson himself states earlier in the book, comparative liter-

ature “was often little more than competitive literature” (55) in the past. Isn’t the language of commerce which is penetrating the study of literature, as, for example, in the current notion of world literature (note Hutchinson’s marketplace metaphor used in the first chapter to describe the discipline), bringing back this “competitive literature”? What kind of play is comparative literature? A play understood as competition? What kind of play is comparative literature? A game understood as competition? Can we reconcile egalitarianism with competitiveness? Can all peoples and literatures meet as equal partners in a world dominated by the Anglo-sphere? These questions are not answered in the book, despite the fact that Hutchinson is a proponent of multilingualism and is sympathetic toward the world beyond what is called the Global North. However, these questions necessarily arise in the globalized world we live in.

As an introductory text, the book is meant for a wide audience. It is a very good summary of the current developments in the discipline in the Anglophone world, and it is an interesting reading even for a seasoned comparatist because of its optimistic view of the state of the discipline.

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### **CHARLES SABATOS: *Frontier Orientalism and the Turkish Image in Central European Literature***

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In recent years, the concepts of Orientalism and frontier Orientalism have been receiving increasingly more attention in comparatist scholarship. The literatures of the Central European region are riddled with the presence of Ottoman invasions and the proverbial culturally and morally antagonistic “Turk”. Creating such representations has been crucial to the formation of ethnic and national identities from the Early Modern

period until the present. In *Frontier Orientalism and the Turkish Image in Central European Literature*, Charles Sabatos meticulously and masterfully dissects frontier Orientalist narratives in Slovak and adjacent Central European literatures. Frontier Orientalism, a concept introduced by Austrian-American anthropologist Andre Gingrich, refers to a set of “metaphors and myths” imprinted into the popular imaginary of Eastern Europe