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The Sea and Seafarers: looking at the literatures of the world from a maritime perspective

The theme of the sea and seafarers, which I have been teaching for several years to science students from over twenty different countries at Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, has led me to reflect on some practical and theoretical issues, thus changing an Undergraduate course into an intellectual odyssey *per se*.

This year, the students had to choose and present a piece of literature from their country related to the theme of the course, in order to share it with the other participants of the class. This assignment obliged the students to dive in the literary heritage of their respective countries. I had anticipated that the challenge would be of a very different nature according to the countries they came from, but I was confident that they could find something. I have not been disappointed. In fact, they brought to the surface some pearls that, due to my Western education, were unknown to me, making me realise two things :

- The first is the sheer scope and depth of the existing literary worlds which could turn so quickly a scholar into a simpleton;
- The second is about our methods to address the literatures of the world.

Is geography, a science which developed in the XIXth century around land bearings and also shaped the study of literature in academia the right way to contemplate our subject(s)? Some euro-centered definitions obviously fail to grasp their object, such as «Asian literature». More often than not, «national literatures» are in the same situation. Yet, comparative studies rely on those distinctions if only to show that they are ill-founded.

Comparative literature has always had all-encompassing and theoretical ambitions. Alongside the current trends of literary criticism such as post-colonialism and eco-criticism, I would like to argue that reshaping our perspective on cultural transfers according to a maritime perspective based on the three oceans of the world and its many seas, both open and closed, could offer a new and refreshing way to bring together the literatures of the world and help us rethink our binary distinctions about North and South, East and West, major and minor on our Blue Planet.