

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE «AMERICAN HOUR»  
OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: CLAUDIO GUILLÉN  
IN CONVERSATION WITH HARRY LEVIN

*Una historia personal de la «hora americana»  
de la literatura comparada: Claudio Guillén  
en conversación con Harry Levin*

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ABSTRACT: In this essay I examine the unpublished correspondence between Harry Levin and Claudio Guillén from 1956 to 1992. I also review Guillén's proposal for the Ph. D. Degree in Comparative Literature at UC San Diego, a 21-page document he submitted in 1968, three years after the first ACLA report, also known as the Levin report. In the first section of this essay I argue that their letters evidence the existence of diverging views, as early as the mid-1960s, on the nature of a discipline that had been recently institutionalized in the United States. I then look at how Guillén's relationship to Levin changed significantly after Guillén abandoned Harvard to work in the Spanish public university system in the mid-1980s. In the third and final section I examine Guillén's prologue to

the second edition of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* (2005), in which he described his Spanish experience as a failed attempt to spread comp lit in his country. This prologue was published only two years before Guillén passed away in 2007.

*Key words:* Claudio Guillén, Harry Levin, History of Comparative Literature.

RESUMEN: En el presente ensayo analizo la correspondencia inédita entre Harry Levin y Claudio Guillén entre 1956 y 1992. También estudio el programa doctoral en Literatura Comparada que Guillén diseñó para UC San Diego, un documento de 21 páginas entregado a la universidad en 1968, tres años después del primer informe de la ACLA, también conocido como el informe Levin. La primera sección del ensayo muestra cómo sus cartas se hacen eco, ya a mitad de la década de los sesenta, de la existencia de ideas muy diferentes sobre qué debería ser la literatura comparada, disciplina que acababa de ser institucionalizada en los Estados Unidos. A continuación examino la manera en la que la relación entre Guillén y Levin cambió después de que Guillén abandonara su puesto en Harvard para trabajar en la universidad pública española en los ochenta. En la tercera y última sección analizo el prólogo de Guillén a la segunda edición de *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* (2005), en el que describe su experiencia en España como un fallido intento para popularizar la literatura comparada en su país. Este prólogo apareció sólo dos años antes de que Guillén falleciera en 2007.

*Palabras clave:* Claudio Guillén, Harry Levin, Historia de la Literatura Comparada.

*For Mario J. Valdés*

Claudio Guillén (1924, Paris-2007, Madrid) arrived in the USA in 1940, at the age of sixteen, when his father Jorge secured a teaching position in Wellesley College. The Guillén family had left Spain for Canada shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936. Jorge Guillén, a member of the so-called *Generación del 27*, was one of the greatest poets in twentieth-century Spain, and an intimate friend of Federico García Lorca. In 1921 he married Germaine Cahen, a woman from a Franco-Jewish family, a decision that upset his family in the deeply Catholic region of Castile. In the following years the Guillén family spent several months a year in Paris for professional and personal reasons. Jorge Guillén also lectured at Oxford (1929-31) before his appointment to a professorship at the University of Seville in 1932. These biographical circumstances made his son Claudio a person naturally sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences, and a devotee reader of world literature.

In 1943, after majoring in English at Williams College at the age of 19, Claudio Guillén joined the resistance forces in France. He came back to the United States in 1946 and started graduate studies in Harvard, eventually obtaining a Ph. D. in Comparative Literature in 1953, under the mentorship of Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli. Guillén taught at Princeton until 1965, when he accepted a position at the recently established UC San Diego that had as its primary task the creation of a graduate program in Comparative Literature. Guillén moved to Harvard in 1978 but he took several leaves to teach in Spain before settling there in the mid-1980s. In this essay I examine the unpublished correspondence between Guillén and Levin from 1956 to 1992; I also review Guillén's proposal for the Ph. D. Degree in Comparative Literature at UC San Diego, a 21-page document he submitted in 1968, three years after the first ACLA report, also known as the Levin report. Both the letters and Guillén's proposal are contained in the Harry Levin papers deposited in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. In the first section of this paper I place Guillén's correspondence with Levin in the context in which the first acla report was produced. Their letters evidence the existence of diverging views, as early as the mid-1960s, on the nature of a discipline that had been recently institutionalized in the United States. I then look at how Guillén's relationship to Levin changed significantly after Guillén abandoned Harvard to work in the Spanish public university system in the mid-1980s. His departure meant the sudden end of his tenure as Harry Levin Professor of Comparative Literature, a distinction he had received in 1983. In the third and final section I examine Guillén's prologue to the second edition of his most popular book, *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* (2005; first edition 1985), in which he described his Spanish experience as a failed attempt to spread comp lit in his country. This prologue was published only two years before Guillén passed away in 2007.

## 1. «THE AMERICAN HOUR» OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

In 1957 Guillén published the third essay of his career, «Literatura como sistema», in the Italian journal *Filologia Romanza*. The main premise of this early essay, a systemic approach to literary history after the Saussurian distinction between langue and parole, was still at the core of his article «Literature as System», published in *Comparative Literature* in 1970, and one year later included in his collection of essays *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History*. Guillén thus made of «the elucidation of structures in history» (1971, 375, his italics) a central concern of his scholarly work since his early work in the 1950s. He conceived his work

on literary history as a response to then two dominant schools in the North American academy – New Criticism and French structuralism<sup>1</sup>. To read literary history anew, Guillén also set his work off from that of Amado Alonso, a professor also originally from Spain who taught at Harvard from 1946 to his premature death in 1952, and a leading representative of the only distinctively Spanish school of literary criticism in the twentieth century, the *estilística*. In his essay «Estilística del silencio» (1957) Guillén explicitly acknowledged Alonso's ascendancy, but also questioned their excessive reliance of an idea of «poetic intuition» that would limit, in his view, the objectivity of the literary critic.

Guillén's idea of a systemic and comparative literary history shared the optimistic belief in comparative literature that permeated the contemporary writings of his mentor Levin. In 1956 Levin had proudly announced that the «comparative method», one that consisted in correlating «each documentary or monumental artifact against the vertical axis of chronology and the lateral axis of structure» (1956, 159), had finally produced «the metamorphosis of the United States, from a provincial to a cosmopolitan role» (1956, 158) in the post-war era. Levin's generation, Roland Greene writes, «had the opportunity and the inclination to think openly about the discipline of comparative literature –to give it a charter and an institutional identity in this country– which their forerunners [Auerbach, Spitzer, Curtius], many of them elderly exiles after the war, seldom experienced» (1995, 147). The inauguration of comparative literature as the discipline with the highest degree of reflectivity represents what Green defines as the «entrepreneurial era» (1995, 147) of comp lit in America. During these years, both Levin and a young Guillén conceived thematics as the route to dispense with the requirement of

1. In *Teorías de la historia literaria* (1989), GUILLÉN recalls: «I chose one field, that of literary history [...] Those who lived in exile (we were children when the Civil War erupted), in some cases more diasporic subjects than exiles, wandering in different cities and languages, were the consequence [...] of a historic process that affected everything. To go deeper in our historic conscience was to assign a positive sign to this process. And, in my case, this happened despite two unfavorable circumstances: the North American environment, where the interest on history would be lukewarm or minority; and the boom of Structuralism in the sixties and early seventies». [«Elegí un campo, el de la historia literaria [...] Quienes vivíamos en el exilio (los que éramos niños cuando estalló la guerra civil), más diaspóricos algunos que exiliados, errantes de ciudad en ciudad y de lengua en lengua, éramos consecuencias [...] de un proceso histórico que todo lo abarcaba. Profundizar en nuestra conciencia histórica era asignar a este proceso un signo positivo. Y ello a pesar, en mi caso, de dos circunstancias desfavorables: el entorno norteamericano, donde la inquietud histórica solía ser tibia o minoritaria; y el auge del Estructuralismo de los años sesenta y principios de los setenta» (14)]. All the translations from Spanish are mine.

empirical contacts that had characterized the French tradition of comparativism. Guillén would later define as the «American hour» of comparative literature precisely that «coming of age of the discipline through the work of a number of scholars of different origins, brought together on American soil» (1993, 61) and working in the mid-1950s. This rupture with the «prevalence of the investigation of influences in the principal national literatures» (1993, 60) was sanctioned at the Second Triennial Congress of the ICLA, held in 1958 in Chapel Hill.

In this context of rethinking of the discipline in the late 1950s, Guillén invited Levin to inaugurate a series of lectures organized by the department of Romance Languages at Princeton to mitigate what Guillén saw as a lack of dialogue among units of humanities and social sciences in the university. In the letter Jan. 9, 1959, Guillén complained to Levin that «we do not know well enough what others are doing and thinking, especially what methods are being developed, or what neighbouring fields are likely to have a fertilizing influence on our own endeavours» (1959a). In this letter Guillén envisioned a forum in which «outstanding specialists in literary criticism» would meet with scholars «in such other fields as linguistics, psychology, sociology and art history, to discuss methods and new developments» (1959a). The two topics Guillén suggested to Levin were literary history and the literary anthropology of Carl G. Jung and Gaston Bachelard. Levin initially declined this invitation, in letter from Jan. 16, and the honor to inaugurate the lecture series that March fell to René Wellek. Levin, however, changed his mind and agreed to lecture in May. Levin wanted to lecture on thematics, a topic that was of his interest after having «picked up a little awareness of the subject from my colleague Murray [*Barnson Emeneau*] during this term» (1959b), as noted in letter of April 1, 1959.

If the ICLA conference of 1958 had confirmed the shift of power from the French to the American academy, the letters that Levin and Guillén exchanged in the 1960s contained numerous allusions to the practical consequences of the rising popularity of comp lit in the USA. In the opening lines of the first ACLA report, in 1965, Levin acknowledged that «The recent proliferation of Comparative Literature, in colleges and universities throughout the country, could hardly have materialized without the support of the National Defense Education Act» (1995, 21). The economic stimulus from the NDEA was in fact one of the main subjects in the correspondence that he exchanged with Guillén in 1962 and 1963. In a letter of December 13, 1962, Guillén happily announced to Levin the creation of a graduate program in comp lit in Princeton, after «some years» of planning, thanks to a «decisive boost: the award of three NDEA fellowships» (1962). The program should be under way by September of 1963, Guillén explained in

the letter, and in interdisciplinary fashion it was to recruit professors from six departments: Classics, English, Germanic Languages, Oriental Studies, Romance Languages and Slavic Literatures. At the same time, the money from the NDEA elicited diverging views on the nature of the discipline that diverged from those of Levin and Guillén. In letter of December 10, 1962, Levin complained that «such arrangements [the NDEA money] can mean very little when they are superimposed upon such departments as I have seen at Iowa and Colorado; and yet they will probably hire some bright applicants away from us, since established departments can receive no government funds» (1962). Levin added that «those of us who try to maintain high standards will have to work together through the Association» (1962). And in a letter of Jan. 9, 1963, Guillén voiced his concerns that emergent, federally-funded programs, now considered Harvard and Princeton «old-fashioned»:

I agree absolutely with your misgivings about some of the glamorously dangerous schemes that are sprouting across the country. According to the such, our new program [Princeton] –and, by implication, Harvard’s– is considered old-fashioned, because we insist on a basis of training in the traditional literary departments (1963).

In this letter to Levin, Guillén was specific to the point that he provided the names of two universities with which Princeton was already at odds. «This kind of tension has already developed between Rutgers and us», Guillén wrote before quoting the following excerpt from Rutgers’ implementation plan: «Existing plans elsewhere tend to be whimsical, essentially philological in direction, and concerned with rather simple-minded juxtapositions of literatures and ideas» (qtd. in Guillén 1963). Guillén was also very critical of the program in Michigan State. He disapprovingly quoted the statement in which this new program claims to be more than «national literature courses in translation [and] a congeries of courses accumulated from the regular offerings of several departments» (qtd. in Guillén 1963). Despite Guillén’s sense of achievement after the approval of the comp lit program in Princeton in 1963, his correspondence with Levin reveals uneasiness with the growing number of comp lit departments. In this same letter of Jan. 9, 1963 Guillén affirmed:

I can only think of comparative studies as of a very long pull, of which a careful basis, by means of the traditional departments, must be built during the first few semesters. But these new departments seal themselves off from the rest of the University, pretending to a few specialists in everything –or, in the words of a California comic, «the world’s foremost authority» (1963).

To avoid a crisis of legitimacy, Guillén concluded this letter with a call to join forces («I need your reassurance in this»). Guillén's mistrust towards departments of Comparative Literature was somewhat echoed in the Levin report when the document suggested the «interdepartmental committee» as «the most practical arrangement in the early years of a new program» (1995, 22). Guillén's idea of comparative studies as a discipline not suitable to the average student, nor the average university, was also present in the first ACLA report. The Levin report envisioned comp lit as a discipline «for the more highly qualified students», and presupposed «an existing strength in language departments and libraries to which not very many colleges, and indeed not every university, can be fairly expected to measure up» (1995, 22).

In 1965 Guillén left his teaching position in Princeton to join the department of Literatures at UC San Diego, founded one year earlier by a group of international scholars that included Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, who shared with Guillén the experience of leaving Spain as a child due to the Civil War. This move to California surprised Levin, who had begun to mention the possibility of a visiting appointment in Harvard that would have constituted the first step to eventually lure Guillén back to his alma mater. Guillén, however, believed that a place with no history in the humanities, such as UC San Diego, offered him the possibility of designing his ideal Ph. D. in Comparative Literature. He fully implemented this project in 1968, three years after his arrival. Guillén authored a Ph. D. proposal of 21 pages that incorporated most of the practical recommendations contained in the Levin report<sup>2</sup>. In the Ph.D. proposal Guillén defined comp lit in the United States as «an academic discipline [...] [that is] relatively recent [...] In the years immediately following World War II, the need was widely recognized for the systematic consideration of literature in international terms» (1968: 1). According to Guillén, «the introduction of courses in Great Books or General Education» and «the influence of such émigré scholars as René Wellek and Renato Poggioli» were two key factors in the «coming-of-age of the discipline in this country» (1968, 2). The proposal said that Harvard had «had such a program in its books since 1904» but that it only «began in

2. The 21-page document consists of five sections. 1. Introduction: Objectives of the program; Historical development of the program; Timetable for development of the program; Relationship of the program to other campus and university programs (pp. 1-7); 2. The Program: Undergraduate preparation for admission; Foreign language requirement; Program of study (Advisory system; Individual plan of study; Introductory courses in Oriental literatures; Exchanges with other campuses); Qualifying examinations; Dissertation and final examination (pp. 7-16); 3. Staff (pp. 16-17); 4. Courses (pp. 18-20); 5. Facilities and equipment (p. 21).

earnest in 1946» (1968: 2), as if to emphasize the exemplary post-war nature of the discipline<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of the young age of comp lit programs, Guillén explains, «nearly all these departments or programs were founded much *after* the traditional departments [...] had established themselves in their respective institutions, or indeed had become establishments in their own right» (1968, 2, his italics). In disciplinary terms, comparative literature constitutes a «cumbersome afterthought» (1968, 2). The practical consequences of this peculiar nature of comp lit, Guillén observes, was that it found itself competing with the literature departments in every university, a less amicable picture that the one contained in the first ACLA report («programs in Comparative Literature are not designed to compete with those in the other departments of languages and literatures, but rather to augment and to bridge them», Levin, 1995, 22). The difficulties of putting together a graduate program in comp lit also affected the «content» of comparative studies. Adopting a pragmatic point of view, Guillén describes two possible orientations among comp lit scholars. «At worst», Guillén notes, comp lit «signified a stress on international literary contacts (Montaigne in England, etc.), implying actually a perpetuation of the national point of view» (1968, 3). On the other hand, «at best, even when the basic goal of the comparatist became the study, from a radically international or theoretical point of view, of forms, genres, themes or myths, it meant that progress was difficult, and that the standards of several departments had to be met simultaneously» (1968, 3).

On the issue of teaching on translation, Guillén had no problem with undergraduate students reading works in translation in courses under the Humanities, World Literature and Great Books label. He only intended to implement comparative literature at the graduate level, to the point that he was reluctant to accept students with majors in comparative literature from other institutions because these programs «do not always maintain the necessary standards» (1968, 8). The doctoral candidates «should know in depth a minimum of two foreign languages» and should have a reading ability in German, French or Italian. While French or German are required by «most Comparative Literature departments» (1968, 9), Italian is now added «in view of the significant body of writing in aesthetics and literary theory that has been produced in that language» (1968, 9). Finally, the document

3. In a letter dated January 17, 1968, Levin, after reading Guillén's Ph. D. proposal for UC San Diego, complained about his insistence on tracing back the history of comp lit at Harvard exclusively to 1946. Levin explained that Harvard granted its first graduate degree in the discipline in 1904, and a department of Comparative Literature was founded in 1906. For a detailed account of the history of Comparative Literature at Harvard, see LEVIN 1994, 14-15.



states that doctoral students would also be «be encouraged to study a language in its classical phase, such as Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese» (1968, 9). The proposal also announces the creation of «Introductory Courses in Oriental Literatures» meant to bridge «a deplorable distance in literary studies between “westerners” and orientalists» (1968, 13). Comparative metrics and a comparative theory of genres are two examples of the new direction to be followed (1968, 14).

In letter dated January 17, 1968, Levin praised Guillén's document without reservations, defining it as «a model of its kind» and contrasting it to recent proposals also out of the UC system: «The length of the experience and the quality of the thinking that have gone into it should be self-evident to those who have worked in the field, and it stands in striking contrast to the rather slap-dash document I received from one of your sister campuses a short while ago» (1968a). In this letter, Levin also praised the «oriental requirement», which he understood as a «practical compromise between the absurd perfectionism of Étiemble and the more usual hemispheric provincialism» (1968a). That same year of 1968, in the Presidential Address delivered at the third Triennial Meeting of the ACLA, Levin referred to René Étiemble's «far-flung cosmopolitanism» (1968b, 11) as a set of unrealistic expectations. While learning a non-European language is always desirable, Levin argued, the Western researcher should not should feel «culturally deprived» (1968b, 12) for not doing it.

## 2. GUILLÉN, LEVIN, HARVARD

After months of agony general Francisco Franco died on November 20, 1975. From that day on Guillén found himself less interested in the vicissitudes of the American academy and more willing to collaborate with universities in democratic Spain, even at the cost of renouncing the cultural and economic capital he had accumulated in the United States. Levin officially offered him tenured professorship in Comp Lit and Spanish in Harvard, in a letter dated December 12, 1975, only a few days after Franco's death. It took Guillén more than three months to verbalize his rejection of a plan that in practice amounted to becoming the successor of his mentor in Harvard. In letter dated March 4, 1976, Guillén finally justified his decision to stay at UC San Diego, while traveling more frequently to Spain, on personal and «existential» grounds. Guillén first alleged personal reasons not to accept the offer, the biggest obstacle being that «the possible return to Boston evokes my adolescence, the difficult years of initial emigration and apprenticeship, in ways that I find difficult to control» (1976). In this

letter Guillén recognized UC San Diego as «the only institution to which I have ever become attached», and claimed that it was too late for him to join Harvard. Guillén suggested Edward Said as a possible future hire:

I should have gone to Harvard, had I achieved enough, ten or twelve years ago, ready to give to my new colleagues the kind of drive and imagination that I may have brought to San Diego. Now I feel that the moment has passed, I look forward but to Cervantes and some poetic genres and theoretical issues on which I would like to write, and I assure you honestly that though I may be committing a grievous mistake where I am concerned, I feel certain that you need a younger and stronger person at Harvard at the present time. Some one, say, in Edward Said's phase of development and participation in current movements of thought. I am not presuming to advise you concerning Said, let me hasten to add, much though I admired the lecture he gave us here a couple of months back, but simply mention him as an example of what I mean in a generic way (1976).

In letter of March 4, 1977, one year after rejecting the offer from Harvard, Guillén informed Levin of his will to reconsider his decision after learning from Stephen Gilman, his brother-in-law and professor of Spanish also at Harvard, that the appointment was still possible. This letter contains a lengthy postscript that reveals to what extent Guillén found himself in between two different lands. He felt pressured to leave his comfortable environment in San Diego to accept the offer from his former mentor, but at the same time he was already making arrangements to visit Málaga, the first of a series of temporary stays that preceded his definite return to Spain a few years later:

(P.S.) I have asked for a leave of absence from San Diego to teach at Málaga next academic year, thus delaying both my availability, which is awkward, and the possibility of a decision on your part and that of your colleagues ... I have spoken to you earlier concerning my real involvement in Spanish affairs. The involvement is still real but is not likely to have any academic consequences. However, a Spanish Comparative Literature Association was set up last October in Madrid at a meeting where I was the principal speaker; and I would like to offer some course in the discipline (which in the Spanish context is truly a liberal and constructive force today) in Málaga –for the first time in the history of the Spanish universities!– and thus follow through and help make plans for others to profit from on the future (Guillén 1977).

Guillén eventually joined Harvard in 1978, but his constant stays in Spain for professional and personal reasons significantly slowed his adaptation to a department that he felt was «in disarray, or in a state of suspension»

as he wrote in April 15, 1983 to Levin, who had retired one year before. Guillén's mind was already elsewhere –one evident sign being Guillén's denial of rumors of a permanent move to Spain after he was named «extraordinary full professor» («catedrático extraordinario») at the Universidad Autónoma of Barcelona in 1982. «I shall not move to Barcelona, definitely not», Guillén wrote to Levin in this letter of April 15, 1983, only a few days before becoming the first Harry Levin Professor of Literature at Harvard. Guillén's letter of March 14, 1984 is a clear-cut example of his uneasy position between his loyalty to Levin and the emotional ties that linked him to Spain. As if negating, again, the possibility of leaving Harvard for good, Guillén wrote from Barcelona: «Comparative Literature is a few years away still, here, for the simple reason that the modern European literatures are insufficiently taught and must be developed first. A long pull, and it is too late for me to devote my energies to the task» (1984). Yet at the same time Guillén explained with great excitement the progress of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, a manuscript now 450-pages long after tripling the size Guillén had originally envisioned. Also in this year of 1984, Guillén became the president of the Spanish Society of General and Comparative Literature, a position he held until 1989. In order to popularize comparative literature in Spain Guillén had to accept a modest economic remuneration and deal with a scandalously high student-to-faculty ratio<sup>4</sup>. He also conducted research without adequate library resources to the point that he frequently made use of his friends' private collections (Collazos 2012). Starting in 1983 Guillén taught at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and the Pompeu Fabra University, also in Barcelona, and he officially retired from Harvard in 1988.

The last letter from Guillén in the Harry Levin Papers is dated April 20, 1992. This time Guillén's postal address is not Spanish but American, the institutional address of the department of Spanish at Vanderbilt University, where he served as visiting professor that year. Guillén wrote to Levin to inform him of an upcoming ten-day visit to Harvard on occasion of the Renato Poggioli lecture he would deliver in early May, «an improbable and marvelous event for me, circular beyond words». Guillén invoked finances to justify his acceptance of an invitation from Vanderbilt:

I have been reading, writing, studying like mad in Nashville, Tennessee, of all places, since January; and I am inclined to think that you deserve an explanation. Harry, I do not regret the decision to teach in Spain and live

4. The first graduate course Guillén taught in Barcelona, in 1983-84, was attended by sixty students (BLECUA 2009, 30).

there, callous though it may sound; it was a lifelong purpose. But of course I have missed in my work the American university. The Vanderbilt Library is not among the best: but compared to the Spanish ones it's the British Museum. I need it desperately, so as to push on with my many projects. It is not possible to return to Harvard after one has left it, and, living as I do on a modest pension, I could not afford a couple of months in Cambridge, nor would I wish to impose for so long on Teresa<sup>5</sup> (1992).

There is little doubt that Guillén's alleged economic difficulties were less a real problem than a way to justify his bad conscience after leaving the Harry Levin professorship a few years earlier. Moreover, Guillén's relationship with his alma mater was troubled. As it to appease Levin, Guillén downplayed the importance of his recent work in Spain: «I don't think that I was able to accomplish very much in Barcelona, though of course there were a few interested students and colleagues [sic]» (1992). Yet he mentioned his presidency of the Spanish Society of General and Comparative Literature (1984-89), and seemed expectant about the future creation of a B. A. degree in Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature («We shall see what happens. The convergence of the two is remote utopia for now»). Forced to retire at age 65 due to a new law by the Socialist government of Felipe González, Guillén explained to Levin that he was taking advantage of the fact that he could be indefinitely reappointed visiting professor in and outside Spain –Italy and Brazil were two of his immediate destinations.

The final lines of this letter of 1992 evidence Guillén's eagerness for some sort of spiritual reconciliation with Levin. About a collection of essays then in progress, Guillén said that it «could be another Ph.D. thesis, but I intend instead to write a selective and readable volume, à la Levin». Guillén continued: «As you can see, I am still doing Comparative Literature, very stubbornly, very loyally with respect to my origins... And I feel proud of all that I was able to do and achieve for the department at Harvard while I was there» (1992). After mentioning Harvard, Guillén decided to address an episode in his recent past that, as one can infer from his words, had damaged his relationship with his lifelong mentor. The issue that Guillén brought to surface concerned a stay in Hong Kong while chairing the department of Comparative Literature:

By the way, when I went to Hong Kong for two weeks I was not teaching, for I had concentrated all my courses that year, while chairing two

5. Guillén is referring here to his sister Teresa, wife of Stephen Gilman, then Spanish professor at Harvard.

departments at once, during the first semester. Bette Anne<sup>6</sup> must remember that. I am sorry for including these lines of self-serving *apologia* in this letter; but you must try to understand, after our last conversation. What I wish now is to see you, as always, without looking back (1992).

Guillén concluded this last letter remembering the figure of René We-  
llek, «whom I was able to visit a year and a half ago, in his clinic», and ex-  
pressing his desire to enjoy a conversation with Levin. This reconciliatory  
meeting, however, never took place due to Levin's fragile health –he ex-  
plained to Guillén he was not attending lectures anymore in a letter dated  
April 24, 1992. Levin passed away two years later, in May 29, 1994.

### 3. THE EXPERIENCE OF SPAIN

A revised edition of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, a textbook originally pu-  
blished in Spain in 1985 and translated into English under the title of *The  
Challenge of Comparative Literature* in 1993, well past the «American hour»,  
came out in 2005. The prologue to this new edition of *Entre lo uno y lo  
diverso*, published only two years before Guillén's death, was a testament  
to his biographical and intellectual implication in the project of comparati-  
ve literature for half a century. In this prologue Guillén remembered with  
nostalgia what he defined as the golden age of comp lit, a span of forty  
years ranging from 1945 to 1985 –*Entre lo uno y lo diverso* was first pu-  
blished precisely that ending year of 1985. In retrospect, Guillén referred  
to his book as a recollection of the comparative work that was made in the  
USA, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Soviet  
countries during those four golden decades (2005, 12). The differences  
from the prologue to the first edition of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* are telling.  
The two-page 1985 prologue mentions how the book grew out of univer-  
sity lectures, explains the citation style to the Spanish reader, and conclu-  
des acknowledgments. Twenty years later, however, Guillén voiced his  
frustration for what he saw as the failure of a life project –the introduction  
of the discipline of comparative literature in the Spanish university system.  
In this new prologue Guillén laments that in Spain «Comparative Literature  
has been absorbed by the Theory of Literature» («la Literatura Comparada  
ha sido absorbida por la Teoría de la Literatura», 2005, 12). While theory

6. Bette Anne Farmer, administrative assistant in the department of Comparative Li-  
terature at Harvard.

of literature constitutes an inquiry on aesthetics that has aspired to universalism since the eighteenth century, Guillén argued, comparative literature fosters an «open globalism» («mundialismo abierto», 2005, 15) that deals with an «unnamable variety of languages, literary traditions and epochs» («in-nombrable variedad de lenguas, tradiciones literarias y épocas», 2005, 15). This balance between the one and the many had been embraced by Levin himself when he declared, as early as 1956, that «the comparative method enables us to follow an individual process of development by bringing together different manifestations which have taken similar forms» (1956, 159). It was through a comparative approach to themes and literary genres that Guillén continued Levin's legacy as exemplified in his two most important contributions after *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, the collections of essays *Teorías de la historia literaria* (1989) and *Múltiples moradas* (1998).

In the prologue to the new edition of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, Guillén criticized the refusal of the ministry of Education of Spain to differentiate between comp lit and literary theory. In 1998, the ministry inserted comp lit into previously existing departments of theory of literature to create a *licenciatura* [Bachelor of Arts] now called Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature. Guillén's negative evaluation contrasts with earlier statements on the subject. In *Teorías de la historia literaria*, published in 1989, Guillén had explained to the Spanish reader that «theory of literature and comparativism tend to converge and to need one another. Many of us believe that the future of literary studies in our country lies in this confluence» («la teoría de la literatura y el comparatismo tienden a converger y a necesitarse mutuamente. Muchos pensamos que en esta confluencia reside el futuro de los estudios literarios en nuestro país», 2005, 13). Moreover, as early as 1968, in the Ph. D. proposal that he put together for UC San Diego, Guillén had envisioned theory of literature as «the main thrust of the program. Comparative Literature, as a centralizing section of a single department, should become above all its theoretical wedge. In this sense, its role is akin to [...] the role played by linguistic theory in a single department of Linguistics» (1968, 4). In 2005, however, Guillén was frustrated to the point that he could hardly resist the temptation for personal revenge: «The story would be long to tell and deplorable. It will be better if I do not name names» («La historia sería larga de contar y lamentable. Mejor sera que no dé nombres y apellidos», 2005, 14). Guillén was very displeased by the fact that comp lit professors tended to teach national literatures in isolation, something due in great part to their very limited language skills. The idea of a monolingual professor relying on faulty translations, not uncommon in Spain, was the complete opposite of what Guillén would expect in a comparativist. Also, most of the professors of Spanish literature, now rebranded as teachers of Theory of

Literature and Comparative Literature, felt safer in the theoretical realm of linguistic theory, genre theory and narratology (or *estilística*, if poetry was to be discussed) rather than pursuing the idea of world literature that Guillén proposed to map.

After disapproving of the collaboration of scholars and administrators in the development of what he saw as a wrong curricular approach in Spain, Guillén devoted the second half of the new prologue of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso* to what he described as a deep intellectual crisis in the American academia. This move outside Spain was in consonance with the title of the prologue, «Comparative literature and the crisis of the humanities» («La literatura comparada y la crisis de las humanidades»). Guillén referred to «a crisis [...] that affects [...] not only comparativists but all those who work in the fields of literary and humanistic studies» («una índole de crisis [...] que envuelve [...] no solo a los comparatistas sino a todos quienes se dedican a los estudios literarios y humanísticos», 2005, 12). In his account, the pretense of leaving the ivory tower made American scholars emphasize the interests of women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities to the detriment of the humanistic values widely accepted at least until the 1970s (2005, 17). Guillén referred to cultural and postcolonial studies as the two main areas of resistance to the traditional idea of literature that Levin and he had embraced for decades. After providing a very schematic summary of these two critical schools (2005, 18), Guillén then devoted two and a half pages (2005, 18-20) to Fredric Jameson<sup>7</sup>, in his view the most original scholar in cultural studies today. On postcolonial studies, Guillén also wrote a very generous appreciation of Edward Said (2005, 22-4), an exilic scholar whose humanism he always admired.

Guillén's refusal to discuss virtues or errors of the thinkers broadly known as poststructuralists in this polemical prologue is not surprising in view of the absence of reference to them in his previous works. Excepting a brief reference to Jacques Derrida as a Manichean thinker who does not do justice to the scholars he refutes (1989, 141), Guillén never showed public interest in deconstruction<sup>8</sup>, for example. Nor did he mention the contradictions that had characterized the comp lit in North America since

7. Jameson was a young professor of French at UC San Diego when Guillén was the chair of the comp lit program. In the prologue to the revised edition of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, GUILLÉN suggested that the small size of UC San Diego had benefited Jameson who interacted with professors in very different areas while working there (2005, 19).

8. In letter to Levin dated April 15, 1983, after referring to Barbara Johnson as «a “deconstructionist” of talent», GUILLÉN jokes: «If I may quote the beginning of a short article I just did for Eva Kushner: “Comparative Literature is like a lady with a past who has interesting

the early 1980s. It is well known that a shift took place from philology and literary history to cultural studies in the eighteen years between the second and the third report of the ACLA (from the Greene to Bernheimer Report in 1975 and 1993, respectively). To reproduce here an often-quoted statement from the Bernheimer Report, new «ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term “literature” may no longer adequately describe our object of study» (Bernheimer 1995, 42).

In the last two decades of his life, a time mostly spent as professor –up to 1994–, essayist and editor in Spain, Guillén obtained institutional and academic recognition for his intellectual achievements: From 1998 to his death in 2007, for example, Guillén served as editor of the newly created Biblioteca de Literatura Universal, a joint enterprise between the ministry of Culture of Spain and a private consortium; he was elected to the Spanish Royal Academy in 2002, and one of his essays was included in the commemorative edition that the Academy published on occasion of the 400th anniversary of Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* in 2005; also in 2005, his manual *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, central to a whole generation of literary scholars in Spain but out of print since the late 1990s, returned to bookstores in the new edition by the prestigious Barcelona publishing house Tusquets, with the new polemical prologue. One can speculate that by leaving the American academy and settling in Spain in the 1980s Guillén was able to maintain his loyalty to Levin’s idea of what comparative literature should be. Guillén’s discomfort during his brief period as professor of comp lit in Harvard evidences the extent to which he could not empathize with poststructuralist theory and cultural studies, and it was by moving to Spain that he maintained his intellectual and biographical past intact while still looking forward to a promising future. His plans to popularize comp lit in the Spanish university system failed miserably, according to his own words, in what constituted the final chapter of a contentious relationship between literary theory and an idea of comparative literature that he always identified with the disciplinary boundaries set by his mentor Levin in the postwar years.

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problems. Deconstructionism –that merrily tragic sequel to the New Criticism– is not one of those problems”.



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