

## DIGGING (W)HOLES IN A GLOBAL WORLD. IDENTITY IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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*Abstract: In the last decade of years, the discourse on cultural identity and national literatures was highly influenced by the debate on the role and redefinition of the comparative literature, marked by terms like "death", "triumph" and "rebirth". These terms belong to some influent works: Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Haun Saussy's *Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares* (2004) and David Damrosch's *Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies* (2006). For present and future decades, in 2014, the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) delivered brand new reports on the State of the Discipline. Haun Saussy and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen made productive suggestions about the future developments of comparative literary studies. What about the Romanian comparative literature? What were the contributions devised by the Romanian comparativism in the last years to the global endeavour of redefining comparative literature? Our paper investigates the specific responses and positions assumed by a Romanian updated comparativism, as they are expressed in the last years.*

*Keywords: identity, globalization, planetarity, discipline, comparative literature*

**Motto:**

"Comparative Literature must always cross borders".  
(G. Spivak, *Death of Discipline*)

### Comparative Literature Again

In this paper, the term *comparative literature* is specifically molded by some relevant contemporary theorists. For instance, Claudio Guillén views comparative literature as a system of comparisons not between literatures, but between degrees of theoreticity admitted by the definition of literature. If so, I think we can use this term for a comparison between literary systems. By literary systems we may understand models of reading (literary models) or national literatures and world literature. One may even accept a term of global literature, if needed.

Intriguing and full of fruitful suggestions and results is the actual endeavour of contemporary comparatists in evaluating again and again the scope and the aim of comparative literature, in a prolonged age of globalization. As a matter of fact, my paper is focused on some of the most influent redefinitions of the comparative literature made in 21<sup>st</sup> century and on how comparative literature regards the idea of identity, be it cultural, literary or national. How do we define national literature and world literature today? Is it possible a definition related to the identity of Romanian comparative literature? Can we identify a Romanian definition of what national literature is, in relation with the contemporary definitions of world literature or globalization?

For Romanian comparatists, the term "globalization" is not a frequent one. With very few exceptions, globalization is poorly present in theoretical displays. A possible cause is the fact that Romanian tradition of defining the national literature is deeply rooted in a European tradition: national literature, literary identity is derived or defined in direct connections with de German or French literatures. And, as we all know, the term globalization is associated with the American tradition, which has a less important influence on Romanian reconstructions of the concepts of comparativism.

### Globalization – Still a Real Challenge?

As globalization is seen as a challenge and a new source for the crisis of the comparative literature, I strongly emphasize (as most of comparatists do) that the whole history of comparative literature is nothing if not but a history of perpetual change, motion and transformation. If globalization wouldn't exist, our discipline would have been forced anyway to (re)define itself, as its theoretical discourse is a discourse of legitimation. There are at least two causes of the continuous crisis of comparative literature: a) the partial framework of theory and methodology since 19<sup>th</sup> century, from its inception and b) its construction based on national literatures “at a time when the paradigm when the paradigm of global has gained currency in many disciplines and approaches”. (Tötösy de Zepetnek & Vasvári, 2013: 13) The binary structure of diagnosis from above is doubled by a binary definition of comparative literature: method of literary study (knowledge of more than one national literature) and ideology of inclusion of the Other, facilitating the cross-cultural interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study of literature. For the authors mentioned above, the advance of comparative literature is evident in “peripheral” cultures and is a result of the impact of globalization and an elaborated construct, adopting both traditional and new approaches. Comparative literature remains a discipline with a global history and intellectual presence and a focus on literature, while world literature, cultural studies and comparative cultural studies remain fields of study, considering literature within the context of culture, practising *interdisciplinarity*. (Tötösy de Zepetnek & Vasvári, 2013: 16)

In her highly influent and controversial *Death of Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak placed comparative literature in a context of three dominant dimensions for the culture of 20<sup>th</sup> century: crossing borders, collectivities and planetarity. Basically, the last term is of most importance here, as it represents one of the main proposals of Spivak. The term *planetarity* should replace *globalization* – an obsolete term for global dominance of one language (English). To be planetary rather than global, continental or worldly, as globalization means “the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (Spivak, 2003: 72) Comparative literature must imagine planetarity and escape the “cultural relativity, specular alterity and cyber-benevolence”. Still, planetarity should not deny globalization.

A new comparative literature, for Spivak, is an inclusive comparative literature (implying quality and rigour, borrowed from Area Studies). Comparative Literature and Area Studies (as academic disciplines) can work together in the fostering of national literatures and the literatures of indigenous languages in the world “that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made” (Spivak, 2003: 15) Globalization means, first of all, globalizing the capital. The new comparative literature could fit a careful reading coming out from “the Third World” (Spivak is inspired here by Fredric Jameson), with attention to language and idiom, that will show that themes like tradition and modernity, collectivity and individualism act in different ways. And touching older minorities: African, Asian, Hispanic; with the mention that the old postcolonial model (India mainly) will not be the model for “transnational to global cultural studies on the way to planetarity”. (We should observe that this is not very far from the way some Asian comparatists – like Wang Nang, Dipesh Chakrabarty, or Swapan Majumdar – propose models of reading.) Far from discussing in terms of national literatures, national identities and legitimating discourses, Spivak asserts that if we are serious about advanced instruction in comparative literature, “we have to ask the question of the formation

of collectivities without necessarily prefabricated contents”. (Spivak, 2003: 26) If it is considered a fallacy, Spivak reaffirms the condition for this problem to be discussed: when we assume culture we do this by assuming collectivity. The crossing of borders is possible only with the help of comparative literature, playing the role of the interpreter between local languages, dialects, idioms, collectivities. The planetarity conceived by Spivak can be best imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet, inscribing collectivities and their responsibilities. The new comparative literature should undermine and change the phenomenon of appropriating the emergent by the dominant, concludes Spivak.

In *Rebirth of a Discipline*, David Damrosch draws the attention to the expansion to “a global and planetary field of vision that not represent the death of our discipline so much as a rebirth of perspectives that were already present in the formative early years of comparative literature as a discipline”. (Damrosch, 2006: 99) Though, one must keep in mind that “the death of the discipline” was, in fact, announced by Susan Bassnett (*Comparative Literature: A critical Introduction*) in 1993. (This diagnosis is also a Euro-American-centric point of view, as it neglects the advancement in what are called peripheral regions, literatures in Europe or Asia.)

For a true revival of our discipline, Damrosch suggests a return to the origins of comparative literature, (re)considering the proposals of two great scholars: Hutcheson Macauley Posnett’s provincialism and Hugo Meltz von Lomnitz’s cosmopolitanism. Posnett’s *Comparative Literature* (1886) and Meltzl’s *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (first journal of comparative literature, 1877) are two expressions of the two dominant models of literary and cultural study from 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time of nationalist affirmation and definition, when identity played a central role in cultural discourse. For Damrosch, these two positions are complementary, not disjunctive, and they best characterize our discipline.

In the latest report of the state of the discipline, Haun Saussy predicts that ten years from now, comparative literature will be – again – in a state of crisis. The pressures on comparative literature in 2014 are similar to those from 2004 due to “globalization stories [...] comfort the biases of our institutions and our public. Globalization stories as the new form of modernization narratives end up being about us” (Saussy, 2014). “About us” includes those scholars concerned with the perpetual definition of the comparative literature, especially with the continuous sense of crisis that “we make for ourselves” (Saussy’s claim). Comparative literature is – again – forced to reinvent itself by external conditions, but also by the absence of clear boundaries and by the claim that comparative literature is the domain of describing and relating the literary productions of all times, peoples and languages. As Saussy emphasizes, the crisis we make for ourselves is, actually, our greatest resource and he propose three solutions for the future: “Comparatists will have to stand up for themselves in the next ten years, first by championing the so-called national language departments without which comparative literature will not survive except as a label for general-education literature-in-translation courses; second by reminding the culture around us of the value there is being able to synthesize complex and discrepant information that was never designed to be drawn together; and third by demonstrating new ways of making sense exactly where existing canons and methods fail us.” (Saussy, 2014)

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen insists upon the necessity that comparatist scholars should work on the difference between the cultural transfer that actually takes place and upon the deeper layers of the literary culture “in order to uncover the structural difference of the kinds of reception and circulation works have” (Thomsen, 2014) in an age which encompasses labels as “multiculturalist” (1995 Bernheimer’s report) or “globalized” (2006 Saussy’s report). Both reports mentioned above deal with the changing status and configuration of nation states, but we may notice a shift towards “world literature”, a shift that underlines a cosmopolitan dimension of comparative scholarship and a calling of new ways of thinking the discipline of comparative literature. The debate on world literature implies once again the debate on national canons and international influences. Like Damrosch, Thomsen also suggests that a more reflected approach to the differences between local and international canonization is a precondition for working with world literature. Canonization must be seen as a complex social mechanism where agents (readers, critics, publishers etc.) take part in a permanent debate on the value in literature, keeping in mind that some agents are more powerful than others. Literature is seen as a vast system of communication connecting people and bringing new perspectives on the world.

Thomsen asks for more attention to the process of continuous globalization and complex influence of migrant writers, to the pluralism of the literary systems. Narrow theories of world literature must be abandoned as comparative literature is “more than any other a discipline where texts are not just sources or means to explain something else, but the thing itself laden with aesthetic value”. (Thomsen, 2014) The continuous process of globalization and the influence of digital humanities fundamentally provide more knowledge of intercultural influences and exchanges that define the world literature(s).

As Paul Jay observed, the crisis – as stated by René Wellek – is associated to the way comparative literature was practiced at that time: “its tendency to conflate European literatures with ‘all literatures’, and its flattening out of the diversity of human experience, of the differences that distinguish cultures from one another and make suspect the whole idea of the unity of ‘all creation and experience’.” (Jay, 2014) It is a Eurocentric perspective, which could be considered the first stage of “globalization”. The term stands for cultural homogenization, and implies the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism as a worldwide model, as Homi Bhaba presented. One must not forget that the concept itself of comparative literature is based on the Goethean concept of world literature, that resulted in Eurocentrism and national approaches, which shaped the comparative literature. Jay remarked that when adopting a comparatist practice that incorporates the work of multicultural, postcolonial or globalization theory, some theorists (Jan M. Ziolkowski, Peter Hulme, Ania Loomba) want “to move comparative literature beyond comparatism by paying attention to complex, networked, and fluid forms of mobility and exchange”. (Jay, 2014) And this kind of practicing comparative literature equals in fact with the calling the attention to questions raised by the way we may track “processes, networks, and fluid formations: the cultural effects of mobility, and the mobility of cultural effects” and opens the door for *transdisciplinarity*, an attempt to get beyond binary coordinates. (Jay, 2014) A new comparativism is possible today, adopting *transdisciplinarity*, which requires a *transgressing* of the laws of the older model of comparativism: “Simple comparison can too often lock us into binary analyses, but transnational and transdisciplinary studies, concerned more with

flows, networks, intersecting lines, and, most importantly, the spaces between those lines, requires a transdisciplinary approach.” (Jay, 2014) The transdisciplinary comparativism proposed by Paul Jay – working in the spaces between disciplines and explores the spaces between nations – is intended to reduce the relativism from comparative literary studies and to diminish the fears of losing coherence. What is needed is not coherence (“a negative product of disciplinarity”), but more complexity, as we are facing mobility in the age of globalization.

### **Comparative Literature in Next Ten Years: A Romanian Voice**

Unfortunately, Romanian comparativism – with very few exceptions – remains under the sign of a highly descriptive approach, having a small number of conceptual proposals or directions for future developments. The Romanian identity of comparative literature is related to a complex history, lacking institutional coherence. But, as Saussy emphasized: “What needs propagating is the comparative reflex, the comparative way of thinking, not the departmental name; and if those are to be spread at the cost of identity and institutional reward, so much worse for identity”. (Saussy, 2006: 5)

I strongly agree with some recent observations made by Mihaela Ursa in considering that, for Romanian literary studies, the appeal to theory and method is quite rarely and not typical, with few exceptions. In studying Romanian comparativism – focusing on theoretical discourses – one should not forget the volumes of Adrian Marino (*Comparatisme et Theorie de la Litterature*, 1988; *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură*, 1987), or Mircea Martin (*Dicțiunea ideilor*, 1981; *Singura critică*, 1986, 2006), original contributions to the international comparative history of the literary criticism. Also, the highly original approach of Corin Braga: *archetypology*, theorized in the volume *De la arhetip la anarhetip* (2006), which continues *10 studii de arhetipologie* (1999) and “Anarhetipul și sfârșitul postmodernității” (2003, in *Observator cultural*). I shall present only the methodological solution imagined by Braga, not the whole range of research, as far as I published elsewhere an extensive review. (Constantinescu, 2006: 324-327) Braga identifies three possible challenges for contemporary comparative literature: multidisciplinary (several domains in culture), interdisciplinarity (methods from several domains) and transdisciplinarity (the object of research and the results of research belong to various domains, yet becoming an autonomous cultural invariant). The aim of comparative literature (at least one of them) is the research and the identification of the invariants, of the recurrent cultural archetypes, myths, symbols or scripts, which move from one culture to other. This kind of comparative approach is focused on cultural morphology, on generous paradigms, labeled by the author himself as “functionalist and relational”.

The effort of delineating a national literature is connected with observations on the discourse on national identity. It is widely accepted that the national literature is part of a national and cultural identity. As literature is – for a relevant and major part – a representation, a national literature could be a representation of communities, be it nation or any collective entity. (The idea of nation is, of course, far from being homogenous.) And it is well approved that cultural representations are supporting strategies through which national literatures attempt to acquire more important and favourable positions within world literature. These strategies were investigated and scrutinized in last years by authors like Mihaela Ursa (already mentioned), Caius Dobrescu or Andrei Terian. The efficiency in history of this kind



of strategies was to be tested in Terian's study "National Literature, World Literatures and Universality in Romanian Cultural Criticism 1867-1974".

Though, in identifying the role and the status of the Romanian comparative literature I would rather follow the suggestions of Paolo Bartoloni (and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, subsequently), in questioning the roles of comparative literature, world literature: How does the role of world literature differ from that of the comparative literature? And what is the difference between world literature(s) and comparative literature, having in mind the idea that literature "still plays an important cognitive function in the age of globalization as part of plurality of art forms which are in constant and mutual exchange and relation". (Bartoloni, 2013)

In analyzing influence of the concept of *Weltliteratur* on Romanian literary criticism from Westernization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the post-Stalinist era, Caius Dobrescu argues that the notion *Weltliteratur* of Goethe sees the world literature as the conveyor of universal (i.e., cosmopolitan) skills of socio-cultural adaptation. Adopting Norbert Elias' diffusionist theory of the civilizing process, Dobrescu contends that one of the role models of the Romanian literary scholar and critic was the 18<sup>th</sup> century "philosophe" in the tradition of cosmopolitan politeness: "[...] the Goethean model of *Weltliteratur* is premised not only on an aspiration of the human mind towards a unifying universal perspective, but also on a universal tendency of human beings towards mutual benevolence and dialogue. In the latter interpretation, the Goethean *Welt* is not (only) a global marketplace. The concept has affinities with the *salon* as a form of intellectual sociability that had become – in terms of both its self-understanding and of its sociological reality – a West European event in which pan-human and national allegiances seemed to harmonize (see Fumaroli; Lilti; Simanowski). World literature is possible when and where it can be assumed that politeness has become the language of a *Weltgesellschaft* (see Macho)". (Dobrescu, 2013)

Dobrescu asserts that the cosmopolitanism and the taste induced by the literary criticism directly or indirectly resisted even against the communist ideology, in the communist era, having a sense of cultural history that "implied the illusion of a 'world' created by a dynamic network configured and sustained by an *esprit de finesse*. What is even more important is that the comedy-drama of epic proportion of the Romania's literary history was interwoven with the greater networks of European literatures, cultures, and societies." (Dobrescu, 2013) Thus, the concept of world literature had a special meaning in the cultural history of Romanian: not exclusively a universal or transcultural canon, but mainly a "network of transcultural communication", even this network was not organized or institutionalized (Dobrescu, 2013). Dobrescu's view on the nature and history of the Romanian understanding of world literature(s) contribute to a more profound and complex understanding of the connections between literary criticism and literary scholarship, under the umbrella of comparative literature.

A specific positioning may be found in Andrei Terian's account of the mechanisms governing the relationships between peripheral and world literatures, where a framework from the 80's is taken into consideration: the theory of "cultural complexes" developed by Mircea Martin (*G. Călinescu și complexe literaturii române*, 1981; 2002). Many of the "cultural complexes" of various literatures act like the individual complexes, the most relevant aspect being the emergence of the "complex" from the comparison with the Other. The comparison

generates a “complex” when it is enforced by frequent recurrence and by attempts of overcoming them. The “theory of complexes” should provide a basis of a more adequate analysis of relationships in world literatures, starting with two strategies: legitimating and pragmatic – both important for a literary system like national literature. (Terian, 2013) The legitimating strategy is strongly associated with the value and valuation of a national literature, looking towards the past, not focused on (literary) facts, but on perceptions, representations. This is a strategy also connected with the construction of an identity of national literature, and of a Romanian (national) comparativism too, using comparisons between Romanian and foreign writers, building a “national character” and attempting to appropriate a historical, local, regional heritage.

Terian imagines three possible consequences of the implementation the (pre)modern developments of Romanian comparative literature (by synchronization with and updating to “global” comparativism). First, the critical and ideological discourses could play a special role in the drawing of cultural “directions” for reinforcing the international status of a specific literary system, and this drawing “does more than invalidate the hypothesis of the alleged «unconscious» nature of the corresponding mutations”, restricting almost any comparative approach based on naturalist conjectures. (Terian, 2013) Second, an additional accuracy may be found in the study of the relationships between national literatures and world literatures and in the comparative analysis of the types of policies used in various literary spaces. Third, the range of different models chosen as “points of reference” by authors or scholars (even those belonging to peripheral literatures) may contribute to the fruitful reconstruction of the concept of “world literature”: “a world without peripheries is a world without centers” (Terian, 2013).

For Mihaela Ursa, the main challenge for comparative literature is not globalization, but the *digital culture*. Having an analogue nature (sequential reading, linearity), literature in our days is confronted with the digital technology and new literary practices, implying simultaneity, interactivity for the author and the reader also. The calling into question is radical: “If it should survive through the change, comparative literature has to investigate with its specific means of research this new frontier of knowledge where literature and technology inter-condition each other. New genres (cyberpunk fiction), languages (codewurk poetry) or traits (ergodic literature) are born as if to rend impossible the using of the word ‘literary’, that has become reductionist and insufficient. The approach of this sensitive cultural area of the last decades is interdisciplinary by definition: on one hand, it necessarily has to comment on the intervention of digital technologies on literature (or the other way around), but on the other, it has to take into account the redefinition and new emergence of specific historical concepts such as ‘literary’ or ‘literariness’. Where does the practice (and theory, for that matter) of comparative literature in Romania stand? Does it rely on enough ‘tradition’ and methodological rigour to entertain the change without breaking apart? Is it sufficiently connected to global developments to be aware of the recent challenge in front of it?” (Ursa, 2011: 12) My assumption is that these are almost rhetorical questions, as far comparative literature advanced an indefinitely small number of responses to such questions.

Ursa observed that in East-European cultures the theory and the practice of comparative literature persist in investigating the role and shapes of the identities, as for these countries the discourse on identity is central and the act of comparing the literatures and

literary histories, the act of translation remain an important strategy of cultural presence. A “Romanian character” of comparativism is actually a minimalist term, based on the fact that one can identify elements of representations, in the theory of our discipline, derived from the mental imagery of the community of Romanian comparativists. Ursa rhetorically asks if there was a moment when Romanian culture devised the disciplinary aspect of comparative literature. One possible answer can be the following: it was a long and complex process of synchroization with Western definitions of comparative literature. Romanian comparativism is based, like other collective assumptions, on a comparative system of evaluation and analysis. The link between Romanian comparativism and the philological and linguistic tradition is evident, as it is based on the preoccupation for the national criterion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The national identity is more relevant for the Romanian comparativism, not just in comparison with other nations, but with the history of Romanian literature itself, due to the fact that until the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a “disciplinary meditation” on national identity seen as a condition for universality. (Ursa, 2013: 174) Romanian comparativism is guided by a schema summed up by Adrian Marino in 80s: to participate to the virtual universal literary network means to be simultaneously *specific*, *national*, *general*, in a word: *universal*. The whole history of comparative literature in Romania is characterized by a perpetual negotiation between *local* and *universal*, and provide the reflexive awareness for verifying its own identity during the evolution. (Ursa, 2013: 54)

Ursa asserts that an adjustment is required for comparative literature, as a consequence of the divorce from the questions of national culture and identity – announced by Susan Bassnett. For Romanian comparatists, these questions are still important, and comparative literature has to adopt the principle of *re-use*, not of *negation*. (Ursa, 2013: 239) The future explorations of comparative literary studies should integrate literature in a complex assembly of discourses in knowledge or as alternative *praxis*, focusing on literature’s pragmatic, therapeutic virtues and powers (with some degree of loss of aesthetic dimension). Ursa proposes an ex-centric repositioning of the integrative comparativism, in order to research literary texts with a specific understanding of fictionality – towards ethic values. Having similarities with the cultural studies of 90s and the comparative literature of 19<sup>th</sup> century, this could be seen as an interdisciplinary approach of the ideas of knowledge, culture, nation and identity.

Comparative literature has two main targets, on different levels: first, restoring a local tradition, in the greater context of European tradition; second, shaping a paradigmatic profile of Romanian identity, in terms of Otherness.

## Conclusions

World literature should be understood in terms of David Damrosch or Haun Saussy: a mode of circulation and of reading and understanding individual works, an “expanding universe of works” across time, cultures, in translation, abroad and global (Damrosch, 2006: 5; Saussy, 2006: 14). And, as Marko Juvan observed, keeping in mind that the Goethean *Weltliteratur* was interpreted in terms of “intercultural dialogism or hegemony embodied in the asymmetrical structure of the world literary system” (Juvan, 2013).

A simple and profound assertion of Gayatri Spivak must be taken into account: “In the arena of humanities as the uncoercive rearrangement of desire, he who wins loses. If this



sounds vague, what we learn (to imagine what we know) rather than know in the humanities remains vague, unverifiable, iterable. You don't put it aside in order to be literary critical". (Spivak, 2003: 101)

Comparative literature should *dig (w)holes* in world literature. *Digging (w)holes* is the only real chance of legitimization in our days. Studying comparative literature helps to understand, provides knowledge of individual, national, collective, cultural identities, also debating and defining what national or world literatures mean. Identity is an aim of comparative literature, but, also, we may speak about the identity of a comparative literature, as Mihaela Ursa suggested in her recent seminal and most comprehensive volume on Romanian comparativism. And, as some of us agree, comparative literature defines itself in our days as *discourse* on possibility of establishing a subject (at the intersection of several domains) or a *metadiscourse* as important as the content. (Ursa, 2013: 41)

Surprising or not, the final image of the comparative literature in Romania, and elsewhere, is the same that Haun Saussy metaphorically has built ten years ago: the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of orchestra.

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