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Methodological discontinuities and inertias in the history of comparative literature

-Abstract-

KEYNOTES: History of comparative literature, Romantic organicism, the rhetorics of comparison, historicism, positivism, structuralism, poststructuralism, literary theory, global literature, the ACLA reports, the literary absolute, narratology, comparative poetics, interdisciplinarity, globalization, comparative epistemology, history of science

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The present thesis aims to reconsider analytically the body of theoretical works that held a legitimizing position within the tradition of comparative literary studies, worldwide. Our selection focuses only on the fundamental interventions in comparative literature or literary theory that impregnated the scientific paradigm, which generated scientific deontologies inherited later on by many generations of researchers, or on those which stated those rhetorical reflexes that have suddenly reemerged in some contemporary demonstrations. The finality of this project is articulating a compendium of agonic history for our discipline, while paying attention

particularly to the moments when the identity of the comparatist discourse is clarified within the pressure of polemical stands. Therefore, starting with the early beginnings of the nineteenth century, ending nowadays, the thesis traces the history of the main definitions of comparativism.

The first chapter, *Preliminaries: From the cartography of the object to the first histories of the origins of comparative literature*, reviews the scarce historiography of comparativism so far, in a critical perspective, applying the model of classifying historical discourses proposed by Hayden White in his book *Meta-History: the formist, mechanistic, organic and contextualising explanations*. Starting from these theoretical assumptions, this first chapters announces the research hypotheses and denounces the ideological predeterminations that might subjectively bias the critical balance of the present project.

The second part, *the Romantic origins of comparative literature* confronts the contemporary arguments that attempt to redefine the field by mistifying its history and changing its point of origin. The text assumes as a structuring plot searching for the answer to the question: when and under which exact epistemological assumptions, the practice of literary comparison, that had existed since the Greek Antiquity, suddenly became an autonomous methodology? Thus, following an overview on the prehistory of literary comparison and on the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, this chapters discusses the rhethoric dimension of comparison inside the Romantic episteme, as it is expressed inside the life sciences, starting from the early European Classicism to the middle of the XIXth century. Constant parallels are made to the comparative philology, the history of the folklore and other disciplines that based their logic on the practice or Romantic analogy. A further chapter explains the rhetorics of Romantic organicism and the structural mutations that redefine comparison by a new configuration of the relationship between part and whole, built on a metaleptic logic, common later on insife the inductive syntheses of literary comparativism. The first important names of the discipline (Johann Gottfried Herder, Germaine de Staël și August Wilhelm Schlegel) are mentioned here with a subsequent discussion of their works, and the echoes that they would have in the later theoretical debates of the discipline, when they have been gradually assumed as founding fathers and then rejected. A last chapter of this part offers an inventory of the occurences of the expression “comparative literature” and one of the most representative definitions that the field has received in time. I have particularly insisted on this chapter, in order to overcome a major

lack of the contemporary international bibliography: until now, a comprehensive history of the beginnings of comparative literature, amplified by a constant parallel to the status of other sciences developing inside Romanticism has not been written. Lacking the legitimation of an epistemological grounding, any subsequent organic history of comparativism would run the risk of relying on shaky arguments.

The third part, *Three ages of the discipline*, follows synthetically the history of comparativism, from the first definitions and identity negotiations of the XIXth century to the methodological challenge posed by René Étiemble in the second half of the twentieth: finding a common instrumentary that might be effective for a trans-cultural, global science of comparative literature. The three steps discussed here are: the XIXth century factualism and the temptations of cosmopolitanism, the positivistic rigors of the French school and the interdisciplinary broadening of the disciplinary grounds, following the Wellek era. Even if it seems extremely tempting, associating the decomposure of Romantic organicism with the ages of our discipline (positivism, new criticism and structuralism) could prove to be slightly abusive since the taxonomy of comparatist practices offers a much more diversified reality, both culturally and geographically, wherein the different instruments of research, validated in contrasting epochs end up by coexisting in a paradoxical synchrony.

The last part of the thesis, *Survivals: the identity strategies of the discipline during the age of global realities* discusses the theoretical polemics animated during the '90s, such as the opposition between formalism (the heirs of structuralist and post-structuralist, rhetorico-stylistical approaches) and contextualism (new historicism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism). The text focuses on a case studies: the work and the critical interventions of Peter Brooks. Slightly atypical for the American context, Peter Brooks serves as the example for methodological hibridity, simultanuosly influenced by psychoanalyses and narratology, extrinsec and intrinsec approaches to the literary text. The two poles reenact the two traditionally opposite trends in the history of comparative literature: on the one hand, the opening of the disciplinary limits and the exploring of other humanist sciences, and on the other hand the obsession for literary specificity. The polemics of the '90s will be synthesized by that between the adepts of comparative poetics against the ardent supporters of interdisciplinarity. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis discusses briefly the re-orientation of the contemporary debates to the question of

global literature and implicit need of repositioning the scientific discourse on new epistemological grounds.

The conclusions aimed at by our project encompass the following aspects:

- a. Comparative literature has been a practice of the critical discourse extremely reluctant to any attempt of describing taxinomically the branches of literary science. The rhetorics of Romantic organology (invoking totalities whose components behave in a descentered way) and the practice of analogy proved to be the inherent mechanism of a double identity construction. First, it builds a concept, that was gradually identified with the successive ideas of national identity, cultural specificity, a certain model of colectivity, a canon or a world of literature. At the same time, it builds the intellectual identity of the comparatist voice that is permanently renegotiated inside the very act of interpretation. Confronted with other discourses on the method, the theoretical legitimations of comparative literature often seem to lack a scientific programme. Reluctant to theory and consumated between analogical speculations about cultural and intellectual realities, the comparatist discourse inherits the Romantic refusal of the systematic reproaches or of the classical idealist ideas. It is not at random that throughout the history of the discipline, the texts that should have defined clearly the object and the method of comparative literature are substituted by bibliographical lists, by an impressive traditions of applications: the comparatist discourse is being legitimized while it is produced. Any dogmatic definition of a methodology would ultimately impose an idealistic matrix. Romantic freedom, deeply manifest within the rhetorics of analogy would be fundamentally denied by a normative attitude.
- b. It is exactly this inherent freedom of comparison that the second conclusion aims to exploit: even if it might achieve spectacular speculations in the most diversified fields of knowledge, whether or not it involves formalist or contextualist believes, comparative literature is to be defined as a cultural hermeneutics of the literary fact. In spite of being initially highly improbable to survive as the discipline name, the syntagm of “comparative literature“, has been assumed and it has become relevant for the field, as gradually, the meaning attributed to the idea of “literature” contaminated it. First, the expression “comparative literature” might have meant “the comparative

study of literary texts, very well illustrated by the defenders of aesthetics autonomy and of the role of the aesthetic inside the postmodern epoch. Secondly, the expression can denote “comparativ bibliography” since the large number of secondary sources used by interdisciplinary readings. Last, but not least, “comparative literature” might also assume the challenging meaning of “comparative fiction”. Haun Saussy declared that comparative literature rather than discovering meaning, as it happens with other branches of the literary science, it builds them. If the rhetorics of literary comparison functions as a strategy of buiding and negoicating identity, the fictional pact made by the researcher at the debut of his analogical thinking requires the deontological principle of a reflexive consciousness.

- c. A third conclusion concerns just the tools, the motivations, the ideological and aesthetic principles that animate the practice of analogy and invoke semantic cohesion. The rhetoric of the inductive syntheses of comparative literature studies are critically discussed in parallel to the changes undergone within the scientific paradigm. Thus, after Romanticism, the practice of literary analogy suffers the influence of the rhetoric causality imposed by the nineteenth-century historicism and furthermore by scientific positivism. The following major structural influences would be: affirmed, the dogmatic theories of the French school, and then another fundamental mutation was meant to happen with the outcome of structuralism, continued by the ethics of poststructuralist self-reflexion. This critical perspective integrates the history of literary criticism and that of comparative literature in a larger context, but the focal perspective can zoom out in an even broader context: that of the rhetoric of science.
- d. The change of perspective is extremely radical, because this definition modifies the rhetorical reflex of positioning a science as secondary to its object, by means of substituting referentiality by performativity. Implicitly, the shift of the meta-literary discourse brings about a theoretical renegotiation of the concept of „literature” itself. For the tradition of interdisciplinary comparatist studies one of the central ideas in defining „literature” as an object of comparison was the underlying claim that the main function of any literary language is reference. The bridge linking literary studies to the other fields of the humanities was often understanding literature as a thematic

deposit of cultural symptoms; implicitly or explicitly, it pointed outside itself, to the national spirit, the human spirit, the cultural construction of a collective identity, a political stand, a hidden reference to the Zeitgeist. The concept of „World literature” envisaged by Moretti and Damrosch, either as the dynamic processes of success and canonization occurring inside the complex liquid geography of the international book market, or a way of reading pluriperspectively works of all times and spaces, has suffered an immediate loss of a degree of thematic referentiality by decontextualization. The shift of focus from the denotative function of the literary discourse to its specificity as a global discourse might stir a critical reaction from the defenders of the specific and authentic character of minor cultures. The persistent menace of the phantom of literary cosmopolitanism denounced by Bruce Robbins in 1992 might return: „the very act of comparison as in comparative literature, can seem to signal a liberation from insularity and national prejudice into the one true judgement. And when the international range of comparison suddenly and dramatically expands to include the world outside Europe, there is the danger that, under cover of the most democratic intentions, what will be reinvented is the old free floating intellectual and-or an even older version of privileged impartiality” . In other words, the world of „world literature” might never cease to raise suspicions of imperialism. Even in the recent years, for Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, the obstacles against establishing „world literature” as a legitimate domain might be:

-The closed history of the Western Canon.

-The barriers set by the insufficient knowledge of foreign languages and the extensive reading of texts in translation.

-The complicated interests of maintaining a national identity while being open on the world.

However legitimate and adequate to the sociopolitical reality of the practice of literature, the arguments reflect still the survival of organicism, national canons and literary histories. Any definition of world literature inside an organicist rhetorics will rightfully trigger the defensive stand of the marginal voices.

- e. Perhaps, the shift of perspective that is required would be a repositioning of the scholars inside a new scientific paradigm, such as that of complexity. Chaos theories,

strange attractors and butterfly effects in the process of international literary success and reception could adequately describe and analyze the new reality of world oriented writers and local canonicals. In a context where „the whole idea of identity has changed from essentialism to a more contingent construction” , literary authorship could be understood less as representative for a certain ethnical or social category, and more in an atomized, nomadic perspective. The future might hold an unexpected challenge for the practitioners of world literature: that of losing the world or its topographical temptations and regaining literature