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O I P O S D R U



ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ



Mihaela URSA

Identitate și excentricitate

*comparatismul românesc
între specificlocal
și globalizare*



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române



Mihaela URSA

IDENTITATE ȘI EXCENTRICITATE

COMPARATISMUL ROMÂNESC ÎNTRE SPECIFIC

LOCAL ȘI GLOBALIZARE



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Colecția AULA MAGNA



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ADDENDA

Abstract

The most common and most difficult question that professors of comparative literature must address as soon as they declare their specialty - especially in a non-professional context - is: "Comparative? Compared to what?" (or "What do you compare?"). In other words: "what does *comparative literature* mean?" Indeed, if we are willing to see beyond the academic familiarity of the term "comparative literature", we cannot deny that the concept seems so poorly designed, that it requires further clarification; particularly in languages where the verb "to compare" is transitive (as in the case of Romanian language). There is always a distance (larger than in disciplines whose titles are self-explanatory) between the term "comparative literature" and the content it endorses. Or, at least, this is the implication of the perplexity that continues to surround its occurrence. Albert Guerard articulates the same terminological dissatisfaction that all specialists of the discipline experience at a given moment: "My attachment to the *principle* of Comparative Literature gives me the right to express my opinion that *the term* Comparative Literature is useless, dangerous and ought to be abolished." („Comparative Literature?", in *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature VII*, 1958: 1). However, in a 1940 preface, the same author had confessed that, although some protest against the term "comparative literature" is needed, not less binding is the testimony, "in the same breath" that "we have no better one to suggest".

More than any other discipline, comparative literature today still gives a discourse of legitimacy. This is motivated and often claimed by polemic insinuations or direct attacks, as well as by the issues still raised by its terminology and concept, by its methods and subject. Finally, a continuous legitimization discourse is justified by the allegation (made from the distance of other research fields) that comparatists are either marginal, outsiders, or imposters and usurpers of dominance over territories

"previously assigned". Even worse, they are sometimes seen as "literary ecotourists" who "dwell mentally in one or two (usually Western) countries, summer metaphorically in the third, and visit other places for brief interludes." (Susan Lanser, *Compared to what?*, p. 281) This study has no ambition to explain all this problematic fabric: though it will be discussed and not overlooked, this text deals with the extent to which certain identity values can be attached to the way in which comparative literature in Romania was conceived as a theory, methodology and practice between the sixties and 2010, i.e. during what we can properly call the disciplinary and institutional history of Romanian comparative literature.

Complex documentation (in Romanian libraries and archives, but also in France, Italy and the United States, as well as in archives and electronic databases) has proved that the problems raised by this approach are multiply rooted. Firstly, a historical zoom on the past fifty years of Romanian comparative theory and practice was needed, with special attention to those quite a few authors who have academically evolved between several cultures. Leaving Romania, these authors continued to write and think about Romanian culture developments in the international context that had become accessible to them in a different light. Secondly, the question of identity is always contrastive. In order to highlight an identity, one has to highlight some form of otherness and use it as a landmark. Or, if we're talking about cultural identity, the major criterion of tracking specific features has been, since the nineteenth century onwards, that of national terms and culture. By 1990 (see especially Parts II, III and IV of the study), the national criterion gives good results in finding a Romanian comparative literature, theory and practice. They can be seen as a reflex of Romanian culture perceived in an international network. Whether invoked for nationalist or universalist reasons, saluted or blamed, *the national criterion* is visible and reveals the concerns, obsessions and complexes of comparative literature studies. But from the nineties to the present day (see especially Part V) cultural semantics begins to favor globalization, where national structures have less and less power (given the collapse of historical states and of the national ideology, but also cultural and individual mobility allowed by population movements driven by

economic criteria or simply encouraged by new communication technologies, leading to the weakening patriotic attachment).

Therefore, for the decades between 1990 and 2010, we find that there function *two secondary criteria*: the first one is used in postcolonial studies, where the main issue is the *revelation of those identities previously censored* by imperial cultures. An interest for small groups, professional communities, academic or strictly local cultures nurtures this view. The second one is *the adherence to a "republic of letters"*, as defined by Pascale Casanova in his volume. The latter can be seen at work in studies with a more traditional look, but written with almost no attention to national culture or terms, as if the authors have already assumed a transnational authorial conscience. Both of these secondary criteria are subspecies of main one, active even before 1990 in exceptional circumstances, which we identify as *the need for intermediality*.

Intermediality becomes equally important as a reference and landmark after 1990 as the national criterion was before this date, whether it applies to comparative studies written in exile, or it appears as a favoring factor or a consequence of living and acting *in-between*, or of the discomfort experienced in a fixed paradigm of thought and the inability to find a self-matrix. Therefore, I proposed the concept and analyzed the manifestation of a *comparatism of ex-centric repositioning*. Although not specifically Romanian, it is characteristic for the need to describe and explain a specific space of cultural transition and translation. However, as the purpose of this study was not theoretical, I only propose the concept in this paper and I intend to further develop it in a subsequent paper.

Thirdly, a discussion about the characters of comparative literature in Romania could not get around the thorny issue of comparative literature everywhere, i.e. the methodological crisis. However, this theme has its own set of ramifications: a problematic concept and terminology, a temperamental history, various explanations of the sources and extension of the crisis, very different configurations of the crisis in the West and South-Eastern Europe and the East. Even if the latter were not the subject of this research, they had to be analyzed in order to clarify the theoretical and historical concept of the "crisis of comparative literature."

Finally, one of the most urgent issues that required discussion covers teaching comparative literature in universities. An exhibition of "theoretical fashion" in the academic world, of fluctuations of academic sympathy towards this discipline were synthetically associated with my results on the institutional conditions of teaching comparative literature in the main universities in Romania.

The structure of the study is not diachronic, but follows a set of chains of problems. In Part I, entitled *A Discipline or a Concept in Crisis*, I attacked one of the most pressing historical concerns of this quite young discipline: that of a methodological impasse. Historically speaking, comparative crisis is reported several times, in different ways and invoking different reasons (Wellek criticizes the dogmatic historicism of the binary theory in 1958, Etiemble argues that comparison alone does not motivate comparative literature in 1963, Bassnett declares in 1993 that, in some sense, comparative literature is dead and Spivak states the death of the discipline in 2003). The chapter *An Archaeology of a Methodological Impasse* is meant to color the picture of *pro and con* debate in the matter of the crisis of comparative literature, the interpretation of the main arguments being reserved for chapter *Comparative Literature: between Triumph and Autopsy*. As it is impossible to decide who knows "the truth" in that debate and even *what* that truth is, I chose to emphasize the *functional or dysfunctional dimension* of the solutions that were offered. Reverse logic argumentation (from present-day issues to their historical roots and to traditional definitions), led me to place here a chapter of *Definitions, objectives, goals*. This order allowed me to conclude Part I by joining discussions on the history and those on the future of comparative literature (in *A Comparative Literature for Digital Beings*). Throughout this discussion, as in most of the following parts, references to Romanian issues were interwoven with references to other contexts, without segregation on different chapters. A focus on the Romanian history of the discipline, but also on the identity of Romanian comparative literature occupies Part II, *National and Universal*. Problems of disciplinary adaptation and upgrading, according to the current episteme are not specific to the Romanian space, since the epiphenomena of globalization challenge all areas of contemporary life (s. *Global and Local*). Four were the terms of discussion in the three chapters of

Part II: *universal, global and local*. The approach became integrative, comprising local and national modulations of the general history of this terminology (s. *Complexes and tradition*). The conclusion of this part was formulated in *The Transnational Challenge*, which I have identified as one of the most constant creative impulses in the discipline of comparative literature (overcoming national boundaries), as well as one of the most sensitive factors for the Romanian space. I devoted Part III (*How to Make a Discipline*) to the issues rising from converting a discourse and praxis into a discipline. Besides the wish of belonging to a community of people of letters (analyzed in *Romanians in the Republic of Letters*), I found that the definition of national identity, far from being "hindered" by imitation theories, was stimulated by the inherent opposition that a "foreign model" stirred. In *Imitation and Influence. Simulation and Stimulation*, starting from the idea of the 19-th century Romanian theorist and critic Titu Maiorescu, of *simulation as stimulation* (from the „forms without substance" theory), I followed the power of creative motivation that a few famous "patriotic hoaxes" had in East-European cultures. Chapters *Stages of Construction* and *Acquiring an Identity Imprint* recovered a sensitive archeology through which Romania went from "mere *manifestations* of Romanian comparative" to a proper "Romanian comparative literature" with the few forms of institutionalization (in a scientific and academic community - the latter aspect being pursued with statistical data and observations regarding standard comparative teaching practices in Romanian universities, s. *Comparative Literature as an Academic Discipline in Today Romania*). I ended Part III with a chapter entitled *One Discipline, Different Ways to Use It*, in order to prepare the typological description of Part IV (*Distinctive Marks*). Each chapter here describes one feature I considered to be representative for a definition, in terms of identity, of Romanian comparative literature. Until 1990, the identity of Romanian comparative literature is characterized by: *Spontaneous Comparatism, Philological roots, Synchronicity, Methodological crisis* affirmed as dispute between formalism and contextualism, concern for *Theory and method, Polemic universalism vs. Owned Nationalism, National values, Critical and anti-imitative encyclopaedism, Localism, Imagologic interest, National specific*. Finally, Part V, entitled *Romanian Comparative Literature today* focuses on forms that the discipline take after 1990, i.e. on several sets

of themes characteristic for the intermediality that began to preoccupy the specialists just as strongly as the national question before 1990. Of course the time limit must be understood in conventional terms, because - for many comparatists - intermediality is rather a *forma mentis* than a historical development. In this light, I reviewed several studies grouped in *Themes of exile*, *Themes of mutation and destructuring in postmodern times*, *Themes of refusing traditional prejudice*, *Themes of cognitive anarchy*, *Nostalgia themes*, *Themes of translation*. Part V ends with a very important chapter, where I formulate my conceptual proposal: *Intermediate Considerations: On the Comparatism of Ex-centric Repositioning*. Despite the unstable and fluid nature of my object of research, a series of conclusions and predictions have precipitated at the end of the study.

Since I tried to stay away - when possible - from any strong adherence to one theory or taxonomy or another, the term "comparative literature" is used alternatively with that of "comparatism". My goal was not to solder the problematic connection of this discipline and literature, but to insist on fertile and creative possibilities that comparative methodology brings to any system of thought and analysis.

(traducere de Mihaela Ursa)

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