

Language, Literature and Other Cultural Phenomena
Communicational and Comparative Perspectives

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Introduction

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The present book is a selection of 13 papers presented at the 11th edition of the International Conference “Comparativism, Identity, Communication” organized by the University of Craiova on the 12th and 13th of October 2018.

For any observer of the international academic sphere, with its many upheavals and struggles from the latest decades, it is evident that most of the researchers who are involved in some way in the study of the abovementioned conceptual trichotomy (“identity”, “communication”, “comparison”) attempt to respond, in their theoretical and analytical work, to the challenges raised by the new media and the processes of globalization (Grabovszki 1999, Saussy 2006, Walkowitz 2006, Gallagher 2008), as well as their impact on the larger culture.

Ideally, dialogue and communication should provide the panacea for all the identity crises generated by rapid modernization and globalization. But communication itself has often been turned into an artefact or a device, under the effect of postmodern hyperreality:

Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the ‘proteic’ era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication (Baudrillard 1983: 127).

In the era of “fake news” (which often coincide with the “mainstream media”), we are even motivated to talk about the “tyranny of communication” (Ramonet 1999), whereby manipulation and propaganda have become the norm. This is also the era of *memetic* communication via the Internet: similarly, semiotic “articulations” are propagated by various media, and these “need not be wise or true in order to circulate; their mere circulation and repetition endows them with the aura of truth, even if that aura is (partly, largely, wholly) illusory with no obligation to bend toward documented reality” (Goss 2018: 186).

Communication is intrinsically connected to circulation – of people, ideas, commodities and intellectual models, suggesting the emergence of a transnational rhizomatic network, which is on one hand extremely mobile and on the other hand multisystemic. As Rebeca Walkowitz argued,

literary studies will have to examine the global writing of books, in addition to their classification, design, publication, translation, anthologizing, and reception across multiple geographies. Books are no longer imagined to exist in a single literary system but may exist, now and in the future, in several literary systems, through various and uneven practices of world circulation (Walkowitz 2006: 528).

Communication theory has been criticized, and rightly so, when is reduced to a mechanistic model of information and transmission. Tzvetan Todorov has shown that, while writing polemically against the formalists, Bakhtin criticized “the Jakobsonian model of language some thirty years before the model was formulated”: “It is not by chance that Bakhtin says ‘utterance’ rather than ‘message’, ‘language’ rather than ‘code’, etc.: he is deliberately rejecting the language of engineers in speaking of verbal communication” (Todorov 1984: 54). Similarly, it has been noticed that

It is no coincidence that the most influential early model of communication, the Shanon-Weaver model, was developed by an engineer from the Bell telephone company. Communication here [...] was understood in a transitive, unidirectional sense as the transmission of a message along a definite channel by an active sender to a passive receiver (Conan 2013: 249).

Hence, the need to look for alternatives, even today, in the form of a re-humanized “genuine dialogicality” (Sell 2000) of literature, or the (again) “genuine” cultural dialogues engendered by translations, imitations and adaptations of canonical works (Fishelov 2010), or the “epistemic dialogues” initiated by polemic rewritings (Cowart 1993). At the intersection of literature and religion, “transpersonal communication” is counterposed to “the linear or orchestral models of communication” by taking into account “the forms of metaphysical experience (the prayer, the meditation, the religious rituals, the mystic visions and representations)” and their ability to “express the subjective need for transcendency, which is an immanent dimension of the self” (Parpală 2017: 173).

Back in 1994, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha claimed that “The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – as the grounds of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition” (1994: 5). The transnational dimension of analysis (Ramazani 2009, Jay 2010, Terian 2013) is therefore required by the materials and corpora themselves (or the objects of study) which often transcend the narrower meaning of identity, either personal or collective. Instead, we are more and more confronted with the realities of hybridization, migration, neo-nomadism and the questioning of traditional modes of belonging and of shaping identities. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti enthusiastically supports what she terms “nomadic subjectivity”:

The nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Not all nomads

are world travellers: some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one's habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions and the consciousness-raising that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling (Braidotti 2014: 182).

While the conscious commitment to this type of ideological "nomadism" appears to be compatible with the rejection of radical ethnocentrism and the ethics of cosmopolitanism, perhaps not everybody subscribes to Braidotti's definition of subjectivity in the Foucauldian vein of the omnipresent, invisible "power":

It is particularly important not to confuse the concept of subjectivity with the notion of the individual or individualism: subjectivity is a socially mediated process of entitlements to and negotiations with power relations. Consequently, the formation and emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the individual self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth and singular structures (*ibidem*: 168).

If these consequences of global modernity should be embraced and celebrated or, on the contrary, deplored and met with resistance, is not for us to decide, in the modest space of this Introduction. We can only notice that the cultural phenomena that have been lately tackled by the humanities are highly ambivalent, ambiguous and contentious. The very pervasiveness of hybridity entices us to reassess the notions of "border" and "boundaries" and, perhaps, not to let go so easily of these basic categories. Therefore, global studies should be counterbalanced by "border studies", according to Paul Jay:

If all cultures and identities are at their core hybrid, then two things happen: hybridity loses its value as an explanatory term specific to border cultures, and the term itself becomes essentialized and foundational, since it comes to stand for a general truth about the ontological nature of all forms of subjectivity and identity (Jay 2010: 82).

Just like the study of literature borrows concepts and methods from extraliterary domains, including communication theory, the corresponding fields of study (communication and identity studies) can look closer to artistic products (literature, fine arts, film) for inspiration. Literature, for instance, has a special ability of sensing, like a fine barometer, subtle changes which are "in the air", but which escape, for the moment, the (perhaps) not so finely tuned conceptual devices of the social sciences:

As the expressive medium of a language, literature exploits and uncovers the changes which take place in identity under the pressure of external contacts or internal ethical revisions when characters face dilemmas, crises and internal conflicts which ultimately bring about the formation of authentic, hybrid, divided or antagonistic beings. In fact, within the issue of identity, otherness plays an essential role in the arts as well as in social interaction (Loveday & Parpalá 2016: 3).

The critical instruments are also transformed, in the aftermath of global paradigm shifts, including in situations when they are applied to older cultural forms, and when approaching elements of the canon through the lens of postcolonialism, feminism or gender studies is not at all uncommon, as even this collection of studies shows. But methodologies which are less susceptible of being steered towards a particular ideology are also well represented, as is the case for the cognitive-conceptual framework. Another theoretical tool which is both powerful and flexible and can also help us avoid the excessively politicized tendencies of much contemporary discourse is the comparative method, whose importance is already underlined by the topics of the conference. The comparative method is, fundamentally, a dialogic-communicational endeavour, just like the intertextual phenomena that this method often employs (cf. Popescu 2017). What makes comparisons efficient is the scholar's willingness to allow the *comparanda* to have a "dialogue" between them, with no agenda of making one object of comparison the standard for the other one(s); also, comparison is not exclusively the task of students of literature, but is profitably used by linguists, anthropologists, sociologists and media scholars as well:

Ideally, comparatists bring together works which are capable of conducting with each other a conversation, on one or more topics, which is worth overhearing for what the conversation reveals about themselves and / or the topic. The topic chosen is not necessarily that about which individually has most to say – but it must be able to provide the focus of a sustained and disciplined discussion between those texts (Brown 2013: 83).

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Scholars from several fields of research (ranging from language and literary studies to film, media and communication studies) have gathered in Craiova on the occasion of the conference to share the results of their research. The papers in the volume are connected not just through the key-concepts proposed by the organizers, but also through the choice of subject matter and approach, including across the two main sections.

Thus, one can notice that the cognitive framework is employed by the scholars interested in literary stylistics (Deaconu) as well as by those who probe the complexities of everyday language (Csillag) and of media discourse (Țenescu). Metaphors are pervasive in every type of discourse or text, according to this theory. The findings from one field can certainly be useful for the related field, provided that researchers are willing to look in the neighbour's garden. Mădălina Deaconu is the author of *The Communist Regime in Ana Blandiana's The Architecture of the Waves. A Stylistics Approach*. The cognitive analysis of metaphor in Blandiana's poetry sheds some light on the intricate relationship of literary discourse with the communist censorship. Metaphor was, in a way, a means to be free, in the confined space of the poem; at the same time, by their very indirection, metaphors cannot be

properly subversive. That is why the prevalent metaphor of the *waves* suggests the futility of all efforts of overthrowing an abusive regime, at least through strictly cultural resistance. Despite this realization, the detailed analysis informed by the theories of Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Peter Stockwell or Gilles Fauconnier shows that Blandiana's style obtains a genuine effect of novelty and originality.

In Andrea Csillag's paper, *The Concept of Anger as Presented in an Online Monolingual Dictionary – A Cognitive Semantic Analysis*, the cognitive-conceptual framework is put to use for the analysis of a particular emotion, namely *anger*. Apart from the categories identified by Kövecses (*Emotion Concepts*, 1990) in reference to conceptual metaphors and metonymies of anger in American English, the author makes many necessary additions (for instance, FUME and EXPLOSION as separate metaphors) by studying an online corpus. It is our opinion that these new findings about the language of emotions should also be taken into account by the scholars who study emotions and emotional expressions in literature.

Alina Țenescu analyzes conceptual metaphors found in a corpus of online English perfume reviews and advertisements, as well as in printed reviews outlining the connection between astrology and fragrance advertising. She identifies the presence of peculiar images: perfume as astrological blend, as statement, as power suit, as sensory awakening and as dance; these metaphors are based on the perception of scent through olfactory, audio-visual, motor and tactile mental imagery.

An important overlapping between papers pertains to the issue of identity, which is focused on in the first section from the standpoint of literary criticism as subjectivity and traumatized selfhood (Toma, Popescu), as the shaping of the personality through the contact with the archetypes (Stela Pleșa) and from the angle of cultural studies, anthropology and sociology in the second part (Dimova, Dumitrescu Voinescu). Personal and collective identity are thus revealed to function on a continuum, with similar manifestations and threatened by common dangers. In *Losing Cultural Identity, Acquiring Intercultural Communicative Competence. A Case for Globalisation*, Costina-Georgiana Dumitrescu (Voinescu) makes a positive, optimistic assessment of the paradigm changes that have taken place on a global scale in today's societies. While acknowledging the feelings of deterritorialisation and erosion of cultural identities brought about by the successive waves of globalization, the author underlines the idea that the nationalistic or ethnocentric retreat into the local identity, with the total exclusion of otherness, would be a mistake. A solution is to balance the respective merits of multiculturalism and cultural hybridity, as in the Netherlands. One of the problems arising in this context derives, the author argues, from the conflation between national and cultural identity. The aim of this research is to describe Intercultural Communicative Competence and its role in bridging cultural difference. Not least, this type of competence is necessary in the process of learning a foreign language.

Where Dumitrescu (Voinescu) makes a passionate plea for globalization and even for erasing cultural identity in a narrow sense, Zlatina Dimova deplors the acculturation to which Bulgaria was subjected after the overthrow of the communist

regime. In the article *Chalga as a factor for deformation of cultural identity in post-communist Bulgaria*, Dimova deconstructs the musical genre called *chalga*, a type of global music only superficially connected to indigenous folklore and which seems to be totally devoid of the capacity of creating or strengthening a community. While such critiques are increasingly censored as politically incorrect, the author argues that Bulgarian traditional values are gradually subverted and undermined by this pseudo-culture whose artifacts appeal to the basest desires and instincts, making a mockery of any effort of elevating the soul through artistic creation. According to the author, the “chalgarization” of society is a very pernicious phenomenon and it has a lot to do with the advancement of globalization and its agenda of annulling national differences.

Brian Michael Goss’s analysis entitled *La Isla Mínima (2014): Refracting “The Two Spains”* brings into attention what might be called the palimpsests of history, by dealing with the minutia of context revealed by Alberto Rodríguez’s film about Spain’s post-Franco transition and the very problematic Pact of Forgetting which had marked this period. This film by a multi-awarded Spanish director is approached through a context-heavy version of auteurism. The two Spains which the title makes reference to are the liberal and the illiberal one, with the latter undermining the former’s efforts of post-war healing or the attempt of building a more open and democratic society. When falling back on old habits, the characters suggest that the dictator is still “alive”, or at least his spirit is. The tension between the two “layers” of Spain is being dramatized throughout the film, but, as the author of the article shows, one needs a sophisticated theory of both genre and gender in order to understand the cultural and political implications of this work of art, which transcends *film noir*, stereotypical imagological representations and other categories.

Péter Gaál-Szabó writes about *History and Memory in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Sermons*. The core identity of the black community is strengthened by resorting to collective memory and “counterhistory”, whereby King, the iconic figure of the civil rights movement, tries to also mediate a relationship between the white majority and the black minority. The pastor’s sermons create a cultural-historical palimpsest by paralleling (or even equating) the African-Americans’ predicament with that of the Hebrews during their periods of enslavement. The presence of the Biblical intertext is meant to give coherence and meaning to what might otherwise seem frustratingly absurd and unfair in the community’s past. The inspiring words of the preacher are always directed towards the future, as a means of overcoming but also integrating the past.

Identity and discourse or the discursive formations are virtually inseparable. As shown by the analyses in this collection of papers, discourse may be constrained (or just partly determined) from several directions. External pressures, political or of other kind, are often a challenge for the artist (as in Blandiana’s case), but there are also internal factors which are crucial for the final shape of the imaginative world the writers create. Psychology and psychoanalysis will be the appropriate frameworks for discussing literary works where the author’s tormented soul searches

for a solution to its drama (Plath, Berryman, Ionesco) but for the more “universal” workings of imagination, a focus on symbols and archetypes is more effective.

Contemporary British Poetry by Clementina Mihăilescu draws an interesting synthetic picture of the poetic landscape in Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. The authors featured here are June English (especially the poem *Dover-1940*, subtitled *Warfare over the Channel*), Lesley Saunders (with her volume *The Walls Have Angels*) and Wilfred Owen, a well-known war poet. What is remarkable about their poetry is that they combine their personal, subjective mythology, with the myth of “great history”, particularly that of their country and of Europe. Like Deaconu, Csillag and Țenescu, Mihăilescu is trained in the field of cognitive studies. She also resorts to methods borrowed from Bachelard’s phenomenology of imagination, which connects her paper to that by Stela Pleșa, *The Awakening of the Inner Hero in A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh*, where one can notice the same concern with symbolic invariants and archetypes. With this article, we enter the realm of children literature, exemplified by A.A. Milne’s novel *Winnie the Pooh*. This bear-hero has a series of adventures which, on a closer look, appear to mirror the stages of psychological development, by actualizing various archetypes: the innocent, the orphan, the protector, the ruler, the lover, the magician, the sage and the fool. As inner guides with a crucial role in the hero’s journey, these prototypes also determine the narrative function the character plays in a particular story.

Although in a less apparent form, archetypal story patterns are also present in urban legends circulated via the Internet and even the mainstream media, as demonstrated by Oana Voichici’s paper, entitled *Some Instances of Humour in Romanian Urban Legends*. “Romantic entanglements”, “the guiltless guilty” and “the dead was alive” are the main categories of legends identified by the author in this particular corpus. Variations on these themes have been long documented in Romanian folklore and also in American or Eastern European popular culture. When adapted to new socio-cultural contexts while acquiring a humoristic spin, the stories may seem plausible and not “legends” at all but the comparative analysis reveals their archaic core (or their archetypal nature). Along with comic relief, these pseudo-journalistic accounts about imaginative acts of revenge and frustrated expectations always have an implicit moral lesson to teach contemporary society.

Other papers add to the archetypal approach an intertextual-comparative perspective, also making incursions into the psychology of emotions along with their cultural codifications (Popescu) and the intercultural and imagological aspects underlying colonial relations (Șchiopu). *Coping with Fear and Anxiety in a Poetic Way: John Berryman and Mircea Ivănescu* by Carmen Popescu highlights the similarities and contrasts between two post-war poets from two different national traditions – American and Romanian. Clinically depressed, struggling with alcoholism and obsessed with suicide, the two poets have nevertheless managed to keep their drama in check for many years, at the same time converting it into art via the special alchemy of words. The recourse to intertextuality (echoes, allusions, pastiches, etc.) and the poetic personae (“Henry” for John Berryman and “mopete”

for Mircea Ivănescu) serve as a supplementary dialogizing strategy and a means of temporarily escaping their traumatized subjectivity. Another aspect mentioned in the article is that the two authors scrutinized through a comparative analysis are, somehow, the missing link between the confessional paradigm of their generation and the postmodern paradigm that they helped usher in.

In the article “*Kim*” by Rudyard Kipling: *Intertextuality, Interculturality, Colonialism*, Marinică Tiberiu Şchiopu outlines the compatibility between the intertextual and intercultural paradigms through a close analysis of Kipling’s novel *Kim*, which has some autobiographical elements, disguised in a picaresque formula. While the postcolonialist perspective endorsed by most critics is undoubtedly important, the author shows that there is a place for viewing the colonial palimpsest as a dialogue (albeit asymmetrical and unequal) between cultures. In fact, the narrator refers to all Indian religions: Hinduism, Islam, Jain, Sikh. Şchiopu is interested primarily in the Buddhist influence present in the novel (in the form of philosophical concepts and themes, religious practices). The Buddhist intertext is detailed in the form of allusions, quotations and paraphrases.

In “*The pure gold baby*”: *Post-Traumatic Identity and the Role of Attachment in Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”*, Laura Monica Toma describes, with the help of psychoanalysis and depth psychology, the consequences of early trauma and its interpersonal dimension: insecure attachment can have devastating results as regards the process of identity formation. The close reading of just one poem by the American poet Sylvia Plath, a tragic figure of the confessional generation, can reveal much about the fragmentation of the psyche, the resentment and the despair someone can experience when being the victim of deep emotional wounds at a vulnerable stage of life. The creative act becomes an attempt at introspection and perhaps at self-healing, but the exhibitionism it entails is in fact no less damaging than the actual, physical self-harm the poet is prone to.

In conclusion, the contributions in this volume are meant to offer multifaceted investigations of identity and communication, often by resorting to the comparative method. The means by which this goal is achieved is through close analysis of texts in various genres and through in-depth theoretical explorations which we hope will be useful and enlightening for the future readers.

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