

CARMEN POPESCU

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**EXPLORATIONS
IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**



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The chapters in this book are based on previous research projects, materialized in the following articles and chapters in books. The articles are listed in the same order as the chapters in the Table of Contents for the present volume. The titles have been sometimes changed to better fit the general outline of the book. Also, the content of the articles has been modified and enlarged, in some cases substantially:

- *World Literature and Comparative Literature. Some Methodological Aspects*, in *Cultural Dialogues*, edited by Emilia Parpală and Carmen Popescu, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2023, pp. 64-79.
- *Intertextual Configurations*, in AUC (Analele Universității din Craiova), Seria Științe Filologice, Engleza, ISSN: 1454-4415, nr. 1-2/2009, pp. 216-229.
- *Coping with Fear and Anxiety in a Poetic Way: John Berryman and Mircea Ivănescu*, in *Language, Literature and Other Cultural Phenomena. Communicational and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Emilia Parpală and Carmen Popescu, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2019, pp. 51-64. A Romanian version of this chapter has been published under the title *Rezistența poetică la frică și anxietate: John Berryman și Mircea Ivănescu* in Carmen Popescu, *Studii de literatură universală și comparată*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2023, pp. 225-246.
- *The Dialogic-Differential Palimpsest in Scott Cairns' Three Descents*, in *Signs of Identity. Literary Constructs and Discursive Practices*, edited by Emilia Parpală, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 181-199. A Romanian version of this chapter has been published under the title *Coborâri în infern. Palimpseste dialogic-diferențiale* in Carmen Popescu, *Studii de literatură universală și comparată*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2023, pp. 279-302.

- *Intertextuality and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, in *Conference on British and American Studies*, 2009, Editura Universității Transilvania din Brașov, ISSN: 1844-7481, pp. 271-284.
- *Subjectivity and the Dialogic Self: The Christian Orthodox Poetry of Scott Cairns and Cristian Popescu*, in *Literature as Dialogue: Invitations Offered and Negotiated*, edited by Roger D. Sell, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, Dialogue Studies Series 22, 2014, pp. 197-218. A Romanian version of this chapter has been published under the title *Subiectivitatea și sinele dialogic în poezia lui Scott Cairns și a lui Cristian Popescu*, in Carmen Popescu, *Studii de literatură universală și comparată*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2023, pp. 247-278.
- The chapter *Poetic Passion and the Death Drive: Cultural Meanings for the Legend of Sappho's Suicide* is my contribution to the article co-authored with Dragoș Marinescu (my co-author's contribution to the article has not been reproduced in the present volume): Carmen Popescu & Dragoș Marinescu, "Grant Me Surcease from Sorrow", in *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity*, No. 1, Vol. 1, Spring 2013 (*Suicide-bound poets*), New York: Addleton Academic Publishers, ISSN: 2327-5707, pp. 27-36.
- "We are cast down until the end of time", in *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity*, No. 1, Vol. 1, Spring 2013 (*Suicide-bound poets*), New York: Addleton Academic Publishers, ISSN: 2327-5707, pp. 163-166.
- *Towards a Comparative Poetics of the Picaresque* in *El Siglo de oro antes y después de el „Arte Nuevo”*. *Nuevos enfoques desde una perspectiva pluridisciplinaria*, coord. por Oana Andreia Sâmbrian-Toma, Craiova, Editura Sitech, 2009, pp. 70-78.
- *Theoretical Resources for the Study of Tragedy - Modern Comparative Perspectives*, in *Communicating Identities. Literature and Other Forms of Verbal Interaction*, edited by Emilia Parpală & Carmen Popescu. Craiova: Editura Universitaria, 2021, pp. 71-83. A Romanian version of this chapter has been published under the title *Resurse teoretice pentru studiul tragediei*, in Carmen Popescu, *Studii de literatură universală și comparată*, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2023, pp. 83-107.

- *Hubris and Hamartia in the Modern Rewriting of Classical Tragedy*, in AUC (Analele Universității din Craiova), seria Engleză, no. 2 / 2015, Year XVI, pp. 145-159.
- *Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in Ancient Greek Tragedy (The Oresteia)* will be published in a collective volume on the topic “Intertextuality” edited by the Laboratory of Modern Literatures (Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova).
- *Modernist Temporalities and the Complexity of Tradition*, in *Time and Space in Literature*, edited by Florentina Anghel and Valentina Rădulescu, Belgrade: AGM knjiga, 2022, pp. 59-77.
- *Intertextuality in Literary Comparisons. Arguments for a Dialogic/ Communicational Reassessment*, in *Le Comparatisme comme approche critique. Objets, méthodes et pratiques comparatistes / Objects, Methods, Practices*, Anne Tomiche (coord.) Tome 3, *Objets, méthodes et pratiques comparatistes / Objects, Methods, Practices*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, Collection Rencontres– Littérature générale et comparée, 2017, pp. 287-303.
- *The Modernist Poetics and the Issue of Language. Theoretical Considerations*, in *Forms of Critical Thinking*, edited by Emilia Parpală and Carmen Popescu, Craiova, Universitaria, 2022, pp. 84-98. A Romanian version of this chapter has been published under the title *Poetica modernistă și problema limbajului. Considerații teoretice*, in *Studia Linguistica et Philologica. In Honorem Prof. Univ. Dr. Doina Negomireanu*, coordonator Elena Pîrvu, Craiova, Editura Universitaria, pp. 336-350.

Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations throughout the volume are mine.

I.
World Literature, Comparative Literature
and the Intertextual Method

WORLD LITERATURE AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: A FEW METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

1. Introduction

In this article I intend to review a series of studies concerning the status and epistemology of world literature and comparative literature, with a focus on their overlapping and inextricable connection. In the simplest way possible, we can see *world literature* as the (quasi-infinite) corpus or object of study and *comparatism* as the method we use in order to study a diversity of literary works in a transnational perspective. In a conversation with his secretary Eckermann, on 31st of January 1827, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe asserted that

“It is becoming more and more obvious to me that poetry is the common property of all mankind and that it is manifest everywhere and in all ages in hundreds and hundreds of people. The only difference is that some express themselves a little better and are on top a little longer. [...] I therefore like to keep informed about foreign productions, and I advise everybody to do the same. National literature means little now, the age of Weltliteratur has begun; and everyone should further its course”
(Goethe 2012: 11).

The approaches within this field can seem dauntingly and confusingly diverse. However, we can notice common concerns for major theoretical issues, from the problem of the canon, literariness, translation, inter-artistic connections, influence, reception and intertextuality to universality itself and, also, to cross-cultural communication and the purported *epistemic violence*¹ inherent in the act of comparing works of literature from different cultural

¹ I have dedicated the first chapter of my book *Intertextualitatea și paradigma dialogică a comparatismului* (Popescu 2016) to the survey of main directions in contemporary comparatism, with a special focus on authors who borrow the notion of “epistemic violence” from Michel Foucault in order to denounce a version of comparison which risks to assimilate the *other* in the name of the *universal*.

backgrounds. The following statement by Susan Stanford-Friedman is illustrative for this recent attitude of suspicion towards comparison conducted according to Western norms and standards:

“Comparison presumes a normative standard of measure by which the other is known and often judged. In describing one thing in terms of the other, comparison assumes knowledge of the one to which the other is compared. The known then operates as the measure of the unknown, standing in an unequal relation to it”
(Stanford-Friedman 2011: 753).

The scholars are always in search for the most adequate methods. From the very beginning, comparative literature aspired to be a hard science and modelled itself after, for instance, Georges Cuvier’s comparative anatomy. This somewhat utopian ambition is visible in early theoretical contributions like *Littérature étrangère comparée* (1835) by Philarète Chasles, in *Cours de littérature française: Tableau de la littérature du moyen-âge en France, en Italie, en Espagne et en Angleterre* (1840) by Abel-François Villemain or in *Comparative Literature* (1886) by Hutcheson M. Posnett. The prevailing assumption in this period was that “all knowledge is comparable because it is measurable, and that all knowledge can be reduced to a handful of universal principles” (Mattana 2020: 356). This scientific emulation can be still observed today, for example in the very influential paradigm of digital humanities, world-systems theory and “distant reading” promoted by Franco Moretti (2013). Once more, Darwinian evolution is the inspiration for the outlining of patterns and paradigms in world literary history:

“A theory that takes as its central problem the *multiplicity of forms* existing in the world; that explains them as the result of *divergence and branching*; and that bases divergence on a process of *spatial separation*: here is what evolutionary theory has to offer to literary history. Many different forms, in a discontinuous space: not a bad starting point, for the study of world literature”
(Moretti 2013: 125).

Without abandoning all dreams of scientific objectivity, systematicity and the outlining of universal laws and principles,

contemporary theorists are also careful not to dismiss cultural difference and the uniqueness of individual works, and not to fetishize their concepts, but rather perceive them as tools. We should thus heed Alessio Mattana's warning that

“all approaches to comparative and world literature are to some extent theories that bring together heterogeneous specimens of literature and combine them into a forceful synthesis. [...] single instances always hold the power to disprove a theory, and work to show that all syntheses are provisional constructions based upon a selective and convenient collection of data. This is why anomalies are so important: they exert pressure on conventionally accepted theories” (Mattana 2020: 366-367).

What recent developments in world literature and comparative literature also show is that methodology goes hand in hand with the ethics of the discipline: cosmopolitanism, the rejection of eurocentrism and ethnocentrism (together with racism and xenophobia in general) and a commitment to respecting difference are some of the basic principles constituting its distinctive ethos. Comparative literature has become a “discipline of tolerance”: “If a secular, universalist humanism had lost favor among comparativists in the heyday of high theory, the signs today are that this kind of humanism is back in full swing, with a self-conscious and tyrannical mission of tolerance” (Chow 2011: 21).

2. Awareness of endemic crisis and the search for the best method(s)

Decades ago, some scholars were of the opinion that there was no clear distinction between the methodology of comparison within national literature and the same procedure when employed cross-culturally or between different literatures. This reproach is usually associated with René Wellek (*The Crisis of Comparative Literature*), who was disappointed with the French school's (especially Paul Van Tieghem's) fine distinction between *comparative literature* (reduced to “rapports de fait” or binary / causal relationships) and *general*

literature, dealing with more encompassing movements or fashions, like Byronism, Petrarchism, Ibsenism, etc. In Wellek's terms,

“An artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences, a motivation by cultural nationalism, however generous – these seem to me the symptoms of the long-drawn-out crisis of comparative literature”
(Wellek 1963: 290).

The attack on traditional comparative scholarship is motivated by a certain organicist and autonomous concept of “literariness”, which is visibly the one specific to modernism, New Criticism and other types of formalisms:

“Works of art, however, are not simply sums of sources and influences: they are wholes in which raw materials derived from elsewhere cease to be inert matter and are assimilated into a new structure. Causal explanation leads only to a *regressus and infinitum* [...]”
(*Ibidem*: 285).

The method and object of any science are, ideally, in harmony. The anxiety about how we should *do* (practice) world literature and comparative literature is rooted in the anxiety about what these disciplines *are*: which is their territory and scope, or their identity, in contrast to national literary studies and other types of scholarship, and if they are truly autonomous, as they claim to be. Hence, the issue of epistemological legitimacy of this discipline, which has been seen as dominated by a “logic of indiscipline” (Ferris 2011: 28). A new mode of asking fundamental questions might be a chance for this very troubled and murky domain, which needs to constantly justify itself:

“A reflection on comparison that is capable of interrupting its own unfolding in a mode other than the coercion of crisis would be a start so that our present can make a claim on *why* and avoid the endless repetitions of *what* and *how*. The natural sciences may ask about *what* is in our world, the social sciences may measure *how* we are in that world, we, at least, can ask *why* – and that is why we compare”
(*Ibidem*: 43).

The answers to this question will undoubtedly vary, according to the theoretical schools or trends a particular comparatist adheres to. As a compensation for the aforementioned state of crisis, Adrian Marino wished that comparatists could reach a consensus regarding a “methodological monism” (1998: 100), but most authors are not bothered by pluralism or eclecticism. The diversity of interests in the field of comparativism is reflected in its definitions, which have progressively become less restrictive and more open to interdisciplinarity, thus documenting what comparatists actually *do* in their regular research, instead of prescribing what the science should *be*. Henry H. H. Remak’s widely accepted definition of comparative literature (from *Comparative literature: its definition and function*) is indicative for the methods habitually employed, beyond any polemics between the French and the American schools:

„Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expressions”
(Remak 1961: 3).

Along with the interartistic parallels and analogies, comparative research includes intermediality, as it was already stated in the “Bernheimer Report”, later included in a collective volume:

“Comparative Literature should include comparisons between media, from early manuscripts to television, hypertext, and virtual realities. The material form that has constituted our object of study for centuries, the book, is in the process of being transformed through computer technology and the communications revolution. [...] This wider focus involves studying not only the business of bookmaking but also the cultural place and function of reading and writings and the physical properties of newer communicative media”
(Bernheimer 1995: 45).

Instead of seeing world literature as a corpus or a canon, David Damrosch proposed to understand it as “mode of circulation and of reading” (2003: 5). As long as we are in the “mode of reading” frame, it means the methodological option is on the table. Also, the comparatist’s way of reading through a transnational lens is not very far from the regular reader’s “natural” reading practice, which involves “reading across time”, “reading across cultures” and “reading in translation” (Damrosch 2009: vii). Method is somehow inescapable, even if it is, at its loosest and freest, only “generalism”:

“To adopt generalism is to redefine it, not as the not-so-secret vice of comparatists, those dilettantes of the academy, but rather as a surprisingly timely kind of critical method, the intellectual corollary of globalization and an answer to the urgent problem of thinking big”
(Cooppan 2004:11).

Globalization is often feared because it threatens to bring about homogenization and uniformity, erasing cultural differences and specificities, the uniqueness of every literature – in other words, the very things comparative literature is interested in. At the same time, the power of imaginative literature is such, and the abilities of local cultures to lay their own imprint on borrowed material are considerable enough to make us look at these phenomena in a more hopeful manner, on the background of a truly dynamic and vigorous cultural exchange. Through various deconstructive and revisionist strategies, the periphery can rewrite and radically change the authoritative model received from the metropolitan centre:

“Globalization has inspired social research to revive and refurbish distributional models of culture, and in such models, as in any models for which culture spreads through transmission and diffusion, reception is negotiated. Incoming objects are always—notoriously—subject to some translation, and therefore liable to betrayal, by the tradition, the cultural codes of the group [...] and by the individual [...]. Noise, disruption being unpreventable in communication, an object in flow is semantically in flux”
(Loriggio 2004: 57).

3. Comparison as a critical method and a meta-method

We could describe comparison as a meta-method which can absorb and instrumentalize many other methods. These, in their turn, may be shared with other disciplines. We can thus delineate comparative stylistics, comparative narratology and even comparative poetics. For the first illustration, a seminal study is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis. Representations of Reality in Western Literature* (2013). Comparative narratology can be refreshingly productive in diachronic surveys of the novel (Doody 1996, Pavel 2003) which also set as a goal to outline a theory of the genre or to apprehend the ontology of fictionality, or in comparative poetics (Miner 1990, Beaujour 2017).

While in an early phase of comparative studies this new domain was considered a part of literary history (Tieghem 1966), in more recent times there is an insistence that comparatism belongs to literary criticism, as one of its most prominent and efficient methods (Reynolds et al. 2015, Tomiche 2017: 18).

In what follows, I will lay out the tenets of several approaches which, over the years, have proved their value in the study of world literature corpora.

3.1. Intertextuality and influence

Intertextuality is by now an important gain for the comparative study of literature. At least, many comparatists agree with regard to the efficiency of this modern method and its capacity to balance the more traditional approach, usually conducted from the standpoint of influence studies. Francis Claudon and Karen Haddad-Wotling associated intertextuality with what they called “constructive comparatism” (1997: 25-26). Others have assimilated intertextuality in their vocabulary together with reception (Troubetzkoy 1997: 26, Martel 2005), or with interdisciplinarity, translation and the electronic text (de Zepetnek 1998). According to Daniel-Henri Pageaux, intertextuality is a particular case or a “new dimension” of comparison, “the possibility of a *comparative* reading” (2000: 26-27).

Some see in intertextuality a better alternative to influence (with its unpleasant connotations of elitism, authority and asymmetry in interliterary relationships), or at least a very useful complement to it.

Especially considering that, as Susan Bassnet emphasized, the “tracking” of influence is a tedious and problematic endeavour; the very nature of inspiration or creativity suggests that the reality of influences and their true impact often elude us:

“Writers draw their inspiration from all kinds of sources, some conscious, some unconscious, some acknowledged, some vehemently denied. All that we, as readers, can do is to see parallels, connections, affinities, and this is a more fruitful approach than one which seeks to prove certainty where certainty is a chimera”
(Bassnett 2007: 138).

Instead, it would be more profitable for us, the author opines, to have “a more holistic model that sees the study of literature as the study of intertextual connections” (*Ibidem*: 134). Noticing the common interest of the contributors for the intertextual method, the editors of *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* inferred that

“If there is one principle that Comparative Literature in all its forms has stood for over the years, it is the necessity to understand literary texts in relation to other texts, whether belonging to other languages and cultures, other disciplines, other races, or the other sex. That necessity continues to inform the comparative perspective today”
(Koelb and Noakes 1988: 17).

And still, we should not abandon influence studies. Duly updated, they can be very illuminating, especially when combined with the more recent trend of intertextual studies. The latter are also under a critical lens, in the present context of generalized suspicion towards the dehumanized, depersonalized doctrine of poststructuralism. Within a survey of theories of influence in literary history, Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein pointed out that

“From the very beginning, influence was an author-centred and evaluative concept, and an important tool for literary historians. [...] Tracing influences was an essential element in the rise of