

# The Scales of Literary Study: National, Connected, Comparative, and World Literatures

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*This article discusses the ways in which literary scholarship has conceptualized the relations between different literary cultures. It suggests an application of a multiple-scale analysis of literary phenomena, and explores the characteristics of certain national, transnational, connected, comparative, and world literatures.*

Keywords: comparative literature / world literature / national literatures / connected (*croisées*) literatures / world system / cultural identity / transnationality

## **National and transnational literatures**

Comparative literature as a field that has expanded its study beyond the limits of a given national literature has always been concerned with the dynamics of space, to which various currents that conceptualized such adjacent fields as postcolonial studies and world literature turned further attention in the second half of the twentieth century. Contrary to an approach that had dominated the field for a long time, the idea that comparative literature should focus on Western influences on different literary cultures was criticized by new approaches that emerged in non-Western contexts, stressing the historical character of this perception, and focusing on the questions of hegemony and power that it involved. For these approaches, expressed among others in Latin American scholarship, Eurocentrism was a hegemonic form of knowledge based on a version of modernity for which the history of human civilization naturally and ahistorically culminated in the achievements of Western culture (see, for example, Quijano). If thus the literature of the colonized had been invented (see Said) by the Western center, scholars now suggested alternative, decolonized, decentralized theories, histories, and interpretations for the literatures of the periphery. In their description of the relations between local cultures and the culture of the colonizers, various approaches sought to explore the literary

manifestations of certain processes of hybridization, through which the once separate structures and practices of a native culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, an external culture were now combined and gave rise to hybrid, creolized, transculturated identities (see, for example, Cândido; Henríquez Ureña; Glissant; García Canclini; Bhabha). The dismissal of eurocentric comparatism by Latin American criticism gave rise to approaches according to which the different literatures of the continent had to be conceived as participating in the same literary system, the characteristics of which had to be jointly examined (see Cornejo Polar; Rama; Pizarro; Coutinho). This kind of criticism thus opted for the conceptualization of a Latin American version of what Đurišin grasped as the supranational interliterary community (see Đurišin), the constituent parts of which shared a common culture and had to take a critical stance toward the dominant eurocentric comparatism.

Contrary to the idea of an interliterary community to which part of the Latin American criticism subscribed, many other literatures, such as Modern Greek (see Dimaras) and other Balkan literatures, were stubbornly studied as the expression of a linear national culture. While the interliterary system consisted of different national literatures that were determined by common socio-historical, cultural, and linguistic developments, Greek literature was linguistically isolated, and Greek criticism followed a tradition for which the unit of analysis was the nation-state. This kind of criticism was linked to a national scheme that was of ethnic and perennialist character (see Smith). By the end of the eighteenth century, this scheme had constituted itself by assuming the continuity of the Greek nation from antiquity to the modern times; and by the second half of the nineteenth century, it had annexed the Byzantine period as well. In this perception, Modern Greek literature was associated with the ancient and Byzantine tradition, as well as with European literary cultures, rather than with Oriental and Balkan literatures, the contact with which was seen as a period of deviation from the principal national scheme. While the idea of a connection of Modern Greek literature with non-Western literatures was generally rejected, comparatism gradually became interested in the relation of Modern Greek literature with European literatures in terms of a peripheral literature influenced by the great literatures of the European center. European literatures were thus considered not as participating in a common interliterary community, but as having a canonical, normative value serving as criterion for the evaluation of Greek literature.

Hence, while Latin American literatures, considered as so many parts of the same interliterary community, were studied at a supranational level, Modern Greek literature was usually studied at the level of the nation-

state, isolated from any non-hierarchical interliterary community in which it could participate. The conceptualization of a supranational literary network in the case of Latin America, and its dismissal in the case of Greece and the Balkans, should be linked to specific historical developments and to certain interpretative schemes with which they were associated. Latin America had been colonized by forces that had assumed political, economic, and cultural domination through the imposition of language, religion, and a system of values. For criticism, these forces represented first a center in the periphery of which lay Latin America, then a center to be decentralized, and finally the center of a culture the characteristics of which had determined a hybrid Latin American identity by orienting it toward modernity. Greece and the Balkans, on the other hand, had been controlled by a force that had assumed political and economic domination, while cultural domination had been much more marginal due to the absence of any generalized policy of imposition of language, religion, and cultural values. For criticism, this force represented a pre-modern paradigm, the characteristics of which had influenced various aspects of Greek culture but not literature, and which were seen as the reason for the belatedness and the incomplete character of modernity in the Greek case.

### **Connected literatures**

The discussion about different interliterary networks as an alternative to the adoption of an interpretative model that took a perennial nation as the basic unit of analysis allows us to introduce a discussion about the character of the comparison that is involved in comparative literature. Contrary to a comparatism that focused on the relations of contact and influence between a major, Western, literary culture and a minor, non-Western, one, the concept of interliterary community intended to question the idea of the supremacy of the West as the center of the literary world-system. In terms of the contemporary discussion in the field of history, the idea of interliterary communities could be associated with *histoire croisée*, entangled or connected histories, the parallel study of cultural formations that are assumed to be in relations of crossing and intersection with one another (see Werner and Zimmermann). This kind of relational basis also underlies the kind of comparatism that focuses on the relations of contact and influence between Western and non-Western literary cultures. Yet the exploration of the connected literatures that comprise a given interliterary network generally introduces interpretative schemes that question influence and other relations of inequality between Western and non-Western literatures.

The conceptualization and study of certain connected histories, or literatures, was a response to both internal developments in the human and social sciences and to the implications of an external political context. Comparative literature had always been linked to certain extra-literary political concerns, and the idea of, say, a series of Latin American connected histories came to compete with the previously dominant eurocentric concern with the nation-state. The conceptualization of interliterary communities thus questioned the idea of a system in which the different literatures were dominated by a single literary center consisting of the European literatures with the most symbolic capital. The study of literatures at the level of the interliterary community thus proposed to decentralize the international literary system, replacing a unipolar order with a multipolar one. If Europe had for a long time dominated the international literary scene, the normative value of its literature was now questioned, and new poles emerged, multiplying the literary centers. The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a crisis of the Western world, and the emergence of new centers with considerable economic, political, and cultural capital. The emergence of the economies of China, India, or Brazil, but also of certain political projects that served as alternatives to those of Europe or the United States, as in the case of a series of Latin American countries, was linked to the questioning of a model of world economy that had Western countries as its single center. It was this political background that underlay the transition, in the field of comparative literature, from a time of unipolarity and inequality (see Saussy) to a time of multiculturalism (see Bernheimer).

At this stage, the political dimensions of the approaches that questioned the established eurocentric comparatism can be summarized as the dismissal of the nation-state as the basic unit of identity formation and as the principal field in which contemporary processes of globalization are taking place, the observation of the condition of hegemony that characterized the relations between Western and non-Western economies and cultures, and the emergence of alternative forms of globalization that contested the supremacy of the West and established new centers in what used to be the periphery of the world-system. At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, this political context has changed again, with the further destabilization of the Western world, and the establishment of alternative centers that represent emerging economic forces as well as important cultural actors. In this context, different parts of the periphery now came in contact with one another. At the same time, as far as internal developments in the human and social sciences were concerned, the idea of a Latin American community proved to have certain

limits, and the study of the different literatures at the level of a Latin American nation involved the risk of explaining away the various literary phenomena by considering only the most distinguished cases of the continent. Moreover, the view according to which Latin American literature was the result of a process of hybridization between local and European cultures involved the constant presence of the European center that Latin American criticism intended to provincialize. If the world was less unipolar, and if criticism had to a certain extent already decentralized the world-system of literature, comparative literature could now propose, not only to interpret the inequalities of the world-system, but also to overcome the constraints of the center by establishing direct communication between different parts of its periphery. Thus, comparative literature could now engage in the comparative study of literatures that belonged to different parts of the periphery and which were not linked by relations of contact and influence; that is, it could become comparative literature without a center and without hegemony.

### **Comparative literatures**

A comparatism interested not in the study of literatures that were linked by relations of contact and influence, but rather in the study of certain entangled or connected literatures, corresponds to the historiographic idea of comparative history, the study of different systems that were not linked by relations of direct contact (Kocka; Haupt; Haupt and Kocka [ed.]). This kind of non-relational comparatism had, methodologically speaking, heuristic, paradigmatic, and analytical functions, that is, it helped to identify important questions to which to seek answers, to clarify the characteristics of single cases and indicate the limits of the idea of uniqueness of a given case, and to provide causal explanations for the identified phenomena (Kocka; Haupt and Kocka [ed.]). This non-relational comparative approach, however, was not incompatible with the concept of connected or entangled histories, as the latter methodologically involved the former. For example, the exploration of the connected literatures of the Balkans, that is, of a possible Balkan interliterary community, would involve the comparative method. Heuristically, this approach would identify and formulate the question, say, why were Greek, Bulgarian, and other literatures of the region not substantially influenced by Ottoman literature while Bosnian and Albanian literary cultures incorporated many features of the Ottoman *divan* poetry (see, for example, Elsie; Rizvić). Descriptively, it would qualify medieval Bulgarian or Serbian literature as

belated in comparison to the Greek literature of the period, which, moreover, served as a model for numerous translations and adaptations that constituted the basis for the development of this Bulgarian and Serbian literature (see Moser; Castellan and Vrinat-Nikolov). And paradigmatically, it would relativize the idea of the uniqueness of, say, the use of the idea of a perennial nation in the nineteenth-century Greek novel. Finally, analytically, it would formulate and test the hypothesis that the absence of the Ottoman influence on Greek or Bulgarian literature is due to the general absence of acculturating processes, which are for their part due to certain historical and social conditions, while the presence of the Ottoman influence in the case of Bosnian and Albanian literatures has to be associated with certain economical, religious, and social conditions that made the respective populations convert to Islam and, to a considerable extent, integrate into Ottoman culture.

Such heuristic, descriptive, paradigmatic, and analytical functions of the comparative approach have been criticized as being mere methodological tools that only serve to formulate and check the validity of hypotheses; thus, the value of the non-relational comparative approach has been questioned in favor of the study of connected (*croisées*) histories, or literatures. However, while the heuristic, descriptive, and paradigmatic functions can indeed be criticized as being instruments for the constitution of a method rather than features of an autonomous field, the analytical function, with its focus on the exploration of causal explanations, cannot be denied its systematicity and autonomy. On this basis, the non-relational comparative approach does constitute a field of studying the kind of convergences and divergences between literary phenomena that are not due to direct or indirect connections. Literary scholarship has been concerned with this kind of convergences and divergences, suggesting either that they can be seen as manifestations of universal evolutions in the field of literature (Đurišin), or that they can be associated with analogous extra-literary historical developments (Zhirumunsky). In this last case, the non-relational comparative approach would reveal typological convergences that were considered to be linked to similar developments in their socio-historical contexts. The non-relational comparative study of literatures belonging to one or more interliterary systems could, for example, test the hypothesis that the development of the indigenist novel in some of the Latin American literatures could be associated with their invocation of an important pre-Columbian civilization that was absent in other Latin American literatures; or, say, the hypothesis that the adherence of a part of the Colombian literature to the idea of the superiority of Spanish imperial culture, in contrast with the rejection of the Ottoman culture in most of the Balkan literatures, could be

associated with the different structures of the two empires due to which only the Spanish one systematically employed policies of acculturation of their subjects.

## **World literature**

A systematic and autonomous approach of non-relational comparative literature focuses on phenomena considered as manifestations of universal tendencies, or as processes analogous to certain non-literary social processes. But the non-relational dimension would also be involved in the study of literatures indirectly connected at the level of the system, in this case, of a global or world literature. In terms taken from historiography, the idea of global literature would correspond to that of global history (see Mazlish), as both include phenomena that were subject to the processes of globalization of the last decades of the twentieth century. The idea of world literature, on the other hand, associated with that of world history, proposed to study literary cultures as so many parts of a world-system (as conceptualized by Braudel and later Wallerstein) of literature. Far from being the sum total of the world's most important works, world literature has importantly been seen as a result of what could be today considered as certain processes of globalization (see Goethe), and as a commodity bound to be produced and distributed on the scale of a globalized economy (see Marx and Engels). Recently, world literature has been grasped as a system that is subject to the rules of the economy of literature; a field where certain centers, due to their dominant status in world economy and their subsequent capital, dominate the literature of the periphery, establishing an order of unequal distribution of the literary resources among the different national contexts (see Casanova). Other approaches have associated globalization with a capitalist world-system with a series of historical Western European centers dominating vast peripheries (see, for example, Wallerstein). This perception has given rise to the idea of a modern literary world-system (see Moretti) whose center and periphery are linked by relations of inequality.

This last approach insists on the idea of a homology between the economic world-system and the literary world-system, tracing the coincidence between intellectual and material centers in the exercise of hegemony over the periphery. The hypothesis of the coincidence between political and cultural centers, considered, in a rather evolutionist manner, as a universal tendency of the literary world-system, could nevertheless be questioned by a non-relational comparative study of different literatures of the periphery of

the world-system. Contrary to the assumption that the borders of a cultural center always more or less coincide with the borders of a political center—say, of the Ottoman empire as the political center in the case of Balkan literatures—the Greek case seems to indicate that the cultural centers of Western Europe (France, England, and Germany) were more powerful than any other cultural actor. On the other hand, the evolution, for example, of Bulgarian literature indicates that Balkan literatures that were not influenced by the Ottoman political center could be influenced, not only by Western European literatures, but also by other literary cultures, to which they may have been related for different reasons. Bulgarian literature was historically formed under the influence of the Byzantine empire, the political, economic, and cultural center that dominated the region for centuries, and the relation with Greek literature would still determine the evolution of Bulgarian literature in the centuries following the fall of the Byzantine empire and during the Ottoman domination. Historically, this relation was based upon the policies of acculturation employed by the Byzantine empire, the leading role of a new Greek bourgeoisie in the Ottoman economy, the role of Greek intellectuals as mediators of the ideas of Enlightenment and revolution, and, finally, the Greek war for independence and the subsequent formation of the independent Greek state several decades before the Bulgarian one. These processes led to the formation of an important Bulgarian Greek-speaking élite whose influence on the Bulgarian cultural élites was felt even as late as the nineteenth century. The example of Balkan literatures then illustrates the dynamic character of cultural hegemony and the limits of the idea of its direct dependence on material hegemony. Hence, instead of subjecting cultural hegemony to the postulate of an a priori coincidence between political and cultural centers, we should see it as dependent on different processes, including policies of acculturation, that have made it part of historical processes of modernization.

### **The scales of literature**

As the approaches that opted for the study of a world-system of literature proposed to interpret literary phenomena based on a kind of dialectical relationship between centers and peripheries, their demand of large-scale studies encountered certain limits. Although this unequal world-system of literature was seen as a result of the modernizing process of globalization with its Western European centers, this model did not manage to account for literary phenomena that take place in different temporal and spatial contexts. The assumption of the coincidence between political



and economic centers, on the one hand, and cultural and literary centers, on the other, was based on the analysis of the relations between Western Europe and the zones it had colonized, thus ignoring zones that had been under the control of non-Western forces such as the Ottoman empire. This kind of large-scale analysis then involved the application of models that explained a series of literary phenomena while overlooking others, which were, however, perceptible in a small-scale analysis (see Gribaudo). However, while large-scale models tend to reduce literary phenomena to those aspects that they can properly explain, a small-scale analysis cannot perceive movements that take place on a larger scale and determine the evolution of the literary phenomena that this kind of analysis chooses to put under the microscope. Indeed, the inequalities between the different literatures of the literary world-system remained unnoticed by the micro-approaches that had for a long time dominated the study of literature, even though they determined the different phenomena that these approaches proposed to study on a reduced scale. Although both kinds of approaches inevitably reduced the literary phenomena to certain aspects that could be convincingly explained by their interpretative schemes, there is no reason to argue that the dominant small-scale approach to literature was more well-founded and trustworthy than the large-scale one. Hence, as soon as macro-phenomena and micro-phenomena (see Lepetit), that is, different temporal and spatial scales, are equally recognized in the study of literary history, comparative literature will be able to proceed to the study of both connected and non-related literatures at the level of either established or non-established interliterary networks and at the level of a world-system of literature that would finally overcome the constraints of the relations of hegemony between centers and peripheries.

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## Ravni raziskovanja literature: nacionalne, povezane, primerjalne in svetovne književnosti

Ključne besede: primerjalna književnost / svetovna književnost / nacionalne književnosti / povezane književnosti / svetovni sistem / kulturna identiteta / nadnacionalnost

Članek obravnava načine, na katere je literarna veda konceptualizirala razmerja med različnimi literarnimi kulturami, in razišče poteze nekaterih nacionalnih, nadnacionalnih, t. i. povezanih (*croisés*), primerjalnih in svetovnih književnosti. Medtem ko so bili primerjalni pristopi dolgo časa osredotočeni na zahodne vplive na različne literarne kulture, so novi pristopi opozorili na problematiko hegemonije, povezano s starimi pristopi, in predlagali alternativne, dekolonizirane metode interpretiranja literatur periferije. Obenem so specifični zgodovinski procesi prispevali k temu, da so bile nekatere literature še zmerom obravnavane na nacionalni ravni, druge pa že kot del različnih nadnacionalnih medliterarnih omrežij. Pojem medliterarne skupnosti lahko povežemo s konceptom povezanih zgodovin, kjer osrednje razmerje ni vpliv, ampak preplet. Nadaljnji razvoj družboslovja in humanistike pa tudi zunajliterarni zgodovinski in politični procesi so pripomogli k uveljavitvi proučevanja različnih literatur periferije, ki jih ne povezuje neposredni stik, temveč posredna, strukturna razmerja, kakršna obravnava primerjalno zgodovinopisje. Tovrstna ne-relacijska primerjalna književnost se lahko osredotoči na manifestacije univerzalnih teženj ali na analogije z zunajliterarnimi zgodovinskimi procesi. Tovrstna ne-relacijska perspektiva lahko naposled proučuje literature, ki so posredno povezane na sistemski ravni svetovne literature, in sicer z razmerji, kakršna vladajo med centri in periferijami svetovnega sistema.

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