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WHY COMPARE? WHAT'S TO COMPARE? THE PRACTICE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN A POSTCOLONIAL/POSTCOMMUNIST CONTEXT. A RESPONSE TO DAVID DAMROSCH [1]

***Keywords**: postcolonialism and postcommunism, transnational literature, translation and comparative studies, nationalism, Eastern vs. Western scholarship*
***Abstract**: This article examines the basis of recent comparative studies of literature against the background of global cultural and political markets. It finds that the positioning of Eastern (European) and Western literatures is constantly asymmetric, as is scholarship of the two regions itself. In spite of all efforts to redress this a priori inequality and of the new international dynamics of globalization, there is a huge disparity between the attention given to translations from Western literatures (especially in English) as compared to those from Eastern (European) ones. This can only increase and modulate the hegemonic position of the West in both literature and the academe. As a result, comparisons and evaluations are generally rigged by nationalist agendas just as attempts at neutrality in comparative studies are thwarted by the metaphors of origin and originality or of modernity and progress as a race. Relying on insights from such postcommunist critics as Maria Todorova and Alexander Kiossev, the paper suggests that figurative representations of world literature contaminate the study of transnational cultural phenomena and that a new historical and comparative framework needs to be used to avoid nationalistic and hegemonic images in present-day scholarship.*

> *If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.*
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> (Max Ehrmann, "Desiderata", 1927)

Professor Damrosch's provocative talk has incited a host of questions and has opened many avenues for reflection. For the sake of brevity and clarity of focus I am

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going to raise just the two questions in my title. Of course, I am going to cleverly employ rhetoric to suggest my favorite answers while appearing to simply ask those questions. You will probably see me drifting away from Professor Damrosch's text into ruminations that have nevertheless been inspired by our guest speaker's key presentation.

Why compare?

Since literature is something that I teach to undergraduates, I have grown used to asking simple yet basic questions whose answers are meant to precede any effort to interpret or evaluate literary texts. These questions help them (and myself) understand where critical efforts are coming from and where they are going, since I am convinced that literary studies, like anything else in human practice, are caused by something and aim to have a certain effect.

So whenever students propose to write a comparative essay, I will only give them the go signal if they manage to answer the question "why do you need to compare these works/authors/contexts/paradigms?" Hence my first question here: why compare?

Since to most of my students the question is baffling, here is how I help them find an answer. Comparing is no more than a tool, never an end in itself. True, it is a sophisticated and demanding tool that only the highly trained and widely read scholars are able to use with some degree of precision, but it is still no more than a tool. It is never enough to compare. The reason one compares is that one wants to make a point based on an ulterior motive. By that I simply mean a motive that is "not immediately apparent" (I am not implying that it is necessarily disreputable). I like the phrase because it implies at one and the same time a plan that precedes or preconditions the comparison, and a point that succeeds the comparison, something that is derived from it and is served by it.

In other words (really in the words of the other), *Comparaison n'est pas (assez) raison*, comparing is not sufficient reason in and by itself.

As an instrument, comparative literary research may be and has been wielded as part of diverse critical approaches. It can equally be employed by synchronic or diachronic investigations, it may serve to better understand styles, movements, cultural traditions, to highlight transhistorical and transcultural paradigms or archetypes, to discover sources and influences or to trace the reception process, to find generic structures and common significance or to emphasize cultural differences, to name just a few of the possible motives for comparison.

With this in mind, I turn to Professor Damrosch's invitation to focus on the transnational flow of literary texts and ideas from one national cultural market to another, a claim that is rich in implications and that he has backed up with a beautiful set of illustrations. What I would like to better understand is the ulterior motive for this concern. What are the critical premises and the theoretical axioms supporting such an interpretive effort and what is the proposed outcome for this kind of inquiry? What is the larger explanatory framework that accommodates the study of transnational processes in the context of correlations between the national and the global? Is Professor Damrosch interested in foreign influences or in foreign reception or, more likely, in both since he seems to suggest that a foreign text may fuel up or even initiate a national tradition?

And, since context is introduced to us as a significant explanation, I wonder if we can compare such remote historical contexts for the circulation of literature as seventeenth-century or eighteenth-century England and twenty-first-century Europe? Which is the overarching explanatory framework wherein they can be treated as similar? Also, what can we hope to demonstrate by comparing them? That the "transnational" processes we are witnessing in the globalized post-industrial civilization are the same as those occasioned by the rise of modernity, that there is some universal template for all transnational processes? Or, perhaps, that transnational flows occur before, during, and after the age of nations/nation-states?

I also think some critics may display reserve to qualifiers such as "international" or "transnational" for the fact that Ionesco's plays were first staged outside France. The presence of some individual writers in foreign cultural milieus may not always amount to a "transnational" phenomenon. One has to consider the direction and outcome of the cultural transfer, the actual magnitude of the impact, the difference between who the writer was (what his market rate was) at that time and later/now etc. The value and effect of literary works both change over time, as these works were not then what they would later become. In 1959, *Rhinoceros* was the work of a still relatively unknown playwright who could only hope to be put up on small fringe stages. If I remember correctly, it was only in the sixties that bigger mainstream theatres started performing Ionesco's plays. Then (that is, in the beginning) he must have sounded quirky, irreverent, and, no doubt, off-beat; it was a bit later that he became a fashion, only to eventually turn into the respectable classic that he is today. Given that his was still a feeble voice of limited circulation at the time of the first performances outside France, one may wonder if the use of the words "international" might not illicitly encourage us to think that the impact of such events was not just nation-wide, but also global, meaning that it literally affected the cultures of more than one country.

One has to wonder if Ionesco became an influential factor for a non-French (or non-Romanian) national culture as a result of one fringe show in that culture or rather because the larger theatres in France started playing him successfully and because critics and reviewers in France warmed up to his art.

Not least of all, one can ask if there really is a good reason to compare literary markets or the market presence of certain authors. This is where the second question I will be addressing today might show how insightful it is of Professor Damrosch to be talking of markets in the context of comparative literature.

What's to compare?

I was hoping to convey the ambiguity of this question which may read both as "What does it mean to compare?" and also as "Is there really any comparison?" or even as "Is comparison really possible?"

Comparing implies that two different things may be alike or equal when in fact they are not. They remain irreducibly different and disproportionate. Ranking one over the other is always a simple choice, really. Moreover, the very act of comparing is itself conditioned by the status of the comparer, who may be, for instance, a Western or an Eastern European intellectual. Take us, here, today. We are here to prove that enlightened

scholars from such different parts of the globe can sit together and exchange ideas as peers in a global environment. But, of course, we are not peers, we are not equal, there is no comparison, especially when to compare the East with the West is always done in the terms set by Western institutions and practices. On the one side there is an American scholar with a well established and long standing reputation, the chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard, on the other side there is—some guy from Romania. The Western scholar is being courteous and generous by simply acknowledging a Romanian-born writer in his talk and by accepting an invitation to a conference in Bucharest, that is, in a remote and marginal nation like Romania. Such gestures leave me, the marginal scholar, on the receiving end with the option of being either compliant if I acknowledge his kindness or brazen and ungrateful should I decide to critique some of his ideas.

I am by no means trying to be rude and I am definitely not questioning Professor Damrosch's motives and his genuine openness, I am merely pointing to the unavoidable situation in which we are both trapped. What I am trying to illustrate is that different, unequal contexts work to make the comparison implausible if not impossible. That is why I particularly enjoyed Professor Damrosch's comments on the way in which John Phillips' translation functions differently in the English political context than the original by Las Casas against a Spanish background.

In response to Hirakawa's objection (not very dissimilar from my own) that comparative literature is an exclusive Euro-American club meant to entertain Western nationalism, Professor Damrosch proposes that "this situation has changed dramatically in recent years, and both the globe and the map of Europe itself have opened up." While this is no doubt a verifiable assertion, I wonder if opening the EU door for less developed, former communist countries or opening the cultural market for marginal and exotic literatures or arts (take, for instance, the "new wave in Romanian cinema") automatically generates the conditions needed for genuinely even-handed comparisons. I am afraid that any parallels, juxtapositions or analogies between major or established Western literatures and minor non-Western ones are going to remain asymmetrical. They are just as asymmetrical as the political balance of European and world power. Think of the discretionary (for some even discriminatory) opposition from Germany and France to Romania and Bulgaria accessing the visa-free Schengen space. Or think of the discourteous way in which French president Chirac admonished Eastern European states (Donald Rumsfeld's "New Europe") for supporting the US intervention in Iraq: "They missed a great opportunity to shut up." Then, referring particularly to Romania and Bulgaria, who were still just aspiring to join the EU at the time, he added like a regular bully: "If they wanted to diminish their chances of joining Europe they could not have found a better way." (http://articles.cnn.com/2003-02-18/world/sprj.irq.chirac_1_french-president-jacques-chirac-eu-leaders-romania-and-bulgaria?_s=PM:WORLD)

At this point, before I turn from politics proper to the politics of culture, it may be helpful to invoke the etymological relative of the word "comparison". Professor Damrosch is no doubt well aware of it, as he is conversant with so many foreign languages. Long before the founding of comparative literature as a discipline, the Latin root (*comparare*) yielded in Romanian *a cumpăra* ("to buy"). In this we are comparable

to other Southern offshoots of Latin (see Ital. *comprare*, Span. *comprar*, Port. *comprar*). Interestingly, Latin had the same word (*comparator*) for both comparers and buyers. In that sense, when Professor Damrosch invites us to compare how texts and authors perform in different cultural markets he obviously strikes—Rome. He is implicitly validating the ancient ken that comparing is intimately connected with commerce and market value.

Sadly, in this post- or neo-colonial age, we can no longer be seduced by the metaphor of a "free" global market being driven by an "invisible hand". The hand is only invisible because the puppeteer is cautious enough to disguise it. The recent recognition of exotic cultural market products such as Romanian cinema or fiction is just temporary and is only tolerated when it may serve the interests of the main market players. The new wave in Romanian cinema is no more than a fling as was the presence of Romanian writers in the edition dedicated to them by the French annual festival *Les Belles Étrangères*. (Consider the title of the festival itself, which institutionalizes the stereotypical assimilation of the exotic and the feminine that Said and other postcolonial critics have talked about.) Romanian art, the minion of the day, is no more than a momentary thrill and like all non-Western cultural products is already condemned to ephemeral consumerism. Such fleeting pleasures are usually the subject of pornography.

By contrast, Western cultural products remain something permanent, the stable ground for the Western life style and worldview. And not just for the West. They are exported and many marginal cultures "buy" them, taking Western standards and models to be universal yardsticks. The West will occasionally open to Romanian or other exotic cultural products in order to either validate its own established values or justify their revision, but never in order to embrace the values of that exotic other. Hence, such works will remain evanescent, brief encounters. The transient function of their strangeness is either sensual or comic (as the Russians in Wodehouse's fiction). Note that the received work of Brâncuși, Cioran, or Ionesco, who are now considered French artists and have been canonized there and elsewhere in the West, is almost entirely purged of any native or pidgin accent, which may very well have been a condition for their Western assimilation.

An implicit hierarchy attends all comparisons, as well as the dramatic story of success and failure that accompanies them. And comparers are part of this story. To be an Eastern European comparer is to be doomed to an ineluctable sense of failure. This has been convincingly argued by the Bulgarian cultural historian Alexander Kiossev. Allow me to quote him more abundantly, since he may not be that broadly known in comparative circles:

> The hypothesis of this text is, therefore, the following: the birth of these nations is connected with a very specific symbolic economy. It seems that the self-colonizing cultures import alien values and civilizational models by themselves and that they lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models.
>
> Yet which are, in fact, the cultures that we call, using a strange metaphor, "self-colonizing" cultures?

> From the point of view of the modern globalization of the world, there are cultures which are not central enough, not timely and big enough in comparison to the "Great Nations". At the same time they are insufficiently alien, insufficiently distant and insufficiently backward, in contrast to the African tribes, for example. That's why, in their own troubled embryo, somewhere in the periphery of Civilization, they arise in the space of a generative doubt: *We are European, although perhaps not to a real extent . . . .*
>
> Aren't we then forced to describe the historical rhythm of such traumatic, self-colonizing cultures as a constant repetition and return? Maybe the constitutive traumas cannot be overcome and they will occur over and over again in the form of various historical symptoms - as a *Wiederkehr des Verdrängten* - a recurrence of the suppressed?
>
> Or maybe this is just a reminder that the history of Modernity could not be written as a composite history consisting of the histories of many separate nations (that means as histories of the Native and the Alien), but should be written (described, analyzed, criticized, etc.) globally, as a history of the entire process of asymmetrical modernization, transgressing the boundaries of the established historiographical narratives about states, cultures and ideologies? (115, 118)

The consequence of all this is that we, marginal, in-between nations, are like the poor Achilles in Zeno's paradox, it doesn't matter how swift-footed such latecomers might be in the chase, we are never going to catch up with the smart Western turtle, much less overtake it. And just as in Zeno's paradox, the reason is not something palpable or demonstrable in the "real world", but the very manner in which we compare the two contenders' performance. The premises and the method for comparing are "poisoned".

Comparison, by which we might hope to assert ourselves in relation to the greater cultures, is the Trojan horse. Maria Todorova denounced historians, anthropologists, economists, and political scientists for working with a "rigged" comparative concept, that of an origin of ideas or models (always Western) which can only be "pirated" and "copied" by sluggish Central and East European nations (Todorova 145 and passim). She also notices a commercial metaphoric imagination at work in comparisons between Western and Eastern accounts of nation-building (150). This comparative framework condemns such nations to an eternal life in the past, in a different time, constantly lagging behind and hopelessly aspiring towards modern models. The metaphor of the race is constitutive of modernity which is a temporal construct. One's modernity consists in leaving the others behind: the primitive and the obsolete, the tardy and underdeveloped nations etc. In this cultural race, those who get there first become the origin, the source, the genuine article, whereas the others are left to copy and mimic. Todorova proposes that within a Braudelian perspective of the *longue durée* one ought to abandon the obsession of genealogies and adopt the notion of relative synchronicity in spite of chronological precedence. This is predicated upon the anthropological observation that similarities exist even when cultures are not in immediate contact (149).

The way things still stand today, comparisons between Western and Eastern literatures, cultures or societies are posited in the mind of most comparatists as putting side by side the original and its various copies or derivatives. Under the circumstances, attributing value and ranking the Western original over an Eastern copy is the prearranged and unavoidable market outcome.

This brings me to the conclusion of Professor Damrosch's paper:

> The national and the global are by no means opposed spheres . . . . "European literature" is best understood as the product of a dynamic interplay of the international within the national, and the national within the regional. Seen in its transnational and global dimensions, European literature gains a new kind of distributed coherence, and becomes a newly vital force field of study . . .

"The national and the global are by no means opposed spheres." I would add "for some". Indeed, the global works miraculously *for some nations*, not for others. Let us see how this applies to the context of translations, an issue that is so germane to Professor Damrosch's presentation today. US readership seems to be chronically averse to foreign literature translations which, according to The New York Times, are known as the "three percent problem", meaning that translations never amount to more than three percent of the overall American book market (Rohter 1).

To return to Europe, here are some figures collected in 2007 by Rüdiger Wischenbart, a cultural policy consultant who worked as director of communication for the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001. In France, 60% of all translations into French come from English as opposed to 7% from German and 0.2% from Polish. In Germany, 62% of all translations into German come from English, 9% from French, and less than 3% from Italian, Spanish, or Dutch. This means that East European literatures put together can never hope to reach 1% of the total number of books that are translated in a Western country. Western books are almost all that is being translated, especially in Eastern European countries, with English literature counting for more than a half (the count can go as high as 70% in East European countries like Serbia). Under the circumstances, perhaps Professor Damrosch's closing statement "Seen in its transnational and global dimensions, European literature gains a new kind of distributed coherence . . ." might be better phrased as "European literature finds a new distribution for its old asymmetrical coherence". This is, of course, because the Western comparer remains a reluctant buyer of non-Western literary products even in a global environment.[2]

To conclude, while I have some reservations as to the empirical accuracy of Professor Damrosch's quoted claim, I believe his words have a deontic charge. He is, no doubt, hoping to rid comparative studies of their habitual nationalistic attitudes. I salute the renewed comparative framework proposed by Professor Damrosch and I admire his astute identification of markets as a critical site for the explanation of literary and cultural processes. His pressing towards a more open and flexible comparative perspective, one that may shake off the traditional West-centric bias, are both commendable and heartwarming. I only hope that he and other Western scholars will cast an equally sympathetic eye on East Europeans such as myself who cannot help being painfully

[2] The Romanian etymological pun is lost in translation: *Comparativistul vestic rămîne un cumpărător reținut.*

aware of the traumatic disproportions in the comparative perception of East and West. Such asymmetries are replicated and sometimes augmented in the global environment by the metaphorical arsenal that attends the comparative imagination.

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