

## The Permanent Crisis, Or Can, Could or Should Comparative Literary Studies Survive?: Between History, Theory and Area Studies

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‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of comparative literary studies.’ Such may be said, with only a little exaggeration, of the current state of the method and discipline. If we take into account that comparative literary studies only really came into existence at the time of positivism as well as the still surviving conception of literary history and evolutionary visions of genre studies later called by Paul van Tieghem “genologie” (a term hard to find in any French dictionary now), the development and contemporary state of literary criticism might be termed as a massive return to and, at the same time, reevaluation of positivist concepts.

This is confirmation of the fact that positivist literary criticism created basic methodological tools and visions and with these elaborated the problems of literariness and the poetic language of literary works while its post-postmodernist stage faces the challenge of the formation of new concepts of literary criticism via permanent returns and revaluations. Comparative literary studies (as we also have to take into consideration comparative biology, law or political studies) have had a long and colourful history. Unlike the above-mentioned disciplines, it represents three positions: an approach, a method and an autonomous discipline of literary scholarship or criticism with an elaborate system of terminology and methodological tools. While the nineteenth and twentieth century manifested three stages of development — the cultural historical, positivist and morphological/eidological/formalist/ poetological/immanent and, last but not least, receptionist /hermeneutical — the recent stage has been represented by the dialogue of cultures, area studies and the reevaluation of literary theory and history or, moreover, theory of literary history.

The characteristic feature of the contemporary stage of the development of comparative literary studies is deep self-reflection and, at the same time, a certain defensiveness and awareness of the uncertainty of the existence of comparative studies as such.

Comparison is a commonplace method and comparative methods are well-known in nearly all scientific disciplines. In the sphere of literary studies comparative literary studies has become a discipline that contains its own history, theory, terminology and research methods. This long history and elaborate theory and methodology make comparative studies in literary criticism a specific phenomenon.

Comparison in literary studies has been closely connected with the formation of the complex of European literatures, with the Mediterranean area, with ancient

Greek and Roman roots of European culture and, finally, with the domain of national literatures. Now it seems that the evolutionary circle has reached a certain point of return towards searching new syntheses. In the past, comparison often served an imitation of the classical models, as in the Renaissance and Neoclassicism. Comparison was played a role mainly in the world of free artistic values that communicated and interacted with one another. Comparison was possible in the world of medieval universalism, later in the Renaissance period and in the era of bourgeois revolutions and the Napoleonic wars that liquidated feudal isolation and social hierarchies, with the idea of a more-or-less united Europe and, of course, in the period of Romanticism with its escapism, on the one hand, and social revolt on the other.

Especially within the framework of Romanticism, famous works arose on the basis of comparison. The general idea of J.W. Goethe (1749–1832) expressed in his cultural travelogue *Italienische Reise* (1816–1817) focused on the impulses of various cultural strata that came into existence on the Apennine Peninsula, and in the notion of ‘world literature’ (*Weltliteratur*). Then there is the work of Germaine de Staël (Madame de Staël, 1766–1817), *De l’Allemagne* (1810); in Central Europe we find the fundamental study of Pavel Josef Šafárik (1795–1861), *Geschichte der slawischen Sprache und Literatur nach allen Mundarten* (1826); and probably the first comparative work by H. M. Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (1886).

While in the founding period and later in the years of the prevalent impact of formalism and immanent, autonomous methods there was a general idea of comparative studies as such, since the mid-20th century there has been a prevalent methodological dispersion.

The Czech tradition of comparative studies has been most associated with the works of A. N. Veselovsky (1838–1906), Jiří Polívka (1858–1933), Matija Murko (1861–1952) and, above all, Frank Wollman (1888–1969) on the one hand, and Prokop Haškovec (1876–1935), Václav Černý (1905–1987), František Chudoba (1878–1941) and Karel Štěpaník (1903–1970), on the other.

The presence of a sense of permanent crisis is a feature of literary scholarship across the board and so naturally concerns comparative literary studies.<sup>1</sup> But the crisis of comparative studies is largely connected with a crisis of methodology: positivist, morphological/eidological/immanent or receptionist. One of the recent tools used in a bid to overcome this impasse is that of area, or territorial, studies.

Over the past few decades, new non-Czech editions of the work of Frank Wollman have marked him as one of the leading figures of twentieth-century literary scholarship in general and of comparative studies in particular (to the chagrin of opponents, who have been shocked that his 80-year-old reflections might offer something topical to contemporary literary development).

Wollman’s ideas have proved progressive even in an era of multiculturalism — he declared the common roots of our culture (‘multiculturalism before multiculturalism’), a shared Mediterranean cradle of European civilization and culture. Thus he was against discrimination of Slavonic literatures and must have clashed with Prague German slavists of the interwar period who then, in the years of Nazi dictatorship, took control of the Slavonic Institute and its publishing activities.

As early as Wollman’s first book synthesis *The Literature of the Slavs* (*Slovesnost*

*Slovani*, 1928) which was published in German recently, Wollman's significance was clear as the creator of a new methodology that was gradually overcoming *Ideengeschichte* and tended towards an eidological, that is to say, morphological vision of literary evolution.<sup>2</sup> Especially in eidological similarity, Wollman sought a new, restituted but relative, unity of Slavonic literary community. The theoretical basis of his reflections led him to the view that the last simplified version of Slavonic literary community found itself in a state of permanent disintegration. At the same time, however, new common features appeared and chains of national literatures could be linked by this community even in the period of modernism, which can be found in the very conclusion of *The Literature of the Slavs*.

Partial syntheses, such as *Slovene Drama (Slovinské drama, 1924)*, were published outside the Czech cultural milieu — the Slovene editor confirmed Wollman's brilliant reputation by saying that he had discovered Slovene drama for the Slovenes themselves.<sup>3</sup> And there was the famous Slovak edition of folklore collections organized by Wollman and his pre-war Bratislava students.<sup>4</sup>

Some theorists today battle for Wollman's methodological heritage. The Slovak comparatist and expert in Italian studies Pavol Koprda in his article prepared for publishing in the *Slovak Review* in 2006, 'Frank Wollman through the Eyes of a Non-Slavist' (Frank Wollman očami neslavistu), rightly applies Wollman's methods to the sphere of non-Slavonic European literatures. But Koprda understands Wollman as a combative advocate of discriminated minor Slavonic literatures, although Wollman's strength lies more in his ability to detect the common sources of European culture in its Mediterranean complexity — all our literatures have similar or identical roots and composite aesthetic values.

Nevertheless, Pavol Koprda is a scholar who understands Wollman's conception in its depth and with its cultural background. And Wollman does not seek any privileges or protections for Slavonic literatures in the sense of fashionable 'positive discrimination'; he prefers to balance and relativize various stages of development of national literatures with their rise and falls.

Dionýz Ďurišin's position tended towards the boundaries of traditional comparative studies through the area, or territorial principle, with the help of 'interliterariness' and 'literary centrism'. Ivan Dorovský was the first Czech slavist and comparatist to become a member of Ďurišin's team — the others, including the author of this study, followed him later after his invitations in the wake of Ďurišin's famous trip to Brno in 1992 (when I spent nearly three hours in stormy debate with our Slovak guest) and several other meetings including the Congress of Slavists in Bratislava a year later.

Dorovský was one of the active members of the team who not only mastered its methodology and terminology, but also developed it. His discipline — Balkan studies in the widest sense — provided him with much material and contributed to his formulations that gave a more general character.

One of his recent studies *Slavonic Interliterary Correspondences and Differences (Slovanské meziliterární shody a rozdíly)* turns back to the Balkan cluster of problems<sup>5</sup>, but in a much wider context. It comprises his work of the past few years that the author divided into three sections: the first contains the studies devoted to the Balkans and to the problems of Southern Slavs; the second deals with general methodologi-

cal problems of interliterariness and traditional and 'new' comparative studies; and the third concerns the problems of South-Slavonic modernism and postmodernism. Dorovský's studies are — besides several others — among the most consistent but at the same time most creative continuations of the work of the late Dionýz Ďurišin.

The article, 'Language as a Characteristic Feature of a Nation' (*Jazyk jako znak národa*), is a polemic putting forward the view that the rise of standard Macedonian goes back further than the period after 1945. Dorovský convincingly argues that standard Macedonian was being formed gradually, not through any sociological or administrative impact, but naturally out of the depth of national life and linguistic development, especially in the work of Krste Misirkov (*On Macedonian Affairs*, 1903). The surfacing of a standard language accompanied the rise of the independent nation, a contention confirmed by the *Grammar of Standard Macedonian*, written by the Macedonian poet and linguist Blaže Koneski (1921–1993).

If we formulate, however, the question of whether language is an elementary and perhaps also determining feature of a nation in general, we come to a less definite conclusions. The nations of Byelorussian and, to a certain extent, Ukraine can serve as examples. They both have their standard languages going back into the past, but in practice they also use another language (Russian) or an interdialect (such as Ukrainian *surzhyk*). The characteristic feature of a nation is not mere language, but, above all, ethnos, territory and, mainly, independence as a state.

More interesting is the example of the Irish living in the Republic of Ireland. They regard themselves as a nation but rather than speak their Celtic language, use the Irish variety of English. Although Gaelic is sometimes spoken in western parts of the island and is obligatory at school, it is used less than the related Scottish Gaelic that is found in the western Scottish highlands, which are said to have been inhabited by the Irish themselves.

In contrast with this is Welsh, which is commonly spoken in Wales across all spheres of life and which benefits from strong positive discrimination. It, like Scottish Gaelic, is differentiated from Irish Gaelic by its enjoying significant, and very disproportionate in terms of its number of users, support from government and the media.

The contention that I take issue with is that of the 'representational principle', a view that may hold good for parliaments but which cannot apply to literature, the aesthetic value of which cannot be measured by strips of land or state policies. No canon can be defined by the representatives of national literatures of a given zone — the canon is supranational and supersedes any border. Art and aesthetics do not undergo any diktat and, if they do, it is only a temporary episode.

Positive discrimination cannot be a constant accompanying element of linguistic and literary evolution (although it may serve as temporary tool), since development has its own factors and drivers, including that of size. The big has an immediate advantage over the small, and nothing can be done about this. (Exceptions only confirm the basic rule.) In the case of literature, size is conferred, among other things, by the largeness of a nation, by the number of the people speaking the same language, and by the readers of the given language, as well as by historical development and its tragic events.

The case of Central Europe and of the Balkans evidently confirms this fact and one can only speculate on what the state of Serbian, Bulgarian or any other South-Slavonic

literature might be, had there been no Turkish oppression, or what might be the case for Czech literature if there had been no Hussite wars or Battle of the White Mountain.<sup>6</sup>

Commenting upon the volumes of the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*<sup>7</sup> we arrived — aside from the general positive evaluation of this scholarly attempt — at several critical conclusions that are prompted even by the title of the immense project: ‘literary cultures’ and ‘East-Central Europe’.

The first problem starts with the basic meaning of comparative literary studies and with a certain tension between supranational and national literary structures in their both diachronic and synchronic aspects, their partial and general aspects. One must be careful to take into account not only the contemporary, topical state of things — the contemporary and largely political status of literature — but also the diachronic structures that emerge from the deep well of mentalities and cultures of the past.

One must neither apply a rigidly historical approach that overlays past situations onto the current position, nor must one modernize the past. There is no scope for definite conclusions, but only for basic principles that oscillate between universal and specific points of view. Below I outline ten pointers or guidelines that I believe must be kept at the fore to illuminate the role and scope of comparative literary studies as it impinges on the region.

1. The various methods of comparative studies are useful for the study of Central Europe only if implementing the principles of area, territorial or zonal, cultural, religious and political studies but preserving the philological core of the entity as the key-factor.

2. It is necessary to study not only coincidences and similarities, but, above all, divergences and resistances that are often methodologically more prolific.

3. Central Europe is more a spiritual or cultural entity than a geopolitical one.

4. Comparative literary studies are of no use if used as a political tool. A relic of this thinking is the term *Ostmitteleuropa* (East Central Europe). Such an entity has never existed and is a purpose-built artifice such as, for example, the West and East Balkans.

5. Vestiges of the Cold War such as the assertion that Prague is situated in the East and Helsinki in the West are false and unhelpful — as is similarly the claim that Dresden lies in Central Europe while Cheb, on the western-most edge of the Czech Republic, is in East Central Europe.<sup>8</sup>

6. Key to understanding Central Europe are marginal undercurrents and outsiders. Thus one should look at developments that do not form the mainstream in Central European national literatures — these include religiously oriented and cultural or literary streams and currents such as Catholic Modernism, traditionalism, rural literature, utopian and anti-utopian literatures, conservatism of all strands, regressive trends, static literary structures, naive art, children’s literature and mass literature.

7. When studying the literature of Central Europe, a useful starting point is to compare the transformations of literary genres.

8. Beware the danger of the prevalent impact of shallow but now fashionable subjects and approaches, such as the pure focus on the internet, mass media, sexual deviations, social or domestic violence, gender studies, political correctness, and so on.

9. To study Central Europe also means to examine the role of so-called invaders, who have provided crucial outer stimuli. Thus the impacts of French, Anglo-American and Scandinavian cultures are all important, as, among other things, are the

problem of immigration and emigration, the impact of East Slavs in general and the Russians in particular, the impact of Balkan and Asian elements and the importance of non-Christian religions.

10. Avoid the exaggeration of Western cosmopolitan ideas of literature that march to the chant: 'The less national, the better'.

Đurišin's examination of the linguistic, cultural and ethnological aspect of comparative literature showed the need for a new, integrative discipline that could synthesize new developments in philology and various elements of social science. This led, finally, to the establishment of integrated genre typology and area studies in the Institute of Slavonic Studies at the Masaryk University, Brno.

While the methodological integrity of comparative studies is today a mere fiction, the importance of comparative studies manifested its strength in modern and post-modern constructions of the history of literature. Today it is not possible to write a history of any national literature outside a comparative framework. The construction of any history of literature is connected with comparative criteria and with the notion of literary streams and currents.

The general principle of periodization of the literary process starts with the search for a net of mutually permeating criteria. The usual method is a peculiar hierarchy of social, political and poetic and individual criteria. At the point of intersection of all these factors there are the streams and currents as a specific historical-aesthetic manifestation of the development of poetic forms.

The problem of so-called progress in literature has been put aside in the same way as that of development in society. Periodization obviously has paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects. The former is represented by the evolution of literature split into autonomous stages defined by the above-mentioned complex of criteria. The latter, as a rule, defines the horizontal boundaries of a literary process, for example, in the framework of a national literature. The problem is closely linked to that of the corpus of each national literature — what belongs to a certain national literature and what does not.

In Slavonic literatures in general, and in the literatures situated in the transitional areas that are Central Europe and the Balkans, it often means the polyliterariness or the presence of foreign or other literature or literatures in the area: in both the Lands of the Bohemian Crown and Slovenia there is the Old Church Slavonic 'cradle' — the entity of canonical texts written in different geographical varieties of Old Church Slavonic and the literature created by the representatives of Germanic tribes or Germans themselves from the Middle Ages.

The problem has been exacerbated by the permanent existence of one or more other literatures in the area of the major national literature and by their intersection, sometimes even permeation giving birth to a bi- or polyliterariness of the key authors. Sometimes it gives rise to a 'cordon sanitaire', the hermetic sealing and the international isolation of these literatures — this is partly the case of Czech and German literatures in certain periods of their development, especially towards the end of the 19th century and after the First World War. The oscillation between openness and isolation did much to shape the literary landscape, especially at the time we are interested in, the interwar period when the occurrence of the national tendencies was becoming obvious.

Another problem is linked to the intrinsic structures of a national literature. Of

course, a dominant role has been played by the literatures created in capitals and natural centres of national life. But due to historical developments, some literatures have been differentiated in greater detail according to their regional roots. For example, in the Czech cultural environment, German or Austro-German impacts and other facts connected with the cultural orientation of the 19th-century national revival complicate the picture. And then there are elements such as the immense impact of Russian literature during the whole of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

A crucial factor is also that of the changing area and political administrative framework that a national literature has developed in — in modern times in Central Europe, Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and the Russian and later Soviet influence and the split of both bigger countries after 1990. It is obvious that there are potential vestiges from those processes still present in the corpus of both national literatures – in both the positive and the negative sense.

The weak aspects of contemporary comparative studies are connected with their methodological dispersion and non-existent methodological memory. New comparativists are often forced to discover methods time and time again, and come to results, already revealed. A doctoral student of literature from the Masaryk University, Brno, once told me that they had discovered a powerful and innovative method called comparative literature in Paris during a longer study stay there. The entire Czech tradition of comparative studies and the work of its French and Russian predecessors was like an undiscovered land to the student.

One of the relevant aspects of comparative studies is linked to a so-called dialogue of cultures. In the past we were interested in it for various reasons. Besides the concrete example of contradictory Russo-Czech literary relations, it was the dialogue of cultures as such and later also different manifestations of some other phenomena: area studies and the literature of quasi-postmodernism, the prose of virtual authenticity and so on. In more general reflection we came to the conclusion that the dialogue of cultures has an intrinsically inconsistent nature. On the surface the dialogue may function as a positive means of communication, but at a deeper level it is also as a powerful strategic tool. It is a positive source of mutual understanding but, at the same time, a purely pragmatic medium of reaching individual goals.

The dialogue of cultures and area studies has been cultivated only recently, but goes back a long way under different names and labels. The primary goal is to return literature to its wider stream together with culture in general, sciences, arts in general, economy and economics, politics and political science and social custom. In other words: the dialogue has always had spatial and temporal dimensions: events in a concrete area have always focused on culture and the dialogue of cultures.<sup>9</sup>

What is even more important is the fact that area studies, together with the dialogue of cultures, can play an important role in the conception not only of history of literature, but also of the theory of literary history (Wellek, 1936). From this point of view, new publications, reacting to a certain absence of historicity in contemporary literary criticism, are a mere reflection of Wellek's attempts (Greenblatt, 1993, 2000, 2005; Bassler, 2001, Elbrich, 1999, Kelly, 2002, Papoušek–Tureček, 2005, Kako pisati..., 2003, *Writing Literary History*, 2006). In the framework of this return to

a diachronic approach, some new researchers in Russian studies of a younger generation have appeared (Tihanov, 2000, 2002, Pospíšil, 2006).

The contemporary status of comparative literary studies is, therefore, rather complicated; on the one hand, traditional comparative studies are newly revealed as inspiring in some respects and are regarded sometimes as predecessors of more modern approaches, such as area studies. On the other, there is a keen quest for further innovations. And, last but not least, comparative studies have appeared in the focus of application as a methodological tool when conceiving a new model of literary history or a history of any national literature that cannot be understood outside its comparative framework.

The answer to the question asked in the title of this paper — can, could or should comparative literary studies survive? — may therefore be: comparative literary studies may function as a loose net of historically tested approaches, single methods and visions, or as a link of a chain of more complex approaches connected with new subjects and problems of world literature, with the prevalence of certain genre clusters and with the dominant impact of mass literature in general. Moreover, and even paradoxically, because it reminds us of its position under positivism, comparative literary studies will become a constant part of traditional disciplines of literary scholarship, such as literary history or practical literary criticism. Comparative literary studies, might more than in the past, dissolve into other disciplines, or may function as a more-or-less compact discipline in a wider framework of cultural and area studies. In the everyday practice of literary criticism, comparative studies will not cease to exist and will function as a tool of useful comparison of various literary phenomena as any time in the past with no or little regard to innovative trends in literary theory and methodology.

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## PERMANENTNÍ KRIZE ANEB MŮŽE, MOHLA NEBO MĚLA BY LITERÁRNÍ KOMPARIATISTIKA PŘEŽÍT?

**Komparatistika. Krize komparatistiky. Porovnávání. Metodologie. Areálové studie. Frank Wollman. Dionýz Ďurišin.**

„Strašidlem literární komparatistiky“ z počátku článku je míněna pozice literární komparistiky dnes v situaci, kdy existuje v několika podobách včetně té, jež se zrodila v obdo-

bí pozitivismu. Literární komparatistika je současně přístup, metoda a autonomní disciplína literární vědy s rozvinutou soustavou terminologie a metodologie.

Jestliže v minulosti prošla kromě stadia pozitivismu také etapou psychologismu, imanentních metod, zejména formalismu a strukturalismu (i když právě čeští strukturalisté ji nejprve spíše ignorovali) a nakonec poststrukturalismu, zejména hermeneutiky a dekonstrukce, nyní je jejím charakteristickým rysem hluboká sebereflexe a současně jistá obranářská tendence a vědomí znejistění a nesamozřejmosti vlastní existence.

V struktuře literární vědy představuje disciplínu, jež obsahuje dějiny, teorii, terminologii i povahu výzkumné metody. Právě její dlouhá historie činí z ní disciplínu specifickou, jež vychází ze studia mediteránní oblasti, antiky a posléze z domény národních literatur. Zdá se, že právě nyní dosáhlo její vývojové paradigma jistého syntetického klimaxu. Srovnání bylo k dispozici hlavně ve světě volných interaktivních uměleckých hodnot, což bylo možné ve středověkém náboženském univerzalizmu nebo renesanci či v buržoazních revolucích včetně jejich napoleonského pokračování s vizí jednotné Evropy překonávající feudální izolacionismus. Tradice, které se v českém a slovenském kulturním prostoru utvářely a které směřovaly od wollmanovské eidologie k ěurišiovským zvláštním meziliterárním společenstvím, meziliterárnosti a meziliterárním centrismům, ale také ke Koprdovu tvořivému pokračování ěurišova a k Dorovského problému hodnoty a rovnosti v literatuře, odhalily nejen sílu, ale také slabší aspekty literární komparatistiky spjaté s její metodologickou disperzí a slabou metodologickou pamětí; noví komparatisté někdy pod jinými maskami objevují již objevené, jen je jinak pojmenovávají; proto otázka terminologie je tu více než jinde spjata s metodologií. Jeden z aspektů současné literární komparatistiky je spojen s tzv. dialogem kultur a areálovými studii, které rozšiřují, reagující na prostorové koncepty literární vědy, pozadí komparativních bádání. To přirozeně navazuje na Wellkův koncept tzv. teorie literární historie. Současný status literární komparatistiky je tedy poněkud komplikovaný: na jedné straně jsou tradiční komparativní metody odhalovány jako inspirativní (reedice Franka Wollmana, zájem o Matiju Murka, Karla Krejčího apod.) a chápány jako předchůdci nových přístupů (areál), na druhé straně je tu silná touha po radikálních inovacích. A, last but not least, literární komparatistika se tu jeví jako nástroj modelující pojetí literární historie a celé literární vědy překračující rámce striktně národních literatur. Odpověď na otázku z titulu může tedy znít také v tom smyslu, že literární komparatistika může fungovat jako volná síť historicky vyzkoušených přístupů nebo jako řetězec kompaktnějších postupů spojovaných se světovou literaturou a určitými žánry. A přímo paradoxně se může rozpouštět v jiných disciplínách, stát se jejich součástí stejně jako fungovat v rámci kulturologie nebo areálových studií, generální komparatistiky nebo zcela tradičně a takřka neinovativně, více či méně jako stabilní nástroj pragmatického či spíše praktického poznání vnitřně literárních i mimoliterárních souvislostí „bytí literatury“, jak fungovala předtím.

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