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Diachronic Asymmetry as a Comparativist Problem

Abstract

This article offers an unpopular comparativistic method that does not fit into the previously known conceptual frameworks of comparative literature. In order to be more clearly distinguished from the hermeneutic practices existing in comparativistics, a brief overview of some basic views on the subject of comparative literature has been made. Thus, it becomes clear that we not only ignore the contactological aspect, but in order to apply this approach, it is necessary to prove the absence of any form of direct or indirect interaction. In terms of typology, we apply the requirement of non-appropriation to a common cultural area or direction. The manifestations of typological aspects (e.g., similar motives or characteristics of the character model) are seen as a consequence and not as a prerequisite for carrying out a comparativistic procedure. The proposed model is illustrated by paralleling two diachronously different artistic worlds for which there is factual evidence that they meet the criteria set by us — those of François Villon and Karel Hynek Mácha. We only consider the proposed comparativistic modus as possible without ignoring others. On the contrary, the tendency to extend the field of comparative literature offers us new options for rethinking dialogism not only as a direct explanation of interliterary relationships, but also as a system of returning questions about human existence at different times and in different national contexts.

When, from the 1950s onwards, the crisis of comparative literature began to become increasingly publicised, it was not a question of abandoning this type of research, but of the conscious need to rethink the comparativistic object. Disputes, as is well known, continue today, maximising the amplitude of countervailing opinions: from its establishment as megamethodology to the ultimate negation of its grounds for existence. In cases where its place in literary science is still recognised as legitimate, the debate focuses on the contents of its research field: what type of phenomena to be studied, whether intertextuality should be integrated into it, whether it is possible for translatology and reception to acquire independent status, etc.

Of course, like any heuristic activity, comparative literature is dynamic. The restructuring global space of literature now implies not only a new type of intercultural relations, but also a new understanding of the possible intersections of different national literatures. The expansion of the intercultural horizon quite naturally and logically presupposes that new levels of comparability should be allowed in the field of comparative literature. It is in such a perspective that we will propose a hypothesis that will not refer to new manifestations of intercultural dialogue, but to a new look that involves rethinking facts from literary history, which have not been the object of comparativistics so far. Their absence in this case would prove quite natural, as their comparability could not be assumed according to the conceptual options available in comparative literature. The comparative approach that we will propose is directed towards the unexplained, either in diachronic or synchronous terms, attesting to the dialogic character of literary consciousness in a proven lack of both direct and mediated dialogue, both through the author's reception and through the literary historical context. We assume this approach with the conviction that the absence of obvious and easily recognizable testimonies in the textual zones known so far and mainly applied in comparativistics does not, however, mean a lack of justification in the hidden levels of intercultural communication and the general field in which ideas circulate with different cultural historical addresses. In this sense, our intentions are aimed at expanding the comparativistic research field towards the inclusion of such literary texts, for which there are certainly no certifiable intertextual relationships, as well as receptive reflexes, which would definitely guarantee the operation of some interactive mechanism. The contact modus of the direct participants included in the comparativistic approach should not only be ignored, but also

proven non-existent. This condition for carrying out the counterfactual approach we propose is of paramount importance and in itself requires solid argumentation. It is necessary, on the one hand, that the texts involved in this research procedure have a common basis for comparability, but on the other hand, they must belong to different cultural and historical contexts which in no way have entered a general communicative environment in order to ensure the absence of any author's and/or contextual dependencies, i.e., that such a type of comparativistic objects will be less involved in literary studies. Moreover these texts will require a significant in scope preliminary research work to establish the absence of any direct communicative act between the phenomena involved in the comparativistic object.

In order to define more clearly the conceptual framework of the proposed comparativistic approach, we consider it necessary, first of all, to set ourselves apart from some existing opinions, which are most often applied as a fundamental theoretical framework. By doing so, we aim not to discredit their grounds, but to outline more precisely the specific comparativistic modus we offer, which could possibly be considered possible. To this end, we will recall some principle formulations involved in the debate, which has problematised the boundaries of comparative literature since the mid-50s of the twentieth century. This debate puts forward different, even opposing arguments: on the one hand, the thesis about the comparativistic nature of knowledge in general is forwarded, and on the other, the lack of significant heuristic value in comparative studies is promoted.

However, before the debate began, the foundations on which comparative literature is based were laid by the so-called "French School". Paul van Tieghem, regarded as the first literary theorist, in *Comparative literature (La littérature comparée, 1931)*, citing the genetic link between comparative literature and literary history, defines as its specific research subject "influences received and applied" (Van Tieghem 1931: 13). He gives as an example the impossibility of thinking and understanding French literature, without considering the impact of Greco-Latin culture on its entire centuries-old development. Within the scope of comparative literature, Paul van Tieghem includes different types of interactions between works belonging to different national literatures, taking into account cases where the foreign context is present at the thematic level. Another specific task for comparative literature, according to the French scientist, is "to study closely similarities and differences" (Van Tieghem 1931: 14), i.e., phenomena of an intertextual nature, if we use the term introduced several decades later by Julia Kristeva. In this sense, even when requesting to address a typological problem, Van Tieghem again refers, in particular, to the one-way impact of previous literary texts, since it is likely that at this stage there is still no explanation for the so-called 'similarities' other than contactological argumentation. It is also important to note the emphasis that Van Tieghem puts on translation, seeing in it one of the manifestations of the interliterary dialogue. According to the French scientist, the broad field of literary comparativistics thus delineated itself as an autonomous scientific zone, which, unlike literary history, explores the diverse manifestations of interliterary influences and interactions. Van Tieghem therefore identifies comparativistics primarily as a science that explores contactological processes including the entire possible spectrum of interliterary interactions, which are subsequently identified as research sites of thematology, reception and translatology. In view of our previously stated criteria, it is clear that we are heading towards a field of research that stands outside the entire spectrum of manifestations of interliterary interactions, which Van Tieghem defines as the essence of comparative literature.

In the lively discussion that began in the 1950s, there are two opposing tendencies — both to extension and to the shrinking of the boundaries of comparativistics. One direction can be illustrated by René Étiemble's interest in non-European cultures, which he successfully pursued, especially after being elected Professor of Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne in 1955. In his book *Comparison is not reason. The crisis of comparative literature* (*Comparaison n'est pas raison. La crise de la littérature comparée*, 1963), which has become one of the major studies in comparativism, he returns to the problem of the relationship between general and comparative literary science: to overcome the Eurocentric nature of comparativistics and its opening to so-called world literature (but without expecting homogenisation of this concept), the need to examine the intersectional thematic and aesthetic zones of the various types of arts, of which the word is also a part. In fact, Étiemble argues that comparative literature is not limited to a mere heuristic operation of 'comparison' and, in that regard, his objection is directed against the concept itself.

The tendency towards the extension of comparative literature reflects both the understanding of the humanistic ethos of comparativistics and the process of the Mondialisation of contemporary culture. In this direction, comparativistics are no longer confined to the contactological framework of interliterary influences, as determined by Van Tieghem, but rather self-determined as a science related to general literary studies and to finding the answer to questions concerning all aspects of literarity. Jacques Derrida, for example, defines comparative literature as "the practice of establishing relations in all forms (comparison, citation, translation, inheritance, contamination, graft, misappropriation [détournement], etc.) in all figures and in all topics between different Literatures (different in their language, be it national or not, but also in their genres, their periods, etc.)" (Derrida 2008: 26). It is clear from Derrida's thought that the extension process risks blurring the boundaries identifying the right of comparative literature to have its own subject of study and discrediting the criteria that legitimise comparative literature as an independent scientific field. 'It is not illegitimate to speak of comparative literature and of practical theorems when a work borrows, utilises [met en œuvre], transforms, grafts, translates, or transfers an element coming from another genre or another type of work belonging to the same linguistic sphere and the same cultural sphere, assuming that these things have a strict identity. In the end, every relation between one work and another, between one corpus and another, can in all rigor come under the heading of literature compared [littérature compare, comparative literature] — compared to itself' — (Derrida 2008: 27). In order to prevent such a conceptual diffusion, in which the lexical meaning is transferred to a new terminological environment and begins to denote an overall methodological concept with its specific and yet complex conceptual structure, it seems appropriate to distinguish the concept of a juxtaposition in which the phenomena compared belong to different systems (national, linguistic), such as a subject of comparative literature, it needs to be distinguished from the concept generally applicable to each act of comparison, including phenomena belonging to the same national or linguistic area. Such a distinction would, on the one hand, preserve the terminological convention which has been imposed for almost a century, however disputed it may be (including as to whether it is correct to use the singular or plural in the designation of that scientific field, provided that phenomena from different literatures are commensurate). On the other hand, it would be quite clear that, when research sites do not leave the boundaries of a particular national language territory, they should not be considered as an object of comparativistics.

In contrast, an excessively broad understanding of comparativistics, the other extreme that was manifested at the same time, i.e., again in the 1950s–60s, narrowed its object by requiring a clear and strict definition of the comparativistic grounds. For example, the need to belong to the same direction or epoch of the compared objects is highlighted. A similar “constriction” of the research object is observed by Roman Jakobson, but not in terms of the requirement of synchronicity, but of a common linguistic genesis. In his extensive study, *The Kernel of Comparative Slavic Literature* (1953) Jakobson linked the comparativistic methodology with the conceptual paradigm of poststructuralism, and therefore privileged the structure of literary language as the basis of counterfactual studies. Jakobson specifically refers to Slavic comparativistics, which he mentions in the very title of his work, citing as its basis the kinship between the Slavic languages — according to him, “a common denominator unifies the various Slavic Literatures and distinguishes them from other Literatures” (Jakobson 1985: 1). Jakobson’s understanding of the linguistic kinship of the literatures involved as elements of the research object derives from the content of the concept of ‘comparative linguistics’, which, unlike comparator linguistics, studying languages irrespective of the existence of kinship or geographical proximity, is, by definition, linked to the study of kin languages. The reduction of comparative linguistics to the study of genetically related language systems explains why Jakobson transfers this conceptual algorithm to comparative literature. Of course, the reference to the linguistic factor as a basis for the comparability of literary texts put literary comparativistics within very narrow linguistic boundaries.

A relatively wider perimeter distinguishes the thematology, as it presupposes the study of certain thematic nuclei in both diachronous and synchronous terms. This type of research, however, risks turning into descriptive analysis. Thematology allows for the accumulation of observations of both a textual and contextual nature. We need to note once more that the method we propose would be applicable only if the phenomena compared belong to different not only national but also time-spatial contexts. In this sense, although it does not imply a special focus of attention, the context must be taken into account in order to prove different.

As a branch of thematology, we would also define an interesting and noteworthy concept, that of differential comparativism, which, according to Ute Heidmann, is aimed at “the heuristic potential of a certain type of comparison, which renounces the universalisation of literary and cultural phenomena in favour of differentiation based on their discursive dimension, in particular the utterance of the text” (Heidmann 2010: 27). What is particularly intriguing in this comparativistic approach is that it focuses not on similarities but on differences as well, which in a sense is relevant to our hypothesis. In this type of contrasting study, the phenomena included in the general research field are intended to reveal, above all, the uniqueness in the artistic treatment of migration characters or micro-subjects, since, as the Swiss researcher points out, it is the process of differentiation that accompanies evolution. In Heidmann’s opinion, however, what matters is the conscious nature of the dialogue, in which different languages, literatures and cultures are involved and which is driven away from tradition and exhibits resistance to authoritative texts and stereotypes (Heidmann 2017: 32). Although the methodological option we intend to offer excludes the conscious modus of intercultural dialogue and presents, as participants in it, authors whose completely independent orbits do not intersect at any point in their

personal existence, we consider such an approach to be justified. This method could be possible, especially if we strictly adhere to a logical thread of reasoning and the proposed idea proves productive and applicable to supposedly commensurate phenomena.

A brief overview of the two diametrically opposed conceptual directions in which comparative literary science develops, urgently requires us to clarify our principal position on its research subject. First, our hypothesis is based on our understanding that the typology of literary processes should not be limited to the requirement of diachronic or synchronic similarity. The reason for comparison can be found not in the diachronic correspondence of the phenomena in question, but in the worldview expressed by similar poetics. In this sense, of particular interest for us are the possibilities for conceptual and discourse commensurability of works belonging to different, not only national, but also historical contexts. This diachronic asymmetry between similarities verifiable by artistic texts necessarily goes beyond the thematic level, which could in certain cases also possess intertextual elements. Ignoring the thematic approach is necessary because it presupposes that the texts involved in the comparativistic object should already be regarded as literary reflections of an active generating unit within the cultural space. Hence the second important consideration for us: this specific type of comparing procedure excludes any conscious reference (receptive or intertextual) to the texts under consideration. Figuratively speaking, let us imagine two (or more) strangers who speak different languages but whose voices sound in sync. This is also the phenomenon that most sustains our sense of the enigmatic nature of art.

We will try to apply the hypothesis of the existence of commensurate texts or phenomena, for which at first glance it would be difficult to find comparativistic arguments, to two poets who are separated by impassable boundaries — François Villon and Karel Hynek Mácha. There is a set of factors that give us reason to believe that the basic conditions for conducting such a comparativistic analysis are met, which should check whether cultural historical asymmetry and the lack of interliterary and even interlingual communication would prevent the similarity between the French and the Czech poet. If we apply the term contrastive linguistics, meaning an area that explores non-native and geographically or otherwise unrelated languages, we would clearly have reason to define this type of literary comparativistics as contrasting. In this case, however, it is important to add both diachronic asymmetry and indirect dialogue to this definition.

The diachronic asymmetry between the Late Middle Ages of Villon and Mácha's Romanticism problematises the stereotypical notion of the ongoing historical time, whose linear unidirection has repeatedly provided teleological arguments. When we say that at first glance there is no basis for comparison, we also mean the absence of a mediating communicative environment between the French late Middle Ages and Czech Romanticism. The correspondence between the French and the Czech poet seems all the more shocking given that Macha neither used French nor was there any reason to suppose that Villon's name was known to him, since it was the French romantics who discovered this forgotten poet throughout the centuries. In 1844, i.e., only after the death of Mácha, Théophile Gautier in his collection of essays *The Grotesques*, in his first line for Villon, pointed out his unpopularity, which gave rise to his assuming the role of the inspired discoverer of Villon's "originality and eccentricity" (Gautier 1910: 15). "His poetry for a long time goes unnoticed or undeservedly neglected," he says, but it is in it that the real pearls lie. And it is not

surprising that Romanticism, with its tendency to look into the impenetrable depths of the traumatised human soul, discovers Villon — he remains alien and misunderstood because of the “internal infinity of his individual personality” in the words of Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1965: 52, subs. a.). It is important to emphasize that, independent of the fact that Villon’s writings were published by a Renaissance poet Clément Marot in 1553, it is precisely Romanticism that penetrates the essence of Villon’s poetic genius and its relevance to the philosophy of melancholy.

Similarly, Karel Hynek Mácha is perceived in his Czech context — it took decades for his astonishing poem *May* to be recognised as a grand literary work that marked the beginning of Czech modern poetry. Rejected by their times, both Villon and Mácha were adequately appreciated only by subsequent literary generations, which, in turn, proved to be one of the essential reasons for both being labelled as first cursed poets in their national contexts. Unpragmatic, antisocial, socially unreliable, both poets turn their poetry into a candid expression of their inconsolable insights into being, identifying themselves with the image of the unfortunate, the exile, the foreigner, the criminal. Gautier’s words for Villon are also adequate for Mácha: “[...] it is a bitter disenchantment, the sad, deep glance cast upon things of this world, the regret for the past, the feeling for what is beautiful and good which survives the apparent degradation, the loss of all illusion, and the disparate melancholy which is the result thereof” (Gautier 1910: 30). Given the dramatic and creative fate of both poets and their understanding of poetry as truth and revelation, it is natural to expect a similar poetic tonality that associates love with death. The motive of inevitable death, which Simeon Hadzhikosev highlights as leading in the poetry of Villon (Hadzhikosev 2000: 227), is obsessively present in the entire work of Mácha. Sadness, physical and emotional impotence, black colours, feelings of abandonment and loneliness, even the stillness of the body — all elements of the auto-presentation of the lyrical subject are in the register of melancholy, which we understand not so much as an individual mentality or emotional state, but as a worldview. The consonance thus outlined contains abundant textual evidence, some of which has already been interpreted in an article devoted to this topic (see Cholakova 2016).

The diachronic asymmetry we have highlighted here would not be essential if it were not accompanied by the absence of any contactological influences and effects. There is rather a typology which, however, reveals commensurate phenomena in a more specific context than that based on a common affiliation to an era, a direction, a cultural area (e.g., Balkan, Slavic, Central Europe, etc.) or even a thematic matrix.

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