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During the last few years, there have been numerous discussions about the state of the discipline of comparative literature and its institutional inertia. The latter seems to be associated with the fact that, despite comparatists' tendency to emphasize literature's openness to the complex world-system that has been defining our economic and geopolitical reality, the established centre (*i.e.* the Anglophone system) still owns institutional and epistemological hegemony over this area of literary studies. In other words, comparative literature and its actual practices (postcolonialism, cultural studies, translation studies, Digital Humanities, etc.) have failed to fully facilitate the access of other cultural systems to the global capitalist world literature. In this context, an attempt to diagnose the state of this area of literary studies in other regions that are outside the main Western power-centres is salutary. This is the proposal of the recent volume edited by Nikol Dziub and Frédérique Tудоire-Surlapierre, *Comparative Literature in Europe. Challenges and Perspectives*.

Despite its focus on European space, the volume is not promoting a Eurocentric perspective. Instead, it aims for a deconstruction of the myth of a unitary and strictly hierarchized European macroculture. As it can be seen from the selection of case studies, the volume's *foci* of interest lay in what one may call the "problematic" and controversial regions of the continent. Thus, cultures that have undergone the process of decolonization (both past colonizers and colonies), "buffer"-countries situated at the contact between other major nation-states and the countries that had developed inside the Eastern Bloc are brought into discussion. Each contributor was invited to present a survey of the institutional and methodological aspects of the discipline of comparative literature in their country, while analysing the history of this domain in that particular national space. The

concluding perspective is extremely heterogenous. There are countries that have developed a strong institutional basis for comparative literary studies and others in which comparative literature is a weakening field, while an obvious pattern for these discrepancies cannot be observed. However, what can be abstracted from all the contributions is what Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre's affirms in the *Theoretical Introduction* of the book: "there is a correlation between *comparison* and *nation* (or at least country, European territory)" (12). Each nation's particular relationship to the field of comparative literature has an ideological and political (if not ethical) undertone, dependant on the historical context.

Paradoxically, the international and comparative perspective on literature appears in the process of each country building its own national identity. This is a common issue in the 19th century, in the context of the Herderian revolution and the awakening of the nations. The fact that "Finnish literature was born from a comparison" (81) is exemplary, given the fact that the publishing of the *Kalevala* in 1835 was determined by a need to enter the international cultural competition with a literary work that is comparable to the canonical European epic poems. Another example is that of Ukraine and Mykhailo Drahomanov's comparative literary studies on the relationship between Slavic and non-Russian literatures, that attempt to emphasize "a continuum between West and East, between Europe and Asia, in order to reduce Russian cultural power" (75). This is also the case with countries that emerged from the USSR. The contribution regarding post-Soviet Estonia shows that there had been a tendency to compare local literature to "phenomena observed in another literature or in the global literary field" (165), in order to create an organicist image that mirrors Western culture. In these contexts, it can be observed that the comparative method has a clear ideological function. By comparing themselves to other literatures, certain cultural spaces are positioning themselves in the centre-periphery power structure, turning towards a certain geopolitical pole or opposing another. This is usually the principle by which a comparative perspective has entered a national space.

However, the latest methodological and theoretical acquisitions in comparative literature are related to the need of deconstructing the inherently hierarchical view on world literature. The aim has been to democratise the area of study, so as to obtain a more ample and veridic perspective on the way literature works and circulates in a transnational polysystem. The challenges and

problematizations brought up by all the contributions in *Comparative Literature in Europe* are raising awareness about this objective and its materialisation in the academic sphere. For a better understanding of the nature of each country's stance on comparative literature, it is useful to systematize the case studies in four different categories. The first one is that of the former major colonial empires, Spain and Portugal. The second one represents the newly-formed postcolonial societies (in this volume, Ireland). The third one is that of cross-cultural and multilingual states; while the fourth englobes the post-Soviet countries.

In the case of the first category, there can be observed two complementary attitudes toward comparative literature: one that is embracing comparative studies for their legitimization of the nation's and its ex-colonies' literatures as world literature and another that is reluctant to comparative literature's inclination to decentre national literatures. The first case is that of Portugal, for which there have been two important directions of comparatism: the "Iberian perspective" of Fidelino de Figueiredo and the "transatlantic perspective," which explores "supranational readings" (41) of Latin-American literature. This shows the Latinocentric interest towards Iberic and Latin-American literatures of Portuguese comparatists. The second case is that of Spain. The ideology of Hispanism and the hegemony of the Spanish-Castilian language have shaped the Spanish cultural life inasmuch as other intranational literatures and cultures (like the Catalan, Basque, Andalusian or Galician ones) have been diminished. The centripetal linguistic standard in Spain is related to the loss of Spanish colonies at the end of the 19th century. While Hispanism as an academic field is becoming obsolete because of the monopole of the Spanish-Castilian culture, a comparative approach on this subject does not exist yet. César Domínguez argues for the need of comparative literature within this controversial context, which would subsequently lead to "a heteroglossic redefinition of Hispanism, no longer restricted to Peninsularism and Latinamericanism" (36).

In "the postcolonial and bilingual context" of Ireland (51), comparative literature as an academic discipline has been complicated by its extremely recent emergence as an official discipline in 2004 (therefore, by the lack of a local comparative tradition) and, more significantly, by the relationship between the two official languages (English and Irish) on the institutional level. Given the fact that comparative literature is taught in English, it is understandable why academic performance in this area is affected by the need to protect Irish from the dominance

of English after Ireland gained independence. Cultural protectionism is a symptom of postcolonial societies. The drawback of this language issue is the fact that comparative literature degrees are assimilated into English departments, or, in the terms of Brigitte Le Juez, “as they are in the UK” (58). The transnational focus of comparative literature is affected by this Anglocentric distribution of the discipline within the academic curricula. The problem is not related to issues of accessibility or lack of interest towards comparative studies but to the political (and ethical) position of the English-speaking local comparatists.

The third category includes countries that are situated in the contact zone between other major literary spheres, where multilingualism and multiculturalism play a major role in the way literary studies function on an institutional level. It can be observed that in these states there are two institutional positions on comparative literature: either comparative literature is a major department in the universities across the given country or at least it is a theoretically and methodologically updated field of practice, given the influence of the cultural zones it is related to, or there is a fundamental lack of initiative towards comparative studies because of the “minor” status the country has in relationship to the centres. Austria and Finland belong to the first type. The Austrian approach to comparison as an academic practice denotes the beneficial influence of two important centres for comparative literature: one that is Slavic and Central-European, focused on literary theory, and specific to the literary departments in Innsbruck, and another that has a more Westernized perspective, is interested in socio-literary studies, and is found at the University of Vienna. The “international orientation” (117) and the dialogue between the two spheres have offered comparative literature a strong position.

The Finnish case is different, because “comparative literature and the comparative method have been present in literary studies in Finland, but without having a strong disciplinary status” (86). However, Harri Veivo shows that, despite it not being institutionally established, the comparative method is fundamental to the way literature is perceived by scholars. Finnish textbooks are up to date with all the methodologies and theories in the international comparative field, from Russian formalism and Digital Humanities to postcolonialism and world literature. The same cannot be said about Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. All the contributors emphasize the collective preconception that these countries must have a comparative perspective towards culture since all of them belong to several cultural and

linguistical spheres at the same time. In reality, comparative literature is a weakened field in these countries because of numerous factors. Some are the separation between linguistic communities (such as in Switzerland) and the effect of “the historic and aesthetic normativity of the centres” (113). The canons hold such an influence that most comparative studies are focused on showing only the similarities between major literatures and the “satellite” ones, bringing the discipline to a dead end.

The category of post-Soviet countries is the vastest and the most surprising. First of all, it deconstructs the infantilized image of the Central- and East-European post-communist states. As it can be seen from the contributions, there seems to be a growing preference towards the discipline of comparative literature all across the former Eastern Bloc, and the outcome has been a strong institutional position in the national universities and a significant interest in the domain of literary research. For example, the 2000s brought Ukraine a collective academic attempt to “promote a polycentric system, and to take into consideration not only the political connexions, but also the non-political links between the objects of study” (76). In a similar key, Romania’s latest orientation towards translation as a means of expanding its national literary horizons and upgrading the local scholars’ theoretical grasp on literature is stressed by Mihaela Ursa. The object of study for Estonian comparatists is turning out to be not the traditional comparison between specific cultures, but the “complex intercultural exchanges, relations and networks” (169) of the literary. Macedonia has been going through a “Spatial Turn” (216), given its interest in geocritical explorations.

It seems like comparative literature is developing a polysystemic approach to its object of study in post-Soviet countries. Secondly, each case emphasizes the way in which comparative literature managed to maintain its status as a discipline during the communist period, in spite of the “anti-bourgeois and anti-cosmopolitanism propaganda” (75) of the USSR. For example, while the political system tried to establish the monopole of Soviet culture in Ukraine, local researchers tried to evade censorship by studying imagological exchanges between Ukrainian, Western, and Eastern literatures. Similarly, Lithuanian scholars rejected the exaggeration of Soviet influences on national literary works in comparative studies and “shifted the focus of comparison to the West” (178). Thirdly, it is important to note that not all manifestations of comparative literature in socialist countries were determined by a

political compromise. In some cases, local comparatists managed to develop their own methodologies and theories on the matter. This is mostly seen in the case of Central-European socialist states. The Slovak comparatist and literary theorist Dionýz Ďurišin developed a systemic approach towards comparative literature while influenced by Russian formalism and structuralism. For this reason, it is clear why the Slovak tradition of comparatism is deeply enrooted in local literary research.

More than offering an indexation of institutes, departments, syllabi, and degrees in the field of comparative studies in each case study, the essays in *Comparative Literature in Europe* offer a panoramic view of how the discipline has been disseminated in Europe, the political and ideological issues related to its status, as well as its current challenges. Given their atomized nature (since they are focusing on separate countries and they lack a macronational perspective), they cannot fully explain the factors that led to the current state of the discipline. However, they point out several aspects that should be taken into consideration in any discussion about the international usage of comparatism.