

Corin BRAGA, *Archétypologie postmoderne. D'Œdipe à Umberto Eco*, Honoré Champion, 2019, ISBN 978-2-7453-5133-3, 444 p.

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With its numerous spheres of inquiry and somewhat nebulous borders, comparative literature is not only a reflection on literature, but also an autoscopic discourse, constantly interrogating its own aims, methods and practices. This “epistemological placelessness” (Emily Apter 1995) makes the comparatist a kind of nomad, a trespasser, a “researcher-traveler” (Corin Braga 2006) with no fixed, predetermined position or specialization. His epistemic and methodological travels – and, sometimes, (mis)adventures – make comparative literature a somewhat experimental and transdisciplinary “art.” While the condition of “visiting scientist in alien worlds” (Corin Braga 2006) can prove uncomfortable and precarious at times, it can also allow for a subtler and more nuanced understanding of the connections, influences and relations between different representations, ideas or discourses.

Navigating such uncertain and perilous epistemic waters requires not only a certain speculative creativeness and freedom, but also a solid methodological framework. Thus, if “the aim of comparatism (or one of its aims) is the research and exposure of invariants, of cultural archetypes, of myths and symbols, of recurrent characters and scenarios” (Corin Blaga 2006), a suitable approach should favor an all-encompassing, multi-faceted and in depth analysis of all these invariants and of their specific dynamics. As a comparatist method, “archetypology,” argues Corin Braga, can still offer the necessary tools for such a complex, broad and cross-disciplinary understanding of cultural phenomena.

However, the current intellectual climate, shaped – or maybe eroded – by a rather iconoclastic spirit, deeply skeptical regarding the notion of archetype in general, seems like an unlikely (if not impossible) ally in this generous theoretical endeavor. Is it

possible to reconcile the deconstructivist zeal, questioning precisely the usage and epistemic relevance of archetypes, with “archetypology”? Or, in other terms, can we still legitimately use the notion of archetype, while fully acknowledging the postmodern critique of the “grand narratives”? Corin Braga’s most recent book, *Archétypologie postmoderne. D’Œdipe à Umberto Eco*, is trying to convincingly meet this challenge, arguing in favor of a comparatist approach that would integrate both archetypology and the postmodern, disenchanting outlook.

As the major part of the studies included in the volume are versions of articles or book chapters already published elsewhere – evidence of the laborious reflection dedicated to the subject over the years –, the book could be considered at first as a comprehensive summary of all these research efforts. Yet, Corin Braga’s analysis exceeds the boundaries of a mere scholarly recapitulation and exercise (compelling as it may be) and aims at a broader understanding of “archetypology.” Its aim is the “attempt to offer a new perspective on archetypes, in all their acceptations, thus allowing us to fully make use of their resources without ever having to consider the question of their validity” (54).

The first chapter, titled “L’archétypocritique à l’âge postmoderne” [“The archetypocritique in the postmodern age”], is the theoretical centerpiece of the volume and will also be the focal point of our analysis, as it introduces the main concepts and the general methodological framework.

Corin Braga proposes a twofold approach: on one hand, a historical overview of the concept of “archetype,” revealing the term’s various transformations and avatars and, on the other, a reflection regarding its recuperation as a valid operational notion nowadays.

Three main definitions of the “archetype” are considered, each peculiar to a certain historical period and, also, to a certain methodological perspective. The first is the “metaphysical” (or ontological) one, rather specific to ancient philosophy. Archetypes were conceived as essential models – either transcendent or immanent – found at the very basis of existence, while the actual phenomenal world, ontologically impoverished by comparison, was a mere degradation or imitation of these “Ideas” (if we were to use the Platonic terminology).

Doubts regarding the objective existence of invariants, already announced by the scholastic quarrels over the nature of universals, led to a gradual change in accent from the metaphysical dimension to the psychological (or anthropological) one. Instead of ontological essences or divine ideas, archetypes became cognitive models or aprioric categories structuring the subject's perceptions, understanding and judgments. Cassirer's "symbolic forms," inspired by the Kantian philosophy, or Carl Jung's "primordial images" and "collective unconscious" are emblematic for this psychological turn in the definition of archetypes. Moreover, by using notions specific to the Jungian or the psychoanalytical discourse, theorists like Gaston Bachelard or Gilbert Durand further explored the "anthropological structures" of the imaginary, revealing the way symbols, ideas, myths and representations evolve and mutate over time, and in different local contexts. Under their different guises, archetypes were understood as innate, complex and dynamic forms organizing the psyche's activities, both at an individual and at a collective level.

The third definition of the archetype discussed by Corin Braga is the cultural (or philological) one, rather linked to various XXth century archetypological and comparatist approaches. Archetypes were conceived as distinct phenomena, not separable from their actual manifestations in art, literature, religion or myth. The question regarding the actual existence of archetypes – be it psychological or metaphysical – was thus suspended (by a sort of *epoché*), in favor of a more prudent approach. As Corin Braga points out, the notion of archetype "no longer describes the psychical function responsible for the generation of images, but designates the actual corpus of images in the materiality provided to them by their artistic and discursive support" (22). From a literary point of view, the cultural turn was instrumental in articulating the idea of comparative literature as a "new humanism," based on a set of "core common values" (24). Theorists like Adrian Marino or Northrop Frye, for instance, embraced this comparatist and universalist view, arguing in favor of a general science of literature that would reveal, in a totalizing panorama of human culture, all the common, recurrent types, invariants and themes.

While the notion of archetype has had a long and rich history, often coextensive with the evolution of philosophy, psychology or literature, it has not been impermeable

to critical scrutiny. The decline of metaphysics, for example, precipitated by Nietzsche's corrosive criticism and completed by the "postmodern philosophers," almost completely voided the idea of metaphysical archetypes. At the same time, the psychological and anthropological archetypes, as well as the notion of collective unconscious, were denounced as simple speculative fabrications, with no real basis and no actual scientific relevance. Moreover, the morphological analyses, trying to uncover "typologies" specific to certain cultures or groups, were met with suspicion for their dangerous ideological implications.

In spite of all the critics and debates, the idea of "behavioral mechanisms," of innate categories, still has traction in various contemporary scientific discourses – evolutionary psychology, neurosciences, ethology etc. Thus, the "battle for the archetype" has not been settled yet. For instance, Gilbert Durand's archetypology, founded on the three dominant reflexes – postural, digestive, and sexual – is compatible with researches regarding the pre-conceptual structures and instinctual patterns in evolutionary psychology.

However, as Corin Braga points out, comparative literature is not directly concerned with all these disputes, as "we can very well acknowledge the existence of recurrent themes in mythology, literature or the arts, without ever having to make a decision about their metaphysical or psychological foundations" (53). From this point of view, working with the philological (or cultural) definition of the archetype is an essential part in restoring the notion's epistemic legitimacy and operational value.

Such a methodological approach would also have to assume a more prudent, distanced and nuanced epistemic positioning, recognizing the relative nature of all interpretive models. In other words, archetypes – and, with them, the different archetypal hermeneutics – are no longer regarded as "ultimate explanations of reality" but as descriptive scenarios or narratives, different ways of representing (and making sense) of the physical and human world (55).

Being no longer concerned with their truth value, the comparatist could freely study images, symbols, texts, ideas or myths as specific cultural expressions, enacting a certain world-view or experience. This way – and despite their contested epistemic status – the ontological and psychological significations could be recuperated as parts of

a three-fold “archetypocritical” interpretive device, with the cultural approach as basis. The main philological, thematic or aesthetic analyses would thus be amplified by two supplementary “filters” (or layers) – one revealing the metaphysical view of the world at play in the “author’s *Weltbild*,” and the other aiming to decipher its underlining “psychological mechanisms” (66).

Corin Braga’s “archetypocritique” is a three-dimensional hermeneutical device that would not omit or disregard the “abyssal” or phantasmal dimensions of the human spirit. Echoing in a sense Gilbert Durand’s call for a new, “hermetic humanism, integrating and comprehensive” (33), Corin Braga’s consistent defense of archetypology fully acknowledges at the same time the postmodern disenchantment with the “grand narratives” and its lessons. His multi-faceted analysis of the archetype is not a simple call for its revival, but a reminder and a safeguard against the perils of an uncritical and unidirectional rehabilitation.

“The archetypocritique,” concludes the author, “could be a very effective hermeneutical instrument, provided we don’t forget its role as an instrument, as an optical device, as an intellectual construction: a game, detached and relativistic, combining several perspectives on the world and the soul” (68).

Having the theoretical stage already set and its main coordinates defined, the next chapters illustrate the archetypocritical method of interpretation by applying it to a broad selection of texts: from the Greek tragedies to Umberto Eco’s postmodern novels, thus covering the main European cultural paradigms. Strongly infused with Jungian notions and also relying on Gilbert Durand’s anthropological and mythocritical approaches, Corin Braga’s compelling analyses draw a complex, detailed and dynamic picture of the “archetype.”

The first studies – “*Œdipe, entre mythanalyse et psychocritique*” [“Oedipus, between mythanalysis and psychocritique”] and “*Les Bacchantes et le palimpseste de la religion greque*” [“*The Bacchae* and the palimpsest of the Greek religion”] – propose a re-reading of two ancient legends, starting from the two tragedies written by Sophocles and Euripides. At a mythocritical level, Braga uncovers the various cultural, religious and mythical layers present in the stories, revealing their successive (mis)readings, appropriations and reconfigurations. One of the main gains of this type of analysis is the

fact that it shows that, rather than fixed, abstract or definitive universals, “archetypes” are, in fact, historically and locally determined, part of a continuous (and open) process of articulation, confrontation, and of cross-cultural, cross-historical translation.

Equally important are the psychocritical interpretations dedicated to the story of Oedipus or to the mythological figure of Dionysus. Inspired by Jung’s “analytical psychology” and seeing big, universal narratives as manifestations or expressions of general ontogenetic or phylogenetic trajectories of the libido (72), Corin Braga argues that Oedipus’ road to Thebes and its tragic conclusion should not be interpreted only through narrow psychoanalytical lenses. While his path was, indeed, a regression, invested by an unconscious desire to revert to a previous, infantile stage, it was also a path to knowledge of oneself, a reconnection to the hidden sources of life. As for Jung, for Corin Braga regression is part and parcel of the larger process of individuation, not only a malign expression of the “death drive.” The confrontation with the “shadow,” with the inner, hidden double also signifies the possibility of rebirth, of a new consciousness, fully aware (and in possession) of its shadow twin.

The next chapter tries to compare two types of stories about the voyages in the “other world”: the Irish *fisi*, mainly spiritual and ecstatic, and the descents into Saint Patrick’s cave, inspired by the Christian tradition. The various morphological resemblances and differences between the two types of stories are indicative for the process of assimilation of the local Celtic themes by the Christian narratives.

Another study, inspired by Calderon de la Barca’s play *Life is a dream*, explores the emergence of baroque theater, topically focused on ontological disillusionment. The author connects this baroque disenchantment with the confrontation between two “grand metanarratives”: the hermetic Renaissance and the austere, iconoclastic and hostile ideology of the Counter-Reformation; or, in other terms, between the magical thinking of the Renaissance and the rationalistic and repressive gaze of the catholic reaction. Another spectacular return of the magical, the nocturnal, the hidden and the hermetic came with the Romanticism. This “modern Renaissance” fully embraced and explored themes such as the unconscious, the shadow and the double, as showed by Braga in “*Eidola. Images du double au XIXe siècle*” [*Eidola. Images of the double in the 19th century*].

Dedicated to Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, the next chapter reflects on the profound crisis that announced the end of the "old Europe" during "La Belle Époque," a period marked by the rejection of the dominant, patriarchal, rationalist order and the spread of discourses that decried the decadent, fragmented and disenchanting social ethos.

A quite interesting analysis included in the volume is devoted to the interwar Romanian novel and the way it portrays romantic love. The heroes' isolation, inadequacy and delusions are interpreted as a symptom of a wider, societal failure at grasping (and relating to) reality. The devastating modern doubt regarding the transcendental foundations of the world, contends the author, is the origin of this sentiment of loss and failure that announces a change in the cultural and societal outlook – from a consistent, grounded, reliable reality to a fragmented, contradictory, and absurd one.

The last part discusses Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before* and the way the novel revives, from a contemporary, postmodern perspective, a world-view which is specific to another conflicting period – the age of explorations –, imbued with both magic thinking and religious fervour. Similar to the other chapters, the study has a mythocritical part, analysing the various representations of the "terrestrial paradise" represented in the story, and a psychocritical one, inspired by Carl Jung's archetypology. Thus, Roberto's travels and (mis)adventures can be read as an initiatic travel towards the origins of life, inspired by the dream of rebirth, a regressive path leading to the confrontation (and the acceptance) of his evil double.

All in all, Corin Braga's volume is an excellent example of a thorough and nuanced comparatist approach. One of its main merits is precisely the convincing illustration of comparatism as an interpretive practice. At the same time, the theoretical framework proposed is not only conceptually solid but, first and foremost, operational. However, while the stated aim of the book is to acknowledge the "postmodern" skepticism as an integral element of the new archetypal critique – and maybe as a safeguard against "the suspect ideology of archetypes" (Jacques Le Goff cited by Braga, 32) or against simplistic, essentialist interpretations – some statements still seem to implicitly suggest an insurmountable dichotomy between the two approaches and

outlooks. An ending chapter, summing up the main ideas and formulating some conclusions, might have brought a plus of clarity to the matter.

If the “archetype” remains a contested notion nowadays, relying on it and recuperating it as the cornerstone a new “archetypocritique” is more than an audacious theoretical endeavor. In a sense, the quest for the “archetype” has all the elements of a perilous (and adventurous) return towards a hidden and disregarded origin, proving to be either a death-trap or the cradle of a new birth. Maybe this is how we should interpret the missing conclusion – the journey is still underway and its outcome still ambiguous. Still, Corin Braga’s book succeeds in one crucial aspect: it makes a compelling and generous case for the re-enchantment of comparatist theory and practice.