PURDUE UNIVERSITY

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 8 (2006) Issue 1 Article 7

US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature

Letitia Guran
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Guran, Letitia. "US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.1 (2006): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1295>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.
The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1134 times as of 06/01/15. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

PURDUE UNIVERSITY UNIVERSITY PRESS <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series.* Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Langua-ge Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monog-raph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

***CLCWeb* Volume 8 Issue 1 (March 2006) Article 7**
Letitia Guran,
"US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/7>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.1 (2006)
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/>

Abstract: In her paper, "US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature," Letitia Guran begins with a short overview of the state of the discipline of comparative literature based on the *ACLA Report 2003* (ACLA: American Comparative Literature Assiociation) by Haun Saussy and its responses in order to focus on a recent comparative project of large dimensions, the ICLA: International Comparative Literature Association project *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, organized and its volumes edited by Marcel Cornis Pope and John Neubauer. The thesis of Guran's paper is that there are many alternatives to the continuous -- and current -- crisis of comparative literature and that the said ICLA project provides one of such alternative. By engaging in a trans-national, multicultural, and postcolonial perspective, the first two volumes of the *History* present the highly diverse cultures of Central and East Europe according to decentralized, non-hierarchical categories. As a result, the *History* destabilizes the power-generated polarity between the hypercanon and the marginalized works and insists instead on the cooperative dimensions of those texts that supported co-habitation between various groups and cultures in the region.

Letitia GURAN

US-American Comparative Literature and the Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature

The renewed interest in theoretical frameworks and methodologies for comparative literature and the impulse to update the profile of the discipline, evident in many recent studies and professional meetings, come as no surprises in the midst of recent canonical battles, of the much debated demise of literary theory, and of the postcolonial offensive of the last decades. Given this plethora of new material about comparative literature, the necessity of considering the very state of the discipline as outlined in the most recent documents concerned with the topic, becomes clear. The *ACLA Report 2003* (ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association <http://www.acla.org>) and the responses triggered by it (*ACLA Report 2003* <http://www.stanford.edu/~saussy/acla.pdf> [inactive]; nota bene: my discussion is based on the draft report available online until July 2005; the report is scheduled to appear in book form in 2006) -- are some of the best source materials against which to consider the accomplishments of concrete projects to reform the field of comparative literary studies. In my paper at hand, I take into consideration a couple of such projects which appeared on the landscape of scholarship in recent years. In "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age" David Damrosch, who oversaw the 2003 version of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, undertakes the analysis of some directions along which contemporary comparative literature as a discipline could develop, while paying attention to the multicultural and postcolonial conditions of our world. Noting the disturbing, yet unavoidably emerging differences among writers belonging to, what he calls, "the hypercanon," "the counter-canon," and "the shadow canon," Damrosch argues for a cross-cultural comparative approach to world literature. His pleading envisages two directions of reform: one regarding the propagation of the comparative mode of thinking to other fields in the humanities, the other concerning the enlargement of the frontiers of the discipline of comparative literature itself and the continuous challenge of the theoretical methods underlying its approaches. Instead of a Western-guided hypercanon supplemented by the hypercanon belonging to non-Western cultures, Damrosch suggests the undermining of the very notion of hypercanon through a conjoined reading of "classical" and "counter-canonical" texts from various literatures. The results of bringing together works by authors such as James Joyce, Rabindranath Tagore, and Higuchi Ichiyo could be -- and have been in Damrosch's own experience -- both illuminating and refreshing for all parties involved. Ichyio's previously unknown work to non-specialists became available through the unveiled thematic and stylistic convergences with the widely read and analyzed *Ulysses*, while *Ulysses* itself was refreshed by the new company. Moreover, the autochtonous notes of Ichyio's texts were fully emphasized and presented freely from the possible constraints of Western master-narratives.

As Damrosch points out, in the long run, such a direction of reading world literature could engender the much awaited process of communication across national borderlines and thus enable the cross-cultural dialogue envisaged by most comparatists as the solution to the problematic state of the discipline. By establishing "lines of connection across the conflicted boundaries of nations and of cultures, and new lines of comparison across the persisting divisions between the hypercanon and the counter-canon of world literature" (Damrosch 10) the researcher could "link the hyper and counter-canonical works beyond the boundaries of national and imperial spaces" (7). Previously considered too individualistic and thus a potential hub for "terrorist thought" (Kadir 7) or not enough so and thus subject to Western appropriation (Spivak), the comparative literature approach has vacillated between literary hegemony and unlimited openness to unacknowledged borrowing (Saussy). Many times the discipline found itself both in deep crises and also able to provide an overarching theoretical model for other disciplines in the humanities. The optimistic tone in which Haun Saussy proclaims the absolute triumph of comparative literature, while also noting the striking under-funding of such academic departments, is doubled by irony and concern. As he says, comparative literature has, in a sense, won its battles. It has never been better re-

ceived in the US-American university. The premises and protocols characteristic of the discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, and hiring; the scholarship of authors and critics who wrote in "foreign languages" are now taught (it may be said with mock astonishment) in departments of English!; the "transnational" dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized, even by the specialists who not long ago suspected comparatists of dilettantism, while "interdisciplinarity" is a wonder-working keyword in grant applications and university promotional leaflets. Moreover, "theory" is no longer a badge of special identity or mark of infamy as everyone, more or less, is doing it, more or less, while comparative teaching and reading have taken institutional form in an ever-lengthening list of places, through departments and programs that may or may not wear the label of comparative literature (they may be configured as humanities programs, interdisciplinary programs, interdepartmental committees, or collaborative research groups). The controversy is over; and finally, comparative literature is not only legitimate, but its conclusions have become other scholars' assumptions (see Saussy 1). Yet, as a "universal but anonymous and unrecognized donor," comparative literature might end up being just another trendy theoretical fashion (Saussy 1). Unless "the comparative reflex [and] the comparative way of thinking" are propagated in humanities scholarship at large or at least in and to literature departments, the recent opportunity of exploring the potentialities of a pluralist, multicultural, and dialogic model of interpretation might just pass us by (see Saussy 1-2). Also, the chance of the humanities to open up toward a truly global understanding of culture and to play a role in remapping and recreating the identity of the twenty-first century world could as easily be missed.Yet, this line of thought is not new in the field. Along with many scholars preoccupied by the evolution of comparative literature and more importantly by its actual role in our world, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, for example, suggests an even wider opening of the discipline toward comparative cultural studies. This still emerging field brings together the theoretical and methodological strengths of comparative literature and cultural studies, while insisting on a contextual while at the same time evidence-based (empirical) and systemic theoretical approach applied in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies. By opening up toward non-literary fields of the humanities and also applying to them a systemic method of analysis, comparative cultural studies could play a relevant role in reshaping the relationship between cultural products and the interpretive processes that shape their reception. While this direction does not give priority to the study of literature over other cultural fields, it does situate comparative literature in "a global, inclusive, and multi-disciplinary framework and an inter- and supra-national" understanding of the humanities (Tötösy 261; see also Tötösy <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/2/>; Tötösy, *Comparative Literature*). The project holds salutary potential and part of it has already been undertaken by the author himself and in various forms by other comparatists (see *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu> and the Purdue University Press series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/compstudies.asp> & <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/ccs-purdue.html>, both edited by Tötösy). Along these lines of redefining the interpretive tools of comparative literature, in the past decade a couple of initiatives, some initiated and sponsored by the ICLA: International Comparative Literature Association <http://www.byu.edu/~icla/> and the ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association <http://www.acla.org> have taken the challenge of implementing a cross-cultural, transnational, and postcolonial model of interpretation. In the present paper, I discuss one such project, the recent (first) volume of *History of Literary Cultures of East- Central Europe*, published in 2004, part of a larger project to reform literary history, initiated in 1996 (see Cornis-Pope and Neubauer; see also "The History of Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: An Introduction" <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/ecei.html>). My reason for selecting this particular project to illustrate my argument is manifold: first, it is one of the few wide initiatives to theoretically reform a crucial literary field -- literary history -- according to comparative principles, while also remapping an area previously subjected to mass-ideologization. Secondly, the project responds to the need to enrich the comparative perspective by taking into consideration the profiles of non-Western cultures. Last, but not least, such a project brings under close scrutiny the multicultural element of a region often regarded by various imperialist and colonial master narratives as an in-

discriminate block.

The profit of reconsidering the profile of East-Central Europe and of making use of its multicultural history and potential in the context of today's crisis of comparative literature was also the topic of one of the responses to the *ACLA Report 2003*. In "Answering for Central and Eastern Europe," Caryl Emerson's characterizes these cultures (including Russia) as the embodiment of "multi-languagedness, heteroglossia, outsideness to oneself and thus a taste for irony, the constant crossing of borders and the absence of a tranquil, organic, homogenized center that belongs to you alone" (Emerson 1). Her conclusion is that "all these Bakhtinian virtues and prerequisites for genuine dialogue," which comparative studies in recent years claimed as their goals, have long been endemic to Central Europe (Emerson 1). Looking back at the role the region has played in the project of launching comparative literature as a discipline, Emerson considers that its contribution was fundamental, although never properly acknowledged. What had broken the visibility barrier were not the languages themselves, and (except for the eminently translatable Great Russian Novel) not their classic literary texts, but an arsenal of devices, methods, and rationales (such as Shklovsky's and Russian Formalist concept of "literariness") for linking all literary products at some higher level. Alexander Veselovskij in the nineteenth century (just now being translated) and Viktor Zhirmunskij in the twentieth century are acknowledged leaders in this effort, as are, of course, the Russian Formalists and Prague Structuralists. The latter two groups are famous for having worked out, in the 1920s and 1930s, many of the ideas re-invented in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s (see Emerson 5). The time has come, Emerson seems to imply, to pay more attention to these beginnings and inspiring theoretical contributions and make use of the "meta-capacities of the Central European mind: cosmopolitan, restless, homeless, a natural translator and hub; of the peripatetic, trilingual qualifications of these intellectuals, exiled (or self-exiled) east and west, born of nations that adored the literary word but f[ound] themselves always between several cultures and unable to lose themselves in any one of them" (6). By cultivating the tolerant, open-minded, multinational side of their cultural tradition, within which literature played a major part, (East)-Central European thought could provide an alternative paradigm to the dichotomic, mimetic Western model, devised around "power-centered" categories such as "major" versus "minor," "center" versus "margin" and so on.

Aware of the post-communist transition developments in east-central European countries, Emerson wonders whether the post-communist departments of comparative literature in these countries will also feel the pressure of the domestic equivalents to US-American "relevance wars," cultural studies, and post-cultural studies. The realist answer she comes up with is "Doubtless yes," although she also adds that "exact equivalents [to the situation of US-American academia] will not be" (Emerson 5.) Still, can one hope that everything will work for the best? The current modern-postmodern debate illustrates the possibility that, in the Western footsteps, the region will soon experience all the major forms of culture wars, while also getting immersed in the commercial, late-capitalist mentality, which marginalizes literature. By framing the natural aesthetic conflict between generations and the ethical postcommunist challenge in the reshuffled terms of the Western modern-postmodern debate, some East-Central European scholars and critics reenact the very scenario from which Western/US-American academia tries to escape. In her article Emerson mentions the case of post-communist Russia: "At stake in freshly post-communist Russia was not the legitimacy of the national language itself, or the opportunity to advertise one's own literary history, traditions, and cultural heroes (after all, the whole world knows Dostoevsky and Tolstoy). Russian scholars and critics sought the right to discuss these, and other, phenomena through the formerly taboo lenses of Foucault, Derrida, Blanchot, Baudrillaud, Benjamin, de Man, etc. -- in a word, the right to practice in Russian journals what has long been the familiar binding gesture in English and comparative literature departments in the Western academy: a juxtaposition (and thereby a comparison) of disparate national works through some "transnational," transcendent theory" (Emerson 3). The result of this orientation is somewhat troubling as it brings to an end the great modernist aesthetic utopia and together with it an age when literature seemed to have naturally found its place in the world where Russian culture and literature "risks losing the exceptional status she enjoyed for two hundred years ... literature that stood up to the state and put poets in

the front lines of the struggle for humanity" (Emerson 6). The moment is indeed dramatic and marks the fact that at this point East-Central Europe itself might need to reconnect with the abandoned and thus estranged "Central European" tradition. Whether it will chose this path or would engage in the critical steps already taken by the Western world, under the pressure of its dominant model, remains to be seen.

The alternative model I propose is a model of cross-pollination of the two approaches mentioned above and provides some general answers to the methodological questions of comparative literature. What I suggest is a return to the multicultural mindset of the East-Central European tradition with the ideological benefit of today's awareness of postcolonial theories and the critical restraint against any new form of ideologization. To undertake such a project, one needs to redefine each of its terms. First, I would like to draw attention to the use of the sometimes idealized version of a pre-World War I and interwar Central European model of multilingualism and tolerance, in an attempt to stimulate the rebirth of its best potential (on this, see, e.g., Christensen <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/8>). The observation also applies to Emerson's generally uncompromising article, which ends on a very high note of praise and sympathy: "they [the East-Central Europeans] have been through every abomination. An ideology or an -ism that takes itself seriously is simply ludicrous. They (and we can now include the imperial Russians) have accustomed themselves to loss. They've had a good look at our Western victories as well as at our patterns of protest, and are indifferently impressed. This state of affairs encourages an outsideness to all things rather than a consuming of them, and is sympathetic to a robust 'potentiology.' We could begin learning from them" (Emerson 8). This relatively simple transformation of East-Central Europe, including the Russians, into paragons of critical spirit and multicultural understanding overlooks the potential of the region for inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, as well as the unfinished re-visiting of the consequences of Soviet-imposed communism and colonialism (on this, see the theoretical model proposed by Steven Tötösy whose model for the study of the region he terms "in-between peripheral" includes the impact of the Soviet-communist period <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/STotosy1.pdf>; Tötösy, "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture"; see also Tötösy, Andras, Marsovszky). Yet, this ideal state of co-operative interpretation evoked by Emerson in the wake of Bakhtin's and Mikhail Epstein's models can be reached once the (East)-Central Europeans themselves decide to use those best potentialities of their tradition. Yet, judging by the present situation, most critical groups seem more prone to wage intergenerational wars disguised as cultural disputes, than to look for a cooperative, "transcultural," and irenic model. In the hope of healing the rift between society and literature brought about by the consumerist mentality of late-capitalist society and of closing the gap between the (modern) aesthetic tradition and the post-aesthetic age, scholars identify (East)-Central Europe with a source of cooperative, "irenic" (Spariosu) concepts. This utopian attitude of over-estimating the (East)-Central European mindset is probably no more helpful than the extreme criticism of the East-Central European neo-modernism professed by the young, radical critics of each national culture of the region. A historical, cross-national comparative analysis of (East)-Central Europe in the two centuries between 1776-1789 and 1989 could contextualize the fluctuating meaning of the concept, while giving a sense of its amphibolous profile (in my paper, corresponding to the said ICLA project and volumes, I use the designation East-Central Europe; however, I am aware of alternative designations of the region, such as Central and East Europe, Central Eastern Europe, etc.; on the taxonomies of the region, see Sven Tägil's [Ed.] 1999 *Regions in Central Europe: The Legacy of History*; see also Tötösy <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/STotosy1.pdf>). The consequence of such undertaking would be a better understanding of the various functions of the term during its long history and a sense of its potential. Such a study is the said four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe*, which is in the process of being published. Part of a larger project initiated by Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon (both at the University of Toronto), the volumes consist of a mode of reconsidering the aesthetic/literary traditions of these countries from a largely comparative and cultural perspective. The chosen title, *History of the Literary Cultures*, stresses the broad

sociopolitical aspect of the enterprise meant to complement the traditional stylistic analyses of the national literatures of the region and bring to light the forces, historical contexts, and processes that have shaped the assessment of East-Central European literary texts. Conceived as a decentralized structure, the four-volume book was intended as an alternative to traditional aesthetic histories of national literatures organized according to organicist, and thematic principles of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Valdés v). The layout of the volumes follows a network of "nodes," which are set to do justice to an area of great cultural diversity and to draw attention to the centripetal forces around which its identities have been shaped and reshaped. Politics is undoubtedly one of them and as such the first volume makes its debut with a series of "nodes of political time," such as 1989, 1956/1968, 1948. Given these specifications, to proclaim the volume(s) mainly an attempt to contextualize the aesthetic histories of the area would be a limitation of its scope. As an international, comparative, and collective project published in 2004, *History of the Literary Cultures* implicitly answers the theoretical urgencies of the moment, among which the devising of appropriate comparative methods for a world and region with fluctuant, multicultural, plural identities. By engaging the culturally specific contributions of various East Central European authors in a temporal, genre-oriented, institutional, and imaginary-focussed dialogue, which sweeps over the identity-profile of the region several times, the first volume manages to accomplish this task. As a result the single, overwhelming master narrative, characterizing former literary histories, is replaced by a constellation of culturally specific reports, open to find formerly ignored points of convergence with each other. This convergence is accomplished in the volumes in the overview chapters written by the editors. Chapters such as "1989 The Collapse of Monologic Structures: Glasnost, Postmodernism, Postcommunism" or "1956/1968 Revolt, Suppression, and Liberalization in post-Stalinist East Central Europe" summarize while also extracting the general trends of the area comparatively. The fact that each temporal or topographic node is preceded by such theoretical chapters -- thus connecting the conclusions of temporally and regionally-specific analyses -- ultimately endures a meta-comparative dimension to the volume. As a historical project, the book takes a second major challenge in rearranging the traditional chronological manner in which the literary material has generally been presented, while also calling into question the conventional relationship between the two fields involved. With the historical narrative fragmented into temporal "nodes," assembled in a present-originating order, the constructed and interpretive aspects of historical enterprises become more obvious and easier to tackle.

Cornis-Pope and Neubauer take advantage of this opening while discussing the amphibolous identity concepts of "Central Europe," *Mitteleuropa*, "the Balkans," and "East-Central Europe." While the first term of this list "has helped many to associate themselves with the West and to dissociate themselves from the more 'primitive' or even 'barbaric' people to the east and south," (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 6), and the second sense pointed to a German perspective of the eastern part of Europe, the last usage is a less divisive term. Its value consists in renegotiating a transnational profile for a region, which has been the subject to both stereotyping by its influential imperial neighbors and ignorance by the rest of the world. The blame is not to fall entirely on the latter, as long as the countries of the region have made little effort to define a common identity, while constantly advancing theses about their belonging to the Western paradigm. Now, in tune with the ideology of the enlarged and still growing European community, which attempts to erase the borders of various mimetic and ideological models, the comparative approach of *History of the Literary Cultures* could provide a pertinent identity study. Moreover, after decades of national, literary-centered histories of literature, the recently unified European world looks up to the multicultural, dialogic concepts promoted for quite a while by certain writers, institutions, and marginocentric cities in East-Central Europe. A "regional" history focusing on a transnationally "imagined" (Anderson) region instead of national traditions could better accomplish such dialogic task especially when supported by heterogeneic concepts, with a fluctuating meaning, such as the "nodes." Ranging from points of convergence of "crucial dates and date clusters" in political history, to topographical, institutional, and imaginary moments of crystallization, the nodes "acquire different meaning in each of our History's five parts" (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 17). The advantage brought forth by this structure privileging descentrality

and allowing for disjunctures to be represented is that "by focusing on nodes, it allows [the authors] to interrupt the flow of narration and concentrate repeatedly on synchronic-regional perspectives (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 17). The result is that the authors "'scan' the last two centuries of literary production five times" accomplishing a multi-perspectivist image of the area (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 17). The new image of East-Central Europe has the virtue of emphasizing both the similarities and the discontinuities among various national traditions in terms of important political moments, literary categories such as genre, movement, and period, and cultural institutions. As supra-thematic points of convergence, the nodes are implicit points of comparison, enabling the authors to single out specificities of culture and region. The arch-point of reference is implicitly Western culture, with respect to which all these cultures have defined themselves, beginning with the nineteenth century, and even more after the communist takeover. Owing to this theoretical super-perspective, *History of the Literary Cultures* develops an implicit comparison with the West, which apart from identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two, reassesses the potentialities of much disputed models like "modernism" and "postmodernism." One such example is provided by Magda Cârneci's analysis of East-Central European modernism, which reverses the dominant perspective in the contemporary Western world with respect to its "meaning": "Because of its specific historical rhythm, more typical of a circumference than a center ... as well as because of repeated interruptions in the cultural evolution of the modern period, modernity is still a central theme [in the area] a fertile obsession that has to be continued, completed, and consummated, simultaneously with its own critique and deconstruction" (Cârneci 26). The conclusion sounds paradoxical to the scholar not familiar with the theoretical hybridization and overlapping characterizing the region. In fact, together with a "postmodernism of resistance," East-Central Europe also experienced a post-1947 "neo-modernism of resistance," which transformed many aesthetic categories into implicit political tools. If East-Central European postmodernism was "an aesthetic ideological modality of surpassing aberrant political conditions, anachronistic social difficulties, and artificial cultural obstructions" with the help of terms such as "pluralism," "tolerance," "relativism," "anti-utopianism," "diversity," "global culture," so was neo-modernism. Its tools, surprisingly, were mainly aesthetic and their social function still remains to be discussed. As for East-Central European postmodernism, it also performed a series of functions, which might seem quite paradoxical to a Western audience.

The most stunning examples are provided by Yugoslavia and Estonia. In the first case, the propensity of the concept towards regional rather than universal categories was used to support the nationalistic theses of the Yugoslav regime, in total opposition to its critical, anti-establishment profile in the West. An even more interesting reversal of functions takes place in Estonia. As Soviet occupation was promoting a tighter propagandistic discourse, divorced from the realities of Estonian life and the national aspirations of its people, the general impression of the intellectuals was that they were experiencing precisely the "postmodern condition" and were living in a world of simulacra (see Annus and Hughes 62). Thus, postmodernism became synonymous with official, empty discourse, while modernist ideology with its nation-building agenda functioned as the subversive, progressive ideology of the time. This paradoxical situation holds an immense deconstructive potential, employed in the theoretical and historical synthesis preceding each political node. As such these syntheses relativize the meanwhile essentialized perspectives on various concepts, such as "nationalism, " "aestheticism," "resistance through culture," and so on. The composite point of view provided by the volume(s) of the *History of the Literary Cultures*, becomes, thus, an alternative to traditional, though not always outdated modes of conceptualization. Being familiar with the particularities of the region and being somewhat immersed in the "multi-languageness, heteroglossia, outsideness to oneself, taste for irony, and absence of the organic, homogenized center" that Caryl Emerson mentions in her study (6), as I proposed previously, the contributors to the project and its volumes have something to offer to the current methodological debate of comparative literature. This becomes particularly the case when discussing the emergence of new conceptual facets of various phenomena resulting from the grafting of particular East-Central European functions on Western forms. One example refers to the formal postmodern features of "pastiche, parody, montage of ironic questions, deconstruction of narrative continuity, problematization

of mimesis, the mixing of low and high styles, and the confusion of fiction and fact" (Cornis-Pope, "1989. From Resistance to Reformulation" 43) which during communism had a very poignant anti-communist/totalitarian function, reminiscent of Sartre's *littérature engagée*. This particular situation suggests that formal features of any given cultural movement have a potential for ambivalence and ambiguity especially when translated cross-culturally. Under given East-Central European circumstances some of them were at the same time employed as anticommunist tools by certain writers, while equally abused by the official ideologues. The same holds true for the functions of post-1947 modernism in the region and of many other operational concepts, which might have seemed completely mapped, until recently, when their manifold, fluid nature came to the forefront once more. This situation calls implicitly for a revisiting of the conceptual basis upon which many monochord, influential studies have been built and on shedding new light on the multifarious profile of most phenomena. The effort to undergo such a theoretical rereading is further motivated by the fact that the integration of more diverse cultures and traditions in a global world culture already requires the recontextualization of most operational concepts, especially of those with hyper-significance.

Under such circumstances, the "nodal" perspective adopted in the *History of the Literary Cultures* is salutary. Imaginary-related, identity-based, historically, thematically, and genre-centered, the nodes constitute a grid, which recasts the profile of the area according to new identity concepts such as "hybridity," "boundary," "marginocentricity," "multicultural corridors," "cultural interfaces," "imaginary communities," instead of relating it to purely aesthetic or political events. Many of the articles clustered around these nodes are examples of pluri-perspectivism, which integrates the aesthetic reading with the historical, institutional, and sociological interpretation of the area. The result is that despite the strong resistance of many writers to deconstructing the myths surrounding the roles of literature and the writer, both of them end up re-contextualized from the perspective of the present. The same happens with archetypal concepts that supported the process of nation-building. Temporal, institutional, topographical, and figural, the nodes refer to the "watershed dates that separate different periods of development," "the social structures that organized various literary cultures," and the "areas or locations that became the centrifugal disseminators of the imaginary and the centripetal centers of attraction" (Valdés xiv), for various artists. The figural nodes consist of "historical as well as imaginary subjects, stereotypes, personified objects of great variety that galvanized ideas" (Valdés xv) during the time. What follows from the interaction of all these perspectives is an implicit reassessment of various national traditions. When placed within this wide comparative, cultural context, they exhibit previously unnoticed allegiances to transnational/regional forms of the imaginary. These budding structures will further constitute the starting point of a different way of imagining not only East-Central Europe, but also the broader field of comparative literature itself. This approach becomes more visible in the second volume, built on the thesis that "a genuine comparatist revival of literary history will involve the recognition that 'trading on native grounds' means actually treading on grounds cultivated by diverse people" (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 2). As such, the volume is intended to "identify the presence of 'foreign' elements in centers of national cultures," in the hope of emphasizing the hybrid profile of the area, instead of its national image and local cultures (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "General Introduction" 2). The abandon of "center-margin," "national-foreign" dichotomies may foreground new ways of identity-making in the area, while emphasizing [their] local, regional, and transnational possibilities. This direction of analysis meets halfway Mikhail Epstein's model of "transculture," according to which the contemporary scholar should not only abandon, at long last, the old "acceptable" political binary (East versus West) but also to stop hungering after those big convergence schemes, hybridization or globalization. The very idea of majority and minority should be rethought. In the West, we must let go of our established sense of the legitimate "minorities" -- Black, female, Hispanic, bisexual, etc., -- just as we have been forced to let go of the political binary. And we should start thinking instead in terms of "variously delineated majorities": "people grouped according to their experiences of illness, inspiration, love, creativity, suffering, loss, and other states that transcend identity. For more unites us than divides us. One must simply commit to finding co-experience as interesting as confrontation and struggle, and commit

to defining the proper transcendent categories" (Epstein 9). The volume(s) of the *History of the Literary Cultures* reach(es) this point mostly in the large synthetic chapters, which present a comparative view of the area and focus on temporal nodes, hybrid cities, multicultural productions, cultural institutions, and writers functioning as instances of trans-national mediation. The explicit goal of these texts is to undermine the age-old national and centralist perspective on literature, while the implicit result is the activation of a set of profound human and trans-cultural categories shared by the people inhabiting the region. Going through similar political and social experiences, the East-Central Europe peoples react similarly, even if they rarely acknowledged it. The volume(s) of the *History of the Literary Cultures* intend(s) to bring to light these previously ignored topographical and temporal points of convergence, remap the history of the area and open it towards new ways of imagining its identity. As Csaba Kiss notes, "Even though the writers of the East-Central Europe knew relatively little of each other, casting their glances toward Paris, from Warsaw and Prague, Belgrade and Bucharest, their work often reflects a shared world, with its own contradictions naturally, an odd mixture of pain and nostalgia, negative sentiments, affection and hate, gibes and national injuries" (126-27).

It is high time, thus, to analyze closely these convergences of mentality, feeling, sensitivity, and to build specific East-Central European images corresponding to the particular ways in which the region manifests its multicultural profile. The immediate result of such a project resulting in the volume(s) of the *History of the Literary Cultures* is that the region enters into a real dialogue with the West, in terms of its own imaginary master narratives. One of them, with prospective as well as ordering virtues, proposes the image of East-Central Europe as a hybrid, cooperative world which encourages multilingualism and multiculturalism, while also suffering from inter-ethnic conflicts and nationalist prejudices. Supporting this overarching model are the demystifying narratives meant to deconstruct some age-long stereotypes of macro-interpretation and ideologization: from the nationalist to the localist ones; from identity-making concepts to institutionally-imposed categories. By closely studying the less known interfaces of East-Central Europe, whether its hybrid cities with multicultural identities or its imaginary topographies, more previously immutable aspects of its cultures are corrected. In many essays, imaginary spaces replace the nationally imposed ones, from Galicia, Pannonia, to the Balkans. While all literary mappings are imaginary, engaged in delimiting/inventing new boundaries and crossing them, note Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, the authors of the *History of the Literary Cultures* are concerned directly with the myths that underlie particular geocultural constructs and their translation in literature ... The literatures of each nation remap the area along its own lines of interest, but cannot entirely suppress the multicultural crossings (see Cornis-Pope, "Regional Sites of Cultural Hybridization" 218). Such examples of cities are Vilnius/Wilno/Vilna, Danzig/Gdansk, Cernowitz/Cernauti, Prague, Timisoara/Temesvár, Brasov/Kronstadt, Bucharest, and Budapest. Along with them, there are entire regions operating as cultural interfaces of and alternatives to the mighty imperialistic views and dominant nation states. The Balkans, Transylvania, and the Danube's corridor are home to hybrid, multicultural communities, whose substance was many times silenced by the larger, national master narratives. In the *History of the Literary Cultures* their recreated profile brings to light imaginary representations of intricate identity-making mechanisms, which hold the potential of generating new spaces of cultural dialogue and cooperation. The latter aspect is what interests the authors of the East-Central European History, though they rarely idealize the conflictive potential of the area. As the editors note, "The Slovenian literary construction of [the city of] Istra both reflect and react against the homogenizing pressures of the national culture, problematizing the boundaries of Istra and introducing another constructed region in it: Savrinija and Savrinian identity. Macedonia and Albania provide other examples of overlooked identities: those of Armenians and Macedo-Romanians" (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "Regional Sites of Cultural Hybridization" 218).

The need to understand the region in these terms, emphasizing the marginocentric cultures together with the so-called central ones comes from the fact that, historically speaking, East-Central Europe is one of the truly multicultural areas of the world. With cities and towns that "would commonly speak several native languages, belong to two or three empires in the course of

a single generation, and assume most of its residents to be hybrids who carried the dividing-lines of nationality within their selves" (Emerson 1), no other approach can make justice to such a cultural diversity. By emphasizing the points of convergence between the marginal culture and the "central" one, the *History of the Literary Cultures* destabilizes this power-generated polarity and insists instead on the cooperative instances that supported co-habitation. Such a direction of analysis recalls Damrosch's suggestion to undertake comparisons between writers of the hyper- and counter-canons while at the same time attempting comparisons between texts that have not shared a direct influence. The fact that Romanian, Serb, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish authors may not have been in direct contact with one another is not enough reason to continue studying them separately today, when so many convergences within East-Central Europe have come to fore. At the same time, by recreating the profile of the literary cultures of the area in a trans-national manner, the scholars of the *History of the Literary Cultures* make the best of the democratic potential of the comparative way of thinking and thus go beyond the immediate purposes of a regional literary history. By showing hospitality to the disfavored, the marginalized, the a-typical, such an approach makes use of an opportunity truly incumbent on comparative literature in this day and age: "to present [itself] as the test bed for reconciving the ordering of knowledge, inside and outside the humanities" (Saussy 12). As such, the topographies imagined and sustained by the first two volumes of this project aim toward Epstein's "transculture" by rethinking most of the categories defining traditional literary history. Instead of linear chronology, *History of the Literary Cultures* chooses a perspectivist approach by looking at the past from the present; instead of insisting on the centralized, national identity, it shifts the focus toward hybrid sites such as cities with multiple identities; instead of a literature structured by main themes and clear-cut genres, it insists on hybrid works, and, finally, instead of the exclusive focus on male figures and national icons, it supplements the picture with feminine presences (on this, see also Imre <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss1/6/>; on contemporary Hungarian gay poetry, see Vasvári <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/2/>). In all these choices the editors and authors of the volumes make a conscious decision to go against the grain of tradition and rethink the very method of literary history on contemporary comparative bases. It is in this sense that the first two volumes of the project answer the need to renewal outlined by the ACLA Report and its responses and situates itself at the forefront of the effort to rethink the traditional theoretical paradigm. There is one final step left before reaching the stage envisaged in Epstein's suggestion of replacing the exclusively politically-drawn identities, based on notions of race, gender, and minority, with a manner of grouping people "according to their experiences of illness, inspiration, love, creativity, suffering, loss, and other states that transcend identity" (Emerson 7). By making its implicit goal to re-order the analyzed experience according to categories of decentralization, the volumes of the *History of Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* comes close to accomplishing this vision. The reader needs to go a step further and accomplish the final synthesis according to universal human categories.

Note: The above paper appears also as Letitia Guran, "The Study of East-Central European Culture and Literature and US-American Comparative Literature" in *The New Central and East European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Carmen Andras, and Magdalena Marsovszky. Purdue Books in Comparative Cultural Studies 11 <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/ccs-purdue.html> & <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/compstudies.asp>. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2006. E-Book.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Annus, Epp, and Robert Hughes. "Reversals of the Postmodern and Late Soviet Simulacrum in the Baltic Countries -- with Exemplification from Estonian Literature." *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* Ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Amsterdam: John Bernjamins, 2004. 54-65.

Cârneci, Magda. *Arta anilor '80: Texte despre postmodernism*. Bucharest: Litera, 1996.

Christensen, Peter G. "Szabó's *Colonel Redl* and the Habsburg Myth." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.1 (2006): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/8>.

Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "Regional Sites of Cultural Hybridization." *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* Ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Amsterdam: John Bernjamins, 2004. 217-19.

Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "1989. From Resistance to Reformulation." *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* Ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Amsterdam: John Bernjamins, 2004. 39-51.

Cornis-Pope, Marcel, and John Neubauer, eds. "General Introduction." *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* Ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Amsterdam: John Bernjamins, 2004. 1-19.

Damrosch, David. "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age." *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Damrosch, David, April Alliston, Marshall Brown, Page duBois, Sabry Hafez, Ursula K. Heise, Djelal Kadir, David L. Pike, Sheldon Pollock, Bruce Robbins, Haruo Shirane, Jane Tylus, and Pauline Yu, eds. *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*. Longman, 2004.

Emerson, Caryl. "Answering for Central and Eastern Europe." *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Epstein, Mikhail. "Transculture and Society." *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication*. Ed. Ellen E. Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 102-12.

Imre, Anikó. "Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East-Central European Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.1 (2001): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss1/6/>.

Kadir, Djelal. "Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism." *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Martin, Mircea. "Nationalism si Comunism" ("Nationalism and Communism"). *22 Magazine* (2002-2003): 654-93.

Saussy, Haun, ed. *ACLA Report 2003* (2005): <http://www.stanford.edu/~saussy/acla.pdf> (inactive).

Saussy, Haun, ed. *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.

Saussy, Haun. "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes." *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Saussy, Haun, ed. *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization: The 2003 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Spariosu, Mihai. *The Wreath of Wild Olive*. New York: State U of New York P, 1997.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakraborty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

Tägil, Sven, ed. *Regions in Central Europe: The Legacy of History*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1999.

"The History of Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: An Introduction." *Rethinking Literary History -- Comparatively* (2005): <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist/ecei.html>.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies." *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2003. 235-67.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture." *Kakanien Revisited* (2003): <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/STotosy1.pdf>.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2002. 1-32.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.3 (1999): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/2/>.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998.

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, Carmen Andras, and Magdalena Marsovszky, eds. *The New Central and East European Culture*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2006. Forthcoming.

Vasvári, Louise O. "Queer Theory and Discourses of Desire." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.1 (2006): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss1/2/>.

Author's profile: Letitia Guran teaches modern and ethnic US-American literatures at the College of William and Mary. Guran received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Georgia in 2005 with a dissertation entitled *The Function of the Aesthetic in East Central Europe and the United States after the Second World War*. The focus of Guran's dissertation was on the historical and intellectual processes that led to the current multifaceted and often polemic understanding of "the aesthetic" on the landscape of US-American and East-Central European scholarship. In 2001 Guran was awarded the Rutledge Prize for best essay for her "The Aesthetic Dimension of Romanian-American Criticism," followed by the paper's publication in *The Comparatist*. E-mail: <letitia_guran@yahoo.com>.