

Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity," Jola Skulj proposes a framework inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's work. Skulj argues that the validity of cultural identity cannot be an equivalent to the measure of originality of an inherent national subjectivity in it. Such an idea of identity concept, quite acceptable in the nineteenth century, is insufficient to the views in literary studies today. From the standpoint of comparative literature, cultural identity exists only through its own deconstruction and permanent multiplication of several cultural relations. The identity principle of individual cultures is in fact established through the principle of otherness or -- to use Bakhtin's terminology -- through the principle of dialogism. As any individuality, cultural identity is a meeting point of several cross-cultural implications. It is of a complex plurivocal character, open to its own changes in order to preserve its own being in a new context of interests. Skulj argues that cultural identity is genuinely an intertext expressed in many instances in and via culture texts including literature. Thus, permanently re-interpreted cultural identity undoubtedly refers to the field of research of cross-cultural interactions and such a concept of cultural identity pre-eminently belongs to an expanded field of comparative studies.

**Jola SKULJ**

### **Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity**

The problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning. In turn, we may also ask whether the self-questioning is motivated in the problematic, uncertain, or insufficiently reflected idea of our selves or in a desire to analytically reaffirm the fragility of culture. From the viewpoint of literary studies, the question of cultural identity is primarily with reference to literary identity in the community we are living in. Here, Bakhtin's argumentation that "Literature is an inseparable part of the totality of culture and cannot be studied outside the total cultural context. It cannot be severed from the rest of culture and related directly (by-passing culture) to socio-economic or other factors. These factors influence culture as a whole and only through it and in conjunction with it do they affect literature. The literary process is a part of the cultural process and cannot be torn away from it" (Bakhtin 1986, 140) is most relevant for my discussion. However, if the very existence of literature can be defined in terms of structuralism (and, in another context, by Heidegger) as a re-examination of the possibilities of language itself (and through it refracted historical consciousness), then the problem of literary identity would logically be reduced to the natural environment of native language, that is, to one's national culture. Such a view cannot, of course, be a relevant interpretation of literary identity at the end of our century because it reveals a concept of identity implying characteristics unacceptably finite and self-referential. The identification of literary identity with national culture is regression to the idea of identity conceived in the nineteenth century. The literature of Romanticism and Post-Romanticism was acceptable as a factor confirming national entities and as a genuine representation of the cultural self. This understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. The subject of Romanticism defined itself by its own subjectivity, interpreted as being self-aware, self-sufficient, and self-referential. In Romanticism, being was recognised to be authentic while comprehensible only as interior consciousness.

The insufficiency of such a reductionist view on culture and literature, for example, the "soul of nation" (Herder) was, in fact, already conceptualised by Goethe when he constructed the concept of world literature. But any gesture of openness in the *geistesgeschichtliche* frame of Romanticism was only understood as self-affirmation of the romantic absolute and autonomous subject. Any notion of an understanding of openness as a feature of transgressing or of the self-revaluation of the romantic self can be found only in the phenomenon of romantic irony. Thus, the problematic of cultural identity undoubtedly refers us to a question of cross-cultural interactions. Considered this way, it is pre-eminently a concept belonging to the field of comparative literature. Literary works, genres, trends, and periods of artistic orientation in a given nation, as manifested through history, cannot exist as isolated events of the closed national existence of cultural history and cannot be understood without contacts with literary phenomena of other national cultures. No cultural identity can be identified or analysed only on its national ground. Any national culture was given form on the borders of other influential cultures. For example, *The Freising Manuscript* (a Slovenian text from the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century) bears evidence, among others, of Latin and Old High German traces. Clearly, literature cannot be but an intercultural historical phenomenon of mutual artistic and other influences from several cultures, of mutual interactions of artistic expression produced in different cultural circumstances, and thus of mutual reception of Otherness. "Otherness" is, irrevocably, cultural reality. The Other does not necessarily endanger its selfness or its principles of identity: "The reality principle coincides with the principle of otherness" (de Man 103). According to this notion, the validity of cultural identity cannot be an equivalent to the measure of originality of an inherent national subjectivity in it.

Formations of cultural identity pass through their own "deconstruction" and permanent multiplication of cultural relations. Consequently, the interweaving of cultural and literary influences does not result in loss of identity. Rather, it constructs a multiple plane where yet inactivated possibilities interact and merge. In Europe, the convergence of different cultures has been a permanent factor of their existence. On the other hand, the role of marginal phenomena and traces of contacts with minor cultures were not insignificant in European cultural and literary history. Concepts of identity cannot mean simply "to be something" or to be "identical with oneself," or, in other words, identity should not be seen as "the first way of being" (Descombes 35, 37). Rather, the principle of identity coincides with the principle of otherness or -- to use Bakhtin's terminology with the principle of dialogism: "The self is the gift of the other" (qtd. in Kershner x). As a historical concept, cultural identity implies an introduction of difference into itself, i.e., an element of reciprocity into its own being (Descombes 38). Cultural identity -- as an element of the historical process cannot remain of the same nature and is never a perpetuation of itself; it cannot be preserved in a fixed, unchanged form; it inherits the "divine privilege" to introduce its authentic construct of alterity and innovative nature into itself through its continuous contact with the Other and Otherness. According to this, cultural identity as expressed in literature is re-established through constant dialogue with other cultures and literatures. This dialogic nature pre-determines that the study of cultural identity and/in literature is best performed in and with the tools of the discipline of comparative literature.

Within comparative literature, I propose that a most appropriate methodology for the study of cultural identity be provided by the work of Bakhtin. More precisely, I mean Bakhtin where he goes beyond the metaphysical orientation of the earlier formalists and where he developed his ideas under the specific circumstances of prescribed ideological monism and totalitarianism. Both contexts, the formalist and the totalitarian, evoked specific philosophical and theoretical responses by Bakhtin and his followers and served the unmasking of fundamental flaws in the organisation of Western rationality. Bakhtin's views of dialogism, in fact, extricate European rationality from its predicaments in that they mediate toward an ideology of otherness. The event of Bakhtinian ideology of otherness as overcoming ideological monologism was due to the historical changes in the self-consciousness of European thought after the initial manifestations of Modernism.

A critical reading of Bakhtin's work on the background of contemporary poststructuralist premises may prove influential in literary theory. But even more important are Bakhtin's specific terminological solutions that have brought to light some ethical and ideological dimensions of art. In the eighties, after a decade of extremely good acceptance of Bakhtin's issues in theoretical debates, Paul de Man intervened with scepticism: "why the notion [could] be so enthusiastically received by theoreticians of very diverse persuasion and made to appear as a valid way out of many of the quandaries that have plagued us for so long" (1983, 100). However, de Man misread in Bakhtin the inherent quality of dialogism, namely conflict and contradiction, i.e., the quality implying the inscribed space for Otherness as something different and opposing. In his *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* -- published in 1929 under the name of Voloshinov -- Bakhtin presented an ontological frame to his ideas and dialogism is disclosed as a notion indicating awareness of competing views on the same thing. It implies the presence of relativized, de-privileged truth of something or, in other words, it implies the de(con)struction of the authoritative or absolute word about it. This concept, established in the philosophy of concreteness, poses anew the problem of truth and its certainty. It presupposes a non-finite character of truth, a multiplicity of focuses on it, a notion of its inexhaustiveness, i.e., an immense, boundless "wealth of its being."

If a dialogic word is an antonym to authoritative discourse (*avtoritetnoe slovo*), and dialogism means decentralizing or a centrifugal force in the conception of the subject or of truth (as evident in marginal comic genres), then these two Bakhtinian concepts have similar value as Heideggerian philosophy in that it has brought elaborated concepts for the de(con)struction of the history of ontology. This Heideggerian call for de-(con)struction -- the German *Destruktion* and not *Zerstörung* -- which later echoed in American poststructuralist deconstructive hermeneutics, means that the "task of destroying is an effort at a creative preserving of history" (Leitch 66). Further, there are corresponding implications in the notion of dialogue and in the Heideggerian

thought on "defamiliarization and unconcealment of truth" (Leitch 1983, 70). Also, "a word, discourse, language or culture undergoes dialogization" (Holquist 1981, 427). This is argued in comments on Bakhtin by Michael Holquist, who gave a most accurate translation to the North American reading public as well as an extensive survey on the problems of Bakhtin's dialogism (1990).

Some other notions from Bakhtin's taxonomy are important for the discussion of cultural identity: "Alien" or "other" -- as in someone else's word (*cuzej, cuzoje slovo*), "otherness" (*cuздost*) "re-accentuation," a quality of incompleteness or absence of capability of definitive finalisation (*nezaversennost'*) or in the appropriate English translation (as used by Holquist) "inconclusiveness" or "openendedness." There are also some seminal attributes like "re-accentuated," "dialogized," "refracted," all of them assuring the presence of at least two different words or views on the given object. This implies Bakhtin's fundamental assertion that "truth cannot triumph or conquer" (Bakhtin 1986, 141). In his view, the basis for the one and only truth concerning cultural identity is "thwarted," if not eliminated, while the problem of cultural identity is to be viewed through the principle of Otherness. The identity of culture is multiform in its being and its actual individuality functions as cultural dialogism. Thus, through dialogism the heterological nature of literary or cultural phenomena in the tradition of a given national history can be explored with fairly consequent argumentation. Cultural identity is complexly structured and it represents a non-finite wholeness. The identity of any national literature is undoubtedly multiform through its historical stages.

In Bakhtinian thought, motivated by the search for a concrete philosophy, the quest for the real self shows a reverted Cartesian position. In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin argues that the self is a stream of statements and that so long as man lives, he is "never coincident with himself" (Bakhtin 1973, 48). The self cannot serve as the subjectum to all existing things any longer, or in other words, it has lost its own Cartesian substantiality: "I realise myself initially through others," Bakhtin argues, continuing, "From them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself" (1986, 138). Actually, he points to the insufficiency of the Cartesian subject being defined in cogito. Bakhtin finds it as a "false tendency toward reducing everything to a single consciousness, toward dissolving in it the other's consciousness" (1986, 141) and he argues that "quests for my own word are in fact quests for a word that is not my own, a word that is more than myself; this is a striving to depart from one's own words, with which nothing essential can be said" (1986, 149). *Cogito, ergo sum* or, as it goes in a later dictum, *ego cogito, ergo sum, sive existo*, is for him an inadequate answer about the self. Instead, truth is not defined as *adequatio* any longer or, in the sense of identity, as being the same. The real face of truth is agonistic, defined as a field of contradictions. Truth could be defined as undecidability: the realm of the Cartesian certitude is annihilated. Truth is acknowledged not to be univocal and the concept of identity is to be redefined. The truth of the real self of culture is defined as not remaining the same; it is defined in an inscribed will to difference (Descombes 1980, 35). Modern philosophy, as well as Bakhtin in his philosophical anthropology, introduces difference into the very definition of identity.

Cultural identity as revealed through history of literature and other forms of art is an entity, which is very concrete in its being. Culture should not be understood as a sum of phenomena, but as a concrete totality, where the notion of totality should be understood pragmatically (not metaphysically), i.e., as something open, non-finite, as something inconclusive in its character. Bakhtin explains the study of literature and cultural identity as follows: "There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. ... In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. ... A meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself ... Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result

in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched" (1986, 6-7).

One should not forget that even "consciousness" is a real fact for Bakhtin. In *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* he asserts that consciousness is materialised in the material of signs. The sign or, to follow strictly his views on language, the word (Russian *slovo*, Greek *logos*) or utterance (as the smallest unit of language), refracts the social and historical entities in itself. He also reminds us of the constant interplay between the sign and its related historical being. At this point, again, Bakhtin's views are very close to Heidegger's: When Heidegger elaborates his ideas of the existential meaning and the role of art and explains why man is "located in the world and situated historically" only "through poetry" (qtd. in Leitch 65), he also points out that the historical being itself is emerging into the unconcealedness only through the language of poetry: "Thus art is: the creative preserving of truth in the work of art. Art then is the becoming and happening of truth. ... All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what it is, is, as such, essentially poetry. The nature of art ... is the setting-itself into-work of truth" (Heidegger 1986, 274). The domain of poetic composition in the wider sense, i.e., of the arts and of culture, has a privileged position in that it is "a mode of the lighting projection of truth" (Heidegger 1986, 275). Thus, according to both Bakhtin and Heidegger, language and thinking imply the presence (facticity) of the historical consciousness or of the historical being.

The identity of a culture is established through a complex reality of historical processes. The question of cultural identity should then legitimately be posed on a very concrete level. Bakhtin's gnoseological point of departure is based in his philosophy of concreteness. My methodological expectation that the implications of Bakhtin's notion of dialogue epitomises in itself the complexity of reality should then prove relevant in the discussion of cultural identity as well. When posing the question of cultural identity methodologically on the ground of the reality principle, a move into the field of comparative literature is inevitable. However, not only the reception of one culture by another is meant here by comparative literature. Much more than in cultural influences through direct or indirect contacts, comparative literature is interested today in a re-examination of the historicity of being entrapped in the languages of different literatures and arts. The question of analyses of literary texts (or other works of art) refers us to the historical being concealed in them, and how it participates in the truth of a global self-understanding of man/woman and, consequently, in the truth of historical subjectivity of different cultures. On the other hand, the question of mutual relations between world literatures only on the basis of empirically realised contacts and influences is insufficient in modern comparative literature. Today literatures cannot be studied ignoring the questions of history itself; neither can they evade matters of their national being - both of which provide answers concerning the situation of individual literatures in a given historical segment of global thought. The study of cultural identity also gives answers connected to the very "facticity" of the historical being which defines the situation of a literature. The problem of English or of Slovenian cultural identity, for instance, has to be compared through analyses with other literatures.

Cultural identity of a given national history is its "primordial founding" (Leitch 69) and it brings forth its existence while its mode of existing is in a multitude of its own faces through history. It is a complex image of the many-sided interests of its own self. The identity of culture, if we follow Bakhtin and his notion of dialogue, is not univocal and it is neither a sum of different qualities nor of characteristics that clearly set the given culture apart from others. As any individuality, cultural identity is a meeting point of several cross-cultural influences. It is of a complex plurivocal character, open to its own changes in order to preserve its own being in a new context of interests. Our cultural identity is our intertext. The immense and boundless world of Otherness constitutes a primary fact of existence of our cultural identity. In his later notes Bakhtin states the following: "The study of culture (or some area of it) at the level of system and at the higher level of organic unity [implies the following notions]: open, becoming, unresolved and unpredetermined, capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries" (1986, 135). The presence of interests in Bakhtin's definition of cultural identity reveals that the question of politics is indispensably inherent in the event of culture through history.

Forming itself and existing through cross-cultural interactions, cultural identity exposes its inevitable intertextual character. This intertextual character of cultural identity suggests infinite diversity of its being: "The world of culture and literature is essentially as boundless as the universe," argues Bakhtin (1986, 140). Openness and un-predeterminedness are the most evident characteristics of culture and its identity. The formation of the self of a given culture through encountering with Otherness cannot, as Bakhtin reminds us, change the existence of it, but only the sense of its existence. Here Bakhtin put in another crucial remark that sounds very much in accord with Post-structuralism: "Authenticity and truth inhere not in existence itself, but only in the existence that is acknowledged and uttered" (1986, 138). The interacting of cultural identities, as follows, results in a change of the sense of their existence. As a reflection of the self in the empirical, the Other should always lead to the self-affirmation of one's existence. Thus, self-confidence of a culture -- or self-consciousness, can only be activated and creatively flourish through the principle of Otherness. Cultural dialogism does not mean obliteration of individual cultural identities. Rather, as history witnesses, it reassures the pertaining of a gap between existing cultural identities and their evolutionary possibilities.

Although being constantly re-established through Otherness, cultural identity cannot be deprived of its own evolution and of its own evolutionary interests. Through creative contacts it participates in its own change of sense. Cultural consciousness today, in an awareness of the infinite diversity of cross-cultural influences on its own being, is not endangered of being dissolved in another cultural identity. Uniqueness of identity of a culture lies in its very features of differences and its Otherness throughout history. Identity features of a given national literature cannot be exhausted. This inexhaustiveness, inscribed in cultural identity through its dialogism, is a guarantee, which enables its persistent existence. In my opinion, the professed fear of European cultures -- especially now with the on-going plans of an extension of the European Union -- that they will lose their distinct cultural identities is groundless. Two thousand years after the beginnings of literary genres and literary "languages," literary history bears witness to the differentiation of distinct European literatures and cultures. In their mutual interactions of cultural identities and literatures, the existing differences of individual national literatures were even increased at the period of Romanticism and since. However, the condition of a permanent flux of contacts and influences, the cultural identity of a national literature is continuously undergoing the impacts of new qualities and peculiarities. Linked to features of another cultural identity, one cultural identity re-accentuates its own inexhaustible characteristics. It can be changed radically or be enriched, but its transformation cannot discredit its very existence (Bakhtin 1986, 137).

And as to the practicality and application of my arguments, the future of European integration processes, as is evident in the perspective of the proposed reflection on the identity principle as dialogism, is not likely to endanger the existence of several cultures and their individual identities in Europe. Based on Bakhtin's dialogism, one might only say that a cultural identity awakens in another's consciousness and lives on its own unrepeatable existence. In conclusion, cultural identity represents non-finite wholeness. Openness and un-predeterminedness are its most evident characteristics. Through its complexity of influences, cultural identity defies predictability. Its own creativity, when being enacted in a dialogue with other cultures, changes itself only to a new sense of its existence. Comparatively speaking, the creativity of individual cultures exists through permanent re-interpretations of their own image of identity. While taking into account the processes of cross-cultural interactions and the permanency of re-interpretations in the formation of individual cultural identities, the role of the marginal and peripheral and their validity has evolved into a new context. In a dialogism that results in overcoming monological or hegemonistic views and statuses, demarcations between majority cultures and marginal cultures is becoming a real possibility. Enacted dialogism is democratic in its origin and in its essence. In history, the marginal and the peripheral has proved influential through its will to power. The role of the marginal, following Bakhtin's philosophy of Otherness, has ultimately changed the historical transformations of thought in the twentieth century.

Note: The present publication is an updated version of Jola Skulj, "Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity: A Bakhtinian Proposal," in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice /*

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