

Limits to Transculturality: A Book Review Article of New Work by Kimmich and Schahadat and Juvan

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## Hrvoje TUTEK

### Limits to Transculturality:

#### A Book Review Article of New Work by Kimmich and Schahadat and Juvan

The discipline of comparative literature seems to have reached another one of the self-critical, self-evaluating junctures which characterized it since its inception. This time such disciplinary insecurity has a dual origin. On the one hand, the discipline has long faced the consequences of the inevitable dissolution of its privileged object of study within the wider field of semiotic phenomena that was opened as a result of the theoretical unfoldings of the last several decades, such as the later phase of the Tartu school of semiotics or deconstruction. Their impact, methodological, as well as political together with the impact of analogous theoretical tendencies rendered the borders of what were once within the Formalist framework considered irreducible literary phenomena "porous and eventually insignificant" (Tihanov 61). "Literature proper" became only one of the signifying practices to be studied, its canons eroded and called into question. On the other hand, today we also witness the constant need for justification of not only individual methodological procedures, but the purpose and existence of the discipline's entire epistemic edifice in front of external evaluative-ideological matrices which come to dominate the institutional practices of the contemporary neoliberal university. Thus the proliferation of such concerns as voiced for example in one of the panels of the 2013 annual conference of the ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association. Entitled "Should We Justify the Humanities?" the panel gathered representative officials of large professional organizations — such as the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association of America — and influential scholars in comparative literature who discussed the perceived "crisis" of the discipline as primarily a crisis of legitimation. Consequently, the discussion was oriented towards proposing pragmatic initiatives through which humanities disciplines, comparative literature among them, could be saved by new ways of selling them as a worthwhile course of study.

With this "state of the field" in mind, it needs to be added that during the past decade and a half or so, the principal theoretical concerns into which this disciplinary insecurity can perhaps be said to have sublimated — namely the debates about world literature, transnationalism, and the possibility of alternative literary historiographies — have registered the specific problems of the historical conditions of capitalist universality, such as the development of the global commodities market, the attendant relations of inequality around which the production of commodities is structured, and the appearance of alternatives to dominant social frames of reference such as the nation-state. In this context, the querying of comparative literature's plurilocal origins and cosmopolitan perspectives should not be seen only as a symptom of the above insecurity, but also as an attempt to somehow incorporate "insecurity" as a feature of disciplinary methodologies, concepts, and epistemic paradigms. Thus, since the 1990s both in the discipline of comparative literature and in the field of world literatures a large number of single-authored and collected books and articles which focus on these problems were published (see, e.g., Apter; Biti; Damrosch; Boruszko and Tötösy de Zepetnek <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6>>; D'haen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; D'haen, Domínguez, Thomsen; Grishakova, Boldrini, Reynolds <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss7>>; Habjan, "Analiza" <[http://www.srl.si/sql\\_pdf/SRL\\_2011\\_2\\_1.pdf](http://www.srl.si/sql_pdf/SRL_2011_2_1.pdf)>, "Research" <[http://sdpk.si/revija/PKn\\_2011\\_2.pdf](http://sdpk.si/revija/PKn_2011_2.pdf)>; Jay; Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5>>; Lawall; Pizer; Ramazani; Schmeling, Schmitz-Emans, Walstra; Spivak; Sturm-Trigonakis; Thomsen; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee; Vajdova, Gáfrik; Werber; for a bibliography see Tötösy de Zepetnek, <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/comparativeliteraturebooks>>).

The above referred to attempts have been driven by a broad ethical and ideological agenda the main tenets of which were described by Franco Moretti who posited that "there is no other justification for the study of world literature but this: to be a thorn in the side; a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures" (68). Although this anti-nationalist impulse is perhaps universally shared across the discipline, there is no monolithic political vision behind it or based on it, although its dominant political-ethical form has most often been conceived in the tradition of humanist cosmopolitanism. The

origin of this strain of literary thought goes back to Goethe and his *Weltliteratur* understood as a product of culture with necessarily local origins, but with a cosmopolitan outlook, a transnational cultural product which in turn produces the cultural conditions for a cosmopolitan world. But there is certainly a danger to the parameters and practices of this strain of liberal cosmopolitanism. A common criticism, for instance, condemns it as nothing more than a veiled attempt by imperialist elites to defuse instances of assertion of local difference where they are potentially subversive (see, e.g., Brennan; Gowan; Mendieta). The two books under review here should be read in relation to said problems, namely the disciplinary insecurity of comparative literature under the conditions of capitalist universality and the ideological tension carried by some of the central concepts and dominant ethical outlooks of the discipline.

Edited by Dorothee Kimmich and Schamma Schahadat, *Kulturen in Bewegung. Beiträge zur Theorie und Praxis der Transkulturalität*, is a collection of studies from various disciplines attempting to develop a theoretical framework of "transculturality," a concept the editors claim is necessary in order to grasp "the fluidity, the dynamics, and the crossing of borders between cultures ... in the age of globalization" (8; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Although some of the contributions are from fields as diverse as criminal law, pedagogy, or music, many rely on literary readings, examples, and concepts which traditionally belong to comparative literature. Despite such multidisciplinary variety, the volume maintains its conceptual coherence. In the light of the broader problems of the field described above, it can even be observed as a typical comparativist project: an attempt to develop a transnational conceptual framework for grasping the historical dynamics of cultural forms. *Kulturen in Bewegung* is divided into three parts whereby the first part serves as a conceptual foundation and each of its four essays is a theoretical exposition on the concept of transculturality or closely related concepts such as cosmopolitanism or transnational literary historiography. The first two articles written by Wolfgang Welsch and Dorothee Kimmich respectively, argue in favor of the need to replace cultural myths, or myths of culture, or old models of conceptualizing culture with newer, more flexible, and more historically appropriate ones. In his article, Welsch posits that these old models have been imagined as clearly circumscribed spheres which more or less correspond to national cultures and argues in favor of replacing them with new ones, which are open, horizontal, and which emphasize the cross-border distribution of cultural forms. The proposed concept is thus transculturality. The other two articles in the first part are written by Galin Tihanov and Anette Werberger. Tihanov examines concepts through which transculturality could be thought politically and the focus of his argument is on cosmopolitanism and its relation to nationalism and world literature as the domain in which the tension between them can be negotiated while Werberger discusses the possibilities of a transcultural historiography of literary phenomena and argues in favor of "entangled history" as a model that goes beyond the limitations of national literary histories.

The second part of the volume contains studies of "realizations of transcultural concepts in various disciplines" (17). Contributions from legal theory (Joachim Vogel), pedagogy (S. Karin Amos; Rainer Treptow), cultural history (Bernhard Maier), and music (Roland Grätz) are presented in order to argue for and demonstrate the hybrid and transnational nature of cultural formations and processes which are often taken either as authentic and monolithic — as shown in Maier's article on the continued existence of pagan models in Christian cultural forms — or as culturally specific and immobile as in Vogel's article on the relations between international criminal law and national legal institutional frameworks. The articles in the third part of the volume go back to (transcultural) literature defined by the editors as literature "that explicitly grapples with the other and reflects upon this other" (19). Renata Makarska presents various recent and contemporary literary conceptions and representations of Central Europe, a region which is, as it is claimed, traditionally transcultural. Lars Eckstein and Günter Leyboldt present a new reading of T.S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* claiming that Eliot attempts to "enact the cultural contact zone as the location of the sublime" (269). This transcultural sublime is the awareness of the double consciousness that emerges when one's own identity is challenged by its encounter with and relation to the bigger picture, the wider context where a particular identity is just a part of a whole instead of itself being that whole. The concluding article by Markus Schmitz is a study utilizing the concept of transmigration in an attempt to analyze the work of

several contemporary Arab American audio-visual artists and writers and to reveal such works' "strategies, operating procedures, and effects of artistic-literary resignifications occurring under the conditions of transmigration and globalized culture industry" (284). Such transmigrational art carries, according to Schmitz, an invaluable ideologico-critical potential he attempts to uncover.

The common denominator of the studies in *Kulturen in Bewegung* is a perspective from which cultural formations and products are observed beyond the limits of the nation-states they are often located in or identified with. The collection is an attempt to point to the arbitrariness of national cultural historiographies and to the apparent incommensurability of cultural production and the nation-state. Moving beyond what Welsch calls the old spherical model of understanding cultural production — tied primarily to the sovereign nation-state, but also beyond contemporary models of multiculturalism which retain the understanding of separate co-existing cultural formations as autonomous and self-enclosed spheres — the volume can be read as contributing to a wider social debate on co-existence, tolerance, and integration that has been going on in the West for the past couple of decades. In this respect, the volume's central proposition is that we can understand neither cultural processes, nor the contemporary social friction between what are perceived to be different cultures without reconfiguring analytical categories to account for the complex state of affairs in which cultural forms are distributed far beyond the borders of nation-states. Hence the concept of transculturality, which points not only to the border-crossing continua of cultural forms, but also to their mutual indebtedness, hybridity, and intertwining, both spatial and temporal. This is especially important to keep in mind in a historical period in which cultural production occurs under the conditions of capitalist universality where commodities (including labor, that is, people) move globally and asymmetrically as directed by the structural logic of the world-system. Transculturality as a concept as it emerges from *Kulturen in Bewegung* directs our attention to the state of flow in which "cultures" (cultural formations, processes, products) cannot be conceived as stable, insulated units and points to the arbitrariness and unsustainability of clear-cut divisions between them.

In this, however, also lies the weakness of the concept. For the difficulty in conceptualizing the mutual relations of different cultural formations is not in simply proving that they are mutually indebted to each other, but in finding out the structure of this indebtedness, in the discovery of mechanisms which configure it, in answering the question as to who is the debtor and who the creditor. In other words, the vagueness of the concept is in the fact that it does not provide a plausible historization of "transcultures." Granted, Kimmich and Schahadat claim that the concept serves to deepen the historical understanding of cultural processes: "The point is to study transculturality in a newly configured historical depth" (19). However, without a theorization that would plausibly tie these cultural processes to a specific social dynamics — that is, without a conceptual instrument that includes an immanent, material political dimension — the awareness of their historical location is not deepened, but erased. Suman Gupta's view in his 2009 *Literature and Globalization* about the hollowing out of the precise historical meaning of the concept of globalization is applicable to transculturality as argued for in *Kulturen in Bewegung*: "Denotation of every kind of historical transaction across boundaries, every encounter and imperial venture across history, everything that passed as 'international', or 'world-based,' or 'universal' in history could now be invested in the term 'globalization'" (Gupta 9). Consequently, "transculturality" as postulated in *Kulturen in Bewegung* points to an abstraction and loses much of the historical explanatory value and political charge it might have carried.

The weakness of the concept is revealed whenever it is invoked to generalize an observation about a specific historical relation. For example, the definition of transcultural literature as the one that strives toward a "clash" with the other and a reflection on the other is used to conclude, although cautiously, that it is possible to claim that all literature or art in general is always already transcultural. However, the aesthetization of the relation to the other is a specific historical preoccupation the condition of possibility of which is modernity or to be more precise, the modern conceptions of individuality. Pre-modern aesthetic production, for instance, is subsumed under various ritual practices which at the basic level serve the needs of inward-oriented communities, not outward-oriented individuals and cannot be said to "reflect on the other." This would mean that we would have to deny — if we wanted to retain the transcultural definition of art that the editors argue for — that

the pre-modern communities have been capable of aesthetic production, which seems as an arbitrary and unsatisfactory conclusion. What allows for such arbitrariness is precisely the lack of regard for historical specificity which in this case leads to a projection of a modern idealist, cosmopolitan definition of aesthetic practice onto a historical period where such a definition is simply not valid because the historical conditions which allowed its emergence do not exist.

My second example is the suggestion expressed in the volume that the concept of transculturality supersedes used-up concepts developed within the paradigm of postcolonial studies: "No special historical place will be conceded to the age of colonization and decolonization anymore" (Kimmich and Schahadat 12). Certainly, there is a need to move beyond some of the commonplaces of postcolonial theory, but this cannot be done by decree as if the legacy of colonialism has left no traces on the contemporary, globalized distribution of cultural forms and configurations of power. It is not possible to simply move automatically beyond the postcolonial paradigms now that globalization is the order of the day. Kimmich and Schahadat claim that "it is now possible, from the perspective of transculturality, to explore the political and cultural landscapes that have traditionally been passed over or examined only rarely within the historical framework of colonization and decolonization" (8). Although it is true that postcolonial theory has had its blind spots, it offered valid theorizations of a fundamentally important historical relation which cannot simply be left behind even when one is stepping out of its comfort zones. Instead, they need to either be built upon or their postulates challenged by more valid theories. Further, although it might be true that the particular problematics of postcolonial theory should not be conceded a privileged place in theorizations of culture anymore, transculturality as it is offered in *Kulturen in Bewegung* does not provide us with an alternative theorization of the social dynamics in which cultural formations we study are embedded. A cultural theoretical concept that strives to have explanatory power (and as such a specific political charge) cannot be devoid of history and cannot be merely an abstract indicator of cross-border cultural processes. This abstraction is, again, what leads to conclusions such as "What is crucial here, however, is that the contemporary transmigrants, in comparison to the ones in the past, are not anymore just victims in a foreign land, but possess in addition to that a certain creative potential as they construct 'fluid and multiple identities'" (12). Certainly, there might be a creative potential to living trans- or cross-culturally for certain individuals or groups of "transmigrants" (on the problem of the meaning and taxonomy of "migrant" and "immigrant," see Sturm-Trigonakis). And this potential might at a certain level, as it is implied, present a challenge to the closed nature of national cultures. But, unfortunately, it is not simply the "closedness" of national cultures that is the fuel for social friction we learned to expect in our day and age. The reasons behind the friction are not simply a matter of mutual unintelligibility of cultural groups — which, as Kimmich notes, is often the unfruitful and politically rather unfortunate conclusion that the hermeneutic tradition of cultural analysis often comes to — or a problem of wrong calibrations of our conceptual apparatus which do not allow us to see the mutual exchange, the intertwining of cultural formations which would allow us to recognize the other within ourselves and ourselves in the other. Here one should be blunt and say that the friction comes about as a function of the global production of inequality that puts certain populations and their cultures in a position of perpetual material dependency that gives birth to an understandable bitterness, anxiety, and resistance (both on their part and on the part of the ones in more privileged positions) which cannot simply be removed culturally — by fostering understanding or offering more open models of cultural analysis — because the cultures themselves are forged from this inequality. From this point of view to argue for the concept of transculturality as expounded in *Kulturen in Bewegung* becomes a way to mystify the asymmetrical nature of the world-system and a sure way to its continued existence. To paraphrase Moretti, the system might be one, but it is also profoundly unequal.

If the main problem of *Kulturen in Bewegung* is a conceptual blindness to the structural logic of inequality, Marko Juvan's book *Prešernovska struktura in svetovni literarni sistem* (The Prešernian Structure and the World Literary System) addresses precisely this problem. After the first part of the book — which contains a detailed study of the history and development of the concept and practices of world literature from the perspective of recent world-system approaches — the second part is a theoretical interlude presenting and developing ideas on transnational literary study and the concepts

of cultural transfer and entangled history that will serve as analytical tools in the third and final part. In the latter part of the book Juvan turns to Slovenian material and identifies the emergence of nineteenth-century Slovenian romantic cosmopolitanism as the point of entry of the idea (or a hegemonic organizing principle) of *Weltliteratur* into Slovenian national literature via cultural transfer accomplished by the "national poet" France Prešeren and his colleague Matija Čop. This principle is then followed in its various incarnations, developments, and functions for the Slovenian literary field throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Juvan shows how the peripheral place of the Slovenian literary field within the constellation of *Weltliteratur* was the material basis on which national cultural myths (later integrated into methodologies of literary historiography) were formed. Finally, by analyzing Dimitrij Rupel's sociological theory of what came to be known as the "Slovenian cultural syndrome" — i.e., the rationalization of the belated development of Slovenian literature in relation to the literary centers as a uniquely Slovenian condition and a consequence of Slovenian literature's role as a substitute for institutional national politics, which was impossible within the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Empire — and Dušan Pirjevec's literary-historical analysis of the "Prešernian structure," Juvan shows that the two theorists have managed to reproduce the same ideological structures they set out to analyze in the first place instead of analyzing these phenomena from an external position and providing their meta-descriptions as they claimed to have done. Their place is, according to Juvan's analysis, firmly within the practices and ideologies they set out to criticize. In this, as in other places throughout the book, Juvan's analysis is convincing, but that does not free it from what might be called some blind spots of its own.

What Juvan's analysis manages to achieve is to dispel the illusory idea that national cultural self-representations such as the "Slovenian cultural syndrome" can be thought of as authentically national phenomena, in this case as a *differentia specifica* of Slovenian national culture. In addition, Juvan shows how attempts to study Slovenian literature comparatively have all concentrated on relating it normatively and one-dimensionally to Western literatures, whereas the relations with other literatures on the "periphery" remain rarely examined (on a similar situation with regard to modern Greek literature, see Kalantzopoulou <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/14>>). Juvan's transnational analysis is successful in showing how narratives of origin of national culture are wrong in the presupposition of national "uniqueness." But this analysis also shows indirectly how there are reasons to conceive of the interconnected world-system of *Weltliteratur* as structurally asymmetrical and of its elements as unequal. Moreover, this inequality, as Juvan himself admits, comes close to the distribution of economic inequality. As such, while the claims of Slovenian uniqueness perpetuated by national literature historians and others embedded into ideologies of Slovenian nationalism might be illusory, these claims are certainly not illusory in their role as demarcations of a certain type of subordination. As such, they cannot be completely dismissed as "false consciousness." The discovery of the simultaneous appearance of "syndromes" such as the one described by Juvan in various places within the world-system recalibrates the nationalist historiographic perspective by pointing to the illusory nature of phantasms of national identity as "unique." However, by retaining the concept of national literature as a primary unit of analysis — although Juvan incorporates it into a systematic continuum that shatters the ideological illusions of nationalists — another problematic illusion remains intact. This illusion is the idea that a nation offers itself as an irreducible unit of analysis existing as a homogeneous social formation: Moretti, for instance, goes around this problem by concentrating on the study of forms as such and disregards the problem of the national canon.

In addition to above, if the concept of national literature is used in combination with Goethe's *Weltliteratur* — burdened as it is with the economism of Goethe's ideas on cultural competition and exchange — it is precisely its simplistic economism that hides the complexity of material relations which influence the production and dissemination of national cultural forms in a historical situation (as I argue with regard to the shortcomings of Kimmich's and Schahadat's volume *Kulturen in Bewegung*). For it is not true that the agents in the cultural field who "interact and exchange" in the name of a nation are simply commensurate with the complex reality of that social phenomenon: such a view is an extension of the type of romantic nationalism that attributed nations the characteristics of individuals. In this sense, the same criticism Juvan levels at Pirjevec and Rupel — namely that they are blind to their historical position and to the embeddedness of their own theories into the ideological

traditions they attempt to criticize — can also be applied to Juvan's book. Further, it can also be said that it is precisely the project of constructing a theory of transnational distribution of what used to be perceived as national cultural phenomena which reflect contemporary historical demands: if the nineteenth-century class project of Prešeren and other Slovenian intellectuals was building a cultural basis for the formation of the nation-state, then it can be said that the late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century project of the same social stratum is precisely the opposite, namely to construct a transnational cultural basis that enables a frictionless integration of national cultures within the institutional and ideological framework of supranational formations such as the European Union. What seems to linger unsaid throughout Juvan's book is a presupposition that revealing the transcultural distribution of certain social phenomena — such as cultural myths of national uniqueness — would be the basis upon which a less inward-oriented, more pluralistic political project could be built. I do not contest that such an intellectual operation is necessary. However, I do feel that this has to go beyond establishing genealogies of national cultural phenomena which reveal their horizontal transnational distribution and move towards historical explanations which situate the projects of nation-building within an analytical framework that also includes intra-national and vertical stratification.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that *Weltliteratur*, as well as its histories are top-down projects in the sense that their history can be observed as the history of the hegemony of dominant social groups. Thus, developing concepts which help us observe cultural phenomena in that dimension as well is a necessary pursuit. However, if what I wrote about the demands of the particular historical moment in which Juvan's study is produced is true, perhaps it is not fair to level this criticism because, after all, who can hope to leap beyond the limitations of one's own historical horizon? Juvan's *Prešernovska struktura in svetovni literarni sistem* and Kimmich's and Schahadat's *Kulturen in Bewegung. Beiträge zur Theorie und Praxis der Transkulturalität* are valuable studies which add to the current scholarly discourse on globalization and culture and provide impetus to explore the matter further both theoretically and in practice.

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