

Comparative Literature, (Comparative) Cultural Studies, Aesthetic Education, and the Humanities

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**Volume 15 Issue 7 (December 2013) Article 4**  
**Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser,**  
**"Comparative Literature, (Comparative) Cultural Studies,**  
**Aesthetic Education, and the Humanities"**  
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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.7 (2013)***  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Comparative Literature, (Comparative) Cultural Studies, Aesthetic Education, and the Humanities" Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser discusses comparative literature in the context of cultural studies and aesthetic education. Her starting point is the complexity of comparative literature as an academic discipline propelled by intellectual curiosity for what lies across the barriers which stand in the way of understanding and enjoying creative acts of all kinds everywhere and at all times. Literary and artistic investigations which focus on aesthetic values lead us towards general aesthetics, analyses which situate the arts and literature in context with little regard for aesthetic criteria take us towards cultural studies. How are these three areas related? Do they share the same concerns in relation to creativity? How do they survive and cooperate in the contemporary world in which the humanities are often sidelined?

## Sonja STOJMENSKA-ELZESER

### Comparative Literature, (Comparative) Cultural Studies, Aesthetic Education, and the Humanities

It is difficult to imagine any other academic discipline questioning its own identity and status continuously as comparative literature has done and continues to do. Perhaps this is because comparative literature needs to unite the rigorous attention to detail typical of literary studies with a necessarily synthetic view of the world. Being a comparatist means addressing the world and human life expressed in acts of creation. Since the late 1950s, comparative literature has found itself in a perennial "under reconstruction" mode and suffering from the tectonic shifts the humanities in general have had to face, including threats to their relevance. Today's politicized and profit oriented world has often pushed the humanities to the outskirts of socially viable engagement. As far back as 1959, the alarming split between the camps of practical, purpose-oriented scientific knowledge and the allegedly less useful form of knowledge of the humanities was evoked in the title of Charles Percy Snow's "two cultures" paradigm. In his later addition of 1963, *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, Snow returned to this postulate and introduced a new term: third culture (*The Two Cultures* 70-71), which he then used to mediate the antagonisms between the (exact) sciences and the humanities. However, from today's perspective, Snow's assumption that Shakespeare "is read by all," including scientists, alongside his insistence that a respectable literary intellectual should also be familiar with the first law of thermodynamics as part of his/her arsenal (14-15), appears naive, since it may be argued that today's knowledge seekers have a far more difficult time embracing literature than paying attention to the latest technological, financial, or medical inventions. In fact, while today's technologically savvy world may seem to promote an integrated scientific worldview, we live in an intellectually polarized environment, perhaps more than ever before, where the humanities are marginalized at the hands of the exact sciences.

This is the atmosphere in which comparative literature tries to make its home as one of literary studies' sub-disciplines. I use "literary studies" here as an umbrella term, often employed, ~~and~~ including at institutional levels, in many European universities to unite the separate national literary histories, critical theory, as well as general and comparative literature studies. "Comparative Literature ... postulates 'Otherness' as its foundational principle, one that allows it to open up borders, translate cultures, and entwine arts whilst looking for a lively and engaged dialogue of ideas and creation. At the same time, this stands as its core trait, accounting for its vitality and strength, despite all of the negations along its century-old historical development" (Stojmenska-Elzeser 8; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Countless definitions have been given as to what exactly is comparative literature, beginning with those who see it as an intellectual adventure all the way to those who equate it with a worldview. According to Yves Chevrel, "If comparative literature has any ambitions, it is to attempt to contribute to a modern form of humanism, valuing each expression of the human spirit" ("Si le comparatisme a une ambition, c'est d'essayer de contribuer à une forme moderne d'humanisme, qui accorde du prix à toute expression de l'esprit humain" [123]). According to Mary Louise Pratt, comparative literature is a "hospitable space" for "the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and a genuinely global consciousness" (62). For Armando Gnisci, if comparative literature is a way of studying and understanding the decolonization of countries which acquire their independence from the West, then comparative literature must represent, for European scholars, "the form of thinking, of self-critique and of learning, in other words: the discipline to decolonize ourselves from ourselves" ("la forma di pensiero, di autocritica e di educazione, in altre parole: la disciplina per decolonizzarci da noi stessi" [44]) while for Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, it means "the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature ... Comparative Literature has an ideology of the inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc." (*Comparative* 13). Comparative literature is, after all, a reading of and writing about literary works as

openly without constraints and limitations and as multi-focally as possible. This writing of/about implies an affirmative stance towards the art of the word and towards literature in general.

The power and value of words points towards other disciplines as well: linguistics, cognitive linguistics, semiotics, etc. Let us take Mark Turner's 1996 *The Literary Mind* in which he offers a contribution to the study of the meaning of literary woven words particularly in the context of cognitive research. Turner argues that artistic (literary) expression is the basis for language itself ("language itself is a child of the literary mind"), that consciousness functions in a literary way through the act of storytelling: "Narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought ... the mind is essentially literary" (4-5). If this is so, then literature is not ephemeral and represents an essential part of being human so that its study and interpretation makes the humanities valuable in themselves. Bearing in mind this understanding of the power of words, literary writing (literary production output) becomes connotatively rich and thus surpasses the confines of the strictly literary. Comparative literature in particular is what has led to developments in a large spectrum of wider cultural perspectives such as gender studies, imagology, translation studies, intercultural communication, intermedial studies, geo-cultural and environmental studies, and so on. All these perspectives approach the literary text as a function of certain knowledge bases in other areas. Thus the literary text acts as an illustrative and applicative material for theses outside of literature's domain. In this way, comparative literature transforms itself into cultural studies and the study of literature changes focus from the literary works themselves to their various contextualizations (of course, cultural studies themselves have their various perspectives, approaches, and schools). On the one hand, cultural research opens up unusual perspectives and reaches worthy conclusions (particularly about the relationship between culture and power); on the other hand, seen from literature's perspective, it can be deemed reductionist.

Cultural studies, which by definition is a field of research that is wide and open, often restricts its scope by returning repeatedly to the same limited amount of literary works that best suit (best act as illustrations of) the dominant interest of the theorizations, thus ending up in a closed circle, as it were: only a handful of literary works remain researched continuously and countless articles keep referencing the same titles (for example, *Heart of Darkness*, *Beloved*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, etc.). The sheer act of re-repetition and statistical annotation of the issues thus analyzed risks rendering those same issues banal (see, e.g., Todorova; for a bibliography see Salzani and Tötösy de Zepetnek <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/travelstudiesbibliography>>). In literature proper, in keeping with the objection to "peripheralization," there are a number of texts in which the stereotypes of the "Balkans" and Europe are deconstructed, for example in Dejan Dukovski's plays or in the novels of Goran Stefanovski and Kica Bardžieva Kolbe. We can go so far as to say that the writers themselves are prone to certain literary modes and themes writing in ways which are current in a given moment. For example, in contemporary Macedonian literature there are many texts which refer to antiquity as a reflection of the current political situation, for example in the work of Slobodan Mickovich or Mitko Madzunkov. Thus these examples demonstrate how social, political, and/or historical backgrounds operate in both creative production and scholarship. In consequence, I argue that work in (comparative) cultural studies — despite protests over their dismissal of aesthetic valorization — remains relevant and necessary to the understanding of literature's contextual aspects with regard to questions on cultural practices and powers, everydayness, the economic, political, historic, geographic, and other kinds of contexts.

Literature of course does not, for all this, forsake its primary function as the art of the word, or, more simply put, as an aesthetic category. The element of enjoyment when experiencing literary works is once again gaining interest, becoming almost indispensable to today's hectic lifestyle; yet imaginative worlds open us up to a world beyond mere enjoyment, helping us seek solutions to the gravest of the emerging problems. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her 2012 *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, re-actualizes the meaning and potential of an aesthetic education. This thesis is well-supported through Spivak's interpretation of Friedrich Schiller's letters, which she uses to postulate the trust that needs to be placed in the art of the literary and the playful, ludic nature of creation itself. But as Spivak herself points out, her book enacts a kind of a sabotage of Schiller's model of seeing literature as a disinterested game, since she deems the aesthetic nature of literature

to have an unparalleled potential of/for human/e action. Spivak advocates that by nurturing the imaginative world of the literary we could change the world: "The most pernicious presupposition today is that globalization has happily happened in every aspect of our lives. Globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being except insofar as it always was implicit in its vanishing outlines. Only an aesthetic education can continue to prepare us for this" (Spivak, *An Aesthetic* 2) since aesthetic education is, as the blurb on the book's back cover suggests, "the last available instrument for implementing global justice." This reminds us of Prince Myshkin's words in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* that "the world will be saved by beauty" (402). Although this may seem Quixotic, it still gives hope that the aesthetic education can remain an important and necessary part of the study of literature. If aesthetic education is concerned with the ability of young (and not just young) people to engage with literary works — the training to recognize aesthetic values not just in academia, but everywhere they meet them, to educate perception, to see and know differently, to learn to "communicate" with literature, not just to memorize, analyze, and criticize it, to build their own literary taste, learn to admire and appreciate literature for what it reveals about the world and how it shapes our lives, and prepare themselves for creative work — and if, subtending all this, is the notion that creating and consuming aesthetics is not just a playful act, but is always an ethical positioning, then aesthetics cannot be what it is if it is not at the same time an affirmation of humanistic ideals. Humanism is its essential quality and even, perhaps, its *raison d'être*.

If we consider the areas of the humanities I am discussing here — aesthetic education, comparative literature, and (comparative) cultural studies — we can see them as forming a unique triangle in which all three sides are facing each other emanating energies which act on one another. They seem, in a way, to reflect the triad text-intertext-context as these three vistas through their continuous mutual influences also merge the internal and external approach to the study of literature. They appear to me as three interdisciplinary nexuses which connect different aspects of literary studies through their common tendencies and points of intersection and through their diverse strategies and practices. Thus comparative literature when it widens its interests to other spheres of the humanities becomes cultural studies (on comparative literature and cultural studies as "comparative cultural studies" see Tötösy de Zepetnek, "From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>, "The New"; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

I posit that instead of teaching one monolithic compendium of "European literature" it would be the above suggested triangle of the study of literature that would serve scholarship and pedagogy best. The new European imaginary is divided between two tendencies: to connect all the different streams in one common identity based on common cultural memory, creativity, and common interest of various kinds and at the same time to care about the specificity and uniqueness of all the different identities in the European frame and to respect their diversity. "European literature" as one single coherent and cumulative teaching field shows up as a utopian and impossible project. Evidently, there are problems with defining European identity itself, so the question of European literature is even more complicated. Which and whose literary works could be incorporated in the common European literary canon if such a canon indeed exists at all? The building of such a canon can no longer be based on the principles of the classic concept of literary history, but it must take in consideration many different and, indeed, mainly "unliterary" aspects: the pragmatic aspects of literary phenomena, the literary system, the market, economy, literary awards, to name just some. And of course, postcolonial aspects are influential, too, especially regarding the minor European cultures (which were themselves subject to colonial experiences as in most of East Europe [see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Central*, "Configurations"]) as well as the hybrid cultures born as a result of (im)migrations (this, especially in the United Kingdom and France, but also as a result of economic immigration as we see in the example of Turkish German writing [see, e.g., Sturm-Trigonakis]). Transculturality as a dominant form of reality of the world has consequences for the humanities. For all these reasons I dare to ask: Does the academy need a canonical approach at all? Does the scholar need to have encyclopedic knowledge about the sum of the national literary canons? I prefer to answer this question negatively and argue that while scholars need to have a basic orientation in the map of the European "republic of letters" (Casanova), they also need to develop a sense of the specificities of the European cultural context. My context for this statement is that of a perspective not

usually thought about much when discussing Europe, which is, nevertheless, European and whose production of culture has strong European bases: the Macedonian perspective, which is, in a way, marginal, peripheral, and subaltern. In Macedonian comparativism and theory of recent decades multiculturalism and interculturalism have been the most popular and re-thought concepts with the intention of going beyond the prejudices and stereotypes of the European cultural landscape. In this debate, the postcolonial theoretical paradigm — as part of a wider intercultural research or theory of otherness — is the most powerful theoretical tool for reaching some conclusions about cultural identities and for self-recognition. For the less powerful, subaltern, peripheral cultures such as the Macedonian these discourses give an opportunity to express their historical pain and marginalization as an academic and creative act and they offer a way of making an effort to take another step towards finding solutions for overcoming the problems inherent in the center-periphery opposition. The Macedonian point of view on European culture is a sensitive one and its many nuances reflect the specificities of the European cultural context.

What do I mean when I say specificities of European cultural context? First, I think of the constant redefinition of European identity as an unstable and ever changing concept. Europe is an "unfinished adventure" (see Bauman, *Europe*), something that is still to come, an identity that is in process of building, or "under reconstruction." Europe is an enigma: geographically it is "a little promontory on the continent of Asia" (Valéry 31), in mythology it is a raped princess who is happy to be kidnapped by politicians such as Jacques Delors to whom Europe is an "unidentified political object" (Delors qtd. in Drake 24), for economists it is a common market without soul, for philosophers it is many different things, for George Steiner "a map of cafés" (18), etc. The question of European identity is often treated in literary works, so it helps to include voices of poets and writers in this endless discussion. The orientation of scholars in this intellectual cartography of the idea of, about, and for European culture is most important for its further understanding as inclusive, transcultural, post-national, and post-Eurocentric. Intercultural communication, multiple identities, pluralism, and diversity should be widely accepted as the principles of a rethinking of the European context. Europe should be always accepted as a mission and as a task: "We must always be building Europe. And it can't be built with hegemonic intentions, as we have seen throughout European history: Charlemagne, Charles V, Napoleon, Hitler — they all attempted to exercise hegemonic power over Europe. But every time someone has tried it, Europe has got rid of them, she has not wanted anyone who wanted one Europe. Europe is not one, they are many" (Cacciari qtd. in Cacciari, Casals, García Ruiz <<http://w2.bcn.cat/bcnmetropolis/arxiu/en/page63eb.html?id=21&ui=400>>). In this multiple and polycentric vision of European culture, literature cannot be treated as a totalizing master narrative: it exists in partial networks, localized narratives, nexuses of researches made from European, but not Eurocentric, perspectives.

The study of the literatures of Europe can have a vertical or horizontal direction: it can turn attention to phenomena which happen across time or space, and it can be either of historical and or geographical. The former should focus on different, evolving stylistic formations within literary history which can be commented on from a European perspective. Some of the best books of comparative literature are, de facto, such types of research, for example Auerbach's *Mimesis*, De Torre's *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia*, Hocke's *Die Welt als Labyrinth*, Praz's *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, etc. The problem is that there are some moments in literary history which are appropriate for European contextualization while others are less so. For example, the periods of the Renaissance, medieval culture, romanticism, modernism, or the culture of the twentieth century can be easily put into international frames and be researched on a transnational European level. Other movements are local and difficult to observe in the wider European context, for example Czech *poetizmus*, Macedonian interwar social playwriting, the British Bloomsbury group, etc.

In the horizontal approach, the multiplicity of European identity can be researched from the starting point of cultural geography and oriented towards the understanding of the unique nature of European regions and the dominant characteristic of the literatures written within them. An example would be the Mediterranean cultural sphere as it is studied by Fernand Braudel or the phenomena of Central Europe as in Kundera's, Havel's, or Kiš's work or Occident-Orient implications in culture and literature with regard to the specificities of southeastern Europe (e.g., Kalantzopoulou

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/14>>), of the Black Sea (Asherson), of the Danube (Magris), reflections on the Nordic, Alpine, Adriatic, Iberian, and others cultural regions, etc. Especially provocative, still enigmatic and politically colored is the problem of the East European and South-East European cultural region: as an example I refer to the project *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, where the chronological and national principle of writing literary history is replaced with the principle of "nodes" such as (multi)cultural regions. These approaches, in classic comparative literature, were expressed in the theory of interliterary communities advocated by Dionýz Ďurišin. And more recently, scholars in area studies introduced the importance of an awareness of the common characteristics of wider geographical or geopolitical regions (e.g., Spivak, *Death*).

Europe is observed as a Europe of regions, of intercultural connections, of nodes, to adopt Cornis-Pope's and Neubauer's term, or nexuses, as I call them. Another level of observation could be the Europe of urban settlements. European cities — the backstage for many narratives — give an additional opportunity to comment on the characteristics of plurivocal and intercultural European realities. There are many literary works connected or devoted to particular cities so that there is much material and this can combine literary facts with architecture, film, tourism, urban sociology, and other aspects of cultural studies (see, e.g., Lisiak). For example, cities like Dublin, Saint Petersburg, Paris, Prague, or Barcelona can be seen through the eyes and the discourses of their writers Joyce, Pushkin, Baudelaire, Kafka, etc., as well through the work of filmmakers, painters, and architects. Most provocative in this regard are border cities and cities with strong multi- and intercultural background such as Odessa, Vilnius, Trieste, Sarajevo, or Skopje. The concept of the *flâneur* and the postmodern concept of imagined or even "invisible cities" (Calvino), as well as the influence of art and literature on a city's formation of identity are some of the questions which can be discussed. Cities are the location of transcultural transformations provoked by (im)migrations, exiles, and other forms of travelling, and any new elaboration of European culture has to take that into account: "Transnational and transcultural streams are not exceptions any more, we can say that they became norm or very soon will be norm. They are the material from which the European culture and identity should be carefully built" (Robins 281). The study of literature needs to pay attention to writers whose profiles and literary works are "on the borders" and who engage in cultural dialog in their works. Exiled and diasporic authors are a special case for teaching literature in a European context and their contribution is vital in producing a "literature for Europe" because in their works we can recognize the high concern for the multiplicity of European identity (Neubauer 133).

The question of cultural mediation focuses our attention on the most important aspect of supranational cultural and literary research: translation. Scholars must be aware of the importance of literary translation as highly creative work, but also of the impact of non-literary factors in its processes because they are connected with ideology, politics, fashion, marketing, literary awards, and other aspects of the cultural industry and readership. For literary works coming from so-called "minor cultures" being recognized and accepted by readers from other European environments is one of the main goals and translation is the first step towards it. Thus the theory and practice of literary translation is an important part of education and of cultural policy in general today: "how much wisdom would we have all gained, how much would our co-existence have benefited, if part of the Union's funds had been devoted to the translation of its inhabitants' writings ...? Personally I am convinced that it might have been the best investment in the future of Europe and the success of its mission" (Bauman, *Culture* 87; see also Apter; Even-Zohar). With the new technologies, the policies of better knowing each other and the vision of possibility for "everyone learning from everyone" (Bauman, *Culture* 84) become more and more optimistic, so the numerous projects of electronic sources or libraries, archives, and digitalized museums provide us with access to greater amounts of information. However, knowledge does not consist just of information: it consists of moving through information, systematizing and applying facts according to the chosen premises. That is why my advocating the teaching of literature in European context, rather than teaching the history of literatures written in Europe in the classic sense is a kind of orientation, preparation, and general framework for various projects of research. In their contact with literature written in the countries located on the European continent students of literature and culture would learn how to recognize and

to overcome the Eurocentric position, not just in the imperial history of the past but also today in policies, discourses, and movements of our time. Thus they participate in the redefinition of the European imaginary and enrich the polyglossia of discourses on Europe.

My proposed educational practice — for both scholars and students of literature — is eclectic from the methodological point of view: it is a program for pedagogy in comparative literature, (comparative) cultural studies, and aesthetic education in combination with various disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology) and different approaches (area studies, postcolonial criticism, translation studies, etc.). However, where, exactly, is literature here? In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* Jan Assmann argues that cultural memory is secured by the canon: the implication of this is that the canon is important for preserving traditional common values for the future. But what can be the canon of European literatures? Is that just a mathematical sum of canons of national European literatures? The problem also occurs when we consider that the national canons do not as a rule include the literatures of minorities, diasporas, dialects (on the question of canon and European literatures see, e.g., Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>; Talvet <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/6>>). Maybe present-day digital databases can make it possible to assemble the detailed picture of all the written texts in all European cultures, but who needs such a picture? Can one person use such knowledge? In order to analyse literature in the European context it is not necessary to be informed about every single literary work although of course, the more languages and texts one knows, the better. It is more important to be capable, through select examples, to acquire the awareness of a supranational, intercultural, "de-colonized" (Gnisci) and post-Eurocentric vision of their inter-connections.

With the proposed approach to literary education we could then contribute to the building of "European citizenship" and to the forming of a European public sphere, which is one of the main necessities of the contemporary European integration process. Literature is a phenomenon of cultural dialogue and a specific mode of communication. If we agree that "Europe exists only in the modes of communication about it" and that the "EU has become more like a network than a traditional state" (Delanty 129-30), then researching literature in the European context can be one of the most interesting fields to examine the fundamental ideas of the European Union, dominant European discourses and concepts, and European poetic self-definition. Such an approach to the study of literature and culture seems appropriate to what Bauman calls "liquid modernity" and is future oriented. Literary works give an opportunity to speculate on the further possible developments of the European Union from various positions: Euro-sceptic, Euro-optimistic, post-West-European, neo-medieval, catastrophic, and so on. For example, Jan Zielonka recognizes neo-medievalism in the new enlarged Europe as a "new creation" which resembles to the medieval empires from the pre-national period. Such an image of Europe is seen as "remedy for coping with the current set of challenges ... it is in a good position to cope with the pressures of globalization because of its inbuilt flexibility and ability to learn ... because it pulls together vast European resources without eliminating Europe's greatest strength: its pluralism and diversity (Zielonka 190-91). From the point of view of comparative literature, the most eminent research on literature from a European perspective has dealt exactly with the medieval paradigm (e.g., Curtius; le Goff). The model of the medieval world can be a fruitful starting point for rethinking the model of the new-European culture, but there are some controversial aspects which should be taken in consideration: imperial power and dominance and religious dominance. While the European tradition is mainly thought of as founded on the Western Christian tradition, it is becoming obvious that after the new enlargement processes of the European Union two other aspects should be taken in consideration: the Slavic Orthodox and the Islamic cultural traditions. All of the traditional streams go beyond any singular regional and national traditions and had great influence on the shaping of European identity and its imaginary. Literary discourses could help in facing these challenges and reshaping the European imaginary in accordance with the complexity of European reality.

All of these reflections need to be built upon the aesthetic experience of a range of artistic works including painting, cinema, music, theater, architecture, and, of course, literature read in its original languages and/or in translation. Hence my objective to advocate the study and teaching of literature in a European context in a constellation of comparative literature, (comparative) cultural studies, and



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aesthetic education. Can they be successful in showing us that literature continues to be a key ingredient of life that cannot be dismissed or replaced? Does literature really have an impact on the key lasting and positive changes in the world? Can the humanities survive despite the many negative forces which threaten them? We can only hope by pointing to the relevance of the study of literature and literature itself so that the humanities remain an important factor of education.

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