

Critical Essays on  
World Literature,  
Comparative  
Literature and the  
“Other”



# Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature and the “Other”

By

Jüri Talvet

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

My path to the present discussion of world literature, comparative literature and the "other" has been long, and not at all devoid of "bifurcations" and "betrayals". My mental-spiritual formation started in the deep Soviet era during my eleven years in a secondary school (bearing the name of the celebrated Estonian patriot and poet Lydia Koidula) in my native town, Pärnu. My homeland Estonia, which had enjoyed its first ever brief period of independence as a European state between two world wars, was against its will made part of the USSR. My school years began in the autumn of the same year that the dictator Stalin left the world.

Any nationalism contradicting the Soviet-Russian rule was nipped in the bud without mercy, and those few courageous patriots who dared to show the blue-black-white Estonian tricolor in public were deported to prison-camps in Siberia. Yet the precedent of the pre-war Estonian Republic made the Communist regime begrudgingly respect the Estonian language and our cultural heritage. Despite ideological and political restrictions, even during the harshest Stalinist years, most Estonian schools, universities and institutions as well as newspapers, magazines and the public media continued to use the Estonian language. Both original and translated works of literature appeared in our native language.

Notwithstanding the official propaganda and the forcible conjugal life of both communities, Estonians and Russians remained mutually alienated under the Soviet rule. Although the state language, Russian, was quite extensively taught at schools, the average fluency among the native Estonian population was still low. The deep historical wounds of my compatriots (such as massive deportations of Estonians to Siberia, etc.) inhibited the motivation to learn, in addition to which Russian (a Slavic, Indo-European language) and Estonian (a Finno-Ugric, non-Indo-European language) have substantial morphological and grammatical differences.

As for Western foreign languages, English and German had only a modest part in the curricula of our secondary schools. Their immediate use and practice lacked any perspective, because the Soviet empire, despite claims of propagating friendship between peoples of the world, kept its borders firmly closed.

Once the Stalin era ended, letter-exchanges with other countries were officially permitted. Especially in the last years of my secondary school, in



the atmosphere of the relative liberalization brought about by Nikita Khrushshov's short-lived rise to power, I found pen-friends in a number of foreign countries, including Spain. As my knowledge of foreign languages was still faulty in those times, I learned Esperanto, which enabled elementary communication. Though I had the ambition of continuing my study of English in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), in the vicinity of Estonia, I was not permitted to enter the university there. Instead I was forced to spend three years of compulsory military service outside Estonia—first in Kaliningrad (formerly, Königsberg) and then in Riga, the capital city of our neighboring Latvia. There indeed I learned to speak Russian, the only language spoken in the army. My interest in Western languages, though, was not extinguished. In the free time allotted to soldiers I took up learning—on my own, from manuals—German and French. I have never learned to speak them properly, but with the help of dictionaries I can still access and understand written and literary texts.

In autumn 1967 at last, I entered Estonia's principal university, in Tartu. I majored in English philology. The uniform curriculum (applied at all universities of the USSR) included history of philosophy, Western literary history, general linguistics and some other useful courses. During my five years of university studies I became quite aware that above all I felt stimulated by and attracted to the fields of literature and philosophy. Yet I declined an offer to enter doctoral studies in philosophy, because that area was subjected above all to the strictest ideological control. Professors of philosophy had to follow the only orthodox teaching, Marxism. As a pledge of their orthodoxy they had to enter the Communist Party. It is true, some of our university professors of philosophy did take an interest in Heidegger and in other ideologically "harmful" Western thinkers. But it was in secret, as their private "hobby": publishing on such topics remained a taboo.

I am thankful to a number of my Estonian professors of those years as a student. Several of them, having started their activity in the formerly independent Estonia, carried something of its freer spirit and academic solidity to the Soviet era. Yet my greatest inspiration among professors was Arthur-Robert Hone (1915-1972), a truly exceptional and genuine Briton, the only foreigner who had permission to live permanently in postwar Tartu. Being himself a young left-wing intellectual, his love of Aira Kaal, the left-wing Estonian poet he married, brought him to Estonia before WWII. Hone taught us, students of English philology, a thorough course of English literary history, but he also had a deep knowledge of music and musical history, understood Chinese and was interested in Oriental philosophy. A Cambridge graduate in Romanic philology, he knew both French and Spanish. Although Spanish was not (and could not be during that period) in

the official curriculum of our university, for many years Hone taught Spanish to students on a voluntary basis. I was among the last students whose graduation theses he supervised. Its topic, literary relations between England and Spain during the Renaissance, far exceeded my youthful capacity and knowledge, but at least it initiated me early into comparative research. Hone's love of Spanish culture and literature "infected" me, and by happy coincidence pushed me ever farther from my official major, finally determining my "betrayal" and subsequent "conversion" to Hispanic culture and literature.

I was intensely stimulated by the letter-exchange with some culturally oriented young people in Spain (especially with Albert Lázaro Tinaut, with whom I collaborated on literary and cultural topics some 16 years before we had the first chance to meet in person). In my student years I became acquainted with Ain Kaalep (born in 1926), a major Estonian post-war intellectual, writer and translator in Estonian of the work of Lope de Vega, Federico García Lorca, César Vallejo and other great Spanish language poets. An important stimulus for me was the fact that Spanish and Latin-American literature were scarcely known in Estonia at that time: I could become a pathfinder. Indeed, later, favored by the general euphoria and enthusiasm of the newly restored independent Estonian Republic (1991) and supported by a few other colleagues, I founded a program of Spanish studies at our University of Tartu, the first complete Spanish curriculum in the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). Its rationale depended in part on my having earned my PhD by then and holding the Chair of World/Comparative Literature at my home university.

As a budding lecturer, I began to teach courses on Western literary history in 1974, and soon after was admitted to PhD studies at Leningrad/St. Petersburg university in their department of Foreign (Western) Literature. Professor Zakharias Plavskin (1918-2006), who taught general courses on European Renaissance and Baroque literature, specializing at the same time in Spanish literature, was assigned to me as my tutor. I will remember always with gratitude that friendly man of generous spirit and liberal attitudes who in his youth had fought in the Spanish Civil War. His example was important for me. I chose a middle way between more specific Spanish studies and general comparative literary research. All three of my doctoral exams helped me grasp wider European cultural-literary contexts. An exam at Leningrad University's department of foreign literature meant that I had to read independently all works and sources on an assigned topic, for an exam talk in the presence of all professors of the department, regardless of their narrower specialization. I had to be prepared to discuss details of the work not only of Baltasar Gracián and Camilo José Cela (of older and newer

Spanish literature), but also of the work of Jonathan Swift and European Enlightenment literature.

I finally defended my dissertation (on Mateo Alemán's picaresque novel *Guzmán de Alfarache* and the formation of European realistic novel) in Leningrad /St. Petersburg in 1981, in Russian. It was immediately after my first-ever journey to a Spanish language country. I spent eight months at the University of Havana, Cuba in 1979/1980. There I finished writing my thesis, translated into Estonian the first Spanish picaresque narrative *Lazarillo de Tormes*, wrote a couple of research articles in Spanish and held my first ever public lecture—at the Cuban Writers and Artists Union, in Spanish. Its topic was the work of the modern Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980); this coincided with his passing in Paris, and funeral in Havana.

During that time, I became ever more actively engaged in original creative writing. More symptoms of "bifurcation" were revealed in my personality. In 1981 I made my debut as a poet, with a book in Estonian. Today, my creative work includes nine books of poetry and a number of essay books, as well as translations of older and newer world literature, along with my books and articles of academic writing and research.

Because my research focused on Spanish and Latin-American literature, I subsequently contributed articles in Russian and Spanish to collections edited by Russian scholars of Spanish literature in Leningrad or Moscow. Spain itself remained closed to me until 1985, the first year of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the year Spain and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations. I was included in a group of Soviet professors of Spanish allowed to stay for two months at Complutense University in Madrid. There I wrote my first essay book, *Teekond Hispaaniasse* (A Travel to Spain, Tallinn, 1985).

My travels to Cuba and Spain were exceptions to the rule. The greater part of the world beyond the USSR remained closed to us until the collapse of the Russian-Soviet empire, so I was not able to visit Finland and establish contacts with Finnish scholars of Spanish studies, headed by professor Timo Riiho, until 1990. It was a short ferry trip from Tallinn to Helsinki, just 80 km, but it had been forbidden to Estonians for more than four decades.

Soon after the reestablishment of Estonia's independence our international contacts with the West expanded rapidly; we widened our academic contacts with Spain, but in parallel established cooperation with the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). Professor John Neubauer (1933-2015), a leading comparative scholar, made a visit to Tartu to encourage us to found our national Estonian Association of Comparative Literature. We did so in 1994. We started to collaborate with the ICLA, contributing to some of its major international collections of articles brought

forth by important Western publishers. We founded *Interlitteraria*, an international journal which published scholarly articles in four major Western languages—English, French, German and Spanish.

At a colloquium of comparative scholarship in Odense (Denmark) I met in person such major international comparative scholars as Gerald E. Gillespie, professor at Stanford, and at the time acting ICLA president. I admired his capacity to embrace in his research a truly wide transcultural spectrum of literary phenomena, to reveal dialogues and parallels that went far beyond any determined national ground of literary creativity. My admiration for him grew even more when he hosted me at his department at Stanford during my four-month Fulbright, in 1997/1998. I witnessed his openness to all original and innovative creativity in literature in English, French, and German: he is a great admirer of James Joyce; his main area of research has been German literature; and he was one of the English translators of the brilliant grotesque *esperpento* play *Luces de bohemia* (Bohemian Lights), by one of the greatest Galician-Spanish writers, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán.

In the first decade after the new independence of Estonia, with its new liberties of academic activity, I also expanded my contacts within the international community of Hispanic scholars, the so called *hispanistas*. These were extremely helpful when I was translating into Estonian some important authors and the works of the glorious Spanish "Siglo de Oro" (Golden Age) and writing extensive research essays that often accompanied the translations of Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (Life is a Dream) and *El gran teatro del mundo* (Great Theatre of the World), Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (The Trickster of Seville and the Stony Guest), Francisco de Quevedo's existentially shaped poetry and Baltasar Gracián's *Oráculo manual* (Manual Oracle, a collection of philosophic miniatures, once translated into German by Arthur Schopenhauer).

By the end of the last century, however, I also came to understand that I could conduct my research more productively in the area of comparative studies, than in the specific Spanish or Latin American field. Besides, I recognized that in small "peripheral" areas of culture, such as Estonia, a comparative scholar may have specific moral obligations. It led me to add one more facet to my "bifurcations" and "betrayals". Relying on my long experience as a comparative scholar, I turned to some phenomena of my native Estonian literature that had not been treated and interpreted sufficiently by our national literary scholarship (whose research fruits, published exclusively in Estonian, had remained "trapped" within the small Estonian linguistic-cultural community, with little if any access from the

"outside"). Hence, my dedication over two recent decades to the work of Kristian Jaak Peterson, F. R. Kreutzwald and, especially, Juhan Liiv.



## CHAPTER I

# *EDAPHOS AND EPISTEME OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE*<sup>1</sup>

### **Knowledge and ground**

The fact that comparative literary studies, against their very nature, have moved in recent decades towards fragmentation and particularization, has increasingly become a point of concern among comparatists themselves (cf. e. g. Kawamoto 2001: 5-13, Gillespie 2003: 10-17). The main postmodern trends in cultural studies, coming since the 1970s predominantly from France (Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu) and having their powerful repercussion in the US, with a fully institutionalized deconstruction as one of the basic segments of postmodern *episteme*, have despite their novelty and attractiveness revealed little capacity for overcoming the tendency of particularization. On the contrary, they have rather been congenial with an *episteme* that gradually drives us away from *comparison* as a substantial element of synthetic literary research (cf. Talvet 2002: 283-303).

On the one hand, there is a follow-up to formalist-structuralist studies, with a strong accent on linguistic matter (the epistemic camp forged by Derrida and his followers); on the other hand, sociological discourses (Foucault, New Historicism, Bourdieu) have inclined literary research towards an "extra-literary" camp of social power strategies, where the aesthetic-perceptual content of literary creation is almost totally ignored. Besides, we should not overlook the fact that the deconstruction *episteme* has emerged almost exclusively from the Western "centers" of economic-political power. Either consciously or unconsciously, it tends to propagate a paradigm of values that may have no relevance at all for the large "periphery", i. e. the greater part of world culture.

In the present circumstances, as described above, a strong *counter-thinking* to the fashionable and institutionalized narratives is urgently

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Interlitteraria*, 10. Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2005, pp. 46-56. Reprinted here with the permission of University of Tartu Press.

needed. Such a counter-thinking should not at all overlook the epistemic novelty emerging from deconstruction, but at the same time its principal aim should become a radical overcoming of the germs, inherent in deconstruction, of alienating comparative literary studies from the fundamental principles of *comparison* and *synthesis/symbiosis*.

I suppose that at the time when such a heavy accent in thinking is falling on *episteme*, to the extent that often the existence of any knowledge beyond written discourses is being denied, a constructive “post-deconstructionist” counter-thinking should focus a new interest on the *edaphos* (from Greek ἔδαφος—soil, ground, land, territory) of literary (cultural) research. By *edaphos* I mean the *ur-ground* from which *episteme* departs. I do not deny that *episteme* possesses a self-creative capacity, yet I claim that any *episteme*, however sophisticated or conceptualized, has its deeper roots in a kind of *edaphos*—a reality that is not restricted exclusively to *episteme* or the written discourses representing it.

Sometimes it is thought that comparative literature is just one of the methods of literary research, along with structural, psychoanalytical, semiotic, sociological, Marxist, deconstructionist, or other methods. Let me doubt this. On the contrary, I suppose the very nature of *comparison*, inherent in comparative studies, is not only related to *episteme* but also, significantly and substantially, to *edaphos*, the object-premise and departing position of research. Comparison is knowledge, an *episteme* that compares itself to other (different) knowledge, and at the same time it is knowledge that departs from the analysis of several (different) literary (cultural, but also vital) phenomena. It relates “self” to “other” in literature, as well as reality in literature (as “self”) to reality beyond literature (as “other”). In that sense, comparative literature can embrace any particular method, but the fact also remains that some methods by their very nature seem to resist comparative *edaphos*, being more congenial with particularization, the principle inherent in positive sciences, or the knowledge derived from exclusively epistemic grounds.

The *edaphos* of comparative literature determines its synthetic-philosophic origin. Comparative literature is a kind of philosophy that, in the ideal, strives to wide generalizations about literature, as well as about the relationship of literature with everything that is not literature. Like any philosophy, it questions the meaning of the particular in a general and universal context. Comparative *edaphos* incessantly activizes and dynamizes the *episteme* of comparative literature. For instance, we may realize a thorough and exhaustive study of the work of a writer in our “own” national-cultural area, but as soon as we locate his/ her work in a wider transnational



comparative context, totally new perspectives emerge, a re-evaluation of the work mostly proves inevitable.

It is often thought that comparative literary research is something traditional and old-fashioned, in contrast with structuralism, post-structuralism, etc., that have supposedly brought in new refreshing ideas. I think the reason for such an impression is that comparative literature, after its early birth in Romanticism, soon became to be identified as a branch of the historical sciences, running in parallel, in the same positivist background, with natural sciences. One of its main objectives seemed to be the construction of literary histories, in which the literary process was "backed up" with a profusely detailed social history combined with the equally detailed personal histories of writers. Literary works were claimed to be almost a direct outcome of social and personal circumstances, as well as of all kinds of "influences" from preceding literature.

It is but natural that at the time when other sciences discovered that they did not really depend immanently on historical factors—either ethical, social or religious—and, in more liberal circumstances, starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, effectuated a powerful "leap", humanities, still strongly dependent on spiritual history, started to look old-fashioned. The "close reading" method of New Criticism and the following formalism and structuralism were the most obvious attempts to fill the gap and make humanities catch up to the currents of other, "real" sciences.

### **"Passionate matter"**

However, the attempt, though it has born some interesting fruits, was doomed to failure from the start. The principal reason is that humanities, unlike "real" sciences, research a matter of which the researcher is an immediate and existential part. In other words, humanities deal with passionate matter, and cannot separate themselves from it. Matter is not dead or obedient to *techne*, but revolts perpetually against the researcher/writer, as well as survives him/her. The above-said is wittily demonstrated in the novel *Niebla* (Mist) published in 1914 by the Spanish philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno. No formal method can reveal the complexity of the human spirit. The "triumphs" over matter prove to be short-aged, nothing definite can be proved, and theories, in the sense of "real" sciences, do not work at all. Literary works of the past keep producing miraculous "explosions", resurrect, and cannot be "overcome" as achievements even by the most advanced "modernity". At its best, theory can only help to understand matter in its historical retrospect, *a posteriori*.

The understanding of the formal difficulty has led humanities to find support in those branches of humanities that apparently have more affinity with "real" sciences, like psychology and sociology. However, here the failure is even greater, as the aesthetic-perceptual essence of subject matter becomes either utterly simplified or is entirely left out of the focus. Psychoanalytical and sociological approaches to literature fail to understand literature as art, as a complex process of artistic creativity. For that reason, at least for myself, the attempts to expand literary studies in the sociologically orientated canon derived from Foucault and Bourdieu or to resuscitate the remnants of Marxism do not look serious enough.

To oppose the one-sidedness of both formalist and sociological approaches, comparative literature should thoroughly revise its *edaphos*. In the field of synchrony, it should boldly trespass across national barriers, and try to grasp any phenomenon to be analyzed in its widest possible context. It is not enough for a comparatist to be well versed in "international" theories—which, in fact, in recent times has exclusively meant the *episteme* emanating from Western centers—but he/she should not only try to expand his/her *episteme* from "own"-and-"known" to "other" (the unknown) as much as possible, but also, and even more importantly, to extend and vary his/her *edaphos*.

Here, naturally, human existence sets its limits, especially as the field of literary studies depends directly on the knowledge of languages. Besides, as is well known, in practice nearly all comparatists have their specialization in some specific field of foreign literature. The worst case for comparative studies is when e. g. a French "specialist" in US literature does not know anything about French literature. The case improves if he/she still does. However, to avoid understanding literary process as exclusively produced by economic-political "centers" and "leading" languages, it is utterly desirable that a comparative researcher could also become aware of some other cultural area outside Western metropolized culture.

In the opposite direction, a comparatist's *edaphos* is generally formed with a lesser complicity, as scholars coming from peripheral areas mostly know, besides their mother language, several international languages. Yet here too, often conditioned by educational systems and historical circumstances, deficiencies are well visible. One of the challenges for comparative research in our days in Estonia, for instance, is to overcome the existing split between our specialists of Estonian literature and those of foreign literature.

On the other hand, the language difficulty should not be exaggerated. Literature is never a merely linguistic exercise, and its philosophy does not depart exclusively from language. (Though, language should never be

undervalued either). A mature comparatist who ideally knows at least two greater international languages and also a "peripheral" language and is, besides, capable of understanding, to a certain extent at least, some other languages, can successfully discuss phenomena beyond his/her specialized field or mother culture. In some cases, the approaches from "outside" or the "border" can even produce important changes in the axiology of a literary work or phenomenon. A critical perspective exclusively from "inside" a national culture has never proved to be completely satisfactory in the formation of the criteria of world literature. The critics belonging to "major" literary areas can do a lot for "redeeming" literary works from peripheral areas, to locate them in the wider context of world literature, while a peripheral or distanced perspective of "another" can provide important new accents in the research of even some major works of the Western canon.

Let the literary philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin regarding Rabelais's work serve as an epitome of the above said. It is quite possible that without some of the "edaphic" premises emerging from Bakhtin's existential position, his conception of "official culture", as well as his different approach to materialism, could never have been born. It goes without saying that Bakhtin was not a "specialist" in French literature, but could write with an equal penetration about the work of Dostoyevski, and others.

Another example is the late head of the Tartu (-Moscow) school of semiotics, Yuri M. Lotman. Elsewhere I have called him a "frontier scholar" par excellence. Indeed, Lotman's balanced cultural philosophy, especially of the latest stage of his writing, conceived in its entirety in the peripheral Estonian town Tartu, can probably be considered as one of the most mature expressions of European cultural research of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Synchrony and diachrony. Form and matter**

The principle of synchrony has been continuously stressed in cultural studies, since formalist currents started in the 1920s. The main target of synchronic criticism has been—with repercussions reaching the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—the old positivist-historical method in cultural sciences. Indeed, in the literary histories written at least until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even later, history has had such an enormous impact that sometimes these books look like histories of nations, and not at all like histories of literature. The diachronic excesses have produced a natural contra-reaction, which has led increasingly to underestimate any history in dealing with arts.

However, again differently from "real" sciences, humanities seldom work when stripped entirely from their historical dimension. Among arts,

literature especially is intensely filled with a historical content that embraces practically all aspects of human existence and activity. To evaluate duly the images of literature, a historical comparison, even if it can never be perfect, is inevitable. To explain satisfactorily a literary work of the past, a merely formal apparatus applied from the present is never exhausting, as it would be insufficient to take, as a measure of comparison, the literary "level" of the present. Quite inescapably, if ever we would like to get closer to a literary work of the past, we should expand our comparative *edaphos* both diachronically and synchronically. Thus, to appreciate duly the aesthetic-perceptual value of *Don Quixote*, we should try to place it in the context of the narrative of his time, as well as of the past and even of the times posterior to the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Only then would we be able to establish a balanced parallel between the masterpiece of Cervantes and, for instance, García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, as myth-creating, magic-realistic and "total" novels, as well as understand the difference of their realism from canonized patterns and stereotypes of the Western realistic novel, formed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I would like to stress here the absolute imperative of comparative studies to keep as close as possible both the form and the "content" of a work of literature. There is a deep inter-dependency between the two aspects. Neither of them should be undervalued or overestimated. Their inter-relations differ from one particular individual work to another. The renewal of the novel genre by James Joyce emerged, first and foremost, from his revolutionary formal experiments. Franz Kafka, on the contrary, could produce an equally influential renewal by relying on much more traditional narrative structures. A truly comparative *edaphos* should supply a comparatist's *episteme* with a sensibility towards both content and form.

At the same time, a comparatist cannot be a literary researcher in the narrow meaning, as somebody just limiting him/herself consciously to what appears in the literary text and to the means by which image systems are created. He/she inevitably must be open to the realities surrounding literature. As any literary work is also an ideological (if not philosophical) appreciation and interpretation of reality, the critic should try to form an adequate *edaphos* for his/her study, that cannot be limited to the merely literary-aesthetic. Any literary work is a unique creative act, with its autonomy and laws; yet it is born in circumstances that can either enhance or inhibit it, both perceptually and aesthetically. No creator is devoid of sensibility towards the temporal reality surrounding him/her. These factors cannot be ignored. A comparatist should see his/her purpose not in specializing in the reality that surrounds a literary work. Instead, he /she should relate reality outside the work to reality in the work, by trying to

assimilate literary creation as a philosophy, a discourse in images that by interpreting and reflecting outside reality, dynamizes and actualizes it.

Once again I would like to refer to the examples of Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman. The theory emerging from the work of both embodies a sophisticated synchrony. Yet both great scholars were also deeply involved in diachrony, which formed a solid basis for their literary philosophy. By researching the complicated modification of society and the human mind in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Bakhtin could conceive "official culture" with its huge dogmatic apparatus as a perpetual diachronic recurrence, extending from the Middle Ages to the Soviet empire of his lifetime. The roots of Lotman's mature philosophy were in German pre-Romanticism. From the position of historical-cultural relativism, originating from the work of Herder, Goethe, and others, Lotman could reach the understanding of the universal not as based on the proclaimed universality of reason—a belief that has been powerfully propagated since the Enlightenment—but on the individual, embracing complicated inter-dynamics in the semiosphere, where the individual, according to Lotman, is inseparable from its biological-physical condition.

The *edaphos* of comparative literature has not only to do with the research object, but also with the researcher, as a subject. It is extremely unlikely that a literary philosopher, devoid of sensual propensities—the very basis of artistic sensibility—could understand the cultural "other" and the image structures and philosophy created by it. The peculiarity of literary research is that it, in a way, overlaps with original (so to say, primary) writing. While a writer compares the phenomena of the world and constructs his philosophy in images on the basis of his "comparative world research", the literary researcher's task is even more complicated. He/she not only has to follow the path of the mind and senses of the writer in researching the world, but must center his/her comparative research on the inter-dynamics between the world created by the writer and the greater one beyond it. He/she must be able to explicate the aesthetic mechanism supporting the work of the writer, and at the same time remain open to the existential and deeply sensorial impulses that feed it.

Here lies the radical difference between a "real" scientist and a literary researcher. The latter, besides being a scientist, must also be a philosopher, and at the same time should not expel poetic sensibility from him/herself. The phenomenon of poets-scholars or writers-critics is not at all anything casual. Even if the times of Romanticism, when the main literary theories were set up by poets and writers, cannot be returned, the field of literary studies and, especially, of comparative studies, should remain widely open to the experience of writers and poets, who by their very sensual propensity

are well prepared to move on an open comparative *edaphos*, to provide *episteme* with a perpetually vital dimension.

### **Histories of literature**

Last but not least, in the mutual relationship between comparative *edaphos* and *episteme*, literary history has had and will probably always have a key role. Literary history itself can be viewed as an essential comparative *edaphos*, or at least as a wide intersection of *episteme* and *edaphos*, from which all kinds of discourses on literature depart. At the same time, the difficulties of constructing and writing literary histories are well known, especially as the older type of literary histories—which, as I already mentioned, have often been just histories of societies and nations, rather than histories of literary creation—seem to be exhausted and hardly look satisfactory.

Literary histories are, by the way, connected with *edaphos* in an almost literal sense. I mean by this the soil of any culture, and especially, literature, as exclusively supported and represented by a *natural* language. Although we speak of globalization, internationalization, inter-cultural dynamics, etc., it remains a fact that in practice the overwhelming histories of literature, written to date, have been histories of national literatures. Those have emerged from a concrete individual cultural space, determined first and foremost by the natural language it practices. I am well aware of deviations from this pattern, like in the case when a writer has worked simultaneously in several languages (Beckett, Pessoa, Nabokov, etc.), has mostly used other language than his/ her native tongue (Unamuno, Baroja, who were Basques but wrote in Spanish), or when the vernacular has been used by writers of other nationality (thus, the earliest examples of poetry in Estonian were written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by German clergymen). However, these deviations do not constitute a general rule.

It remains a fact also that the major attempts, known until today, to write universal or world literary histories have been based on a more or less mechanical compilation of histories of national literatures. This means, they have lacked unity, or the unity has been externally (ideologically) and artificially imposed to the material—for instance, the Marxist point of view exploited in the literary histories written in the former Soviet Union—rather than emerging from the literary-cultural process itself.

It would be even more hazardous to attempt to write an integrated literary history of "trans-national" character, in which different linguistic spaces are involved. Despite the theories constructed some twenty and more years ago by Marxist scholars, any project to write a literary history of the peoples of

the Soviet Union has proved to be a complete failure, just because *edaphos* was constructed artificially, it lacked its natural roots. The difficulties for writing a genuinely adequate and objective literary history of the Iberian Peninsula have well been described by Arturo Casas (Casas 2003: 71-100). There would be obviously little difficulty in involving in such a history literature written in Spanish, either by the native Spanish writers or by the Catalan, Basque, or Galician writers who have created their work in Spanish. The difficulty, however, emerges as soon as the scope of the history intends to move across national-linguistic frontiers.

Historically, there has been an intense interchange of cultural values between different nations that at present constitute the Spanish state and the population of the "peripheral" national areas has been to a great extent bilingual. That fact slightly mitigates the resistance of *edaphos* in the case of the Iberian cultural space. However, the natural conditions of *edaphos* can never be totally overlooked. Thus, to provide another example from the Baltic cultural space, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians have shared a lot in their recent history and evidently there are parallel processes and analogies in their culture. However, any attempt to write a more detailed literary history of the Baltic people is likewise doomed to failure, because the resistance of the linguistic *edaphos* here is absolute, as all three Baltic nations have created their literature in different languages. The hope that such a corpus of translated literature could be created which would enable the researchers of all three nations to approach it in equal conditions, looks like hardly more than just wishful thinking.

## Perspectives

To end on a more positive note, I would still claim that a steady effort at enlarging the comparative *edaphos* and the correspondingly activated *episteme* can disclose encouraging horizons. A new quality can be induced in national literary histories, when due relations between the "self" and the "other" are established, i. e. when different phenomena of national literature are adequately located in the wider context of world literature or viewed in the cultural background of a historic unity beyond the national culture. Thus, in the case of Estonian literature, the wider context would be European and Western literature, in general, and in a smaller space—though strongly restricted in time and also by the language difference—the ethnically conditioned contacts with Finnish culture.

On the other hand, although an ideal project of a history of world literature may well belong to the realm of utopia, our *episteme* of the values created by literature can substantially be complemented by even much less

ambitious projects. I mean that despite all obstacles and the "edaphic resistance", comparatists of different nations should still see one of their major tasks in writing histories of world literature. The limitations of their national *edaphos* should not be considered a disadvantage but be understood rather as a unique value in constituting a dialogic *episteme*, an interchange of discourses coming simultaneously from all three perspectives—"centers", "peripheries" and "borders". Only a *nationally* orientated team of *comparatists* working on the project of a history of world literature can duly appreciate and make all connections between world literature ("other") and their own literature ("self") stand out. The plurality of such histories will gradually set up a paradigm, in which new values and phenomena are involved.

We cannot hope that an international team would write a history of world literature that could satisfy equally all national ambitions. We cannot hope either that an ideal method or theoretical *episteme* could make possible the construction of a satisfactory literary history. In past and recent practices, *episteme* has been strongly biased by ideological preferences. Although ideology cannot be avoided while treating history, we would move across more secure ground, if we turn to the intersection area of *episteme* and *edaphos*, which still, basically, means departing from the natural condition of literature itself. For instance, the application of a generic-typological principle in constructing a literary history of a wide transnational area, like Europe, Scandinavia or Latin-America, would be nothing beyond the feasible. Such histories have already been written, and they could be improved, if we are not attracted excessively by national history, on the one hand, and ideologically biased *episteme*, on the other.

Step by step, we should try to widen the horizon of our concrete individual comparative *edaphos*, as well as *episteme*, to form a continuous, never ending process of identifying world literature and ourselves as part of it.

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## CHAPTER II

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND WORLD LITERATURE: TOWARDS A SYMBIOTIC COEXISTENCE<sup>2</sup>

One of my postulates is that Comparative Literature has really never enjoyed a pivotal or centric status in the broad field of literary studies. At the same time, however, specialized studies of separate literary traditions, indispensable, centric and pivotal as they are and have been (at least as considered from different national points of view), have not been able to fill lacunae in our understanding of literary creation as a broader cultural phenomenon influencing (though often "invisibly") the world-view and axiological attitudes of entire societies and vast communities of people. Nor has literary theory adequately filled the void. It oscillates between two extremes, from formal theories to sociological approaches, neither of which sufficiently explains the essence of a literary work or a literary phenomenon in the broader intercultural context. Moreover, there is a rapidly growing tendency in literary theory for it to become an exclusive self-meditation, a discipline for its own sake, with little if any contact with historical processes and developments taking place in the world.

Besides these discrepancies between national literatures and world/comparative literature, literary creation and criticism of "centers" and "peripheries", major and smaller nations, literary creation and literary science, there recently seems to be a schism emerging between world literature and comparative literature. On the one hand, there is a pragmatic approach (visible above all in the books by David Damrosch), of teaching under the label of world literature, above all those works that are available in English translation, have become part of Anglophone literature, and have gained acceptance in criticism and literary scholarship of major Western countries, the US and Great Britain above all. On the other hand, such a

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pragmatic approach has been criticized by another wing of influential comparatists (Dorothy Figueira, Gerald E. Gillespie), for whom "world literature" taught and researched in the framework of English studies would mean a serious simplification and self-restriction of the field of comparative literature.

For my part, developing some of my own ideas expressed in my book *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* (Toronto: Guernica, 2005) and in my article "Edaphos and Episteme of Comparative Literature", as well as the ideas of the Tartu cultural philosopher Yuri M. Lotman, especially since his "semiospheric" period (with his last book *Culture and Explosion*), I will propose a symbiotic approach, aimed at reconciling extreme oppositions and establishing a dialogue that would strengthen the position of comparative as well as world literature in the wider arena of humanities. The interaction of both is urgently needed, to overcome fragmentation between different parts of literary and cultural research and the widespread mechanical application of theories to arbitrarily selected, isolated literary phenomena, with little, if any, relevance for the spiritual, mental and social processes occurring in the world.

Furthermore, once world literature and comparative literature have been reconciled, there is an urgent need to establish a fruitful dialogue between comparatists and scholars specialized in the area of national literatures. There is nothing ready, definite and finished in the canon of world literature, nor in the canon of national literatures. It is the task above all of comparatists to aid national literature scholars by providing them with the comparative context of a wider spectrum such as European literature or world literature. In this, scholars of traditional "centers" and "peripheries" should establish a steady dialogue, provide new insights into the processes in national literatures and keep open to new and old works and authors. By following this direction, we are likely to contribute to the renovation of the world's spiritual fundament, a challenge poorly met in our days by hard sciences and those softer sciences that mechanically copy their methods.

### **About terminology**

Comparative Literature and World Literature (henceforth CL and WL) are concepts that date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1827 of the term *Weltliteratur* is often taken as the starting point of further conceptualization of the phenomenon. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it reappears, especially in the US where a new pragmatic approach to the canon of WL has emerged. In contrast, CL, initially germinated in Central and Eastern Europe, has gained recognition as a field

of research worldwide. Although the "death" of CL has been repeatedly declared by spokespersons narrowly specialized in fashionable trends in humanities (Li Xia 2011: 6), the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) still remains one of the largest world organizations devoted to literary and cultural research. In some Asian countries, notably in China, CL is gathering new energy (ibid. 6-7). In Central and East European countries (Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Lithuania, among others) important activity in CL is developed at a number of universities. In the following discussion, my intention is not to revise the existing history of CL and WL, but rather to meditate on the current situation of both in their institutional as well as scholarly aspects.

While a formal signifier should not determine the content of the field, it is quite certain that in the case of CL it does, even to a greater extent than one might presuppose. I started teaching Western literary history at Tartu university in the mid-1970s. During most of that period, the curriculum of nearly all universities of the former Soviet Union (henceforth SU), was called *зарубежная литература*. It literally meant all literature produced outside the borders of the SU. Literature created in Russian and other languages of the SU were never included under this rubric. In practice, the curriculum (in broad lines, a uniform course established by programmes prepared and confirmed by Moscow) included predominantly the canon of Western literature, with some selections from Eastern European literatures. Classical Greek and Roman literature was taught apart from *зарубежная литература.*, while Oriental literatures were taught only at some few universities or institutes of major centers such as Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Russian literature was taught extensively, but as a special subject. Thus Yuri M. Lotman, the world-famous semiotic philosopher, worked for most of his life at the University of Tartu as the chaired professor of Russian literature. At the same time Estonian literature was taught separately and comprehensively only to students of Estonian philology.

As for the canon of Western literature taught to all students of philology (regardless of their specialization), it included all major authors and their work from the Middle Ages through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the modern (20<sup>th</sup> century) *зарубежная литература*, there were substantial omissions, since a number of Western authors generally labeled as "modernists" were declared "decadent". Even if a short characterization of their work was provided, it had to emphasize their negative features and be in line with the official Marxist point of view. In fact, students could not really read these works, since translations into the languages of the SU were severely restricted. (For an eloquent review of how *зарубежная литература* fared in Soviet Latvia, see Eglāja-Kristšone 2012.)

The whole process of the reception of Western literature in the former SU—a major research area and challenge for comparatists—is still overwhelmingly unexplored. To draw any far-fetched conclusions on the basis of only one or two language areas of the SU would be misleading. Suffice it to mention a few paradoxes from my native Estonian experience. Thus, until the second year of Gorbachev's *perestroika* (1986) a major volume assembling Kafka's three novels could not be published in Estonia. Surprisingly enough, however, a book with Kafka's short stories (including *Die Verwandlung*) appeared in the Estonian translation as "early" as in 1962, while Kafka's grimmest novel *Der Prozess* (including the large essay "Kafka" by the French Marxist philosopher Roger Garaudy!) was published in 1966. The first two collections of Jorge Luis Borges's intellectual-fantastical stories were translated into Estonian in 1972 and 1976, well before the Argentine writer's work found its way into the Russian language. So, it was not the rule that all Western literature translated into other languages of the SU had to be preceded obligatorily by respective translations in Russian.

### **From *зарубежная литература* to WL and CL**

To return to the question of terminology, towards the end of the 1980s under increasingly more liberal conditions, Tartu University decided to replace the designation, *зарубежная литература* or *väliskirjandus* ("foreign literature"—which was the Estonian adaptation of the Russian term) with a new and bolder signifier, *maailmakirjandus* ("world literature"). The aim of the shift was to abolish restrictive borders that formerly had kept literatures created by the nations of the SU apart from the rest of WL. Naturally, as our staff was limited to only a few professors, in reality we continued to teach courses on major phenomena and authors of Western literature.

When Estonia's political independence as a state was re-established at the beginning of the 1990s and our international contacts with Western countries all of a sudden began to flourish both academically and institutionally, we started to use in correspondence written in English the term "comparative literature", as the closest international term applicable to our activity. I doubt if at that time any other university in the world, beside Tartu, had a chair of WL. But the denomination CL fully described the main direction of our activity in literary research. In 1994 we founded our Estonian Association of Comparative Literature, as a collective member of the ICLA. Our scholars started to take part in the activities led by the ICLA, while at the same time we introduced changes to our Western literature courses. We tried to shift the emphasis on literature as an intercultural

phenomenon. The same focus was introduced in writing new high school and university text-books of WL. Chapters were no longer organized according to the national-linguistic categories (thus, presenting separately overviews of English, French, German, Spanish and other literatures, as it had been the overwhelming practice in the study and teaching of "foreign literature" in the SU).

Instead, there were chapters on European Renaissance and Baroque poetry, the Enlightenment and Romantic novel (with its different subspecies), symbolist and early modernist poetry, naturalistic and realistic prose fiction, the great modernist breakthrough and experiments beginning with WWI, etc. The distinctive feature of this reconfiguration was that all these phenomena came to be viewed and characterized comparatively, transcending national-linguistic borders.

We thus introduced a kind of hybridization of CL and WL. We teach general courses of a comparative Western literary-historical canon. It is not an exaggeration to say that these courses, because of literature's multifunctional core-role in the societal and moral self-conscience of all communities, also mean teaching the guidelines of Western cultural history. We are fully aware that we cannot teach everything and we are not able to go into minute analytical detail in these overview courses. We do, however, make an effort to complement these courses with more specialized seminars, in which a comparative methodology is followed as much as possible.

### **Men of science in need of the humanities**

Our study programmes at Tartu University are far from being perfect. Yet, over recent years, I have been able to observe that our courses of WL/CL are attended not only by those students for whom they are compulsory, but also by students specializing in philosophy, semiotics, history, psychology, and even some hard sciences like biology or physics. In other words, it seems that young people feel a need to complement their specialization with cultural knowledge they cannot get in their own major fields of interest.

Also, the general trend in Western universities has recently been to focus on interdisciplinary studies, which actually just means making humanities look more like the sciences, i.e. saturating them with elements from technological sciences. The tendency seems to have played itself out, since it was in large part artificially constructed and contrary to the inherent nature of various fields involved. It did not take into account the special moral and spiritual role humanities have always played in society. Why do we fail to envision institutionally confronting a radically different challenge, especially at a time when the present global crisis can no longer remain

hidden, namely that hard sciences and men of technology are in need of moral and spiritual support that can only be provided by reactivated humanities?

Why cannot departments of comparative and world literature become the core units of providing courses in comparative world cultural history for all university students, regardless of their specialization? It is a great challenge that would presuppose a special preparation and expansion of CL and WL teaching staff. However, the benefit of reforming the social and moral conscience of young people and future scholars would be incomparably greater than the material investments that such a radical reform might require.

### *Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft, littérature comparée*

More needs to be said about the use of the terms CL and WL. Quite early on, ambiguous yet significant nuances appear in the denomination of the activity of literary comparatists in larger cultural-linguistic areas. English "comparative" has its closest equivalent in Russian where the corresponding term is *sravnitel'nyi*. The German *vergleichende* also has a slightly different nuance. In all three languages, however, the adjective applies to a subject that has set out to compare objects. English-language culture has until recently refused to acknowledge literary research as a form of scientific activity. As the subject's complement is missing, "comparative literature" sounds in English extremely liberal and unscientific. It is not very clear what is meant by "literature". Does it belong to the researched object or the researching subject? Or both at the same time? Germans and Russians have eliminated this ambiguity by introducing the word "science" or "research": it is respectively *vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, *сравнительное литературоведение*.

In contrast, all three widest spread Romance languages have moved the emphasis of CL to the object. The field is called in French, Spanish and Italian, correspondingly: *littérature comparée*, *literatura comparada* and *letteratura comparata*. It is clearly defined as literature, which is compared or treated comparatively. Thus, the field is implicitly contrasted with other types of literary research in which the object can be treated in isolation from other objects.

Maybe, these problems of terminology were less apparent in the past. However, in view of the strong present-day trend to make humanities look more like science, the signifier of CL/WL can easily fail to fully describe the discipline's identity. If in its denomination the accent is placed on science, as in German, Russian and, under their direct influence, also in my