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SLAVIC AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES TODAY – RIVALS OR ALLIES?

Starting from the fact that both disciplines historically emerged almost simultaneously and presuppose a supranational research framework, this paper deals with today's relationship between Slavic and Comparative Studies. It discusses the key dilemmas concerning their research autonomy or interdependence and their methodological attitude towards the contemporary challenges of new disciplines and research perspectives.

Namely, about two and a half centuries after the first efforts in Slavic languages and literature(s) systematic research, and two centuries after the first university courses in *littérature comparée*, it seems that, according to the actual state of affairs, one long-lasting cultural and historical circle has been perhaps defined. In a slightly different form, it could also be said that the two disciplines nowadays face the need for methodological and conceptual recapitulation or revision.

As is widely known, Slavic studies historically affirmed that linguistic affinity is the origin of mutual research on the languages and literature of the same cultural sphere. On the other hand, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most prominent comparative literature theorist today, in her worldwide-known book with the significant title *The Death of a Discipline* warns that, decades after Rene Wellek's famous essay "The Crisis of Comparative Literature", the actual situation in comparative studies means that due to the difficulties with linguistical barriers in the world of postcolonial and globalist influences the discipline has to be under the new-old influence of the so-called big languages, especially English. Because of that, she considers that "a combination of Ethnic Studies and Area Studies bypasses the literary and the linguistic [...] whose hallmark remains a care for language and idiom". It seems that way, the doubt about language specifics between the two disciplines could be overcome in favour of deeper similarities in methodology.

Spivak's attitude implies there is something more than mere cultural "kinship" in the contemporary interest for the humanities and related disciplines, even if we remain loyal to the tradition of linguistically motivated mutual research. When Spivak further writes about "the support of the humanities" as necessary for—let's say—real transgression of frontiers as the outcome of traditionally understood Area Studies, and Slavistics is a kind of area studies, it means we perhaps need a different perspective and methodological approach to both Comparative and Area, i.e. Slavic Studies.

Therefore, "to transgress frontiers" in this context could signify the need to de-centralize even Comparative and Slavic Studies in the meaning that implies the possible de-construction of *power relations* inherent to research perspective, originally affected by Eurocentric logic as a culturally-historically affirmed base. That kind of relations was—even after postcolonial and multicultural turn, and its comparatistically adopted "demand for recognition of marginalized

cultural groups” (C. Bernheimer)—somehow still replicated in other social disciplines and humanities, partially including also Slavic Studies, in the meaning which implies that even in our culturally-historic circle could be find power based connections with prevalence of influences of the so-called “bigger” cultures and literatures on the “smaller” ones.

Considering relatively recent examples of the controversial ex-Soviet and ex-Yugoslav cultural, linguistic, and literary relations, it seems clear that Slavic studies today are not close to their early enthusiastic phase and that our discipline may be going through a kind of conceptual crisis. But looking back at the important past contributions in Slavistics (“The Kernel of Comparative Slavic Literature” by Roman Jakobson, *Comparative History of Slavic Literatures* by Dmitrij Čiževskij), we can conclude that in the history of our discipline, we already have a possible solution which could be useful in the future too. From this point of view, a possible turn to *Slavic comparative literature*, now established as a kind of sub-discipline in the new political and cultural contexts, could be understood as the return to a once-existing modus which reaffirms the alliance of the two disciplines, Slavic and comparative studies.

A contemporary emancipated comparative method that we propose would be an outcome of two basic procedures, which could be named *similarization* and *differentiation*, a simultaneous and also (auto)reflexive search for “convergences” and “divergences”, “centripetal” and “centrifugal impulses” in research of so close but at the same time also different traditions and contemporary literary productions of the Slavic cultures. So, what we perhaps need to do is a dynamic and dialectical interaction between these two concepts with the ultimate goal of *distinction* as an intersected outcome. Practically speaking, it means that the usual binary structured comparatist model of exclusive relations, which mostly assumes the priority of influences or generic features from “bigger” to “smaller” cultures, today perhaps needs to be replaced with a *bifocal* or even *polyfocal* one as an inclusive and non-hierarchical relation, characterised by the *bi-centric* or *poly-centric principle*. It implies “chaining openness”, focused on more than one centre of research interest. In implementing such an approach, we can use relatively new comparatistic sub-disciplines such as *comparative poetics* and *imagology*.

What was previously explained has been finally demonstrated in short form on the example of the ex-Yugoslav cultural relations, with attention to ways of understanding linguistic and especially literary controversies of these South Slavic literatures.

Key words. South Slavic literatures, Comparative literature studies, humanities, language, Eurocentrism, bifocal/ polyfocal approach, similarization, differentiation, distinction

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