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“Peripherocentrism:” Geopolitics of Comparative Literatures between Ethnocentrism and Cosmopolitanism

As cognitivists tell us, our minds are “embodied” in the sense that “all of our experiences, knowledge, beliefs and wishes are involved in and expressible only through patterns of language that have their roots in our material existence” (Stockwell 2002: 4–5). Therefore it is understandable that cognitive organization and verbalization of our experience is centered according to our bodily position in the world – this is evidenced by the fact that “the prototypical deictic categories in speech are founded on the originating deictic center or *zero-point* or *origo*: the speaker (‘I’), place (‘here’) and time of utterance (‘now’)” (Stockwell 2002: 43). Although all cognition is thus inevitably perspectivized and centered by the incommensurable bodily positions of its subjects, it can also be shared and communicated; it is through establishing interactional networks, grouping, and discourse that we are able to transcend the existential nexus “I – here – now” and build transitory deictic alliances either by seeing ourselves as part of a present social body or by projecting our viewpoint onto other mental spaces that come to us only verbally, through linguistic codes. These shared shifters may have factual or imaginary group references (e.g., family, tribe or social class, and nation), but with their orientation towards a collective *origo* they imply a transpersonal agency situated within the coordinates of its proper cultural space. Discussing the notion of boundary in his *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman stresses that every semiotic space – that is, space that constitutes both referents of and settings for discursive semiosis, which is driven by inter-translations between given “natural” languages and predominantly iconic representations – presupposes a certain “we.” This collective pronoun functions as the shifter denoting the communal subject of the semiosphere’s self-description: it is “we” that, opposed to “them” or “others” on the other side of the boundary, populate, semiotically delimit, culturally organize, and discursively describe our own space (cf. Lotman 2006: 185–186). As a result, every discursive collectivity perceives its semiotic space – regardless of its actual position in the geopolitical network – as the center, the “homeland,” the territorializing mechanism that organizes one’s life-world. In this respect, as Michael Wood warns us in his review of Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature*, even the pre-modern and modern imperia are parochial because they export or generalize their “narrow mode” of understanding to the rest of the world, without being aware that they are but a token of the type, according to which “the world . . . is always seen from somewhere” (Wood 2004: 170).

The same blind spot is also characteristic of peripheral zones that are dependent on or controlled and influenced by powerful centers, but on the other hand self-referentially construct their own sense of cultural identity. I am tempted to call this kind of cognitive centrism by the oxymoronic term “peripherocentrism.” This refers not only to the periphery’s “primordial” cognitive centrism, which does not differ from that of metropolises or imperia, but also to the process in which peripheral discourses are becoming aware of their cultural position vis-à-vis the others and consequently attempt to come to terms with some geopolitically or culturally superior center in a special, ambivalent way. Aside from intentionally neglecting the center, ignoring it, or resisting its predominance with various strategies (e.g., by self-referential recourse to “domestic” traditions), there is another important mode or phase of the periphery’s relation to the center. The transpersonal intentionality that is inscribed in European “peripherocentric” discourses, from the Roman Empire through Renaissance France to post-enlightenment Germany and the “national awakenings” in East-Central Europe, typically legitimates intercultural drawing on the center’s resources and modeling the emergent structures on its established patterns, while suppressing its symbolic and political power through imaginary annexation to the periphery’s own cognitive *origo*. The periphery domesticates the semiotic material and perspective of the center by erasing traces of its alterity, or projects the “domestic” semiosphere as an integral and legitimate part or heir of the central culture. The adopted global or regional center of cultural power and the cognitive center of the peripheral cultural space are thus superposed.

Now, what does all this have to do with “Geopolitics of Comparative Literatures between Ethnocentrism and Cosmopolitanism,” as the subtitle of my paper suggests? Before tackling this question, I have to step away from the generalities of cognitivism and semiotic theory of culture to the more specific level of ideologies, those of science in particular. A cognitive approach to ideology, as elaborated by Teun van Dijk (1998), explains ideology as a cognitive and discursive mechanism that shapes communal mental representations of reality through sets of socially shared and verbally conveyed basic beliefs, categories, schemes, and attitudes. Ideology gives perspective and cognitively helps organize knowledge through its articulation and/or representation in texts. In this way ideology provides social groups with cognitive cohesion and builds a centripetal sense of collective identity. It also motivates, regulates, centers, and socially empowers their signifying practices. One of these is literary scholarship. Literary history and theory do not exist as a purely intellectual activity of observing the object of study (i.e. literature), but are themselves – according to pragmatists like Levin – only specific praxes: they consist of particular mental and discursive operations performed by and relevant only to certain agents, communities, and institutions, and they live with literature in the same socio-cultural contexts (Levin 1999: 8–10, 17). Scholarly discourse is thus in permanent need of wider social recognition; it has to legitimize itself not only self-referentially, through immanent discursive rules, methods, and truth criteria, but also by intertextually reacting to ideologemes that circulate in the public space (cf. van Dijk 1998: 3, 19, 49–51, 141–152, 200–209, 266–271). These factors are involved in the ideology of literary studies as well as in reproducing its communities, discourses, and institutions. They adjust the textual worlds of

scholarly works to mental schemes and frames of the established or emerging cognitive centrism that shape a particular semiosphere.

Since the nineteenth century, the discourse of national literary histories has been rooted in the transnational ideology of European cultural nationalism, and historians of literature have often been important actors in national movements: they demonstrated the nation's cultural identity and right to independence with narratives of its continual linguistic, literary, and artistic ability (Leerssen 2006). These self-enclosed and ethnocentric scholarly meta-descriptions of particular semiospheres were based on privileging a monolingual, canonic, and central tradition that historians had distilled from the historical and linguistic plurality of their cultural space (cf. Lotman 2006: 189). The legitimizing ideology of cultural nationalism, interdiscursively adopted from the public sphere, remained inscribed in the generic memory of historical texts until recently, although mainly in the reduced form of what Beck calls "methodological nationalism" (Beck 2003: 39–45, 93; 2004: 40–47). This presupposes that every society is contained within a separate nation-state with its own territory, culture, language, and – not least – literature. The notion of "national literature," associated with the geopolitically delimited space of actual or imagined nation-states, is clearly a prime cognitive category of ethnocentric discourse and methodological nationalism. However, even comparative methods in human and social sciences are not immune to such reductionism. In comparative literature today, the basic categorical unit of comparison is still the ideological construct of "national literature" (Hutcheon 2002; Boldrini 2006: 19), and not region, area, town, and so on.

How is this possible, considering that, in contrast to national literary histories, comparative literature has always stood for transcending the narrowness of a "nationalized" perspective? From the institutional beginnings of the discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, comparative literature attempted to overcome limitations of ethnocentrism both methodologically, by defining the subject (i.e., world literature or international literary relations) and research procedures (relational interpretation of cultural phenomena), as well as explicitly, by referring to universalist humanist ideas. For example, Paul van Tieghem concluded his 1931 *La littérature comparée* with a poetic apology for international literary history: "Chaque nation, chaque écrivain vient à son tour jouer son rôle, exprimer sa pensée, rêver son rêve dans ce drame immense dont la scène embrasse l'humanité . . . Et ce n'est pas un des moindres privilèges de l'histoire littéraire ainsi conçue, que de nous faire mieux connaître à nous-mêmes, d'agrandir et d'enrichir notre idée de l'âme humaine" (van Tieghem 1931: 212–213). The ideology of comparative literature inscribed in the above quotation seems to be cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism is namely a post-enlightenment belief that "in their essence" people are equal, regardless of affiliations to various ethnicities, states, languages, religions, classes, or cultures. As a product of rational self-reflection, epitomized by Kantian critiques of subjectivity and his pointing to *a priori* forms of cognition, cosmopolitanism attempted to surpass all kinds of authoritative, traditional, and ossified cognitive schemes that used to confine individuality; with disdain it rejected various sectarian, nationalist, chauvinist, racist, and class prejudices endemic to xenophobic defense mechanisms, which were – and maybe still are – unavoidable in

collective identity constructions (i.e., downgrading and excluding the other, keeping it outside the community's imagined boundaries or the social body). Whereas the universalist variety of cosmopolitanism typical of the enlightened *philosophes*, intellectual elite, and their internationally widespread but socially exclusive *république des lettres* understood otherness as an emanation of one and the same human nature – rational, emotional, and sensitive – its individualizing variety, launched by Herder and embraced throughout nineteenth-century Europe by much broader social circles, stressed that the role of cultural, historical, ethnic, and linguistic *difference* was crucial in striving for global equality of people and enhancing their non-hierarchic dialogue. Since the eighteenth century, cosmopolitanism has informed the lifestyles of nobles and urban intellectuals as well as conceptually inspired ethics and international law, theories of free market, political science, and the humanities, especially comparative approaches to language and culture.¹

Comparative literature as one of the comparative disciplines outlined its research horizon foremost in the wake of cosmopolitan ideas of “world literature,” which were put forward fragmentarily from the late 1820s to 1848 by Goethe, Marx, and Engels.² During the outburst of national “revivals,” world literature was expected to transcend the rivalry of the emerging national literary traditions and go beyond their cognitive centrisms through their awareness of and contribution to the growing inter-cultural exchange; for example, through translations, reading foreign journals, travelogues, discoveries of old texts, and foreign book reviews. By opening windows to other cultures (Damrosch 2003: 15), world literature was meant to contribute to mutual understanding and equality of nations as well as to the recognition that modern history, connected to the triumph of bourgeois capitalism and imperialism, was interconnected, polycentric, and essentially global. The notion of world literature was based on Herderian (that is to say, the individualizing variety of) cosmopolitanism, which was, however, also used to legitimize pan-European *national* movements, including their ideology of cultural nationalism. This paradox impelled proponents of world literature to imagine cultural difference mainly in terms of nations: nations figured as world literature's constitutive elements. So it does not come as surprise that even Goethe's views on the global polyphony of national literatures suffered from Euro-centric and ethnocentric bias. Aiming at supporting German literature, which faced strong international competitors, Goethe portrayed international links of literatures from the perspective of German cultural nationalism and its geopolitical agenda (cf. Damrosch 2003: 8).

For comparative literature, the notion of world literature has become a regulative idea that helped determine its international or global subject field and legitimize its perspective and methods, such as study of inter-literary contacts, cross-cultural transfer, transmitters, translations, reception, or influences. Cosmopolitan ideology was thus involved in the very cognitive foundation of comparative literature, where it interfered with categories originating in the centrisms of national

¹ On cosmopolitanism see Appiah 2006: ix–xv; Kleingeld & Brown 2006.

² On “world literature” see van Tieghem 1931: 22–27; Ocvirk 1936: 12–13, 71–72; Shulz & Rhein 1973: 1–12; Birus 2003; Damrosch 2003: 1–36; Casanova 1999: 27, 64; Praver 1981: 157–163.

thinking, such as national literature, national character, or individuality. Compared to rigid nationalist cognitive centrism, this kind of post-Herderian, individualizing cosmopolitanism saw any nation in the plural context of other nations, while treating their mutual differences as a *condition sine qua non* of a global intercultural exchange. Further, comparatists often explicitly referred to cosmopolitan discourses in order to legitimize their scholarly endeavors, especially their position vis-à-vis the established national literary histories. As evidenced by van Tieghem, his Slovene successor Anton Ocvirk (*Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine*, [Theory of Comparative Literary History] 1936), and many others, comparatists had to balance cosmopolitan openness to otherness, which was essential for comparative methods and practices, with the ethnocentric national concerns that populated the European public sphere and, through nationalist and racist excesses, led to two world wars.

One of the best examples was Hugo Meltzl, who, as early as 1877, working in peripheral, plurilingual, and multicultural Transylvania, reproached national literary history for being “ancilla historiae politicae” or “ancilla nationis” (cited in Schulz & Rhein 1973: 56). Although his intentions were cosmopolitan in the sense of Herderian historicist individualism, he explicitly rejected “foggy, ‘cosmopolitanizing’ theories” and “universal fraternization” (Schulz & Rhein 1973: 59–60), probably because these notions, being popular targets of the general public and traditional philologists, were meant to blame the emerging discipline of comparative literature. As an antidote to national narrow-mindedness, great power hegemony, cosmopolitan universalism, and metropolitan neglect of minor or peripheral literatures, Meltzl founded the first multilingual comparatist journal, *Acta comparationis litterarum universarum*, in which he did his best to put Goethean “world literature” into scholarly practice. Therefore Damrosch is right to see in Meltzl’s affirmation of smaller languages and literatures an “important early mode[1] of a genuinely global comparatism,” which has been proposed only recently by Spivak and others (Damrosch 2006: 100).

From the above considerations, it becomes evident that the ideologies of cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism conditioned each other and that they were entangled in the same historical development. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century systemic processes of “nationalizing” and “autonomizing” literature, as described by Siegfried Schmidt (1989: 282–283 et passim), were employed to enhance national awareness – for example, by standardizing literary language as national or fictionalizing the imagined community’s particular historical legacy – as well as to advance the esthetic attitude to literary texts. Whereas the esthetic convention was spontaneously applied to reading and interpretation of pre-modern European writing as well as to non-European traditions, this kind of universalist and Eurocentric cognitive appropriation of otherness was, on the other hand, balanced by a consciously global self-positioning of local semiospheres: the collective *origo* of one’s cultural space was becoming decentered, experienced in the environment of other “nationalizing” or “nationalized” literatures. Following the logic of identity construction, nations as imagined communities only became possible through their relations with each other: while emulating the same discursive repertoire of the transnational current of nationalist ideology, they sought their individuality through relentless comparisons with and differentiation from other nations. Modern

European nations were thus established within a new geopolitical reality that was perceived as inter-national (cf. Casanova 1999: 56–59); borders on the newly imagined map of Europe were now drawn almost exclusively by the existing or emerging nation-states.

It may be true that world literature was invented to buffer the dangers of cultural wars and economic competition between national literatures. However, Goethe's economic metaphors suggesting a global market of cultural goods also draw attention to parallels between world literature and the expansion of the capitalist economy into the "world system" since the sixteenth century (Wallerstein 1976; 1991). Elaborating upon Marx's insights, Wallerstein writes that capitalism, encouraged by new technologies of transport and communication, made the economy global by introducing forms of exploitation, labor division, capital flow, and surplus value appropriation that were organized geographically and politically. The world economy thus created local (national) state structures with national-cultural identities, which were positioned unequally: whereas "core-states" as the sites of developed production could accumulate capital and control the geopolitical division of labor, "peripheral" or "semi-peripheral areas," whose means of production were less developed and statehood was weaker, remained dependent on those centers. Hence the world system of capitalist economics with its cores and peripheries shows many striking analogies with the gradual formation of a "world republic of letters" from the eighteenth to the twentieth century (Casanova 1999: 119–178). *La république mondiale des lettres* is conceived by Casanova as a hierarchically organized semiotic space, in which the established and emerging literary fields interact from asymmetrical positions, either as centers of cultural influence, where consecration of literary products for the international cultural market takes place, or as peripheries with poorer cultural capital and worse linguistic, social, or political possibilities for international literary breakthrough. World literature is the space reserved for the diffusion and circulation of literary texts that, after having been recognized by some global metropolis, exceed the linguistic boundaries of their literary fields and become actively present in other languages or cultures (Damrosch 2003: 4–6). Drawing on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, Franco Moretti, too, portrays the "world literary system" as analogous to the world economy (although not identical with the history and spatial distribution of economic cores and peripheries); it consists of influential productive centers and primarily receptive peripheries (Even-Zohar 1990; Moretti 2000). However, according to Even-Zohar and Moretti, strong and developed literatures, which now function as centers of the world literary system, used to be peripheral in the phase of their emergence; without interference with peripheral productivity and the resources of "small" or "minority literatures," even central literary systems would stagnate.

Like fiction writers, comparative literary historians, who are frequently involved in their local literary fields, are also dependent on the international importance of their mother tongue and culture (cf. Casanova 1999: 28–32, 63–64). Consequently, many comparatists incorporate their scholarly work into hidden nationalist agendas: by making international comparisons, they seek arguments for the cultural and political prestige of their own nation or country. Being fully aware of other, even more influential centers of cultural production, they can avoid neither

persistent schemes of cognitive centrism nor the ideologemes of cultural nationalism. Geopolitical profiles of nationalism among comparatists from the central or “great” (G) world literatures thus differ from those coming from (semi-)peripheral or “small” (S) literatures.

Through their own works, or by training or influencing S-comparatists, the G-comparatists consolidated the international dominance of their native literatures (e.g., by recording the planetary influences of their own writers, celebrating their culture’s openness to imports, and comparing only among the “great” literatures of Western metropolises). To take an example, Van Tieghem, who in his *La littérature comparée* of 1931 in principle recognized the historical importance of *littératures à rayonnement limité*, in practice considered inter-literary relations almost exclusively between Western European nations and did not reject developmental schemes based on successive shifts of leading Western literatures (van Tieghem 1931: 207–208). Similarly, Pascale Casanova, although open to literary emergence and periphery, describes Paris as a literary World Bank that plays a major role in the international circulation of literary goods (Casanova 1999: 41–55, 190–191). Power asymmetries in the world literary system have an impact on the discursive perspectives of comparative literature scholars that come from peripheries. Cultural nationalism, combined with or hidden behind the cosmopolitan ideology, also informed the comparative literary studies of S-nations through modifications of metropolitan models, as evidenced by Anton Ocvirk’s 1936 *Theory of Comparative Literary History*, inspired by van Tieghem’s compendium (cf. Smolej & Stanovnik 2007: 77–84).

Ocvirk referred to ideologemes from the cosmopolitan repertoire to overcome the ethnocentrism of Slovene national literary history. Although his attitude apparently deviated from the parochialism and naive patriotism of his colleagues in Slovene studies, he still clung to the same romantic tradition of understanding national identity as collective individuality (“national spirit/soul”) that manifests itself through culture and literature. He only reinterpreted it relationally by using comparative methods and from the perspective of individualizing cosmopolitanism implied in the notion of world literature’s dialogism. The ultimate goal of Slovene comparative literature proved to be the same as that of national literary history: to discern and confirm Slovenes’ cultural individuality and place them on the map of nations. The tendency to circumscribe one’s semiotic territory and foreground the position of “we” typical of cognitive centrism may be detected in the fact that, since Ocvirk’s time, Slovene comparatists have focused mainly on “bilateral” relations of Slovene literature with foreign works and European currents. Comparative literature has thus become a complement to national literary history and consolidated the imagining of Slovene literature as esthetic writing in a single, unified standard language. On the other hand, however, the comparatistic influence- and source-hunting at work in histories of S-literatures raises uneasiness about their peripheral, predominantly receptive status. Such a perception of inter-literary power relations seems to be at odds with the geopolitics of cognitive centrism. Accordingly, S-comparatists such as Ocvirk tend to overcome anxieties of influence by various strategies, of which I will mention but a few.

The *first* is the repression, erasure, substitution, or conceptual revision of influence, a key term of comparative literature. Instead of its unidirectional causality implying esthetic superiority of metropolitan source literatures over peripheral, presumably passive writing, Ocvirk – long before Bloom – saw in influence an agonistic dialectics through which the influenced author or nation creatively reshape and assimilate foreign material in order to articulate their individual identities (Ocvirk 1936: 113). Ocvirk was also among the earliest critics of influence as a means of cultural hegemony: for example, while recognizing the incentive of foreign influences for shaping national identity, he also paid attention to “negative, impeding influences” of German culture upon smaller Slavic literatures (Ocvirk 1936: 116).

Second, Ocvirk as a representative of S-comparatists interpreted domestic literary production by placing it in the categorial system derived from canons of world literature. He attempted to show that Slovene literature, although peripheral, was fully integrated in the central cultural, esthetic, and literary currents of European or world literature, precisely because it adapted, absorbed, and reworked outer influences (Ocvirk 1936: 5). Slovene cultural identity is therefore constructed relationally, but with respect to criteria of some generally recognized evolutionary measure as inaugurated by Western metropolises. The peripherocentric strategy of portraying peripheral national literature as “cultivated” and “completed,” as well as symbolically located in a respected and powerful central area of the world literary system (e.g., “the Western world” or “Europe”) allows the margin to see itself as a shareholder of the center’s (metropolitan) cultural capital and to distance itself from other peripheries (e.g. “the Balkans,” “Eastern Europe”). Nonetheless, by privileging comparisons with the great and being blind to other margins, the discipline strengthened the power of the metropolis and transferred its imperial perspective to the home environment, from which the center appears to be the prime meridian for defining literary modernity and innovation, whereas the periphery is condemned to backwardness and imitation (cf. Casanova 1999: 130–148).

Based on this, inferiority complexes and consolation fiction arose in public discourse, as well as forms of resistance – that is, critical rejection of cultural hegemony and affirmation of the creative potentials of marginal and border zones. Critique of occidentocentrism is therefore the *third* strategy employed by S-comparatists in their efforts to support “national interests.” The ideology of cultural nationalism is here the motor of critical attacks on the exclusivity of the Western canon and the imperial parochialism of its historical narratives. Ocvirk emphasized the creative contributions of Slovenes and other peripheral and non-European cultures to complex networks of world literature; he also protested against reducing European and world literature to the major Western players and deconstructed Baldensperger’s and Brunetière’s developmental schemes. He did this by adducing empirical facts that testify to the pertinence of and need for polycentric models of literary history (Ocvirk 1936: 65–67).

Recently, both traditional ideologies of comparative studies – cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism – as well as their cognitive centrism have been challenged by a new system of legitimizing scholarly discourse: the ideology of

multi- and transculturalism (cf. Bernheimer 1995). Especially in Western urban centers, this has been formed as a reflex of globalization. Within the post-national paradigm, the persuasiveness of the Herderian (both nationalist and cosmopolitan) link of nation, language, territory, and literature has been shaken, and with it also the identity model presupposed by national and comparative literary histories. In this context, Hokenson, for example, conceives comparative scholarship as research in “cross-cultural intertextuality” and as “intercultural poetics” (Hokenson 2003: 71). Cultural identity is shown to be formed in an in-between, floating space of different languages, cultures, or traditions. Jola Škulj connects identity formation of every “national culture” and literature with cross-cultural intertextuality: “Our cultural identity is our intertext. . . . Forming itself and existing through cross-cultural interactions, cultural identity exposes its inevitable intertextual character” (Škulj 2003: 149). Although Škulj, just like many other comparatists, keeps equating cultural identity mainly with the categories of “national culture” or “national literature,” she succeeds in deconstructing its centrism; she stresses the essential role of difference, contradiction, and otherness in any identity construction. Consequently, and parallel to the Kristevan notion of the “subject in process,” cultural identity may be grasped as a process of constant historical self-definition and reinterpretation: on the one hand, it rearticulates itself through influences and ever-changing (intertextual) relations with distant, adjacent, or interfering cultural spaces; on the other hand, it develops with the help of self-referential reshaping of its own memory. Cultural cognitive centers are thus actually everywhere, geopolitically and socially dispersed, of unequal power but of equal importance. Throughout history, they have been constantly moving, crossing, interacting, and overlapping.

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