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# From Comparatism to Comparativity

## Comparative Reasoning Reconsidered

### Abstract

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Comparative literature was born with the national paradigm of literary historiography in the early nineteenth century when literary studies, together with other historical and comparative studies, were institutionalized as a particular field of research and higher education. The cognitive pattern generated by this paradigm comprises both national literary studies and comparative literature. They are both instances of comparatism, solidly anchored in a national context as its basic and indispensable point of reference rather than in the border-crossing life of literary texts. In contrast, the comparative reasoning of the twenty-first century, as exemplified by the emerging interest in world literature studies, attempts to cultivate the comparativity of the literary texts themselves – their potential to engage with several possible contexts of comparison beyond the standard theories and methods of comparatism and without giving an axiomatic priority to one of them. In the traditional aesthetics of imitation, European and non-European, the double nature of any text as being organized around both an external centre and a domestic centre is already an integral part of the definition of literature in view, first of all, of their degree of canonicity. Today, more radically, all literary texts, irrespective of canonical position but as part of their status and function as literary texts, are assumed to possess the capacity to be part of several textual and cultural contexts beyond that of their place and time of origin. The paper traces the history of comparative reasoning, leading both to the national paradigm and the nineteenth-century-inspired comparatism and to the consequences for modern literary studies, opening a broader view of the comparative potentials of texts across time and space.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This paper is dedicated to colleagues and students in Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, in gratitude for collaboration and inspiration during my service as professor 1998–2014.

### The National Paradigm

The core question in comparative literature today is how to get out of the constraints produced by the institutionalized thinking and practice of comparative literature that first shaped the discipline. This

happened in the early nineteenth century Europe of emerging nation states in tandem with other comparative studies in linguistics, anthropology, art history and other disciplines. Comparative literature is one of a set of interwoven comparative studies, sharing its genealogy, methods and theories with them, but also having its own issues and perspectives. Today, we still benefit from the accumulated results of 200 years of practice of comparative literature and will continue to do so. But we also have to bear in mind that the discipline generated a cognitive pattern which does not necessarily respond to the challenges of comparative studies in the twenty-first century, and may even prevent us from asking the relevant questions.

Across the globe, the early nineteenth century was a period of transition in culture, politics, science and ideology, with Europe as the dynamic centre. Here the build-up of new sovereign nation states within a larger colonial framework and an emerging modern globalization, fueled by urbanization and industrialization, exercised a decisive influence on cultures and societies all over the world. This period may be seen as a huge cultural laboratory for a yet unknown future, organized around a geopolitical model with clearly marked centres and peripheries, placing the nation state at the core of the centres. Places or epochs, whether inside or outside Europe, without an organization identical or analogous with the proto-typical European nation state were, by definition, denigratingly considered to be peripheral social formations at worst and embryonic nations at best and so were their thinking, products, literatures, arts, politics, religions, morals and everyday culture.

Around 1800 literature more than other art forms acquired an essential role in the new European nation states. They were considered to be the *telos* of the overall historical processes, and their identity was reflected in and propelled by the national languages, the new term for the vernaculars which now were elevated to the same status as Latin in Middle Ages. Hence, being the verbal art form *par excellence*, national literature was celebrated, spearheaded by German Idealism, as a major contributor to the creation of national identity and as the primary medium for reflection on the values and goals of the nation, which was perceived as the most accomplished social and cultural form of a collective historical development.

If certain local literatures did not correspond to European textual forms or ideas of national literature they were reduced to *ethnographica*, perhaps valuable, but not 'real' literature, and thus left to other comparative studies in anthropology, linguistics, ethnography

or religious studies. As a consequence the cultures that produced them were not judged as capable of reaching the same level of civilization as the contemporary European national cultures. Before the Middle Ages were recontextualized by the Romantics as the cradle of the nation states this period was supposed to be dark, while the African continent throughout European history was seen as the awe-inspiring dark continent and Asia contained fascinating but fallen cultures, bypassed by history. This complex web of literary and cultural ideas constitutes the still active national paradigm in literary studies which also gave rise to comparative literary studies. The basic research focus became the study of relations between literatures defined as national literatures and their authors defined as national icons. This type of comparative study I will call comparatism. The topic of this paper is how it came into being and how we can and why we must reconsider it today.

## An Ongoing Experiment

In spite of its celebratory national ideological underpinning, from its very beginning the national paradigm worked within literary studies, comparative studies included, as an open, although predominantly Eurocentric cultural and scientific project, engaged in an incessant search for its practice. As an ongoing cultural experiment its aim was to explore how to represent the mutual relationship between nation states and literatures without yet knowing how to do it. Today, we face a task similar to that of the founders of the national paradigm and of comparative literature. We, too, are searching for common historical denominators for literatures past and present relevant for the attempts to come to grips with our own contemporary cultural conditions, now located in the increasingly globalized world of the twenty-first century (Larsen, “Other Eyes,” “National”).

Although in opposition to the ideas of the national paradigm and its subsequently institutionalized normative practices during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, today’s investigations are still based on the same two foundational principles that shaped the emerging national paradigm as a research quest:

- 1 The basic research question concerns the *dynamic reciprocity* between culture and literature that sparks an ongoing change in both.

- 2 The answer to that question presupposes that *contemporary culture* serves as the point of departure for the understanding of earlier periods.

I have chosen to highlight these two mostly implicit cognitive features instead of the more obvious issues of national propaganda and fake historicism which most often have showcased the paradigm and therefore also have been the main and somewhat easy target of harsh criticism during the post-Second World War literary debate, particularly in postcolonial studies. But as long as such practices continue to assume a self-evident monopoly around the globe today, which they do, such criticism is still legitimized.

An example of the persistence of the traditional paradigmatic thinking was highlighted when the prestigious Booker Prize changed from a national award to an international award for all literatures in English in 2013. Some critics said that “It’s rather like a British company being taken over by some worldwide conglomerate,” or that “it means that the prize will be dominated by big publishing houses who maybe aren’t taking as many risks. Good novels will be overlooked” (*International Herald Tribune*, September 21–22, 2013). One may add that only in 1987 was the first non-European Francophone writer, Tahar Ben Jelloun, awarded the equally prestigious French Prix Goncourt, founded in 1903. The national paradigm continues at the same time to shape ideology and critical thinking. It is time to open a more profound and difficult debate and greater self-reflection in comparative research.

One difficulty in doing precisely that stems from the fact that the two principles just mentioned still confront literary historiography with pertinent theoretical and methodological challenges. Therefore, our major goal for comparative studies today is again to open the field for new experiments which, precisely as experiments, allow for a non-dogmatic recycling of still relevant components from the national paradigm and turn them into a new viable historiographical practice.<sup>2</sup> In the developed globalized and multicultural world of the twenty-first century, the immanent essentialism of particular locations, nations among them, is subject to simultaneous intrinsic and extrinsic pressure. More than ever, local lives and identities are recognized as unfolding on translocal and increasingly global conditions. From economy and politics via social institutions to language, literature, communication and media, local histories are refractions

2. For a survey of literary historiography, see Larsen, “What is Literary”.

of globalized conditions. Moreover, the immediate and inescapable everyday life experience in the overwhelming majority of places around the world is modulated in different ways by the co-presence of many cultures and histories involving peoples, commodities and media, a situation that as early as 1935 Ernst Bloch in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (2nd Part) called 'Ungleichzeitigkeit,' or 'non-synchronicity.'

Referring again to the two principles, today the dynamics between literature and culture is cast in terms of networks, links and relations determining what we perceive as local spaces and places, and contemporaneity is defined as the presence of the global in the local. Tracing the histories of such features back in time is a way of rewriting literary and other histories to make them the histories of *our* present world and also grounding its future perspectives, in the same way as the early nineteenth century shaped national histories in various disciplines as the histories of *its* time, rewriting both Antiquity and the Middle Ages for that purpose and reshaping them into forms that still reign supreme in widespread conceptions of our history and thereby impeding our access to that history as *our* history today. Reconsidering the Middle Ages (or Antiquity, perhaps late Antiquity in particular) in a new comparative perspective is one essential moment in a necessary modern reshaping of that history.

The process has been evolving in literary studies over the last 25 years. I shall list only a few examples. More and more attention is paid to translation studies as an activity interacting with original language studies as mutually interdependent studies of equal importance, without attributing only an ancillary and at times negative status to translation; studies of transnational reception and dissemination of literature can no longer be separated from studies of individual and local literary creativity and production; traditions are rather seen as ongoing processes of rewritings and transformations than as accumulated repositories of canons; studies of cross-media adaptations are conceived of as important factors in cross-cultural interactions in today's interactive media landscape and not denigratingly taken to be distortions of the supremacy of literary originals; a focus on former colonial literatures hitherto deprived of the status of national literatures shows how they, for that very reason, reflect the global complexity of entangled cultural realities of any locality today more clearly and imaginatively than national literatures in the classical sense; the rapidly increasing importance of a world literature perspective emphasises the mutual relationship between the local and the trans-local or global as the basic dynamics of literatures and their history;

and digital humanities offer new resources and open new comparative perspectives beyond literary studies.

This situation also influences studies of earlier historical periods in Europe as well as elsewhere where nation-building was not on the agenda. In more recent studies, the European Middle Ages, cross-Atlantic literary clusters including in particular the Caribbean, and African literatures all stand out as independent historical complexes in their own right, forcing the studies of literature within a national confinement to reconsider their positions – the empire writes back, as Salman Rushdie wittily has pointed out.<sup>3</sup> We only need to think of the change from backward-looking terms such as ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Middle Ages’ to forward-looking notions such as ‘Early Modern’ and the corresponding take on the Middle Ages as a transnational European phenomenon, not as a set of more or less separate national forerunners for the later nation states or as a homogenous Latin universe on the one hand and a separate and heterogeneous vernacular ‘folkish’ universe on the other.

However, accepting the two basic principles of the national paradigm as a potentially positive inspiration must not seduce us into overlooking two important constraints that are more damaging to comparative literature today than to other types of literary studies – institutional and historical constraints.

1) *The institutional constraint*: Modern literary studies, including comparative literature, are shaped by the national paradigm, and we owe our institutional as well as our cultural position in education and research to its success. Until recently, the standard institutional make-up for universities followed, with some variations, the division between departments of national philologies and comparative studies of various kinds, each hosting their own programs. With the present merger of departments in many universities, the departmental boundaries may have changed, but not those of the programs, which to a large extent are generated by the traditional structure. Hence we are not facing a paradigm outside ourselves from which we can simply distance ourselves in today’s global culture or alternatively which we can just passively take for granted without betraying the historical nature of literature and literary history and neglecting our own historical conditions. As literary scholars we all bear the birthmark of the paradigm, both as culturally anchored individuals and as professionals.

Moreover, we still subscribe to its two foundational ideas of cultural reciprocity and contemporary perspective on literary history.

3. The phrase is a tongue-in-cheek quote of the title *Star Wars. The Empire Strikes Back*.

But if we are not able to recast such assumptions as new guidelines for the actual rewriting of literary histories in the context of today's globalized cultures, we will continue to reinscribe ourselves into the national paradigm. By its very institutional nature it will always give priority to national literary studies in education, criticism and research and marginalise comparative studies, although the comparative perspective is precisely what is needed today and also appears to be most innovative in the contemporary literary research landscape, in particular within the framework of redefined local literary studies.

2) *The historical constraint*: The second constraint is also imposed on us from inside comparative literature itself. The constitution of the discipline in France and Germany in the nineteenth century has acquired the status of its starting point, almost *ex nihilo*, with the result that comparative ancestors and followers will always be judged relative to this originating moment, never in their own right. First of all, the basic notion of comparison is then closely linked to a *discipline*. This situation implies that we at the outset are working on a meta-level in relation to literary texts. In teaching and research we are more preoccupied with the life and death of the discipline and its institutionalized manifestations than with the life and death of the texts and literary culture at large in the broad landscape of languages and media where texts emerge, move, are translated, canonized or transformed and eventually sink into oblivion.

In other words, situating our point of departure on the level of the discipline in order to establish a conception of comparison will unavoidably highlight questions of methodology and theory and pay less attention to the production and the reading of texts. The standard corpus of comparative literature studies only rarely investigate aspects of texts that challenge the established method, or if they do (for example Charles Sainte Beuve as opposed to Fernand Brunetière) they usually only suggest a new theory and methodology that will operate in the same self-asserting way, only with other isolated textual details. *Les petits faits vrais* according to the discipline set the comparative agenda in a comparison between texts that are considered as literature within the national paradigm. In a nutshell, this is what characterizes comparatism as the type of comparative studies generated by the national paradigm.

However, a proper comparative reasoning should always be concerned with three interdependent and maybe at times discordant levels of comparison of equal importance for any comparative enterprise: 1) the meta-level of theory and methodology, 2) the level of

production of texts and 3) the level of reading and reception of texts. These levels in themselves are not new, but two requirements for them are: 1) in an adequate comparative analysis, they have to be seen as interdependent; 2) the priority is not *a priori* given to one level, but will have to be defined by the comparison under scrutiny. Unfortunately, with the emergence of our discipline, the meta-level gained most prominence, and, step by step, comparatism became institutionalized as an authoritative theoretical and methodological paradigm which blinded us to other relevant aspects of comparative reasoning concerned with both textual dynamics and reception, which mostly became separate preoccupations in individual sub-disciplines like close reading or reception studies. Nevertheless, I shall consider each level in turn to unravel in more detail the potential of the suggested change of perspective in comparative studies.

## The Meta-Level: from Cognition to Comparison

In order to expand and revive our ideas of comparison I will briefly trace the history of comparative reasoning without a primary reference to its established time of birth around 1800 and with a view beyond its disciplinary meta-level toward the level of texts. This move will, I believe, make us more sensitive to changes not only in the contemporary literary landscape, but also invite us to reinterpret its history or histories. In other words, I intend to open comparatism to what I will call the comparativity of literary texts.

By comparativity I understand the potential of any phenomenon, texts included, to be compared with something else not specified in advance. Textual comparativity – comparativity for short – is the potential of any text to suggest not only one context, as the national paradigm requires, but several contexts where relevant comparisons may take place, perhaps including complementary or even irreconcilable dimensions. Any systematic exercise of comparison is not only a way of exploiting that potential, but also a way of reducing it by activating only some of the possible contexts through explicitly adapting a certain focus, and thus also self-reflexively pointing to the constraints and shortcomings of that focus. In contrast to comparatism, a valid comparative analysis cannot just focus on results that can be obtained by suggested causal explanations of influences or by way of a convincing demonstration of the historical rep-



4. I use the phrase “what we today would call literature” to highlight that the very notion of ‘literature’ has changed in Europe over time, and that similar notions and their histories in other cultures today may both differ and overlap. The broad notion of *poiesis* places literature under the much broader umbrella of human creativity and thus in a relation of continuity with other manifestations of the human potential for changing natural things. This idea was later incorporated in Giambattista Vico’s use of the term *poiesis* in his *Scienza Nuova* (1725/1744) to evoke a new understanding of the fundamental historicity of the human life world. With the Latin term *litteratura* the fundamental relation to writing is emphasized and has remained so in literary studies, but until European Romanticism still with a much broader view of what is included in *belles lettres* than is usual today, although new genres like docu-fiction and autobiographical writing challenge our present-day ideas. Later, with the Romantic idea of the individual creativity of the poet, the notion of fictionality came forward, emphasizing the power and freedom of the imaginative abilities of the individual poet to create a highly personal invented possible world, separate from reality and the types of texts that deal with that reality. In the twentieth century the idea of literature as verbal art, a particular use of language different from other discursive practices, gained ground. Here, the experiments with the material medium of literature became important, as in other art forms, and prepared for our understanding of literature as interacting with the larger media landscape of today, from film to digital art. In short, “what we today would call literature” could instead be called “fictionalizing verbal art.” Other textual canons, like the Chinese canon used for millennia as part of the education of administrators, cut across any Western categorization. But today, in China and elsewhere, the westernized ideas of literature have gone global, propelled by the many international awards, not least the Nobel Prize, and

representativity of texts within periods predefined on the basis of dogmatically accepted European post-Enlightenment ideas about the sequel of historical periods. Often forgotten in the history of our discipline, or occurring with a severe delay, is the criticism of the standard Eurocentric periodization that became a necessary part of the constitution of literary studies within the national paradigm.

A glance at most surveys of world literary histories shows that they are divided into Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or Early Modern eras etc., and the presentation of non-European literatures is derived from this epochal structure as being contemporary with each of the large European epochs but with no historical trajectory of their own (*Miner passim*). Discussions of competing conceptions of history in different cultures are absent for comparative literary studies, and relevant features of texts risk being defined solely by their capacity to be absorbed by an established method, historical conceptualization of history or theory of literariness, making what is left out of sight irrelevant.

We also have to bear in mind that the comparativity of objects in general, not only of texts, plays an important role for the understanding of human cognition as such, beyond the particular causal and representative take on comparative literature or any other particular discipline. Aristotle already insisted on this point in Part IV of his *Poetics* when he introduced the fundamental cognitive process of imitation through comparison as an underlying theoretical prerequisite for the understanding of *mimesis* as a basic feature of literary strategies, particularly when it comes to drama. His genre-based conception of what we today would call literature<sup>4</sup> builds on a comparative analogy with natural things, which as first substances (*ousiai*), are understood within a system of kinds, *genos/eidos* (genus/species). But according to Aristotle, literary practice could transcend the natural order through comparative strategies. This assumption gave rise to his theory of metaphor as analogical reasoning whereby elements that do not belong to the same natural kind nevertheless, experimentally as it were, are being linked to each other through comparative, analogical inference. For Aristotle, comparative reasoning is a cognitive experiment, not an application of a given theory and methodology.

Aristotle finds a more recent supporter in the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who in his 1903 Harvard “Lectures on Pragmatism” differentiated three types of reasoning: the deductive type, moving from axioms to individual instances; the inductive one, moving from individual cases to general principles; and finally the

abductive type (Lecture 7, 3) which is where comparativity comes in. When encountering an unknown phenomenon, we try to integrate it experimentally in known categories by comparing details in the unknown phenomenon with what we know. This analogical reasoning, as Peirce says, uses metaphors and heuristic similarities to establish an experimental but qualified guess about the nature of the unknown phenomenon based on previous experience which then later has to be tested rigorously. Analogical reasoning as scientific reasoning proper is essential to medieval thinking, which is a crucial source of inspiration for Peirce. Instead of abandoning analogical reasoning altogether as unscientific parallelisms without any explanatory power, as may happen in modern science, Peirce insists on its importance for a necessary prescientific hypothesizing leading to scientific reasoning, also beyond chains of causality. Thus, analogical reasoning is instrumental in avoiding the simplicity of causal dogmatism and in accepting a more differentiated take on explanations, as is needed in comparative studies.

5. See also Leatherdale (science) and Fishelov (comparative literature).

With a modern resonance in Peirce among others,<sup>5</sup> Aristotle's approach to the field of literature seems to me to be an abductive attempt to ground a discipline that was framed by his epistemology and his general philosophy of things, not only a particular literary or aesthetic theory. I believe that this broader cognitive view opens the discipline to a much larger and also more experimental sense and practice of comparing than is legitimized by the established practice of comparative literature. Then, the building blocks of comparative literature, causality and representativity in relation to European national histories are just two of several possible constituents of a comparative meta-level, which allows for a much more context-sensitive comparative take on cognition and a broader view of comparative reasoning. This is a lesson that Aristotle has already taught us but which our discipline has forgotten, and with this oblivion an important potential also disappeared for productive self-criticism of theories, methods and perspectives.

## Textual Production: from Comparativity to Comparatism

On the level of textual production, the second interdependent level, it is clear that the long tradition of *imitatio* in European literature, and similar trends in other cultures with an equally rigid canon forma-

tion, is a principle of textual production based on the comparativity of the texts of the predecessors. Look to the Greek models, Horace teaches in his letter to the Piso family, or *Ars poetica* (v. 304–32). The many treatises on poetics and on textual production were two sides of the same coin; there was no need to single out a specific academic discipline like comparative literature. All cultures practicing canonically-based imitations automatically created a huge intertextual universe constituting the literary tradition based on the comparativity of texts as a resounding echo of the tradition. For written literature, China is a case in point; for oral literature the aboriginal Australian songs of the dreamtime is a privileged example.

The French *querelle des anciens et des modernes* that broke out at the end of the seventeenth century is the most widespread sign in Europe that this tradition was about to collapse. It is not the only one, as the earlier Italian debate around Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* in relation to the newly translated Aristotle shows (Finucci), but the French debate set the agenda across Europe. One of the reasons for its prominent role is that the focus of the controversy was the emerging genre of the modern novel and the new acceptance of prose fiction as a potentially canonical literary form. In a way, the debate paved the way for a genre that grew to be *the* dominant literary genre across the world today. The fierce discussion revolved around a historical problem: was literature in the modern vernaculars able to develop not merely new works but also new forms and discursive types that would surpass the authoritative classical authors? Ancients like Nicolas Boileau said no; moderns like Charles Perrault said yes.<sup>6</sup> A special position was occupied by Pierre-Daniel Huet. Using the novels of Mme de Lafayette as a case in point, he tried in *Traité de l'origine des romans* (1670) to provide the emerging modern multi-focalized novel with a recognized literary status as a genre on a par with tragedy and other canonical genres. Here it may be important to note that the term 'modern' was not identical with later terms as 'modernism,' 'modernity,' 'modernization' and such like. The French debate used the word 'modern' in its sense of 'modo' in medieval Latin: "recently, right now" (cf. the adjective *modernus*, also in medieval Latin). The modern therefore refers to what has recently occurred, in short to the contemporary.

On the one hand, on both sides the debate was fully embedded in Aristotelian thinking: genres are the basic natural forms which legitimize literature as genuine imitations of nature, and the competitive *aemulatio* only concerned the production of even better exam-

6. See Hans-Robert Jauss' large introduction to Charles Perrault's *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*.

ples within the given genres according to accepted rhetorical standards. On the other hand, the new idea which took shape in the French debate was that the contemporary period existing at any time has in itself a normative value, also comprising the evaluation of literatures of the past and without giving priority to the standards of the earlier periods. According to the dawning new insight, it is in the nature of norms to change, foundational norms included, in a process propelled by the literary practice itself. From Huet and the other 'moderns' there is a straight road to the programmatic evocations in the early literary modernism in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular with Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. There is however an important difference: for Huet the modern is still qualified in its deviation from very precise past standards and the creation of a possible new type of canonicity, whereas in Rimbaud's outcry the modern is taken as something absolute, the contemporary as an autonomous temporal bubble, only oriented, if oriented at all, beyond the contemporary toward the future. As for canonicity, past or future, he could not care less.

Placed at the beginning of this process of terminological and ideological transformation, Huet is less radical. For him the emergence of a new genre in itself is not the decisive aspect, but its claim to a competing canonicity is. The aesthetics of *imitatio* could no longer provide the only necessary conceptual framework to cope with this situation. Therefore, the later adoration of the unique creativity of the individual genius or of the particular canonicity of each emerging national literature called for a new independent meta-level to replace the classical set of normative transnational rhetorical guidelines. Its role should be to enable us to establish a theoretical and methodological platform for a discussion not only of competing examples of the genres and styles handed down to us since Antiquity, but also of competing definitions of literary canonicity in relation to new literary trends. Without new guiding principles literary culture could end up being completely atomized by following whatever appeared as new, and thus it required some kind of ideological support. Aristotle's meta-level was constituted in relation to his natural philosophy and thus opposed to the historical change of literature. In contrast, the new type of meta-level grew out of evolving literary practice itself, transcending the existing norms of textual comparativity related to the fixed genres. It became a meta-level that should steer the preoccupation with literature through its unavoidable historical changes without losing a shared sense of literary quality and

importance or, as became the case with the national paradigm, should aim at controlling this changeability through new institutionalized practices in education, criticism and research.

If, for a moment, instead of our own discipline from around 1800 we take as our basic point of reference the long period of imitation as a comparative literary practice, we can see from the very outset how deeply conservative and traditional the new discipline of comparative literature also became in spite of its innovative ambitions. In fact, imitation as a normative practice to be left behind and the new discipline of historically concerned comparatism share the same argumentative structure. In both cases, comparison is a bipolar event, or, in more complex cases, it can be broken down into a series of such bipolar events. From the starting point of a basic invariable – the canonical text, the text exercising an influence, or the core characteristics of a representative text, author or national literature – this invariable component, by way of more or less rigidly conceived causal links, produces variables, to wit, new examples of a genre, new authors influenced by the stable canon, or new texts dominated by the features most prominently present in a representative author.

‘Invariable’ is here used in analogy with formal logic, but not in the same strict sense. What is invariable is the reference itself, not the use of it. One cannot *not* refer to a preceding text with a canonical status, a causal effect etc. But, as we know, all the standard references to for example Homer and other classics often go beyond passive imitation or mere quotation and, in the spirit of *aemulatio*, create re-writings but without transcending the normative standards.

The much acclaimed radical new orientation of comparative studies by the introduction in the 1960s of terms like ‘intertextuality’ and ‘palimpsest’ clearly falls within this traditional cognitive pattern of comparatism. However, these new terms gave the traditional thinking a twist that already began to turn in the debate between *les anciens et les modernes*, and similar debates across Europe, and eventually changed the comparative agenda. Here, the point of departure was an emerging and unstable new phenomenon, the variable, in the shape of the outline of the modern novel. That is to say, a reference that is chosen, not ordered and therefore a matter of debate, in contrast to the obligatory invariable traditional standards. This variable then serves as the point of reference for a re-evaluation of the status of the tradition itself, the invariable, beyond the possible imitative recycling in individual texts, with the aim of discovering new and

hitherto neglected literary potentials within or, more importantly, beyond it.

What does this mean? We shall take a brief look at Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). It is clearly influenced by Homer in a way that can be subsumed under the category of causality, from the reference to Homer as the canonical invariable to Walcott as the variable. But this is only half the truth, and not the most important half. More importantly, Walcott allows us, retrospectively, to reinterpret and thus actually change the tradition by taking a new position vis-à-vis the comparativity of Homer. He reshapes Homer and unravels or even produces new Homeric potentials, changing him from an obligatory reference to a chosen reference in this particular postcolonial context. The comparativity of a new genre or text can only unfold in future texts when they also reshape the past in a dialectical movement. Thus, both Homer and Walcott are recontextualized historically and open up new comparative perspectives.

In contrast, traditional comparatism, either manifested in imitative textual production or in the academic methodology of comparative literature, is a unilateral movement, inevitably turned toward the past before it turns to the present, but never to the future and never back again. While the creative textual production of Romanticism indulged in hybrid genres, emergent forms, fragments, arabesques, grotesque and phantasmagorical prose etc., the newly established contemporary comparative academic disciplines recapitulated, as it were, the principle of imitation on the meta-level of literature and translated it into a normative methodology, separating it from the explosively unfolding literary practice of its time.

At this historical juncture Germaine de Staël's erratic but innovative *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800) is considered to have laid the ground for comparative literature within the national paradigm. It is inspired both by the new historical and national ideas from the end of the eighteenth century and by the older French debate. The first part, "De la littérature chez les Anciens et chez les Modernes," refers directly to the old debate but also amalgamates it with the ideas about nation and literature formulated by contemporary German Idealism:

In all literatures we have to distinguish between that which is national, and that which belongs to imitation [...]. Imitation as artistic principle, as I have shown, does not allow for infinite improvement, and in this perspective the moderns

incessantly create and recreate the old anew. [...] Even the greatest genius transcends only to a minor degree the intellectual level of his time. (vol. 1: 92, 149, 147, my transl.).

Particular literatures are locally anchored and typical of their period, and also depend on social institutions and a regional, climatic, and, consequently, naturally determined mentality. (Mme de Staël advocated the revived climate theory of the eighteenth century). On this basis, literatures old and new are assumed to contribute to a society's and a culture's historical transformation toward a more profound and comprehensive sense of humanity in line with Enlightenment thinking. Literature does not just *have* a history, but *creates* history.

Beginning in France by the end of the seventeenth century, spreading to other European intellectual centres, and recapitulated by Mme de Staël, the two principles evolve that I have pointed to earlier as the cornerstones of the national paradigm: the dynamic interaction between literature and culture and the priority given to contemporary criteria for quality and relevance. What is also clear from Mme de Staël is that the comparative discipline was born as the Siamese twin of the national philologies – the latter provided the map of the nationally or regionally based body of texts which the former exploited for its comparisons. This map presented the cultural hierarchies of texts at the superior producing end or inferior receiving end of causal influences, extended to a hierarchy between national literatures upgrading those regarded as most representative of their time as a whole – mainly England, France and Germany, the so-called golden triangle of comparative literature. They act as the most persistent invariables of comparison. Hence, when national literature is challenged, not as a category but as *the* basic category, so inevitably are comparative literature and the notion of comparatism that goes with it.

Although agreeing on this fundamental cognitive pattern, two diverging methodological directions evolved from the early foundation of the discipline. One was the *positivist* direction, rigorously pursuing influences between textual pairs with a meticulous eye for textual details (and also some contextual biographical details), but without any sense of the text as a whole. With influence as a key term, the basic principle was one of *causality* between elements supplemented by various theoretical superstructures. A few representative examples range from Wilhelm Scherer via Ferdinand Brunetière to Fernand Baldensberger and Paul Tieghem and, to a certain extent, right up to René Wellek or René Etiemble.

The other trend was the *developmental* direction, looking for the ways in which literature was a historical agent within a proto-Hege-  
lian notion of history. Here, the main interest was to single out typi-  
cal textual or contextual details which as a *pars pro toto* were seen as  
embodiments of an entire cultural or textual dynamics. The basic  
principle was *representativity*, not causality, with Georg Brandes as  
an important proponent together with Jacob Burckhardt, Wilhelm  
Wölfflin, Benedetto Croce and later György Lukács, Erich Auerbach  
and maybe Ernst Robert Curtius. Both major comparative trends are  
situated within the tradition of individual human agency shaped by  
European Enlightenment and Romanticism. The positivist school  
set out to explain the emergence of texts from psychological or so-  
cial features conceived as causal drivers for the authors, while the  
other school saw the personality of the great author as a type, a com-  
prehensive representation of his (rarely her) epoch and an embodi-  
ment of its developmental potential.

What was marked, positively, with the new comparative disci-  
pline, but hardly integrated in its thinking, was the necessity in any  
comparative practice to continue to consider the relation between at  
least two interacting levels: 1) the meta-level, which, however, can no  
longer provide the necessary initial definition of an invariable basis  
of comparison; 2) the production of literary texts, where imitation,  
although abandoned as *the* unquestioned basic principle, generated  
together with experiments a double driving force of literary produc-  
tion, as manifested in a flourishing genre hybridity on the one hand  
and an active neo-classicism on the other.

What follows today from this situation is that in the literary field  
– the texts and the study of them taken as a whole – comparative rea-  
soning can take as its point of departure no unchallenged invariable,  
like a canon, a dominating author or literature, or a certain method-  
ology and explanatory paradigm. There will always be multiple con-  
text-dependent perspectives on comparison and several relevant  
points of departure to be considered and reconsidered according to  
the concrete comparative project at hand.

The basic tension between the local and the global, or the trans-  
national, which now has become the core of the world literature per-  
spective, in each case requires a definition based on a careful argu-  
mentation for what is actually local in a given context and what is  
translocal, what is central and what is peripheral, what is minor and  
what is major, what is original and what is translation, and a clarifi-



cation of what the relevant focus of comparisons between such entities may be.

In today's comparative reasoning we always have to work with variables, as is also the case on the level of theory and methodology. One may say that traditional comparatism works *between* predefined national literatures, while modern comparative reasoning, in line with world literature studies, works *beyond* them and between entities defined contextually together with the given comparative project. As in the case of Newtonian physics being challenged by quantum theory, the latter does not refute the former completely, but outlines its boundaries by transcending them.

### Textual Reading: from Methodological Application to Explorative Comparison

Therefore, a third interdependent level of comparison will have to be introduced, the reading practice, but as a practice which does not apply but requires or initiates a particular theory and methodology and takes a more complex view of the comparativity of texts. In "The Location of Literature" (2006) Rebecca Walkowitz introduces this perspective through her concept 'comparison literature' in a critique of what has more often been labeled 'migrant literature.' First, she distances herself from the temptation to accept a new invariable: the biography of the writer as a migrant. Instead, she opts for the term 'literature of migration' as the literature of cultures defined by processes of migration that embrace everyone who belongs to it, although not in the same way, whether this literature is written by migrants or indigenous writers (a separation at times difficult to make). For her, then, comparison literature is understood as literature that defies our reading protocols as they have been developed in accordance with the methodologies of the national paradigm, presupposing a clear-cut distinction between what is inside and what is outside a culture. Instead, and on any level of the text, reading requires a particular definition of the boundaries across which comparisons have to be made in order to produce an adequate comprehension of the text, be it boundaries of circulation, of travel, of characters, of genres, of metaphors, of languages or of cultural values.

This reading practice implies a call for theory to enable the reader to compare differences which cannot be harmonized by a similarity, as was the case of both traditional comparatist trends: influenc-

es are detected through similarities which in turn are explained by chains of causality; representativity is revealed by analogies between, on the one hand, micro-features in texts and personalities and, on the other, macro-features in the contemporary cultural context. In the type of reading envisioned by Walkowitz, comparisons connect different elements without abandoning their difference and without placing them in a hierarchy that reinforces the theory of centre and periphery as it happens in classical comparatism or in post-colonialism. There may be influences involved and also representative elements, but they will never be the whole story and not always the most important story.

More recently the Australian literary scholar Ken Gelder has worked along the same lines in his paper from 2010, "Proximate Reading: Australian Literature in Transnational Reading Frameworks." As the title suggests, he proposes a 'proximate reading.' With this term he is not suggesting a reading on the basis of what is proximate, but what by the adopted literary strategy is *brought* into a proximate relationship – as when the East is made proximate to Europe by the orientalist projection, or when the Middle Ages is made proximate to Romanticism by the latter's medievalism. Reading in a transnational perspective, according to Gelder, is to study the proximity strategies of texts involving elements that are not in and by themselves proximate, and thus explaining what it means in a particular context that they appear in proximity, how it is brought about and how the difference or remoteness between the compared dimensions is dealt with across linguistic, cultural or regional boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

What comparison on such conditions requires is a meta-level that does not define what the right way of comparing is by building on at least one pre-established invariable component, but rather a meta-level that sets the theoretical and historical conditions for a recontextualization of the text on the basis of the possible contexts opened by its comparativity. This is actually what literature itself does when inspired by non-European cultures, and vice versa, or what literary studies do when reinscribing earlier periods in the present, as is the case with *e.g.* the recontextualization of medieval literature in contemporary culture different from the medievalism of Romanticism and also from the denigration of it used to underpin the self-understanding of the Renaissance. Recontextualization is the key word for experimental comparative reasoning.

If traditional comparatism were to pursue the same project the verdict would be harsh and immediate: unscientific anachronisms

7. Similar ideas are developed by the Chinese comparatist Shunqing Cao in his *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* (2013) with a comparative East-West view on texts, histories and theories.

and analogies. But today's multicultural life world is characterized by the interaction of such differences, where multiple and non-synchronous histories inside or outside the European linear and proto-teleological take on historical epochs coexist in the same cultural space without causal links between them or without an unquestioned representative status ascribed to just one of them. When similarities are pointed out they are not taken to be analogies *in re* but eye-opening invitations to engage in recontextualizing experiments in theory and analysis (*cf.* above on Aristotle's *Poetics*). For Walkowitz and Gelder, the task of comparative readings is to make literatures that are shaped on this cultural condition an object of study. The overall ambition is both to create a new dialogue with literatures of the past, as exemplified in the case of Walcott, and also to redefine the task and tools of comparative studies.

In line with comparative reasoning prior to the national paradigm and traditional comparatism, this approach is built on a productive awareness of the multifaceted comparativity within the texts, which calls for a particular formulation of theory and methodology depending on the chosen context and the focus of comparison, but also has a clear recognition of the need for theoretical rigor in the theories and methods brought into play with regard to the production and the reading of the texts. The self-criticism inherent in this type of comparative reasoning is directed toward the focus of the investigation, the particular exploitation of the text-based comparativity and the relevance and sharpness of the theoretical underpinning.

### Comparative Reading 1: a Case of Comparatism

I will conclude my reflections with two sketches of alternative readings of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1957). The novel is written in a society in transition from a colonial to a post-colonial status modeled after the European nation state, pushing the traditional tribal social and cultural structures across the Nigerian borders into the background. But the new state cannot erase the power of tribalism in the everyday life of people, their values, norms and world view, and the traditional culture penetrates into the political life which often appears as a failed projection of Europe onto the African map. Before independence the literature of this proto-national state had, in accordance with the national paradigm, no status as a genuine literature and was hardly published or read anywhere.

Achebe's novel marked the first major international breakthrough of African literature with global repercussions, but was written in English and published in London. It launched a heated debate about which language to use in order to create a Nigerian, or indeed African, literature – the indigenous languages with a strong oral tradition or the colonial languages? At the same time, the purpose of African literature opened another important debate: did writers want to create a national literature, and thereby support self-awareness and also elementary literacy, or to place African literature in the world as a literature on the level of any literary body of text, but different? Achebe's solution was to use English in order to change it according to African conditions (Achebe, "English"), and he has actually become both an icon in Nigeria and also a strong African voice in the international community. In other words, he succeeded both in inscribing himself into the national paradigm of the immediate colonial past and revising it in the new cultural conditions of the independent nation in a postcolonial and more broadly speaking in a global culture.

After Achebe's novel appeared, there was no doubt that African literature had gained the status of a modern canon competing with the traditional national literatures in the European languages. The number of prizes, the Nobel Prize included, translations and sales figures inside and outside Africa proves it. At the same time, the contribution of literature to the debate of national languages and differentiation of national identities has gained a growing importance across the continent, also having an impact in the old empirical centres through a wave of migrant writers.

In a sense, Achebe's groundbreaking novel has made possible a new understanding of the national paradigm. The novel and the debates it occasioned have the potential to reorient the basic components of the paradigm. Achebe was instrumental in breaking up the hierarchies between European and non-European literatures, between original languages and translations, between the oral and the written, between European and local vernaculars, between past traditions and modern conditions, between the ideal shape of a national culture and the protonational cultures emerging in postcolonial environments. Although adapting to the literary standards of European genres and forms, by their literary practice the new African literatures challenge the national paradigm beyond the African continent and therefore also the type of comparative reasoning that goes with it.

The novel is not only written in a country in transition; it also deals with a community in transition, the tribal Igbo community of the 1890s when colonialism was finally established in Nigeria. At the centre stands Okonkwo, a headstrong and powerful man from the village of Umuofia and a member of a powerful Igbo clan that inhabits the neighboring villages. Confronted with increasing pressure from the colonial representatives, from priests to administrators supported by soldiers and police force, Okonkwo is compelled with growing desperation to defend the Igbo way of life, at the end as a lonely rider pushed to commit suicide after repeated humiliations. However, such an act violates the tradition he vehemently wants to defend and his tribe is left with no choice but to suppress any memory of him. The icon of the local culture self-destructively has brought down both himself and his culture precisely in an attempt to stay loyal to it. In a European perspective he becomes a tragic hero, in a local context he has become an outcast.

My first comparative reading plays on the double perspective of Africa and Europe, clearly marked in the title. This is a quote from William Butler Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* (1920), "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" signaling the fragmentation of the post-First World War world, but now projected onto Africa. More profoundly embedded in the text is, however, the particular use of a subtle omniscient narrator who establishes a complex relation between Africa and Europe on the level of the aesthetic strategy of the text. The narrator's position is built up of several intertwined levels of storytelling as a complicated African-European dialogue. In some cases inserted stories are integrated in the novel as part of the plot, or of the description of the settings or the characters; in other cases distinct aspects of the narration are related to the direct and indirect interventions of the narrator; finally, some discursive parts serve as mirrors of others in parallel or contrast.

From the very first pages there is always a double view:

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. *Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.* [...] The night was very quiet. *It was always quiet except on moonlight nights.* Darkness held a vague terror for *these people*, even the bravest among them. [...] *As the Igbo say: 'When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.'* (7–9).

The passages I have italicized are clearly written to inform a non-Igbo reader, possibly an enlightened European, but without a condescending colonial labeling of the Igbo people as primitive. The proverbial oral style is then demonstrated in the following sentence about the palm-oil and in the Igbo-quote about the moon. However, the short phrase written in bold italics, “these people,” which occurs more than once in the novel, marks a distance in line with a white colonial perspective. Once the local culture is invaded by colonisers, it becomes forever changed and can only be grasped by a simultaneous internal and external view of itself (*cf.* Glissant). Achebe’s narrator embodies a culture in transition and the colonial encounter that prompted it.

As the story develops the proverbs are mostly used without comments, but the informative remarks are inserted whenever phenomena occur which, presumably, are foreign to modern readers. This effect also pertains to the embedded stories. Okonkwo tells about war, killing and heroism, but only to his sons, while the women relate the stories about the mythical animals to all the children. The storytelling is performed with the aim of teaching them their culture, its norms and traditions and the identity of the people in their community, but also in order to place the modern reader in the same learning environment, stripped of any prejudice.

The mention on the last page of an anthropological study planned by the British District Commissioner is a reverse recall of the first pages of the novel quoted above. His self-sufficiency is badly disguised as positivistic anthropological science, completely in line with the attitude to Africa produced by the national paradigm. Shrouded in the narrator’s sarcasm, we learn in the mode of free indirect speech about his plans for a treatise on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*: “One could almost write a whole chapter on [Okonkwo]. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate” (146). What he is going to write from his supposedly superior perspective is what we have just read as a novel but from the opposite African perspective. The British civil servant is seen from inside by the free indirect speech, but also via the narrator’s ironic gaze on his thought. In the same way, the Igbo community is depicted in its full complexity from inside, but also exposing a stubborn short-sightedness toward its own past, present and future that equals the arrogance of the anthropologizing commissioner.

In spite of its awareness of the sophisticated narration, this reading is firmly placed within the national paradigm, even if we would

refine our reading by introducing terms like ‘intertextuality’ or read the use of Yeats or phrases like “these people” as a European palimpsest. The narration is the result of an implementation of the traditional comparative paradigm, although in a critical mode: a bipolar opposition between the invariable colonial centre and the variable periphery, easily translatable into terms of influences from Europe and the representativity of characters like Okonkwo. As in many postcolonial readings, the comparative recontextualization is trapped by the cognitive pattern of the same national paradigm it wants to defy.

### Comparative Reading 2: a Case of Proximity

A different reading is made possible by another dimension of the comparativity of the text. When I stated that both Achebe’s own life world and the universe represented in the novel are bound to a society in transition, the former leaving colonialism, the latter entering it, we immediately included both within the centre/periphery dichotomy inscribed in the national paradigm. We may however change the focus from the bipolar framework to the transition itself and see the universe represented in the novel as a transition from an honor and shame culture, based on the family, the clan and the tribe, to a culture of individual choices and responsibilities.

This recontextualization is not necessarily absorbed by the dichotomies of the national paradigm; it is transnational and also transhistorical, although not ahistorical, in as much as it allows for comparisons between texts from different periods and cultures, past and present, provided we can establish a theoretical platform that also enables us to discuss the limits of this recontextualization without relying on simple analogies. The existence of honor and shame cultures across cultural regions and historical periods, and their coexistence with alternative cultures, may support the establishment of such a platform, often related to societies in transition.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming that this is possible, the reference to Yeats will no longer be seen as a confirmation of the bipolar structure of centre and periphery pointing to the origin of both colonialism and the disruptive individualism of modernity, but as a reference to a culture being uprooted, different in nature from Yeats’ perspective but similar in its complexity. What is falling apart in Nigeria, as in many other cultures in transition, is the collective honor culture.<sup>9</sup>

Okonkwo, the main character, is guided by local codes of honor and shame and equipped with an emotional make-up that transcends

8. In my current book project *Forgiveness as a Cultural and Literary Challenge* I discuss this type of transhistorical comparative framework more closely, cf. Larsen, “Battle” and “Emotion.”

9. *Things Fall Apart* is the first of Achebe’s *African Trilogy*, followed by *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), on the transition through Okonkwo’s family and Igbo tribes during the twentieth century into an increasingly global world. The changing conception of what is often called personhood in African philosophy mirrors the tension of this transition between shifting local and translocal perspectives (see e.g. Kaphagawani, Onwuanibe and also Shweder and Bourne).

the bipolar structure of coloniser and colonized. Instead, it reaches out to other contemporary and past cultural contexts where honor cultures of a different but also overlapping composition once guided the collective norms and behaviour which, however, dissolved through a painful transition. The story is not about a victimized protagonist and his culture brought to the brink of self-destruction by colonizing invaders. Okonkwo becomes a character who is both pressed from the outside and also by his own disruption of the honor culture he wants to sustain when he transgresses its norms in his attempts to defend it against all odds, ultimately and paradoxically by his absolutely dishonorable suicide.

With the village of Umuofia as the point of gravity of his life, Okonkwo embodies the core values of his culture. His identity is firmly anchored in the collectivity of this entire context where the honor and shame of each individual reflects its position in the entire community. It is a culture of personhood where Okonkwo's personal fear for his own fate in the same move makes him "mourn for the clan" (129). Okonkwo's embodiment of both the local cultures and the complexity of their encounter with the British colonisers reach beyond his own understanding. He is the agent but also the victim of cultural trespasses of increasing aggravating fatality both in relation to his own people and to the colonisers.

Before the white people enter the stage, Okonkwo also, almost paradoxically, challenges the cultural limits of his own community which he serves with an unconditional loyalty. By his abrasive self-righteousness in relation to others and his at times ill-tempered forgetfulness toward the ancestral spirits, he breaks the code of honor precisely by doing his utmost to practice it. In the three parts of the novel, the internal cohesiveness of the local community is fractured through a series of acts which breaks the honor code and has Okonkwo as the central agent. Most importantly, in a state of fury he disobeys the divine powers on a holiday and, later, he happens to cause a fatal shooting accident.

Although these events are extraordinary, in most cases local religious and legal customs offer coping strategies to remedy the social and metaphysical harm inflicted upon the community by dishonorable acts. But when such limits are being challenged from within, it also leaves the cultural fabric more vulnerable to external suppression from the advancing British colonial power. The whole foundation of the local culture with its core values and complex handling of liminal acts simultaneously involving both religious and social norms



is shattered. Okonkwo also embodies this growing vulnerability within the larger colonial context which at the end, after his swift killing of a black British official, pushes him to commit the unpardonable act of suicide. The fact that he is increasingly isolated shows that gradually by his acts, but against his own will, he becomes an individualized being existing in cultural conditions more like a Europe-based individual responsibility than the locally rooted collective loyalty. He no longer believes in the clan and acts on a purely individual basis, although he claims he does so precisely on behalf of the village. “I shall leave then and plan my own revenge [...] I shall fight them alone *if I choose*” (140–41, my ital.).

In an individual act of free volition Okonkwo decides on the course of his own life, an act which is also an involuntary, or at least non-reflected, reproduction of the free and self-responsible European individual emerging out of the Enlightenment anthropology and embodied in the colonisers. However, in his case it is a desperate act of defense against oppression in the heat of the moment and not a long-term future-oriented change of the course of personal development. What is at work here is a blend of local and non-local values which, as happens in all cultures in transition, deprives both of their status as uncontested cultural invariables.

Both the first and the second reading refer to European influence. After all, the novel is disseminated within a primarily Anglophone western circulation, its theme is informed by European colonialism, and its aesthetic strategies are rooted in the European tradition of cultural criticism. However, through the use of the narrator in the first reading and of the personal development of Okonkwo in the second, Achebe goes beyond Eurocentrism and – to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term – provincializes Europe. In his seminal book *Provincializing Europe* (2000) Chakrabarty points to the importance of using the critical and self-critical tradition from European science and thinking in general as a tool to be exploited also beyond Europe to criticize its own origin. In the first reading, this reversal takes place as a postcolonial criticism which still stays within the conceptual confinement of colonial dichotomies and its embedding in the national paradigm; in the second reading, however, a broader comparative landscape with no *a priori* centre is opened.

When I concentrate on the fate of honor and shame as a collective and individual value, I do so in an attempt to open for comparative contexts beyond the national paradigm in line with the ideas of Walkowitz and Gelder. Literatures reflecting cultures where such val-

ues are challenged by cultural transitions can be found along different historical trajectories, some of which coexist in many multicultural places today where the individualized values of Western culture blend with those of Muslim, Indian, African or Asian communities. Other cultures with a similar normative make-up may belong to the history of a local culture, present or past, as for example the tribal culture of Nigeria or the Old Norse culture of Scandinavia. Moreover, honor and shame also survived in new forms in the bourgeois culture when it established its dominance across Europe, partly absorbing and modifying components from the fading nobility. Thus, comparisons contextualized by a focus on honor and shame bring such universes closer to each other, not as an analogy *in re* but as a cognitive experiment exploring the nature, the conditions and the limits of such similarities and thereby confronting us with the intricacies of living in cultures where different histories interact in a simultaneous presence.

This is the case in the global multicultural universes to which we all belong. Here the national paradigm, even in its self-critical modes, cannot embrace or define the comparisons needed to bring together texts and values from the still living past and the present cultural universes beyond any isolated influences and binary centre/periphery constructions. Honor and shame cultures are both of our time and of its past and bring those dimensions in a proximity to each other in a cultural simultaneity that defies the numeric chronology which, together with the national paradigm, is then revealed as a cultural abstraction that is only relevant in certain contexts.

## Comparative Reasoning Reconsidered

Globalization has often been regarded as a cultural process only working in the contemporary world. But it has also forced us to take a fresh look at the complex history that allowed globalization to emerge and evolve. First of all, it has forced researchers in the various historical disciplines within the humanities to redefine their take on historical developments. On the one hand, we have to pay more attention to the multiple temporal and spatial networks and interactions between localities than to the local events themselves at a certain specific time or along a simple time line. On the other hand, we also have to be aware of parallel developments in different places where causal links are difficult to establish and a shared sense of rep-

representativity is hard to describe and, most importantly, where apparent similarities are never simple *de facto* analogies but indicate a textually based instance of comparativity that points to different possibilities of recontextualization requiring experimental comparative reasoning in theory and practice.<sup>10</sup>

10. There are several cross-cultural studies of honor and shame cultures, insisting precisely on similar conditions leading to cultural differences of a historical specificity beyond simple analogies (see e.g. Peristiany).

In short, comparative studies in a globalized world have to be reconsidered in terms of theories, goals and methods with the potential of embracing any period in history, and at the same time the study of local cultures will have to change its perspective from the study of local features of closed entities to the translocal interactions that defined them and allowed them to occur. To regard all periods as a process of transition, not only the early nineteenth century or postcolonial Nigeria, seems to me a more fruitful view of history that could inspire us to revise the standard Eurocentric delimitations of periods. This move would force us always to understand any place located in time in relation to the larger context with which it interacts in order to be what it is, and not only or primarily in relation to its alleged immanent characteristics and its position in a linear European epochal sense of historicity.

There are visionary examples among our precursors worth remembering. I will end on this note with Georg Brandes, a provocative *bête noir* in comparative literature in his own day (Larsen “Georg Brandes”). One of the most important comparative studies from the nineteenth century is his comparative European literary history, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* 1–6 (1872–90). In his lifetime his *opus magnum* was heavily criticized for not respecting the standard methods and criteria of the national paradigm, but nevertheless, and perhaps because of this, he became the most global in his generation of European comparatists. In his own life time *Main Currents* saw complete translations into German – two translations – English, Russian, Japanese and Yiddish, and after his death in 1927 it also appeared in Chinese and Spanish, supplemented by translations of single volumes in French, Czech, Finnish and Polish.

It is worth recalling first his approach to literary history which, with a focus on contemporary literature, aimed at transcending the nation as the basic frame of reference of literature and its history. His context and focus was transnational by taking the vicissitudes of the quest for freedom and its counterforces as the shared and transnational driving force of nineteenth-century literatures in Europe. With this reference, Brandes set out to build a pan-European contempo-

rary literary history, exploring overlapping and contrasting developments as they were expressed across European literatures. Considering that the nineteenth century was the period where the emerging nation states dominated the view of history, supported by a collective self-reflection shaped by a cultivation of national languages, literatures and histories, this approach was both innovative and provocative, as was later recognized by a critic. For the first time, “European literature is treated as the totality it has been since the Renaissance” (Nolin 26).

Second, Brandes adapted Goethe’s idea of world literature as a core notion in literary studies. The final words in his book *Wolfgang Goethe 1–2* (1915) celebrate Goethe’s innovative take on world literature:

When Goethe died the term *World Literature*, which he had created, had become a reality and through the joined efforts of many people he had himself become the centre of world literature (vol. 2: 331, my transl.).<sup>11</sup>

11. Goethe did not coin the term, but he made it known in its modern sense as a challenge to the national paradigm.

Brandes also wrote the essay “World Literature” [Verdenslitteratur] (1899) for Goethe’s 150th anniversary, emphasizing that world literature is not a transnational canon but a transnational process within local or national literatures. He defined world literature as a locally anchored literature that transcends its local constraints by opening the local perspective to a larger world:

World literature of the future will appear the more appealing the stronger it represents the national particularity, and the more diversified it is, but only when it also has a general human dimension as art and science. (*Samlede* 12, 28, my transl.)

He expressed this idea using the image of a telescope: we can, and must, look at literature from two alternating or rather complementary positions, both through the magnifying and the diminishing lens.

The comparative approach to literature has a dual nature: it brings us closer to what is foreign to us in such a way that we can appropriate it, and at the same time distances us from what is familiar to us so that we can survey it. One never clearly observes what is right in front of our eyes nor what is too distant. The academic study of literature hands us a

telescope: one end magnifies, the other reduces. The heart of the matter is to use it in such a way that we can make up for the illusions of immediate perception (*Hovedstrømninger* 1, 14, my transl.).

Although he only comments on the use of the telescope, not on its lenses, Brandes' intuition has been the subtext of this article. The lenses are the texts exposing their comparativity that compels us to adapt a double perspective. When we look closely at the comparativity of the texts, this will enable us to distance ourselves from the individual text through a comparative study involving more than its immediately perceived contexts, and this move will also give us the opportunity to shed new light on our own context. But we cannot look simultaneously from both ends as the national paradigm invites us to do, like with modern binoculars. We see the national frame together with the representative national text, or we see the invariable together with the variable as linked by causality. If we want to exploit the multifaceted comparativity, we have to turn the telescope and thus recontextualize what we saw in a close-up. This is the experiment Brandes invites us to perform every time we read, a risky endeavor of trying to bring together texts which do not belong to the same context. Literature itself has always done so. Comparative reasoning today is this experiment independent of the period and continent we study.

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