

*Literary Criticism, Cognitive Culture,  
and the World Intangible Cultural Heritage<sup>1</sup>*

A paradox that seems of the essence of today's comparative literature is that the system of reference in which the act of comparison is usually situated is built so as to eliminate a mandatory reference to the different and specific cultures and traditions of literary criticism that fatally underpin the literary works brought under investigation.

I do not imply that the intellectual, social, or cultural were downplayed or utterly let aside. On the contrary, "culture", in its most extended social and anthropological understanding, is obviously taken as an absolute premise. It is seen as a background without which the individual literary works could not as much as be perceived, let alone described or analyzed (Kushner 2001, Suassy 2006). But the paradox lies in the fact that a high level of awareness of literature's cultural determinations goes hand in hand with a manifest lack of interest in the diversity of those specific mediational mentalities, skills, value systems, forms of social behavior, which we could even if approximately sum up under the notion of "literary criticism".

Why should we pay attention only to culture-in-general, and not to such *specific* cultural filters or nurturing beds of literature as the different cognitive cultures of literary criticism? This amounts to stating that, in bringing face to face two literary artifacts with different cultural backgrounds, we inevitably confront two notions of literature, resulting from two different processes of cultural and social evolution, from two different manners of distilling and modeling the experience of indulging in language-based interactive, complex, tensional, expressive, highly symbolic and empathetic virtual worlds.

Actually, literary criticism, as an object in itself of the comparative inquiry, might provide a fertile perspective on the global intercultural negotiation of the very notion of "literature". Literary comparatists, who act for the most as literary critics themselves, should accept that, at least by the very process of constantly defining the substance and the area of application of the notion of

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“literature”, their scholarly peers from other cultures mould to a certain extent the literary works produced in the respective cultures. Then, and, in close connection to this, we should pay attention to the negotiation of qualifications such as “world” and “national” as in the notions of “world literature” and “national literature”. Precisely because these notions are seminal to their science and craft, literary comparatists should be aware that it is not reasonable to see them as emerging directly from the confrontation of their genuine value-free scientific mindset with the varied object of its interest. In many instances, their approach should proceed from the distinct possibility that the world vs. national conceptual dialectics has been previously devised by literary criticism (or its functional equivalents) of the cultures that host the literary samples tagged for comparison.

The task of exposing the more often than not diffuse and implicit cultures of literary criticism which surround (as halos of social and aesthetic values, cognitive attitudes and social conventions) the literary works that are brought face to face should seem natural to the comparative approach to literature. Which is to say that the comparative approach has to acknowledge, on the one hand, that literary criticism evolves in different forms, through different patterns of social-cultural determination and embeddedness, and, on the other hand, that there is a normative-cognitive power inherent in every culture of literary criticism that no reasonable scholar of literature can afford to ignore. Another implication being that a coherent comparative approach should attempt to bring together, in the virtual space of weighing analogies and equivalences, *differing* conceptual representations of what is “universal” as well as of the “world” vs. “national” literary/cultural dynamics which emerge in *different* cultural areas.

The call for a comparative cross-cultural perspective on literary criticism would not imply the study of how an already-constituted universal something that we choose to call “criticism” takes root in different cultures, but of how different critical cultures evolve from *within* different social and cultural milieus. This demand cannot be fully supplied by the histories of literary criticism that are available today. Of course some of these enterprises are as praiseworthy as they are useful, beginning with that of the unjustly forgotten solitary pioneer of a global comparison of literary tastes, Augustin François Théry (1838, 1848), and on to René Wellek’s masterpiece *The History of Modern Criticism* (1955), to the Romanian scholar Adrian Marino’s six volumes *Biography of the Idea of Literature* (1991–2000) or to the intensive team-work concentrated in the nine massive volumes of the *Cambridge History of Literary*

*Criticism* (1981–2001). Some influential anthologies of the critical thinking and practice could also be called into question, as Gay Wilson Allen and Harry Hayden Clark's *Literary Criticism, Pope to Croce* (1941/1962), for the English-speaking world, or, in the Romanian literary scholarship, the three volumes of *Poetic Creeds* (*Arte poetice*) focusing on Antiquity (Pippidi 1970), Romanticism (Ion 1982), and Renaissance (Condrea-Derer et alii 1986). We could also point to the inherently comparative turn of historical approaches of given national traditions of literary criticism sponsored by scholars, mainly American, who are not part of those traditions (e.g. Fellows 1970 or Henry 1994, on French literary criticism).

But, even if such approaches are or tend to be as open-minded and cosmopolitan as possible, they are obviously centred on the core Western European literatures, and, more often than not, on Western European core values. At the same time, almost without exception, they take for granted that the history of literary criticism is the direct reflection of a general evolution (if not progress) of the human spirit.

My point in criticizing such a universalist approach is not that it would be plainly false. It can be reasonably maintained that, especially in modern times, due to unprecedented possibilities of a dense and sustained interconnectivity, one could meaningfully speak of consistent global intellectual communities. These communities have a history, or better phrased, the intensity and effectiveness of their present-day manifestations pressure our sense of perspective into perceiving them as having an articulated, global and goal-driven history. But, if it is true that such networks of intellectual exchanges also develop a certain communality of values, sensitivity, hermeneutical habits, it is also true that these processes do not concentrate and exhaust the meaning of the global sphere of cultural/intellectual/literary practices.

In other words, even if a “vertical” trans-cultural sense of the global relevance of a Western history of the literary criticism is an undeniable and highly influential fact, it does not suppress the evidence of the “horizontal” natural diversity of the literary criticism cultures. The universalist perspective could (and should) not be simply dismissed, given its strong spiritual appeal and the growing body of social and cultural evidence that seem to support the pan-rationalist intimations of the historical Enlightenment (ironically enough, at a time when they simultaneously come under the most savage attack from different breeds of radical philosophical relativists). It is, for instance, relevant that, taking upon himself the daring task of distilling an overview of the literary criticism from ancient to modern times, a widely-learned and theoretically

sophisticated Muslim British Indian scholar such as M. A. R. Habib has no problem in strictly identifying it with a historical canon unequivocally rooted in Greek-Latin and Judeo-Christian hermeneutical and philosophical traditions (Habib 2005). Still, the fact that such visions presuppose on so many levels the notion of a common and essential humanity does not from itself make them exhaustive.

The above-mentioned attempts at a general history of the literary criticism necessarily adopt an understanding of criticism that equates it with a system of ideas. But we live in an age when even the philosophers or at least the intellectual historians seem to acknowledge that the influence of an idea is not so much derived from the its logical solidarity with other equivalently abstract entities inside the enlightening frame of a big theory, but rather from its embeddedness in a wider social fabric of habits of the mind and of the heart. This is, for instance, the spirit in which the representatives of the Cambridge school, and especially Quentin Skinner (1969), understood to unearth the subtle tissue of references that support and give substance to the vocabulary of the political philosophy of the English early modernity. A spirit, it should be reminded, that also fertilized the field of the literary studies, mainly, but not exclusively, in the guise of the highly influential New Historicism (Gallagher & Greenblatt 2001).

The comparative study of literary criticism(s) could also profit from the like of the Cambridge contextualist method. The fact that the critical discourse is generally expected to provide a context (for a work of “genuine” literature) should not obscure the fact that it is itself depending on the context of a given intellectual and emotional culture. One should therefore neither ignore nor underplay the civilizational implications of literary criticism, going from the role it may be ascribed, as an intellectual *arbiter elegantiarum*, in the process of refining the social norms and polishing the mores, to the covert or overt political overtones it may acquire in different contexts and under different circumstances, to its variable degree of implication in what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière calls *la poétique du savoir*, the “poetics of knowledge” (Rancière 2000/2006) or Michael Wood calls literature’s “taste of knowledge” (Wood 2005).

Let us consider the fact that literary criticism either takes root or comes to a new flourishing in all modernizing societies (Schmeling, Schmitz-Emans & Walstra 2000: 115–204, Suassy 2006, Jameson & Miyoshi 2008, Gupta 2009: 62–96). We could hypothesize that the diffusion of literary criticism has to do with a widely spread inclination *to bring together* and *co-exercise* dispositions of

the mind as different as conceptual concentration, logical consistency, the free play of imagination (implying the widest gradient of counterfactuality), norm-orientation, socially pragmatic or metaphysically informed types of empathy. Or, among other things, utter sensual pleasure.

But, unrelated to this assumption of the anthropological cause of its global diffusion, my point is that literary criticism can be globally described as a form of cognitive practice whose specificity is given by the association of intellectual faculties whose public exercise, according to the standard grand theory, should have been carefully separated within the mental frame of modernity. The said association of faculties may highly vary from one culture/society to another in point of scope, manner, ratio or depth. At a psychological level, it is this very diversity that invites a comparative inter-cultural approach. But at the logical level, the prolegomena for any future comparative research rests on the possibility of a general, transcultural understanding of literary criticism as the education and manifestation of a *cluster* of emotional and intellectual cognitive faculties.

It may of course quite rightfully be maintained that creating opportunities for transgressional transactions between mental faculties is also the attraction behind the worldwide success of literature itself, as a means of cultural self-expression and communication. This observation calls for a more precise definition of the mediating/transgressional status of literary criticism (Sell 2000, 2001). The social identity of this cultural practice, or of this species of cognitive culture, is given by the fact that it constantly oscillates between the status of a craft and that of a science, between the pretence of representing an objectifiable, generalizable cognitive discourse, and the self-protective claim of being essentially a form of “tacit” (Polanyi 1958, 1966) or “local” (Geertz 1983) knowledge.

Literary criticism causes and hosts not only mutually transgressive associations of faculties, but also of social functions. It can freely bland together formulating norms, incorporating hierarchies of values, and participating in the perpetual consolidation of the general symbolic frames of the social-communal life. And this with the most different social and political implications, ranging from the overt or covert legitimation to the direct or subversive de-legitimation of the political order and power system. On the other hand, literary criticism is compatible with the intricate etiquette that imposes the display of civic mutual benevolence, and it expresses (or rather puts to a permanent test) the socially acceptable balance between polite compliance and the free expression of personal preferences and tastes (Seiwald 2011).

This fine-tuning is exposed in several interdisciplinary surveys of the critical culture of different moments in space and time. The complex fabric and highly context-bound nature of literary criticism is analyzed in works that investigate the mentalities of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Klein 1994, Parker 2003, Goring 2005) or France (Maxwell Cryle & O'Connell 2004, Kale 2005). Then, there is a lot to deduce for the benefit of the investigation of the emergence of critical cultures from more general intellectual and cultural histories of the Habsburg and post-Habsburg Europe (Schorske 1961, Lukacs 1988/1994, Lăcătuș 2009). There are also studies that directly or derivatively enlighten the polyfunctional condition of literary criticism in Communist societies. With respect to this thematic field, the case of the Soviet Union traditionally monopolized most of the interest of the international academic community (Kagarlitsky 1988, Lahusen & Kuperman 1993), but there are also literary criticism-relevant insights in the post World War II cultural and intellectual history of, for instance, the ex-Yugoslavia (Mlikotin 1976, Wachtel 1998). An interesting problematization of the role of the literary criticism under the Communist regime is to be noted also in the case of Romania, proposed both by Western (Verdery 1991) and by indigenous scholars (Bodiu 2000, Terian 2009, Fotache 2009, Macrea-Toma 2009).

Significant elements of a comparative approach to the cognitive cultures of literary criticism can be distilled from some attempts of offering a regional perspective on the interaction of "literary cultures". The latter notion is explicitly used in the self-assertion of at least two remarkably comprehensive research programs: one centered on the "literary cultures" of Central and Eastern Europe (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer 2004–2010), the other, on the "literary cultures" of Latin America (Valdés & Kadir 2004). A similar broad regional approach, even if limited to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has also been attempted for the Middle East (Rastegar 2007). But the comparative approach is also inherent in surveys of the literary criticism of cultural areas that, on the one hand, expose a tremendous inner diversity, and, on the other hand, went through several phases of dramatic acculturation. I am referring to South Asia (Dev & Das 1989, Dasgupta 1995, Devy 1995, 2002) or the Far East (Karatani 1993, Denton 1996, Cai 2001, 2004, Button, 2009).

Judging on the basis of scholarly experiments such as these, we might conclude that the benefit of a comparative approach to literary criticism is, to speak in classical Hegelian terms, an enhancement in the general self-awareness of the human spirit. This self-awareness is actually what places my definition of the cognitive culture of literary criticism at a clear distance from Fish's

“interpretive community” (Fish 1980). This notion seems to denote a totally path-dependent intellectual behavior, completely absorbed in hermeneutical practices impervious to any (self)critical examination. But the literary criticism cultures are not simply about applying interpretive patterns, but about creatively transforming them from within, and about self-consciously and autonomously reflecting on the very cognitive faculties that are at work in the process of interpretation.

So, were it to be applied to literary criticisms, the comparative method would not bring to awareness cultural practices deeply embedded in local habits (as it might be the case if we compared “interpretive communities”), but rather confront culturally diverse practices of explorative/interrogative self-awareness. By constructing a coherent basis on which these practices could be brought together we no less than expand and refine our understanding of the manner in which the human consciousness not only exerts, but experiences and assumes its own cognitive processes. But the kind of self-awareness we may derive from the understanding of the forms of cognitive culture implied in the practices of literary criticism can also play a more pragmatic role, namely to ground and nourish a critique of ongoing cultural public policies.

In order to substantiate this claim, I will focus on an example taken from the contemporary European cultural and educational initiatives. Let us begin by considering the EU Culture program (2007–2013), which has a budget of 400 million euro. The main goals stated in the famous *European Agenda For Culture* which gave the rationale for the program *Culture 2007 +* are “the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; the promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs; the promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union’s international relations” (Commission of the European Communities 2007).

We have to clarify immediately that the European legislators traditionally understand cultural diversity in ethnic and linguistic terms, so that the notion of the diversity of cognitive cultures as developed in the present paper cannot operate within their conceptual framework. Then, it is essential to bear in mind that their notion of culture is directly linked to economic imperatives such as “growth” and “jobs”. The fact of bringing culture and economy together is in no way unreasonable or detrimental, and it is highly improbable that it had been intended as a polemic trivialization of the notion of “high culture”. The real problem is that the direct juxtaposition of culture and economic rationality seems to leave no places for the playful and gratuitous experiment on which creativity, as both an individual and a social process, essentially depends.

The EU cultural philosophy also shows an incapacity to discern the *market*, a field of social activity of which “culture” as an economically productive activity is a natural part, from the *publicity*, understood as a virtual place of the intellectual production, of the generation of opinions/ideas. In order for both of them to be productive and vibrant it might be necessary to closely-knit market and publicity together. European literary criticism in particular has a well-established historical record of creatively spanning these two social playgrounds. But the unilateral subordination of culture to the logic of economic effectiveness (a tendency not created, but significantly supported by the EU cultural programs) implies, in our case, that the critical opinion is *totally* subordinated to the priorities of the literary market. Such circumstances bring about the complete nullification of the charisma of the critical office, traditionally conferred by its *independece d’esprit*. The immediate result is, for instance, that the literary reviews tend to be assumed not by their individual authors, but by editing houses or literary magazines. The critic as a creative individual instance is put between brackets. His name cannot become a brand anymore.

If this is how the EU policies reflect the degradation of the office of the literary critic as a public speaker for the value of free thinking (which is free not only in the sense of a lack of external restrictions, but also in that of its inner mobility of invention and association), let us now consider criticism in its scholarly-academic capacity. In this respect, we should weigh the impact of the Bologna Process, that is to say of the creation of a so-called European Higher Education Area, on the literary studies and, implicitly, on the academic status of the literary critic. Such a detailed evaluation would, of course, be an immense challenge, but it is a fact that humanities in general, and literary studies in particular have been proved unsuccessful at adapting to the ideals of precise qualifications and of thoroughly quantifiable standards for the research activities lately imposed on the European universities. The bureaucratic logic instituted by the Bologna Process attacked and, to a disquieting extent, eroded the specific intellectual culture of the academic literary criticism. The institutionalized non-adequacy of the Bologna-related evaluation schemes directly threatens the tacit knowledge historically accumulated by the literary studies. Which is to say: their multi-secular culture of improvisation (Hallam & Ingold 2007, Peters 2009, Landgraf 2011), implying cognitive practices and strategies that are simultaneously creatively indeterminate, intellectually flexible, adaptive and dynamic. The intellectual lifestyle characteristic of the academic literary culture is also pressured into marginalization or complete

eviction. The Bologna Process is impervious to what Sir Joshua Reynolds identified, in his time, as “the advantage to society from cultivating intellectual pleasure” (Reynolds 1801: 1–8), and, consequently, finds no use for an academic tradition rooted in skeptical, hedonistic, playful, imaginative manners of thinking.

The better historical understanding of the complex and intricate cognitive culture of the European literary criticism, to which a comparative approach relating it to different other cultures of the world could essentially contribute, might make us realize the magnitude of the damage the European bureaucracy is currently inflicting upon a unique intellectual heritage. Beginning with the early modernity, the European literary critic managed to be simultaneously a learned scholar, a public intellectual, and an entertainer. Of course, these capacities would not be equally relevant for each and every practitioner of the art at every moment in history, and the national traditions could also vary as far as the check and balances of the three was concerned. But still, we could invoke the stability of the principle of alliance between the same cognitive faculties and between the same social roles/public offices, and we could propose a unifying European critical ethos based on intellectual charisma (brilliant intuition), acumen (seductive self-expression), and *decorum* (Müller 2011).

It might be argued that this nexus of faculties and cognitive strategies is only an atavism of the early “paradisaal” phase of the European modernity, when the structural necessity of intellectual specialization and of the separation of the different fields of the social and cultural life was not yet a pressuring objective imperative. In fact, far from expressing the resistance to the modernization project, the cognitive culture of literary criticism was one of its most active agents. But literary criticism bares witness to a morally active attitude in front of the modern imperative of specialization and separation of the domains. The “organic eclecticism” of the literary criticism was, actually, the expression of the fact that the separation between, say, conceptual intelligence, symbolic imagination, expressive sensitivity was not passively accepted as fatal (or providential), but that this process was understood as necessarily implying the active and permanent participation of the individual (self) reflexive consciousness. The cognitive culture of the European literary criticism is infused by the belief that the differentiation of social playgrounds, and of respective social and moral responsibilities, generated by modernity are essentially produced and therefore permanently modulated and negotiated in our own minds. Accordingly, the decomposition of the literary criticism complex might be the indication of a spiritual demise: the apathetic acceptance

of a world-model in which the regulating institutions that differentiate the faculties of the mind function in and from themselves.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that the study of the specific cognitive culture of the European literary criticism should also lead to the commitment of protecting it from the dissolving action of social pressures that the European cultural and humanistic research policies do not try to contain, but actively encourage. A step in this direction, that might contribute to saving Europe from itself, while illuminating the global dimension of the phenomenon and thereby stimulating the interest of the comparatists' community, could be to define the cognitive culture of the European literary criticism so as to place it under the protection of the 2006 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2006).

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