

## The Incomparable as Uninterpretable: Comparative Literature and the Question of Relevant (Re)contextualization

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### ABSTRACT

This article approaches the topic of the “incomparable” in contemporary comparative literature in four steps. Firstly, it systematizes the problem, i.e. it describes the most important contemporary aspects of the thesis of the “incomparable” (or of the “incommensurable”). Secondly, it historicizes the discussion, meaning it tries to prove that many of the current controversies replay – frequently using the same arguments or arguments inferred from them – some of the older debates on the “incomparable” nature of literary works. Thirdly, it “trivializes” the issue – in the meaning of the pragmatic concept proposed by Richard Rorty, for whom “trivialization” is the philosophical procedure of limiting the differences in nature among specific phenomena to differences of degree. Fourthly, it re-examines in brief the problem of the “comparable” from the perspective of its relevance for the contexts of literary interpretation. The conclusion of the article is an advocacy of the comparative approach to literary practices, which, for now, remains a challenge rather than a well-defined field of study within current comparatism.

**Comparative Literature. Incommensurability. Cultural Relativism.  
Interliterary Process. Comparative Poetics. Tertium Comparationis.  
Processual Comparatism.**

Perhaps the most important mutations comparative literature has undergone over the past decades has been the globalization process, which occurred, among others, with the expansion of its sphere of investigations from the so-called core-literatures (particularly those written in English and French, possibly those in German, Spanish or Russian also) toward a series of “emergent”, “marginal” or “peripheral” literatures. Nevertheless, far from setting in motion a mutual reconciliation and a peaceful rethinking of the current practices attached to the discipline, the aforementioned phenomenon has generated instead an even more profound division within comparative literature, whose territory is currently the target of a dispute between two diverging powers: world literature and postcolonial studies. In fact, all this conflict does is reiterate, albeit in new ways, an older paradox of literary studies, which engages equally the universality and the contiguity of art. Thus, despite its stated “democratic” intentions, world literature has been criticized more than once as a new form of

Western domination, which merely reinforces insidiously the supremacy of “central” literatures over “marginal” ones. On the other hand, postcolonial studies has been frequently charged with the abandonment of literature as object of study in favour of a political agenda yielding immediate results. A consequence of this tension, which has grown apparently irreconcilable over the last years, has been a challenge of the possibility and legitimacy in comparison as an instrument of comparative literature and, through it, of the status of the discipline itself (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*).

In what follows, I do not attempt to arbitrate between these two competing orientations, but I do intend to discuss one of the key points of the controversy: the one relating to the existence of an “incomparable” factor, which would render either impossible or, at least, illegitimate the comparison between certain literary works. I have opted for an assimilation of this “incomparable” to the “uninterpretable” – a generic term which, as I show in what follows, covers a series of similar but not necessarily identical theses. I approach this issue of the “incomparable” in four steps. First, I attempt to systematize the problem, i.e. to describe the most important contemporary aspects of the thesis of the “uninterpretable” (or of the “incommensurable”, if we choose to favour Thomas Kuhn’s well-known term – see Kuhn 148–150). Secondly, I historicize the discussion, meaning that I prove that many of the current controversies replay – frequently using the same arguments or arguments inferred from them – some of the older debates on the “incomparable” nature of literary works. Thirdly, I “trivialize” the issue – in the sense of the pragmatic concept proposed by Richard Rorty, according to whom “trivialization” is the philosophical procedure of limiting the differences in nature among specific phenomena to differences of degree (Rorty 139–148). Fourthly, I re-examine in brief the problem of the “comparable” from the perspective of its relevance to the contexts of literary interpretation.

### FORMS OF THE INCOMPARABLE

The current debates in comparative literature seem to define the concept of “incomparable” (as “uninterpretable”) in three main forms. First of all, the incomparable occurs as *irreducible cultural* (or *spatial*) *alterity*, as it has been defined, starting with the second half of the 1990s, by postcolonial studies theorists. With respect to this, for example, Natalie Melas’s works are significant; after criticizing harshly the Bernheimer report, she warns, in keeping with Frantz Fanon, that “the asymmetry between colonizer and colonized is [...] internally incommensurable and maintains itself untenably” (Melas 58). A similar form of criticism is the one practised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in whose opinion “postcolonial comparative studies” result inevitably in what she calls “an abyssal specular alterity”, which is a form of discourse where the dominant Self reflects itself in an Other, thus cancelling precisely the latter’s alterity (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 406). Last but not least, the comparison procedure is also disapproved of by other representatives of postcolonial studies because of its total lack of efficiency:

Why indeed compare, if all that comparison does is to reiterate the economy of a world structured in dominance? Why compare, unless the performance of comparison transforms the world and the many actors who have volunteered to participate in the project?

Why compare, if, after the comparison, each actor goes back to her corner to pursue business as usual? (Radhakrishnan 31)

Another form of the “incomparable”, theorized in the last decade, is the one Emily Apter calls the “Untranslatable” and that I would characterize as a paradigmatic form of *irreducible linguistic alterity*. According to Apter, the Untranslatable dissociates itself from Benjamin’s homonymous concept (which evokes “an ineffable textual essence”) and materializes as

a distinct symptomology. Words that assign new meanings to old terms, neologisms, names for ideas that are continually retranslated or mistranslated, translations that are obviously incommensurate (as in *esprit* to *mind* or *Geist*), these are among the most salient symptoms of the genuine Untranslatable. (Apter 587)

Apter describes this concept with two encyclopedic projects that appeared in the last decade: Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004) and Franco Moretti’s *The Novel* (2006). The former is “a revisionist history of ideas that gives full weight to mistranslation” – a typical example in this respect being the article “Subject”, in which “mistranslation is adduced to explain the historic transformation of Aristotle’s *hupokeimenon* (substrate, the individual substance in a given form) into *subjectum* (I-ness, égoité, the subject of metaphysics, the power of thought)” (586). The latter includes an analysis of several narrative forms such as *midrash*, *monogatari*, *xiaoshuo* and *qissa*, and “what is crucial is that [as Untranslatables] the names for generic forms in Hebrew, Japanese, Mandarin, and Arabic are allowed to stand in their original languages” (590). According to Apter, both cases are a proof of the manner in which some concepts or structures mean, in comparative literature, a limit of “commensurability”.

Finally, a third major form of the “incomparable” is the one analysed by David Damrosch in a relatively recent article, where he launches the thesis of a rather *irreducible historical alterity*:

Today’s literary cultures are far more closely intertwined than ever before, and it would now be an exceptional situation for a leading Japanese or French writer to know nothing of each other. Yet the question of incomparability persists today, taking new forms and requiring new methods of analysis. [...] I would like to suggest that for many writers today, the truly foreign literatures are not so much the works of their contemporaries elsewhere, but rather the classical works of their own tradition. (“Comparing the Incomparable” 147)

I note here, obviously, that Damrosch does not include in the sphere of the “incomparable” the aspect I have labelled above, according to the attitude of postcolonial studies, as irreducible cultural alterity, because, in his opinion, the globalization phenomenon allows the connection and, therefore, the comparison between various contemporary literatures, wherever they are. At the same time, the American scholar does not seem to validate the existence of what Apter calls “Untranslatables” either. On the contrary, in his book *What Is World Literature?* the answer he provides to the title question is that world literature is “writing that gains in translation” (281), owing to what he calls “elliptical reading”, i.e. the mutual refraction of the source-lit-

erature and of the target-literature, which enables the production of new meanings.

Additionally, Damrosch's example shows that the three implications of the current "incomparable", albeit contiguous, are not at all synonymous or redundant, and this is why they must be approached separately.

### A VERY SHORT (PRE)HISTORY OF THE INCOMPARABLE

Interestingly, the three abovementioned arguments are not entirely new. In fact, equally coherent systematizations of the said positions (at least in some respects), which also includes all three of them, were provided at the beginning of the last century by the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce and by the Romanian critic Eugen Lovinescu. Thus, from among the former's writings, literature textbooks retain, usually, as the defining text of his attitude, the concise article "La letteratura comparata", published by Croce in the opening issue of the journal *La Critica*. Here, comparative literature is rejected as either a redundant version of literary history (whereby "the comparative pleonasm merely renders the requirement for a literary history to be complete and aware of the full extent of its approach" – Croce 80; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine), or (in its primary version of *Stoffgeschichte* or *thématologie*) as an operation exterior to the actual understanding of the literary phenomenon:

This never makes us, by itself, understand a literary work, it does not make us enter the living matter of an artistic creation. Their subject is not the aesthetic genesis of a literary work, but instead it is either the external history of an already constituted work (reception, translations, imitations etc.), or a fragment from the material that contributed to its formation (the literary tradition). (78)

Certainly, the contemporary reply to the objection above could be that comparative literature does considerably more than analyse the aspects reproved by Croce. However, for the Italian aesthetician, this would not change fundamentally the data of the issue. Because, in reality, Croce's radical monism claims that *any* kind of comparison is impossible between literary works, since each work is a world closed in itself, and any attempt to decontextualize its components (either at the level of form or of content) would merely destroy the organic unity of this work: "Single expressive facts [literary works included] are so many individuals, of which the one cannot be compared with the other, save generically, in so far as each is expression. To use the language of the schools, expression is a species which cannot in its turn perform the functions of genus." (Croce 110–111) What is then left for the comparatist and, moreover, for any critic who tries to conceptualize the structure of the literary work? Croce never gave any explicit answer to this question, but his own practice shows that, in the absence of any clear limit, the "incomparable" leads inevitably to a paralysis of the critical comment, which is restricted either to an ordinary paraphrase of the text or to a string of arbitrary value judgments operated on the literary work.

Another series of less radical but equally interesting thoughts on the "incomparable" are owed to the Romanian critic Eugen Lovinescu, the proponent, in the interwar period, of the so-called theory of the "mutation of aesthetic values". Lovinescu's

theory relies on an irreducible relativism, according to which each culture – whether older or contemporary – operates with a different category of the “aesthetic”. Consequently, more often than not, the literary works of a certain culture (for example, the European and the Chinese ones) are more than incomparable (because – Lovinescu cautions – “works are not comparable unless they are among the same content and [...] among the same aesthetic formula”; see Lovinescu 63); they are almost incomprehensible to the representatives of the other culture. This thesis comes close to those advocated by some of the practitioners of postcolonial studies in the last decade. Nevertheless, in the Romanian critic’s opinion, this is also the case of the tradition of one’s own culture, from which we grow constantly more distant, given the irreversible process of “mutation of aesthetic values”, described by Lovinescu in terms similar to those used by Damrosch:

Throughout time, the living part, the heartbeat of the work of art jolts, stripping it down to roughly its skeleton, its ideological sketch. The purely aesthetic phenomenon tends to become a cultural phenomenon, which can only be understood and only gains significance as aesthetic sign of a civilization, as occurrence of a long extinct sensitivity, whose vestiges we are going to study within the matrix of all the essential phenomena that determine such civilization. (52)

Furthermore, both of the abovementioned processes (described concisely as “an impossibility to penetrate sensitively rather than intellectually the aesthetic forms of other races and particularly of other times”, 78) are validated in the end by the impossibility of both the literary and the cultural “translation”. Lovinescu borrows French psychologist Fr. Paulhan’s distinction between the “notional [i.e., social, conceptual]” and the “suggestive [i.e., individual, emotional] function” of language (see Paulhan 1929) and he explains the irreducible cultural differences and the blockages in receiving a “foreign” literature by the fact that the “suggestive” function (the actual carrier of the “aesthetic value”) can never be translated in another language. This is confirmed particularly in the case of modern lyricism, which is the “aesthetic” discourse *par excellence* and which prompts the Romanian critic to state, from a position fairly similar to Apter’s, that “poetry is, generally, untranslatable” (as suggestive language, *qua poetry*; see Lovinescu 170). Nonetheless, as a critic of Romanian literature, Lovinescu turned these purely descriptive considerations into normative criteria, side-lining, for instance, “older” Romanian poetry, which lacked “suggestion”, in the name of modern lyricism. Therefore, the thesis of the “incomparable” seems to face the comparatist with a double losing choice: he will either accept resignedly the crisis or even the impossibility of the commentary (e.g., Croce), or he will universalize his own culture in the form of normative criteria which would allow him to judge more or less arbitrarily the other cultures (e.g., Lovinescu). In this context, the only alternative left for comparative literature is the comparative study of different incomparable elements, the “comparative incommensurability” that Damrosch proposes (“Comparing” 152). However, are these the only solutions available to comparative literature?

## JUST HOW INCOMPARABLE IS THE INCOMPARABLE?

In order to answer the question of the alternatives of comparative literature, I need to consider first another question: how incomparable is the incomparable (with all the three implications described in the first part of this paper)? I will start by analysing Apter's so-called "Untranslatables", particularly since both the definition and the examples provided by the American scholar are rather confusing. Thus, on the subject of the definition (or "symptoms") of the Untranslatables, it can be noted from the beginning that they do not denote in any case "words-that-cannot-be-translated", but rather "names for ideas that are continually retranslated or mistranslated, translations that are obviously incommensurate". Nevertheless, explained as such, the Untranslatables *can be translated* and, even more, Apter herself indicates the way to do it. If we accept the fact that the "historic transformation of Aristotle's *hupokeimenon* [...] into *subjectum*" is a case of "mistranslation", this does not cancel the *possibility* of translation, especially since the author of the article herself translates *hupokeimenon* by "substrate, the individual substance in a given form". On the other hand, terms such as *midrash*, *monogatari*, *xiaoshuo* and *qissa* (kept in the original in Moretti's text), seem to be examples for the cases of "real" Untranslatables, possibly for "translations that are obviously incommensurate". If this interpretation is accurate, then this argument is also misleading, because, without ignoring the particularities of these narrative forms, the fact that they are mentioned and analysed in a volume called *The Novel* and, moreover, the editor's note according to which these concepts are part of the "novel's wider ecosystem" (Moretti x) imply without stating the thesis that they *were already translated* (at least as "Hebrew, Japanese, Mandarin and Arabic" novels). Therefore, Emily Apter's Untranslatables seem to suggest her own inaccuracy in handling the concept rather than the incommensurability of the translations of certain key-terms in philosophy and comparative literature.

Similar issues of coherence are also raised by the thesis of the irreducible historical alterity, as formulated by Damrosch. The American comparatist develops this principle of alienation from the cultural past (which presumably makes it "incommensurable" in relation to the cultural present) by analysing Yukio Mishima's narrative tetralogy, in which the author "conducts a [...] triangulation between ancient Asia and modern European culture, a complex process of interchange involving elements of both mutual support and mutual deconstruction" ("Comparing" 150). Nevertheless, the "incomparable" threatens to become a blurred concept in this formulation, since the two apparently "incomparable" traditions become not only comparable (owing to the narrative process of "interchange", which would not be possible in the absence of a *tertium comparationis*), but even partially compatible (otherwise the "mutual support" phenomenon would not have been possible either). To what extent, then, is it still legitimate to talk about "the incommensurability of ancient and modern eras" (152), as Damrosch does? As we saw, this problem of the relation between the "ancient" and the "modern" ones was also one of Lovinescu's concerns; and, at least from a certain point of view, the Romanian critic approached it in a better manner. Lovinescu enlarges upon a well-known fragment from the *Iliad* (Hector's death), which would prove "our incapacity to appreciate by way of sensitivity [hence,

in Lovinescu's terms, aesthetically] the Greek poetry", which is presumably impregnated with a powerful pagan "religious spirit", in which the modern man living in a secularized society could no longer identify himself (Lovinescu 80–81). But Lovinescu's theory, just like Damrosch's hypothesis, ends in a paradox: how else could we identify "aesthetic values" in a culture that could not have knowledge of/acknowledge the category of the "aesthetic" in its modern meaning, but would merely uphold a blend of heterogeneous values? Put thus, the problem seems solved definitively. However, the Romanian critic admits that Homer's epics were attributed "aesthetic" value at least *once upon a time*. This happened with the Renaissance, which initiated the dissociation of the "aesthetic" function from art's practical and religious purposes. Lovinescu explains this projection by referring to the psychological phenomenon of "bovarysme" theorized by Jules de Gaultier (1921), which makes that "antiquity is our projection" and "each of us finds in it what they are searching" (what better proof than the contradictory interpretations given to the presence of the choir in ancient tragedy?) (see Lovinescu 70–71). Nonetheless, this observation, although likely to explain more convincingly a modern subject's attitude toward Homer's poetry (and, generally, toward one's cultural past), leads at the same time to the weakening down near to annihilation of the principle of incommensurability: for, even if Lovinescu, Mishima and Damrosch look at their own cultural traditions as if they looked at "foreign" worlds, this phenomenon is the result of *their* own "bovarysme" and nothing could prevent that, if there were other subjects, they would represent the past as a reality considerably more familiar than the present.

The previous observation seems to cancel the thesis of historic alienation, but at the same time it seems to strengthen decisively Spivak's idea of the incomparable as irreducible cultural alterity (suppressed by "abyssal specularity"). Indeed, since any analysis of a foreign culture engages a phenomenon of "bovarysme", isn't this precisely the process the advocates of postcolonial studies disapprove of in comparatists, i.e. that they reshape foreign culture in their own image and likeness? My answer to this question would be both yes and no. Yes, because "bovarysme" (as approached by Gautier-Lovinescu) is an inevitable phenomenon in the analysis of any literary text; no, because this phenomenon does not necessarily result in a "defacement" of the foreign culture. The two aforementioned answers are not at all contradictory. The idea is that, in order to be able to agree with both of them, we must accept a representation of culture slightly different from the one used by the proponents of the thesis of the incomparable as irreducible cultural alterity. This thesis makes sense only to the extent that we accept an even and fixed representation of a culture; in other words, if we accept that a culture has stable outlines, which separate its members at all times from the Others. However, in reality, a culture is not a marble block, but rather it is a complex web, with variable edges and undergoing a continuous process of self-creation, within which the individuals resemble "nodes" where a number of identity "threads" intersect. (A more adequate representation of these processes could be offered by Quine and Ullian's metaphor of the "web of belief"; see Quine and Ullian 1978). From this perspective, the problem of cultural identity and alterity becomes fuzzier, because, even if she shares with some of her peers one or more (sub)cultures

within a given web (for example, race and language), an individual will always be separated from any other one by at least one contingent difference (gender, religion, age, political beliefs, family ethics, geographic area etc.) – which, in fact, grants her mobile identity. At the same time, it is precisely this difference that prompts an individual to perceive the others (from within or from outside the community, whatever that would be) in an inevitable relation of alterity, which could determine her to project on the Other her own “bovarysme”. This idea stands valid also for verbal artifacts such as literary works: for each of us perceives a text, a fictional world or an author as entities who are, at least from some point of view, different from, “foreign” to us. Hence the following paradox: if we wanted to avoid what Spivak calls “abyssal specular alterity”, we should accept that the only legitimate commentator of a literary work is its author. And not even the latter would be a certain candidate, since in the period since the writing of the work until its rereading it may well be that she has already become an Other. Additionally, nothing can guarantee that the Self is the best commentator of one’s own activity. If we pushed this line of thought to its logical conclusion, we would definitely reach an interpretive solipsism, which would put us not only in the impossibility of commenting on *any* literary work, but also in a position to suppress the commentary itself (including the one made on other social practices, such as soccer matches or electoral campaigns), only in order to avoid the “specular alterity”. Certainly, I do not want to assert that the current practices of comparative literature cannot be criticized. But I think they should be criticized for the manner in which they make use of *certain* comparisons rather than for the use of comparison *per se*.

## COMPARISON AND RELEVANCE:

### A PLEA FOR A PROCESSUAL COMPARATISM

To conclude, I do not believe that one can sustain reasonably, within the current field of comparative literature, the existence of incomparable elements. Is there, however, a modality to dissociate the “good” comparisons (i.e. made in relevant contexts) from the “bad” ones (less relevant ones)? Undoubtedly there is; but I do not think there is a rule to this end. In fact, more than the nonexistence of the rule (a statement hardly relevant in itself), I would like to emphasize the reasons why it cannot be established. Several recent reflections on the methods of comparative literature recalled the older homonymy between comparison as instrument of comparative literature and comparison as a privileged trope (simile) of the literary “art” (see Palumbo-Liu 56–57; Friedman 35). However, so far they haven’t explored one particular consequence of the evidence that the simile is nothing more – at least this is what the old rhetoric teaches us – than an extended metaphor. And, from this point of view, the question “What makes comparisons work (well)?” evokes Rorty’s question “How do (good) metaphors work?” In both cases, it is impossible to provide an answer. For both the comparatists’ “good” comparisons and the poets’ “good” metaphors are good precisely because they are “literalized” *a posteriori*, i.e. they both build and impose retrospectively their own context of interpretation and evaluation, which they are also able to enforce as a rule for all the successors in these fields.

This does not mean, however, that the act of contemplating the relevance of the comparison is itself irrelevant. On the contrary, to a certain extent, it identifies with the history of comparative literature itself, which is nothing more than “a series of attempts to discover or name the *tertium comparationis*, the basis of comparison, the specific object of the discipline” (Saussy 62). From this point of view, in anticipation of the “new” comparisons which should replace the “old” ones (according to the mechanism described by Rorty), I believe it may prove useful to look at two of the pivotal works in the history of comparatism, even if – or precisely because – they have already become “historical”. I am considering here Earl Miner’s (*Comparative Poetics*) and Dionýz Ďurišin’s (*Theory of Interliterary Process*) thoughts, which, born practically at the same time, criticized the dominant comparatism of the era and proposed a renewal of the discipline, albeit targeting diverging directions. Thus, according to Miner, one of the fundamental flaws of comparative literature is that “in existing practice, comparison is dominantly *intracultural*, even *intranational*” (Miner 5), which limits inevitably its study object, among other things also because of what the American comparatist would call “the relativism of genres”, namely the fact that there is not “a pantascopic poetics” and that each culture devises the literary phenomenon in the terms of a dominant genre: the lyrical in most of the other cultures of the planet (particularly East Asian ones). Hence Miner’s advocacy of a genuine “comparative poetics”. In a somewhat similar manner, Ďurišin criticizes the narrow taxonomic scope of comparative study and especially the fact that “in literary history this term, however, persists, and that not only in its original meaning, namely as a term indicating the primary approach by analysis of phenomena, but even as the supreme term indicating the very direction of investigation” (*Theory of Interliterary Process* 86). This is also the reason why Ďurišin proposes the replacement of comparative literature by what he calls the “theory of interliterary processes”.

Apart from the criticism of traditional comparatism, a far from insignificant merit of the two theories is that they are also an antidote to each other. Thus, although the two theorists do not appear to have known of the other’s works, we note that, from Miner’s point of view, Ďurišin is a classic case of traditional comparatism, because perhaps the most relevant aspect of his theory (drawing the concept of “interliterary communities”) is, in fact, a lingering in the territory of “intracultural” comparatism. On the other hand, from Ďurišin’s point of view, Miner himself is the conservative tradition, because his “poetics”, which relies on the theory of genres, does not appear to be different from a reinforcement of the comparison as “classificatory method of study” (87). Nevertheless, I believe the two theories in question – although apparently incommensurable – can be reconciled in a newer vision, which should establish three degrees of relevance (and, implicitly, three types) in the development to date of comparative literature, depending on its choice of a specific type of *tertium comparationis*.

1. *Comparing elements*. This is, to all intents and purposes, the original task of comparative literature, which, while choosing to invoke or not the well-known “influence”, developed until the middle of the last century as a technique for the comparison of symbols, types, *topoi*, rhythms, composition templates, etc.

2. *Comparing forms.* This perspective concerns mainly the type of comparative approach that appeared, in the second half of the last century, under the influence of gestaltism, of the Russian formalist school and particularly of structuralism. It starts with the acknowledgement of the fact that the significance of an element can only be read adequately in the context of the “form” or of the “structure” in which it integrates. Hence a complete series of comparative research of literary genres or movements.

3. *Comparing processes.* This seems to be the dominant perspective in current comparative literature, which has gained increased importance after the fall of structuralism and the acknowledgement of the fact that, on the one hand, literary forms themselves have a history and a function in a particular cultural system and that, on the other hand, each of these systems must be read in a wider, transnational or even global context.

Certainly, the aforementioned scheme can raise a series of objections. The first one could be that it favours what Đurišin called the “integrational” function of literature to the disadvantage of its “differentiational” function (*Theory of Literary Comparatistics* 166). Nevertheless, it is not applicable, because here I discuss the contingent relevancy (i.e. related to the current moment) of a certain type of approach rather than a “general” hierarchy of a type of research over another one. And if the history of comparatism can be amounted, from a certain point of view, to progress, this “progress” seems to mean the enforcement of the following principle: that we must understand the forms better precisely in order to understand the elements better, and that we must understand the processes better in order to understand the forms (and elements) better. In other words, comparatists are *now* in need of more distant reading, and not in order to replace but in order to improve close reading, and they are *now* in need of privileging the “integrational” function in order to better explain the “differentiational” function of literature.

A second objection could be that, while it is not excessively dogmatic, the above-mentioned hierarchy is truistic. From a certain point of view, it seems almost obvious that, given that the processes involve the forms, to study the former is more relevant. But to what extent does this actually happen? At first sight, (A) to compare the type of the arriviste in the French realist novel with the type of the arriviste in the Brazilian realist novel of the nineteenth century, (B) to study in parallel the French and Brazilian realist novel and (C) to study the reception of the French realist novel in Brazil are three topics of research which could match perfectly the three types of comparatism we have delineated before. Is this really the case? In reality, themes (A) and (B) correspond to the operations we noted above as (1) and (2), but (C) does more than correspond to (3) – since, in fact, the comparison involves only one process: *the reception of... by...* – it also corresponds most of the times to (1) rather than (2). In order to apply in truth a *processual comparatism*, such a study should analyse, for example, the comparative reception of the French realist novel in Brazil and in Romania (or in any other country). And, from this point of view, we can note easily that, despite the generous theoretical assertions, very little of the current comparatist research truly meets this condition (even Moretti’s ambitious project concerning the

novel is a comparatism of forms or even of elements rather than one of processes). Therefore, far from being a currency, the comparative approach to literary processes remains one of the extremely difficult challenges and, at the same time, a priority of current comparative studies.

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