

## Swimming Upstream.

### Challenges of Integration in Comparative Studies

Translated by Justyna Burzyńska

In 2010, the American comparatist David Damrosch published a book that was not a scholarly work, but a novel. *Meetings of the Mind* is a kind of intellectual satire on the academic world of comparative literature specialists, who meet regularly at international conferences. The first chapter, subtitled symptomatically “How Do Disciplines Die?”, gives an account of such meeting in Tokyo. Meanwhile the scholars are enjoying their time; curiously, their surnames contain the letters from the author’s name. However, their story is not a form of concealed self-criticism, but rather a vision of modern comparative studies on the verge of crisis.

The agony of the discipline in Tokyo is somehow connected with Barthes, who is one of the main topics discussed among the characters. The same Barthes who wrote *Empire of Signs* – a book inspired by a short encounter with Japan that, in some sense, expresses the delight of an “empty sign” implied in the encounter with a culture which appeared to Barthes as non-transparent and impenetrable. What emerges here is a curious game of “being inside” and “being outside”. The four scholars are confronted with this fundamental non-transparency of the Japanese culture not through marginalization, denied access or rejection, but quite the contrary – at the moment when the polite hosts invite them to visit a local museum, where the main exhibit seems to be emptiness. At some point, the academics realize that the museum is just a packaging and they themselves are the content: celebrated guests from another world, enclosed in an isolating bubble.

The trauma of this Japanese museum stems from the experience of a radical displacement. Up until now, the Western world had the monopoly for locking cultures up in exhibition closets, cataloguing and creating protective bubbles around them. But now it is the Western scholar who becomes a living exhibit, a de-contextualized

sign deprived of meaning. The conference in Tokyo marks a stage in the intellectual and identity disintegration of the comparatist David Damrosch, who breaks up into a group of scholars: Vic d'Ohr Addams, Marsha Doddvic, and Dov Midrash. The process is sealed at the end of the novel, when the three friends give David a surprise – they publish some works under his name and give him his own CV, as a birthday present, including a list of publications they wrote for him. The scholar's identity becomes an elastic bag containing, as it seems, works written by altogether different people.

At each of the subsequent conferences, David tries to save the comparative framework from a complete breakdown. He organizes discussion panels and tries to direct them towards some coherent idea in the chaos of fragmentary and inconclusive studies. All in vain. The end results are always less substantial than the sum of their elements. A coherent research project, either individual or collective, a holistic conception that could be applied to more than one case – such endeavors turn out to be beyond reach. Everything is lost in a kaleidoscope of fleeting inspirations and intellectual trends, which constantly make the comparatists change the subjects of their study. Comparative papers are written *ad hoc* and in hurry (and this is the case not only in Damrosch's novel!). They are usually prepared during the afternoon preceding the conference session in which they should be presented), and their only aim is to meet the demands of academic administration, which requires a list of publications as an instrument of employment policy.

If Damrosch is right in his critical vision of the comparative studies, the discipline has sunk into a chaos of *ad hoc* research, singular comparisons, and unjustified, accidental juxtapositions that have seemingly become acceptable. The first symptoms of this problem were visible as early as in the 1960s, when René Étiemble summoned comparative analysts to change the paradigm. A well-known French proverb, “*comparaison n'est pas raison*” (comparison is not a proof)<sup>1</sup>, became a kind of a slogan in Paris and abroad. Comparative analysis have become a default or makeshift operation, justified only as an accidental “meeting of texts”, not leading to any wider, more substantial comparative picture. It is this state of disorder

that Damrosch depicts in his novel. Another difficulty is caused by the inaccessibility of other cultures, which slip away from the comparativist's hands, locked away in their fundamental otherness. Common categories, indispensable basis for any comparative analysis, are not easy to find. If we were to add one more literary picture to the ones used by Damrosch, we could think of a swarm of flies in a jar. These flies are like the helpless scholars and the glass jar is like the invisible, yet impenetrable “boundary of reading”, separating Western culture from the rest of the world.

Although the comparative studies at their origin, – that Damrosch attributed, in *What Is World Literature?*, to Goethe and the term *Weltliteratur* he had coined, – were supposed to reach far to the East, at least to China, the normal academic practice that stemmed from them was barely able to deal with the complexity of multilingual Europe. The considerable investment of European scholars in Oriental studies led to the cognitive fiasco of the Orientalism analyzed by Edward Said. Damrosch revisits the issue and follows the adventures of the Victorian explorers who discovered the epic of Gilgamesh, that radically pushed the boundaries of Western understanding of literature not only eastwards but also deeper into time. It turned out that literature is something much bigger, older, wider, and more complex than it seemed. However, the nineteenth century, that age of philology, did not rise to the challenge of exploring the world literature. The struggle continued long into the next century, with translation studies and numerous philological subdisciplines established in order to examine specific languages and the literature created in them. On the other hand, numerous were the attempts to grasp the universal structures of myths and creative imagination, attempts that stemmed from ethnology and comparative religious studies, and were supposed to undertake research into universal truths underlying human literary activity. How can it be that such a vast and fascinating discipline is facing death?

In her essay *Rethinking Comparativism*, Gayatri Spivak attributes this impasse to the inability to break away from Eurocentric thinking patterns, which led to failures in addressing the complexity of the world. Commenting on the current situation of the American academia, she concludes that comparative studies are

divided by the conflict between the theory, regarded as something “European”, and the cultural plurality of the world, represented by real people – the foreign students, whose ethnic diversity has in some measure fostered the evolution of the academic paradigms (Spivak 469). We might say that this is still a step forward compared to the previous state of affairs, described by Said in *Orientalism*. The long tradition of European studies of the East had constantly clashed against a kind of intercultural wall that prevented the scholars from entering the labyrinth of the Eastern mind. All they were left with were stereotypes and false or simplified assumptions. Thus, the presence of comparativists who are at the same time representatives of the non-European cultures seems to offer a chance for a new accuracy of research. However, Spivak suggests, the still prevailing Eurocentric paradigm is becoming anachronistic as the degree of systemic changes is inadequate for the necessities dictated by globalization and the migrations that “force the cultures into greater proximity” (Spivak 468).

Since the discipline with such a long tradition that had consumed so much energy led to a fiasco, one might wonder whether it really makes sense to revive it. The new wave of comparative studies may result in the return to old gridlocks. In the meanwhile, the reality that used to give so much trouble to the comparativist seems to have changed. In a sense, the distance between literatures has decreased, and the phenomena of global circulation of texts have gained greater importance. The emerging globalized world seems to require a comparativist approach, and the alternative of continuing with narrow studies in national literature becomes less and less acceptable.

However, this is not only a matter of cognitive validity of the comparative framework. During the last decade, also other aims were indicated, and they are situated in a completely different field, much more important than the luxury of reading foreign books. The emerging challenge is the need for an integration of the cultural heritage that could build foundations of solidarity across civilizational gaps.

One of those great current challenges lies in the Mediterranean. We should go

back to the same area where the comparative studies had been born, to the “incomprehensibility” of the Orient that used to escape comparisons. What is at stake is not another philological exercise, but a kind of intellectual intervention in a sphere where political philosophy fails. Such a juxtaposition might be surprising. But if we consider, for instance, the writings by Giorgio Agamben, we can see that those two disciplines entwine under the same hand to form a cohesive vision that escapes disciplinary classifications. Agamben is well known, in the first place, for his “political” work *Homo Sacer*, but in fact he is primarily a medievalist with a broad competence in comparative studies. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, a book treated by the author as a continuation and supplement of *Homo Sacer*, we can see clearly how he is searching the cultural past for keys to contemporary problems of power and economy. If any solution is to be found, our cultural past must be analyzed in a particularly broad perspective. Therefore, Agamben provides a significant example that could push comparative studies to completely new tracks. The essence of this new paradigm is a specific form of “futurizing” return to what is the most archaic. *The Kingdom and the Glory* is an attempt to explain how the forces acting in the modern world are rooted in the categories of religious thought that establish the basis for all the subsequent development in early medieval origins of our civilization. Such a descent to the roots is motivated by the attempt to find a “place of intervention” – a point that the thinker can attack in hope of fostering a crucial cultural change capable of shaping the future.

This “futurizing” approach to the reflection on the cultural past can provide new, pragmatic aims for what has been a purely academic practice that consisted in looking for the intersections between different cultural orders and modes of creation: literary works or paintings. The scholars used to believe that the aim of such academic practice interested in identifying “common patterns of imagination”, was merely that of increasing our knowledge and understanding of man. However, Agamben proposes a much bolder way of cultivating the comparative field (understood either as a comparative analysis of literary texts, or as a research in polymodal patterns of creative imagination). The literary work is now treated as a

“field of potentiality”, involving not only what it actually is, but also the horizon it opens into. Thus, the scholar's aim is not only to provide a reconstruction of a meaning actualized in the original context of the examined text (an issue that had always remained problematic in the traditional comparative studies, unable to overcome the inaccessibility of foreign cultures and the incompatibility of norms “encoded” in texts). Now, the aim of paramount importance is to explore the “opening” of the text, the potential that a given work may introduce after being decontextualized, isolated from cultural context that originally “stabilized” its meaning. Following this new paradigm, it is possible to build a bridge between the work as it is in its finite form and its prospective meaning that opens a future. The best illustration of this new approach has been given by Agamben himself in his essay *L'Aperto*, in which a medieval miniature is the point of departure for an extensive rethinking of human and animal condition. Reading the medieval illumination as an exemplification of the process of blurring the frontier between the human and the animal in the eschatological perspective, he opened a field of philosophical revision of principles and practices regulating the relationships between man and the natural world. Such a revision connects two aspirations of the scholar: the reinterpretation of the past and the exertion of influence upon the future state of our culture.

Contemporary and future comparative studies may thus refer to the assumption that there exists an abstract *arché*, embracing all extensions and developments implied by the “fields of potentiality”. The strategy of building contrasts, clashes and juxtapositions between texts, characteristic for this discipline, is a promissory way of exploring the universal “rules of the game” that can be deduced from the existing works and determining what else is likely to appear in the field of creative expression and interpretation.

The Agambenian search for the archaic, his endeavor to return to the roots in search of a point that might enable a creative modification bearing fruits in the future state of the culture is specifically referred, as I have already mentioned, to the Mediterranean relations of Europe, i.e. to all those issues that may be symbolized by

the isle of Lampedusa. As the reflection on the Mediterranean problems *Homo Sacer* is only one panel of the polyptych and shouldn't be taken, fragmentary as it is, for the whole image. The political reflection should be complemented with another, vast and ambitious endeavor, that Agamben realizes by baby steps, moving towards the intellectual integration of the Eastern and Western heritage. This is the only way to lay the foundations of solidarity, providing the justification without which the problem of Lampedusa may never be solved. This is how a particular approach to the comparative studies provides an indispensable supplement for the political philosophy project.

The issue of rebuilding cultural continuity within the Mediterranean area (I speak of rebuilding, although, for many, such continuity had never existed; yet Agamben insistently returns to a kind of apocatastatic hope, a hope of restoring the original order existing before the division) is a motif connecting the author of *Homo Sacer* with apparently very unlike thinkers, such as Harold Bloom or George Steiner. They come close to Agamben because of their use of the idea of messianism, but not only. What they have in common is the fundamental issue of heritage, its integrity and integration.

The problem at hand is thus the revision of the Eastern and Western legacies in order to lay the foundation for a new identity, overcoming the idea of a civilizational gap and conflict. The line of division no longer overlaps the Mediterranean border of Europe; now it is situated inside Europe. Therefore, the issue is crucial for the European coherence and cannot be neglected. However, the search for the intellectual integration is still hindered by the fiasco of the orientalist scholarly formation, so convincingly presented by Said. If so many centuries of studying the Orient ended with such a cognitive failure, where should we look for hope that the status quo in this domain may ever change? In fact, at the end of his work, Said suggested several solutions. First of all, the issue should be removed from the hands of professional orientalists. The relations between the East and the West cannot be monopolized as the subject of an isolated discipline, jealously protecting its cognitive exclusiveness. The Eastern heritage should become the subject of *pietas* of the same kind as the one

which, according to Vattimo, we should apply to our own cultural heritage.

Both Agamben and Steiner approach the task of intellectual integration with a great sense of responsibility, not only trying to compare and contrast, but also to unite organically the East and the West in their aesthetic reflection. Agamben tries to incorporate the terms of Muslim theology, analogically to the way he approaches Christian concepts. For instance, in the essay opening the volume *Nudities*, he returns to the Muslim idea of *sunan* – two complementary divine “works” or “deeds”, creation and redemption. This is not an isolated example. In Agamben's essays, Eastern authors and their works are frequently quoted; the reader is no longer surprised to find names of Muslim angels, and a myriad of other references. These could be easily disqualified as mere embellishments or the author's attempts to show off his erudition. Yet I believe that they are meant to become constant reminders of the vastness of the cultural world. Even if Agamben is often not able to grasp and penetrate this vastness with sufficient profundity, he constantly challenges his readers to do so, in order to make sure that nothing is forgotten. The Islamic perspective becomes a permanent background to his argumentation

One may observe that neither Agamben, nor Steiner, the two giants of our times, find the intellectual integration of the East and the West an easy task. In part, this is the result of their personal limitations. Steiner suddenly stops in the middle of his analysis to introduce a rather surprising confession of ignorance: “No essay on the grammars of creation should leave out Islam. My ignorance compels me to do so” (Steiner, *Grammars...* 58) . Thus, he repeats the statement once made in his intellectual autobiography *Errata*, where he remorsefully confesses: “What is now aching in me is the sense of doors unopened: my lack of Russian, for one, my lack of access to Islam, for another” (Steiner, *Errata...* 41). But in *Grammars of Creation*, such a confession might sound like an intellectual coquetry, because as soon as he states his ignorance, he proceeds with an interpretation of Ibn Arabi, not as thorough as we might expect and largely indebted to Corbin. Nonetheless, the attempt is there. Perhaps, just like in Agamben, this is an explicit intellectual challenge that Steiner is trying to address to those brave enough to continue his work. The stream of reflection



is opened and left inconclusive on purpose, to serve as an intellectual provocation for the comparativist's successors.

The author of *Grammars of Creation* is trying, for better or for worse, to incorporate Ibn Arabi in order to add him as one more point of reference on his own conceptual map. As a principle, the comparativist does not accept geographical limitations. Naturally, the book, although extensive and overambitious, is still very far from covering the whole world; what matters is the will of constant redefinition of the conceptual horizon. For only an accurate account of the cultural “exterior” makes it possible to define the large, abstract wholes that Steiner tries to capture under the term of “grammars” of literary and artistic creation.. The poetics of incarnation, so crucial to the European “grammar of creation”, may be perceived and defined only by the contrast with the poetics of emptiness. Therefore, both Ibn Arabi and the account of a wider context of Muslim aesthetic brings substantial contribution to the second chapter of the book, opening with the remarks concerning the process of defining two key concepts, the incarnation and the Eucharist, that shape the European way of thinking since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Incarnation and transubstantiation, terms seemingly entirely foreign to the Muslim theology, have nonetheless a kind of equivalent, which Steiner tries to grasp in the visual realization considered as the most characteristic expression of Islamic culture – in the abstract, geometrical, linear aesthetic, which he interprets as a sign of pure energy. Those lines of tension criss-crossing on the plain surface become a vivid metaphor of the Absolute incarnated in the material world. The grammar of Islam would thus be a “grammar of assent”, establishing specific conditions of communication with the Absolute. The juxtaposition of the two grammars reveals the essence of the Western poetics and allows one to grasp it on a level of abstraction and generality that would otherwise remain unattainable. It turns out that Steiner, having departed from confession of his own incompetence, bordering on coyness (it is, however, a state of mind which constantly accompanies the comparativist – the awareness of stepping on thin ice), managed to grasp something substantial and defining, quite far from fragmentation and superficiality satirically portrayed by Damrosch.

The reader may be under the impression that this article addresses two very unlike realities – on the one hand, the writings by intellectual giants, capable of presenting an impressive, brilliant synthesis, and, on the other, the meagre academic achievements by the people who desperately try to finish their paper before dinner, as they are ironically depicted by Damrosch. No surprise that those academics, brewing their publications according to the old recipe: “This and that issue in the novel by author A and in the novel by author B”, are not able to overcome the lack of originality and the provisional character of their interventions. Nonetheless, the issue of insufficiency and hopelessness of comparative literature is much more fundamental. Steiner, having started his academic career with a fluency in five languages, complained at the end of life about the unbearable limitations connected with his lack of knowledge of Arabic and Russian. Having read the confessions contained in *Errata* as a fairly young woman, I went straight to my local institute of oriental studies. Quite unsurprisingly, such a decision did not solve my problems, by the contrary. For it was already “too late”. The fundamental problem of comparative studies is that people live for too short a time and die too quickly to become true comparativists. This is simply a discipline that no one is capable to cultivate.

The renovated comparative studies, which, against all the odds, still appear to us as irresistibly tempting and topical, have no choice but to acknowledge their own limitations and the sensation of helplessness stemming from permanently insufficient competence. Nonetheless, the cognitive range of comparativism is very specific; it can reach where other disciplines fail, shedding light on issues which would otherwise remain hidden in complete darkness. Therefore the discipline is both painfully insufficient and indispensable.

What is more, the comparative studies possess not only a cognitive, but also an ethical dimension; they establish a tangible connection with such values as solidarity, tolerance, freedom, and understanding above cultural differences. And this is nothing new. Such inspirations have accompanied the discipline since the beginning. Regarding literature as a universal treasury, to which nations adds their greatest jewels, was not unknown either to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, or to Goethe; at

the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comparative studies accompanied the ideals of pacifism. Steiner, still struggling at the end of his long and laborious life against his ignorance concerning Ibn Arabi, brings a significant contribution to the discipline that, against the recurrent nightmares, stubbornly tries to lay foundations of universal brotherhood.

Perhaps the comparative studies might be identified as the essence of culture struggling not with the other, different culture, but with its opposite – barbarity. What is culture? – ask the characters in Damrosch’s book. It is not “a pliable fabric we can brush or fold, it’s not so tractable as that – and we do not sit above it, brush in hand: we are in it”. Quite the contrary:

“Culture is a turbulent stream in which we are submerged, like fish. Now and again someone succeeds to swim, briefly, against the current – we call these swimmers prophets, artists – and sometimes they may even engender something new, like salmon who have fought their way upstream. But their products will mostly be swept away again, as will they themselves, and be dashed to death against rocks or against each other. A few bits of floatsam may eddy around for a while in some backwater or tide pool, say a university, then all but a few pass out into the sea, where they vanish” (Damrosch, *Meetings...* 119).

There is a load of pessimism in this image inserted between the pages of a humorous novel. At the same time, there is also something irresistibly epic. I believe this is a particularly accurate picture of the comparative studies. It is indeed a pitiful activity that consists in trying to surpass one's own limitations and to grasp something far beyond one's reach. Unsurprisingly, it usually comes to nothing. The comparative endeavor fails to reveal the essential; neither it provides us with the access to the foreign part of the river, beyond the rapids. Yet there is heroism and greatness in this intellectual contend. As long as the literary criticism exists, there will be daredevils trying to swim upstream.

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