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Comparative Literary Studies and Area Studies: Advantages and Obstacles¹

Аннотация: Автор статьи рассматривает связь между сравнительным литературоведением и ареальными исследованиями с их преимуществами, недостатками и трудностями. Прежде всего он обращается к анализу различных концепций пространства и времени в литературном произведении, а также пространства как строительного элемента, используемого при конструировании литературного артефакта. В статье указано на опасность применения ареальных исследований к литературной компаративистике, так как это может привести к расфокусированию и затуманиванию филологического, текстуального ядра литературы в ее сравнительном аспекте.

Ключевые слова: Связь сравнительного литературоведения и ареальных исследований, методологическая дисперсия, рассеивание, препятствия и затруднения в процессе взаимодействия литературной компаративистики и ареальных исследований, ареальные исследования как мусорный ящик, поиски методологической целостности

Abstract: The author of the present article deals with the connection of comparative literary studies and area studies, their advantages and obstacles or pitfalls. The article begins with the analysis of various concepts of space and time in the literary artefact. He regards space as a constitutive element of the formation of the artefact. The danger of the application of area studies in general to comparative studies consists in the defocusing and obscuring of the philological textual kernel of literature in its comparative aspect.

Key words: connection of comparative literary studies and area studies, methodological dispersion, obstacles and pitfalls of the permeation of comparative literary and area studies, area studies as a litter bin, search for methodological integrity

The problem of the relation between comparative literary studies and area studies consists in their methodological dispersion and a relatively wide field of their intersection. The latest tendencies in comparative literary studies that appeared some 60–70 years ago, stand very close to the spatial aspect of literary studies in general (POSPÍŠIL 2009, 1983, 1986, 1/2005, 2/2005, 3/2005, 2006).

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The first cluster of problems is connected with the intrinsic structure of both comparative and area studies (POSPÍŠIL 2002). They both went through several stages of development. The former went through the stage of positivist thematology (Stoffgeschichte), morphological or structuralist stage to a sort of cultural comparative studies enriched by relevant methodological approaches of recent decades, such as feminist criticism, gender studies, post-colonial literature, modern hermeneutics, deconstructive criticism etc. (BASSLER 2001). The latter belonged to a big cluster of spatial approaches in which we were supposed to differentiate intrinsic and extrinsic kernels. The intrinsic one concerns the space as a constitutive element of the structure of a literary artefact, the extrinsic one seems to express its outer relations, the semantic fields the whole process of literary communication is being realised in. The intrinsic is usually associated with Gaston Bachelard's and Mikhail Bakhtin's (BACHTIN 1975, 1979, BACHELARD 1957, HODROVÁ 1989) concepts and those of their epigons. On the other hand, the extrinsic concept is based on some philosophical presuppositions of French economists of the 17th–18th centuries, mercantilists and physiocrats continued by those who wanted to form supranational complexes, such as the concept of united Europe – Fortress Europe (German “Festung Europa”), Central European visions and the study of the enemy as part of the former iron curtain policy during the cold war.

In the sphere of linguistics area studies expressed the necessity to study the changes in the language as a result of spatial, zonal or area relations. The concept of area studies is based on the complex approach, complex investigation, and, therefore, it has to be linked to several scholarly disciplines. We can also compare it, for example, with aesthetics which represents a generalized version of a complex of disciplines based prevalently on one of them as a starting point; for example, the aesthetician started his career in the sphere of philology, history and theory of visual arts, musicology, study of architecture, urbanism etc. So each aesthetician studied, first of all, one of the arts, e. g. music, literature, painting, architecture, etc., and later generalized this experience in a wider concept of aesthetics. The area studies are more or less heterogeneous structures with the prevalent majority of history, political science, philosophy, philology, psychology, etc. The best chance how to connect comparative and area studies is therefore the concept based on the material of the studied subject, i. e. language and literature (POSPÍŠIL 2013, 1/2014, 2/2014, 2015) Such a concept was both theoretically and practically launched by the Institute of Slavic studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, in the mid-1990s and was symptomatically called philological-area studies in which philology as such became a natural starting point constructing a hypothetical bridge between the outer and the inner spatial concepts both in area and comparative literary studies.

The boundaries of area and comparative studies are associated with their different objects of investigation in which area studies in general inspires comparative studies to be more open and wider, to leave the pure field of literature for a more complex sphere of culture. This dispersion represents, however, its pitfalls or obstacles of its further productive development based on practical results (WELLEK, 1936, ĎURIŠIN 1987–1993, 1992, GREENBLATT 2000).

The methodological starting point of the research of area studies which should enrich philologies and the teaching of languages and literatures was primarily the Brno project – mentioned above – going back to the mid-1990s of the integrational genre and comparative typology, the traditional Brno conception of poetology and the study of literary currents, streams and tendencies, and, of course, philological-area concep-

tion in the form of case studies, a cluster of approaches going back not only to the area studies as part of Sovietology from the years of the cold war and iron curtain policy, but also to Josef Dobrovský and the autochthonous Slavonic studies of the 18th and 19th centuries not speaking about the already mentioned roots of French mercantilism and economic teachings studying the whole geopolitical area. The problem of area studies consists not only in the enrichment of philology from the point of view of information and contextual background, but also in the strengthening of the philological kernel and the neighbouring cluster of different disciplines overcoming the philological isolation and, moreover, in practical purposes (OŠMAKOV 1/1979, 2/1979, 1981).

A traditional philologist rarely deals with economy, politics and international relations. The old-fashioned concept of life and institutions seems to be unsatisfactory nowadays. The concept of area studies also strengthens the former philological unity motivating linguistics and literary criticism to a more intensive mutual cooperation. The language represents the basic material for literature, which is a representative space for the development of language; each language is being realised through literary texts, it is its mode of existence. Unlike traditional philology, the area concept is based on the study of the cultural space which is heterogeneous covering all from the natural and social framework towards sexual life. Therefore philology has to be completed with sociology, political science, philosophy, psychology, gender studies, the concept of post-colonial culture etc. It is evident that both languages and literatures do not cover the cultural space/area completely; on the other hand the cultural area speaks various cultural languages and their products (texts).

Area studies are generally respected now – in spite of the traditionalists' resistance – but very often are being realised through history and historians or political science and its representatives. It is high time we started to conceive area studies not as a new religion, but as a practical cognitive tool. The negative evaluation of area studies is usually connected with the fact that sometimes they function as a sort of a litter bin, i. e. a sphere of everything, a kind of a mixture, a mess of all and nothing at the same time. This is nothing new as new scholarly disciplines have the same “biography”. They have to define the object of their research and the discipline's borders which concern information science, newly conceived political science, international relations etc.

The accentuation of space/zonal relations is, of course, not new (Gaston Bachelard, Mircea Eliade, Mikhail Bakhtin, his concept of the chronotope). The boundaries of area studies are associated with their range and with the problem of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, i. e. with the search for a new object, a specific “craft” typical of a new discipline, the knowledge of “know-how” techniques which are well-known from natural and technological sciences, but also from some social sciences and humanities. Sometimes it is asserted that new disciplines are a sort of a fake, false sciences which have no distinctive limits; each discipline has to have a certain amount of basic knowledge and approaches, sometimes mythologized, i. e. in mathematics, medicine, philology, etc., connected with certain subjects the students are usually afraid of, say, anatomy in medicine or historical grammar or syntax in linguistics. This all has to be formulated in the course of the establishing of this new discipline called area studies or philological-area studies.

This is all closely connected with the relations between philology and social sciences; if the kernel of area studies is represented by philology, we call them “philological-area studies”; the discipline represents a specific form of a transcendence of philology towards social sciences; at the same time the philological kernel of area studies has

to be preserved. The area character is not a mere mechanical synthesis or a solution of philology and social sciences, but a natural transcendence of philology.

It is inevitable to ignore a fashion of area studies, i. e. a non-critical accentuation of everything which is closely connected with area or space conceptions at any cost; on the contrary, it is extremely useful to stress their connections with other disciplines or notions; area or philological-area studies should be associated with the following terms, such as visualization (ROTT 2002, TOKARZ 2002), history of ideas (Ideengeschichte), the theory of literary history, the dialogue of cultures (POSPÍŠIL 2002, 2004, 2007), culture/cultural studies.

The concept of the net of world cultural areas depends on how detailed and elaborate it should be. The typology of world cultural areas could be identified with that of continents, e. g. North, Central or North America, Asia subdivided into Western, Southern, Eastern or South-Eastern, Australia and Oceania, Africa subdivided due to natural conditions, ethnicity or religion into different regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Muslim Africa etc.

The kernel of European areas is closely associated with their complicated history and cultural development with its language heterogeneity and old and new contrasts and contradictions. Traditionally speaking, there are Western Europe, Northern Europe or Scandinavia, Southern Europe, the Balkan, Central Europe, East and South-Eastern Europe; it is usual to speak of the Mediterranean area.

The Central European area represents the most complicated cultural complex, the region with colourful historical and religious developments, the cradle of revolutions and world wars. It reminds a little of the Balkan area though its intrinsic structure – both diachronous and synchronous is quite different (NEUBAUER – CORNIS-POPE 2004–2010, NEUPOKOJEVA 1976, POSPÍŠIL-MOSER 2004).

There is nothing stable in the typology of areas in general and European areas in particular; though the formation of cultural areas is a long-time process, there are some important shifts and modifications; one possible example might be represented by Italy: a centre of Renaissance and humanism naturally belonged to the West European area in the Middle Ages; its Renaissance concept was then realised in France and England; later when the kernel of Italian culture – the North of Italy with Milan and Venice – became part of Habsburg monarchy, Italy was regarded as part of Central Europe. We can even conclude that very important parts of the Central European area have a transitive character: besides Italy, for example, Slovenia (Central Europe – Balkan), former Galicia, now partly Poland, partly Ukraine (Central Europe – Eastern Europe), Transylvania (Siebenbürgen, Erdély, Ardeal – Central Europe – Balkan), Croatia (Central Europe – Balkan) etc.

The transitivity may function as a distinctive feature of the whole of Central Europe which gives it a more flexible, rich, complex and synthetic character leading to its really “central” position, and the rest of European areas which, of course, tended to transcend to other countries and determine their characters (former African colonies – Britain, France, up to 1918 Germany, then also Portugal, Spain, colonies in Asia, America). It is also often stressed in recent individual or team publications dealing with the problem of aesthetic values, with the rather controversial subject of “East-Central Europe” (Ostmitteleuropa) or the comparative aspect of area studies in general and Central European studies in particular (POSPÍŠIL 2006, 1/2007, 2/2007, 3/2007, 4/2007, 1/2009, 2/2009, MATHAUSER 2005, POSPÍŠIL, ZOUHAR 2008, WRITING LITERARY HISTORY 2006).

From this point of view it is very important to accentuate the significance of the axiological character of literary artefacts, to integrate the area studies also into the concept of comparative philological studies. The contemporary literary history must also cover the theory of aesthetic values though it is not acceptable to apply here a concept of the so-called positive discrimination. No literary canon can be determined by the representatives of single national literatures only, literature is a supranational phenomenon as a part of the communicative process predetermined by the category of the recipient (reader); the product of the process – a literary text – is being mediated through the receptional environment, e. g. translations etc.). In some of the studies dealing with area studies in general and Central European area in particular you can find the term “belatedness” which is a little pejorative, negatively axiological. Each national literature has its own developmental paradigm, its trajectory of evolution independent of other literatures, so there is no need to gain on or overcome something, it is autonomous, prepared to be integrated with other literary entities, to transform their impulses, but otherwise it has its own evolutionary rhythm and pattern, it is axiologically autochthonous. In some articles of mine I called it “pre-post effect” or “pre-post paradox”. The term “literary culture” brings us a little back to the 19th-century cultural-historical school denying the specificity of literature as a kind of art stressing the importance of cultural studies, semiotics and spatial character of the knots of intersection of various cultural streams and tendencies.

The key relations of area studies including Central European studies covering the cardinal problem of area comparative studies, cultural studies, dialogue of cultures, and genre studies is very close to the yet unsolved problem of the extrinsic and the intrinsic mentioned in the *Theory of Literature* by Warren and mainly by Wellek (WELLEK – WARREN 1948, 1968), the interconnection of which is a dominant task of literary criticism including its area aspect.

The weak aspects of contemporary comparative studies are connected – as mentioned above – with their methodological dispersion and non-existent methodological memory; new comparativists are often forced to discover again and again the methods and come to the results already revealed.

The contemporary status of comparative literary studies is, therefore, rather complicated; on the one hand, traditional comparative studies are newly revealed as inspiring from some aspects, sometimes they are regarded as predecessors of more modern approaches (area studies), on the other, there is a strong quest for further innovations. And, last but not least, comparative studies appeared in the focus of application as a methodological tool when conceiving a new model of literary history or a history of any national literature which cannot be understood outside its comparative framework.

Comparative literary studies may function as a loose net of historically tested approaches, single methods and visions or as a link of a chain of more complex approaches connected with new subjects and problems of world literature, with the prevalence of certain genre clusters and with the dominant impact of mass literature in general.

- 1) Genesis of area studies and its relation to comparative literary studies.
- 2) Spatial aspect.
- 3) Boundaries of area and comparative literary studies.
- 4) Area studies and social sciences.
- 5) Area and visualisation (Polish concept of iconosphere).
- 6) Area and history/theory of literary history.

7) Area and dialogue of cultures.

8) Area and culture studies.

There are two ways to reform comparative studies:

– minimalisation, deepening, concentration on the text;

– maximalization: a widening, a wider concept, new relations (postcolonial literature, gender studies, dialogue of cultures, area studies, territorial studies).

The reformed comparative studies permeated by area studies transcends the sphere of literature towards society, culture, other humanities and social sciences which gives birth to a more complex use of comparative methods.

Obstacles, pitfalls:

1) Vague boundaries of this concept of comparative literary studies;

2) Weakening of the pure craft of literary criticism;

3) Dispersion of subjects and methods;

4) Methodological, didactic and practical consequences – character of a graduate of a wider concept of comparative studies.

Some researchers call area studies a waste basket or litter bin, because it really represents a mixture of various approaches and disciplines which is not methodologically pure and which still seeks for its methodological integrity.

The process of the integration of area studies, or more exactly philological-area studies, and comparative literary studies, though it is intensifying and is more profound now than in the past, is a complicated long-distance run.

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