

# From Literature to Culture – and Back?

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*Paper deals with shifting paradigms of so called Literary Studies since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when national literary histories were replaced by Comparative Literature. However, as the idea of literature promoted by Comparative Literature rested on the priority of European over non-European literatures, after several decades of its implementation this underlying discriminative pattern came to the fore being replaced by Cultural Studies. The same recently happened to Cultural Studies whose idea of culture was surrepetitiously linked with an elite idea of literature. The “counter-culturalist turn” (re)introduced the idea of singular literature.*

Keywords: literary studies / literary history / comparative literature / cultural studies / inter-disciplinarity / counter-culturalist turn

With the rising globalization of literature toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national literary histories got gradually replaced by a European perspective as their putative all-embracing frame. However, according to Ferdinand Brunetière (*The European Literature*, 1904) whose work marks the emergence of the idea of Comparative Literature, European literature of that time, far from being autonomous and sovereign, acquired its distinctive identity only against the background of various Asian literatures. Though these “fellow literatures” had superseded the European one for many centuries, “in modern times” they were no longer regarded to be the aesthetic “equals” of the latter. Brunetière here reiterates Herder’s known thesis from *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1791) as well as Friedrich Schlegel’s concordant one from *The History of European Literature* (1803-04). In the wake of their argument, a historical advantage of European over non-European literatures was firstly established in order to be then applied on internal relations between particular European literatures as well. Within the introduced historical perspective they have been equally carefully gradated as to their “progressiveness”. As the compelling force of such an “advancing” history depends on the coherence of its events, whatever was threatening to divert the envisaged “narrative progression” was marginalized or ruled out from it. The torrent of cultur-

ally incommensurable literary activities was to be channeled in an edifying direction which implied the distinction between the “right” and “wrong” tradition as a parameter to be followed in the operation of historical reconstruction.

However, after several decades, the underlying discriminative pattern of comparisons came to the fore compromising the “progressive” idea of history. It became obvious how much the idea of literary unification flagged under the banner of Comparative Literature rested on repression and exclusion. Even after the melting of European literature with “the rest of the West”, i.e. the United States has emerged, a hierarchical division of the world into the various geopolitical and cultural areas seconded by uneven distribution of scholarly attention was hardly to be overseen. The same objection was raised with regard to the alternative idea of *littérature générale* as the denominator of “generality” was set by one of the Western literatures and regarded as the norm against which “deviations” were identified and measured.

In order to take up what was marginalized by this culturally imposed measure, i.e. not only the non-European but also the European subordinated cultures, the project of Cultural Studies was launched in the 1960ies. From its perspective, challenging the divisions between particular national literatures in the manner of Comparative Literature was insufficient. Not just these divisions, the *very idea of literature* had to be reshaped in order to consider its differently structured and unequally supported cultural conceptualizations. The project of Cultural Studies, therefore, grew out of the suspicion of comparative programs that merely adopt an all-inclusive approach without engaging with concerns about its biased politics of representation. The extraordinary colonizing capacity of the West owes a lot to its ability to transform the unbearable otherness of other cultures into a welcome diversity that perpetuates its historical streamline. From the perspective of Cultural Studies the idea of Comparative Literature, if only modestly and unintentionally, eventually reinforced such a goal-oriented unity in diversity.

There are several reasons why Cultural Studies was in a certain sense elected to raise the consciousness of the politics underlying the delineated all-inclusive approach. First of all, Cultural Studies emerged out of adult education programs between 1930s and the 1950s engaged with the hard life experience of mature and politically conscious students recruited from subaltern classes. Through the teaching praxis involved with a heterogeneous and resilient population, centers for continuing adult education subverted the ruling idea of literature from below, as it were, by disclosing its interrelatedness with elite cultural, ideological, social and political

concerns. In this way, an apparently disinterested aesthetics, responsible for the dissemination of this idea of literature, was dismantled as a practice of cultural discrimination. No discipline is a genuine whole but only a set of contrived frontiers and selected approaches, a self-affirming, self-perpetuating frame of reference. As soon as it is put in *natural use*, ignorance toward what remains outside its field is set to work.

Once the depicted cultural profile of the idea of Comparative Literature was laid bare, one was better equipped to understand why aesthetics associated to it treated non-European literary works as failed embodiments of its ideals or everyday life as unworthy of scientific attention. Cultural Studies turned toward these “leftover” elements of disciplinary expertise in a very similar way as, a century or so ago, the heterogeneous form of the novel did. As Michel de Certeau put it, this form with its inclination towards marginal and shadowy customs of bourgeois society was gradually made into “the zoo of everyday practices since the establishment of modern science” (78). It is exactly in this subversive way with regard to the “proper science” that Cultural Studies sees its agenda. Yet if de Certeau promotes a literary genre into the desired model of Cultural Studies – quite an unexpected move if one considers its aforementioned resistance to the very idea of literature – this happens because he engages a *concept of literature which is directly opposite to the one advocated by the “proper science”*.

In terms of Comparative Literature the concept of literature sets the measure of “progressiveness” of national and continental cultures, represents the supreme norm against which comparisons between them are undertaken. From de Certeau’s point of view, on the contrary, literature speaks for the anonymous mass of those who are dispossessed of a “proper locus” having to act on a “terrain ... organized by the law of foreign power” (37). These deprived “human remnants” cannot express their selves except by taking a *fictional detour* through an alien discourse. Being expropriated of a firm site for the production on their own, they manifest themselves only through a subversive consumption, mimicking re-appropriation of given discursive means and turning them against their pre-designated implementation. This is how the novel proceeds. Per analogy, far from officially *representing* literature like Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies spontaneously *incorporates* it; it does not *appropriate* literature from the vantage point of disciplinary norm, but makes this norm *expropriated* by it. If, however, literature is conceived in this subversive way, then it does not make a *distinctive area* to be supervised but rather a *non-representable constituent* of all subject positions; then it becomes, to use Derrida’s phrase (11), “the mystical foundation of /disciplinary/ authority” which the discourse of Cultural Studies, as opposed to the one of Comparative

Literature, takes pains to call attention to. To pinpoint my thesis: If in Comparative Literature the concept of *literature* was secretly empowered by the prevalent and self-affirming *culture*, then in Cultural Studies the concept of *culture* is disempowered by the subordinated and self-subverting *literature*. Thus the path leading from Comparative Literature to Cultural Studies does not read simply “from literature to culture” but rather “from a culturally determined self-affirming literature to a literary determined self-subverting culture”. While taking the center stage, the concept of culture underwent a literary blurring of its boundaries with the aim of avoiding the culturally discriminating consequences of the previous rigid concept of literature.

This might explain the literary manner how Richard Hoggart, one of the forefathers of Cultural Studies, inherited the disciplinary discourse of English Studies, combining it with personal and public history, autobiography and ethnography in order to subvert it out of his worker’s child’s cultural experience. Another literary maneuver was undertaken by Raymond Williams, the second forefather of Cultural Studies, who subverted the restricted meaning of the key disciplinary concepts by delving further back into their forgotten past. So the borders of “literature” were redrawn to include all kinds of writing such as scientific, historical, autobiographical as well as fictional. The intention of Williams’ reconstruction is to show that such an interdisciplinary concept of literature had ruled up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century having been divided into the fictional and factual literature only in the wake of Romanticism. Instead of connecting past and present into historical necessity Williams thus treats the past as the stock-pile of alternative and contestable resources, an unstable and asymmetrical ensemble which can be put in use in various ways. His reconstructive approach takes liberty which is much more akin to literary experimentation than institutional historiography.

Hoggart’s and Williams’ *literary expropriating operations* with regard to the dominant disciplinary heritage paved the way for the discourse of British Cultural Studies which thereupon incessantly maneuvered between various disciplines or the past and the present for that matter. As one commentator put it, the whole British project of Cultural Studies relies on the “ability to plunder the more established disciplines while remaining separate from them” (Moran 51) i.e. on “stealing away /from them/ the more useful elements and rejecting the rest” (Johnson 75). Opposing the growing institutionalization of the field Stuart Hall (285) warned that it threatens the interdisciplinary character of Cultural Studies which draws strength precisely from its marginality within the academy. If the disciplines were to be denied in their exclusive rights, then one was surely

not expected to establish a new one. But exactly this firm alignment with the plundering tactical maneuvers of marginalized cultures may turn out, as Bill Readings (122) has convincingly argued, to be animated by old Kantian nostalgia for an all-inclusive education heading toward a putatively *unrestricted human freedom*. Already in his famous treatise *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), namely, Kant opposed the disciplinary fragmentation of knowledge that lead to a triumph of the disciplined expert over the self-reflective philosopher. He set out by stating an analogy between the idea of the university, promoted at that time under the pressure of necessity of the mass production of knowledge, and the division of labor in the factory (Kant, *The Conflict* 23). In his vision, the form of the university makes just a part of the larger “organism” of an emergent society that replaces the centralized monarchy by the democratic republican constitution. Along with the necessary differentiation of discrete domains, both society and university are expected to strive after *a unifying principle that would ensure the commensurability of divergent particles*. Stressing the importance of this principle that avoids empirical evidence, Kant claims that each member of the state “should have his position and function defined by the idea of the whole” (Kant, *The Critique* II: 23).

However, in order to steadily keep in touch with this unpindownable idea of the whole, readiness and ability for self-governing are required. They distinguish academic people from the extramural “incompetent populace” which unconcernedly obeys someone else’s governance. Unfortunately, not all academics are self-governing subjects because even *within the academia* one can separate true researchers from mere “technicians of learning” (*Werkkundige der Gelehrsamkeit*) (25). The latter Kant scornfully calls “the tools of the government” (*Werkzeuge der Regierung*) as opposed to the representatives of philosophy which is “by its nature free and admits of no command” (29). Placed in the position of the critical judge of disciplines by virtue of its being “independent of the government’s command” (27), philosophy is expected to relinquish the “secondary disciplines” (45) of their “private property” to the benefit of a future “common freedom” (59–61).

If in Kant’s vision only philosophy is the true representative of the temporarily restricted human freedom exemplified in the subordinated extramural populace; and if, once in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century English literature had been substituted for philosophy as the central agent of emancipation, at the end of the 1920ies literary studies took over this representative position; then, in the course of the 1980ies, Cultural Studies authorized its expropriation of established disciplines by the same provi-

sionally restricted freedom exemplified in subordinated cultures. As in all three cases the “quasi-discipline” in the end powerfully embraced and superseded the disciplines, it appears that the institutionally disempowered people offered a much needed service to the institutional empowerment of their representatives. An unprecedented mobility of representatives was purchased at the price of a growing immobility of the people. In order for the first to keep *permanently mobile*, the second had to remain *always easily mobilizable*. This asymmetry entered the daylight as Cultural Studies undertook, in the wake of Kant’s dictum, to assign to “various others” their appropriate “functions and positions”. In such a way a custodial relation like the one between Kantian “free thinkers” and the “unaccountable populace” was instantiated which affirmed the freedom of “representatives” only through a ceaseless detachment from the “adherents of self-containment”. In order for the first to demonstrate their self-governing capacity, the latter were relegated to gender, race, ethnic or sexual positions. Thus the gap between the powerful and disempowered intended to be bridged up was ultimately deepened by Cultural Studies.

This might be the reason why Timothy Clark (19–20) sees in Cultural Studies just a logical outcome of a principle leading from Enlightenment through to late modernism: If the progressive narrative of emancipation is to succeed, its constitutive surplus of whatever sort is doomed to be victimized. After all, why did Cultural Studies experience such an easy acceptance by the Western universities if not due to its ability to domesticate the unbearable otherness of women, racial and ethnic varieties or gays and lesbians into a welcome diversity within a progressive framework which gets rid of whatever does not fit into its self-propelling plot? By explaining texts in terms of “subject positions”, argues Clark (23), the cultural critic “expresses a drive to position oneself as the embodiment of a supposedly fully enlightened eye to whom all these supposed subject positions and identities are visible and morally mappable”, i.e. can be rendered transparent in their particularism as opposed to him who escapes any such liability.

Hence it was against this violence of cultural stereotyping, i.e. contrary to the pressure of the self-exempting norm to *domesticate others through their institutional identification* that Clark recently introduced what he calls the “poetics of singularity”. As he interprets the central concept, singularities are resilient to any kind of identification of their otherness as they are capable to repeatedly become “other than the other”, to be born always anew, to jump out of any allocated temporal or spatial order. As Hannah Arendt, one of the proponents of Clark’s poetics would put it, they are “outside determination” so typical of today’s cultural mechanisms, resistant to their

aggressive appropriation because carrying with themselves a measure of complete arbitrariness. Interestingly enough, all the advocates of the poetics of singularity as Clark envisages them, i.e. Heidegger, Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida, agree that the only proper embodiment of such singularity is *literature*. However, this literature is now carefully uncoupled from its hidden alliance be it with the normative European culture, as in the project of Comparative Literature, or with the temporarily restricted human freedom to be emancipated once in the future, as in the project of Cultural Studies. As we have seen, both projects, though each in its own way, eventually turned out to be drawing on the same pattern of human progression. The main critical target of the “singular” idea of literature, therefore, is this enlightenment narrative itself whose identity-assigning force is envisaged to be undone by it.

As the *realist* novel, taken by de Certeau to be the model for Cultural Studies, obviously cannot suit that purpose, Maurice Blanchot, one of Clark’s main figures, develops the new idea of literature out of Mallarmé’s *modernist* literary “project of the Work, in its realization always yet to come” (*The Infinite* 259; *The Space* 42ff.). This “yet-to-come” or *à-venir* is essential for Mallarmé’s defense of the endangered identity of literature-as-work in the Western modernist circumstances. In order to prevent a cultural appropriation of such literary work, which would domesticate it in terms of whatever subject position, *à-venir* introduces the possibility of intrusion of an altogether other dimension into each segment of the work’s temporal unfolding. So the *work* is undone into the *writing* which constitutes itself, as Blanchot puts it, “as always going beyond what it seems to contain and affirming nothing but its own outside ... affirming itself in relation to its absence, the absence of (a) work, worklessness” (l’absence d’œuvre ou le désœuvrement; *L’Entretien* 388) (*The Infinite* 259). In other words, literature conceived as modern writing continuously unworks itself in the name of an outside. In such a way it replaces any *relation* among its constituents that would unite **them into an identity bond by a non-relation** that evacuates from them any proper nature, draws them out of themselves and forces them to face their utter contingency (Agamben 102, 32). Precisely this is meant by singularity: a complete vulnerability of the constituents of a given whole to an empty external space beyond that whole (32, 39, 67–8) which in the place of their essence establishes a void. This *void*, impossible to be turned into the means for any purpose (65), makes *the ultimate horizon of the idea of singularity* supposed to victimize nobody.

As soon as we, however, recognize the void to be the key reference point of the proposed poetics of singularity, one question is unavoidable: As the singularity of the constituents of the whole decisively depends on

their capability to keep in touch with this void, are all of them equally equipped to accomplish this highly demanding goal? Because if they would be unequal in this regard, as one suspects ought to be the case in an unequally developed world, then some of the constituents would have to *represent the void for the other ones*; then singularity would turn out to be a representative privilege again; and then the poetics of singularity would rest on the same discrimination it had so harshly criticized in the paradigm of Cultural Studies. Finally, the modernist literature promoted by this poetics as a putatively universal measure of moral existence would appear to be a culturally and historically restricted one. Therefore, to come back to my point, instead of simply saying “from culture back to literature”, we would be obliged to formulate “from a literary structured culture back to a culturally structured literature”. It seems as if literature can liberate itself from culture to the same limited extent as culture on its part can free itself from literature.

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## Od literature h kulturi – in nazaj?

Ključne besede: literarna veda / literarna zgodovina / primerjalna književnost / kulturne študije / interdisciplinarnost / protikulturalistični obrat

Z rastočo globalizacijo literature proti koncu 19. stoletja je nacionalne literarne zgodovine polagoma nadomestila evropska perspektiva kot njihov domnevno vseobsegajoči okvir. Zaradi tega so imele v okviru uveljavljenih oddelkov za primerjalno književnost evropske književnosti prednost pred neevropskimi, to nesorazmerje pa se je potem preneslo tudi na odnose med evropskimi književnostmi samimi. Toda po več desetletjih uporabe in razvoja te evropske perspektive je diskriminacijski vzorec politike reprezentacije, ki je ležal v njenem temelju, stopil v ospredje in kompromitiral evropsko »progresivno« idejo zgodovine. Da bi se lotili tega, kar je bilo v njej izobčeno, se pravi ne le neevropskih, ampak tudi podrejenih in marginaliziranih evropskih kultur, so v šestdesetih letih 20. stoletja začeli projekt kulturnih študij. Z njihovega zornega kota je bilo spodbijanje razlik med posameznimi nacionalnimi literaturami, kakor je to počela primerjalna književnost, nezadostno. Ne le te delitve, sámo idejo literature je bilo treba nanovo oblikovati, da bi lahko vanjo vključili njene med sabo neprimerljive konceptualizacije znotraj različno strukturiranih in neenako podprtih kulturnih okvirov. Projekt kulturnih študij je torej zrasel iz suma, da interdisciplinarni programi zgolj privzemajo vseobsegajoč pristop, ne da bi si belili glavo s politiko reprezentacije in znanjem, na katerem temelji. Zaradi takšnega suma se osredotoča na »preostale« elemente strokovne ekspertize na zelo podoben način, kot je to približno sto let prej storila heterogena forma romana. Kot pravi de Certeau, se je ta forma, nagnjena k obrobnim in temačnim običajem meščanske družbe, postopoma sprevrgla v »živalski vrt vsakdanjih navad od uveljavitve moderne znanosti naprej«. Kulturne študije vidijo svoje delovanje prav v tej nedisciplinarnosti in transdisciplinarnosti. Kot pravi eden od komentatorjev, se celoten britanski projekt kulturnih študij opira na »sposobnost, da pleni bolj uveljavljene discipline, obenem pa ostaja ločen od njih«. Toda kljub drugačnim namenom ne moremo spregledati njegovega ujemanja z Leavisovim projektom vseobsegajočih literarnih študij, saj se v obeh primerih »kvazi-stroka« na koncu z vso močjo polasti strok in jih spodrine. Tako kot v primeru romana, trdno uveljavljenega literarnega žanra, v katerem je de Certeau videl presegajoči model prihodnjega transdisciplinarnega raziskovanja, ima tudi zarisana smer kulturnih študij za posledico njihovo institucionalno samopooblastitev in podobno diskriminacijo. Zato

smo od nedavnega priča »protikulturalističnemu« obratu, ki ga je sprožilo nasprotovanje takšni spravi, in to v imenu nezvedljive singularnosti literature. Sklepni del razprave se ukvarja s tem obratom in osvetljuje nekatere problematične posledice ideje literature, ki jo ta obrat zagovarja.

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