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## COMPARATIVE THEORY: CHRONOTOPES AND CIRCULATION PRACTICES

### ARGUMENT

Contrary to its origins and areas of applicability, always “very” local and localized, literary theory aimed at reaching the status of a universal discourse on literature, a discourse that would identify and showcase in a display box the invariants beyond the cultural, historical, and geographical variables. As the anthropologist James Clifford ironically acknowledged in his article/ manifesto “Notes on Travel and Theory” (*Inscriptions*, 5), “Localization undermines a discourse’s claim to ‘theoretical’ status.” The very history of literary theory as a (still) recent human science has incorporated and disguised local heritages while also highlighting in the process their transferable virtue, their mobile and generalizing capacity. The various narratives that accounted for theory’s beginnings, from the organicist ones such as R. Wellek’s *History of Modern Criticism* to those that value the breaking point as the constitutive motive of evolution (such as the introductions signed by Jonathan Culler, Terry Eagleton, or Antoine Compagnon, to name but a few), they all discreetly unify the variables of theoretical reflection into the apparently glorious perspective of a knowledge that makes its way through accumulating and filtering its data; a knowledge that is dubiously similar to the “hard” scientific one. First, theoretical discourse had to become more and more preoccupied with the theme of its own crisis for the motives of circulation, travel, and the unavoidable alteration of ideas to open up new lines worth investigating. This also happened thanks to the rebirth of comparative literature over the past two-three decades.

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Romanian literary theory has never quite fared on the major routes of theoretical discourse. The field’s tradition has rather been passed on from one individual to another, often at a distance, without consistent interaction and exchange that could enable a proper debate on the status of the discipline. Later on, in the golden age of structuralism – the age when theory reached its public climax which, at least in this lateral region of Europe, was to be taken for the very possibility of the discipline –, the attempts to revive and found at the same time a local tradition of theoretical discourse have brought to light marginal figures from the field of interwar literary studies (Mihail Dragomirescu, Dimitrie Caracostea). In other cases, they have stubbornly looked for traces of theoretical underpinnings in the discourse of literary critics or historians. It is not surprising at all that in a culture dominated for decades by a deep respect for the “big names”, critical doubts weren’t welcomed. This doesn’t mean there were no important theorists in

Romania after the Second World War who developed an autonomous discourse without being significantly indebted to the centers of symbolic power (among which Paris occupied the most prominent place). Discursive autonomy was conquered by paying the price of a radical break from the dominant critical-historical trend, which was almost exclusively legitimized in the field (see the cases of Tudor Vianu or Adrian Marino). Theory came thus to occupy an isolated position in the field of Romanian literary studies, a fact that had long-term consequences on the field's equilibrium. When the balance was nevertheless searched for and attained, as in the case of Ioana Em. Petrescu, it was not without a problematic recognition.

On the other hand, in the mainstream literary criticism, references to the fashionable themes and concepts of the same golden age were quite frequent, sometimes being even put to work, as in some critical studies by Nicolae Manolescu or Eugen Simion, the representative names for that period. However, these attempts did not question or engage in a strong dialogue with their sources. The crowned queen of Romanian literary studies, criticism – often including a historical perspective – contented itself with borrowing from the echoes of the theoretical debates taking place in different parts of the world, putting them only to a peripheral use. There were however some important exceptions: the debate space provided by the journal *Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, the theoretical enclaves hosted by the intellectual circles in Timișoara, Cluj, Iași, București, or the work of theorists such as Matei Călinescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Toma Pavel, among others, barely acknowledged in Romania during the '60s and '70s, who left the country to pursue their international careers in exile, in the United States or in Western European universities.

It was only in the 2000s, following another period of burning stages in a culture whose evolution model has been marked by acculturation for a long time that the fast updating through translations and other forms of circulation of ideas reached a relative normality. The Romanian academia could engage in a discussion in modern terms on the boundaries between literary disciplines, on the felicity conditions for the transfer of theories, on the circulation routes and adaptation models. This was the framework of the conference organized by the “Tudor Vianu” Research Center in the University of Bucharest, on the theme of *Localizing Theory. Schools of Thought and Policies of Knowledge in Contemporary Literary Studies* (Bucharest, 3-4 April 2015). Bringing together a small but representative number of Romanian and foreign theorists, the conference debates approached three main subjects: the felicity conditions for the present-day circulation of theories, the reception of theoretical approaches to literature in peripheral scholarly communities, and the import and adaptation of (Western) theories in communist and postcommunist Romania. The thematic dossier we put together includes a revised selection of papers presented at the conference.

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If, as the same J. Clifford states, theory circulates lately on an unpredictable route, with many comebacks, reconfigurations and new exportations towards the

former center (see, for instance, Gayatri Spivak's case), the legitimate question would be now whether the conditions that make a theory mobile and functional have somehow changed. Seen until recently in direct connection with the system of disciplines – because theoretical circulation is enabled by the disciplinary dominant of a certain period –, these conditions acquire variable importance since the customary narrative of the West-to-East transfer has lost its unidirectional character, as well as the traditional distribution of power poles. The change that started with revisiting the Prague school in the '60s and with the new/ old Lukács reinterpreted by Lucien Goldmann<sup>1</sup> was to be continued from the '90s onwards by the enthusiastic dissolution of the former emergence centers. Among many other productive consequences, this triggered the possibility of a more careful reflection on the contemporary theoretical mobility. It is already very clear – as Didier Coste convincingly demonstrates in the opening of this thematic dossier – that open-mindedness, flexibility, and attention to 'the real' are to be counted among the essential attributes of contemporary theory. Without them mobility would be impossible; moreover, mobility is today the very condition of existence for theory: *a static theory is a dead theory*, states Didier Coste, and this view is shared by an entire direction of critical thinking that articulates the status of theory in a visible interdependence with the new world episteme that privileges active, dynamic, and easily adaptable forms, as in a creative and alert ergonomics.

A question that could be raised here, at least as a symptom of the desire to somehow organize a historical trajectory, is whether some of the *felicity conditions* for the old import routes can preserve their place – and mostly, how, and under what circumstances – in the contemporary circulation practices. By choosing to discuss mostly the Romanian case before and after the fall of communism, sections 2 and 3 of this dossier offer a relevant and nuanced picture of these changes.

Theoretical circulation is not necessarily strictly geographic: a possible trajectory could also be that of intersection, of mirroring, of engaging into dialogue with several theories of different ages and places of emergence. This is what section 2 (*Revisiting Empires*) proposes: for Anca Băicoianu, Dumitru Tucan, and Ioana Zirra, the relationship between postcolonialism and postcommunism does not presuppose any relation of inclusion, nor an adaptation pattern of the Western theory of postcolonialism (by "Western", we understand here more a symbolical than a geographical power) to Eastern realities; rather a "theoretical dialogism", if we can call it this way. The articles in section 2 account for what happened with two theoretical schools that are connected, but also strongly circumscribed in a geo-cultural way. They struggle to understand their own principles and limits by relating to each other. This is the section that echoes Didier Coste's point about the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, „Traveling Theory Reconsidered”, in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London, Granta Books, 2013, pp. 436-452.

mobility of theory: the proof that a theory is alive is that it emerges more nuanced and stronger after it has been seen through/ from another.

When the receiving field is less prone to nuancing and to cultural openness, the theoretical import functions in a displaced and hybrid manner. Such is the case of the Romanian theoretical framework in the period 1975-1980, situated in a “classical” and long acknowledged chronotope of marginality – from a geographical as well as a cultural historical perspective –, and in an ideologically conditioned immobility – a totalitarian society, in the national-communist version. The lack of innovative import and of the free exchange of ideas is dramatically resented, especially after their comparative activation; the theoretical climate of the 1960s includes among others, the import of the main structuralist concepts in the operational vocabulary. As the articles included in the section *Western Theories, Eastern Practices* show, there are two schools of thought which act as invigorating agents for theoretical reflection during the last years of communism: reception theories, treated as a privileged object in relation with literary sociology in Liviu Papadima’s article, and deconstruction/ postmodernism whose import path is traced back by Ioana Bot and Robert Cincu through their approaches to the academic environment of the last communist decade in Cluj.

Retrospectively, which were the selection and felicity conditions for these two directions that reached a marginal and (self)marginalized area? For the time frame pre-1989, the causality of the “context effect”, although predictable, seems inevitable: one can thus explain many facts, from the difficulty of Romanian theorists to take part in the contemporary debates to the widely spread popularity of theoretical directions which privilege an immanent approach to literature, together with creative subjectivity, aesthetic autonomy, and the like – all of them contextual-strategical synonyms of an absent freedom of thought in Communist Romania. The interest in the comparatist perspective that two important Romanian theorists, Paul Cornea and Adrian Marino, display in the late ‘80s, can be read, in its turn, as pertaining to this marginality: under such circumstances as the impossibility of circulation, difficulties in establishing a lively dialogue and in harmonizing their readings with those of their Western colleagues, we may infer that comparativism had become, for Romanian theorists, a derived form of theoretical travelling, an attempt at reshaping the immobility of geographical and political marginality, and a way to overcome the import difficulties. As Romanița Constantinescu’s article shows, the ideological constraints blocked all theories which placed individual identity and social singularity at their core: from the impossibility of translating Musil to the post-89 explosion of novelistic characters in identity conflicts.

Other conditions/ attributes which would make a theory worthy to be imported remain yet to be accounted for. Some of them pertain to the features of marginality itself: the argument of central authority (also inevitable in a space marked by the obsession with synchronicity), the stakes of the selection for a theory or another, the innovation/ adaptation ratio etc. The articles in the third section offer a relevant

background for such discussions. Neither the theories of reception, nor postmodernism “itself” represent the main topics of theoretical European and American debates (which had already discovered singularities and localisms at the end of the ‘80s). Yet in the Romanian context they were still perceived as compulsory for several reasons. The most important of these was the novelty effect in the import field: the conceptual/ theoretical innovation presupposed by the debates on reception theories and those on postmodernism had an immediate disruptive effect on the theoretical *doxa* of the local Romanian context, the core of which was, undoubtedly, critical immanentism. Traditionally, the Romanian field rarely imported entire theoretical domains; one of the very few exceptions is the work of Tudor Vianu, the pioneer of Romanian aesthetics, theory of values, and stylistics at the end of the 1930s. The other prominent names in Romanian interwar theory focus on individual theoretical systems, on some celebrity figures of their time, whom they convert into the core and the stake of their own systems: the French critic Émile Faguet for the Romanian literary critic and theorist E. Lovinescu, the Italian philosopher of culture Benedetto Croce for the critic G. Călinescu. The pattern of the individual trajectory remains valid for the main representatives of Romanian literary theory during the ‘60s and the ‘70s: Paul Cornea started his theoretical career in a Lansonian vein, then continued by adopting the line of literary sociology developed by Robert Escarpit in France, to move into reader-response criticism and hermeneutics in the late ‘80s; Adrian Marino, in his turn, took René Étiemble as a model for an integral comparativism. Their individual trajectories also set their coordinates around a name-as-substitute-for-the-domain, usually the founder of a school who is read and re-read after his position had been already strengthened at the center. Marginal areas such as Romania, as can be seen from these examples, do not import minor/ peripheral authors from theoretical centers, but names with credentials that become, as with other cases (Marcel Raymond for Mircea Martin, Georges Poulet for Ion Pop), the felicity condition for a metonymical import (the work and the innovations introduced by a theorist “standing for” the innovative contribution of the domain as a whole).

The model changes partly, as the articles in section 3 show, by the end of the ‘80s. Instead of importing individual theoretical systems – displaying obvious signs of a larger trend –, the Romanian field receives and adapts two orientations which no longer necessarily hold at their center individual figures and school founders. Their disruptive effect is brought by other characteristics: (a) the conceptual innovation in a certain field (reader-response theory) not yet closely explored because of the distance from the Romanian still functional model of scholarly subjectivity and textual preeminence, respectively (b) the degree of theoretical innovation, synonymous to plasticity, in the case of deconstruction. The trajectory of the latter’s adaptation opens the discussion on the maneuver space inside the exported system, as the “transplant” threatens to remain impractical if it does not allow its “importer” to innovatively adapt. During the ‘70s and ‘80s,

deconstruction enters the space of Romanian theory by two access routes: the first, sadly a complete failure, as Ioana Bot proves in her article, is that of Ioana Em. Petrescu's readings of Derrida, Paul de Man, and Kristeva in her 1981 volume, *Configurations* (its unpopularity being interpreted by Ioana Bot as a sign of theoretical frailty of the Romanian academic *doxa* at the time); the second one takes the shape of a concept with a more fortunate posterity: postmodernism. Read in the descent of French theory and having become rather quickly a legitimizing concept for an extremely active literary generation which assumed a double status – that of writer-theorists –, postmodernism did not go through the mandatory standstills of “domesticating” an imported theory which happened throughout time to structuralism, narratology, or literary sociology when applied to Romanian literary objects. Postmodernism became a literary operator derived from a theoretical concept, since the poetry and prose of the Romanian '80s generation, more notably the Bucharest writers, had adhered to it as a literary ideology of sorts before any attempt at theoretical acclimatization: Romanian postmodern literature exists before any conceptual debate on postmodernism. This can also be the place for a discussion on adaptation differences inside a marginal area itself: if in Bucharest postmodernism was “adopted” literarily by a group of writers in the early '80s, and then it had to wait until 1986 for a comprehensive debate to be initiated, in Cluj, on the contrary, the transfer route was marked by the individual attempts of the critics Ioana Em. Petrescu and Liviu Petrescu (in 1980-1981), which did not have a similar impact at the time. And things didn't seem to change even after a decade, as Robert Cincu proves in his analysis of Liviu Petrescu's volume on postmodernism. Therefore we can assume the existence of a difference in perceiving the theoretical import in the manifold areas of marginality: if the focus on the individual trajectory, on celebrity figures, is a felicity condition for most of the imports, the fruitful access of theory towards the periphery is facilitated by collective initiatives and group debates, perhaps even by the necessity of cohesion experienced by an emerging (literary) school. The indeterminacies of a theoretical system chosen to be imported, those leaving room for active adaptation, can thus be approached more rewardingly in a collective project, able to render visible the innovative results of the adaptation.

The circulation and recognition chances of a theoretical culture which has yet to become aware of its potential as the Romanian one is, cannot be easily assessed. They certainly depend on the critical reviewing – without any overemphasis or perpetual marginality complexes – of the local tradition, as well as on the relation to a broader area, be it regional – e.g. the case of postcommunist studies, discussed in the second section of this dossier –, European, or even global. They also have to do with the availability for an open access debate space, in a linguistic mediation adequate to contemporary literary research. This is also the purpose of the current issue of *Dacoromania litteraria*.