

## Historicizing Comparative Literature in the Postcolonial Era

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### ABSTRACT

This paper brings up the history of comparative literature from its beginning to the postcolonial era, discussing the challenges and controversies that have shaped the history of the discipline and practice. Drawing mainly upon Edward Said's thought, but also other prominent theorists, the paper sketches the evolution of the concept of comparative literature on the one hand, and on the other hand, it shows through some recent examples of transnational and transcultural questions, how difficult it is in the contemporary context of Globalization to preserve the nation as a space and concept of reference for the writing of the history of literature, due to the very fact of the transformation of the nation and its contours in recent decades. It is also about showing that despite the circulation of worlds and the challenge of the nation's rigid borders by the process of migration among others, the nation is not yet disqualified as a framework and substructure for literary production. It further discusses the relationship between literature and nation in the contemporary context as well as the issues of transnationality and world literariness, using two examples from France and Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

Comparative literature emerged in a context where it was a question of transcending national borders and getting the literary world interested in the in-common, i.e. something that would constitute the intersection of different national entities. This is how comparativists, such as Jean-Marie Carré, have placed at the center of their concerns the factual relations between writers from different nations (Carré, 1965). One of the founding texts of transnationality is undoubtedly Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's from 1827 on the concept of *Weltliteratur*. The German poet wrote the following: "*Na-tional literature now does not signify a great deal, the epoch of world literature has arrived, and everyone must help to accelerate its realization.*" (Goethe qtd by Pizer, 2006, p. 35). If we are to believe Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, the central element of Goethe's text is indeed exchange, mediation between literary nations of the world. According to them, Goethe sees *Weltliteratur* as a "*means to achieve knowledge, understanding, tolerance, acceptance, and love of the literature of other peoples. [and it was] the concern with the foreign reception of one's own literature*" (Schulz and Rhein, 1973, p. 3). In this sense, we can say that the nation has always been at the base of the writing of the history of literature. However, it should be noted that since Goethe, the relationship between different national literatures has never ceased to evolve and change. Goethe himself was as-

tonished at the speed with which French literature, which he once described as closed in on itself, had caught up with its delay by opening up to the world: "*It is truly amazing how far the French have advanced since they stopped being narrow and exclusive in outlook*" (Goethe, qtd by Schulz and Rhein, 1973, p. 9). From this point of view, the evolution of different national literatures towards an ever more marked opening to foreign influences, but also the important exchanges between literary nations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards correspond to the logic preached by Goethe. As we will see in this analysis, the call for openness and transnationality has been very often marked with the seal of Eurocentrism. However, this eurocentrism has constantly and fiercely been challenged by centrifugal forces both from the European Centre and the so-called periphery, especially in the postcolonial era. Thus, as Achille Mbembe might say, it is not a question of imagining an international literary scene where chaos reigns and where everyone decides at will what should be, but rather it is a question of rethinking "*the problem of the collapse of worlds, their luctuations and tremblings, their about-turns and disguises, their silences and murmurings*" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 8). This is what the recent examples of Nigerian and French-speaking literature that we will discuss in this study invite us to do and which each seem in their own way to reinterpret Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*.

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE YESTERDAY AND TODAY

There seems to be a minimal consensus on the fact that the rise of comparative literature goes back to the period of glory of European nationalism. Comparative literature was then based on the idea of broadening the national horizon and part of the project of overcoming borders, the narrow national perspective and creating transnational entities as well as relationships between nations in times that had been marked by nationalistic conflicts, xenophobia and the rise of nationalism. What Edward Said considers the first Phase in the history of comparative literature, from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century almost to World War II, is supported by the philosophy of great European thinkers like Vico, Herder or Rousseau, or the brothers Schlegel, who consider the world a harmonious whole with different tonalities, these “Enlightenment insights” being the basis for humanism and for a national frontiers transcending universalism (Said E., 1994, pp. 43-49). As Said points it out, this view of the human culture emerged as a reaction to the exacerbation of nationalism and nationalistic disputes between 1745 and 1945 (Said, 1994, p. 44). However, Said challenges this view of a transnational space of human culture (From the nation to humanity), highlighting the Eurocentric philosophy behind it. According to him, “*When most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture they were principally celebrating ideas and values they ascribed to their own national culture, or to Europe as distinct from the Orient, Africa, and even the Americas*” (Said, 1994, p. 44).

Besides a growing intensive and systematic gathering of knowledge in Europe about the Orient (one may add Africa and the Americas as well), one of the main issues in the relation between East and West since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century according to Said has been the asymmetry underpinning the said relationship, for “*Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination. There is no way of putting this euphemistically[...] the essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds, was seen[...] to be one between a strong and a weak partner*” (Said, 1979, pp. 39-40). As Said further argues, manicheism that uses such binary categories to describe human relations ends up in polarizing the reality even more, “*the Oriental becomes more oriental, the Western more western and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies*” (Said, 1979, p. 46). Even that, what Said considers a much more inclusive and less Eurocentric stage of the history of comparative literature, i.e. the period after World War II, is in his words highly shaped by the Eurocentric view of human relations and its representation of Europe being the Center and the rest of the World the periphery. This stage, in which figures like Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, or Karl Vossler play a prominent role, considers a broader horizon of the international literature field, following Goethe’s famous concept of *Weltliteratur*; the aim being to transcend national spaces and go beyond nationalism, working with universalistic principles and allowing the emergence of a “*trans-human perspective on literary performance.*” (Said, 1994, p. 45). Therefore, comparative literature would be the place where

universality is expressed and where the main criterion is neither the nation, nor the language, but rather humanity and “art”. Comparative literature would then be the scene where “the best that is thought and known” is admitted (Said, 1994, p. 45), seems to precisely correlate with Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*. In this regard, the field of comparative literature comprises the intersections of different literatures as well as it includes much more literatures than ever before. Addressing this view of comparative literature and especially the intersections, Jean-Marie Carré establishes a set of terms to scale comparative literature. According to him, the latter refers to *une branche de l’histoire littéraire; elle est l’étude des relations spirituelles internationales, des rapports de faits qui ont existé entre Byron et Pouchkine, Goethe et Carlyle, Walter Scott et Vigny, entre les œuvres, les inspirations, voire les vies d’écrivains appartenant à plusieurs littératures* (Carré, 1965, p. 5)

*a branch of literary history; it is the study of international spiritual relations, of the factual relations that existed between Byron and Pushkin, Goethe and Carlyle, Walter Scott and Vigny, between the works, the inspirations, even the lives of writers belonging to several literatures* (My translation)

Following the pure positivistic tradition, Carré raises the attention on measurable and experienceable influences and relationships between authors from different nations, be they related to their works or their lives. This focus on the so called *rapports de faits* was but contested by Fernand Baldensperger and Paul Van Tieghem, who point out the dynamics of literary productions and the trend of crossing borders in the sense of what Baldensperger calls “*morphologie artistique*”, as well as the intrinsic value of literatures, assuming that the study of literature should not be reduced to pure materialism, ignoring the individuality and the originality of the work of art (Baldensperger & Hazard, 1921) (Tieghem, 1931). Anyway, what is known as the French tradition of Comparatism with Van Tieghem, Jean-Marie Carré, Francois Guyard, Claude Pichois, and André-M. Rousseau, just to name the most prominent, has its main focus on binary literary relationships between national literatures, on the basis of respective genetic influences, analogies and sources. It is noticeable that Carré mainly takes into account European Literature. Moreover, it appears that the category “nation” has once again become central to comparative literature. In fact, Carré’s definition, lineal to Goethe’s considers the peaceful coexistence of different nations taking part in a kind of international coming together of different national literatures. But still, at this stage, most European protagonists, including the inheritors of Goethe, talk of comparative literature as a genuine European matter, excluding other literatures to a large extend or considering them in a minor position. This is why Said indeed praises the widening of the space going along with comparative literature after 1945. He however criticizes the highly Eurocentric view promoted by the Auerbach, Curtius, Vossler and Spitzer, with literatures from other parts of the world being seen as if they were from nowhere:

*To speak of comparative literature therefore was to speak of interaction of world literatures with one another but*

the field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy with Europe and its Latin-Christian literatures at its centre and top. When Auerbach in a justly famous essay entitled 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' written after World War Two, takes note of how many "other" literary languages and literatures seemed to have emerged (as if from nowhere: he makes no mention of either colonialism or decolonization), he expresses more anguish and fear than pleasure at the prospect of what he seems reluctant to acknowledge. *Romania is under threat* (Said E., 1994, p. 45).

Even though Said considers this evolution positively, he still perceives an asymmetric moment underpinning the relationship between literatures from different parts of the World, leading to the splitting of the globe into First-World Literature, on the one hand, and Third-World Literature, on the other hand. By the way, one should notice that French literature is not considered as part of the so called "Francophonie-Literature", which means "other literatures in French language", that is literature in French language outside France.

Since its beginnings, comparative literature has thus gone through several developments and controversies, concerning the matter as well as the methodics of it. In the last decades, literary comparatistics has seemed to be chasing its own tail. From the French School of Comparison with its obsession for materialism, to the American model with the demand to comparatists of departing from a model only related to literature, there have been different attempts to 'fix up' what comparative literature and the comparative study of literature should be. The conclusion most of the time being the idea that literary comparatistics has failed in setting a clear and distinct matter for itself, as Wellek puts it in the following statement:

*The most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology. I believe that the programmatic pronouncements of Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Carré, and Guyard have failed in this essential task....* (Wellek, 2009, p. 162).

Neither his proposition of giving up the separation between general and comparative literature nor the following attempts of other theorists could definitely solve what Wellek himself described as a crisis. Indeed, the task for literature today is different from what it was in the past and what it will be in the future. For sure, poets and theorists of literature up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century would not have found it reasonable to divide the matter and the methodic of their work according to the languages they were using. They would rather have divided literary studies in different fields such as sonnetology, theory of tragedy, theory of the epic, and so on. Wellek has therefore just renewed ideas from the old school, before nationalism was sanctified as the reference for literary production. This idea is based on the fact, say, that "literary history and literary scholarship have one subject: literature." (2009, p. 163).

The comparative study of literature turns out to be simply the study of Literature, the question being at the end, if

literature can point beyond its own sphere. Can we think literature separately from the history of ideas? While one of the most important questions of the methodics of comparative literature may consist in the selection of phenomena of literature suitable to be submitted to comparison, we may consider the relationship of literature to the non-literary world a crucial point. As the French Philosopher Michel Foucault puts it, a work of art is always integrated in a discursive order (Foucault, 1969, p. 148). In the same way, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the matter, the style as well as the meaning of literary works are considerably marked by the social structures incorporated in the author and objectified by him as social agent, without him having any mastery of it (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 184). From this point of view, Henry H.H. Remak's definition of Comparative literature and its function seems a more adequate one:

*Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expressions* (Remak, 1961, p. 3)

The various turns in the field of the Humanities, especially the cultural and the media turn, have made it quite impossible to confine the comparative study of literature to the only sphere of literature itself. The field of comparative literature has come to integrate each literary production as a sort of cultural phenomenon, as a kind of expression of the *Histoire des mentalités*. As a result of all these attempts to fix comparative literature, it is clear that it has been built on the idea that the study of literature should go beyond the confinement of national literature and integrate the relationship between various national literatures in terms of influences, intertextuality, dependences, sources, and so on. Even if one considers the extended definition of what the comparative study of literature should be, considering other spheres of human expression, the idea still dominates that there should be a transgression of national borders, so as to reach transnationality, while it is obvious that studying literature is in any case, comparative, for German literature is then called German, because it is not French. As Said puts it, "no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions" (Said, 1994, p. 52).

## THE NATION IN QUESTION

How decisive is the "comparative" in "comparative literature"? What does it mean? If the term "comparative" seems so fundamental for some theorists of literature, it may have much to do with the "trans" of "transnational", that is the difference between two or more national literatures, or, we may also say, the link between them. But what is a nation? What makes the difference between one nation and another? Even if Wellek's theory of literature seems to enclose literature in a sort of structuralistic autarky by calling for methodologically studying literature as a subject distinct from other

activities and human products, it has the advantage of raising a very crucial issue, that is, the position of those men and women who cultivated comparative literature, at the crossroads of nations, or, at least, on the borders of one nation (Wellek, 2009, p. 165). Therefore, the border plays a fundamental role in the process of comparison. However, one of the greatest achievements of postmodern theorists of the Nation is the idea that “*Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye*”, as Homi Bhabha puts it in his book with the programmatic title *Nation and Narration* (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). In this same sense, Timothy Brennan argues that “*The rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature*” (Brennan, 1995, p. 172).

If nations are narrations, i.e. imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), how do we make it the basis of comparative literary studies? How do we define national literature then? Should we do it according to the language in which literature is produced? Or rather from the political historical point of view? How French or German are Rilke’s poems? Is Kafka German or not? Where do we locate the Belgian, the Swiss and the Canadian or African Literature in French or English language? The same question may also be interesting concerning music or film as well. One thing we should concede is the fact that “*Nations*” as narration don’t stop having a material, measurable impact on reality because they are based on imagination, for narratives create reality. However, if the idea behind comparative literature was to have a transnational attitude towards literary phenomena, then the question remains crucial and legitimate, whether the transnational space created by Globalization and from a certain point of view by colonialism and its concomitants, in its rejection of great narratives, should be the suitable framework for the comparative study of literature.

Georg Forster, the German expeditor, world traveller and one of the greatest ethnologists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was skeptical about comparing products from cultural areas he then considered too far from each other, the Indies and Europe:

*Vielleicht wäre es sogar nöthig, vor einer zu raschen Vergleichung der Kunstprodukte eines so entfernten, so von europäischen Sitten abgeschiedenen Volks [der Inder] mit den unsrigen, und vor der Anwendung unserer Regeln auf etwas, das ohne einen Begriff von diesen Regeln entstand, recht ernstlich zu warnen. (Forster, 1970, p. 291)*

*Maybe it would even be necessary to warn about comparing art products from such a distant and isolated people with ours, as well as about applying our standards and rules on something that emerged without any notion of these rules and standards. (My translation)*

Forster was then already suggesting that comparison is only possible when the products compared are basically similar, i.e. belong to the same genre, divided into different species. One of the species differences being the cultural difference. Should we therefore argue that comparing makes more sense today? Indeed, the context of globalization, and, as far as literature is concerned, colonialism and the postcolonial context

have enabled new constellations which are the source for new forms of literatures. Cultures and nations have come closer and the difference between products of art and different regions of the world mentioned by Forster are no longer self-evident. A specific kind of literature arises with specific characteristics linked with the fact that subjects, be they characters, narrators, or even authors themselves, are part of a new intercultural movement in a global context. When he was asked to say something about the nationality of his literature, Salman Rushdie replied, summing up this situation as follows: “*I have constantly been asked, whether I am British, or Indian. The Formulation ‘Indian-born British writer has been invented to explain me, But, as I said [...], my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? ‘British-resident Indo-Pakistani writer?’ You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside Passports*” (Rushdie, 2009, p. 454). This discourse which tends to free literature from the national shackles sends us back to a representation of literature as it existed before the exacerbation of nationalism. One question that remains, is that of the new approach, the new methodic in a new context. From a postcolonial perspective, the challenge consists in rethinking literature and culture and almost Western culture and literature, questioning certainties. As Edward Said puts it, “*Western cultural forms can be taken out of the autonomous enclosures in which they have been protected, and placed instead in the dynamic global environment created by imperialism, itself revised as an ongoing contest between north and south, metropolis and periphery, white and native*” (Said, 1994, p. 51). The scholar of comparative literature should therefore consider the different interactions and entanglements actually perceptible as phenomena already present even in early Western culture and literature. One of the most important challenges being to reread the literary text, old and new, taking serious account of other discourses, for rereading the cultural and literary archive *contrapuntally*, as Said recommended it, brings us to a more adequate concept of history, one that unveils how discourses on self and the other emerged, how they developed and how they interrelated with other discourses and the legitimacy of power. For Said, “*we need to see that the contemporary global setting [...] was already prefigured and inscribed in the coincidence and convergence among geography, culture, and history that were so important to the pioneers of comparative literature*” (Said, 1994, p. 48). The idea of rereading the cultural and literary archive from the present point of view sounds in Salman Rushdie’s words as follows:

*We could appreciate writers for what they are, whether in English or not; we could discuss literature in terms of its real groupings, which may well be national, which may well be linguistic, but which may also be international, and based on imaginative affinities; and as far as English Literature itself is concerned, I think that if all English Literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that English Literature has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.[...] it’s time to admit that the centre cannot hold. (Rushdie, 2009, p. 454)*

Rushdie from a genuine postcolonial point of view is therefore putting forward the anthropological constants in literature, as well as our human, historical commonality, rather than the *rapports de faits*. His proposal to abolish Commonwealth literature in order to put all English-language literatures into context follows the same logic as the 2007 French-Language Authors Manifesto in which they pleaded for *a world literature in French*. Both positions show that the nation is indeed not obsolete as a frame of reference; however, it is seriously threatened. I will come back to the manifesto later.

### A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

The asymmetric constellation unveiled by the evolution of comparative literature after 1945 as stated by Said is that, what the postcolonial theory tries to undermine. In a kind of deconstruction of the old school of comparatistics, the postcolonial perspective tends among other things to describe texts and narratives that had been excluded from the *Weltliteratur* before, that are more perceptible and can no longer be ignored, since they have become part of the global game, of a broader literary field and sometimes even find themselves involved in the so called “*Centre*”. We need to point out the interconnections, the interactions and the entanglements that characterize this new situation and that challenge the symmetries as well as the asymmetries of the old world. Two major examples can make the challenges for the contemporary comparative study of literature more illustrative:

The first example comes from Nigeria, home country of the Nobel Prize Winner Wole Soyinka. The case is reported by journalist and writer Eytayo Aloh on the internet web site *www.africanwriter.com*. February 2004, the Nigerian Company Natural Gas (NLNG) decided to endow a new, highly-prestigious literature award for Nigerian Authors, with 20 000£, i.e. more than 25 000 UD, the prize with the biggest award in Africa. But one interesting thing about this prize is the fact that, the founders required that it should be exclusively “*national*”, i.e. dedicated to Nigerian authors living in Nigeria, for, in their opinion, those Authors living outside Nigeria could no longer be classified as Nigerian, because “[*their*] experience and identity has changed over time”, so that “*The writers in Diaspora are not telling our stories in their works anymore. They are writing of an Africa that exists only in their imagination and reflects what their hosts want them to hear*”, so to quote one of the authors living in Nigeria, who was then praising the initiative (NNN, 2005, 14.06.2005). Eytayo Aloh sums up the arguments of this side as follows:

*It is strongly believed that the migrating writers have yielded to the allure of the western hosts and have compromised their writing. This has caused them to lose touch with the African realia in return for incentives like writing grants, legal status, and profits from sale and western sympathy; to use a very familiar cliché, the writer in Diaspora has sold his conscience and returned to colonialism. (Aloh, 2012)*

In this sense, identity gets deeply modified through the moment of contact and re-articulation as well as the new

position in the cultural, political or literary field. Identity is further informed by the relationship to the nation as well as to the national narrative. It doesn't matter where one comes from, but rather where one lives. Furthermore, literature is given a new definition, a normative one that takes in account its relationship to reality. Literature in that sense should reflect reality.

As it was to be expected, this decision led to indignation and unleashed fierce criticism from Nigerian authors in the USA and the UK, who rejected the definition of Nigerian identity and pointed at the discrimination. They raised their biggest argument pointing out the fact that most of the canonized Nigerian authors and those texts considered as classics of Nigerian literature are precisely those from outside Nigeria. Identity could therefore not be a matter of Geography, as it seemed to be the case for the award founders, because, according to them, “[*their*] materials are derived from Africa and the stories most writers abroad tell is that of their experience at home” (Aloh, 2012).

As we can notice, Nigerian authors from the so-called diaspora were being by this way denied the affiliation to Nigerian literature, while at the same time their acceptance in the literary field of their host countries is in no way self-evidence. At the same time, these authors from the diaspora would be the international reference for Nigerian literature, that is, people who make Nigerian literature internationally known. In his book *Afrikanische Philologie*, German Comparatist and Literary Theorist Robert Stockhammer has analysed the conditions and complexity of defining African Literature, suggesting how impractical a mapping of African Literature is, be it on a geographical, i.e. spatial, linguistic basis or with regard to its contents (Stockhammer, 2016). It is from this point of view definitely no wonder that the founders of the *NLNG Literature Prize* later on included Nigerians abroad likewise. Meanwhile, the Prize money has reached US 100 000 \$.

The second example is from France, where 2007 most of the prestigious literature Prizes were awarded to Writers who of course write in French, but who have migration background. These authors are originally part of the so-called *francophonie*, that is, literature produced in French outside France, or produced in France by foreign born authors. It is the French counterpart to Commonwealth literature that questions the asymmetric relationship between different literatures and their position in the postcolonial context. Such writers are reminiscence of the colonial inside the metropolitan centre and the call for a new attitude towards literature and new approaches to the comparative study of literatures. In this vein, 44 French speaking writers issued a manifesto addressing the place of foreign-born writers within the French literary field, which they considered a mark of segregation. The manifesto signed by writers such as Dany Laferrière, Amin Maalouf, Alain Mabanckou, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Jean-Marie G. Le Clézio amongst the most important of them, can be considered a re-appropriation of Salman Rushdie's call. That manifesto was a call for what the signers of the then called a *Littérature monde*, reinventing the *Weltliteratur* concept used by Goethe:

*World literature*” because literatures in French around the world today are demonstrably multiple, diverse, forming a vast ensemble, the ramifications of which link together several continents. But “world literature” also because all around us these literatures depict the world that is emerging in front of us, and by doing so recover, after several decades, from what was “forbidden in fiction” what has always been the province of artists, novelists, creators: **the task of giving a voice and a visage to the global unknown – and to the unknown in us.** [...] With the center placed on an equal plane with other centers, we’re witnessing the birth of a new constellation, in which **language freed from its exclusive pact with the nation**, free from every other power hereafter but the powers of poetry and the imaginary, will have no other frontiers but those of the spirit. (Rouaud et al., 2007)

As we can see, the authors of the manifesto fit in a certain way, in the same order of speech as Salman Rushdie when he asserts that “*Commonwealth Literature Do Not Exist*” (Rushdie, 2009, pp. 450-456). However, we can see that unlike Rushdie who brings the writer into a much more global universe, claiming to be practically without nationality, the authors of the manifesto claim to be of French-speaking nationality. In the absence of making francophone foreign born writers French, they would like to make the French writers francophone.

This call was endorsed with enthusiasm by certain protagonists of the literary scene, but it also unleashed skepticism (Migraine-George, 2013), one of the main allegations being the attempt to create analogy between the *Littérature monde en Français* and *World Literature in English*, ignoring the fact that the latter would then even include works of art that are translated into English and were therefore originally not part of the World Literature-Corpus, as Christopher Miller sees it:

*If we plan to teach World literature in French in the only way that makes sense to me – as a collection of texts all of which were originally written in French – then we are setting up a field that is very different from the one that has become familiar in courses on world literature in English, which rely heavily on translation and, while not excluding them by any means, seem to place no particular emphasis on texts first written in English. World literature in English is literature from around the world and throughout history, translated into English: World Literature in French will mean literature from around the world originally written in French and presumably taught in French* (Miller, 2011, p. 41).

What is therefore criticized in the manifesto is too much simplification of the relationship between cultural spaces and too strong a tendency to ignore symbolic power relations. The manifesto thus rebels against the notion of nation as the basis for writing the history of literature. It appears as a symbol of the Trans- era: Transcultural, transregional, transnational, etc. Cameroonian German Studies Scholar D. Simo specifies that this vision is in no way carried by a dominant reality, but rather constitutes a project which unfortunately ignores the fact that space remains a place and a stake of power (Simo, 2014, p. 1). The way Pierre Bourdieu

would understand it, the manifesto therefore participates in the battle within the literary field (Bourdieu, 1992). Drawing on the work of Homi K. Bhabha in particular, Simo indicates that postcolonial theory certainly criticizes essentialist and nativist representations of culture, but that it is also aware of the asymmetries that govern the relationships between contrary representations, just as it underlines the symbolic and political force of these representations which still strongly structure collective cultural spaces (Simo, 2014).

The danger for the authors of the manifesto is to consider the French-speaking literature resulting from colonial and postcolonial migration not as something particular, but as an extension of French literature, thus erasing all its specificities. It is exactly this tendency of the manifesto that seems problematic, because, as Simo says, one of the major assets of postcolonial theory is precisely to take into account these specificities, especially in relation to their anthropological, historical or sociological inking [Ibid.]. From this perspective, the fictional work of an author like the Cameroonian-born Patrice Nganang constitutes an eloquent example, because it clearly poses the question of the historical perspective of the colonial fact. Thus, the author deplors for example through his narrator in the novel *La saison des prunes* (*When the Plums are Ripe*) the inability of French historical and literary narratives to question the part of Africans in the French national narrative. Describing the relationship of the French colonial army to African *tirailleurs*, the narrator sums up the situation in these terms:

*Celui qui comptait, c’était Leclerc [...] Les livres d’histoire décrivent cette fameuse cérémonie d’autoproclamation dans une pirogue sur la côte de Douala. Pleven, le compagnon qui, avec Boislambert, l’accompagnait, arracha des boutons de sa chemise pour lui bricoler des galons. [...] Ah, ces livres si bavards, pourquoi oublient-ils que le statut du Cameroun – territoire sous mandat – enchantait de Gaulle ? [...] Pourquoi oublient-ils, ces livres, que c’est le capitaine d’état-major, puis colonel, bientôt général et futur maréchal posthume Leclerc, qui de territoire sous mandat fit du Cameroun une colonie de la France, lorsque le 29 août 1940, comme par enchantement, il s’en est proclamé le gouverneur à la place du haut-commissaire – terme qui désignait alors l’autorité française ? [...] Il en est du désert comme du souvenir, en effet. L’histoire n’existe que lorsqu’elle est racontée. Faites ce que vous voudrez: si on ne parle pas de vous, vous n’êtes rien, dit-on à Yaoundé. Ne demandez pas aux dunes de se souvenir des combats qui y ont été menés; ne demandez pas au soleil qui brûle la terre infiniment de se rappeler les morts sur qui il n’a baissé son regard que quelques nuits; surtout ne demandez pas aux villes françaises ni aux livres d’histoire française de se rappeler qui a inscrit dans leurs rues et pages la Libération avec majuscule, de 1940 à 1943 !* (Nganang, 2013, p. 105;414)

This extract is about French historiography omitting the contribution of African soldiers in the liberation of France during World War II. One interpretation of this flash-back may be the African claim for recognition, but the one to be stressed on is the struggle for decentralizing, that is provincializing the history of France and Europe, taking it back

to world history, for important moments of this history happened abroad, overseas, as Rushdie sees it in his famous *Satanic verses* (Rushdie, 1988, p. 337). Writing European History from a supposedly peripheral position becomes some kind of counter discourse that enables a rereading of the historical and cultural archives. The author therefore unveils the incapacity of European/French historians and, for our case, mostly French authors, to write from a perspective that enables a contrapuntal narration of colonialism. Thus, Nganang's critique of the French historians is also a critique of French literary narratives of colonialism, which he considers, in the sense Fritz Peter Kirsch sees it, "*le produit d'un continent de colonialistes*", i.e. *the result of a continent made of colonialists* (Kirsch, 2000, p. 36). As Nganang puts it further, "*l'histoire est écrite par les gagnants*" ("History is written by winners") (Nganang, 2013, p. 418). It is not so much about the rehabilitation of a nostalgic past, but rather the mention of the role played by the so-called savages in the transformation of the civilized world. By this doing, Nganang explicitly enters in dialogue with existing narratives for, as Edward Said writes it, "*The constitution of a narrative subject, however abnormal or unusual, is still a social act par excellence, and as such has behind or inside it the authority of history and society*" (Said, 1994, p. 77). But this is authority clearly responding to another authority considered as the authorized one. This counter discourse is in that sense a call for rethinking the historiography, deconstructing the national/nationalistic enclosure of literary and historical narratives, unveiling the diverse and multiple natured relationships between nation and other spaces.

In this sense, Nganang is clearly anchored in another anthropological and literary horizon than that of Victor Hugo for example, of which Fritz Peter Kirsch strongly criticizes the Western perception of the work. For Kirsch, the canonized European or American readers of Hugo find it difficult to perceive the author as a colonialist, for their historical-anthropological horizon is the same as that of the latter. Therefore, provincializing the literary history of France would not mean levelling the cultural horizons as pronounced by the manifesto in order to lead to ONE world literature in French, but rather to include French literature in the trail of a larger world, while preserving its cultural, historical and anthropological prerogatives. It is above all to consider its particularities and its visions, while deconstructing them at the same time, as Nganang and Kirsch do. From this point of view, Hugo, as Kirsch demonstrates so well, is dispossessed of his universalist attributes to be seen as the colonialist, the man of his century that he was. It therefore seems more than illusory to want to include Hugo and Nganang in the same historical or anthropological horizon.

## CONCLUSION

As a concluding remark, we would like to acknowledge that the conditions of existence of comparative literature have changed considerably since its emergence. This evolution has often been dependent on cultural and geostrategic relationships between different human groups, mainly nations. It should be noted, for example, that the golden age of com-

parative literature coincides with the period of exacerbation of national and nationalist sentiment, the practice of comparative literature being a reaction or a preventive attitude in face of the hardening of tensions between national entities, mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the decompartmentalization of worlds, the transgression of national spatial borders as well as the transnational circulation of ideas and people has caused over the decades a restructuring of the concept of comparative literature, bringing on the scene new actors and deconstructing the original Eurocentrism of such a practice. However, if globalization has been able to put the nation in the strict sense of the term in danger by showing its limits, if we have been able to witness the birth of hybrid or transnational identities, the nation could not so far be disqualified as category and reference space for the classification of literature. As a result, as much postcolonial theory favors a transnational approach which often undermines the borders of the nation by deconstructing the great narratives, so much its concept of deconstructing national myths and narratives only works if one presupposes the existence of such entities. The postcolonial theory therefore does not kill the nation, it describes its modalities of existence and describes its relationship to other spaces, while avoiding any centrism and inviting actors who were previously peripheral to intercultural exchanges. In this sense, the contributors to the manifesto "Toward a 'World Literature' in French" consider Francophone writers with immigrant backgrounds as new guests at the table of French literature, with all the related rights, such as the request made by the Congolese-born writer Alain Mabanckou, not to be published in the "*Black Collection*" (*collection noire*) of Gallimard, but rather in the "*White Collection*" (*collection blanche*). However, the reactions emanating among others from the French literary field and mainly the hostile reactions to the manifesto lead to wonder whether the French literature, in the sense of Goethe, falls back into its failings. The example from Nigeria shows us that it is now difficult to speak of the literary nation by simply summoning the so-called *jus soli*.

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