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Premises for a History of Romanian Literature from a Trans-disciplinary Perspective

Abstract: This article sets out to critically discuss the promise and challenges of adopting interdisciplinarity in the humanistic disciplines and especially in the postcommunist countries of East-Central Europe. The adoption of methods and concepts from other disciplines is not always an easy task and does not automatically ensure an effective internationalization of results or acceptance inside the discipline. The first part of the article comments on the hardships of inter- and trans-disciplinary research in the humanities and particularly in the parcel of literary studies. In its second part, the paper offers a brief survey of trans-disciplinary ways of engaging the challenges of today's world from within the field of Romanian literary studies.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, trans-disciplinarity, literary studies, memory studies, history of Romanian literature, quantitative research.

1. Why interdisciplinarity “is so very hard to do”

Literary studies in Romania have, for a long time, taken as their model of scientific work the national literary history, following several great achievements in this area. But the premises for this centrality of literary history have changed, and at the same time changes took place in methodology, concepts and patterns of work in the discipline, prompting the need to discuss a new reformist wave in the history of this often contested, although

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very prestigious field of study. Many of these changes were effected against the background of a consistent interdisciplinary integration, but this is not a simple or unitary process, and its differences in East-Central Europe and the West need to be accounted for. At the same time, the type of reactions to the interdisciplinary model in literary studies are not similar to what happens in other humanistic fields. In this article, we set out to give a brief survey of the difficulties confronted by literary studies in their approach to interdisciplinarity in the last few decades, trying to explain why, in Stanley Fish's jocular phrase, "being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do" (Fish 1989, 15). Then we will proceed to discuss the changes in Romanian literary studies since the advent of interdisciplinarity and identify two main models of trans-disciplinary integration of literary studies, each with its merits and its limitations.

A critical discussion of interdisciplinarity in the humanities in general and especially in the parcel of literary studies must take into account two elements of difficulty, one methodological in nature, the other applicative. In what regards the *methodological* difficulty, we are referring to the vast and volatile semantics of the composite concepts that describe some form of transgression of disciplinary limits, such as inter-, multi-, trans-disciplinarity. Most studies on the topic work with a hierarchical definition of these notions, by arranging them on a scale that shows multidisciplinary as a softer version of interdisciplinary collaboration, while transdisciplinarity is seen as the final goal of cross-disciplinary cooperation (Nicolescu 2007; Wagner et al. 2011, 16). With all these distinctions, interdisciplinarity still functions as an umbrella term for all types of research that goes beyond the limits of an established discipline. The second difficulty confronted by interdisciplinarity in the humanities is *applicative* in nature and refers to the lack of specific indicators that might measure the degree of interdisciplinarity in these disciplines. Ever since the 1960s, when the Institute for Science Information (ISI) of the United States elaborated and launched the three indexes that describe and provide hierarchies for the editorial materials of academic journals worldwide – Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI) –, a number of studies remarked the differences in the specificity and in the output of research in natural sciences (NS) and in social and humanistic studies (HS). These differences regard mainly (1) *the differences in the structure of the disciplines*: a mostly applicative structure in NS; a structure centered on text and source analysis in HS (Fish 1989; Ochsner 2014); (2) *the potential for internationalization*: almost total in NS, but considerably limited in HS, since the latter are conditioned by a national language and by a local cultural patrimony and are inscribed within the local and national traditions of research of these domains (Patraş et al. 2017); (3) *the habitual type of academic*

collaboration: team work in NS vs. individual work in HS, co-authoring academic articles vs. writing single-author articles etc. (Holm, Jarrick and Scott 2015; Wagner et al. 2011); (4) *funding granted for research*: HS are taken into consideration in only 10% of the domains of the H2020 project (Pedersen 2016). All these factors influence negatively the public and academic perception of the social and humanistic studies, and reduce their capacity to attract further funding for research.

These difficulties notwithstanding, interdisciplinarity remains an indicator with a growing importance in the humanities. According to *Humanities World Report 2015* elaborated by three independent researchers, in HS interdisciplinarity is associated with *internationalization*, *the import of recent methodologies* from neighboring disciplines, with *developing collaborative projects* and *publishing co-authored articles* (Holm, Jarrick and Scott 2015, 122-135). However, these characteristics of interdisciplinary work go against some of the patterns and practices of humanistic disciplines. Conversely, there are aspects of humanistic research that function as actual limits of interdisciplinarity and should be perceived as such. Thus, (1) the *relatively long tradition* of many of the branches of humanistic studies led them to become self-sufficient and intra-referential, instead of trans-referential and open toward other fields of research. (2) This venerable tradition has led to the *naturalization of its founding principles*, but also to the naturalization of several practices and methods, of a certain research design and of disciplinary protocols that, as a consequence, are hard to change. However, we must note that the trans-disciplinary impulses from within the discipline have come, so far, from those who sought to contest this apparently immutable tradition. (3) There is a centripetal dynamic of humanistic studies that comes from their national circumscription or, as cultural critics have called it, their “*methodological nationalism*” (Beck 2000, Bender 2001). Given that they developed inside a national linguistic framework (the study of language and literature) or that they studied national groups (history or sociology), they transferred the characteristics of their object of study at the level of the field of research. Although the social and technological aspects of today’s world – migration, mass-media and electronic communication, for instance – challenged and continue to challenge this model, in several disciplines it still remains very stable. (4) Humanistic disciplines profit from a *legitimizing function* in relation to the state, since the establishment of some of these socio-humanistic disciplines at an academic level coincided with the formation or the consolidation of national states (Beck 2000). There is little incentive to abandoning a culturally prominent position that, sometimes, ensures funding from the state, albeit for political and identity related reasons. (5) To some within these disciplines, interdisciplinarity looks like an intrinsic condition of existence in this area, and this leads to the current lack in its problematization and even in its conceptualization. For instance, the *encyclopedic aspect* of early modern literary

history or of comparative literature appears to the practitioners within the field as an efficient version of interdisciplinarity. There are, indeed, specific types of traditional philological work, for instance manuscript editing, that involve forms of cross-disciplinary cooperation since long before the emergence of the concept of transdisciplinarity. But this type of work covers only a small part of the domain and does not account for the greater impact that can be achieved through a more integrated humanistic research in the face of socio-economic and cultural challenges presented by the contemporary world.

From among the humanistic sciences, literary studies represent one of the most important domains of research at a global level. An analysis of the domains in the AHCI index developed by ISI shows that 51% of the research areas imply the study of literature, whereas 33% of the total are dedicated exclusively to the study of literature (English literature, British, Germanic, Romance, Scandinavian literatures; national literatures; the study of individual authors or genres¹). This is precisely why a discussion of the way in which interdisciplinarity is assimilated by literary studies is relevant both for the culture of the discipline, and for the various national cultures. In East-Central Europe – but also in other areas of the globe – literature functioned as a motor for the formation of national cultures and was essential in the creation of a national identity and language. In his well-known article “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe?”, Galin Tihanov notes “the early institutionalization” of literary studies in this region: “at the university level, the first chair of Russian literature in Russia was established in 1835”, while “the first chair of literature in England was not established until 1852” (Tihanov 2004, 77). This early institutionalization, however, determined a development of literary studies inside a national framework which, on the one hand, gave it prominence over other academic disciplines but, on the other hand, linked it with the authority of the state and limited its field of choices. Because of this traditional association, the pressure of becoming interdisciplinary in East-Central Europe began to be felt only in the second decade of postcommunism, much later than in Western Europe and the United States, where interdisciplinarity was being discussed ever since the 1980s in a tone both playful and radical by critics such as Stanley Fish (Fish 1989).

Given all these difficulties, we preferred to use in this article the term *trans-disciplinarity* instead of *interdisciplinarity*. However, our use of the term does not imply a hierarchy of types of cross-disciplinary integration, as it is postulated in the literature on this topic (Nicolescu 2007, 54), and must be understood as stressing the linguistic root *discipline*, and not the prefix *trans-*, which Nicolescu accentuates. In order to bring out this difference, we use the hyphenated form of the word. We do not consider that the goal

of trans-disciplinarity should be an integrative humanistic science of all sciences. We consider a defining trait of trans-disciplinarity the tendency to surpass the limits of a discipline, to polemically transcend it, and we stress this distance by using the hyphenated form of the word. In this sense, trans-disciplinarity integrates the meaning of post-disciplinarity. Since we are already living in an age brimming with socio-political and cultural “post-”s, among which postcommunism, (post-)postmodernism, posthumanism, posttheory, we prefer to describe the situation of contemporary Romanian literary studies as that of a “posthistory of literature”. In our account, literary history, understood as both a discipline and a practice, is less and less perceived as a “natural” model for researchers, despite its long tradition and prestige (Mironescu 2018). In what follows, we will turn to contemporary Romanian literary studies and discuss the conditions that led to a critique of the long-standing principles of the discipline in the last two decades.

2. Romanian literary studies in postcommunism and the challenge of trans-disciplinarity

Even though we are fast approaching the end of the third decade since the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s communist dictatorship in December 1989, the situation of contemporary literary studies in Romania still needs to be defined, at least for its initial phase, as postcommunist. This happens because the whole dynamics of the field depends on the initial condition of the discipline after the regime change. Literary studies contemplated the loss of their high status, but this was not due to a severe political indoctrination or to an exceeding nationalist instrumentalization in the communist years; on the contrary, the elevation of literature and its associated “science” during communism was indebted to the particular type of political value acquired by an openly apolitical literature. Reading literature and the practice of literary criticism had come to be seen as having a liberating effect in a time of oppression, part of what was called in the early 1990s, either derisively or apologetically, “resistance through culture”. By “cultural resistance”, the seemingly atemporal and ahistorical status of fiction permitted literature and the hermeneutic exercise associated with it to acquire a political value, as they effectively could “shut out” the politically manipulated quotidian reality and allow the literature connoisseur an inner space of virtual independence, for a republic of one’s own. But if literary hermeneutics and close reading were thus celebrated, literary contextualization and meta-critical research were seen as derivative, inessential practices, as they engaged segments of literary history very remote from the present day (sociology of 19th century literature, for instance, in Paul Cornea (1980) and seemed to lack the kind of oblique, subversive referentiality that was

required. In time, after 1989, this generated a dissatisfaction with decontextualized literary hermeneutics and with its refusal of history stemming from a political program that no longer applied to the social realities at hand.

Another important factor that stimulated discussions of change in literary studies was the intervention of a relatively new type of work in humanistic sciences in the conditions of a market economy. While literary studies had been done with the goal of finding ever new arguments for the validity of the literary canon and, as such, had gravitated towards the consolidation of their tradition, neighboring humanistic disciplines were gaining a new-found relevance by reinventing themselves in order to comment on economic, social and political phenomena of the immediate present. Since economy, sociology or political studies could aspire to acquire influence and possibly even effect changes in society through an intelligent marriage of theory and practice, literary studies saw their old propensity toward evasion as a hindrance and sought ways in which investigating literature could become more socially engaged. Academic communities throughout East-Central Europe grappled with a new imperative, that of remaining relevant after communism (Wachtel 2006), or, in economic terms, of achieving sustainability. When trans-disciplinary methodologies and strategies began to be imported by Romanian scholars in literary studies, these were seen as a way to bring the discipline out of its perceived insularity.

At the same time, literature went ahead and did what literary studies did not appear to be interested in doing. A new generation of writers started in the 2000s to tackle socio-political problems of present Romania, including generational conflict, economical migration and identity displacement, poverty, ruin and ecological distress. Critics had to follow suit, and soon literary historians were forced to observe that a new cohort of postcommunist writers had emerged on the literary stage and had to be discussed in relation to the existing canon (Cordoş 2012). This phenomenon coincided in time with a “retreat” of a generation of critics who had been active throughout the 2000s from cultural journalism and a reorientation toward academic research (Matei 2011). While writers became socially involved and tried to reach to a socially conscious audience, the critics’ turn toward academic publishing in the academia was not a form of boycotting contemporary literature – on the contrary, thanks to some of them, postcommunist Romanian literature has become a hot topic of academic study. In researching contemporary literature, power games in modern literary history and ways in which blindness to ideology provided literature with surprising insights, these authors felt compelled to open up their field to trans-disciplinary methods and borrow instruments and concepts from neighboring disciplines. The result was a new development in Romanian literary studies,

a change that brought the discipline in closer contact with other humanistic sciences and helped it metabolize its own tradition.

There are several ways in which trans-disciplinarity is processed in contemporary literary studies in Romania: (1) as a thorough critique of the fundamentals of the discipline, thus going at least one step beyond its ecosystem; (2) as an integration of methodologies from other disciplines to the study of literature; (3) as a migration of literary researchers toward emergent multidisciplinary fields. It is clear that the drive to make the research more trans-disciplinary is not only a methodological imperative, but also a political one. It is not only meant to address the “technical” limitations of the field, but also to analyze the direction of the flow of concepts and theories on the international stage, to expose the power games that lead to canonical equilibrium and the ideological presuppositions that underscore the strong concepts of the discipline, and to try to find means of communication within a world-wide system of reference, thus going around the national systems of validation.

In the last decade, several interventions de-naturalized the critical language of traditional literary history through contextual analyses that exposed its formation and the reasons for its authority. Probably no other humanistic discipline in Romania went through such a deep process of self-analysis and contestation. Not always the contestations came from a polemical drive against tradition; what was crucial was the metacritical dimension of these studies, which sought to find a way to describe the premises of more traditional studies of literary history in a metalanguage that does not start from the same presuppositions. For instance, Teodora Dumitru studied the connection between the political and the literary ideology of interwar critic E. Lovinescu in her book *Modernitatea politică și literară în gândirea lui E. Lovinescu* [*The Political and Literary Modernity in E. Lovinescu's Thought*] (2016) and in the process identified several contradictions of Romanian modernism that helped produced its unique pattern of political idealism and aesthetic autonomism. Andrei Terian proceeded to decompose the system of thought of Romania's foremost canonical critic in his monograph *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență* [*G. Călinescu. The Fifth Essence*] (2009) by analyzing his thesis on the aesthetic, biographism, national character etc. and also studied his many-faced legacy in Romanian criticism. In his book *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului* [*Criticism in the Trenches. From Socialist Realism to Aesthetic Autonomy*] (2011), Alex Goldiș discusses the political causes and methodological effects of the aesthetic turn in Romanian criticism in the second half of the 20th century. On the other hand, Ioana Macrea-Toma in her book *Privileghenția: instituții literare în comunismul românesc* [*Privileghenția: Literary Institutions in Romanian Communism*] (2009) stressed the importance of the economics of publishing in communism and analyses the

patron-client dependence established between writers and the state. Adriana Stan gives in her book *Bastionul lingvistic. O istorie comparată a structuralismului în România* [*The Fortress of Linguistics. A Comparative History of Structuralism in Romania*] (2017) an account of Romanian structuralists and structuralism-inspired criticism in the 1960s and 1970s by taking into account the political protection that a neutral, ahistorical form of criticism inspired by the apolitical science of linguistics could provide in times of political pressure. In *Ideologiile literaturii române în postcomunism* [*The Ideologies of Romanian Literature in Postcommunism*] (2017), Mihai Iovănel turns to contemporary literature, to the writers' political allegiances, institutional power and economical interests, and analyses the social turn as it is reflected not only by writers with canonical aspirations, but also by popular fiction authors from "minor" genres. Finally, bringing together all the insights provided by these authors and many more, a collective work edited by Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian, *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (2017), set out to deconstruct Romanian literary history by setting it against the world scene and identifying the "quilting points" of its transnational tapestry. In all these critical works we are talking about a virtual type of trans-disciplinarity, which actually has an epistemological function, rather than a methodological one. They tend to distance themselves from key moments of the history of the discipline in order to better describe them critically, but in the process they de-naturalize the canonical position of the authors discussed and relate their theories and concepts to the contexts which influenced their formation. By examining how concepts came to be elaborated, they restore the historicity of often actualized and multiply refunctionalized concepts and reveal literary history as an activity heavily marked by its own historicity, that often comes to be obscured by the discipline's tendency to perpetuate itself and to consolidate its tradition.

But aside from these critical works and their implicit trans-disciplinarity, there are studies which indeed practice trans-disciplinarity in an explicit manner. Their appearance is suggestive of the drive in the discipline toward a more integrative methodology, that borrows more from other humanistic studies and conceives of literature as occupying a much more volatile space, that overlaps with that of many other disciplines, among which geography, statistics, economy, environmentalism, trauma studies and cultural studies. We are interested in the ways these forms of explicitly trans-disciplinary work transform the domain of literary studies, and to this end we stop at two directions that are fairly well represented today, quantitative literary studies and memory studies.

Entering the Romanian stage in the context of a powerful drive toward internationalization, quantitative studies profited from the manifestation of two principal theories that came to dominate literary research at the beginning of the 21st century: *world literature studies* and the so-called "space turn"

in the humanities. While the first encouraged big-scale investigations of large numbers of texts, following literary phenomena across literatures and ages, and research on translations, the space turn favored a heightened awareness of the predicament of globalization. Quantitative studies in the United States and Western Europe are usually the product of large interdisciplinary teams working on institutionally supported research projects, but in Romania they have been done, so far, by individual researchers in small working groups, especially at the universities in Cluj and Sibiu. The problems raised by their studies concern the corpora and databases available for quantitative research, as well as the difficulties of working with them (Terian 2019a). This is why one of their most important achievements so far is that of transforming several instruments produced by classical philology (mainly dictionaries of the Romanian novel or of works translated into Romanian) from sources of information into resources for quantitative research, thereby refunctionalizing existing corpora of metadata as primary sources for a new way of investigating literature. The topics researched are usually classical topics of Romanian literary history, such as the predominance of specific genres in literature (Terian 2019b) or the international circulation of Romanian literature in translations (Sass, Baghiu, Pojoga 2018). The avowed intention of many studies that use the quantitative method is to go beyond the results of traditional criticism and to overturn classical perceptions and interpretations through the authority of numbers.

Another type of disciplinary behavior in postcommunist Romanian literary studies is migration to emerging trans-disciplinary fields, among which a prominent place is held by memory studies. Stemming from Holocaust studies and group sociology, memory studies gained considerable terrain recently in East-Central Europe, mainly because the local memory battles that had waited to be fought for decades needed a wider space in which to be played out and, hopefully, come to an ending. Although memory has been obsessively present in the public arena in Romania for the last three decades, only in recent years a critical theory of memory started to materialize, with a consistent help from literary scholars. It is also true that literary scholars are more prone to doing theory on the topic of memory than historians or sociologists because of their formation in a theoretically-inclined discipline. The fact that postcommunist literature turned to the topics of social angst, troubled identity and generational conflict was reflected by the turn to memory in academic research, given that the most prominent topic in memory studies in Romania is remembering communism and the various forms of memorialization that emerged in postcommunism, be they fiction or memoirs, public monuments and other forms of art, film, Facebook groups, museums and virtual archives. The novelty of the matter under study is a defining trait of most of the studies in memory produced, although some work on Romantic literature and ruinology does

exist (Mironescu 2016). But the bulk of the work being done refers to the memory of communism, a topic that has helped in the internationalization as research, as multinational teams investigate the East-Central European memory of communism (Todorova 2014) or the state of cultural memory in contemporary Romanian literature and art (Mattusch 2018). The field also favors comparative and intermedial studies, such as Claudiu Turcuș's *Împotriva memoriei. De la estetismul socialist la noul cinema românesc* [*Against Memory. From Socialist Aestheticism to the New Romanian Cinema*] (2017). The aim of such studies is to offer analyses on literary and literature-adjacent topics that might be used by researchers in neighboring domains. This is why the engagement with canonical issues of Romanian literary history is less important for these scholars, as they tend to neglect them in order to achieve a better interaction with colleagues from other fields of research.

3. Conclusions

In Romania, literary studies are still developed in the academia under the guise of national literary history, as most university study programs will attest. In Romanian universities, literary studies are not subject to pressure in favor of interdisciplinarity, as it happens for more than three decades in the U.S. and Western Europe. At the same time, there are no research policies that push traditional humanistic disciplines to become “sustainable” through social-oriented cross-disciplinary research. This is why at the center of the canon of the discipline are still single-authored national literary histories, starting with G. Călinescu's influential *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present Day*] (1941) and ending with N. Manolescu's *Istoria critică a literaturii române* [*Critical History of Romanian Literature*] (2008). In this article, our goal was to identify the premises for a systemic change of the discipline following the advent of trans-disciplinary methodologies and research patterns and behaviors in Romania. The first thing we noticed was the strong impetus of a generation of critics emerging in the years 2000 that work to de-naturalize the language and the premises of traditional literary history. In the wake of this metacritical drive, critics turned to methods and instruments that originated from other disciplines in order to achieve more positive results to long-debated topics of literary history. In their early stages, quantitative studies relied on major literary dictionaries initially meant as monuments of and to the discipline they served, turning them into databases. In this way, traditional literary history was estranged from its own purposes and used as a basis for new types of research, less concerned with borrowing the authority of tradition. On the other hand, beyond the methodological import,

emerging transnational and trans-disciplinary fields such as memory studies attracted Romanian literary researchers. By working essentially on the topic of postcommunism, memory studies in Romania achieved the objective of internationalization, but strayed from their original disciplinary allegiance, a fact which might not let them contribute to the reformation of the field. Literary studies constantly reform themselves and are habitually oblivious to exterior factors thanks to their tradition and prestige. But in the last three decades, the growing imperative of trans-disciplinarity encouraged them to open up to other humanistic sciences and profit from their metacritical drive to question the premises of literary history as a model of the discipline. Still, this trans-disciplinary turn functions, for now, from the bottom-up, from individual researchers to, presumably, the institutions in which they function.

Notes

¹ Cf.: http://mjl.clarivate.com/scope/scope_ahci/

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