

# Constructing Transnational Identities: The Spatial Turn in Contemporary Literary Historiography

Andrei Terian

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts, Romania  
andrei.terian@ulbsibiu.ro

*The article approaches several transnational contemporary literary histories in order to critically evaluate the efficiency of “the spatial turn in literary historiography.” Although it acknowledges the benefits of this phenomenon as a tool to deconstruct the narrow national criterion and the obsolete teleological model, it also signals the risk that the programmatic quest for (spatial) discontinuity ultimately affects the very coherence of historical knowledge.*

Keywords: literary history / national literary studies / cultural identity / spatial turn / discontinuity / determinism

By analyzing several transnational contemporary histories, I will propose, in this article, a critical evaluation of the so-called “spatial turn in literary historiography.”<sup>1</sup> I chose to particularize the generic topological transformation of literary studies in the specific framework of the literary history for a simple reason: over the last decades, spatial models have often been used successfully in order to define and explain many political, social, economic, and cultural events, to the degree that their basic relevance can no longer be doubted in the field of social sciences and humanities—the field of literary studies included. Nevertheless, one determined subfield of the humanities (history—and literary history is not an exception in this respect) seems to hinder by its very nature the appeal to spatial models. And it is not the traditional anthropological—and somewhat easily deconstructable—opposition between space (as freedom) and time (as necessity) I am thinking of here, but rather a concrete epistemological incompatibility that Roberto Dainotto explains in the following manner in a comment on the contemporary “spatial turn”:

What have we lost by our “getting back to place”? What [we] have lost . . . is a *historical* perspective. Place, as much as we can see its theorists claiming to the

contrary, is fundamentally a negation of history. To claim that culture springs from a place means, after all, to naturalize a process of historical formation, and along with history to negate the historical forces, struggles, and tensions that made culture what it is. The discourse of place, to put it differently, attempts to substitute a latently ideological tool of analysis—history—with an allegedly natural one—place. (Dainotto 2)

On the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that, as noted by Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza—the scholar who, in fact, coined the phrase “the spatial turn in literary historiography” and co-edited one of the three literary histories I will discuss—“any history involves a spatial aspect, profoundly entwined with the epistemological and ideological hypotheses on which it is based” (Cabo Aseguinolaza, “The Spatial Turn” 2). In order to pin down this aspect, we only have to glance at the majority of the national histories of European literatures that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paradigmatic case here is, of course, Hippolyte Taine’s five-volume *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863–68), which explained the configuration of the so-called “English character” by means of a series of geo-climatic data subsumed under the notion of *milieu* (Taine 10). However, many other pre-WWII national histories, both West and East European, are also structured along geo-literary coordinates: for example, following Taine, Teófilo Braga (*Historia* 10) claims that “physical geography” determines a “moral geography” and that “Portugal’s climate” favors an extreme, “bilious-melancholic temperament”; according to Francesco de Sanctis (*History*), the spatial coordinate is rendered by the traditional competition between the North and the South, while in Gustave Lanson (*Histoire*) and Albert Thibaudet (*French Literature*), the tension is between Paris and the provinces; last but not least, as I have shown elsewhere (Terian 326–31, 531–3), Eugen Lovinescu (*Istoria*) and George Călinescu (*History*) describe the emergence of their “national” literature as a result of both rivalry among and the synthesis of the local characteristics of the three “historical” Romanian provinces: Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia.

However, inferring from here that a “spatial(ized)” literary history is a truistic project would be erroneous. On the contrary, the survey given above allows us to stress both the rationale and the methodological innovations involved in the recent “spatial turn in literary historiography.” This rationale was best expressed by Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés in a series of articles published in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hutcheon and Valdés, “Rethinking”; Valdés, “Postmodern”; Valdés, “Rethinking”; Hutcheon, “Rethinking”), and it relies equally on political and epistemological grounds. Epistemologically, the main argument favoring “the spatial turn” resides in the attempt to deconstruct the narrative, organic, and

teleological model that was the basis of most of national histories throughout the modern era; politically, this transformation was legitimized by the resistance to narrow nationalism, which had often been used as an instrument of ideological manipulation and ethnic repression. After all, nothing could be a more suitable tool to serve both purposes than transnational literary histories, which, zooming in on a multi-ethnic object of study and appropriating a polyphonic and fragmentary perspective, position themselves deliberately as alternatives to the literary histories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Hutcheon puts it, these “new” histories “can . . . work to enlarge our sense of what it is we belong to and recognize ourselves as part of” (34), but they also “have to be self-critical and self-reflexive narratives that are open to contestatory and resistant voices” (31). Therefore, I will illustrate the phenomenon of “the spatial turn in literary historiography” by giving an overview of three of the transnational literary histories that have emerged in the past decade,<sup>2</sup> which have all been more or less directly inspired, and in some cases even co-edited, by members of the “Toronto group”: Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir’s *Literary Cultures of Latin America* (3 vol., 2004); Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer’s *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (4 vol., 2004–10); and Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín Gonzalez, and César Domínguez’s *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* (1 vol., 2010).

As shown by the statements of the editors of these histories, they all rely on circumscribing their object of study from the perspective that space is (or at least could be) the main factor in the construction of a transnational identity. This purpose is stated explicitly by the two editors of the East-Central European literary history:

East-Central Europe is, like the nation states that compose it, an *imagined community* in Benedict Anderson’s sense of the phrase . . . Constructing its literature means reconceptualizing the existing literatures and their national histories. At its best, this reconceptualization may make a significant contribution to the social and political construction of the region: just as the writing of national literary histories participated in the invention of nations, so too the writing of a history of East-Central Europe may participate in the transnational construction of the region. (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, “General Introduction” 14)

But this is also an aim more or less recognized by the editors of the other two literary histories mentioned above. For instance, *Literary Cultures of Latin America* opens with a mapping of “the land and its people,” which is meant to demonstrate “the historical process of making communities and thereby making literature,” and to serve as “a macro-frame for the entire three volumes”; moreover, the authors’ special focus on “cultural

geography” is justified by their “conviction that the spatial aspects of the habitat are of primary importance to a history of production of the symbolic works” (Valdés, “Parameters” 2). Similarly, although they admit “the controversial character of the chosen geographic framework,” the editors of the *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula* ground their project in the “historical recognition of the Iberian Peninsula as a supranational whole perceived as a *possible community*, not only from its interior but rather from an external and distanced position which defines it in relation to the concepts of *European* or *World Literature*” (Cabo Aseguinolaza, Abuín Gonzalez, and Domínguez xii).

However, this starting point raises at least two important questions: What are the actual methodological innovations that sustain “the spatial turn in literary historiography”? And to what extent do the privileges granted to the axis of spatiality affect the axis of temporality, which remains (or should remain), after all, intrinsic to the structure of every literary history? In order to answer these questions, I will borrow Cabo Aseguinolaza’s definition of the “spatial turn in literary historiography,” which involves three interlinked aspects:

- 1) the “definition of the object of historical study from a geographical perspective, or rather, a geoliterary one”;
- 2) the “internal structure of historiographical work according to guidelines to do with the organization and structuring of spatial contents”;
- 3) the “recourse to theoretical and epistemological models that imply a definition of the object in which spatiality takes precedence over temporality,” for example literary “fields” or “systems” (Cabo Aseguinolaza, “The Spatial Turn” 2).

In the scope of this article, I can only review the extent to which these aspects are developed in the transnational literary histories mentioned above. Thus, regarding the definition of the object of study, the history of literary cultures in Latin America admits from the onset that Latin America is not a geographical configuration, but rather “a cultural construction”: “it is the only continent in the world whose name bears a qualifying adjective signifying the culture that shaped it” (Théry 1). This viewpoint is confirmed by the fact that the “geography” of the project is not strictly limited to Latin America, as it also includes the literary works of the Latin American writers who emigrated to New York or Paris (see, for instance, Rolland). The other two transnational literary histories claim a geo-literary approximation of their objects of study; however, like the Latin American project, they look beyond a purely geographical criterion. For example, even if the literary history of East-Central Europe allegedly includes the entire Balkan Peninsula, it effectively excludes Greece and

the European part of Turkey because, despite their location, these countries do not meet “the unifying feature of East-Central Europe”, which is defined in strictly ethnical and cultural terms, as “the struggle of its peoples against the German and Russian hegemonic threats” (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, “General Introduction” 6). Similarly, the history of the “Iberian Peninsula” dedicates an entire chapter to the Canary Islands (see Westphal), making frequent reference to former Spanish or Portuguese colonies in Africa and Latin America. Therefore, all these projects prove that the geographical criterion requires the back-up of ethnic, political, or linguistic criteria.

If we proceed to the second aspect formulated by Cabo Aseguinolaza, namely the intimate structure of historiographical works as such, we can again see the insufficiency of the geographical factor. In the history edited by Valdés and Kadir, the geographical coordinates cover the third part of the second volume, titled “The Cultural Centers of Latin America” (307–716). The remarkable aspect here does not reside in the description of the Latin American literary systems depending on the classical relation between center and periphery, but rather in the particularization of this scheme by what Hervé Théry (4) calls “the archipelago model,” that is, by a network of cities that are relatively isolated from one another, but which operate as centers of gravity for the surrounding areas. However, it is highly questionable that the spatial distribution of these “symbolic constructions that have modeled the culture of the continent” can be explained by the mere geography of Latin America, as stated by Luisa Campuzano (xxxviii). On the contrary, the dispersion of these centers, which, at origins, had been colonial harbors, that is, results of a specific *historical* process (the so-called “discovery” of America by the Europeans) rather than of a particular spatial configuration, is one of the most solid arguments against the primacy of the geographical factor in cultural history. In the history of East-Central European literary cultures, the “archipelago” is echoed by the model of “marginocentric cities” (Vilnius, Bratislava, Trieste, Sibiu, and others), which, accompanied by the “larger topographic interfaces” (such as the Danubian corridor, Galicia, and Transylvania) occupy the entire second volume. According to Cornis-Pope, both phenomena are multiethnic spaces which “encouraged a de/reconstruction of national narratives, a hybridization of styles and genres, and alternative social and ethnic relations” (“Introduction” 4). Like the archipelago model in Latin America, these “topographical nodes” have contributed constantly to the configuration of a “dynamic regionalism” (7) as well as to the construction of transnational identities in an area frequently dominated by uncompromising nationalisms. Of the three cases, the comparative his-

tory of literatures in the Iberian Peninsula appears to remain the one that is the closest to the national criterion, even though it is the only one that programmatically approaches a “great historiographical shift towards a spatial or geographic paradigm” (Cabo Aseguinolaza, Abuín Gonzalez, and Domínguez xi). For, in the section titled “The Iberian Peninsula as a Literary Space,” which occupies the largest part of the first volume (133–323), the organization of the study material is based on the traditional ethnical compartmentalization (in this case, into chapters dedicated to the Catalan, Galician, and Basque literatures).

Finally, concerning the third aspect of “the spatial turn,” namely the appeal to “theoretical and epistemological models that imply a definition of the object in which spatiality takes precedence over temporality,” Cabo Aseguinolaza’s examples (particularly the concepts of fields and systems) are rather inconclusive, since the most important models built on these concepts—Bourdieu’s theory of the social fields and Even Zohar’s poly-systems theory—equally emphasize the dynamic, and hence diachronic and temporal, nature of their own tools. More relevant in this respect seem to be the analytical tools used in order to connect *the space in literature to literature in space* (Moretti, *Atlas* 3), which can be divided into two main categories: *geo-literary determinism* and *self-referential reductionism*. Geo-literary determinism is based on the premise that the production of a certain work in a certain space influences to some extent its artistic form. This is what explains, for example, the preference of Latin American poetry for “epic landscapes” (see Kirkpatrick), or the preference of the East-Central European literatures for the historical novel (see Neubauer). On the other hand, self-referential reductionism is based on the premise that a work produced in a particular space reflects, in however oblique a manner, the space in which it was produced. For example, Cornis-Pope identifies, in two poems of the Romanian writer Lucian Blaga, a series of disguised descriptions of his natal Transylvania, although one of the texts simply refers to the mythical figure Pan, while the other focuses on a Romanian—but not necessarily Transylvanian—archetypal village (Neubauer et al. 267). Similarly, Marcela Orellana (676–7) links a text written by Gonzalo Millán to the city of Santiago de Chile simply because the poem to which she refers is titled *La Ciudad* (The City). Thus, the recourse to such models—which are, in fact, anachronistic reminiscences of the nineteenth-century “national” histories—faces the risk of trivialization that cancels the particularities of fiction as such. The most successful connection between the two types of space is, perhaps, the one made in Cabo Aseguinolaza’s (“The European Horizon”) and César Domínguez’s (“Historiography”) introductory studies to the comparative history of literatures in the Iberian

Peninsula: in both cases, the authors explain the geo-literary and ideological relevance of categories such as the cardinal points or the opposition between “(pen)insularity” and “continentality” in the definition of the identity profile of the Iberian Peninsula as well as of its literatures. However, even these chapters signal a limit of the geo-literary approach: in order to render truly relevant the links between the *space in literature* and the *literature in space*, they have to favor fatally “factual” genres such as cultural histories or travel narratives, to the disadvantage of strongly fictionalized genres such as poetry or anti-mimetic prose.

Apart from these local observations, a principal issue arises: are the transnational histories mentioned above proper histories? Certainly, it is tempting to provide a negative answer to this question, given the numerous omissions and discontinuities in the three corresponding historiographical projects. But such an abstract examination of these histories would simply reproduce the perspective of the traditional teleological model they want to surpass. On the other hand, accepting unconditionally the methodological standards submitted by these geo-literary histories involves the risk of entering another vicious circle and of assigning them what Karl Popper (17–20) conceptualized as “unfalsifiable” nature. But this would again prove to be wrong, since the coordinators of these projects admit that “geography cannot and should not displace history” (Cornis-Pope, “Introduction” 1). So, which is the correct position in this respect? Although “the spatial turn” in literary studies was often associated with the practice of “distant reading” (Moretti, “Conjectures” 56–8), it is perhaps not impossible that this new trend still has something to learn from a veteran of “close reading”: I am referring here to Yvor Winters (64) and his concept of the “fallacy of imitative form,” which criticizes the attempts of making the form of a discourse imitate its content. It is true that, most of the times, the history to which transnational literary histories refer is “a history of discontinuities” (Valdés, “Introduction” xx). But the *writing of discontinuity* is not compelled to automatically involve the *discontinuity of writing*, just as an academic discourse on prophecies does not have to adopt a prophetic stance. Otherwise, the risk is that, guided by the legitimate desire to deconstruct the obsolete teleological model as quickly as possible, we come to sacrifice in the end the very coherence and intelligibility of our knowledge. Without attempting to be a prophet myself, and without denying the many useful contributions the phenomenon signaled here has brought up to date, I believe that the future successes of “the spatial turn in literary historiography” will depend considerably on the manner in which this “turn” will manage to solve this challenging paradox

NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, the meaning of the term “transnational” designates a compromise between “multinational” (since the macro-literary communities analyzed by the literary histories mentioned above remain, in fact, conglomerates of nations) and “postnational” (since, in principle, the criteria of delimiting these communities—mainly the spatial one—aim to overcome the national determinations of literature).

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## Konstruiranje transnacionalnih identitet: prostorski obrat v sodobnem literarnem zgodovinopisju

Ključne besede: literarna zgodovina / nacionalna literarna veda / kulturna identiteta / prostorski obrat / diskontinuiteta / determinizem

Članek kritično predstavi t. i. »prostorski obrat v sodobnem literarnem zgodovinopisju«. Kot primeri tega pojava so izbrane tri pomembne primerjalne literarne zgodovine iz zadnjega desetletja: *Literary Cultures of Latin America. A Comparative History* Maria J. Valdèsa in Djelala Kadirja (3 zv., 2004), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* Marcela Cornis-Popea in Johna Neubauerja (4 zv., 2004–2010) in *A Comparative History of Literatures In the Iberian Peninsula* Fernanda Caba Aseguinolaze, Anxa Abuína Gonzaleza in Césarja Domíngueza (1. zv., 2010). Ta obrat bo analiziran v treh korakih. Najprej bodo nakazane topološke razlike med novimi in »starimi« literarnimi zgodovinami. Tudi večina evropskih nacionalnih literarnih zgodovin druge polovice 19. stoletja in prve polovice 20. (ki so jih prispevali na primer Taine, De Sanctis ali Călinescu) temelji na geografskem kriteriju. A razlika med tema vrstama literarnega zgodovinopisja je vendarle vidna na ravni opozicij, kakršne so narava/kultura, kontinuiteta/diskontinuiteta ipd. Drugič, prostorski dejavnik je ne le edina alternativa »nacionalnemu« kriteriju, primerna za transnacionalne literarne zgodovine, pač pa tudi modalnost, ki lahko reši specifične probleme »nacionalnih« literarnih zgodovin, kakršni so dvojezičnost, regionalnost in multikulturalnost. Tretjič, proučene bodo tele zagate prostorskega obrata: v kolikšni meri prvenstvo prostorskega dejavnika vpliva na časovni dejavnik; je »prostorska« literarna zgodovina še zmerom zgodovina ali se preoblikuje v literarno geografijo; in kako programsko iskanje (prostorske) diskontinuitete vpliva na epistemološko načelo zgodovinske vednosti?

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