

Translated by Marta Aleksandrowicz-Wojtyna

## Regaining Lost Time

### 1. Permanent crisis

The 1960s announced the end of comparative literature. Indeed, the discipline was not new (it dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the terms *la littérature comparée* and *comparative literature* were for the first time used consciously), but in comparison with the history or theory of literature, it was rather fresh<sup>1</sup>. Problems with determining the exact area of comparative studies triggered a series of never-ending disputes. It is enough to quote articles from two opposite schools of comparative literature – René Etiemble's "Comparison is not reason" and René Wellek's "Crisis of Comparative Literature" which attack the methodological foundations of the discipline. A popular course book from the 70s reads:

"No distinct system can, it seems, emerge from the accumulation of such studies [emphasis added]. There is no methodological distinction between a study of 'Shakespeare in France' and a study of 'Shakespeare in eighteenth-century England', or between a study of Poe's influence on Baudelaire and one of Dryden's influence on Pope. Comparisons between literatures, if isolated from concern with the total national literatures, tend to restrict themselves to external problems of sources and influences, reputation and fame (emphasis added). Such studies do not permit us to analyze and judge an individual work of art, or even to consider the complicated whole of its genesis; instead, they are mainly devoted either to such echoes of a masterpiece as translations and imitations, frequently by second-rate authors, or to the prehistory of a masterpiece, the migrations and the spread of its themes and forms. The emphasis of 'comparative literature' thus conceived is on externals; and the decline of 'comparative literature' in recent decades reflects the general turning away from stress on mere facts, on sources and influences" (Wellek 40).

The prospects of the discipline were gloomy. The dispute over the method, or rather – as it was held by some – over the lack of a clear method that would mark comparative studies and make them distinctive, from historical or theoretical perspectives,

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out works such as: Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Erstausgabe 1946; E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern 1948, and in Poland works by Julian Krzyżanowski and Kazimierz Wyka. See Julian Krzyżanowski, *Paralele. Studia porównawcze z pogranicza literatury i folkloru*, Warszawa 1935; Kazimierz Wyka, *Cyprian Norwid. Poeta i sztukmistrz*, Kraków 1948.

in analyzing literature, turned out to be an important factor shaping the basis of current comparative literature<sup>2</sup>. The need to separate comparative studies, accentuating similarities and differences between narrow national literatures from the traditional way of seeing literary works ordered chronologically was stronger than the paralyzing deliberations over the essence of comparison, influence, and reference. In 1989 Halina Janaszek-Ivaničková wrote that the view that comparative literature should deal primarily with analyzing influence still lingered on in some publications (Janaszek-Ivaničková 195). In this context, it is worth mentioning that such comparative analyses led to absurd conclusions, e.g. about inspirations drawn by Polish Romantic writers: “Byron’s works influenced Polish Romantic poetry to such an extent that it would be possible to analyze them on the basis of Polish literature. If Byron’s works disappeared, we could recreate them from Polish reflexes” (Windakiewicz 88). Also, the author of the above study expressed his “comparative” belief that “the power of talent in Poland depended upon the knowledge of Scott and Byron. The more we value a poet, the closer he is to his masters” (Windakiewicz 88). If we look at the claim from the vantage point of today, we must admit that it is a rather terrifying vision of Mickiewicz’s and Słowacki’s *œuvres* perceived as a collection of quotations, repetitions, and clichés from other writers’ works. Indeed, such arguments date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, but the tradition of asking questions and seeking answers in that way was alive throughout the last century in Poland, and the rest of the world.

However, the crisis in comparative literature turned out to be constructive. It motivated scholars to establish the theory of comparative literature and determine the position of the discipline among other literary fields. As for Polish comparative literature, apart from Janaszek-Ivaničková’s works and some other articles<sup>3</sup>, it is worth mentioning the position that the book edited by Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa entitled *Badania porównawcze. Dyskusja o metodzie* (*Comparative Studies. A Discussion of Method*) achieved. For the first time in discussions among Polish scholars, a clearly defined thesis that comparative literature is a metadiscipline was formed; thus, it should deal with interpretations and reinterpretations of accumulated knowledge about literature<sup>4</sup>. It was given the role of a critic who:

“Established mutual relations between particular segments of knowledge, often functioning separately. It finds their *tertium comparationis*, and thanks to this, it establishes correspondences

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to comparative cultural studies practiced especially in American universities, comparative literature appeared to be closer to the traditional history of literature. Opponents of cultural studies claimed that both disciplines have a common subject – literature – and establishing a new area means an excess.

<sup>3</sup> See Edward Kasperski, “O teorii komparatystyki”, *Literatura. Teoria. Metodologia*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dydaktyczne Wydziału Polonistyki UW, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Kasperski, *ibidem*, p. 35.

and differences between phenomena. It notices similarities and bonds wherever they were formerly rejected, and it perceives differences wherever only identity was recognized" (Kasperski 35).

An important step for Polish comparative literature was the opening of the Section for Comparative Studies at the University of Warsaw<sup>5</sup> in 2007 – perhaps the only Polish university with such a strong comparative tradition (it was here that the first Polish department of comparative literature, under Ludwik Osiński, was established in 1818), which did not have a separate section/department dealing with this type of research<sup>6</sup>. Nowadays, it is worth stressing the position of the center for comparative literature in Kraków (practicing mostly comparison of Polish and European literature<sup>7</sup>) and the center for comparative literature in Poznań (dealing mainly with the theory of translation and postcolonial studies<sup>8</sup>), which have had a positive influence on the discipline in Poland. In brief, we can say that the above-mentioned centers, their scholarly perspectives, and most of their recent publications demonstrate the triumph of the intertextual idea over the former comparative "influenciology".

## 2. Is this the end of the humanities?

It is important that the second half of the twentieth century is also a time of reflection on the role and position of the history of literature. Poststructural thought (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault) destroyed a traditional, naïve approach to a literary work and, consequently, provoked some scholars to examine the basis of their discipline. According to Teresa Kostkiewiczowa:

"Especially the last group [poststructuralists] – by belaboring the issues of sign, text, reading, and interpretation—enabled us to notice those qualities of the history of literature which were

<sup>5</sup> See its recent publications, e.g. Kasperski, *Kategorie komparatystyki*, Warszawa 2010; *Komparatystyka dzisiaj. Zagadnienia teoretyczne i ogólne*, E. Kasperski i E. Szczęśna (ed.), Kraków 2010; M. Dąbrowski, *Komparatystyka dyskursu/ Dyskurs komparatystyki*, Warszawa 2009; E. Szczęśna, *Poetyka mediów*, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>6</sup> In 1831 the University of Warsaw was closed due to post-insurrection repressions. The department of comparative literature was not reopened after 1857, when the University was reactivated.

<sup>7</sup> See Tomasz Bilczewski, *Komparatystyka i interpretacja. Nowoczesne badania porównawcze wobec translatologii*, Kraków 2010; Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, *Archipelag porównań. Szkice komparatystyczne*, Kraków 2007; Marek Dybizbański, and Włodzimierz Szturc, *Mitoznawstwo porównawcze*, Stanisław Balbus, et al., eds. *Intersemiotyczność. Literatura wobec innych sztuk (i odwrotnie)*, Kraków 2004; but also "Komparatystyka polska", which includes: Olga Płaszczewska, *Przestrzenie komparatystyki – italianizm*, Kraków 2010; Magdalena Siwiec, *Romantyzm i zatrzymany czas*, Kraków 2009; Małgorzata Sokalska, *Opera a dramat romantyczny*, Kraków 2009; Grażyna Królikiewicz, et al., eds. *Literatura a malarstwo – malarstwo a literatura*, Kraków 2009; Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, et al., eds. *Oblicza Narcyza*, Kraków 2008. See also the magazine "Przekładaniec" dealing with translations studies.

<sup>8</sup> See Beate Sommerfeld, *Kafka-Nachwirkungen in der polnischen Literatur: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der achtziger und neunziger Jahre des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main 2007; Maria Krysztofiak, *Skandinavien und Mitteleuropa: literarische Wahlverwandtschaften*, Wrocław – Görlitz 2005; Bogusław Bakula, ed. *Polska – Ukraina. Partnerswo kultur*, Poznań 2003; Bogusław Bakula, *Historia i komparatystyka. Szkice o literaturze i kulturze Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej XX wieku*, Poznań 2000; Maria Krysztofiak, *Przekład literacki a translatologia*, Poznań 1999; and also journals: "Porównania. Czasopismo poświęcone komparatystyce literackiej oraz studiom interdyscyplinarnym" and "Slavia Occidentalis".

previously imperceptible or neglected. It also discovered presuppositions and assumptions (often received uncritically) placed in the practice of literary critics, obliging them to offer methodological self-definition. After rethinking Barthes', Derrida's and others' arguments, a literary historian cannot aspire to be a discoverer of "the only, canonical meaning" of the interpreted text, to reveal its "global and hidden *signifié*" (Kostkiewiczowa 28–29).

As it seems, the disputes over the sense of literary history in postmodern times belong to the broader phenomenon of the crisis of the humanities in general. The reflection on the prospects of this research has a longer tradition in Poland. It is worth mentioning works by Kazimierz Wyka, Maria Janion, Henryk Markiewicz, Tomasz Burek, Jerzy Ziomek, Teresa Walas, and Włodzimierz Bolecki<sup>9</sup>. The discussion from "Teksty Drugie" from 2005 is also noteworthy. Kostkiewiczowa claimed that:

"Within the idea of the crisis of the humanities, practicing the history of literature after structuralism and poststructuralism requires determination and consequence. The discipline cannot, of course, stay indifferent to ideas and discussions of the most recent decades. They allowed the historian to understand better her/his subject matter, but also the opportunities, borderlines, and specific character of its cognition. The restructuring of the discipline is based on the critical view of the problems and tendencies of postmodern thought, and on formulating assumptions enabling us to construct the course of literary changes historically" (Kostkiewiczowa 43).

Apart from new deconstructive methodologies undermining the status and achievements of the history of literature, comments about the decline of the humanities can be heard more and more often. In Poland, the symptoms of this phenomenon are also lower readership of highbrow literature and fewer students of Polish studies, which, in any case, guarantee gloomy employment prospects. As a fact illustrating the change in attitudes to literature and literary studies, we could refer to Maria Janion's *Gorączka romantyczna* (*Romantic Fever*), which got a lot of publicity not only in Polish academic circles, but also in literary magazines. Nowadays, hardly any publication reaches beyond universities and scholarly bookshops, is distributed in "Empik", or is reviewed in literary-cultural magazines. The only exceptions are Maria Janion's works (e.g. *Wampir: biografia symboliczna and Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*<sup>10</sup>),

---

<sup>9</sup> See Kazimierz Wyka, *O potrzebie historii literatury*, Warszawa 1969; Maria Janion, "Jak możliwa jest historia literatury?", *O potrzebie historii literatury*, Warszawa 1969, Maria Janion, *Humanistyka: poznanie i terapia*, Warszawa 1974; Henryk Markiewicz, *Dylematy historyka literatury*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1986 z. 4; Tomasz Burek, "Jaka historia literatury jest nam dzisiaj potrzebna", *Żadnych marzeń*, Londyn 1987; Jerzy Ziomek, "Obrońca potoczna historii literatury czyli półka czytelnika i półka badacza", *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1990); Teresa Walas, *Czy jest możliwa inna historia literatury*, Kraków 1993; Włodzimierz Bolecki, "Czym stała się dziś historia literatury", Teresa Michałowska, et al., eds. *Wiedza o literaturze i edukacja. Księga referatów Zjazdu Polonistów* Warszawa 1995, Warszawa 1996.

<sup>10</sup> See Maria Janion, *Wampir. Biografia symboliczna*, Gdańsk 2003; Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, Kraków 2006.

and works by Ryszard Przybylski (*Krzemieniec. Opowieść o rozsądku zwyciężonych*) and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (*Słowacki. Encyklopedia*)<sup>11</sup>.

To the above-mentioned symptoms, Magdalena Rabizo-Birek adds scholarly conservatism. In her opinion:

“Alarming phenomena in current Polish studies are conformism, conservatism, dependence, mental and consultative weakness of this populous circle. Literary historians too often demonstrate powerlessness in view of many phenomena in contemporary literature, they succumb to mass advertising, or uncritically repeat opinions promoted in the media. The consequence of the ignorance (some specialists in Polish studies do not read literary magazines at all) and sad evidence of the weak reception of contemporary cultural phenomena only through large publishers is qualms about interpreting works which have not been acclaimed best sellers and writers who are not stars or winners of contests, promoted by large publishers” (Rabizo-Birek 217–218).

What is more, the author also connects Polish literary-historical studies with the tradition of writing syntheses. Bolecki refers here to “Wielka historia literatury polskiej” (“The Great History of Polish Literature”) series published since 1995 by PWN – an academic coursebook which presents literary epochs – from Middle Ages to the interwar period<sup>12</sup>.

The problem with these syntheses, which were authorial “narrative-compositional constructions”<sup>13</sup>, is based on the temporal distance implied in the image of the epoch. The lack of this distance leads to the lack of any companion to post-war literature even though the dividing line could be 1989. On the other hand, it is worth seeing the history of literature, not only as a discipline producing thick companions, often simplifying and selective, which present remote Polish literature with temporal distance, or monographs which do not expand the understanding of the historical process or of mutual relations between phenomena.

We should note that postmodern criticism has caused – apart from the new language based on rhetoric and recycling – a new way of seeing other phenomena, which traditional positivist history of literature pushed on to the sidelines. According to Kasperski, criticism “by discovering inadequacies and examples of groundless usurpation, finds

---

<sup>11</sup> See Ryszard Przybylski, *Krzemieniec. Opowieść o rozsądku zwyciężonych*, Warszawa 2003; idem, *Ogrom zła i odrobina dobra: cztery lektury biblijne*, Warszawa 2006; Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Słowacki. Encyklopedia*, Warszawa 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, when Bolecki’s text was being written, the series of coursebooks embraced the period from Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, but the next volumes, *Young Poland* (Polish modernism [translator’s note]) by Artur Hutniewicz and *Interwar Period* by Jerzy Kwiatkowski, were supposed to be published within the next few years.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

space for discovering new lands. Hence it reveals cracks and the unknown, and it simultaneously invites one to recognize them" (Kasperski 22–23).

What is more, he claims that:

"This kind of criticism should be considered a spur to research. It gives rise to the need to strengthen its solutions, and it initiates reconstruction of bonds with the reality analyzed, social surroundings, and culture [emphasis mine]. Thus, a reluctantly received postmodern negativism often actively stimulates research. Its real threat is not the negating critique, which reveals scholarly shortcomings, but rather opinionated belief in its own excellence and omnipotence, which conceals those weaknesses, or presents them as virtues" (Kasperski 23).

Kasperski's opinion makes us realize that the questions or problems often called the decline of the history of literature have also brought positive effects. They have initiated a diagnosis of the state of affairs, but also triggered analyses of issues such as the grotesque, parody, pastiche, and irony, which were said to have "a peripheral influence" (Kasperski 22), and without which the analysis of Bruno Schulz, Witold Gombrowicz, or Dorota Masłowska would be practically impossible. If we look from this perspective on the state of recent literary-historical research, we will notice a shift in interests from the subjects once fundamental (the context of the epoch, literary genres, themes, etc.) to once peripheral subjects such as corporeality<sup>14</sup>, literary anthropology, and phenomena connected with civilization changes (e.g. the influence and presence of the new media in contemporary literature).

Therefore, the parallel with the constructive role of the decline in comparative literature arises naturally. It is worth considering whether a refreshed comparative literature, which as the first discipline recovered from the crisis, would ever be able to replace the history of literature. This question suggests, however, a return to the times before "the discussion on method" and to the question whether freeing a literary work from the so-called context of the epoch carries a positive or negative message seems to be an anachronism. Admittedly, comparatists are not – as literary historians are – limited by the genetic method (prescribing the presentation of literary phenomena in a chronological way, as a cause and effect chain). Their subjective parallels must be based on clearly established and justified grounds. At the same time, we should remember that the confrontation of literary works in comparative studies can be carried out synchronically and diachronically (confronting "what was" with "what is now"). Every time this happens, the act of comparison, although fully dependent upon the comparatist, "is history-making and becomes a part of the comparative method" (Kasperski,

<sup>14</sup> See Małgorzata Hornung, et al., eds. *Ciało, płeć, literatura. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Germanowi Ritzowi w pięćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa 2001; Beata Przymuszała, *Szukanie dotyku. Problematyka ciała w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, Kraków 2006.

O teorii... 585). Secondly, comparative literature as a metadiscipline (especially its diachronic perspective) draws much from the achievements of literary history and literary-historical knowledge and, in this respect, it is largely dependent upon it. As long as it exists, it comments on the literary knowledge systematized by literary theoreticians and historians.

Although recent texts appear to be heterogenic and scattered, their solid analysis is a necessity; therefore, it remains a matter of time. The role of comparative literature as a separate discipline is also highlighted by contemporary comparatists. According to Susan Bassnett, the discipline should be understood not as a history of the moment when the work was created but also as the history of its reception within a longer period, taking into account changing literary, social, and historical realities, in which the text is produced and in which it functions. Is it worth, then, calling this period, full of doubts, reflections, and disputes, lost time?

“Distance – according to Barbara Skarga – effaces differences in the whole, but highlights the difference which separates today from yesterday. The further we look in the past, the more surprised we are that people behaved in such ways. How difficult it is, however, to estimate qualities of the world we live in now. The reality surrounding us, which is directly understood as our own, present, ordinary, hides its deepest crux from us. We still lack the reference point and distance; therefore, we lack the ability to think. [...] Time brings the ability to select events and phenomena” (Skarga 9).

## Works cited

- Bassnett, Susan. “Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century”. *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1–2 (2006): 9. Print.
- Bolecki, Włodzimierz. “Czym stała się dziś historia literatury”. *Wiedza o literaturze i edukacja. Księga referatów Zjazdu Polonistów Warszawa 1995*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1996. 46. Print.
- Etiemble, René. *Comparaison n'est pas raison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963. Print.
- Kasperski, Edward. “O teorii komparatystyki”. *Literatura. Teoria. Metodologia*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dydaktyczne Wydziału Polonistyki UW, 1998. Print.
- Kasperski, Edward. “W objęciach ponowoczesności. Recycling i retoryka zamiast wiedzy?”. *Tekstualia. Palimpsesty Literackie Artystyczne Naukowe* 4 (2008): 22–23. Print.
- Kostkiewiczowa, Teresa. “Historia literatury w przebudowie”. *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005): 28–29. Print.

- Nowicka-Jeżowa, Alina, ed. *Badania porównawcze. Dyskusja o metodzie. Radziejowice 6–8 lutego 1997 r.* Izabelin: Świat Literacki, 1998.
- Rabizo-Birek, Magdalena. "Polonistyka na rozdrożu". *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005): 217–18. Print.
- Skarga, Barbara. *Granice historyczności.* Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 2005. Print.
- Wellek, René. *Concepts of Criticism,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963. Print.
- Wellek, René, and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949. Print.
- Windakiewicz, Stanisław. *Walter Scott i Lord Byron: W odniesieniu do polskiej poezji romantycznej.* Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1914. Print.



Andrzej Nowakowski, *Antinomies 2*