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## Comparative Studies: Comparative Criticism

It has become a common opinion that comparative studies operate on a macro scale – the primary, but not always revealed, aim of research is to observe vast cultural resources from above. One national literature is placed next to the other, complete works by one author are confronted with other author's works, philosophy is juxtaposed with art, painting with architecture etc. And if comparative analyses incorporate only one poetic work and one musical piece, still the far-reaching principle of the discipline places the comparison within a broader relation between poetry and music.

This ambitious scale of comparative studies has its great founding fathers – Batteux, Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Goethe - and provokes many inspiring questions, but does not always seem necessary or justified. It is worth noting that exactly the same practices employed by comparative analysts in this vast field are applied by any "ordinary" historian of culture (and literary historian) almost constantly, when making a decision to juxtapose subjects surrounded by more or less transparent boundaries. Usually those subjects are much "smaller" and thus seem not to deserve to be embraced by the discipline of comparative studies. Writing any history of a fragment of culture, we inevitably use the comparative method, as we are obliged to take into account a vast number of independent facts and find connections between them, secret doors and bridges that justify our perspective. In this sense, comparative studies are nothing more than a tool of culture studies, and it might be interesting to look at the prerogatives of the discipline from this humble point of view.

For it seems that comparative studies might now join the growing crowd objecting to practices in the history of culture in which facts are treated in a linear way and the linear order is authoritatively instilled in the history of ideas. Then not only could a critical literary narration become the subject of critical examination, as an example of an ideological conquest, but it could also be applied to other symptoms of cultural engineering, using other ways of expressing expectations of the history of philosophy. In this case, from the point of view of a literary critic, comparative studies will become not so much a discipline, but rather a trend and turn into an "alternative history of culture" – a history that is not bound by ideological links between examined facts, and one rejecting their linear subjugation to social or ideological priorities. It will basically become a comparative

criticism demonstrating the idea that there is no need to support comparisons with “big issues”, as the subject of analysis might as easily be identified without them.

Because comparisons are given in culture – obvious as it might be, this is worth recalling (Jost 42). They stem from culture and give evidence of it. They come directly from a system of boundaries, which – as everything else around us – has its origins and draws semantics from them. An analyst should not think of what can be compared, what pair of phenomena has not yet been juxtaposed, what connotation is the shortest way to successful socio-political directives, what associations seem the most appealing to the imagination or can best reflect his/her favourite books. Their task is not to add another exhibit to a collection of comparisons, but to recognize those vectors, polar oppositions, scopes, and potentials that determine relations between products of culture established without the researcher’s intervention.

If we were to use a schematic representation and juxtapose two cultural phenomena, A and B, then comparative studies are interested in the dynamic of power relations which position the subjects towards or away from each other, and its value can be marked, for the sake of simplicity, as C. As we know, in this kind of research, C is the most important and it is something completely different than *tertium comparationis*, i.e. a shared field between A and B. This field is by no means the focal point of comparative studies, and can even be ignored altogether. A comparison without *tertium comparationis*, but not without the C element, is, for instance, the canonical theory of the archetypes of genres formulated by Northrop Frye. For Frye, who was greatly influenced by the Chicago School, literary genres evolved as a result of a disintegration of plot structures within a once uniform myth. Thus, if we were to divide the plot of an archetypal narration into a downward and upward movement, the hero’s death and resurrection, and in parallel relation to cycles of night and day, sowing and harvest, Autumn and Spring – then we can see that with time, those parts gave rise to the division into comedy and tragedy. Both genres provide an insight into various aspects of their original myth, but none of them belongs to the part shared by comedy and tragedy (Frye 500–14).

Therefore, there is a need for a discipline which, while critically observing comparisons leading to C, looks for methodological solutions other than a superficial and ill-considered focus on *tertium comparationis*. We need arguments which can prevent a literary historian from focusing attention only on searching for common features of two works by the same author, between works by two authors living in the same period or in different periods, between the novel and the drama, Polish and foreign literature, poetry and philosophy, literature and painting etc. Naturally, common features do occur in a comparative model and might be useful, but they do not deserve

the status of the main subject of analysis. The C field exists, by definition, outside A and B, which means also outside the data collected in the coinciding sets of elements. It is A that causes comparative studies to resemble a jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece. We can recognize the content of the missing puzzle not because the remaining pieces have a tangible common feature, but because their distinct features point to the lost, physically but not symbolically, “third” element.

Comparative studies should be critical towards comparative methods, limit the importance of *tertium comparationis*, but provide tools which reveal – indirectly – all kinds of lost items of culture. First of all (but not only, as we will see later), it will be concerned with reconstructing the past. In Polish medieval poetry, the hymn *Bogurodzica* and the lyrical texts that are most like it date from the fourteenth century, and are, thus, over a century distant from it. If literary historians do not want to pretend that in such a long period of time (and in terms of time-span, it could cover both Romanticism and Positivism) no Polish song was created, then they have to resort to preparing a hypothetical outline of the epoch, using data from other national fields (German and Czech literature), languages (poetry written in Latin), and other semiotic fields (architecture, sculpture, painting of that time). The aim of this procedure is not only to restore a panorama of lost creative works, but also to highlight some significant phenomena, which were subjected to aesthetical and non-aesthetical directives of the period, or were simply too difficult to grasp and, for those reasons, were not underscored in works of literature, but were rather kept in the margin, present only elliptically, euphemistically, without establishing their own means of expression. In his work on the poetics of Old Russian literature, Dmitry Likhachov considers the issue of combined studies on literature and painting and states: “Studying similarities and difference between types of art enables us to reveal facts that would otherwise remain hidden, should we study each type separately” (32). Later, he adds:

“Sometimes only one type of art responds quickly to changes in economic and political reality, while other types are behind, or process the influence with such a degree of dependence, that it can be detected only in a comparative analysis of all types” (34).

The strategy of comparative criticism can be applied both to large-scale reconstructions, when we have to consider an entire period in the history of poetry, philosophy, liturgy, music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, fashion, theater, social conventions etc., as well as to the meticulous, painstaking effort of associating facts in a seemingly uniform historical and literary scheme. The second range seems safer, but before we attend to it, let us look for a moment at the first one, which turns a humanist researcher into a kind of discoverer of new lands.

Since geography stopped fuelling the belief in reaching inaccessible places in space, it was replaced by astronomy, which started exploring planets beyond the Solar System by processing data gathered from the whole system. What did not change, was that comparative studies – inspired by both mentioned disciplines – wants to go beyond boundaries and horizons and not only gather information about long conquered, measured and described lands. Here, science is understood as exploration: in the course of comparative research, our knowledge about culture should be expanded by new objects. Not phantoms, not fabrications, not speculations, but objects which are real in a given semiotic domain, just like in the physical domain a planet is real, as it blocks the light of a star with its undetectable presence. If we could travel beyond the boundaries of our world, then the reconstructed object would be a real obstacle on our way. Similarly, if we could travel into the past, we would encounter objects which are equivalent to those predicted in comparative research.

In the modern age, an example of such practice was given in the nineteenth century by a Russian analyst Alexander Wiesiolowski, rightly called the founder of historical poetics. He used masterpieces of world literature: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Vergil, and Seneca in order to describe (via Aristotle) epic poem, tragedy and comedy. He also had access to the great literature in Sanskrit (with guidance of Jacob Wackernagel and Hermann Oldenberg) and to tales, legends and sagas studied by the Grimm brothers. Thus, he had at his disposal data serving as set A and set B. What he did not have, what he searched for and what would be included in the symbolical C field, was the culture preceding all those phenomena, existing before the Indo-European culture or even earlier – one that was utterly illiterate, did not know the said genres but cherished their prototypes and which determined their future antagonisms, dynamics and instability. Reading Wiesiolowski from the contemporary perspective, we might say that he meant to create foundations of the genological system. Therefore, it was the case of syncretism, which did not yet have properties of a system, but had all the means to design such a system and could instil in the consciousness of Indo-European tribes all those systemic principles we know so well now: from binary opposition to temporal progress of utterance. For the genological system is rooted in religious rituals of our ancestors. It is impossible to speak of them objectively, as they are not present in the scopes of A and B, but they can be, to some extent, revealed by comparing A and B, that is comparing the data we already have.

From a historical point of view, such an understanding of the C field should be placed in a distant past. The syncretic form of culture long ceased to exist and was replaced by a division into genres. However, its influence did not decrease,

as it remained a source of motivation for all connections and oppositions in the entire genre system of the three thousand years of written literature. Among evidence pointing to this conclusion, there are findings of the most renowned contemporary expert in *Rigveda*, Jan Gonda. The structural theory of language could not be born in any other cultural field, as the very language of Indo-Europeans encourages one to think in linear terms, even in parallels: recapitulation, equivalence, antithesis, and dialogue (57). Therefore, studying the C field consists formally in analysing the past, but also the current state of our language, the foundation of our scientific thinking process and the reception of the subjects of our studies. As I have already mentioned, comparative studies are a criticism of comparison.

Coming back to Wiesiolowski, over a century after his death, some of his theses might seem questionable, but the essence of the issue remains valid:

“At the beginning of the process, there is a rhythmical and musical syncretism with the gradual emergence of word and text, the psychological and rhythmical foundations of stylistics. The choral tradition is connected with rituals. Songs of a lyrical and epic nature seem to be the first to emerge from the relation between choir and ritual. In the documented circumstances of military life, they are transformed by qualified singers into epic songs, then connected in cycles. They occasionally take the form of epic poems. At the same time, the poetry of choral rituals still exists and might be turned into the established forms of cults. ... At this stage of development, prior phenomena are still present: the ritual and cultic choral tradition, epic and epic poem, and cultic drama. The organic emergence of artistic drama from cultic tragedy is probably a matter of circumstances which took place in Greece only once...” (390–391).

What can we learn from this recapitulation?

We find that in the original syncretism there are prototypical forms of later oppositions: choir and monody, stage poetry and poem, tragedy and epic poem. There are also many others placed on a much higher level: military tradition and myth, liturgy and literature, music and poetry. All this diversity organizing our civilization is rooted in a past that did not know those oppositions, and perhaps did not even need them. But paradoxically and involuntarily, it brought a set of fictional turns and contradictions, later turned into dynamic forces of culture, which generated different art forms and filled semantically diverse genres within each art form.

We might say that regardless of all doubts connected with this reconstruction, one assumption does not seem controversial: that people of the West, by and large, have lost the ability of “mimetic practice” – and to such an extent that this Aristotelian term sounds now like an oxymoron (Ricoeur 55–58). We are also reluctant to agree with

the thesis that despite such profound revaluations, the human mind was not impregnated against a non-diverse ritual, musical, and literary sphere, and could be persuaded to see beyond the boundaries of genre divisions. Europeans did not become blind to syncretism, if only because of the fact that the structure of oppositions, which makes it possible to understand and classify the cognitive sphere of the world, is rooted in this dynamic field. Therefore, the motivation to all kinds of comparisons, in which there is the A of literature and the B of religion, music, politics, and acting, excludes the validity of recording analogies between the two fields, but it does require a thorough analysis of their identities. For they are active identities and their energy has not solidified yet. They are still rooted in the assumption that a writer is rarely also a composer, and a priest is rarely a poet, but not rooted deeply enough to make art fully autonomous and stop affecting the audience without referring to religion, to make poetry independent of recitation, and to remove liturgy from music. The flexibility of the boundaries between a literary fact and a social fact – inspiringly pointed out by Yuri Tynyanov (19) – is not the case of a relation between two systems, but a phenomenon indicating that they are both set in one system. Art cannot be fully independent of the principles of reality, those that dominate everyday life, and life cannot do without the meaning that is – according to contemporary beliefs – present in art.

The above reflections can be observed particularly in the following two areas:

The first one is liturgy – the instance of a collective prayer in a church understood both as a community and a temple. A temple which is both a building separated from the outside world with stained-glass, and at the same time depicting the outside world in stained-glass. The master of celebration is a priest *in persona Christi*, and at the same time the embodiment of the people. Paintings and sculptures speak of what is happening at the altar, but also of what could happen only once in the history of the world. There is also singing – without division into music and lyrics, and resonating in the walls, which were built in a way that does not break the sound – teaching that liturgy has not left the phase of syncretism. Liturgy is an act of comparative awareness, which remains possible, active, and valid. Liturgy restores human integrity and shows people the foundation of their culture.

The second field is that of genres. Not all, but only those the structure of which demands “pairs” in neighbouring disciplines. In this respect, comparative studies are allies of linguistic stylistics. Aleksander Wilkoń writes from a linguistic perspective about such forms, the genre names of which reappear in different registers of the Polish language. His attitude is rather radical:

"You cannot... mechanically transfer terms born in the field of poetics and rhetoric into statements which have nothing in common with literature or the art of speech. Literature has its types, sub-types, genres..., and scientific or official languages have theirs. The name of the genre might be the same, but there is a world of difference between a *literary letter*, an *official letter*, and a *pastoral letter*. These are not variants of letters, but distinct genres, and the only thing they have in common is that there is a written contact between the sender and the addressee"<sup>1</sup> (256–57).

This opinion given at the end of the article, more like an additional comment, actually refers to a much more complex issue of utmost importance to the assessment of the whole stylistic diversity of the Polish language. For stylistic boundaries seem to be rather flexible. The three types of "letters" mentioned by Wilkoń undeniably belong to separate registers: artistic, official, and religious. They can be appropriately defined within each register: the literary letter is placed next to the journal in the field of autobiographical writing<sup>2</sup>; the official letter belongs to the category of administrative documents; the pastoral letter is a homiletic genre. Who would think of the times when the official letter represented knowledge about the sacral origins of a country, and the pastoral letter demanded recognition of its artistic value? Yet, the homonymy in the names of those three "letters" is not only a remnant of a long-gone syncretism. It also represents an awareness that it remains a hidden structure supporting the stylistic divisions. The common origins of the artistic, official, and religious registers are communicated in such principles of the letter as: a known sender and addressee; equal rights of the individual and the collective speaker; a pinch of ceremonial attitude; a linguistic etiquette elevating a private affair to the level of a social review; impressive structures at the beginning and end with a simultaneous invitation to engage the addressee in a dialog; the irremovable connection with the reality outside the text, which is manifested if only in the date and place of writing the letter, etc. Those syncretic features do not undermine the "theory of three letters". They rather determine its provisional character, stemming from history and set in its form, which might unconsciously permit the phenomenon to be unaware of those divisions and much more primal. If we currently have doubts, as to whether an e-mail is really a type of letter, this suggests that we are using its rich semantics fuelled by the deepest roots of meanings, but present on the surface in the form of a field of external meaningful associations.

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<sup>1</sup> The author addressed a classic subject of literary criticism. The issue of the letter as a genre, which changes its affiliation as a result of "border changes" between literature and neighbouring linguistic practices, was presented by Tynyanov (see the quotations above). Later, the example of the letter – as a type of speech in a transition from the original stage to derivatives – was also used by Bakhtin, *Problem gatunków mowy*. 349.

<sup>2</sup> See: J. Trzynałowski, *List i pamiętnik. Dwie formy wypowiedzi osobistej*; R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, *Funkcje listów w tekstach o charakterze autobiograficznym*.

The horizontal relation between the literary, official, and pastoral letter can be also observed in other migrating types of speech (story, description, dialog, monolog, confession, complaint etc.). It is also a subject of standard analyses on a higher level: literature and painting (perspective, point of view); literature and theatre (costume, prop, staging); literature and music (verse, stanza, chorus) etc. There is no need to write more about this here. However, it is worth stressing that, in the light of those arguments, historical and critical studies also deserve to be called comparative studies when they focus solely on literature or even the literature of only one country. The belief that crossing the boundaries of one's own language automatically places the analyst in the orbit of comparative discoveries is a symptom of scientific naïveté. Methodological and interdisciplinary analysis of literary genres offers some educational conclusions, as the continuity of language makes it possible precisely to distinguish the field of analogies forming the *tertium comparationis* from "the third", which we earlier called a genre picture of the world (Sadowski 12). It is sufficient to mention here the classic studies of Vladimir Propp – the reconstruction of the tale genre based on a number of Russian examples of tales leads indirectly to a hypothesis of one coherent animalistic epic with archaic roots. This folk epic was never written down, because it was not possible (as it has infinite semantics, just as language does), but its fictional structures, outlines of episodes, models of characters, and notions of possible time-space relations were spread over centuries-old generic variations of the tale, making them, to some extent, expressions or records of this text that was never given its own form. (See: Propp)

As I have already mentioned, in comparative criticism it is important to measure the depth of the boundaries around works of literature within literary genres, around genres within national literatures, and to analyze the remaining boundaries that are clearly founded on syncretic bases. Research should lead to a synecdoche – in the sense that comparative studies wants to show and understand unity and continuity where provisional divisions were set over the centuries.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, its main subject is the dynamics of summaries, placed in culture facing particularization and – so it seems – it even takes precedence over it (since, after all, people experience culture as a whole), but does not justify the tendency to disregard particularization and, consequently, does not let the analyst forget the principles and obligations of each discipline. Since, in general, the *totum pro parte* perspective is dominant, literary historians, limited by their own life-spans, at the outset are always dealing with

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<sup>3</sup> In categories suggested by Paul van Tieghem in *Synteza w historii literatury*, it would be a form of historical-critical synthesis understood as "general literature", as opposed to the narrower "comparative literature", which does not go beyond the analysis of particular parallel phenomena.



*pars pro toto* material. Paradoxically, this makes them realize the importance not only of the methodological conditions of literary criticism or the evolution of a particular field of knowledge, but also of the connection with the research tradition vis-à-vis a certain literary issue (for instance poem, metaphor, particular artistic trend, or motif). The attempt to jump immediately to the interdisciplinary level is like usurping the divine perspective, while the semantics of unity seems accessible only on the level of material coming directly from the analyzed works.

Comparative studies tend to reassure themselves that the constantly examined field C does not begin somewhere up high, in the orbit of global issues (Thomism in philosophy and architecture, rhythm in music and sculpture), but stretches also lower, between objects of a much smaller calibre (three letters, different representations of a tale, competitive systems in a poem). This way, it can be studied using the tools of one discipline (history of literature, history of poetry), which are much safer - without the risk of intentional or unintentional ideological assumptions and without testing the researcher's ability to avoid falling into the trap of homonymy of terms.

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Roussanka Alexandrova-Nowakowska, *Space 2*