

Methodological Dilemmas of Contemporary Literary Historiography

The close connection between literary history and comparative literature is self-evident, since comparative literature came into being in the 19th century as a literary-historical discipline.¹ The self-evidence of this connectedness later used to be problematized, whenever the historical method became questionable, for instance within the early Russian formalism,² phenomenological methods, new criticism or structuralism. The identification of comparative literature with literary-historical approach was further undermined in a famous lecture by Wellek, *The Crisis of Comparative Literature*.³ Nevertheless, at least since the end of the 1960s, when Jauss conceived the reception aesthetics, literary history has been rehabilitated, for it plays a crucial role in contemporary approaches, such as new historicism, cultural materialism, genre studies, postcolonial studies etc. Today, several comparatists explicitly welcome the return of comparative literature to literary history (cf. Leernout 2006: 46), and literary history is “as topical as never before: as an experiential field of

¹ It is understood as a part of literary history even by some recent comparatists. According to Āurišin, “the comparative literary research always directly depends on the momentary state, aims and tasks of literary history” (Āurišin 1976: 33).

² However, in its later phase Russian formalism started developing a (rather modern and dynamical) conception of literary history; yet in the Western literary criticism, the reception of this developmental phase was even more belated than the reception of the early, strictly “formalist” phase.

³ In this view the lecture was supplemented by the article *The Fall of Literary History*, published in the 1970s.

encountering the Other, as the vastness of mutual openness of unique cultural subjects...” (Венедиктова 2003: 19).

Of course, the history of this relationship is more complex and dynamic than that. Literary history as a serious, academic discipline did not develop simultaneously with comparative literature. The 19th century, which is the birth period of the literary history proper, is the period of national rather than comparative literary history. The most eminent literary histories – for example *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870–1871) by De Sanctis, in which the author explicitly asserted that the history of Italian literature was identical to the history of Italy itself (and the same point was later emphasized also by two renowned introductory articles of two later editions, Croce’s and Wellek’s)⁴ – were not only national, but frequently nationalist. The reasons are well-known today. They can be expressed briefly by the words of John Neubauer: “This institutionalisation of literary studies was a tremendous boon to literature but the price was to be paid: literature was put to the service of national purposes; it came to be seen as one of the most authentic expressions of the national spirit” (Neubauer 2005: 110).⁵ All the great positivist or *Geistesgeschichte* literary histories appeared to be of this type, which was still prevalent as late as the first third of the 20th century, until the comparative literary-historical syntheses turned up, such as Hazard’s, Auerbach’s or Curtius’. But only after World War II did comparative literary history come to its highest reputation. After the nationalist experience of the 19th century and distinctively political ideologization in totalitarian systems of the 20th one of the main tasks of general and literary history became deideologization of historical

⁴ Cf. Sinopoli 1999: 10; Cornis-Pope and Neubauer (eds.) 2004: 10.

⁵ However, the widespread argument about privileging and institutionalizing literary history by the state authorities to support national interests also has its weakness (it is the same weakness that we can find in fashionable theories today: the facts, regarding the less known, smaller, although declaratively and “theoretically” particularly important and exposed cultures, are in fact still neglected and overlooked). The assumption that “national(istic)” literary histories developed with the active support of the authorities, which were in this way granted the power and identity, fails when we look at the nations which were gathered under Austria-Hungary.

discourse. New historiographic conceptions emerged, for instance Lotman's and Genette's idea of literary history as "a history of literary system, that is, history of formal and thematic procedures" (Sinopoli 1999a: 16),⁶ Goldman's "genetic structuralism", the concept of literary history as a history of literary institutions or *literary field* (Dubois, Bourdieu), Đurišin's concept of interliterariness, Jauss's notion of reception history, the notion of intertextual literary history etc. The common feature of all these conceptions is that they understand the history of literature as a dynamic, transnational process. Gradually the opinion started developing, that literary history is in its nature transnational (Cornis-Pope 2006: 197), or that comparative method is "the essential basis for all possible types of literary history", national literary history as well (Kos 2002: 7).⁷ In the last third of the 20th century comparative literary history therefore was re-established as one of the central tasks of comparative literature, which is also manifest on the "institutional" level: the magazines *New Literary History* (1969) and *Neohelicon* (1974) started, both devoted particularly to methodological problems of (comparative) literary history; and the International Comparative Literature Association launched the project "Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages" (in the 1960s).

In this way, the status of comparative literary history was confirmed both conceptually and institutionally. However, from the 1970s on, with the emergence of poststructuralism, general historiography witnessed shifts, which weakened its status anew. The historiographic discourse underwent a strong revision under the influence of the French school *Annales* and growing influences of authors, such as Hyden White, Paul Ricoeur, Franklin Ankersmith and, of course, Foucault. Its supposed objectivity became demystified, its narrative nature and foundation on the strategies of the fictional discourse rather than objective truth were revealed, and Grand

⁶ For such literary history, which aims at being the history of literary genres, see also Genette 1972: particularly 18–19.

⁷ In contemporary comparative literature this opinion, illuminated from several aspects, strongly prevails. Cf. Valdés 1992: 18; Pavel 1999: 3; Hokenson 2000: 7; Kos 2001: 5–6; Hutcheon 2002: 26, 30; Cornis-Pope 2003: 71; Strutz 2003: 315; Zaplotnik 2005: 137 etc.

narratives were problematized, defined as the unconscious presumption of traditional historiography, literary as well. As a consequence, on the one hand – similarly to Fukuyama’s “The end of history” – rumours about the end of the literary history spread; and on the other hand, new literary histories emerged, which tried to implement new epistemological and methodological criteria.

In what follows, my attention will focus on two revisionist projects: Denis Hollier’s *A New History of French Literature* (1989), and *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004–; edited by John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope). Hollier’s literary history explicitly rejects the holistic presentation of the past in the shape of well-rounded historical narrative. It refuses not only any literary-historical synthesis and periodization concepts, but also Grand narratives, in which literature would play a role of the main hero. The book consists of 198 short articles, written by as many as 164 authors. The articles are not connected and united to any sort of Grand narrative; they do follow in a chronological order, but regardless of whatsoever homogenous substantive principle; the only principle that remains is the methodological decision for absolute fragmentariness and absence of any arranging order. Within the frame of each discussed year there is a *pelle-melle* of several cultural events of the year, but nowhere can we find complete information, for instance about a certain author, period, genre, generation, literary current etc. – Neubauer’s literary history similarly declines the established periodization. Instead, it focuses on five “nodes”: dates of political history, traditional concepts of literary history, topographic nodes, institutions and imaginary or historical figures. According to editors, such a concept does not represent any causally arranged “Grand narrative” of literary history; instead, it offers a “five-time scanning” of the last two centuries in the literary culture of East-Central Europe from various perspectives. As a matter of fact, it does not wholly refuse the chronology, but it reverses it: chronologically ordered “political nodes” in the first part are dealt with from 1989 back to the past.⁸ In contrast to Hollier, such a history preserves a

⁸ This is of course not an experimental feature of the “reversed time current”, as in Amis’s “holocaust” novel *Time’s Arrow*. It rather refers to the

connection to the historiographic discourse, but the history here consists of several microhistories (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004: 17–18), denying any close links between them.

Both Hollier's and Neubauer's literary histories triggered numerous responses; some indeed positive, but also many negative ones. I cannot resume the polemical discussion here.⁹ However, I wish to draw attention to some common neuralgic points, which can be found not only in these two but also in other revisionist attempts in the field of literary historiography. I will briefly discuss the following principal concepts: linearity, continuity, teleology, Grand narratives.

According to advocates of the radical revision of literary history, history does not happen as a continuum, but rather in the form of coincidences and leaps, which are only *a posteriori* linked into a continual Grand narrative by historiographers; consequently, literary historiography should refuse the linear teleology – as both Hollier and Neubauer do. Instead of the integrity of the epochs and continual processes it ought to “emphasize contingency, discontinuity, heterogeneity, and the localization of distant events” (Juvan 2006: 32). – Let me first stress that the idea of (necessary) discontinuity is far from new and has gained a general epistemological value in modern theories. In the context of the treatises in humanities probably the most influential was Derrida with his essay on Husserl in 1967 (*Le voix et le phenomene*). However, Derrida was not the first one. While reflecting on history, Nietzsche and the school *Annales* had spoken in favour of this thought before Derrida; similarly Jurij Tinjanov in the field of literary history (cf. Тынянов 2002: 191); in the first half of the 20th century the idea of discontinuity appeared even more sub-

fact that the past is always (re)constructed from the point of view of the present and that with historiographic reconstruction we are moving from the present back to the past, and not that the past travels linearly to the present, which is common with the chronological surveys (not only of literary history, of course).

⁹ Let me just mention some of the most important publications, where the polemical discussions appeared: for instance in the collections of scientific papers *Writing Literary History* and *Rethinking Literary History*, and in special thematic editions like *Arcadia*, *Neohelicon* and *New Literary History*.

versively in quantum physics, namely as a theory of the so-called quantum leap, which did not go unnoticed in literary criticism (it was used as a theoretical concept by Ihab Hassan¹⁰). The concept of discontinuity of (literary) development is therefore an indispensable consequence of the epistemological movements in natural sciences as well as in humanities, and is also inevitable correction of philosophical-historical concepts of the 19th century.

However, this does not mean that we may push this thought to the very edge and request literary history which would completely do away with continuity, for this is practically impossible due to anthropological and hermeneutic reasons. As Mario Valdés points out, a human being dwells temporally and can perceive anything as sensible only within the time's continuum (cf. Valdés 1998). Or to quote the findings by Ricoeur: we are condemned to the condition of experiencing and understanding only through the mode of narration, through its linearity. Thereupon one can conclude that continuity and discontinuity in literary historiography do not necessarily exclude one another. The idea of discontinuity justifiably reminds us that we construct and synchronise all historical coincidences into a smooth, fluent Grand narrative, which is always only our subjective, *a posteriori* conceptualization of the otherwise muddled happening, full of unusual leaps and discontinuities. Yet this does not mean that quite evident continuities do not reside beside the obvious discontinuities. Literary history itself offers an abundance of examples: the authors of *nouveau roman* felt themselves to be in a continuum (as the opposition) with realism, which they wanted to surpass; this relation holds an implicit notion of development, progress.¹¹ Similar statements can be made about the postmodernists; although the postmodern period in particular witnessed different conceptions of time, the postmodernists frequently understood themselves in a sort of continuity with the modernists—as the term *postmodernism* itself implies.¹² If theory on the one hand denies continuity, the mere

¹⁰ For instance in his essay *Culture, Indeterminacy and Immanence*.

¹¹ As much as opposing the tradition is still in continuity relation with it. It is a sort of continuation, only with “different means”.

¹² If there is some doubt as to the continuity of postmodernists, let me mention the essay “The Literature of Replenishment”, written by one of the

reality or life-experience on the other hand definitely confirms it. The postmodern paradigm did inarguably point out some drawbacks of the continuity model of literary history, but it did not do away with it. It co-exists as one of the possibilities (or even necessities) of literary history today, which cannot be ignored; it is essential, however, to reflect upon it.

Something similar could be said about the declarative refusal of the Grand narratives. I believe the disadvantages of the Grand narratives at least since Lyotard's *Postmodern condition* have been rather transparent. However the question arises, whether this means we can completely avoid them.¹³ In spite of Cornis-Pope's and Neubauer's explicit endeavour to avoid the conceptual traps of the Grand narrative (Neubauer 2005: 114), their literary history remains under its verdict and cannot possibly escape it. This can be observed on several levels, but let me give only one example. The inevitability of the Grand narratives becomes quite evident—albeit at the same time also concealed—in the following way. The two authors postulate in nearly all their programmatic and explanatory articles, related to their literary history,¹⁴ that East-Central Europe is an especially suitable area for comparative history because it is distinctively “cross-cultural”, where each nationalism is *a priori* relativized with the perpetual and lively intercultural relations and mixes. However, bearing in mind the extreme importance of national identity for the majority of literary cultures involved, the question arises, whether this conceptualization of the “cross-cultural” identity of East-Central

leading postmodernists John Barth, which explicitly places postmodernism in a continuity line *realism-modernism-postmodernism*.

¹³ One of the reasons we cannot avoid them is that, as Valdés summarizes Ricoeur, “temporality is the structure of human existence and that it resides in language as narrativity” (Valdés 2002: 77). This implies that the very nature of time – or of the course of history – is narrative, and that the narrative structure is not imposed on the treated matter by the historian, but on the contrary, the history itself and the historical events themselves imply it. Therefore, according to Valdés, even Braudel, a fierce opponent of narrativity, cannot avoid it. (ibid.: 79)

¹⁴ Cf. Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004; Cornis-Pope 2003; Neubauer 2003; 2005.

Europe is not itself merely a Grand narrative?¹⁵ Is it not so that the refusal of the Grand narrative of Nation is performed in the name of another Grand narrative, the “cross-cultural” East-Central European one? The whole idea of the project and its methodology are subordinated to this very construct—which is at least as much an “imaginary community” as the nation; and the Grand narrative is entering it through the back door. The authors are of course very well aware of this dilemma (cf. Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2002: 22), but nevertheless avoid any conclusive answers to it; they only somehow unclearly suggest that the difficulty could be solved by the paradigmatic shift from national(istic) literary histories to transnational, comparative ones (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004: 14–15).

I could go on with the analysis, but the examples mentioned probably demonstrate the basic idea sufficiently. Every turn of epistemological and methodological paradigms makes demands for changes, and the inevitability of the changes in literary historiography today is transparent. Yet the most radical demands, which in the last resort mean the abolition of literary history, are nonetheless unjustified. The opening of this area to various thematical, methodological and ideological aspects seems to be more suitable. The awareness of the necessary renovation of literary history today should probably be the awareness of the pluralism of perspectives.¹⁶

¹⁵ It would be too myopic to think that internationalism is Grand narrative less than nationalism is, and incorrect to attribute the ideological neutrality to ourselves and decline it to others.

¹⁶ The conclusion, oriented above all towards the surprising excludedness of some recent debates on the revision of literary historiography, seems to be merely the starting-point for a thorough reflection on literary history today. The true problem of contemporary (literary) historiography might lie in the distinguishing between a multi-perspective attitude on the one hand and relativism, arbitrariness, dilettantism on the other. This is a hermeneutic problem and particularly Valdés raises the right questions, based on hermeneutics. He is aware of the fact that the existence of a historical “event” cannot be questionable, what is questionable is its interpretation. Hermeneutics has a significant task to approach the “event as such” as closely as possible, and to fix the boundaries between it and (in itself unavoidable) constructivism or perspectivism of interpretation. Valdés tackles it (logically enough) from the aspect of reception, but meanwhile gradually slips from hermeneu-

And most of all it should be the consciousness of the specific contribution of comparative literature to the literary-historical problematics. Comparative literature is according to its definition a plural, interdisciplinary, intercultural, transnational discipline, and therefore its most appropriate standpoint is the one argued by Linda Hutcheon, namely, that we need more alternative ways of narrating the history of literature.¹⁷ This means that we should try to treat each chosen subject of literary history with as many methods and from as many points of view as possible. Continuity and discontinuity approaches can go hand in hand, they can be complementing each other, since only all together illuminate the whole. The writing of literary history with the purpose of rehabilitation of, for instance, overlooked writers cannot just replace “official” literary history, but it is certainly supplementing it in an important way. The position Knut Hamsun occupies in the political history of world literature is probably different from his position in the “merely literary one”. The greatest Slovene poet Prešeren plays – regardless of whether Slovenes like it or not – a much smaller role in transnational literary history than in the national one, therefore we need both literary histories to get a more detailed picture, and in addition another one, which for instance depicts the symbolic figures of Slovene culture. Comparative literary historiography does not need to be the field of exclusions, but the field of inexhaustible possibilities, including those which are (wrongly) thought of as out-of-date.

tics (from the mere literary “fact” as an “event”) towards sociology and cultural studies (towards the analysis of several forms of its reception and reception’s conditions).

¹⁷ Cf. Hutcheon 2002: 31. In addition, Vera Nünning enumerates twenty four different approaches to literary history only in the sphere of contextual models (Vera Nünning 2006: 43).

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