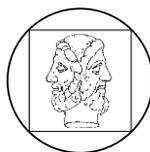




NARODOWY PROGRAM
ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI



Originally published in "Porównania" 4/2007, p. 39-51.

METACOMPARISON. COMPARATIVE STUDIES AS A SELF-FEEDBACK SYSTEM¹

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Key words: Constructivism, crisis of comparative literature, metadiscourse, metatheory, Niklas Luhmann, multiculturalism

Ключевые слова: конструктивизм, литературная компаративистика, кризис компаративистики, метадискурс, метатеория, Никлас Луманн, мультикультурализм

Abstract: Paweł Wolski, METACOMPARISON. COMPARATIVE STUDIES AS A SELF-FEEDBACK SYSTEM. "PORÓWNANIA" 4/2007, Vol. IV, ISSN 1733-165X, p. 39-51. In order to obtain, as the author himself puts it, "a successful internalisation of the comparative metadiscourse" necessary for "the survival of comparative literature", the author refers to Constructivism by noticing crucial similarities between the two directions in terms of their historical development and character. The author does not agree with the accusation of the secondary status of comparative research in relation to other fields of science. He points to the fact that the existence of a rich comparative metadiscourse, which implies analogy with Constructivism and accounts for the status of comparative studies as an important area of research, is omitted. By means of referring to Niklas Luhmann, the author identifies comparative studies with second-order observation, that is, focusing not on the objects of comparative studies (those seem to be as numerous and various as the reality surrounding the human being), but on the nature of the comparative process, in other words on the manner in which the comparison of the above mentioned objects is carried out.

Резюме: Павел Вольски, МЕТАСПРАВНЕНИЕ. КОМПАРАТИВИСТИКА КАК САМОНАПРАВЛЕННАЯ СИСТЕМА. „PORÓWNANIA” 4/2007, Vol. IV, ISSN 1733-165X, с. 39-51. Автор, желая добиться, как он сам это называет, „эффективной интернализации компаративистического метадискурса”, что является неотъемлемым условием „выживания сравнительного литературоведения”, обращается к конструктивизму, отмечая существенное сходство двух направлений, касающееся их исторического развития и характера. Не соглашаясь с обвинением компаративистических исследований во вторичности по отношению к другим научным дисциплинам, учёный отмечает, что при этом не берётся во внимание существование богатого компаративистического метадискурса, как раз таки позволяющего провести аналогию с конструктивизмом и в значительной мере обосновывающего статус компаративистики как важной исследовательской области. Ссылаясь на работы Никласа Луманна, автор отождествляет компаративистику с „вторичным осмотром,” т.е с концепцией концентрирующей внимание не на

¹ Przekład pracy naukowej sfinansowany w ramach programu Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego pod nazwą „Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki” w latach 2012-2013.

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объектах сравнительных исследований (которые настолько же многочисленны и разнообразны как окружающая человека действительность), а на сущности процесса сравнения, иначе говоря на том, как сравниваются упомянутые объекты.

In this text I am going to apply the theory of Constructivism as proof for the chance of a successful internalisation of the comparative metadiscourse. To my mind such internalisation is necessary for the survival of comparative literature as a relatively coherent research discipline.

1. Position or philosophy?

1.1. Constructivism

Constructivism is not a new theory. Some of its 'derivative names' go as far as to imply its secondary nature vis-à-vis preceding philosophies (e.g. 'Neo-Kantianism', or – in some of its aspects – 'Neo-Darwinism'). In the course of a heated debate on the legitimacy of Constructivism as a study area³ (in many respects resembling the discussion on comparative studies), the argument of philosophical secondariness was frequently used. The proponents of Constructivism do not see this fact as an argument that undermines the foundations of their construction, to follow Constructivist terminology. The Constructivists themselves indicated multiple elements in (primarily Western) philosophy that were prior or actually identical to the underlying assumptions of Constructivism. In the first part of his text introducing a series of articles that elucidate Constructivism, Ernst von Glasersfeld looks for the erosion of objective meaning as principal for Constructivism, from the olden days of the Greek sceptics to Post-Kantian philosophers⁴. In the same collection Heinz von Foerster refers directly to the concept of Plato's cave or rather certain (usually omitted) consequences of its reception as an example of a perfect image of the phenomenon of multiple realities⁵. Apart from the long list of actual or alleged ancestors, the transparency of Constructivism was further impeded by the

³ The critique of Constructivism (concerning its various aspects, not only the ones aforementioned) e.g. in: M. Olssen, *Radical Constructivism and its Failings: Anti-Realism and Individualism*. "British Journal of Educational Studies" 1996, No. 3; E. Kałuszyńska, *Pytania do konstruktywisty*. "Filozofia Nauki" 1999, No. 1-2, E. Bińczyk, *Na obrzeżach konstruktywizmu, na obrzeżach myślenia*. „Er(r)go” 2001, No. 2(2); J. Mitterer, *Tamta strona filozofii*. Warszawa 1996, and in a vast set of texts by Al. Sokal, predominantly targeting Constructivism and 'other relativisms' posted at: <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/#papers> (09.08.07).

⁴ E. von Glasersfeld, *Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit und des Begriffs der Objektivität* in: Red. H. Gumin, A. Mohler, *Einführung in den Konstruktivismus*. München 1992, p. 9-14.

⁵ H. von Foerster, *Entdecken oder Erfinden. Wie läßt sich Verstehen verstehen?* München 1992, p. 9-14, p. 54-56.

hermetic language of some of its precursors (most notably Niklas Luhmann, not only because of the difficult idiolect⁶) and by the use of many and varied research disciplines ranging from neurobiology through literary studies (another obvious point of convergence with comparative studies). The above are by no means the only reasons for the misunderstanding of Constructivism.

The ambiguity of the word 'Constructivism' may be explained in yet another way, by indicating that Constructivism is on the one hand a certain methodological 'position' which infiltrated many branches of science, and on the other hand it is a study area in its own right, one divided into a number of kinds at that. Constructivism, then, appears within multiple discourses (and this is precisely when we should refer to a 'Constructivist position'[...]), and at the same time branches off into many discourses (as an autonomous philosophy⁷)⁸.

1.2. Comparative studies

The afore-quoted diagnosis proposed by Andrzej Skrendo about the dual nature of Constructivism can refer without too much reservation to the situation of comparative literature. All the allegations of the secondariness of comparative studies and its dependence on other study areas⁹ are targeted against a 'position' rather than a science, a separate research area. This is so also when critics censure particular scientific aspects classified as comparative. This can be justified in two ways:

1. Firstly, the allegations of comparative literary studies being non-autonomous apply most often to comparative research focused on reception, influences, shared topics, tropes (which are actually strictly comparative – in the sense of a science, not a position – and useful research tools, provided they are not the exclusive element of a comparative study) etc., and thus most frequently to comparative studies which is still a position, one from 'before the crisis period'.

⁶ "The Germans themselves say that Luhmann should be first of all translated into German." See E. Kuźma, *Teoria systemowego konstrukttywizmu N. Luhmanna*, in: Red. E. Kuźma, A. Skrendo, J. Madejski, *Konstrukttywizm w badaniach literackich. Antologia*. Kraków 2006, p. 23.

⁷ At this point of the author of the quote makes a note where he adds that the philosophy moreover has its own history and precursors, while on the other hand, 'as many other contemporary philosophers, the Constructivists too announce their radical departure from the great tradition of European philosophy' (A. Skrendo, *Tożsamość w perspektywie konstrukttywizmu*. "Teksty Drugie" 2004, 1-2, p. 67), where we can also identify certain affinities to different positions existing in the debate on comparative literature.

⁸ A. Skrendo, *Tożsamość w perspektywie konstrukttywizmu*, op. cit., p. 66-67.

⁹ "Comparative literature most often leaves the drawing of conclusions arising on the basis of colourful images of literary comparisons ... to theoreticians and aestheticians of literature *sensu stricto*, providing them solely with material (...)." (H. Janaszek-Ivaničková, *O współczesnej komparatystyce literackiej*. Warszawa 1989, p. 227.

2. Secondly, they leave out an important question, namely that comparative literature (as a set of methodologies, rather than individual publications) consists also of a debate on itself, where the hierarchy of interdependence is reversed – in a debate on the manner of operation of comparative literature, it is other sciences that are to explain comparative literature (which sounds like a platitude but will be crucial for my later observations on a clearly defined interdependence).

The first justification, along with its assumption of the current golden age of comparative literary studies, as opposed to its preceding iron age, is a matter of concern if we look at the tempestuous development of this discipline. If we accept its ‘prehistory’, or in Skrendo’s terms ‘dispersed positions’, it evolves after all from a rather cohesive idea to a multidirectional debate that questions its existence, i.e. from *logos* to chaos, not the other way around. However, irrespective of whether such a scenario may be adopted for virtually all developing sciences, not to speak of religions, ideas, cultures, and identities, the process is so evident in the development of comparative literature that it should be seen as its characteristic feature, which in fact makes it cohesive and coherent.

Edward Możejko, when enumerating the major events that have had a decisive impact on the state of contemporary comparative studies, mentions ‘five pivotal reference points that contributed to the transformations of these studies and allow a better understanding of its present state’¹⁰. While these reference points are mainly connected with ‘the experience of North American comparative literary studies’, they are at the same time a reflection of the majority of positions raised within comparative literature as an international debate and as a science in general¹¹. The turning points for E. Możejko (and in fact by definition) are moments of crisis, and there is no denying that although ‘The notion of a crisis of

¹⁰ E. Możejko, *Między kulturą a wielokulturowością: dylematy współczesnej komparatystyki*, w: Red. W. Bolecki, R. Nycz, *Sporne i bezsporne problemy współczesnej wiedzy o literaturze*. Warszawa 2002, p. 410.

¹¹ A report on the history and current (as of the publication) state of comparative studies in different parts of the world can be found in a monograph issue of “Comparative Critical Studies” 2006, No. 3/1-2. On Asian comparative studies (and on the world’s first institution dedicated to comparative studies, established precisely in Japan!) see e.g. J. St. André in: J. St. André, *Whither East-West Comparative Literature? Two Recent Answers from the U.S.* Article posted at: <http://www.litphil.sinica.edu.tw/publish/PDF/Bulleton/22/22-10.pdf> (03/08/07).

The evolution of comparative literary studies in Poland, apart from Maria Cieśla-Korytowska (See: M. Cieśla-Korytowska, *Komparatystyka w Polsce*. “Ruch Literacki” 1995, issue 4), is described by J. Kornhauser (J. Kornhauser, *Koniec komparatystyki słowiańskiej?*, in: *Nadzieje i zagrożenia. Sławistyka i komparatystyka u progu nowego tysiąclecia*. Red. J. Zarek. Katowice 2002, p. 152-164), who in a manner similar to the one at hand analyses the impact of the new cultural and scientific paradigm on comparative studies of Slavic literatures.

comparative literature is not a geographically proportionately allocated one. In terms of the institutional level in continental Europe (not to mention other regions), the crisis is somewhat less intense than in the USA, Canada, or, to certain extent, in Great Britain', still:

Europe, too, has not remained immune to this crisis. Some more recent works, such as Peter Zima's collection *Vergleichende Wissenschaften* (2000) or Armando Gnisci's *Introduzione alla letteratura comparata* (1999), show that European -- or any other, for that matter -- comparative literature can no longer close its eyes to the questions raised by Anglo-American scholarship. By itself, that seems to be a sufficient enough reason for us to devote precise attention to them¹².

[...]

There are two characteristic aspects in the development of comparative literature as presented in Mozejko's article. First of all, the author abstains from introducing the entire 'prehistory' of comparative literary studies. Second of all, the starting point for his story about it is the watershed of its history ('Réne [sic!] Wellek's paper *The Crisis of Comparative Literature ...* and René Etiemble's treatise *La comparaison n'est pas raison*¹³), which usher in a time of constant self-doubts and a permanent crisis of comparative research¹⁴. This is no doubt an arbitrary starting point; it can be equally credibly argued that the debate on the essence of comparative literature started with the activity of Hugo von Meltzl or Hutcheson M. Posnett¹⁵, but, on the other hand, definitely not with that by René Rapin and Charles Perrault¹⁶. To recognise Johann Wolfgang Goethe as a precursor, if not of comparative literature, then definitely of the idea of world literature, as has been tacitly assumed, is far from unobjectionable, either. That this can be seen differently is demonstrated by Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig, who observed that for Goethe *Weltliteratur* is a certain concept that has little to do with a set of literary texts but rather with an exchange of ideas. This is a concept that harks back to the Neo-classical notion of *lettres*, used to denote a general erudition rather than a particular literary phenomenon or a scholarly area of research¹⁷. However, irrespective of the possible alternatives of the *genesis* of contemporary comparative literature and the relevant

¹² T. Virk, *Comparative Literature versus Comparative Cultural Studies*. Transl. from Slovenian into English by K. J. Kozak, in: CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal, December 2003/5.4; article posted at: <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb03-4/virk03.html> (11.08.07).

¹³ Mozejko, *ibidem*.

¹⁴ Another arbitrary date of the onset of comparative meta-discourse can be the date of establishing the International Society for Comparative Studies, i.e. 1954.

¹⁵ As is done by D. Damrosch in: D. Damrosch, *Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies*. "Comparative Critical Studies", op. cit., p. 99-112.

¹⁶ As observed by J. Z. Lichański in: J. Z. Lichański, *Głos w dyskusji*, in: *Badania porównawcze. Dyskusja o metodzie*. Red. A. Nowicka-Jeżowa. Warszawa 1998, p. 21.

¹⁷ S. Hoesel-Uhlig, *Changing Fields*, in: Red. Ch. Prendergast, *Debating World Literature*. London-New York 2005, p. 31.

arguments, as of the moment indicated by Mozejko we can observe more acutely than before the gradual disintegration of the earlier, often seen as the only proper, style of conducting comparative research in literary studies (i.e. a style earlier promoted by French scholars such as Paul van Tieghem and Guyard, attacked by Wellek).

A shift in comparative literary studies, actually confined to identifying the impact of foreign literatures on a particular national literature or of a national literature onto foreign literatures (primarily the indication by French scholars of the impact of the literature of the French language onto other literatures, so aggravating for Wellek) was effected, then, by the author of *The Crisis of Comparative Literature*. The place that remained empty after this shift was filled by Henry Remak as the author of *Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function*. Unlike Wellek, he proposed a new project of comparative studies rather than only a critique of their earlier status. Remak's definition, by now classical, implies that:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression [...]¹⁸

and thus splits comparative literature in its earlier homogenous and coherent form of a strictly 'philological' science, directing it towards the successive pivotal point, i.e. the 'postmodern relativism'. However, it transpires that the 'dissemination of comparative literature', the fragmentation of an earlier coherent concept, proves – on the strength of the paradox pointed out by Jacques Derrida – a uniting factor. Like deconstruction, (paradoxically...) dismantling the earlier hard structures of cognition, at the same time provides them with a certain integrating framework, comparative literary studies, disseminating ever wider the scope of its interest and undermining its own foundations as a separate discipline, by the very debate on its operations legitimises its status as a scholarly practice (or, to borrow a metaphor from Tomo Virk: 'an external enemy strengthens the inner firmness of a community'¹⁹). The gradual disintegration of comparative literature as a discipline of literary research is, therefore, a major cause of its cohesion as a branch of science [...]. Furthermore, on the strength of meta-debate, via intensive theoretical self-substantiation and self-explanation, comparative literary studies acquire a specificity so much

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H. Remak, *Literatura porównawcza – jej definicja i funkcja*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁹

T. Virk, *Comparative Literature versus Comparative Cultural Studies*, op. cit.

desired by Bernheimer; this specificity was provided neither by the object of research, nor by the methodology, nor by the comparatist's erudition and mastery of many languages, the last resort for the scholar. However, to claim that meta-reflection is to be the attribute of comparative literature is to claim too little, or too much, as the same can be said about any other science (and religion, idea, culture, identity...). I would like to prove using Constructivism as an example that something more, i.e. a profound internalisation of metadiscourse, is at stake.

2. The Constructivist paradigm in comparative studies (on the basis of Niklas Luhmann's Constructivism)

The element of comparative literature that would demonstrate its uniqueness and autonomy, the one I would like to domesticate and prove via references to Constructivism, is the aforementioned comparative metatheory, a constantly revised self-awareness of literary studies.

Constructivism is a rather unique science/concept, since it claims to be a universal theory of everything with almost no reservations and equivocations typical of most radical theories. Therefore, as I use certain Constructivist assumptions to describe comparative literature, I am fully aware that in the intention of Constructivists they refer to comparative studies and to any and all other manners of acquiring and organising knowledge ('any and all', as they concern scholarly cognition and non-scientific knowledge, also one originating in premonitions, dreams, predictions, and folk lore). However, since I do not treat here Constructivism as a tool whose assumptions set some basic truthmarker for my story, I will use it only as a certain example that grounds my reflections in the already existing and operating scholarly *universum*; I use it as a prosthesis which I use to boldly step forward.

Constructivism has many faces. 'Siegfried Schmidt spoke many telling words about this case: there is not a single Constructivism; there are multiple; there is no single grand Constructivist narrative (*Meistererzählung*) shared by all the versions; Constructivism is a dynamic tangle of themes, theses and concepts [...]'²⁰. It is no 'uniform theoretical construct proposed by a homogenous group of scholars and provided in a ready acceptable form. Rather

²⁰ A. Skrendo, *Tożsamość w perspektywie konstruktywizmu*, op. cit., p. 67.

than that, we deal here with a certain discourse where one can hear voices belonging to a host of diverse disciplines ..., many of them dissonant'²¹. One of the more coherent theories of Constructivism was proposed by the aforementioned Niklas Luhmann, who despite numerous arguments with other Constructivists (primarily with Siegfried Schmidt) put forth theses that were in general terms convergent with the theories of other representatives of the current. Therefore, in the remainder of my paper I will take advantage of his version of Constructivism.

Of principal significance for this reflection is the fact that in each successive publication [...] Niklas Luhmann presented anew the fundamental assumptions and findings of his (systemic) Constructivism. For Luhmann theory was fundamental²² not only because of the persuasive power of a persistent presentation of the principles of a discipline which long tried to acquire an autonomous status. Erazm Kuźma observes this aspect of the German scholar's writing as follows: 'In fact Luhmann is not concerned with traditional empirical research of sources, field studies, questionnaires, and statistics ..., but rather with theory. This does not mean, however, that he despised erudition; on the contrary, he demonstrates its profundity in all possible aspects. Johnathan Culler once observed that the present time generated a new kind of discourse, which should simply be called theory. Those dedicated to it transcend the confines of individual disciplines and write in a way to make the reader change common notions, and adopt a new perception of himself and the world ... Niklas Luhmann is one of them, too'²³. For Luhmann, theory is not so much the opposite of empirical research but empirical research *par excellence*, a bit differently understood at that: "empirical research" is seen as a systematic (theory-dependent), observation of a second degree, whose results can be socially stable. Stabilisation becomes possible if in a given relevant group of observers there is an explicit or implicit consensus as to observation concepts and criteria, and observation results and consequences remain in line with socially

²¹ S. J. Schmidt: *Kognitive Autonomie und soziale Orientierung. Konstruktivische Bemerkungen zum Zusammenhang von Kognition, Kommunikation, Medien und Kultur*. Frankfurt am Main, 1994, quoted after: O. Prieb, *Konstruktivismus. Überlegungen zu seiner Bedeutung für den Einzelnen*, article posted at: <http://www.userpage.fu-berlin.de/~miles/konstrukt.htm>.

²² The followers titled the book dedicated to him *Teoria jako pasja*, an allusion to the title of Luhmann's book *Love as Passion*. (E. Kuźma, *Teoria systemowego konstrukttywizmu Niklasa Luhmanna*, op. cit., p. 17.

²³ Ibidem, p. 16-17.

acceptable criteria of the real (...)’²⁴. Action is not only dependent on the modes of operation adopted at the level of theory; the theoretical level is the description of ‘how something works’ and is the inner element of operation of the second degree. It is precisely the Constructivist category of a second-degree observer that will allow us to demonstrate the need for (and thus a possibility and precedent of) the introduction of this theory into the zone of comparative literature.

2.1. Comparative literature as second-degree observation

Luhmann’s second-degree observation has its equivalent in Ernst von Glasersfeld’s notion of a ‘second-degree order’ (*zweiter Ordnung*). Glasersfeld points out a simple logic that underpins first-degree observation: not seeing the non-seeing leads to not seeing (*Nicht-sehen von nicht-sehen verursacht nicht sehen*)²⁵. First-degree order is an equivalent of first-degree observation, not seeing that any answer to the question he poses (‘**what** do I see?’ – unlike the questions posed by an observer of a higher degree: ‘**how** do I see?’ or ‘**how** do I see that I see?’) is invariably an incomplete answer (since one way or another ‘I do not see that I do not see’, no matter how hard I may try to see).

This is how we can perceive metatheory as the principal element of comparative literature: there is no point reflecting on **what** the object of comparative literary studies is, as from this perspective each and every object of research (literature, culture, politics, society, biology, economics) calls for a **comparativist stand** [...]²⁶; we can say that in this respect one happens to a comparativist and is a comparativist in a **polycontextural manner**²⁷. However, the moment we reflect on **how** we compare or provoke such reflections in any other (deliberate) manner, in line with the above concept we enter a second level of observation²⁸, i.e. we take part in the creation of **comparative literature as a scholarly discipline**. If I were

²⁴ S. J. Schmidt, *Konstruktivism, teoria systemowa i literaturoznawstwo empiryczne*. Transl. by B. Wójcik, transl. reviewed by A. Skrendo, in: Red. E. Kuźma, J. Madejski, A. Skrendo, *Konstruktivism...*, op. cit., p. 254.

²⁵ E. von Glasersfeld: *Konstruktion...*, op. cit., p. 49-51.

²⁶ A. Lam, *Głos w dyskusji*, in: Red. A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Badania porównawcze...*, op. cit., p. 25

²⁷ Polycontextuality – ‘actual simultaneous coexistence of formally identical possibilities of perception’ (D. Krause, *Luhmann-Lexikon*. Stuttgart 2001, p. 185, entry *Polykontextualität*.); according to Luhmann we operate in a polycontextural manner e.g. in everyday life: our perception system of the world is different when we describe it as employees, as daughters and sons, or as, say, comparativists. This banal dependence acquires scientific value when it is an element of Luhmann’s theory of systems; at this point it is not possible, however, to place it in a broader context.

²⁸ And at least a higher level of observation. In time Luhmann developed his taxonomy by adding a third level of observation – chance (see e.g. *Gespräch zwischen N. Luhmann und G. J. Lischka*, in: N. Luhmann, *Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems*. Bern, 1994, p. 79); this, however, does not bear on the line of argument applied here.

to use once more the language of Constructivism, I would say that comparative studies is a science only when it works as an autopoietic system whose operations take place in the course of feedback, i.e. as a result of contact with the outside (other sciences or other areas of life in general), but on the basis of its own resources (metatheory)²⁹.

3. 'Meta-' impossibilities

A quotation from the aforementioned text by an eminent commentator of Constructivism, one of the first in Poland, will allow one last comment on the metatheoretical (and Constructivist) inclinations of comparative literature. The quote reads as follows: 'The 1984 book that launches a series of Luhmann's fundamental works bears a subtitle *Outline of a Universal Theory*. In its *Introduction* the author explains the universal aspect of this theory, showing that the theory refers to all, including itself, and is self-reflexive:

It teaches itself on its own study objects ... Such an assumption calls for an extraordinary level of abstraction ... He likewise admitted that such a theory is like a labyrinth rather than a highway successfully leading to a destination and that it is not linear³⁰.

That each comparative theory is self-reflexive can be observed for instance in the fact that few contemporary texts on comparative literature touch on **what** to compare, and more focus on **how** to compare. That Luhmann's theory does not resemble a highway successfully leading to the destination point can be seen in Tadeusz Sławek's text: 'At the heart of comparative reflection is precisely the ongoing reflection on what/who is the one I read and look at.³¹ The reflection is 'ongoing' since I cannot accept any answer as the final one, which should safeguard me from jumping to conclusions about the other ...'³² Meta-debate must be precisely ongoing, as the identity of comparative studies cannot be exhausted; the closure of self-analysis of comparative studies would be tantamount to its demise. Comparative literature is observation of the second degree; reflection on itself and on itself vis-à-vis the outside world is its part and parcel, as it is inscribed in the nature of art, which of necessity provokes reflection, not because it would not be art then but because it would be non-existent then [...]. The theory, or rather metatheory referred to here, is, besides, rather elusive. Nothing binding can be said about it save that it exists, while little is certain about what it is and what it should be. Besides, we may wonder whether Richard Rorty is very much mistaken when he writes in no equivocal terms, far more resolutely than Tadeusz Sławek, too resolutely, one might claim [...] about this issue: 'I doubt that anything can be ever be

²⁹ See: D. Krause: *Luhmann-Lexikon*, op. cit., p. 208, entry *System, autopoietisches*.

³⁰ E. Kuźma, *Teoria systemowego...*, op. cit., p.17.

³¹ The dissonance with the statement introducing the quote is apparent only; reflections on 'What is it that I compare?', unlike the question 'What should I compare?', lead directly to a reflection on 'How to compare.' and 'Who am I with respect to what is compared?' (P. W.).

³² T. Sławek, *Literatura porównawcza: między lekturą, polityką i społeczeństwem*, in: Red. M. Czerwińska et al., *Polonistyka w przebudowie: literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku – wiedza o kulturze – edukacja: Zjazd Polonistów Kraków, 22-25 września 2004*. Kraków 2005, p. 393.

identified as central to an academic discipline any more than anything can ever be identified as the “core” of a human self³³. Still, the perception of theory – in the sense of self-awareness, metatheory, rather than theory as the opposite of the empirical – as a unique characteristic of [...] comparative literature is not alien to comparativists themselves, as I have already indicated. Most scholars, however, avoid openly formulating these intuitions. Statements in defence of theory, such as the one in Peter Brooks’s article, seem all the more interesting, then:

(...) comparative literature might best conceive of itself as that place that provides the most probing and self-conscious reflection on what it means to study literature. It could be – and often is – the place where poetics, rhetoric, and the history of literature are most closely attended to. It could be – and often is – the department where “theory” receives the greatest attention³⁴,

or as a demand put forth in the course of the Polish debate on comparative studies:

Treating comparative literature as a meta-science means the impossibility of omitting the question of contacts and metastases (secondaries) at the level of the impact of theory. This leads to a conclusion that within comparative literature we also deal with a comparison of theories (types of theoretical and critical awareness, etc.). This kind of activity becomes one of the tasks of contemporary comparative literature. It is hard to approve totally of such a position but to claim that the discipline at hand consists also in making use of literary theories, especially from the field of comparative studies, is fully legitimate³⁵.

4. Meta-theory as meta-therapy. Conclusion.

The (in)famous *The Bernheimer Report*³⁶, a *faux-pas* of literary studies which was naturally taken back and commented on by the very editor of the book as ‘poorly phrased³⁷ (but still functioning as a clear clash in relations between comparative literature and cultural studies), arouses suspicions of the report’s authors’ drive to break free from the literary text and to embrace (meta)theory. Such suspicions, however, become a legitimate diagnosis when we read the following sentence in another ACLA report:

(...) in the last few decades, it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature (...)³⁸.

³³ R. Rorty, *Looking Back at Literary Theory*, in: Red. H. Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Baltimore 2006, p. 66.

³⁴ P. Brooks, *Must We Apologize?*, in: Red. Ch. Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore and London 1995, p. 102-103.

³⁵ B. Bakula, *W stronę komparatystyki integralnej*, in: „Porównania 2004, No. 1, p. 9 (author’s emphasis). The article is also available in an extended book version in: B. Bakula, *Historia i komparatystyka*. Poznań 2000. I quote the version from the article ushering in the first issue of the periodical dedicated to comparative literature, since as such it seems to possess the value of a manifesto.

³⁶ ‘These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to the authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term “literature” may no longer adequately describe our object of study’ Ch. Bernheimer et al. *The Bernheimer Report*, 1993, op. cit., p. 42.

³⁷ Ch. Bernheimer, *The Anxieties...*, op. cit., p. 15.

³⁸ H. Saussy, op. cit., p. 12.

Thus ten years later at the meta-theoretical level displacement still takes place. At a practical level, on the other hand, in his text ‘Conjectures on World Literature’ published in 2000 in “New Left Review”,³⁹ Franco Moretti proves its taking place in a style that ultimately confirms the inclination of comparative practice to homoerotic intercourses with theory (or rather self-erotic, with itself). Moretti introduces here his ‘own’ – the reason for the use of quotation marks will become apparent shortly – idea of the origin of the novelistic genre⁴⁰, created in the course of analyses of early European and non-European texts. Moretti makes these analyses based solely on already existing scholarly texts, analyses, and publications of his subject of interest (As the anguished author admits in a footnote: ‘OK, I confess, in order to test the conjecture I actually did read some of these “first novels” in the end’⁴¹). He does this in the name of the same demands put forth by all comparativist manifestos (‘reports’) (and texts by Gayatri Spivak), i.e. in the name of departing from the European and any other canon that impoverishes a scholar and that does not take into account literatures with narrow distribution channels or a low sales potential. ‘... The trouble with close reading ... is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. ... You invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter’⁴². Starting from this conclusion Moretti proposes a technique of *distant* reading, exemplified by his own (‘own’?) analysis of novelistic structure and the theory of the genesis of the genre developed in the course of this analysis. This theory ‘allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more’⁴³.

This is a clear manifesto of theoretical self-reflexivity, but does not go as far as to indicate the metatheoretical inclinations of comparative literature (while it evidently proposes its practices to comparative studies as “the only reason to keep the adjective ‘comparative’ in comparative literature”⁴⁴). Moreover, it easily yields to criticism⁴⁵: what is acutely evident is the discrepancy of concern for ‘minor literatures’ and the concurrent light-hearted admission that ‘we are bound to miss something’, a certain indebtedness to systems theory [...] and

³⁹ F. Moretti, *Conjectures on World Literature*. “New Left Review” 2000/1, article posted at: <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2094>, (08.08.2007); quotations from the text reprinted in: Red. Ch. Prendergast, *Debating World Literature*. London-New York 2005, p. 148-162.

⁴⁰ Which claimed that the novel rose as a compromise between a type of narration common in the strict European center and its adaptation in peripheral cultures and that the compromise, because of the discrepancies of the cultures of the regions outside of the center, sometimes at a long distance of it, invariably left some ‘bumps’ and clashes in the construction of novels. The novel as a complete realisation of an image of culture, both at the level of structure and content of narration, is an exception rather than a rule (F. Moretti, *Conjectures on World Literature*, op. cit., p. 152-154) and therefore ‘the “typical” rise of the novel is Krasicki, Kemal, Rizal, and Maran – not Defoe’. [ibidem, p. 155.].

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 155.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 151.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 158.

⁴⁵ Which was naturally levelled vigorously; in response Moretti chose the allegations that are the least interesting from the point of view of these reflections (see: F. Moretti, *More Conjectures*. “New Left Review” 2003/20, the article published at: <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2440>, date of last entry: 08.08.2007), and therefore it is not worthwhile to invoke the debate generated by his text.

finally the many issues earlier codified on the strength of Constructivist observations [...]. It is at the same time symptomatic of a covert need of comparative literature to succumb to theory, a need strongly opposed to by the authors of the two above ACLA reports. [...] As is demonstrated by Constructivism⁴⁶, treating theoretical meta-awareness as the essence (if not the sole practice!) of comparative literature might prevent it from statements jeopardising its autonomy, such as the following one: ‘comparative literature usually leaves the conclusions arising from the colourful imagery of literary comparisons – in which it revels – to theoreticians and aestheticians of literature *sensu stricto*, providing them solely with the material without whose knowledge their generalisations might be only false’⁴⁷.

Transl. Marcin Turski

⁴⁶ Constructivism as a reference point rather than a current of comparative studies conducted, e.g. by S. Tötösy de Zepetnek. The author invokes the findings of e.g. Luhmann (and more often of Schmidt) but ignores the fact that the Constructivists do not generally perceive culture as a system; Zepetnek persistently uses the term as an autopoietic system.

⁴⁷ H. Janaszek-Ivaničkova, *O współczesnej...* op. cit., p. 227.