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# Comparative/Historical Poetics in an Age of Cultural Studies

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'Comparative poetics' does not belong to the set of established terms. It has been introduced by Earl Miner as a title to his book (1990) and might have heralded an ambitious project if not immediately undermined by the subtitle 'An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature'. It did not take long to find that poetics did not easily agree with cultural studies as they were laid out. The only combination where the word 'poetics' could be admitted was 'poetics of culture', picked up by Stephen Greenblatt from Yuri Lotman and conceptualized as an invitation to semiotics. It was a decisive turn in understanding poetics which since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in different national traditions but unanimously, had been advanced as part of linguistics focused on the poetic nature of word. In this direction theory was developed by Benedetto Croce and the Russian Formalists, and later New Criticism practiced it in all forms of close reading.

The Russian Formalism was especially famous for its theory of speech focused on the question how the word of the language takes on a poetic quality. This tendency, extreme in its formalist transformation, can be traced back to Alexander Veselovsky's 'From the Introduction to Historical Poetics' (1893) which he had memorably opened arguing that "literary history is reminiscent of a geographical zone that international law has consecrated as *res nullius* [no one's land], where the historian of culture and the aesthetician, the erudite antiquarian and the researcher of social ideas all come to hunt" [Veselovsky 2016: 40]. Veselovsky did not intend to fence off a special field for poetics but insisted on the specific literary/poetic quality waiting to be examined. Some decades later Roman Jakobson, in his youth a member of the Russian Formalist circle, canonized the problem as *literariness* stipulated by one of the verbal functions initially inherent in the language.

The accent on literariness and specific quality of the poetic word was often overstated. The Russian Formalists – at least in the early days of the theory – were ready to negate any reference to reality sacrificing semantics to poetic significance in the self-sufficient word. Poetics as part of semiotics ran to another extreme: word was reduced to a sign cut off from its poetic specificity, and natural language was treated as a cultural product minimized in its poetic quality.

Culture and literature do not immediately invite to oppose them, and had not been memorably opposed before one was considered the object for poetics the other – for cultural studies. Cultural

reading of the text – not rarely – is illuminating on the plot in its historical context but passing by its literariness indiscernible in the picture memorably defined in its universality as “historicity of texts and textuality of history.” [Montrose: 23]

An enthusiastic and wide rally in cultural studies was a reaction of students of literature generation after generation involved in close reading. Under these circumstances an invitation to locate poetics within cultural studies, no matter whether comparative or any other, was doomed to fail. The century, which opened with a hope for a new linguistic poetics capable to concentrate on the distinctive features, was closed with a semiotic concept of language and text. Literary/poetic text was perceived as a cultural text with a minimum of interest paid to its specific literariness. For poetics it could mean either the death of the discipline, or, at least “the downgrading of literature” [Saussy: 21]. But now we know – better than ever – that cultural deaths are an introduction to revivals.

In 2004 a foremost figure in American theory of literature Jonathan Culler, invited to join an exchange of opinions following the meeting of ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association) and to give his recommendations, expressed his hope that aesthetics “which for a while was a dirty word” began to attract an increasing interest, and that “comparative literature would provide a home for poetics” [Culler: 241, 240].

Comparative literature was always noted for its keen awareness of its method. Its dynamic definition suggests that comparative literature is by no means an aggregation of texts, neither a canon, but ‘a mode of reading’ [D. Damrosch: 11]. And now when poetics is on the agenda again the question how to read and how to read comparatively is raised.

An attempt to answer was suggested by Franco Moretti when he coined the term ‘distant reading’ [Moretti]. The connection with and opposition to ‘close reading’ is evident in the adjective. But no less important is a repetitive part of the term – ‘reading’. Again we are invited to discuss its ‘mode’, but does it bring us to comparative literature as ‘a home for poetics’?

The term “distant reading” is an invitation to comparative poetics where “a mode of reading” has a suggestion of reading in foreign languages. After decades of insistence on a broad linguistic competence for the comparatist, a polyglot beyond European languages on a level to read texts closely, this utopian demand seems to be reduced in view of reality, especially when reality of world literature is considered really worldwide. Haun Saussy argues that “the battle between ‘literature’ and ‘cultural studies’” is “repeatedly correlated with the battle between ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘non-Western’ canons of text and theory...” [Saussy: 21]. Even if an overstatement this opinion is consistent in relation to poetics of comparative literature where the worldwide understanding of the world literature asks for a mode of reading comprehensive in its coverage and profound in its relation to the text, both close and distant.

This is a short historical sketch of the recent situation and the perspective for poetics and cultural studies in view of their would-be cooperation. Poetics as a way to understand verbal art was always considered an important instrument in reification of the human. Cultural studies, with culture as

its object, do not seem to prompt the idea of dehumanization. And nevertheless cultural studies had played its part in the process because of the view of culture with its verbal centre removed and culture devoid of its traditional logocentricity. This is why the revival of poetics is associated with the return of the human in culture and poetics bound to seek for its new method.

In the last 5 years not a few international events in Russia, USA, Italy and other places confirm the growing attention to historical poetics and its author - Alexander Veselovsky. New editions of historical poetics in Russia were published, for the first time following his original plan and filling up the lacunae with the works written by Veselovsky beyond the plan but devoted to the problems he intended to discuss in “Historical Poetics”<sup>1</sup> [Veselovsky 2006; Veselovsky 2010]; translations of his works proliferate, collections of articles on historical poetics come out.

It is much less surprising that Veselovsky’s name becomes familiar at last; it is more surprising how long it took for him to come out from the shadows. For decades his name was vaguely heard or mentioned in the works of the eminent Russian scholars (the Formalists, Bakhtin, Propp) who were always ready to admit the fact that, no matter how different, they all worked in the domain cultivated by Veselovsky and named by him historical poetics.

In the first report from Germany, where Veselovsky went in 1862 to continue his education, he pointed out what had grown archaic: “The time of manuals on rhetoric and poetics is irretrievably past’ [Veselovsky 1862: 444]. Between Veselovsky’s early discovery that poetics was gone and the term he accepted as his own 30 years had passed. First he avoided poetics, then he was looking for a name he could appropriately apply to his own system of thought, and for a long time preferred Steintal’s ‘historical aesthetics’. Veselovsky, unlike contemporary theoreticians, was apprehensive of terms, both old and new. He did not want to precipitate but at the same time he did not want to provoke wrong associations. This was true with poetics, an overall term for his system, and genre, a final term in the plan of his poetics. Veselovsky used the ‘genre’ but rarely and preferred a corresponding Russian word ‘rod’ – genus).

Veselovsky’s slow gait on his way to historical poetics had played a bad joke on its comprehension after his death. In a broad view it had a reputation of a great idea Veselovsky had stumbled on and left unfinished. The general regret has been long concerned with the absence of the plan laid down by the author for “Historical Poetics”. The fragmentary reception had grown into such an unshakable persuasion that the publication of the author’s plan by Victor Zhirmunsky in 1959 had passed practically unnoticed and only half a century later a new edition of “Historical Poetics” according to the plan was brought out [Veselovsky 2006].

Part I in the plan has a title “The Definition of Poetry” and is preceded by the Introduction first voiced in public as a lecture in 1893 and published a year later with the qualification ‘*From the Introduction to Historical Poetics*’.

Part II “Historical Conditions of Poetic Production” looks most extensive, probably, because

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1. The term is written in capital letters when the book Veselovsky was working on is referred to.

three quarters of it (three sections out of four) were partly written, partly in progress. The first two were presented by articles published in Veselovsky's lifetime. The name of the first section has several manuscript variants « Syncretism of the Old Poetry and Beginnings of the Differentiation of Poetic Genera». Veselovsky uses the word 'genera' (rodov) not only because he is still apprehensive of 'genre', reminiscent of the prescribing normative poetics, but because in this section he speaks of the situation when – at the beginning of poetry within the ritual – epic, lyric and drama (the genera of Aristotle's poetics) were taking form and emerged from the initial indistinguishability.

Section 2 deals with the "History of Poetic Style" and can be reconstructed from several articles published by Veselovsky: "Language of Poetry and of Prose", "Psychological Parallelism and its Forms in the Reflection of Poetic Style", "From the History of the Epithet". Section 3 "Poetics of Narrative Plots" was left unfinished and in fragments reconstructed by Veselovsky's disciple Vladimir Shishmarev for the collected works (Part I of Volume 2; it had to be continued in the publication of raw materials from the archive but this Part 2 never came out).

This is what we have from "Historical Poetics", far from completion but much above the basement. The final section in Part II had to be devoted to the "History of Ideals", Parts III and IV respectively – to the poet's personality in its historical evolution and poet's relation to his audience; and the history of genres (still cautiously called genera). Some of the lacunae left can be filled up with the works written and published by Veselovsky in his earlier years, formally beyond historical poetics but on the way to it (as the volume complementary to the edition of "Historical Poetics" was titled) [Veselovsky 2010]. Of course, much could be changed and brilliantly innovated by the scholar in his heyday compared, for example, with an early work in the history of ideals "From the History of the Development of Human Personality. Woman and the Old Theories of Love". Written by the beginner in 1872 it impresses now as a powerful precursor to the research both of the everyday and of the feminist approach.

Summing up the value of Veselovsky's achievement for a current research one should pay attention to how widely and in how various particulars its significance had been acknowledged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Formalists appreciated Veselovsky's call to change a vague status of literature as *res nullius* and to concentrate on the specific. Propp claimed for him the right to have laid the foundation of the narrative research with the difference drawn between the 'plot' and the 'motif'. Bakhtin considered the importance of Veselovsky's genre theory in relation to his own future interpretation of genres as the driving belts 'from the history of society to the history of language' (Bakhtin V: 165) and at the same time as verbal structures (the idea that Julia Kristeva attempted to interpret introducing her famous catchword – *intertext*).

In other words the unique significance of the historical poetics stands out in its *universality* stretching from the minute constituents of the poetic function of the language up to the social function of verbal art. The most general appreciation of this aspect had been expressed by Mark Azadovsky, a foremost folklore scholar, when 80 years ago he argued that in Veselovsky's work every "encounter of plots" presents "an encounter of various culture" (Azadovsky: 101).

A demand for the theory capable of a similar universal scope is on the agenda in the humanities nowadays when the tradition of close reading is being opposed with the idea of “distant reading”. Franco Moretti with his terminological neologism has responded to several challenges both old and new. In the field of comparative literature he has provided an argument in a long-term dispute how many languages the comparatist ought to know. Veselovsky’s linguistic competence was extraordinary: he knew practically all European languages, knew and old, some of them to such perfection that he wrote and published in them, he could read some oriental texts, not to mention Hebrew. But an average comparatist, even if he reads half a dozen or even a dozen languages, in how many of them he can boast of the ability to read closely? Distant reading is to save him from the sense of guilt and incompetence if he is allowed to draw on translations in his reading or other people’s experience and judgment without being thought of as second rate.

The allowance is actually made not for an individual use but for the sake of scholarship in its present day methods when corpus linguistics and similar literary studies deal with a huge amount of texts. Even the most assiduous and conscientious student of Victorian novel is supposed to have read a collection measured in 3-figure numbers but new methods of corpus reading allow to count in thousands. Comparison with a European novel may result in a hundred thousand.

But would this kind of research mean a ‘mode of reading’, named a ‘distant reading’ would this be a reading at all? It would depend on the researcher, on his ability to address the computer sensible questions which, in its own turn, depend on the researcher’s experience in close reading and poetics. In other words, reading as a human activity and human knowledge may be successfully supported and developed by the scope of information we have an access to. But ‘to support’ should not be taken for ‘to substitute’, not to substitute information for either reading, or knowledge. This is where poetics can step in and close reading serve as an argument to introduce distant reading with an aim to draw on the entire accessible database, but not to undermine the sense of the specific quality of the data and our ability to judge of it.

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