

Comparatism and the Crisis of Literary Studies

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ABSTRACT

The article is an analysis of René Wellek's contribution to the theory of comparative literature. It draws on his characterization of the crisis of comparative literature presented at the 2nd Congress of ICLA in the USA, and continues with the interpretation of some of his other opinions concerning the situation in which (not only comparative) literary studies in the USA found itself at the end of the 20th century. They are included especially in his articles "The Attack on Literature" and "Destroying Literary Studies." René Wellek's theoretical opinions are analysed especially in the context of emerging cultural studies and their ideologization of literature in general, formally expressed, for example, in the Bernheimer Report for the American Association of Comparative Literature. The author points out that the future of comparative literature lies not in its use of ideological contexts but in its ability to draw attention to universal principles and values, perhaps through the conceptions of interliterariness and world literature, and thus overcome the harmfulness of separatist tendencies fed by particularisms of various types.

Comparative Literature. Theory of Literature. Literary Study. Literariness. Interliterariness. Cultural Studies. World Literature. National Literatures.

In current literary studies it seems inappropriate, if not downright provocative, to discuss the work of René Wellek. His name has been automatically associated with the past and, especially in the USA, with a conservative approach to the study of literature. At a time when the American literary scene is ruled by ideological approaches to the study of literature, it is not politically correct to refer to the ideas of a man whose main critical credo was to attempt to define the autonomous nature of literature, to identify the specific subject of literary criticism, and, consequently, to study literature through methods and terminology of literature, not of discourses belonging to other scholarly fields. Analogically, the same seems to be the case for the cultural area from which he came to the USA, Czech and Slovak literary studies. As one of the most important representatives of then Czechoslovak literary scholarship, he has not been given adequate critical attention by Czech or Slovak scholars. One of the rare exceptions may be Pospíšil and Zelenka, who in their monographic study *René Wellek a meziválečné Československo: ke kořenům strukturální estetiky*

have discussed the pre-American period of Wellek's literary activities. This "oblivion" is, however, undeserved since he was a critic who wrote a book on literary theory that monopolized the study of literature in the 1950s and 1960s, and was translated into many European and world languages, founded the department of comparative literature at Yale, and stirred critical views on the nature and methodology of comparative literature. A glimpse of his towering presence in literary studies during the post-WWII years thus can be obtained perhaps only through infrequent references to certain stages in the development of critical approaches to literature, or through such events as the Wellek Library Lectures, organized by the Critical Theory Institute, or The Wellek Prize awarded by the American Comparative Literature Association to extraordinary books in the field.

If there has ever been a literary scholar whose life circumstances may have predisposed him/her to work in the field of comparative literature, it was definitely René Wellek. Born in Vienna to an Austrian official of Czech origin and a daughter of a Prussian officer of Polish descent, he had an experience, both direct and indirect, of what it means to be a European, a Central European reflecting in his work unique cultural circumstances of a unique region at a critical time of the clash of civilizations. Due to his background, multilingualism, one of the basic conditions of a traditionally trained comparatist, was a natural fact for him, allowing him to move naturally across several Western and Eastern literatures and cultures. His linguistic abilities included his two native tongues, German and Czech, as well as several other languages in which he could speak and, most importantly, read and write – such as English, French, Russian and Spanish.¹

However, much more important than his linguistic training and skills was his knowledge of various European national literatures, both older (Greek and Roman), and more recent ones (French, German, English, Slavic), as well as his study and work in the times of great theoretical flourishing that tried to synthesize the variability of aesthetic experience into a common concept. As a student of Vilém Mathésius, and a tentative member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Wellek almost inevitably gravitated towards the search for such qualities of literary works that could describe them in "all contexts". The phenomenological analysis of the nature of literature led him to the concept of *perspectivism* (Wellek and Warren 156), to the emphasis on literature's essential unity expressed, however, in different manifestations, embodiments, or, one could say nowadays, readings of a particular work located in the potentiality of the system of norms. As Holquist has claimed, his Kantian perspective "anaclastically perceived through the lens of Prague School Structuralism [provided] the ultimate justification for Wellek's definition of the literariness of the literary work of art" (175).

The concept of literariness plays a central role as regards Wellek's thought in the field of comparative literature as well. The fact that in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" literariness is also presented as "the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature" (293) suggests that what is important for him is literature's specific "mode of being", its status as "a subject distinct from other activities and products of man" ("The Crisis of Comparative Literature" 293), to be studied intrinsically

through literary critical terminology and categories. The problem and crisis which he identifies in the field of comparative literature is then, in essence, the problem and crisis of literature per se. He makes it explicit in his interview with Peter Demetz:

In Iowa I became more and more interested in the theory of Comparative Literature, in the sense that I was strongly convinced that literatures should not be studied in isolation, from one another, that the old ideas of separate philologies were obsolete, and that literature should become a general subject. In some way I always defended the view that “comparative” is really an unnecessary adjective which has become conventional and established. (Demetz, “A Conversation with René Wellek” 143)

The primarily methodological thrust of the “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” was not understood by several of his fellow comparatists, who took it as a personal attack on them. But, as he tries to explain later on, “It was instead a polemic against the conception of comparative literature as it was propagated by the school of scholars at the Sorbonne, Baldensperger [...] Carre, Van Tieghem, and Guyar” (Demetz, “Third Conversation with René Wellek” 83). Indeed, Wellek’s insistence on the dominance of aesthetic criteria in any discussion of literary phenomena, comparative or non-comparative, could not be compatible with the so-called French School and “their methodology, which was limited in its emphasis on purely external relations” (Demetz, “Third Conversation with René Wellek” 84), or with “mere factualism, a preoccupation with external information, without any serious attempt to understand the text, or to have a feeling for literature as a form of art” (84).

The aesthetic as embodied in the concept of literariness lies, implicitly or explicitly, behind most of Wellek’s theoretical generalizations, and could be characterized as a central point of reference informing his *Theory of Literature* as well as New Critical² close readings of Western literary texts in the decades before the coming on the scene of what I would call ideological discourses. It has to be emphasized here, however, that although the application of literariness has frequently been associated with the “Wellekian” formalist or structuralist theories of literature, its centrality in certain post-structural discourses cannot be denied either. One must add, however, that Wellek’s literariness was based on aesthetic principles, while the post-structural literariness was identified as the essential principle of the functioning of language in general, resulting in the essential indeterminacy or fictionality of all the areas of human endeavour using language as a means of communication. And since language affects the totality of human existence, post-structuralists considered the entire world as “literary,” that is fictional. We can say then that the intrinsic literariness gave rise to its essential opposite – the extrinsic pan-relativity. Wellek himself was aware of the proximity between his theory of literature based on the literariness of literary phenomena and what followed later on: “I sometimes feel guilty of having helped to propagate the theory of literature. Since my book, theory has triumphed in this country and has, possibly, triumphed with a vengeance” (“Destroying Literary Studies” 8).

Such penetration of the extrinsic through, as it were, a backdoor of literariness was not, could not, be accepted positively by literary scholars for whom literature was still firmly located in the “literary” universe. Wellek’s first strong objections against

the new tendencies in literary criticism and theory were expressed in his “The Attack on Literature”. As in some of his other articles, he defends, in a comparative fashion, literature against the threats of modern attacks by citing various sources from many national literatures. The first danger is seen in political attacks accusing literature of a supposed conservative nature and claiming that it helps preserve conservative power. The second attack on literature is the so-called cult of silence resulting from the artists’ distrust of language, while the third comes from the “electronic age”, which can destroy literature by substituting writing with electronic media. Although one does not have to agree with all of Wellek’s claims, there is no doubt that he managed to identify the phenomena which problematize the study of literature in the late twentieth century – the post-structuralist distrust of language as well as a general shift of most post-war intellectuals to the left and their use of literature for pragmatic objectives of various kinds.

His second open objection to the tendencies ruling contemporary literary studies appeared in his article with a no less expressive title – “Destroying Literary Studies”. While in “The Attack on Literature” he is preoccupied with the analysis of the state of literature, here his focus is rather on the state of the study of literature. Like “the attack”, the destruction of literary studies also comes from different sources, though it is generally understood as “an attempt to destroy literary studies from the inside” (“Destroying Literary Studies” 1). He is worried about the denials of the aesthetic nature of literature, as manifested in the refusal of Kant’s distinctions “between the good, the true, the useful, and the beautiful”, in the work of such theorists as Croce, Dewey or Richards. However, much more dangerous for literary study, he claims, was the tendency ushered into the literary critical scene by some post-structural thinking, subverting the traditional trust in language as a system which can, to a degree, represent reality.

The danger that Wellek fears most in the “Destroying Literary Studies” is deconstruction – an extreme case of theory continuing the intrinsic concentration on literary language and venturing into the realms of extrinsic contexts – promoted, paradoxically, also by his colleagues at Yale Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom and their French “teacher” Jacques Derrida. One can understand this fear since Derrida and deconstruction reached a level of popularity in American academic circles of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s comparable to Wellek’s and New Criticism’s popularity in the preceding decades and were leading literary study outside the scope of literature. And although deconstruction and the “Wellekian” type of criticism, especially New Criticism, have sometimes been characterized as having grown out of the same source (Green 69), i.e. the primacy of the textual, they were, in fact, epistemologically separated in their attitude to language. While for Wellek and New Critics language, for all its inaccuracies, is a device of communication providing access to mind and reality, though “the relation of mind and world is more basic than language” (“Destroying Literary Studies”), for Derrida, and an army of his American followers, it is something more essential, a world-creating “device”, a gate and a condition to the (Heideggerian) being-in-the-world, a signified and a never completed signifier at the same time. The highly existential (de Man) and extremely semiotic

(Derrida's play of signifiers) aspects of language could never be accepted by Wellek in his phenomenologically inspired theories based on the identification and description of the phenomenon of literature.

The ultimate indeterminacy of language resulting in the relativity of linguistic constructs (of which the world is also one) as practised by deconstruction is, for Wellek, the main culprit destroying the "identitarian" theories of the previous times, and affecting his previously painstakingly elaborated concepts and categories – literary theory, literary history, literary criticism. It undermines claims to truth of any historical, critical or interpretive judgments and, instead of this, creates an ideal space for the blurring of the genres and emergence of interdisciplinarity, which is something that René Wellek was always against. He puts his feelings bluntly at the end of the paper:

The abolition of aesthetics, the blurring of the distinction between poetry and critical prose, the rejection of the very ideal of correct interpretation in favor of misreading, the denial to all literature of any reference to reality are all symptoms of a profound malaise. If literature has nothing to say about our minds and the cosmos, about love and death, about humanity in other times and other countries, literature loses its meaning. It is possible to account for the flight from literary studies in our universities. ("Destroying Literary Studies" 6)

However, in spite of their strong language, the two papers (unlike "The Crisis of Comparative Literature") have not exerted an essential influence on literary study from the 1980s onwards, being at most symbolic expressions of nostalgia over something that has passed and may never come back again. It is a well-known fact that a writer's, a critic's, "fame", as well as "oblivion", are to a great extent conditioned by the context of the times, and the times were unmerciful to Wellek's firmly held convictions. His fame came in times characteristic of an increased appeal of the values of internationalism and humanity, after WWII, which significantly contributed to the "Wellekian" understanding of literature not through a narrow national view but as set in a larger network. His fall, on the contrary, came when these values were forgotten or at least not considered as important as their opposites.

The volatilities of the times determining Wellek's appeal but also leading to the labelling of him as a conservative outside modern (or rather postmodern) trends of literary study, could be demonstrated in three "reports" on the state of comparative literature in the USA issued by the ACLA in 1965, 1975 and 1993. The first report informed about the spread of comparative literature courses and departments as part of the more general "revival of interest in language teaching, the introduction of programmes and courses in great books, and the international crosscurrents and exchanges" ("The Levin Report" 21). Having established the Yale Department of Comparative Literature, Wellek was naturally invited to take part in its preparation. The "Report" set comparative literature along traditional views of the centrality of European, or Western, thought, emphasizing literary works written in major European languages and preferably studied in the original, which was the context in which Wellek moved very naturally and without any obstacles. The second, or "The Greene Report" continued the depiction of a very similar picture, perhaps with a realization

of the winds of change beginning to blow as the vision of the emergence of global literature and the potential parochiality a comfortable European view would indicate. A significantly different approach to literature, comparative literature, and a probable reason for Wellek's "fall from grace", was offered in the third or "The Bernheimer Report", which was a reflection of a changed sensibility – a departure from literature as an independent subject and a shift towards interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism. The "Report" claims, among other things, that "Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline" and "are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production" (42). Such an approach is "miles away" from Wellek's phenomenological analysis of the nature of literature and is clear "proof" of what he had called a destruction of literary studies.³

As the reports demonstrate, literary study moved along a difficult path from the literary to the extra-literary, from literary theory to the "Theory", from the European to the non-European, from the national to the international and multicultural. Although the shifts have occurred across the entire literary study landscape, comparative literature is almost universally credited as having significantly contributed to this development, especially as regards the emergence of the "Theory", which became "the lingua franca of comparative literature departments" (Brooks 103), a consequent move to the cultural and multicultural as "the discipline [which] has intrinsically a content and form that facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and culture" (Tötösy de Zepetnek 2), or its penetration into larger contexts through its protocols becoming, as Saussy maintains, "the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion" (3).

Like the (mis)appropriation of literariness, the association of comparative literature with the phenomenon of "theory" makes it instrumental in the emergence of contemporary approaches to literature, especially cultural studies. In a way this is understandable, since comparative literature has always had the potential of involving into its analyses larger than aesthetic issues from the very beginning of its existence, when it was connected with 19th-century nationalism. Although larger issues cannot be eliminated from general literature either, since art without such a context – individual, national, international or global – would be just for its own sake, what counts is the extent of their presence in works of art, which is undeniably greater in the case of comparative literature. The same holds true for the so-called "comparative reflex", as Saussy (5) calls it, which has always been present in literary interpretations and analyses, not only of individual works but of larger movements as well. Comparing is, in fact, subconsciously present in any writer's attempt to bring about something new, to distinguish himself/herself from predecessors. It was definitely behind Wordsworth's differentiation of his poems in "Lyrical Ballads" from the previous era – in themes, genre, form, etc.

One of the undeniably positive aspects of such enlargement of issues is that it turns (or should) our attention to many other regions of world cultural heritage. There is no doubt that post-colonial approaches to the study of literature, turning critical attention to Oriental, Asian, African, and other cultures, would not be possible without

a “comparative instinct”. What is problematic, however, is that the extension of the scope of comparative study is not without implicit dangers, or perhaps just simplicities of critical opinion, to which I would also like to point. Perhaps the most acute seems to be the tendency towards fashion-based criticism, present especially on the American scene, whose first symptoms had appeared already during the so-called “Derridean Age”, when Derrida’s undoubtedly innovative first works were suddenly taken as a model of an absolute critical practice, followed by an army of second-rate imitators. A similar danger has been recognized in contemporary appropriations of comparative overlapping into extra-literary considerations as well. Saussy, for example, expresses a cautionary attitude to what is going on by pointing to the abuse of interdisciplinarity (3) and Zepetnek, on the other hand, is slightly irritated that “approaches and subject areas in cultural studies purport to be innovative, when in fact the same areas have been studied under similar terms in comparative literature” (2).

The dissatisfaction with how the comparative spirit was appropriated by(in) multicultural approaches, as a fetish of the Otherness, was expressed even by some scholars within the multicultural and post-colonial group. Rey Chow has, for example, argued that the problem of the Eurocentric focus of the old comparatists cannot be simply done away with “if we simply substitute India, China, and Japan for England, France, and Germany” (109), since we only substitute one set of “great nations” for another one. What is needed instead is concentration on non-national units. “Instead of reconsolidating the boundaries of nations, through the study of national languages and literatures, comparative literature should remain the place where theory is used to put the very concept of the nation in crisis, and with that, the concept of the nation as the origin of a particular literature” (112).

Something similar seems to be beginning to occur also in Europe, where comparative study originated and was, in the beginning, based on nation-states (that is, “great nation-states”, such as England, France, Spain, Germany, or perhaps also the Scandinavian states) as well as on positivistic exploration of influences, though one also has to say that multiculturalism has not reached here the dimensions comparable with the USA. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Europe is a homogenous entity consisting only of certain traditional cultural centres, as accusations of Eurocentrism coming from certain American comparatists would indicate, but an area where struggles for representation are also taking place. As Cabo Aseguinolaza has recently maintained, “certain notions like European literature or world literature have returned to the forefront” (418), but in a different shape. He sees this as a natural tendency, since “Europe is suffering a lack of representation” (421). He argues, however, that the return cannot be to a narrowed Enlightenment notion of Eurocentrism, which was, in fact, understood as a version of globalism since the world was looked at through the European point of view. The world has changed since that time and Europe is just one part of it. And because of that even the concept of Europe cannot be automatically taken as representing the Enlightenment universality, representing in fact just certain “great literatures” of “great nations”, but including other spaces seeking to legitimize themselves – he mentions, for example, Galician, Basque and Catalan literatures (422).

It goes without saying that the emergence of other cultural spaces in Europe would be incomplete without such supranational entities like Slavic literatures, Central European literatures, Mediterranean literatures, and so on. Also the changing concept of Europe after the fall of Communism and an increasing participation of European nations in the European Union requires a new approach in re-situating the former socialist countries into the cultural picture of Europe, reinstating them as natural parts in a European (multi)cultural mosaic. A new dimension should also be given to the cultural relationships between the countries that gained independence after the split of federative or multinational states, like the former Czechoslovakia⁴ or Yugoslavia. All this was formerly absent from the analyses of Europe's leading comparatists, who could not speak Slavic languages.⁵ Moreover, much work has been done in the theory of the comparative process as well, especially by Dionýz Ďurišin, who drew on the conceptual framework of the Prague Formal School and on Czech Structuralism. Ďurišin was a Slovak comparatist whose contribution lies especially in the systemization of the relationships between the categories and concepts reflecting the processes occurring between the two limiting points of the interliterary process – national and world literatures. Although his works are affected by socialist terminology (frequent references to Marx, Lenin, as well as Soviet literary scholars), it may be said that he was not by far so ideological as some contemporary “Western” literary scholars for whom literature is just a device of social, political, ethnic, cultural or multicultural struggle.

Such strong complicity of contemporary American scholarship with ideological discourses often forces literature to act as an “acolyte” in ideological struggles. Even though one has to admit that there have always been abuses of literary criticism and theory of any kind, and that, as suggested above, literature (especially comparative literature) has never been separated from larger cultural and social issues (see, for example, the role of certain European Romanticisms in national liberation struggles, or the role of some artists in the struggle against Communism in Central European literatures), or that the rightful struggle of post-colonial literatures for their acknowledgment could have caused the natural infusion of ideology, the sheer extent of the ignorance of the aesthetic function in literature and art at the present time is shocking.

The association of the causes of such excessive ideologization with theory, not the theory of literature, but the post-structural proliferation of the “Theory”, for which comparative literature is frequently blamed, requires further discussion and, definitely, more scope than this article affords. However, the claim seems sometimes justified and even obvious if we realize that many of the leading scholars of the American 20th century's literary studies were in fact comparatists. The Yale Department of Comparative Literature was, for example, chaired by Paul de Man, one of the two prominent celebrities (together with Jacques Derrida) of “Theory's” principal theory – deconstruction. Besides that, one cannot forget such other “Yale Critics” as Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, or Harold Bloom, who also practised critical text-exegesis, the interpretations exploring ontological realms of meaning production and emphasizing indeterminacy resulting from the subversion of semantic processes in

language. And even though Paul de Man cannot be considered an ideological critic, since the aim of his theory of reading was, among other things, to unmask the aesthetic ideology, to show it as being of a textual nature, not reality, his rhetorical readings almost inevitably led to the establishment of new ideologies ignoring traditional critical concepts, including those of reading, aesthetic value, as well as interpretation, all in line with his theory of reading “which always both postulated and undid its subtending theory” (Brooks, 99). On top of that, he was also a critic who, according to Wellek, emptied literature of its human sense, which was another indirect impulse for the rise of cultural studies and the subsequent loss “of literary tradition and with it philological tradition” (Villanueva 5), or, in other words, for a crisis of literary study at the beginning of the 21st century.

The notion of crisis is certainly not new for comparative literature which, in its history, has faced several “crises”, or “deaths”. In the late 1950s it was René Wellek, claiming that comparative literature was in crisis since it lacked a distinct methodology and object of study; then came Bernheimer’s forcing out of literature from the field of comparative study and Bassnet’s diagnosis of its death, to end with Spivak’s “death of a discipline”. Furthermore, there have been disagreements concerning its “function and nature” as well as other methodological and terminological skirmishes. Wellek, brought up on Kant and phenomenology, could not agree with the French school of contacts and influences, and assigned comparative literature a place within the borders of literature, attributing it with the noble task of aesthetic representation of human universals. After several decades, Bernheimer perhaps also felt the crisis mentioned by Wellek, but his proposed solution was different – to leave the intrinsic world of literature and have comparisons enter the fields of media, economy, politics, etc. Spivak’s dissatisfaction is, for a change, with the Eurocentrism of comparative literatures tradition and non-representation of new languages and nations.

What does this mean for comparatism, literature, for its particular and universal values? First of all, that all the above views are both right and, at the same time, to a certain extent limited. For all the complexity and depth of Wellek’s literary scholarship, it seems that he did not give sufficient credit to the fact that comparing influences among certain nations is a natural activity for “comparative” literature. One can, and again to a certain extent, also agree with Bernheimer. But instead of being swallowed up by cultural studies, as he would have it, comparative literature should become “a viable interlocutor” to them, “one that insists that contextualizations of literature in ideological and cultural terms remain aware of literature’s institutional definitions” (Brooks 103). And finally, one cannot ignore Spivak’s urge either, for even though the world is not the same as it used to be, Europe should not be “deleted” from its global picture. What remains then is to say that comparative literature should cover all of the mentioned aspects.

One of the possible ways in which to achieve this could be through the concept of interliterariness, and the concept of world, or global literature as logical and natural objectives of the interliterary process. Traditional comparative literature drew not only on historical and national impulses (at present developed into sociological, cultural, ethical and political aspects) but also absorbed the impulses of formal and

structuralist thinking. The formalist term of literariness ought to be preserved if literary scholars do not wish to “commit suicide” and deprive the field of critical scrutiny of the aesthetic treatment of the human condition, and further developed into interliterariness, if comparative literature is to preserve its spirit of comparison and thus not to give up addressing also the particular within the universal. In contemporary troubled times there is nothing more appropriate than the cultivation of the spirit of global humanity, not suppressing, naturally, its partial manifestations in the cultures of individual nations, regions or communities. And even though the concept of world literature is neither a new one,⁶ nor unproblematic (denoting different things at different periods for different scholars), it has the ability to become a natural goal of comparative literature in its “combating the false isolation of national literary histories” (“The Crisis of Comparative Literature” 282-283), demonstrating Goethe’s conviction that “there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science”, and, furthermore, that they simply belong “to the whole world, and can be fostered only by untrammelled intercourse among all contemporaries, continually bearing in mind what we have inherited from the past” (qtd. in Strich 35). The true force of world literature should not then lie in the unification and reduction of uniqueness but rather in the creation of a global framework of cultures of the world where each individual and unique culture could be seen as one among many, as a part of world heritage, as well as in the creation of a space where cultures could transcend traditional divisions based on terminology of “national Geist”, and be discussed as parts of larger interliterary communities.

NOTES

- ¹ Knowing foreign languages was mentioned as one of the most important conditions for the successful study and interpretation of works of comparative literature even in official documents of the ACLA. In the so-called “Levin Report”, for example, one of the minimum requirements for an undergraduate in comparative literature would be the ability to study at least one literature in the original language, and at the graduate level to acquire a reading knowledge of a second language. The importance of foreign language skills is upheld also in the “Second or Green Report”, even though courses in translation are not ruled out either. The “Third or Bernheimer Report” continued the placing of importance on accessing literary works through foreign languages, but the focus naturally shifted to the importance of non-European languages.
- ² Although Wellek was closely associated with some members of what was later understood as New Criticism, he never became part of the movement. For more on his understanding of New Critical principles, see Wellek’s *A History of Modern Criticism*, especially the chapter “New Criticism”.
- ³ To demonstrate Wellek’s response to this tendency, let me include here my own brief personal experience of my meeting with Wellek. In 1993 – 1994 I was a Fulbright Fellow at Yale University where Wellek worked for most of his career. When I came to see him in 1994 (with a friend of mine), Wellek was already confined to bed in a nursing home in Hamden, Connecticut. I remember that his mind was very clear and the room was full of books. I treasure two clear memories from the meeting. The first one is the remembering of his stay in the High Tatras (coming to his mind apparently upon learning that I was Slovak), while the second one was his response to a book which I had with me – *The Resistance to Theory* by Paul de Man. Seeing the book, Wellek just moved his hand, in an irritatingly bored way, and continued talking. Although the following years slowly blurred the details of our discussion, the hand-sweep stayed in my memory, probably because I was quite surprised that he apparently did not share my enthusiasm for what I had considered at that time the highlights of post-structuralism – still rare and fresh for a mind like my own, brought up on the maxims of socialist

realism. The move was also a symbolic brushing away of the new and returning to his own world.

- ⁴ For more on the Czech and Slovak cultural contacts, see the work of Anna Zelenková, especially her monographic study *Medzi vzájomnosťou a nevzájomnosťou. Sondy do česko-slovenských a slovensko-českých literárnych vzťahov*.
- ⁵ Holquist (167) in this respect points to the difference between Wellek who had “a native understanding of the very different world of Slavic culture” and Spitzer and Auerbach who lacked it.
- ⁶ Its origin has been frequently associated with Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* developed in his several works and statements on literature.

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