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Živo branje
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Reading Live
Literature, Science and
the Humanities

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Živo branje
Literatura, znanost in humanistika

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Reading Live: Literature, Science and the Humanities

Jola Škulj

Focusing on the creative intersections between literature, sciences and humanities, this special issue of *Primerjalna književnost*, the journal published by the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association, will examine how these three fields of human creativity attract and reflect the immediate participation of those who become involved in them through readings, observations or reflections. More radically, the question might be sharpened to wondering whether the subjective, the process of life itself, is inscribed in textual decoding, in the ‘objectivity’ of scientific cognition, in the processes of thought. Recently, such confrontation between literature as creative practice on the one hand, and the positions of the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ sciences on the other, has been repeatedly foregrounded and discussed in a number of published works; indeed, the European science policy has been able to grasp their interconnectedness in more productive relations, to encourage and promote it.¹ It seems only reasonable to rethink the links between these branches of the human inventive mind in the Slovenian milieu as well: to perform a task which demands responsible, large-scale confrontation and reflection on our viewpoints, if a more productive national science policy is to be achieved. At the same time, this special issue should serve as a reminder that poetry (*poiesis*) – as the *conception*, or *making* of, and synonym for creative acts – is by no means as marginal as it appears in our hectic everyday life, in our neglect of everything useless; indeed, it demands far greater commitment, for it touches, directly and openly, our own selves, the immediate human existence in the world. In fact, as minutely as researchers investigate their research objects, true art investigates our fragile and enigmatic being-in-the-world.

The established tradition of special bilingual issues of *Primerjalna književnost* ought to provide a suitable context in which Slovenian researchers in the so-called ‘soft’ sciences can engage in a dialogue with their colleagues in the ‘hard’ sciences to confront jointly their own views with those held by other European scientists, and to promote their own visions and findings internationally, in topical attempts at establishing more efficient *integrated* knowledge. The intersections of the interests sustaining the art of literature, as well as the irrepressibly burgeoning knowledge produced by the sciences, are inscribed in the phenomenology of what Helga Nowotny calls *transgressive thinking*, which is why it is in the context of the

emerging 'life sciences' that it makes sense to open and reflect on the inherent tacit dialogue between sciences, literature and humanities.

It seems that the fundamental question to be raised is, can the knowledge unfolded by the humanities complement the skills and insights unfolded by the hard sciences? This preliminary question relates to the idea that the new paradigm of knowledge, labelled by Nowotny and her colleagues as 'Mode 2', represents a departure from the scientific paradigm 'Mode 1', 'characterised by the hegemony of theoretical or, at any rate, experimental science' (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 179), and that it is distinguished by an increasingly pronounced interest in reflexivity and in the dialogical process, but most of all by an awareness of the irrefutably active role played by the humanities in the production of knowledge. An essential aim is to point out the new view of the role and significance of the humanities as 'the most engaged of all disciplines' (188), capable of providing other scientific disciplines with the concepts of reflexivity and analytical historical insight.

The articles that comprise this issue of *Primerjalna književnost* aim to dig into the complexities of literature and of scientific thought, pointing out the theoretical premises for confronting sciences, literature and humanities. They raise the issues of mutual cognitive bases and of complementary matrices encompassed in the key words – such as complexity, inventiveness, networking; system, autopoiesis, semiosis, narrativity, focalisation, identity, the role of the self, that is, of the human factor – which have been methodologically detailed in literary studies as well as in contemporary hard science. The views that the issue of language is relevant to all sciences did not take shape only with Lotman's semiotics of culture; rather, they are visibly highlighted as early as in Heisenberg's *Schritte über Grenzen*, and further corroborated by ground-breaking biologist understanding of cognition (Maturana and Varela) and language (Thibault). Moreover, the new conceptions of cognition offer a different, more precise understanding of facts and their historicity; through recognising the indispensable role played by reflexivity and by the dialogical process in the wording of knowledge, they open a new view on the significance of the humanities in knowledge production.

If cognition is part of our own 'live' phenomenology, if readings and interpretations of the world are an unavoidable challenge to the human autopoietic adaptation and rethinking of identity, then a comparativist intervention, confronting the conceptions in the overemphasised binarism of the hard and soft sciences, leads to responsible self-reflection and a confident attribution of meaning to our work. With its consistent analytical approaches, the comparative commitment to the issues of literature and to

the context of cultural practices is accustomed to reading semiotically the complexity and inventiveness running through the texture of art system, as well as to interpreting the role of the self, the human factor, in literary acts, and thus to considering historically the reasons for the emergence of and changes in the matrices of art and knowledge. Communication across the institutional borders of research disciplines is undoubtedly a stimulating component of a genuine and responsible research interest; literary studies, with its theoretical and methodological findings and its conceptual territory, can significantly contribute to a new, active production of knowledge. Indeed, a convergent approach to knowledge may have multiplicative effects.

This convergent approach leads to more convincing scientific arguments why a creative practice such as literature should continue to exist, while its degree of topicality efficiently attests and internationally promotes Slovenian comparative literary studies, consolidating the work that had begun with the inclusion of our research in this field in the aforementioned European project ACUME 2.

Translated by Nada Grošelj

NOTE

¹ These problems were, after all, successfully addressed by the European 2006–2009 project ‘ACUME 2: Interfacing Sciences, Literature & Humanities’, co-ordinated by Vita Fortunati and Claudio Franceschi.

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