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AT THE INTERSECTION OF SLOVENE EMPIRICAL LITERARY STUDIES

This article describes and critically evaluates the status of the field of empirical literary studies, and in particular publications that represent an “orthodox” variant of empirical literary studies. It attempts to overcome the stagnation in conceptual and theoretical discussions by rethinking certain recent cognitive research projects. An equivalent role is acknowledged for research that employs primarily empirical methods and contributes to the empiricization of literary studies. Major names, achievements, and institutions in Slovenia that carry out empirical studies are noted.

Key words: empirical literary studies (ELW), radical constructivism (RK), theory of cognition, methodological empiricization, institutions

A formidable move to empiricize the field of literary studies has been observable in Slovenia since the 1990s. This means that more than a full decade (PERENIČ 2010: 99) had to pass from the origins or first phase of the institutionalization of ELW, as signaled by the appearance of its founder, Siegfried J. Schmidt’s¹ *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* ([1980] 1991), or a good thirty years until now for the empirical paradigm in Slovenia to become even stronger, to judge by certain successful M.A. and doctoral theses and books. This is a welcome time, if we take into account that the majority of Slovene representatives are in a “teacher-student” relationship, and the younger ones are not blindly following their teachers’ authority but have, despite their relatively small number, developed original models of literature as representatives of empirical literary discourse and chosen purely individual paths in literary research.

Following the early empirical analyses of literature, which are of interest because of the relatively quick turn to computing in the 1970s and 1980s—Peter Scherber’s *Slovar Prešernovega pesniškega jezika* [A dictionary of Prešeren’s poetic language, 1977], Denis Poniž’s *Numerične estetike in slovenska literarna znanost* [Quantitative aesthetics and Slovene literary studies, 1982], and the articles *Numerična estetika in usoda umetnosti* [Quantitative aesthetics and the fate of art, 1972a] and *Računalniki in poezija* [Computers and poetry, 1972b]—Miran Hladnik’s article *Količinske in empirične raziskave literature* [Quantitative and empirical literary research, 1995] ought to be mentioned from the 1990s and certainly included in any

¹ At the time he was at the the university in Siegen. In 1989 he published the monograph *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, which is a sort of realization of the the theoretical model in *Grundriß*. Among the final phases of institutionalization of ELW, aside from the LUMIS collection (see below), was the founding of an international ELW society, IGEL, in 1987. It next conference will be in Turin in 2014.



list of articles in the field of empirical literary studies.² Hladnik emphasized that in empirical studies literariness is a cognitive phenomenon,³ and therefore he went in the direction of purely quantitative analyses of literature. The quarter for discussing ELW's theoretical principles remained virtually vacant. The profile of the majority of empirical analyses, which for the most part were devoted to different layers of literary life, like the book trade and publishing, indirectly attest to this. Book publishing and readership research are examples. In 1999, a book by this title authored by Gregor Kocijan, Martin Žnideršič, and Darka Podmenik was published at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. It had been preceded by Kocijan's monograph *Knjiga in bralci* [The book and readers, 1974].⁴ Dejan Kos was among the first who began to fill the lacunae that had appeared in discussions of ELW's conceptual and theoretical models. His 1998 dissertation on German literature, *Konzeption der radikal-konstruktivistisch fundierten empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*, introduced the first thorough picture of ELW's theoretical principles and was the foundation for his book *Theoretische Grundlage der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* (2003). Yet this publication, which was important for establishing ELW in Slovenia, did not have the kinds of effects that it might have had,⁵ at least in the study of the national literature. One of the most obvious indicators is the dearth of references to ELW in scholarly publications on literature. The reasons for this might be sought in the relatively tenuous ties between Slovene and other philological studies, with too little attention to and interest in similar research on both sides; the language of scholarly publications (e.g., Germanists publish a great deal in German); place of publication; and likely elsewhere. However, the criticism of flawed lists of references has even more to do with the absence of leading German theoreticians in ELW in some Slovene publications on empirical and related studies—something I have already pointed out and which I would explain by the fact that yet today we lack Slovene translations of fundamental works on ELW. Besides Schmidt's two fundamental works, which often go uncited while his theory is adapted from Slovene authors who refer to him, the LUMIS-Schriften⁶ collection and the selected works of leading theoreticians⁷ in the field deserve attention (PERENIČ 2010: 29). The Germanist Neva Šlibar (e.g., 2001) has also written on the role of radical constructivism in literary scholarship. Marijan

² I say "certainly" because some researchers, especially those who approach literature with other methodologies, when referring to ELW often cite only the studies of younger researchers who mainly began working after 2000, thus showing a poor knowledge of ELW in Slovenia and in a wider sphere. At the same time, this clearly confirms that an awareness of ELW in Slovenia began to spread and take hold only at that time.

³ This is the conceptual core of ELW.

⁴ *Knjiga in bralci II* (Kocijan and Žnideršič) and *Knjiga in bralci III* (Kocijan, Žnideršič, Podmenik, and Rupel) appeared in 1980 and 1985.

⁵ Slovene and Slavic scholars likely became acquainted with the topic he was writing about in the article *Izhodišča in perspektive empirične literarne znanosti* [The principles and perspectives of empirical literary studies], which appeared in *Slavistična revija* in 2004.

⁶ It was founded at Siegen in 1984 and published (theoretical) articles in the field of empirical literary and media studies.

⁷ These are Schmidt's "student" Gebhard Rusch, Achim Barsch, R. Viehoff, D. Schwanitz, N. Werber, G. Plumpe, and others.



Dovič⁸ published an article on the topic of ELW's theoretical bases in *Primerjalna književnost* in 2002. Tomo Virk had previously mentioned constructivist (meta) theory in *Moderne metode literarne vede* [Modern methods of literary studies 1999, 2003: 228], introducing only ELW's founder, as might be expected since the book was intended as a survey of research methods. In a paper for the 2007 Slavistični kongres, I spoke on the radical constructivist (RK) bases of ELW, and wrote about it in the introductory chapters of my dissertation, *Konstrukcija nacionalnega literarne sistema z vidika empirične sistemske teorije* [The construction of a national literary system from the viewpoint of empirical systems theory, 2008],⁹ which was the basis for the monograph *Empirično-sistemske raziskovanje literature: Konceptualne podlage, teoretski modeli in uporabni primeri* [Empirical-systemic literary studies: Conceptual framework, theoretical models, and applications, 2010]. A critical survey of systems models for literature and a project for an original model are at the core of the monograph,¹⁰ but I also touched on the role of RK in (empirical) literary studies.

Despite these publications, which were important for the solidification of the empirical paradigm, we can nonetheless observe that conceptual and theoretical discussions of ELW in Slovenia stagnated.¹¹ In establishing its empiricism,¹² ELW relies on findings to the effect that all of our ideas and models of reality are cognitive social structures, which research locates in the (neuro)biological organization of living cognitive systems, as well as in the ways they operate (social communication) and connect (*strukturelle Kopplung*). In general, the research continues to rely on the neurobiological and sociological explanations of Humbert R. Maturana, Francisco J. Varela, Gerhard Roth, Ernst von Glaserfeld, and Peter M. Hejl. This is fine; however, more than four decades since Maturana's works were published, marking the transformation of ELW into a science, it is difficult to imagine that there has not been progress in neuroscience. This gap can in part be tied to the cessation of the LUMIS collections, which hosted high quality discussions.¹³ Among recent theories in the field of experimental brain research I would at least note the German psychiatrist

⁸ In 2004, Dovič published a book entitled *Sistemske in empirične obravnave literature* [Systems and empirical literary research].

⁹ My article on the possibilities of an empirical systems theory of literature appeared in *Primerjalna književnost* the same year (Perenič 2008).

¹⁰ Dutch systems theorists are also critically assessed. They were, at least in Slovene literary studies, little known or unknown.

¹¹ I will refrain from evaluating the situation at the time in a broader context, although it seems to me to have been similar elsewhere.

¹² Empiricism is not at all understood as direct access to reality or its depiction.

¹³ The last collection came out in 2000. It contained a bibliographic survey of all LUMIS publications. The following collections should be noted: Ernst von Glaserfeld's *Konstruktivistische Diskurse* (1984), Helmut Hauptmeier and Gebhard Rusch's *Erfahrung und Wissenschaft: Überlegungen zu einer konstruktivistischen Theorie der Erfahrung* (1984), Peter M. Hejl's *Konstruktion der sozialen Konstruktion: Grundlagen einer konstruktivistischen Sozialtheorie* (1985), and Siegfried J. Schmidt's *Selbstorganisation – Wirklichkeit – Verantwortung: Der wissenschaftliche Konstruktivismus als Erkenntnistheorie und Lebenseinstwurf* (1986). Of recent publications on the topic, I am familiar with *Konstruktivistische Ökonomik* (2006), the editor of which, G. Rusch, gave me to read and thanked me for my interest in constructivist discourse at Seigen. However, in this volume constructivism is connected with economics and management.



and philosopher Thomas Fuchs's research into the brain's functioning. I am trying to integrate the ideas found in his book *Das Gehirn – ein Beziehungsorgan: Eine phänomenologisch-ökologische Konzeption* ([2007] 2008), which came out last year in a fourth, revised edition, into a discussion of the conceptual and theoretical bases of ELW. In contradistinction to so-called naturalistic reductionism, Fuchs rejects the concept of human consciousness and thought as simply a construct of the brain. He conceives of brain development and functions as taking place primarily in an individual's interactions with his or her social surroundings, which influence changes in the brain's structures. Consideration of Bennett and Hacker's research also suggests the thesis that the brain is first of all an organ in a living person. The brain's functions are connected on the one hand with an organism's nerve, motor, and skin functions, and on the other with the (social) surroundings, with other people (Pawlik 2009).

Thomas Fuchs's "phenomenological-ecological" concept, according to which the brain's functioning, its cognitive and nerve systems can be understood only in relation to a person as a whole as he or she exists in the environment, has implications not only for psychotherapy (Zsok 2009), but, in my opinion, for ELW's conceptual and theoretical bases. In short, we might posit the thesis that (objective) reality is always a function of a subjective relationship to the world, conception of the world, experience of the world, and connection with the world. This is important for the concept of empiricism in ELW because it strengthens the realization that our understandings and modeling of reality are not direct access to it but that all of our cognition and behavior, including literary and research behavior, to paraphrase Fuchs, is but (inter)personal forms of human communication, and are thus influenced by biological, intra- and interpersonal, socio-communicative factors. In considering its discussion of conceptual and theoretical fundamentals, I would situate Fuchs's concept in a transitional area of theory—that is, between biological and sociological explanations for systems' processes—because of its tendency to account for biological and "non-biological" factors. It seems to me that by using Fuchs, it is possible at least in part to fill the lacuna that has again appeared in conceptual and theoretical discussions of ELW.

If we have a look at the relations between empirical theory and methodology and compare them with existing empirical analyses of literature, we see that the temporary lack of theoretical frameworks did not have an overly negative impact on the condition of empirical studies in Slovenia. Hladnik became involved with methodological problems of empirical analyses instead of theory. His article Prežihov Boj na požiralniku in metodološka vprašanja analize pripovedne proze [Prežihov's "Boj na požiralniku" and methodological questions of analyzing narrative prose] appeared in *Slavistična revija* in 1988. He applied quantitative methods to literature and researched large corpora, such as the Slovene historical novel and rural tale (the article Preštevna določila slovenske povesti [Quantifiable measures of the Slovene tale] 1993), and inquired into the role of new, digital technologies in literary research.¹⁴

We can find quite a variety of applied examples from all of the representatives of ELW that have investigated individual slices of literary life from a systems theory

¹⁴ Miran Hladnik, *Digitalna humanistika na Slovenskem* [Digital humanities in Slovenia 2012], on the Internet.



perspective. Dejan Kos investigated German literary life around the year 1200, Marijan Dovič was interested in how the creative writer's role developed in the Slovene literary system, and Urška Perenič researched the literary life of cultural-political societies and reading centers in the mid-nineteenth century. These projects appeared in monographs (2003, 2007, and 2010), and have since the late 1990s been published in collections and journals in Slovenia and abroad (*Slavistična revija*, *Primerjalna književnost*, *Slovene Studies*, *Vestnik*). From this it is evident, among other things, what an important role *Slavistična revija* played in presenting the most recent empirical approaches, despite the fact that major journals usually hold conservative positions. Among Slovene collections, which are as a rule interdisciplinary, the collection *SSJLK Slovenski jezik, literatura, kultura in mediji* [Seminar on Slovene language, literature, culture, and media, 2008], edited by Mateja Pezdirc Bartol, ought to be highlighted. Pezdirc Bartol (2004) employed empirical methods in her dissertation, where she treated drama reception. It was the basis for her book *Najdeni pomeni: Empirične raziskave recepcije literarnega dela* [Meanings discovered: Empirical research into the reception of literary works, 2010].

Pezdirc Bartol's work has its proper place in the area of aesthetic reception, because she was most interested in the reader's role in various forms of twentieth-century literary scholarship (i.e., formalism, [post]structuralism, aesthetic reception, reader response theory, and New Criticism), and the audience's role as concerns drama. Yet the reception of dramatic texts and their staging is treated empirically.¹⁵ She used questionnaires, which along with content analysis and interviews are among the most frequently employed empirical methods in the social sciences and humanities. Other scholars can be placed in this second group, where methodological empiricization is present (Groeben) and the use of empirical methods is significant. Aleksander Bjelčevič (1993; 1996) made use of empirical methods in his M.A. and Ph.D. theses already in the 1990s. They are also seen in the work of Alenka Žbogar (*Sodobna slovenska kratka zgodba in novela v literarni vedi in šolski praksi* [The contemporary Slovene short story and novella in literary studies and school curricula, 2002]), Aleksandra K. Bizjak (*Jezikoslovne osnove pridige kot žanra* [The linguistic bases of the sermon as a genre, 2004]), and Zoran Božič (*Poezija Franceta Prešerna v srednješolskih učbenikih in njena recepcija* [The poetry of France Prešeren in middle school textbooks and its reception, 2010]), even though the contents of their works belong to the field of education or linguistics. Among recent successful dissertations in literary studies I would mention Robert Jereb's (2009) research project, which employed quantitative methods for analyzing the structures and functions of literary criticism. Among empirical investigations, Jure Zupan's *Kaj je Prešeren rekel o -: Poezije in konkordance* [What Prešeren said about -: The poetry and concordances, 2001] ought not to be overlooked, with its statistical analysis of Prešeren's poems and a concordance of nouns, as well as the article "Usage of multivariate analysis in authorship attribution: Did Janez Mencinger write the story 'Poštena Bohinčeka'?" (2008), by the mathematician and economist Marko Limbek. The publications of

¹⁵ In a similar discussion, Norbert Groeben, for example, does not consider aesthetic reception to be an empirical field, although he believes that with the thesis that the (real) reader is important for constructing a text's meaning it is approaches methodological empiricization (GROEBEN 2011: 154).



Maja Breznik and Anja Dular on book culture, the book trade, and publishing can be grouped with the kind of research introduced earlier, by Kocijan in Žnideršič. The sociologist and literary scholar Igor Kramberger's articles assuredly are empirical studies. He applied models from ELW for the study of literature to an excerpt from the text of Cankar's epilogue to *Vinjete* (2010).

In an interview with the journal *Literatura* three years ago, Marko Juvan spoke about the embryonic empirical-systems school, or the younger generation of Slovene literary scholars and "systemics," of whom he named Dejan Kos, Marijan Dovič, and Urška Perenič (JUVAN 2009: 100). His statement allows us to surmise that he discerned differences among the individuals' contributions, which belong to the field of empirical literary studies. I would be in favor of establishing certain distinctions be made when applying the term school of Slovene empirical literary research. The distinctions are not evaluative and do not imply a hierarchy of studies, but simply underline their different qualities. On the one side are studies that rest firmly on a (radical) constructivist ELW foundation as originated and outlined by Schmidt, who thus provided fundamental directions for modern literary analyses (PERENIČ 2010: 28); on the other side are studies that are methodologically empirical. I would place studies that deal with various models of the book trade, examples of which I have given, in a special group, where the conceptual and theoretical principles are not (always) articulated and the use of an empirical or systems theory frame is not (always) consistent.¹⁶

I do not attribute such importance to articulating theoretical principles only because they form discourse's paradigmatic background, which can be strengthened by reflection, but because in essence it is key to understanding the concept of empiricism. In the absence of at least occasional reflection, empiricists and scholars in general might receive the impression that empiricists deal with a (ontological) reality, while even in direct personal communication (e.g., between observer and reader in research on reading and understanding) it is not simply a matter of conveying information (about reading, understanding, and knowing literature), but always of the communicative "cooperation" of living, cognitive systems together with their biological organization and way of operating in their respective empirical conditions. Consistent and clear articulation would void the possibility of criticism on account of the seeming abstractness of systems theory, which prevents its application to concrete problems.¹⁷ All such statements are problematic because they underestimate or overestimate the potential of particular methods¹⁸ and in no way correspond to the principles, concepts, and views of empirico-systems approaches to literature. They

¹⁶ The idea of orthodoxy in the article abstract is connected with this, but it is meant positively. So-called true believing suggests to me consistency of application within a given method, which also dictates consistent use of an inventory of methodological terms—for example, of the terms components; roles of actions; processing etc.

¹⁷ We empiricists read one such criticism with great disappointment in the third issue of *Primerjalna književnost* for 2010 (p. 217). It was as if someone familiar with basic mathematical functions and without a command of integration (that is, addition), were to state that an integer cannot be used in addition because of the complexity of its functional uses.

¹⁸ I myself have never entertained illusions about the salvific power of ELW (PERENIČ 2008: 114), although I think it is one of the more comprehensive and suitable approaches to investigating literature.



also engender doubt in their understanding of the relation between theory and the empirical in general in ELW. In ELW there is an ongoing conversation about empirical theory with reference to the systematically and experimentally tested theoretical bases of systems' operations. However, the tenets of empiricism, which are founded on the systematic functioning of living, cognitive, social systems, need not be reestablished in each discipline. Even when we waiver in literary studies, this empirical theory functions independently and simultaneously as a link in the theory of systems. Given this view, it is probably clearer why a systems approach has become the main instrument in empirical investigations into literature or literary life.

Besides the articles and books that have, since the end of the twentieth century, contained empirical studies of literature, the institutional representation of the empirical orientation has been important to its establishment and growth. Schmidt's publication on theory (ELW) was an integral part of the introductory series of lectures on German literary studies in Ljubljana University's German program under Neva Šlibar,¹⁹ who wrote the academic plan for the Bologna agreement subject The Literary System I (the literary text), and The Literary System II (context). We already encounter the concept of literary system, used in ELW, in Marko Juvan's 1995 and 1997 courses of study. In the 1990s, he responded to change in the literary research paradigm. Miran Hladnik's introductory lectures on methodology have for a long time acquainted students in the Department of Slovene at Ljubljana University with ELW, mostly in the course Introduction to the Study of Slovene Literature, which I currently teach with him and in which I cover the area of systems research on literature (PERENIČ 2010: 7–8). I recently (2011–12)²⁰ included systems theory in an undergraduate elective course on The Slovene Literary System, and in the doctoral course The Methodology of Slovene Literary Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana University. Dejan Kos also teaches it in The Methodology of Literary Studies, having some years ago included aspects of ELW in the German course of study at Maribor University. Certain Bologna courses, such as Literature and the Media and Literature and Cultural Institutions, have included the empirical study of literature.²¹ Besides researchers at the main research and higher education institutions, students' baccalaureate, M.S. and doctoral theses, too numerous to name here, contribute to the strengthening of empirical literary studies. Although the majority do not appear as books and are therefore seldom considered in scholarly debates, they represent an important addition to the empiricization of the discipline. Among the research projects that assess literature in an empirical fashion is the project "Prostor slovenske literarne kulture: Literarna zgodovina in prostorska analiza z geografskim informacijskim sistemom" [The space of Slovenian literary culture: Literary history and the GIS-based spatial analysis], headed by Marko Juvan. It has already attained certain of its goals with the

¹⁹ I first became acquainted with ELW thanks to her.

²⁰ Since 2007 I have attempted to include individual aspects of ELW especially in theoretical and methodological courses in the Maribor University Slavic program, where the field has been inadequately covered after a reform.

²¹ A literary scholar Irena Novak Popov, wrote the first program for this course. She exhibited a great deal of openness to empirical studies and the research of junior colleagues in this field. We are currently lecturing in tandem on the types of institutions in literary life; next academic year Urška Perenič will assume both courses.



publication of a 2012 issue of *Slavistična revija* entitled *Prostor v literaturi in literatura v prostoru* [Space in literature and literature in space], edited by Urška Perenič. A group of Ljubljana University students from the Department of Slovene successfully cooperated on the collection of an array of biographical and geographic data for the project. This is probably yet another way to strengthen empirical studies—through close ties between students and research faculty members.

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