

## Concepts of World Literature, Comparative Literature, and a Proposal

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**Marián Gálik,**

**"Concepts of World Literature, Comparative Literature, and a Proposal"**

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Concepts of World Literature, Comparative Literature, and a Proposal," Marián Gálik surveys the concept of world literature as it occurs within comparative literature based on Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. Given its recurrent yet problematic occurrence, he proposes a way in which comparatists can acknowledge and address the problems of the concept of a world literature. The concept is surveyed across various texts and studies and is mapped out in accordance with the ways in which it has been defined and discussed. The picture that emerges is the problem of national delimitations within the context of an international setting. Gálik urges that the solution to this problem may be found via the development, pursuit, and administration of International Scientific Projects. In this way, various determinations may come to occupy and interrogate a shared conceptual terrain, namely, that of a world literature.

**Marián GÁLIK**

### **Concepts of World Literature, Comparative Literature, and a Proposal**

In this paper, I present a brief critical survey of selected definitions of and discussions about the concept of world literature as emanating from Goethe's thought and with regard to its evolution in the study of literature today. As well known, the concept gained high currency in the discipline of comparative literature to the point that at times the notion of comparative literature overlaps with the notion of world literature. To illustrate my point, I begin with Dionyz Durisin's concept of world literature in his *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*, a text of seminal thought on the landscape of comparative literature in both theory and application. In his discussion of world literature, Durisin adheres to a 'trinomial' approach, that is, to an approach where a group of notions containing three different visions form the concept. Durisin takes his lead from a view advocated by the Frank Wollman in a 1959 article, "Srovnávací metoda v literární vědě" ("The Comparative Method in Literary Scholarship"): "1) World literature: The literature of the entire world and thus history of world literature as an ensemble of the histories of individual national literatures alongside each other; 2) World literature as a selection of the best created by the individual national literatures, and thus a kind of synthesizing view of what has been created; this is also termed Classical literature; and 3) World literature as the product, in some way mutually connected or alike, of all the individual literatures"(qtd. in Durisin 1984, 80-81). In today's perspective, Durisin's understanding of world literature is contested as I will show. To put it into context, in Hugo Dyserinck and Manfred S. Fischer's *Internationale Bibliographie zur Geschichte und Theorie der Komparatistik* (1985) there are 187 theoretical essays concerning concepts of world literature published in a large number of languages between 1884 and 1982. In the last fifteen years many more studies about the notion of world literature have been published, including ideas and new views following the debate about the canon with regard to multiculturalism and feminism.

I continue my critical survey of the concept with Horst Steinmetz's article, "Weltliteratur. Umriß eines literaturgeschichtlichen Konzepts" (1985). Steinmetz puts forward the argument that because it is not fully developed and systematic enough, Goethe's concept of world literature allows for a wide variety of divergent interpretations resulting in view that world literature cannot be identified either with the sum total of all literatures of the world or with the canon of sets of chef-d'oeuvre-s. Steinmetz argues against Zoran Konstantinovic's view of world literature as a typological concept and as such being valid from the very beginning of literature (see Konstantinovic, e.g., 1983, 1984). On the other hand, Steinmetz welcomes Konstantinovic's understanding of world literature as an outcome of the interliterary process as elaborated in Durisin's *Theory of Interliterary Process*, published later in 1989. Konstantinovic knew Durisin's works on the basis of Slovak versions earlier. Further, with regard to the Steinmetz-Konstantinovic debate, Nikola Georgiev locates the notion of world literature in a postindustrial and postmodern context where in his opinion the whole notion becomes unworkable (*unanwendbar*) and worn out (*abgenutzt*).

Earlier, Gerhard S. Kaiser's 1980 *Einführung in die Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft. Forschungsstand - Kritik - Aufgaben* contains the analogue argument that contact between literatures is predicated on "contact with the technical and economic conditions of capitalist industrialization" (15-16). Thus, the notion of the interliterary process brings us also to Marx and Engels's 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* where we read: "The intellectual product of single nations will become common property. National one-sidedness and narrowness will become increasingly impossible and from the many national and regional literatures a world literature will emerge" (446) and Steinmetz's notion of world literature includes the Marx and Engels item, or so it seems to me. The notion and concept of world literature can thus be understood here as determined by historical period and geographical/cultural locus -- that is, beginning with the nineteenth century in Western Europe and by the present time including the globe. (I should like to note here that originally Durisin did not quote Marx and Engels: It was added to the German version of his book from the year 1972 by the government appointed communist editors.) In my opinion Steinmetz did not fully understand Durisin's notion of world literature. For example, in

1988 Steinmetz compares Durisin's notion of the interliterary process with his own understanding of world literature and suggests that there is a correspondence and harmony (*Übereinstimmung*) between his notion and that of Durisin: "Under the concept of World Literature we do not understand a sort of see only a survey [*Zusammenfassung*] of national literatures from the synchronic or diachronic point of view and neither do we understand the concept as consisting of the best achievements of individual literatures; rather, world literature is an ensemble of the literary creations ordered in and by their historico-typological relations" (see Steinmetz 141 and Durisin 172, 48; my translation). It appears to me, then, that Steinmetz constructed his concept based on Durisin's argumentation and combined it with Marx and Engels's notion of the location of creativity as being linked to a specific time frame technological and capitalist processes.

In the theory of comparative literature, a good example of a change of the concept of world literature appears in the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* of 1986. The volume contains a discussion concerning a turn-of-the-century essay entitled "World Literature and Comparative Literature (1901)" by Ernst Elster (1860-1940) followed by Claus Clüver's "The Difference of Eight Decades: World Literature and the Demise of National Literatures." Clüver suggests that if the concept of world literature as understood by Elster was not problematic at the beginning of the twentieth century, it certainly becomes problematic by its end. The way I read it, Clüver accepts, with some reservation, Steinmetz's concept of world literature as a result of a specific historical period and location but makes no reference to Konstantinovic's work of 1983 and 1984 (Konstantinovic later criticizes Clüver for the latter's assertion that after the "demise of national literatures" comes also the "demise of Comparative Literature" (Konstantinovic 1988, 140-42).

In German-language comparatist scholarship, Hendrik Birus has published studies on Goethe's concept of world literature and its applicability today. For example, his "The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature" (2000 at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/7/>>), "Goethe's 'Orientalism'" (1995), and "Goethe's Idee der Weltliteratur. Eine historische Vergegenwärtigung" (1995) show a development of thought and detail. In particular, the 2000 version is clear in pointing out the important characteristics of Goethe's concept. Birus stresses the existence of the world literature before Goethe, the meaning and importance of folk poetry, and his conceptualization of world literature is evident, for example, when he refers to such texts as the Chinese novel *Yu Jiao Li* (*Les deux cousines*) published in Paris in 1826. However, for Birus, the notion of world literature as compendium of canonical works does not coincide with Goethe's concept. His argument begins with Goethe himself thus implicitly referring us to the notion that Goethe's readers did not fully understand Goethe's notion of world literature fully. Goethe writes that "If such a world literature will soon come to being, as is inevitable given the ever increasing rapidity of human interaction, then we may not expect anything more from (this literature) than what it can and does achieve... whatever pleases the masses will expand without limit and, as we are already witnessing, find approval in all areas and regions" (35). Interestingly, in Erich Auerbach's 1952 article, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," Goethe's pronouncement was thought to be wrongly attributed to Goethe as "un-Goethean" (301). On the other hand, while the pronouncement does not need to be read as contrary to Goethe's understanding of world literature he said elsewhere, the quote highlights Steinmetz's contention that Goethe's concept invites a conflict of interpretation and the possibility of misunderstanding. What is important here is that we find in Goethe's thought the basis of Wollman's and Durisin's.

To continue with my survey of the concept of world literature, perhaps the best definition is Erwin Koppen's 1988 article, "Weltliteratur." Koppen argues that the Goethean concept of world literature is a "denomination of a literature with international correlations" (816). However, just like the situation I presented above, Koppen's notion has a precursor: Twenty-five years earlier, Gyögy M. Vajda highlighted Goethe's vision in a more idealistic way, when he wrote in "World Literature and the Comparative Analysis of Literatures" that world literature is "not a summarizing category of national literatures and still less of their history, but a characteristic of a certain literary quality, of the human spiritual integrity of national literatures, that is to say the common product of humanity" (29). And in his 1986 article, "Methodologische Fragen einer Historiography

der Weltliteratur," Vajda proposes that after many different histories of world literatures already attempted, it may be advantageous to compile a "comparative synthesis of one period or even one history of World Literature, if this is possible at all" (194). This proposal is still valid and Vajda's opinion that comparative literature unfortunately does not have its own Arnold Toynbee is to the point, indeed.

In German-language comparativism, I illustrate further the problematics of the notion of world literature with the following examples. The concept as based on the notion of canonicity is in Walter Koschmal's "Ästhetischer und universeller Wert. National- und weltliterarische Funktion" Koschmal devotes his attention to Slavic literatures which he locates to the margins of world literature. According to Koschmal, only Pushkin may enjoy the privilege to be accepted into the "literary Eden" of canonical world literature and if Dostoevski is to be counted into world literature, then this is so not because of the aesthetic value of his fiction but because of his total oeuvre including his philosophical, ethical, and other texts and importance in his fiction. Other canonized writers in Slavic literatures such as Mickiewicz, Mácha, or Shevchenko are outside of this scope. Clearly, Koschmal is a diligent reader of Mukarovsky and Vodicka, perhaps a more intuitive reader than the latter in "Structural Roots of Modern Comparative Literature" (1974). If, according to Durisin, "the structural comparative method as represented by Mukarovsky's theoretical works is confined, for the most part, to sporadic theoretical considerations and is not represented by literary-theoretical comparative analyses" (103), Koschmal's reading unearths the "universal value" of world literature, which is not the same as "aesthetic value" or "evolutionary value" in national literatures. In Koschmal's thought, universal value is different from aesthetic value in that the former in world literature is dependent on an "anthropological substance" (104). Accordingly, just as aesthetic value is evolutionary, i.e., changing, the same can be said about universal value.

A more recent example of German-language comparativism discussing the concept of world literature is Manfred Schmeling's collected volume, *Weltliteratur heute. Konzepte und Perspektiven* (1995). What is of particular interest to me with regard to the volume as a whole and Schmeling's work itself is that they are symptomatic of much of work in Europe and North America in comparative literature (still), that is, strikingly traditional and a-theoretical studies and an often explicit, more often than not implicit Eurocentricism (and, often compounded with Germanocentrism or Franco-centrism). And Eurocentrism, I would urge, is endemic. For example, the volumes of the series *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* (the series is sponsored by the ICLA: International Comparative Literature Association starting in 1973 and still on-going) and the situation is similar with such volumes as the *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* (see See) or the Russian-language volume *Istorija vseмирnoj literatury (A History of World Literature)* (Berdnikov, ed.). The ICLA series is a comparative undertaking but includes literatures written in mainstream European languages only as stated in its title. In this, the project follows its own objective and of course this is acceptable; the problem is that the ICLA as the one international association for the discipline of comparative literature did/does not envision a truly global perspective. It should also be acknowledged that some of its volumes of recent, for example Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema's (Eds.) volume, *International Postmodernism* is a basic introduction to postmodernism in a truly global perspective, thus including China, India, South Africa, etc., while the German-language *Handbuch* and the Russian-language *Istorija* both discuss areas outside of the Euro-American landscape of literature.

More than historical fact, the literary fact possesses an axiological charge. For the interliterary impact it is the most important feature and for the world literary impact it has to have always peculiar and very broad and applicable anthropological characteristics. Thus, canonical values are not important since canons are of varied problematics depending on period and location. Further, not all literary facts are equally relevant for world literature. The most important factors of the concept of world literature are the literary texts of individual writers but not in toto. In other words, it took almost two thousand years for Homer to take the place of Virgil in European culture and literature and it took several hundred years for Shakespeare to post-Renaissance ages. Or, for the interliterary community of the Far East owing to its specific conception of "feeling" (*qing* in

Chinese and *jo* in Japanese), Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* was preferable in comparison with his *Faust* and only later, after the impact of the West and the "liberation" of the feelings and sentiments after the impact of European Romanticism was *Faust* first translated and critiques followed by the development of readership (see, e.g., Hsia).

In contrast to Durisin's work and similar approaches to the concept of world literature, I reject the existence of an internally determined, uniform, and universal process of literature. Single literatures, especially such outside the European cultural system show us a different picture. In fact, only after the slow progress of globalization beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century do we observe tendencies which suggest the annihilation of the given and historically determined multiformity of single literatures and their multiple linguistic, ethnic, and/or national manifestations. Thus, the question as to what to do with the concept of world literature in our postmodern age remains most pertinent. What to do in the situation after Durisin's work and those of similar thought I briefly presented above? In the 1993 "The Bernheimer Report" we read about the different "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 authors, nations, periods, and genres, that the term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study" (Bernheimer 42; see also Pratt). Personally, I object to this removal of the main objective and focus of scholarship in literature in the strongest terms. If "literature" does not adequately describe the object of our study, can comparative or world literature do it?

In 1985 Henry H.H. Remak writes in his article, "The Situation of Comparative Literature in the Universities" that the interdisciplinary ambitions of "supposedly 'literary' scholars have mushroomed (linguistics, structuralism, History of ideas, philosophy, political and economic ideology, communication theory, semiotics), their literary sense and their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures have declined. Comparative Literature is not well served in and through such a subservient arrangement" (10). I would like to add that in my opinion it is Remak himself who earlier opened Pandora's box with his "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function" in 1961. Of course, he could not foresee the invasion of the more often than not intellectually shallow productions of "cultural studies" and its impact on the study of literature, including comparative literature. According to Harold Bloom in a 1994 interview with *Newsweek* magazine which bears the heading "We Lost the War," those who won are "pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists" (82). And in my opinion the appeal of the same figures and approaches is no different in Asia, for example. It is, indeed, not only at Yale that scholars of literature are "far more interested in various articles on the compost heap of so-called popular culture than they are by Proust or Shakespeare or Tolstoy" (Bloom 82). In this situation with the wide-spread uncertainty of theoretical saturation of both literary and cultural studies it is very difficult to say something positive about the concept of world literature and its function in comparative literature or, indeed, in the study of literature and culture as a whole. However, in my opinion it ought to be the vocational duty of historians of comparative literature to resist the fad to compile more studies Bloom mentions. Practitioners of the discipline of comparative literature today often try to ideologize the aesthetic values of literature (and culture) singularly for the purpose of political agendas and this, in my opinion, must not continue.

I agree with the third part of the trinomial by Wollman and Durisin. In the global development of our age, at the beginning of the third millennium, I would like to point out that world literature comprises *mundum universum* in its historical and gradual development, which was, is, and will be in the state that may be defined as "coming to be," always in flux, impermanence, and change. All is a part of global interliterariness, transgressing the interliterariness between individual literatures, even interliterary communities (commonwealths), and overbridging the literary continents with its myriads of interconnected literary facts of the whole world. It is, therefore, the logical task of comparative literature to fill the gap and to write a truly global history of world literature in the said context of interliterariness.

#### **A Proposal**

Following the 1976 Budapest Congress of the ICLA, I published my article: "Modern Asian Literatures: Towards a Potential Approach to Their Study" in the journal *Asian and African Studies*

(1980). The Budapest ICLA Congress was markedly strong by an interest in Asian and African literatures, for example, Wole Soyinka was among the participants, and it appeared that the study of a truly global world literature, one where the "Other" including African and Asian Literatures may take place. For example, at the said congress Douwe W. Fokkema chaired a panel and he has been involved with the ICLA project I mentioned previously, *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*. I was hoping that the said interest would have caused the development of a sub-series following the special ICLA session of the congress, "The Comparative Study of Literature: African and Asian Series?" Unfortunately, nothing has happened since. In the context of a truly global world literature and the discipline of comparative literature fully aware that I may be a *vox clamantis in deserto* I reissue here a rough outline of my proposal.

During the past half of the twentieth century we have been witness and often also the participants of various international projects. Today, international scientific projects (ISP) as efficient means of dealing with the most diverse issues of a scientific, scholarly, technological, and cultural nature and subject matter, have come to be accepted as a matter of course. ISPs are of course initiated and realized within the Western world, its rich countries such as those within European Union and in North America. If the concept of world literature as an approach to study literature and culture is to be regarded as a possible ISP, a set of certain factors restricting such a project must be dealt with. First and foremost, this is in the domains of weak or no contacts at all among scholars working in this area, inadequate or unreliable bibliographic knowledge, insufficient equipment with book and source references, budgetary restrictions, if not in all but certainly in many countries of the world. Second, the problem of coordination must be addressed. I propose some of these drawbacks may be alleviated by frequent scholarly symposia on a smaller scale and at the same time also through a rational use of various international congresses and meetings. Numerous items of information may be mediated through other channels, too, for instance, bulletins, international directories, exchange of offprints, reviews, and review articles. Of course, today we must employ the advantages of the internet, e-mail and the world wide web. I propose that a prerequisite of success of every ISP is the existence of an international committee but also that of a guiding center with a scholarly and administrative structure that would be capable quantitatively and qualitatively to carry the burden of the project and win the confidence of those involved. For an ISP to succeed, there are also requirements to be satisfied such as a minimum representation of researchers for different study objects, a minimum of agreement on methodological questions, a minimum of technico-economic base required for the acquisition of necessary study materials, possibilities of publishing, and a maximum of knowledge of different single literatures involved, including at least three or four European languages plus the several main languages of Oriental and African languages in the case of my specific proposal. To research, write, and publish a history of world literature the way I understand it, is, I am aware, a difficult proposal. At the same time, I argue that we must continue to deliberate about the notions and concepts of world literature, comparative literature, and the study of literature and culture in general.

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