

Interculturality and World Literary System(s)

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Abstract: In her article "Interculturality and World Literary System(s)" Jola Škulj proposes a new framework for studying planetary exchanges of literatures, one that subverts the systemic distinction between centers and peripheries. She advocates a model that can yield the analytical conceptualization and hermeneutic understanding of literary phenomena and their historical reality in the complexity of semiotic traces, in actual distinctiveness of formal and textual deposits, and in interconnections of poetological impacts. She argues that literary facts seen in such intricate networks of mutual intertextual phenomenology and reaccentuations attest to their character of permanent mobility, evident instability, and constant inventive reformulation of verbal and literary matrices, which means that literary texts ought to be reinterpreted through ever new disseminations of literature. In Škulj's view, in the intricacy of cultural memory and cultural transfers it is necessary to keep records of traces which reestablish continually the singular manifestation of literature in a certain geocultural space and to ensure the vitality of world literary system(s).

Jola ŠKULJ

Interculturality and World Literary System(s)

Propositions of the critical paradigm of the intercultural existence of literature seek to understand analytically the factuality of cultural spaces and to read literary phenomena and their historical reality in the complexity of semiotic traces. Literary facts seen in such intricate networks of mutual intertextual phenomenology and reaccentuations attest to their permanent character of mobility, instability, and inventive reformulations of verbal and literary matrices, which means that literary texts ought to be reinterpreted through the always new dissemination of literature. For this reason, in this critical paradigm of the intercultural existence of literature as a part of world literary system(s), the concept of literary and cultural transfer has become topical (see, e.g., Juvan, "Svetovni" 201-05). For the sake of methodological clarity, in the further research focusing on the versions of world literature it will be appropriate to first confront the view with reinterpreted conceptions of comparative literature studies (see, e.g., Casanova; Damrosch; Đurišin; Moretti; Saussy; Spivak; Sturm-Trigonakis; Tötösy de Zepetnek, etc.) and especially those perspectives which have derived new critical content from Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (see also Sales Salvador <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1162>>), Yuri M. Lotman's semiotics of culture, Walter Mignolo's border gnosis, Siegfried J. Schmidt's systemic and empirical approach, Dionýz Đurišin's approach of interliterary processes, and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and the problematics of "nation and narration." The discussion here is derived from Samuel Weber's thesis that the humanities demand new consideration of the singular, which means that in the complex network of cultural memory and cultural transfers it is necessary to keep records of exhaustive mapping of traces which reestablish continuously the singular manifestation of literature in a certain cultural space and thus ensure the vitality of the world literary system.

Neither culture nor the world literary system are a sum of phenomena, but are self-referential sub-systems (on systems approaches in general, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). World literatures exist as a multilayered reality, an open, non-finite collective entity, and its diverse legacies are structured in an intricate network of shifting literary contacts. Inscribing in themselves different histories throughout their past existence and hence bringing to the surface inherent asymmetries, world literatures call for reexamination and fresh ways of apprehending "the incommensurables of the singular" (Weber 251). Understanding of the world literary system needs more exhaustive approaches to grasp the complexity of its manifold profile. Opening the discussion on issues of world literature studies, we are invited to reconsider dissimilar world literary realities through a complex comparatist perspective involving also viewpoints of border poetics. World literatures urge us — in their forming a complicated system while maintaining irreducibility — to envision new, comprehensive approaches and methodologies to identify its complexities and their infinite facets. Can comparative literature studies discuss world literatures beyond national or territorial anchoring? My objective is to revise long-established views on cultures and to rethink the realities of cultural identities, as well as views on world (and national) literary corpora and canons, which (like the idea of "nation") have changed throughout the last two centuries. Can a modern cosmopolitan perspective through well thought-out concepts provide more promising, multifaceted insights into cultural realities for scholarly interpretative practices and reveal in world literature "constellations as facts ... the realism of constellations" (Thomsen 139)? A true understanding of world literary realities needs an appropriate response to difficulties posed by cultural variance and cultural pluralism: it calls for reformulations of the epistemological issues underlying the current debates on comparatist agendas. Weber, in his arguments on "a place for the study of literature, of art, of language and of philosophy in a world progressively dominated by an economic logic of profit and loss" (236) asserts that "the task of the Humanities would ... become nothing more or less than that of rethinking the singular, which is something very different from subsuming the individual under the general or the particular under the whole" (245).

The responsibility to articulate insights into complex literary situations in order to reveal their intricate, multifaceted reality and their fragility is a challenging project. Weber claims that "to determine something as real is not simply to ascertain its existence, once and for all, but to ascertain

that it is 'still' there, there a second time, as it were, the result of a repetition" (245). In his framework, Weber touches upon the problem of identity and explains that "Identity, in short, is a relationship that presupposes repetition. It is not self-contained or instantaneous. But in presupposing repetition, it presupposes a process that inevitably entails alteration, difference, transformation as well as similitude. In construing reality in terms of the logic of identity, however, what we do is to abstract from, ignore or exclude — separate ourselves from — the dimension of heterogeneity contained in all repetition" (245). In contemporary critiques of universalism, reading asymmetries and approaching the incommensurability of the singular demand fresh routes in literary studies and poses a challenge to overcome old ontological schemes and map world literatures' existence in its dialogical identity (see Škulj, "Comparative Literature," "Dialogism"). Such a claim is rooted in the ethical imperative to revise also the views on literary and cultural histories: "The singular is not the individual, precisely by virtue of its mode of being, which can never be that of a once-and-for-all, but rather, paradoxically, that of an after-effect of iterability. The singular is that which emerges, which is left over after the process of iteration has come full circle: it is the remnant or remainder, what Lévinas and, after him, Derrida have called the trace. Trace of a difference that can never be reduced to sameness or similitude" (Weber 245).

The multifaceted landscapes of the world's literatures call for holistic concepts which can convey the reality principle and the diversity of literary histories and their intertwining coexistence. Settled in historic disparities, world literatures inscribe in themselves dissimilar cultural memories. Any literature preserves consciousness of its terrains and, as a multilayered historical record of past, lives on through ever-changing semiosphere (see Lotman). Cultural space with its semiotic universe represents a frame of reference for any literary data and so the questions are: how is it possible to grasp the substance of memory kept in world literatures or to think of their singularities as the background reality of their existence, how is it possible to approach the asymmetries in them and to invent the proper conceptual framework for studying their various archives, their heterogeneous interests, and their not yet fully evaluated sense of correlations? Cultural inscriptions as semiotic facts expose transparently articulated powers and abilities and map human self-understanding through history.

Literature as a culture of writing is an outcome of transgressive realities of "cultural tribes" and thus territories of literatures are symptomatic of being incorporated in dissimilar historical frames of different loci in the past. Backgrounds of cultural routes of most literary phenomena epitomize fluctuating and unstable contexts or constellations: "on this unstable soil of theoretical searching ... [is] attempt at a systematics of the comparative study of literature" (Đurišin, *Theory of Literary* 7). Addressing the thorny issue, Đurišin points to "a contradictory dialectical unity, which in literary historical practice appears as tension between the national-literary and the interliterary historical approach, between the history of national and that of world literature" (*Theory of Interliterary* 18). World literatures are interliterary and intercultural events and as a contradictory dialectical unity can be read more exhaustively. Intercultural realities of literatures and a world literary system can be approached thoroughly and empirically if we comprehend cultural spaces and their cultural identity in views of dialogism with other cultures. Grasping the complexity of the interliterary and intercultural existence of literatures, Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogue and Lotman's notion of semiosphere appear to be valuable concepts: both can help understand literary realizations as an open set, as a literary life in the process of on-going exchange, reaccentuation, and renewal. Configurations in cultural events and in literary practices are all the time territorialized and deterritorialized through the dynamics of cultural and literary transfer. The idea of transgressiveness implies Bakhtin's notion of otherness. Whatever the case may be, "otherness is the reality principle of any literature" and of any cultural achievement (de Man 103). Otherness is irrevocably our cultural reality. In Bakhtin's view, the self is the gift of the other. In the on-going event of world literary system formation (concurrently, of course, with the advances of planetary cultural edifice), the role of otherness is much more seminal as one may assume. Principles of identity and identity formation coincide with the principle of otherness or — to use Bakhtin's terminology — of dialogism (see, e.g. Bakhtin, *Speech*). Construing our own cultural selves is both a mirror process and an event of resistance. It is also an uncompleted dialogical response: "Difference is what enables identity to be itself" (Descombes 40).

In literature, construing identity means giving or explaining the intention of the territorial self; it is a responsive act in which is disclosed how people that are territorial through literary texts interpret themselves, which face they intend to preserve, what interests they care for. Yet the viewpoint on literatures constituting a world literary system and on their cultural identity as a mere realization through their own national languages, their autochthonous experiences and representations seems too limited. One is reminded of Peter Madsen's similar position that such a view on "the construction of national identity, however, is in itself a mystifying (and potentially destructive) endeavor ... from the outset the idea of world literature goes against the grain of nationalism" (74). Scholars of the humanities today are well aware that the history of languages is an insufficient criterion to view and discuss their cultural imagination on given loci, let alone to examine and record historical instances of overlapping cultural memory (literature of the borderlands, minority literatures, exile writings, etc.). It is not a well-founded condition to grasp effectively the dynamic issues of circumstances of cultural realities. Boundaries of national languages and ethnicities are too exclusive to be satisfactory discriminating features of factual cultural and historical knowledge throughout centuries, even in pre-national times. Multilingual residues are inherent in any culture and even a repository of words existing in a language can reveal an influx of traces of diverse ethnic contacts and past cultural ties. The self and the other are all along discursive factors of the culture of writing: cultural differences and discontinuities are shaped in the dynamics of their mutual bond and the Other as the principle of discontinuity and the self as the principle of continuity. Multifarious perception, imagination, and representation of our self-images are inscribed in chronotopic and transhistorical matrices of world literatures and this exerts ever new individual drives in constituting the sensitive traditions of literary discourses and their key focal point: people's self-understanding. Realities of world literatures cannot be approached as homogeneous events. But are we ready and well equipped to comprehend and think about them as a contradictory unity, as a united yet diverse world literary system? How is it possible to study their plurality and solidarity as singular occasions? Are we able to read world literatures and discuss their complex figurations? How is it possible to figure out effectively in them the plurivocal sense of their heterogeneous profiles? Can we imagine writing "a sort of spatialized history" of world literatures (Casanova 5)? Taking into consideration the fact that world literatures exist and originate in "a distinctive sense to 'the human'" (Weber 251), adequate means of access to heterogeneity to comprehend their manifestations more responsively and in Even-Zohar's polysystem perspective are essential. The system of any literature is always instituted and read as the logic and structure of response and hence any effective transaction of literary ideas and thought involves a dialogical enterprise enabling the negotiations on otherness. Literary texts are given in their immediacy and actuality although the geocultural grounds always represent a frame of reference. Actualized in readings, semiotic worlds of literatures are in themselves on-going, inconclusive, and never final realities. As such, in their semiotic existence texts can be seen as fragments of materiality full of gaps.

Challenging tasks for a shift in our perspective when examining world literary processes and focusing them in their intricacies through a more elaborate "scopic vision" (Spivak, *Death* 108) can bring us closer the very game in which the literary institution is involved. The claim for more precise understandings of world literatures and for subtle concepts such as dialogue and narrative identity (see Ricoeur) enables us to read more thoroughly and identify the shifting terrains of cultures and their vital hybridity. Employing cultural categories to gauge the tentative, the relational, and the unstable, the challenge represents the conceptualization of insights into complex situations beyond a plain binarism or, in other words, beyond the logic of exclusion so as to reveal the weaknesses of the prevailing deep-rooted Eurocentric paradigm in Western studies of literature and culture (see, e.g., Juvan, "Worlding" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>; Li and Guo <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/5>>; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

Interliterary and intercultural communities in themselves and dialogue, semiosphere, or narrative identity are fluid concepts grasping the nomadic meaning they are able to communicate. Such a call for schemes and notions to apprehend the world's literatures in their complexities manifests the tendency to supersede the metaphysical binary logic of mastery by an inclusive view on world literary system: simplify and use accessible language because such can facilitate reading asymmetries in histories of world literatures and thus we can better understand "the incommensurability of the singular" (Weber 251). A semiotic understanding of literatures and cultures suggests that the semiotic

space is "not ... a single coding structure, but a set of connected but different systems" (Lotman 125). Entering the thought-provoking conundrum "of connected but different systems" — resulting in a constantly retold story of identity, as well as the retold histories of the identities of world literatures — is possible from the standpoint of border-crossing poetics of global intercultural and intertextual existence, of their cross-lingual and cross-cultural effects, and of the idea of the postnational. This can move us closer to dealing with the concreteness of cultural realities and to rethinking the facticities of world literatures. Bakhtin's thought of dialogue — an effective approach in discussions of world literatures and their "interstitial" existence — was in fact a result of his philosophical interest in concreteness. Contained by ideas such as dialogue and dialogism and thus conveying factual comprehending and reasoning of the gaps in the reality of world literatures or cultures, such an approach can help us to overcome the unnecessary "culture wars" (see Eagleton) and to integrate in the model of realities observed in world literatures all that appears to us as divergence or difference or, in Bakhtinian words, as contradiction and conflict. Identity issues involve us in idiosyncrasies in the hermeneutics of restatement and ever newly construed comprehension of individual qualities and unique characteristics of world literatures. The recognition of shifting collectivities as manifested in realities of literatures around the world can help respect asymmetries in their historical developments and to revise erroneous claims about historical belatedness. It can modify the rigid views on metropolitan and peripheral cultural systems and consequently moderate the Eurocentric view on literary canon when encountering non-European literatures or cultures. Then, the debate over the emancipatory and hegemonic dimensions in identity will be superfluous (see Biti).

From a comparatist standpoint, world literatures and their cultural identities exist only through their own deconstruction and permanent multiplication of several interliterary and cultural relations. As any individuality, cultural identity is a fusion, a meeting point and an interface of innumerable cross-cultural implications. It is of a complex plurivocal character open to its own alterations in order to preserve its own being in a context of interests or values. Identity inscribes in itself the concept of invention and "distributes its two essential values between two poles: the constative — discovering or unveiling, pointing out or saying what is — and the performative — producing, instituting, transforming" (Derrida 206). World literatures and their cultural identity formation can be considered also in view of Paul Ricoeur's elaboration of the idea of identity detailed as a narrative issue. Ricoeur reminds us that selfhood and the state of having a distinct identity can never imply its sameness. He made a detailed critical examination of the fundamental distinction between two main meanings of the concept of identity: identity as sameness (*idem*) and identity as selfhood (*ipse*). His analytical intervention into the idea of identity brings us closer to the hermeneutic approach to identity issues and such a proposal can offer a more exhaustive historical insight into the cultural memories of world literatures and into their semiotic situations as dynamic systems. World literatures are singular events marked by fluidity in their constant restructuring. As a result, the world literary system can exist only as a plurivocal functioning entity (see, e.g., Juvan, "Svetovni" 205-06) and its transfigurations can be discussed through a narrative method to obtain richer and more profound understanding of said system and its sub-systems. Such a position supports a claim for the comparative narrative research (see Grishakova <<http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/79>>; Vandermeersche and Soetaert <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2239>>) and, in addition it may be seen as a call for introducing views of a geocritical approach with regard to the world literary system (see Domínguez <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1902>>; Westphal).

Establishing the features of their collectivities in contacts of border crossing and in their liminal negotiation of cultural identity across differences of cultural and literary traditions, the border culture realities of world literatures with their distinctive (and dissimilar) profiles — even when they belong to minor nations and to "weak" cultural systems, if we borrow the terminology from Even-Zohar polysystem theory — retain their multifaceted vitality. The in-between situation of the border and its cultural position can be recognized as a powerful dynamism in the historical development of any literature (see Bhabha) and it can throw fresh light on cultures and literatures in a multiple Europe (see Spiridon), a notion that helps in dethroning the Eurocentric view on the world literary canon. When discussing his theoretical views of cultural liminality and hybridity, Bhabha argues that cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent.

Discussions about the world literary system can thus derive benefit from the emergence of new forms of knowledge, which Walter Mignolo calls border thinking. Border thinking — which introduces in cultural studies sensibilities of geohistorical locations — is a side effect of the crisis of Occidentalism and embodies the shift to postoccidental reason. For Mignolo, "border gnoseology is emerging at the intersection of Western epistemology and non-Western knowledge, characterized as 'wisdom' by the former ... border gnoseology (rather than epistemology) in all its complexity (geocultural, sexual, racial, national, diasporic, exilic, and so on) is a new way of thinking that emerges from the sensibilities and conditions of everyday life created by colonial legacies and economic globalization" (43-46). Indeed, such new ways of imagining the heterogeneous geocultural spaces of world literatures as single, yet pluralistic regions can be approached — without totalizing this plurality — through a critical regionalism as an alternative to views of studying distinctiveness as national cultures or literatures (see Spivak, *Other Asias*). In view of dialogism and narrative identity, the dissimilar routes of literatures and profiles of cultural life can be mapped more comprehensively. Hence views of the world literary canon can be altered as well.

Literary topographies of identity at globalized crossroads call for further clarifications. When at the earliest can such possible complex insights into heterotopies of literature and its intertextual and cross-cultural penetration of patterns be detected? Can the national still be a pertinent concept as it was in the nineteenth century or has the urban reorientation of modernist culture put its meaning aside encountering the metropolitan identitarian anxiety? How does the event of a global world relate to the ideas of "nation" in cultures? The twentieth century culture certainly revised the comprehension of the national, although a vexed question of the globalized world still brings back into use its obsolete meaning (see, e.g., Dagnino <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/7>>). But is the notion of globalization — which is burdened in everyday speech and in politics and economics with essentially monological interests of neoliberal postindustrial society — in the framework of cultural and world literary studies a relevant concept at all? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak promotes the contours of "a project grounded in a planetary vision as opposed to globalization" (Ernesto Laclau on the back cover of *The Death of a Discipline*) and her scheme of comparatism as an inclusive discipline employing concepts of crossing borders, collectivities, and planetarity "freed from its traditional national anchorings" (Jean Franco on the back cover of *The Death of a Discipline*) provides a promising edge to advance our insights and to conceptualize the complex reality of a world cultural map of plural identities. To discuss the encounter with various histories on world literary territories, dialogism and narrative identity appear to be helpful ideas as they can introduce thoroughness and attention to detail for grasping the shifting collectivities manifested in cultural traces. Both notions — dialogism and narrative identity — can help us respect any irregular and asymmetrical progress of literatures and inform of the heteronomy of cultural worlds.

Approaching the asymmetries in cultural histories through more detailed postpositivist realist concepts of objectivity (see Mohanty) can help us to reconsider and overcome the perception of the lagging behind and suspend the essentialist view on metropolitan cultures as a homogeneous system. In fact, even Europe is a multifaceted entity and it ought to be seen as a multitude of loci whereby many cultures are seen as the Other (see, e.g., D'haen <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/9>>; Leersen). As a result, there are active multilingual residues and dynamic traces of cross-border contacts which underlie their cultural systems. The potential of distinctive border-crossing individuality can enable the culture to reimagine and reaccentuate its own self in the contact zone and to evolve its complex plurivocal character open to its singular way of alterations in order to preserve its own being in a new context of interests. Behind all literary processes runs a multitude of interplay of cultural impulses and such dialogical investments contribute to their mutant, hybrid, fluid, deterritorialized, yet strong and resilient presence. Routes of plurivocal literatures reveal their centrifugal character and embody their infinite configuration and their altering or decentralizing disposition. The semiosphere — a whole packed history of cultural texts — persists in playing its role behind the actual life of all literatures: it embodies forces which shape literatures through on-going dialogism in ever reevaluated and transformed realities. Lotman's idea of the semiosphere suggests agency: it is an emergent activity and offers information on the transgressive realities in literatures and in any cultural dynamism. It is a strategy of an unpredictable rearrangement of a cultural system that involves a complex pattern of actions and responsive

accomplishments in a self-motivated life of literatures: "In the history of art ... works which come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as living factors ... What 'works' is not the most recent temporal section, but the whole packed history of cultural texts ... In fact, everything contained in the actual memory of culture, is directly or indirectly part of that culture's synchrony" (Lotman 127). The semiosphere represents a holistic world model behind actual cultural processes, although one should see it as a constantly reread entity, a reworked actuality, or a redefined network of cultural traces shaped through on-going dialogism.

To understand literary traces and the multitude of processes and to make contact with the network of historical routes behind literatures and cultural memories is not easy. How can it be within one's grasp to enter reading literature and its textual memories and to postulate history in the singular? History, no doubt, involves inimitability, dissimilarity, and alterity. Here again Weber brings his "very preliminary remarks on a dauntingly urgent topic to at least a tentative conclusion" when he claims that

The future of the Humanities in a world of virtualization and of globalization cannot reside in the continued propagation of a model of unity and totality for societies or nations. It can no longer consist in a continuation of the project of Western modernity: that of separation and demarcation as a means of constituting secure and self-contained entities, whether individuals, collectives or even "humanity" itself. For if there can be a distinctive sense to the "human," something which is by no means certain or assured, than it cannot lie in the direction of unity, totality and autonomy. It must consist, rather, in the opening of and toward heterogeneity. Nothing else was and is at stake in the rethinking of repetition that runs from Kierkegaard to Deleuze and Derrida. Kierkegaard found a word and notion that perhaps brings all of these tendencies together: that of exception. (251-52)

Explaining his view further, Weber quotes Kierkegaard: "Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal and the universal repeated to the point of the most boring insipidity. There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained, either. Generally the difficulty is not noticed because one thinks the universal not with passion, but with comfortable superficiality. The exception, however, thinks the universal with intense passion" (Weber 252) and Weber maintains that

The notion of exception would thus continue the project of separation, while at the same displacing its ultimate goal: that of securing the Self, the se-parare that would reduce distance, difference and alterity to functions of an identical and constitutive subject, to its outermost borders. The notion of the exception, by contrast, repeats separation but in so doing transforms and deforms it: rethinking it as a movement of resistance that defines and determines what it resists, the "norm," without being assimilated by or into it. A task for the Humanities would be to rethink not just the "human" but everything connected with it not, as hitherto, strictly from the perspective of the universal, the concept, but from that of the exception; which is to say, from the perspective of what refuses to fit in, what resists assimilation, but what, in so doing, reveals the enabling limits of all system, synthesis and self-containment. (252)

In the light of dialogism and narrative identity, or Spivak's "scopic vision," one can well realize "what refuses to fit in, what resists assimilation" (Weber 252). Dialogue and narrative understanding of identity embody an effective solution for approaching complex traces in world literatures hermeneutically. Dialogism and narrative identity both involve a non-dialectic philosophy of "becoming" which can be found in Deleuze's and Guattari's thought. In legitimating cross-cultural readings in the world today and grasping cultural multiplicities in literatures as non-hierarchical entries — the Deleuze and Guattari *rhizomatic* model of knowledge — is another promising option.

In conclusion, when can we detect the paradigms of world literatures' complexities and their intercultural and cross-cultural penetration of patterns we will be able to gauge and discuss world literatures — in the plural — without Eurocentrism. It was only after the shift introduced by modernist art that the "being" — as an existence and a presence — and its ever-elusive quality was brought into focus when modernity with its questioning of identity and its openness to the present enabled an insight into pluralist realities. Such a view is only possible following the events of modernist art forms behind which one should read a historical encounter with existence in both Western cultures and Other cultures. Behind modernist and postmodern matrices — complexity, systems, chaos, modeling, networking — knowledge that manifests the tendency to overcome binarism and exclusion is a

tantamount objective. The model I propose suggests the possibility of an approach that accounts for a factual universality of literature and the study of literature and culture.

Note: The above article is a revised and updated version of Škulj, Jola. "Understanding Europe: Its Cultural Realities and Asymmetries," *Questioning the European Identity/ies: Deconstructing Old Stereotypes and Envisioning New Models of Representation*. Ed. Vita Fortunati and Francesco Cattani. Bologna: Mulino, 2012. 73-90. Copyright release to the author.

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