

Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature

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Volume 2 Issue 4 (December 2000) Article 6**Marián Gálík,****"Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/6>>

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Abstract: In his article, "Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature," Marián Gálík observes that the concept of interliterariness has a relative short history and limited application owing to geo-political reasons. He traces the history of the concept and cites instances of its use within the Central European scholarship of comparative literature. Dionýz Durišin is identified as the most prominent exponent of the concept and Gálík then locates the question of interliterariness within the context of its potential applications. The concept of interliterariness is defended as both a guiding and unifying principle in so far as it is irreducible, relative, and encompassing. Interliterariness provides the universal concept of literature and the study of literature with an ontological grounding and epistemological justification. Literatures may therefore be compared and understood via a historical process and with respect to a systematic series of related literary facts across cultural boundaries, movements, and moments. Literature thereby remains an interliterary global community, one characterized by trans/formations. Consequently, the system(at)ic study of any given literature(s) should trans/form itself accordingly.

Marián GÁLIK

Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature

The concept of interliterariness has a very short history and is used mainly in Central European literary scholarship. Proponents of the notion are indebted to Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists; "literariness" as a forerunner of interliterariness has been coined in the *Werkstätte* of Roman Jakobson in 1921: "The object of literary scholarship is not literature but literariness, i.e. which makes a given work a literary one. Up to now literary scholars were more similar to policemen who, aiming to arrest some person, will round up everybody and everything to be found in the flat, even the people passing by chance on the street. Prey to the literary historian was human existence, psychology, politics, philosophy" (11; my translation; see also Gálik 1996). A similar concept of literariness has been briefly stated by René Wellek in his well-known study on the "crisis of comparative literature" in 1959: "literary scholarship will not make any progress methodologically, unless it determines to study literature as subject distinct from other activities and procedures of man. Hence we must face the problem of 'literariness,' the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature" (293). Here "aesthetics," of course, does not mean aesthetics as a philosophy of beauty and art, or the laws governing its manifestations, but an embodiment of aesthetic value, and other values, in the works of literature.

Dionyz Durisin, in his *Theory of Interliterary Process* (1989), characterizes literariness even in a more succinct way, as the "basic and essential quality" (21) of all literature embodying all relations within the literature, their intensity, amount, and manner of their conditionality within the framework of various individual literatures. If this intensity, variability, mutual relations, or affinities transcend the boundaries of individual literatures, then "literariness" transforms itself automatically into "interliterariness." Thus, interliterariness is the basic and essential quality of literature in an international and inter-ethnic context and ontological determination. This determination and its framework comprise all possible relations and affinities, individual literatures, supra-ethnic, and supra-national entities of various kinds, and the highest embodiment of interliterariness, world literature. In *Les Communautés interlittéraires spécifiques* Durisin writes: "Interlittérarité exprime la base ontologique du processus interlittéraire supranational, c'est-à-dire du déroulement et de l'évolution littéraire, de la vie littéraire" (1993, 14). For Durisin, the concept of interliterariness forms the main notion for a theory of interliterary process as comparative literature and as such it deserves more attention by theoreticians of comparative literature as well as theoreticians of literature and culture in general. And this attention does occur although in my opinion not in a sufficiently critical mass. For example, according to the editors of the 1989 *Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice* (Amiya Dev and Sisir Kumar Das, eds.), there is a need for a new epistemology in comparative literature, and also for the "redefining [of] its areas in terms nearer to ... interliterariness ... as yet the *prime rationale* of the discipline" (my emphasis; inside back cover).

Ontologically speaking, interliterariness is secondary to literariness. Because of their "division of labour" they are distinct entities: Although interliterariness always comprises literariness, the reverse is not always the case. From an epistemological point of view, the question of interliterariness -- its scope, contents, and characteristics of its various manifestations in Comparative Literature, that is, in the interliterary process -- is not as deeply studied as questions concerned with literariness. One of the most important features of interliterariness is its implied or implicit processual character, a system(at)ic series of related literary facts within the ethnic or national framework presupposing the temporal and spatial changes in the course of their literary development. Particular literatures, from the oldest Sumerian and Egyptian to the most recent emerging ones, have always been in the state of permanent flux, in a tension that might be defined as a "coming to be," i.e., a flux of construction (Piaget 140).

If we look at the facts of process over a period of one hundred years of one of the first great works of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, starting with its first version by G. Smith in 1872 and the numerous translations and version including the Czech translation by L. Matous in 1975, we

may see the process of interliterary metamorphosis of Sumerian, Accadian, Assyrian, and Hittite bases. Here, at the dawn of literary civilization, we find a systemo-cultural filter or sorter of interliterariness. The different copies (no one complete) reflects differentiated literary development and shows the structure of individual literatures and their overall sociopolitical and ideological frameworks. Different attitudes to gods among Sumerians and probably more sophisticated Semitic Akkadians have found their various representation of *suġet* and their literary processing (see Berdnikov 99, 102-11). The Hittite version was shorter than others owing probably to once again to a different receiving structure. These were first links of an extremely long chain, or knots in the immense fabric of literature of all ages and broad territories of *orbe universo*. The impact of this work and many of its components we may find in Moses' *Genesis* or Homer's *Odyssey*. The genetic relations are plausible in both cases. The existence of a Euro-Afro-Asian intercultural community is beyond doubt in the pre-Antique age; it comprises Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, and the Aegean civilization with its Mycenaean stratum (Berdnikov 53).

If we add up old Indian epics and the literary products of the pre-Antique intercultural community, then we find not only genetic relations but also clear structural-typological affinities between the literatures of a Euro-Asian world. Its interliterary unity and variety, for instance, is reflected in the similar use of epithets and similes, and in resembling themes, such as the abduction of a woman (Helen and Briseis in the *Iliad* and Sita in the *Ramayana*), or her seduction (Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and Penelope in the *Odyssey*), or the hero's dream affecting the epic action, or a heavenly messenger announcing something to other celestial or to terrestrials (Hermes in the *Odyssey* or Impaluri in the Hittite *Song on Ullikumi*). Also similar is the use of narrative within narrative, as so abundantly seen in the *Mahabharata*, the *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad*, although to a lesser extent in the latter two (see Dev and Das 118). Interliterariness is concerned with that part of the process at first regional or zonal and in the last centuries global which leaves aside the purely ethnic or national aspects of literatures (or the aspects that define their individualities or individual qualities) and focuses on the trans-ethnic, trans-national, and lately on the geoliterary development as a whole. It involves all possibilities of literary impact and response. To put it more specifically, a literary fact or a literary phenomenon as the most basic element of literature and of its study and research may be the outcome of stimuli that have an extra-ethnic or extra-national character in their vertical or horizontal continuity, surpassing the confines of ethnic, national, or single literatures. Thus, a literary fact or phenomenon changes into the interliterary and becomes in the process a basic element of interliterariness. An interliterary impact and response to it is, as a rule, a prerequisite for a literary production in every literature -- with the exception of the possible existence of only one literature in the world at the beginning of human civilization or a scattered existence of a few at great distance from each other -- if it satisfies the overall structural requirements of the receiving literatures which in themselves are the representations of ethnic, national, or individual characteristics. Geoliterary development seems to be a new term in interliterary studies and represents the most recent state in the interliterary process. More recent concepts emerged based on the theoretical developments starting at the end of the nineteenth century, when the countries of Asia and North Africa began to respond to the literary and cultural impact of the West. Recent developments came with the advent of the post-colonial era and are connected with wholesale cultural globalization, where the broadest East-West synthesis is an aim to be achieved in interliterary process and its concrete realization, as well as its geoliterary and geocultural globalization.

Interliterariness is most conspicuous in the field of genetic-contact relations (or within the framework of influence and response) comprising all the phenomena in the interliterary process where contacts between literatures are a *conditio sine qua non* of their development. External contacts, i.e., those which did not leave any deeper traces in the structure of the receiving literatures, and internal contacts, where the impact could be reasonably proved, establish the different qualities of interliterariness. The first qualities are more shallow while the second ones are deeper. This process of interliterariness becomes most common in times of great cataclysms in literary evolution, where the whole systemo-structural entities of individual literatures change their overall habitus owing to the metamorphoses in ideology, aesthetics, literary kinds, genres or

forms. This is the case, for instance, with many new literatures in Asia and Africa of the second half of the nineteenth and during the twentieth centuries and following the enormous impact of the Euro-American world (see Král et al). The genetic-contact relations in the pre-Antique time were certainly different from those of later ages. If there were any traces of the external contacts, they were certainly not preserved for later generations. But without internal contacts existing between the Egyptian, Accadian, Cannanite, and even Sumerian poetry, we are not able to properly analyze the interliterary process leading to the Hebrew poetry of the *Bible*, and especially to the *Song of Songs*, probably the most beautiful love song of the world literature (Leick 69, 72, 238; Albright 131, 221). It was, among other reasons, also owing to the high level of interliterariness that the *Bible* became the "book of books" in Western literature especially after the translation of the *Old Testament* into Greek as *Septuagint* and whose style had an influence on the *New Testament* and on the Christian world as a whole. The interliterariness connected with the genetic-contact relations does not appear to be always effective when two well-developed literatures meet. On the other hand, if the contact occurred in a relatively new environment, and provided there were enough possibilities of free development, as in Chinese Turkestan (now Xinjiang in Mainland China) between the second century B.C. and the eighth century A.D. These literatures developed into the first world culture in history: the Silk Roads connected Chang'an (now Xi'an) with the Tarim Basin through the passes of Pamir, the towns of Samarkand, Bukhara or Balkh, Merv, Palmyra, Tyrus, Antioch, Alexandria and ended in Rome, or later in Byzantium. Here, four most advanced cultural areas met: European Greco-Roman and Oriental, i.e., West, South, and East Asian, in a fruitful clash and harmony. Here, interliterary development, combined with interartistic and intercultural processes, formed the first specimen of the highest embodiment of the world's intercultural process. Gandharan (Greco-Roman and Indian) interartistic symbiosis, religious (Buddhist, Manichean, and Nestorian) *oecumene*, polylinguism reminiscent of the mythic Tower of Babel (with Sanskrit as the most important among them), cultural pluralism, intensive translating, and artistic activities made it possible to enrich the local environment and to make their impact on the regions eastward of China and the whole Far East. The world culture of the Oasean cities between the Himalayas and Tianshan remained for more than one millennium a paradigm of liberal spirit, intercultural, and interliterary tolerance and understanding (see Gálik 1993).

In the realm of structural-typological affinities, that is, literary parallels, we may find another kind of interliterariness. Here it is not the concrete, material evidence that is important, but its value in the history and development of individual literatures. Affinities (parallels) in the structural-typological field are equivalent to relations in the genetic-contact field; their study could be even more valuable than that of the real substance of the literary facts concerned, since it could supply us with new knowledge and lead to a deeper understanding in various areas of literature, its history, theory, and criticism. Influence and reception studies helped literary scholars to illuminate the problems of the genesis of works in their continuity within the dialectical tension between the tradition (coming mostly from ethnic or national literatures) and innovation (coming very often from the interliterary field). The structural-typological realm, exploring analogies in the interliterary process of different literatures of the same period, or of different epochs, and sometimes spatially very remote from each other, meant or at least could mean a deeper penetration into the study of the interliterary process, and its results could lead to the discovery of the higher forms of interliterariness. While the field of genetic-contact relations reveals the mechanism of continuity that exposes the course of the interliterary process in its most visible way, the field of structural-typological affinities is securing the same effect in a more sophisticated and not so immediate form. For this reason, it compels the researcher to study not only various forms of social consciousness, political situations or contexts in which the works were written or to which they corresponded in a creative manner, but also literary traditions and conventions, literary genres, and trends. Especially new knowledge within the framework of literatures outside the Euro-American cultural area is needed now.

In the list of terms distributed to the participants of the XIIIth ICLA/AILC Congress in Tokyo (1991) and connected with the *International Dictionary of Literary Terms*, we find only six terms related to old and modern Chinese literature among about six hundred devoted to the rest of the

literatures of the world, mostly to the Euro-American West. If we look into James J.Y. Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature* (1975), we find there at least thirty important terms concerning old Chinese poetry alone, not including fiction and drama (183-97). Interliterary poetics, as one of the objectives of comparative literary theory, is still in its embryonic stage, and will not achieve any even relatively serious results without taking into account comparative study of the literary genres, traditions, and conventions at least of Sanskrit and post-Sanskrit Indian literatures, Arabian literatures, and the literatures of the Far East. With attention to such a wider scope of areas, I believe it possible to find a common metalanguage in the field of comparative literary scholarship. It is within human cognitive abilities to come to the core of terms very different from those we use in Europe, to define their adequate meanings, to detach ourselves from their pure sign forms, presented very often with the veil of ineffability to the indigenous and foreign experts, to focus on their content and range, particularly in concrete cases, and endeavour to give it approximately precise delimitation within the framework of comparative literature, concretely within the proposed comparative, that is, interliterary, poetics.

Earl Miner's *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories Literature* (1990), taking into account mostly Sino-Japanese and European literary and theoretical legacy, is probably the best book of its kind in the last years. A thorough investigation of the literary areas mentioned above will not be enough in order to study the most basic aspects of the structural-typological affinities. According to Earl Miner, other literatures, including the literatures of Africa and Latin America, and lesser known literatures of Europe and Asia deserve the attention of scholars: "the consideration of the other three quarters or four-fifths of the race must enter into any literary study denominating itself comparative" (11). Interliterariness as a quality of literature surpassing the confines of national, ethnic or individual literatures, according to Durisin, finds its broadest implementation in the field of interliterary communities (or commonwealths), i.e., supranational and supraethnic conglomerates of literatures coming into existence, changing and disappearing in historical developments conditioned spatially and temporally by ethnic, linguistic, national, and even ideological factors. Interliterary communities are literary "families" similar to each other owing to factors just mentioned. We may speak about many interliterary communities of different kinds (their typology has not been scholarly elaborated as yet), e.g., the community of English and American literatures, the different communities of Slavic literatures, the specific community of Swiss literatures, the interliterary community of the Far East up to the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Balkan interliterary communities during the last two millennia, contemporary interliterary communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, etc. These communities which exist in the "commonwealth of world literature," are fulfilling certain functions which help them to realize their special nature in order to exist as interliterary communities, whether in a positive or a negative direction (see Durisin 1987-93).

In interliterary communities, the literatures in contact -- and all literatures forming interliterary communities are in contact -- are fulfilling some functions that are not visible in the field of ordinary genetic-contact relations. Owing to the great extent of mutual impact and response, individual literatures and their various strata behave mostly in two different, opposing ways: either taking the foreign impulses and integrating them into their own receiving structure (an integrational function), or trying to filter or sort out stimuli in order to select the most convenient one, and to repudiate inconvenient elements of the giving systemo-structural entity (a differential function). These two functions can be fulfilled only if certain factors of interliterary community are at work: e.g., the existence of a common language as in the case of German speaking countries -- the community of German and Austrian literatures together with a part of Swiss literature, Jewish Prague literature up to 1939, and even Jiddish literature; or in the case of different communities within the framework of Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, or Hispanic literatures, as well as contemporary Chinese literature on the Mainland, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and elsewhere (as ethnic minority literature, for instance). The last one mentioned, i.e., literature written in Chinese in different parts of the world, may serve as a paradigm of interliterary flux through the centuries and millennia. Its history is more than three thousand years old and its great era was connected with the interliterary community of the Far

East comprising the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and in the second millennium B.C. for some periods also a part of Vietnamese, Manchu, and Mongolian literatures. This interliterary community began to develop in the last decades B.C. or in the first decades A.D. in harmony with the Chinese concept of *Zhongguo* (The Middle Kingdom), or *Zhonghua* (The Middle Civilization) and in its relation to the peripheral "barbarian" territories. An essential difference between the Chinese and the "barbarians" was to reside in *wen* which may be roughly translated as the "spiritual culture." From China, which was highly endowed with it, this *wen* radiated like rays of the sun into the surrounding world, surpassing the integrational function working in most other interliterary communities, and spread Chinese literature into neighbouring countries. During the rise and development of non-Chinese literature of this interliterary community, Chinese literature fulfilled its "culturalist" function and served for many centuries as a substitute for the indigenous literatures of the area. Only after centuries, or even after a millennium, did this function decline until it disappeared altogether. Literary works of Japan, Korea, or Vietnam, especially of the last two, if they were written in their own languages, for many centuries had only a complementary function. This traditional interliterary community disappeared in the last decades of the nineteenth and in the first two decades of the twentieth century (see Gálik 1995). A new interliterary community of the Far East did not come into being owing to political, ideological, cultural, and literary reasons.

Bilingualism or biliterarity, such as in the interliterary communities of the Balkans, India, Central Asia, or Africa, or polylinguism and polyliterarity of certain groups, e.g., in Switzerland or in Malaysia, is another example of interliterariness. These phenomena are usually accompanied with another kind of interliterariness, even more important than that just mentioned: That of *dioicousness* and *polyoicousness*. These terms, borrowed and applied from the Greek *oikia* (a house or dwelling), mean in the first instance an ability to be at home in two different literatures, usually but not always in two different literary languages and cultures. *Dioicousness* and *polyoicousness* prove to be important in times of great social and political mobility. For example, P.J. Šafárik was writing in Czech and German and *dioicous* in Czech and Slovak literature, Ivo Andrić was present at first in Croatian and later in Serbian literature, and Alisher Navoi (1441-1501), who wrote in three languages, has been "at home" in Old Uzbek, Persian, as well as Arab literatures.

Theoretically, the highest quality of interliterariness may be found in the concept of world literature, which in its literary-historical and evolutionary apprehension within the interliterary process is its highest hypostasis. World literature is a *summa litterarum universarum* not in their overall quantity but in their mutual relationships and affinities within the complicated systemo-structural reality of the interliterary process. This interliterariness is uniting all other kinds mentioned above, but on the highest possible level, owing to its deeper, broader, and mutual contextuality. This does not mean that all interliterariness in the dimensions of world literature is the most worthy from an axiological point of view. It means only that specific literary facts went through all the interliterary filters mentioned above. This interliterariness depends on the measure of the knowledge of inter-literary facts and processes and therefore it is much more variable within the flux of time and space than those in subordinated spheres of the interliterary process. There is a great difference between the interliterariness during the time of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1922) or *La Naissance de l'Odysée* by J. Giono (1938).

If we consider the first known literatures of history: Sumerian, Egyptian, and Akkadian and the "last" known accumulation of literatures based on a numerical account of languages (about six thousand languages), we may imagine the differences in the degree of variety, complexity, and intricacy existing in this kind of interliterariness. As far as the theory of inter-literary process is concerned, I argue against the concept of world literature as a *summa* of all literary works produced in individual literatures in the course of their evolution, as I argue against *Weltliteratur* as *Wertliteratur*, i.e., a *summa* of all literary masterpieces. Neither do I agree with theoreticians of literature -- such as Horst Steinmetz -- who connect world literature with the literatures, mostly of the Euro-American cultural area, produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Steinmetz 1988). More than five millennia of the existence of literature in world history and about some hundred of single literatures existing today provide the researchers with unimaginable

numbers of different relationships and affinities within the interliterary process, including so far unknown and never studied concrete relations between individual literatures of the world. These were not researched yet, and when proposed, as in Durisin's case, then in relation to the lower level components of the interliterary process, these possible relationships and processes can be regarded as a pure hypothesis to be researched and extrapolated (see Durisin 1992, 7-56, 174-95). In sum, while in literary study the application of the theory of interliterariness as the basic and essential quality of literature in its international or interethnic realm awaits realization, it is, most importantly, an evolutionary concept which changes in time and space. Thus, new theoretical and methodological frameworks and applications are necessary for its deeper and broader understanding.

Note: The present publication is an updated version of Marián Gálik, "Comparative Literature as a Concept of Interliterariness and Interliterary Process," in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic, and Irene Sywenky. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. 95-104. Publication of the new version is by permission of Honoré Champion.

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