

Current Status and Contemporary Academic Perspectives of Comparative Literature in Slovakia¹

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Abstract: The paper seeks to offer an expert examination and brief overview of the development of Literary Comparison as a separate scientific discipline in the Slovak Republic, to present its current status and to consider the possibilities for its further realization in the future. The beginnings of Literary Comparison understood as a methodological paradigm in Slovakia can be traced back to the early works of Mikuláš Bakoš from the early second half of the twentieth century, whose primary researches are in the domain of historical poetics, formalism and structuralism. Decades later, the well-known Slovak theorist Dionýz Ďurišin reflects, and at the same time creatively shapes the postulates of his papers by building on his already well-known theory of special inter-literary communities, inter-literary centers and of characteristics of the inter-literary process. Drawing on national literature as a concept, Dionýz Ďurišin develops a whole theoretical model of rethinking world literature, and his terminological categories also inspire the academic sculptor Ludwig Korkoš, who “revives” them in an artistic way in the nineties of the 20th century. Today, in the Slovak Republic there is a Center for Research on the Heritage of Dionýz Ďurišin at the Faculty of Pedagogy at Comenius University Bratislava under the leadership of prof. Maria Bátorová; while the subject of Literary Comparatics is taught as a compulsory subject at the Faculty of Arts at the same University in Bratislava under the guidance of prof. Zvonko Taneski, and also an elective at the Universities “Constantine the Philosopher” in Nitra, “Matej Bel” in Banská Bystrica and “Pavol Jozef Šafárik” in Prešov. In 2015, the Czech-Slovak Association for Comparative Literature was formed, which recently became a full member of the International Association for Comparative Literature AILC / ICLA. The Slovak headquarters of the Association are at the Institute of World Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, and the president of the Slovak section of the same Association is prof. Róbert Gáfrik. The Association organizes domestic scientific conferences and congresses and regularly participates in appropriate scientific symposia abroad. In the last decade new representative collections have been published devoted to literary comparison in several academic centers in Slovakia. A good platform for presenting and publishing new posters from comparative literary science has become the prestigious scientific journal *World Literature Studies*, which is periodically published by the Institute of World Literature in Bratislava, and its

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status and prospects are growing as the magazine is registered, i.e. indexed in several important world scientific databases.

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The earliest articles on Literary Comparison as a separate discipline in Slovakia appeared in the second half of the last century. In the 1960s there was a change of generations in methodology in general, including literary methodology. Post-war Marxist generation was replaced by theory-oriented one. In the field of interliterariness and world literature this change is expressed by R. Wellek. There is a reason why his concept is called “theoretical”. It is based on the categories reliability preserving interliterary memory, thus providing development stimuli regardless of the specific situation. The foremost example is genre. The Western and Eastern scholarly community in the 1960s had been discussing the way of overcoming decades of crisis of Comparative Literature Studies. Apart from discussion in scholarly journals, international scientific such as the congresses of International Association of Comparative Studies, International Congresses of Slavonic Studies and other international conferences focusing on concepts of history of world literature have provided space for such debate. Dionýz Ďurišin,

who has followed the debate closely, entered it in 1967 with his monograph *Problems of Literary Comparative Studies*. This work, far from mechanical survey of previous discussion, offers creative synthesis and unified system presenting new theoretical and methodological concept of comparative literature studies, outlining ways out of the enduring crisis. (Tomiš 2003: 113)

In Slovakia, the pioneer of historic poetics and formalism, Mikuláš Bakoš conformed to René Wellek in 1968. Dionýz Ďurišin, on the other hand, had at the same time

developed the Czecho-Slovak structuralist idea that impulses for literature development come from extra-literary reality, conditions and circumstances of literary creation, which are, to various extent, in a dialectic relationship with literary evolutionary line. This concept enables wide international cooperation because it legitimizes a whole range of literary categories, which are a distilled expression of literary life in specific external connections, as crucial for development. Thus every ‘world part’ can perceive world literature from its own wide cultural framework of literary development. (Koška & Koprda 2003a: 17–18)

Dionýz Ďurišin then became one of the most prominent Slovak comparatists, introduced the term “interliterary communities” into Slovak comparatistics in the 1980s. Ďurišin at that time continued to develop theoretical, methodical and methodological questions of comparative literature. Amended Slovak and foreign language versions of his *Theory of Literary Comparative Studies* were published. Through them, as well as through its author’s appearances on international congresses, the theoretical-methodological concept of Dionýz Ďurišin entered the awareness of expert circles and met with a favourable response. A representative of Slovak literary scholarship meets international scientific community as an equal partner for the first time in history.

His achievements prompted him to work further. In 1985 the monograph *Theory of Interliterary Process* was published, followed in 1988 by the original collective monograph *Systematics of Interliterary Process*. In them he had revised the previous system of traditional comparative studies and formulated its amended version. The concept of “literary influence” had been abandoned in favour of “reception-creation”, expressing activity and creativity on the side of the recipient, while the received phenomena in the process of literary continuity was termed “stimulus”, “impulse”, expressing a new way of understanding the substance of reception. The systematics of the interliterary process was also reformed. Instead of “Comparative Studies” the category of “interliterariness” is proposed, which expresses the object as well as the aim of the research: interliterary process, development from national literature and its analogical historic units to the category of world literature. Both publications contain further specification of his concept as well as development of the conceptual and methodical apparatus.

Ďurišin’s additive conception of the world literature came to life after that in the beginning of 90s of the last century (*What is the World Literature?* Bratislava: Obzor 1992) and responded to the times’ critical thinking (to the capacity of the human mind). But in the 1990s it was the internet, the web, which had rushed in, and limited a man and his cerebrum in his creating of additive bibliographical and other models of literature, and took over this Syzifos’ work on its shoulders. But Dionýz Ďurišin never ascribed absolute value to his system. He perceived it as a working hypothesis, a point of departure for further research of interliterary processes on specific literary-historic material. He had realized that this task was above the capacity of one individual. Therefore, he included a wide range of Slovak and foreign experts into his following projects. Thanks to Ďurišin, the Institute for Literary Studies of SAS and later the Institute of World Literature of SAS became one of the organizational centres focusing on international research of interliterariness. That is the real reason that his works were soon well-known in the Central and South-European region and he collaborated with many colleagues there.

Ďurišin has developed his ideal of inter-space of literature most thoroughly in interliterary communities, centrism and the Mediterranean (“sea in-between the land”) intercultural “knot”. Many other theories of the “inter-spaces” before him in the areal past federation of Czecho-Slovakia are legitimate too: Šafárik developed the theory of Slavonic national cultures as “comparative beings” of higher units, thus higher units form compositional unity in which the process of integration prevails over differentiation. F. Wollman has developed this Slavonic compositional unity from its genetic, cultural aspect. This had enabled F. Vodička to divide the categories of interliterariness into two groups, intraliterary-eternal, especially literary genre, and historic. Ďurišin then turned external literary categories into a principle underlying the functioning of interliterariness and world literature.

Dionýz Ďurišin’s approach was based on the principle of national literatures, i. e. his interliterary communities were literary, based on the idea of an interliterary process, i.e. translations, contacts or contact-free typological relations between literatures and their texts. His “specific interliterary community” was represented by groups of literatures considered related for various reasons (geography, language, politics, etc.) and therefore their mutual relations underwent a higher degree of intense development. All Ďurišin’s works (and their international reception) and also the art works and sculptures by Ludwik Korkoš, which were inspired by the literary categories in 1990s, were integrally presented in book collections which were published by the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava in 1990s². Instead of the traditional dualistic notion of the history of national literature on one hand, and of world literature on the other, Ďurišin introduces a monistic interpretation of all constituents of a single literary process.

Today in Slovakia there is a Center for research on Ďurišin’s works at the Pedagogical Faculty within Comenius University in Bratislava; the course “Introduction to Comparative literature” is taught in the study programs of the Faculty of Arts and the Pedagogical Faculty at Comenius University in Bratislava³, at the University Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra⁴, at the

² For example Ďurišin & Korkoš 1993, Ďurišin et al. 1993, 1998, Ďurišin 1995, Koška 2002, Koška & Koprda 2003b. In the last listed book collection, a scientific paper by Naftolij Bassel has been published in Russian and it was dedicated to Estonian literature (its summary was translated into Slovak language by Eva Maliti, p. 284–294).

³ The academic lectures on „Introduction to Comparative Literature“ are predominantly taught in Bratislava and they are organized and delivered by Associate Professor Zvonko Taneski at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University and by prof. Mária Batorová at the Pedagogical Faculty at the same university.

⁴ University profesor Pavol Koprda from Department of Roman Literatures on Faculty of Arts at University Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra has published a serial values

University Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica and at the University in Prešov. There is an obvious reason for taking a recourse to Comparative Literature as the fundamental branch of literary scholarship: so far every literary scholar of some importance has been seeking theoretical grounds for the fundamental questions such as the genetic relations among literatures, the typological analogies and the interliterary connections. Today, there is an additional issue: the interdisciplinarity. In addition to phenomena that cross the boundaries of national literature, comparative scholarship now focuses also on the relations among literature and other artistic and, generally, human activities, while keeping the literary as its central point of departure. Current comparative literary scholarship typically deals with two dominant models: the textual presence of other literatures in a given text, and its reading by a different linguistic and cultural environment. Needless to say, the first impulses in the direction go to Dionýz Ďurišin. Therefore, comparative literary scholarship should deal with each act of such reading and interpret it from the given context. Obviously, purely comparative research cannot be the only thing for comparative literary scholarship which during the course of its methodological advancement has embraced such disciplines as the theory of communication and hermeneutics, let alone numerous auxiliary disciplines. Thus, e. g. the semiotic system of culture will be of decisive significance for alterity, while intertextual analysis cannot dispense with narratology. It is crucial to understand national literature primarily as a framework for the study of the literary process in particular and the cultural process in general. This way, we all can study the interliterary bonds and analogies, as well as the transliterary connections.

The current scientific magazine *World Literature Studies*, which is published in the Institute of World Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences has committed a few years ago several thematic volumes on *Comparative Literary Studies*⁵. The Czech and Slovak Association of Comparative Literature was formed in 2015, which is an organization of literary scholars interested in comparative literary studies. Its aim is to support the activities of research institutions dedicated to the research in the field of comparative literary studies

of theoretical works about interliterary process (Koprda et al. 1999–2010). Last year in the same university was published also a academic collection of works named as a *Comparative Literature Studies in Context Relations* (Teplan 2016a).

⁵ *New Theoretical Vistas in Comparative Literature* (*World Literature Studies*, Vol. 1, 18, 2009), *Komparatistika na prahu zmien* (*World Literature Studies*, 2 / 2009), *Postkolonializmus a literatúra strednej a východnej Európy* (*World Literature Studies*, 3 / 2012), *Comparative Studies as Cultural Criticism* (*World Literature Studies*, 2 / 2013), *Art and Literature. Intercultural Exchange Processes* (*World Literature Studies*, 1 / 2015).

and create an environment for mutual contacts, exchange of experience and information with similar research institutes and organizations abroad (Teplan 2016b). They organized the first Czech-Slovak congress of comparatists in 2015, which culminated in a special luxury publication⁶. Last year, recently, this Association became a member of AILC / ICLA.

In the last few decades, Comparative Literary Studies in Slovakia have expanded even to those parts of Europe that it had not reached before and has thus become truly global at least from the external perspective. However, at the same time it has experienced a crisis in its traditional centres across Europe, which has shaken its conceptual premises, theoretical foundations, and methodological structure, acted on its inclusion in university and scholarly institutions, and jeopardized its social status. Comparative literature itself is no exception here because the situation explained above was characteristic of all of literary studies, the humanities, the social sciences, philosophy, and the general theory of science, and was also connected with the diversifying nature of research zones and subjects. The discipline responded to this fundamental change brought about by the postmodern age through increased self-awareness and a true flourishing of relevant production directed towards fundamental reflections on oneself, the current situation, its genesis, and possible future paths. The principles and viewpoints, empirical findings, value assessments, and development proposals worked out at numerous meetings and in a series of publications are of course different, caught between opposite extremes, ranging from forewarning of the subject's imminent death to the anticipation of its renewal. If it was possible to have a premonition of some kind of catastrophe based on these conclusions of revolutionary events, a gradual establishment of the feeling that the current crisis also camouflages productive dimensions, which open up new developmental perspectives, has lately been frequently checked. In the end, frankly,

the connection between comparative literary studies and cultural studies was a long-debated issue and has in some circles remained so until now. The older generation of literary scholars in Slovakia may still have reservations about this connection. However, in general, cultural studies have integrated with comparative literature in such a way that nowadays the discipline has become almost unthinkable without it. (Gáfrík 2010: 17)

One thing more worth mentioning here is that the translation in Comparative Literary Studies in Slovakia still has a significant status. Translations are

⁶ One thematic number of the Czech scientific magazine *Slavica Litteraria* (2015, Vol. 18, No. 1) was dedicated to papers from the first Czech-Slovak congress of comparatists.

valuable in bringing about similarities and dissimilarities between significant works of literature and are very helpful in the field of research among their studies of literary works. Slovak comparatists know that translation can be used as a tool for comparative study⁷. Translation also helps students of Comparative Literature to develop an international approach in different spheres such as literary, economic, social, philosophical, religious, cultural, historical and artistic values. Translation is of paramount importance in Comparative Studies of World Literatures as well as regional literatures. Among other views, that was a main reason for publishing several books in foreign languages from the Slovak comparatists in collaboration with colleagues from other European countries in near past. The most famous works, in our opinion, which have traced a rather different path to that of D. Ďurišin in Slovak Comparative Literature Studies, are the following: *New Imagined Identities: Identity Making in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* (Ed. Libuša Vajdová a Róbert Gáfrik, Bratislava, 2010), Dorota Pucherová: *The Ethics of Dissident Desire in Southern African Writing* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011), Mária Bátorová: *Domini Tatarka: The Slovak Don Quixote – Freedom and Dreams* (Peter Lang, 2015), *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*. Ed. Dobrota Pucherová a Róbert Gáfrik (Brill: edition Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 2015) and the last – academic scientific monographies about Slovak Comparative Studies for German public: *Kultur im Transfer. Komparatistik in der Slowakei*. Ed. Sandra Vlasta, Róbert Gáfrik, Stephan Teichgräber (Peter Lang, 2016) and *Kultur im Transfer: Komparatistik in der Slowakei*. Hrsg. Sandra Vlasta, Róbert Gáfrik, Stephan-Immanuel Teichgräber. Frankfurt am Main (Peter Lang Edition, 2016). Finally, it is necessary to mention the scientific monographs of prof. Ladislav Franek about reception of Hispanic literatures in Slovakia and also about a Comparative-Historical and Theoretical aspects of literatures, Comparative Literature and Literary Translation. His two latest books have the title *Interdisciplinarity in the Symbiosis of Literary Studies and Art I – II* (Bratislava: Veda, 2012 – 2016). Some of these studies, which are published as a part of his books, were originally announced just in the Estonian journal *Interlitteraria* (Franek 2012, 2014). Prof. Franek today is probably the only Slovak literary scientist who writes with erudition about Estonian literature

⁷ For example, in the Institute of World Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences there is a famous published edition from cca 50 exclusive scientific books and collections about Comparative theoretical aspects of Literary translation and also about the Reception of Foreign Literatures in Slovakia.

and Estonian Comparative Studies in the cultural area in Slovakia (see, most recently, Franek 2018).

However, Comparative Literary Studies in Slovakia are studies behind the boundaries (beyond the borders), studies among different languages, cultures and literatures. In Slovak comparatistics and literary theory of the last decade multiculturalism and interculturalism are the most popular and reflected concepts, promising to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes about the European and World cultural landscape. Besides that,

Comparative Literary Studies, might more than in the past, dissolve into other disciplines, or may function as a more-or-less compact discipline in a wider framework of cultural and area studies. In the everyday practice of literary criticism, comparative studies will not cease to exist and will function as a tool of useful comparison of various literary phenomena as any time in the past with no or little regard to innovative trends in literary theory and methodology. (Pospišil 2009: 57)

Hence, the hope arises for their potential status and perspectives in this Central European country and abroad. Slovak literary studies today basically strive towards an integral combination of historical and critical concepts, with the focus on the needs of the national literature, which were mostly reflected through the field of the literary translations. In such an interdisciplinary space, which is also open to the future in the sense of a desired revival, the reception of Slovak scholars is still flourishing, based on a multidimensional research of interliterary relations.

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