

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

INFLUENCES, INTERTEXTUALITIES, GENRES: HISTORY OF NATURALISM AND CONCEPTS OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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“*Pourquoi la littérature comparée?*” begins Yves Chevrel in his 2006 guidebook to comparative literature, *La littérature comparée* (3). Such anxiety over the purpose of comparative literature is not new. As Ulrich Weissman argues, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, comparative literature has yielded to a nearly pathological urge to question its fate constantly (167). The permanent crisis of comparative literature seems to be unending. Franco Moretti in his article “Conjectures on World Literature” declares that the discipline has not lived up to the promise shown at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Postcolonial studies and an improved awareness of the unread literature of cultures outside the mainstream topographies of the literary atlas have eroded the credibility of a discipline that has traditionally been limited to Western Europe, “mostly revolving around the river Rhine,” as Moretti puts it (1). In addition to the inability of doing justice to minor languages and small cultures, the crisis of comparative literature has been a methodological one. In his work *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, published in 1992, Claudio Guillén names the genetic survey of literary contacts as the most recent theory of comparative literature (69). Comparative studies are still too often limited to observation of evident resemblances and mapping of literary influences, while no proper methods exist for a demanding interpretation of cultural relations that are often hybrid, dynamic, and impure.

In this essay, I take up the challenge of comparative literature from a Finnish

perspective and, with a retrospective eye on my previous study, *Le naturalisme finlandais: Une conception entropique du quotidien* (2007), I discuss the notions of influence, intertextuality, and genres as methodological concepts of comparative literature. By exploring the relationships between French and Finnish naturalist novels, I suggest that genre study may advance the work of comparing distant literary traditions, helping us not only to cross national borders between centre and periphery, but also to bring new insights into the set of methodological problems included in the traditional study of influences and reception. I first take a short historical look at the naturalist novel in Finnish literature and then set out to examine the theoretical issues raised by this topic.

WORLD LITERATURE FROM A FINNISH PERSPECTIVE

Comparative literature became a plausible project due to a nineteenth-century historical paradox; Guillén reminds us that the rise of nationalism laid the foundations for a new internationalism (27). Insisting on the Romantic search for the exotic and the exceptional, Goethe launched the idea of the *Weltliteratur*, which merged distant literatures from China to Serbia to the tradition of European classics. The opening to “primitive” cultures and to oral poetry promised a new path to universality.

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The Romantic Movement gave birth not only to comparative literature but also to completely new literary cultures, such as Finnish literature. In the spirit of German Romanticism, the Finnish elite set out to create a national literature that would reflect the original spirit of the Finnish people. Despite the Hegelian ideals of tracing the unique nature of Finnish-language culture, the cultural mission of Finnish Literature was engaged to political purposes from the very beginning. Even as Finland languished politically as an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, literature was considered to be a necessity for national integration between the educated circles and the common folk in the poor country.¹ National literature was considered indispensable for creating “an imagined community,” to quote Benedict Anderson’s famous expression (6).

The act of collecting folk poetry into literary treasuries fostered faith in the project, but the creation of national literature advanced slowly. Still, during the closing decades of the century, the nationalist-minded critics called for a man of letters who would make Finnish literature an eligible member of world literature. “And he will not only climb up the shoulders of our people but also those of the other peoples, and with one single hit he will make Finnish literature a member of the most eminent literatures of the world,” wrote cultural journalist J.A. Lyly for the small provincial journal *Kaiku* in 1887.

This situation took a decisive turn for the better when new ideas from Central Europe and France arrived in Finland. However, it is a fatal irony that the first generation of Finnish-language writers—Juhani Aho (1861-1921), Minna Canth

(1844-1897), and Teuvo Pakkala (1862-1925) among others—adopted Émile Zola’s naturalist doctrine and embarked on writing pessimistic works discovering the dark side of Finnish society. These authors described the primitive instincts of their characters, instincts that invariably led to death and destruction. The nationalist-minded critics in particular, who expected positive descriptions of Finnishness, were scandalized by the unpleasant truths of French naturalism that had seemingly infected the works of Finnish authors. The naturalist image of man did not advance the nationalist cultural program, which sought to reinforce national identity and called on literature to support this aim. The conservative critics considered Zola and French naturalism a dangerous European contagion that should not spread to the young and healthy Finnish nation. If literature was seen as valuable capital by which writers in languages at the periphery tried to win a place at the centre in literary markets, as Pascale Casanova explains in her renowned work *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999), Finnish critics of this era certainly espoused this view. They recognized

372 the worth of literature as an important means of building up a national “brand” in a literary field governed by rivalry, competition, and cultural conflicts between and within national literatures. With its pessimistic images of death, destruction, and wasted lives, naturalism was not considered appropriate to the narrative of the Finnish nation.

In consequence, while dreaming of membership in world literature, nationalist critics insisted on the originality of Finnish literature and negated unhealthy European influences. Late nineteenth-century realism was regarded first and foremost as an original Scandinavian phenomenon that differed radically from the French literature of the era. The idea of Scandinavian realism as an endogenous movement emerged in the nineteenth century, when the Danish critic George Brandes strongly opposed the French influence by insisting on Nordic idealism and pure morals. Brandes himself had studied in Paris and defended his doctoral thesis on Hippolyte Taine’s naturalist aesthetics, but with time he became more unresponsive and even hostile to French influences. According to Brandes, Nordic authors remained mainly idealists and moralists, and unlike Zola’s French school, they adopted a critical attitude by debating current social issues (402). In the spirit of Brandes, Swedish scholar Gunnar Ahlström declared that Zola’s heavy pessimism and overdetermination of the passive nature of the human mind had nothing in common with the active worldview of Nordic authors—an idea that was also widely adopted by Finnish scholars until the end of the twentieth century (384).

In a peculiar way, the rise of nineteenth-century naturalist literature was firmly rooted in the same intellectual context that gave impetus to comparative studies. The rise of the natural sciences, Auguste Comte’s positivism, and Hippolyte Taine’s theory of explaining cultural relations as products of milieu and moment all inspired not only Zola to write naturalist novels, but also urged the comparative critics to explain literary influence through causal explanation.² In adopting the positivist concern for causes and effects, the study of literary influences in comparative studies

eventually became the dominant mode of explaining international literary phenomena from the end of the nineteenth century forward.³ In Finland, however, the influence-oriented study encouraged the research on naturalism to stay increasingly within the limits of Scandinavian literature. The influence theory even proved to be a mercy for those who did not countenance the suggestion that French writing influenced Finnish literature; from the positivist perspective, the relationship between Finnish and French realisms may seem rather distant. The Scandinavian authors who made the pilgrimage to Paris in search of new ideas mainly remained in contact with their fellow citizens or their Scandinavian comrades-in-arms. “It is impossible to reach any French authors here,” Aho exclaims in a desperate letter from Paris in 1889 (qtd. in Niemi 145). His Swedish colleague August Strindberg succeeded better after sending a translation of his play *Fadren* (*Father*, 1887) to the father of the French School in the hope of receiving some comments from the maestro. Zola responded to Strindberg with a complimentary letter, but that was the short history of their collaboration (Zola, *Correspondance* 220-221). On the other hand, if Scandinavian authors lacked personal contact with French authors, they still could read their works, which were already available in many Scandinavian languages in the 1880s.

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Despite the ideals included in the positivist study of literary relations, such as neutrality and serious scientific observation, in practice the influence theory was strongly coloured with nationalist interests and did not avoid the implication of colonialist conquest. “Ibsen in China,” “Zola in Russia,” or “Victor Hugo’s success in Portugal” were examples of this tendency that, along with the study of a writer’s reception, emphasized the author’s success *la fortune d’un écrivain* in another cultural area. Goethe’s idea of world literature evoked a democratic dream—even Marx and Engels picked up on the project of a *Weltliteratur* in the *Communist Manifesto*—but in practice the literary field was much less idealistic and much more competitive, as Casanova has described. When a French critic compared Zola’s novel *Lourdes* to the Norwegian play *Bankrupt* by Bjornsterne Bjørnson and thus implied that Zola could have been influenced by a Norwegian author, the master of the naturalist movement strongly resisted the suggestion. “In the same way as our Bordeaux wine has succeeded to voyage in India, it is certain that some of our ideas have gained, through the Nordic genius, admirable abundance and intensity. But how could these ideas influence in our literature, because they already exist here? All these germs have their origin in our old France, and we don’t have to wait the harvest, our stores are full,” declares Zola in the 1897 article “Enquête sur l’influence.”

FROM INFLUENCES TO INTERTEXTUALITY

The growing notion of influence was thus susceptible to many ambiguities and errors. Besides the inflexibility of causal explanations, the overemphasis on influence could result in excluding literatures in which genetic relationships were not

particularly evident, as attested by the case of naturalism in Finland, or lapsed into unnecessary disputes about the justification of some intertextual relationship.⁴ The rise of structuralism and textualism in the 1960s, not to mention Roland Barthes' famous pronouncement that the author was dead, altered the situation dramatically. Literary works were no longer considered to be something fixed, no longer the unique and autonomous products of original authors, but rather they were intersections of several texts, as Julia Kristeva described (83, 194). The task of tracing origins lost its meaning. As Guillén simply puts it: "Was it necessary for a Renaissance poet to read Petrarch in order to write Petrarchan sonnets? How many people were petrarching without realizing it? But if something of A is found in B, perhaps we have only an example of what is today called intertextuality" (57).

From an intertextual perspective—on the basis of common themes, topics, and motifs—Finnish literature appears in another light than on the basis of genetic contacts. When freed from the exigency of causal explanation, nineteenth-century

374 Finnish and French literatures uncovered a variety of interesting resemblances and dialogues that, in addition to apparent parallels, are inscribed deeply in the works' semantics and thus indispensable in interpretation. Aho's *Papin rouva* (*The Parson's Wife*, 1893) for instance, evokes immediately Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), and critics have compared Aho's work to Flaubert's novel since *Papin rouva's* first publication. The novel's events are set in a remote countryside parsonage in Eastern Finland, and the dramatis personae are clearly reminiscent of Flaubert. A clever, sensitive woman is unhappily married to a clumsy, prosaic man. The wife and husband remain strangers to each other. Tired of bourgeois banality, surrounded by the silence of the countryside, she craves love and passion. As if on cue, an elegant seducer arrives on the scene, fueling the wife's romantic illusions and her urge to flee to another life. The triangle is prepared and the reader is primed to expect a scandalous scene of infidelity, the collapse of bourgeois façades, and, considering the nineteenth-century moral atmosphere, ample judgment and contempt from society. Aho, however, aims at creating a contrasting figure for Flaubert's Emma and unfolds the marital drama in relation to the Scandinavian debate on the female condition. Emma's Finnish sister figure is described as a woman lacking the courage to transgress the boundaries of her holy union and to thwart the expectations of her conservative community. Because she searches for a real love instead of sexual adventures, Aho's heroine is also portrayed as more chaste than the "frivolous" Emma, allegorizing the supposed virtues of the Nordic woman of the era. Aho's novel is of course only one example. One could mention a number of other texts written by this generation of Finnish writers who were filled with the spirit of the new scientific worldview. Ina Lange's *"Sämre folk": En Berättelse* (*"Rabble": A Story*, 1885) focuses on Nadja, a working girl from Helsinki who becomes an upper-class courtesan within urban high society only to end up in misery. The ascent and descent of a lower-class woman who menaces the fragile balance of the social order clearly evokes Zola's *Nana* (1885); even the protagonist's name suggests the connection. Canth, another female natural-

ist author, similarly shows many connections in her novel to Zola's central naturalist works from *L'Assommoir* (1877) to *Germinal* (1885). Like Zola, Canth presents in her novels an assortment of working class miseries. These works depict the catastrophic consequences of irrational instincts and human passions, focusing especially on women as the tragic victims of their environment and unconscious desires.

Intertextuality, however, has not proved to be a panacea to the crisis in the discipline of comparative studies. As Guillén notes, intertextuality is rather a theory of literary texts than a practical method for a comparative study (247). Intertextuality has radically changed the conception of a literary text, but the term also suffers from vagueness and limitlessness. How can the quantity of conventions, formulas, and commonplaces that make up the language of literature be limited even for a single era? Should every prostitute figure be considered Nana's sister character, every marital triangle a return to Flaubert? In the unending chain of texts, the figure of the fallen woman seems more a perennial literary motif encompassing all literature from Homer to Shakespeare than a distinctive theme of naturalist novels. If the concept of influence is susceptible to overemphasising originality, colonialist conquest, and nationalist interests, then intertextuality raises problems concerning the limits of the resemblances between texts and thus risks losing a historical perspective. In the end, the results of mapping intertextualities can be as mechanical as the work of listing influences and, similarly, produces comparisons that lack an interpretative perspective. Moreover, the emphasis on anonymity and generality of literary texts, instead of works written by particular authors born in a particular culture, loses sight of the humanistic notion of creativity.

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FROM INTERTEXTUALITY TO GENRE STUDY

The insufficiency of intertextual analysis thus calls for context to be placed within a wider frame of reference in which the diverse cultural, ideological, ethical, emotional, and cognitive aspects included in fictional works can be productively examined. There are certainly several options available to frame the work of interpretation, but I limit my view to the generic context, the one that I used in my work on Finnish naturalism. In the studies of naturalism, the concept of genre has been more widely discussed by David Baguley, who, first in his work *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (1990) and then in his study *Zola et les genres* (1993), defines naturalism, on the one hand, as a distinct literary genre of its own and insists, on the other, on the generic nature of naturalist texts, having definable relations and sharing common characteristics with one or more general literary classes (*Naturalist Fiction* 5). Baguley's emphasis on the generic nature of naturalism serves to contest the traditional conception of naturalism as a scrupulous documentation of reality and, instead, attempts to define the "literariness" of naturalist fiction.

The concept of genre, especially understood in a modern sense, not as fixed and

static classes nor as an instrument for prescription, but rather a heuristic model for interpretation and meaning, has brought new perspectives not only to the study of naturalism but also to the study of comparative literature. The generic approach has also been emphasized by Moretti, whose recent works are landmark endeavours to create new approaches to the doomed discipline. In a series of comparative studies on the European novel—*Modern Epic* (1996), *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (1998), and *Graphs, Maps and Trees* (2005)—Moretti has, on one hand, insisted on the power of genres in explaining supranational literary phenomena and, on the other, developed new models of describing literary history, deriving from quantitative history, geography, and evolutionary biology. The idea of tracing diverse versions of the novel indeed seems to offer a fertile ground for comparative study, since the novel can be regarded as a migratory genre particularly capable of revealing indigenous social experience and contentious cultural politics. But Moretti's creative schemes have also raised strong objections. Christopher Prendergast, in "Evolution and Literary History: A Response to Franco Moretti," for instance, disagrees strongly with the integration of the laws of culture and the laws of nature that is central to Moretti's evolutionary literary history.

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To emphasize the laws of culture more than those of nature, Mikhail Bakhtin's genre theory and especially his idea of historical poetics opens up another kind of view. As Bakhtin describes, literary genres can be regarded as specific form-shaping ideologies for understanding the nature of events and actions; genres always express a particular image of man, a certain view of the world that is inscribed in the conceptions of time and space particular of a certain era (*The Dialogic Imagination* 85). From a Bakhtinian perspective, genres should be understood as history-bound ideological notions, ways of understanding experience that indicate a historical spirit and mental outlook. The naturalist novel came on the literary scene in response to the stimuli of new scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century, which changed the Western worldview in a fundamental manner. Never before had the human environment and the individual's image of himself altered so radically in such a relatively short span of time. In consequence, the naturalist novel refused any mythical explanation of human fate and instead subjected its protagonist to the cruel analysis of the influence of heredity and adverse social environments, describing human beings as passive creatures incapable of taking life into their own hands and thus destined for death and disillusionment. Ideas derived from the natural sciences affected not only the emphasis on irrational instincts and descriptions of the catastrophic consequences of sexuality, but also, in a more general way, created a poetics in naturalist novels that Baguley calls an entropic vision: the increasing tendency towards disintegration, dissipation, death, an endless repertory of destructive forces, of spent energies, of crumbling moral and social structures (222). Furthermore, as I argue elsewhere (*Le naturalisme finlandais*), the naturalist novel is fundamentally anchored to the representation of everyday life, which lies at the heart of naturalist literature and determines not only its thematic but also generic distinctions. Naturalist authors

strived toward a serious depiction of the daily life of ordinary people; “ordinary,” “banality,” and “daily grayness” became the slogans of Zola’s and Flaubert’s aesthetics. Both authors emphasized the ideal of mediocrity both in characterization and plotting. In comparison with other genres, such as with the idyllic tradition or with Balzac’s realistic novel, naturalism represents the everyday in a more serious and tragic manner. It establishes a distressing, negative representation of everyday life and thus strives to take a critical view of modern society.

The generic context creates the kind of ideological parameters of representation that cross the repertory of naturalist fiction from fallen women to workers’ misery. These parameters shape the distinctiveness of naturalist motifs compared to those in other works of literature and thus help to differentiate intertextual connections from generic resemblances that are significant in interpretation. In naturalist literature, the perennial motif of fallen woman, for instance, needs to be understood in terms of the entropic vision of everyday life within the naturalist worldview. Naturalist novels “re-represent” the Biblical myth of the female as the origin of evil; reimagined within the context of nineteenth-century “scientific theories,” they transform this ancient trope into something new. While Zola’s *Nana* is a victim of her hereditary taints and adverse social environment, her figure also becomes a symbol of the body politics of the era, discovering the double morals and the defects in the female condition underlying the brave new modern society. In Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, adultery is not only a question of transgression and rebellion against the patriarchal laws, nor simply a romantic and thrilling adventure, but also a true attempt to take life into one’s own hands and struggle against both the corruption of bourgeois hypocrisy and life in a loveless marriage. As Zola wrote on Emma Bovary, she is a general type that can be found everywhere in France, in all classes and environments (*Les Romanciers naturalistes* 141).

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On the other hand, as Alastair Fowler argues, a work’s relation to a genre does not mean passive membership but active modulation; the genre primarily has to do with communication (22). In a comparative study, the generic perspective may help in exploring the divergences between national literatures: how and why do they differ, vary, modulate, what is their particularity and distinctiveness in comparison with other literatures? Even though textual interconnections are based on resemblances, they also bring forth the individuality and the originality of a work. In fact, although genre studies, as well as comparative studies in general, have cherished the idea of general and universal features as the basis of research, “the challenge” of the approach in question is not only to study what different national literatures have in common, but also to recognize differences and dialogues that occur between works. Bakhtin’s notion of dialogicity could be invoked here: “The work is like a link in the chain of speech communion. Like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is related to other works’ utterances: both those which it responds and those that respond to it” (*The Problem of Speech Genres* 76). In the context of European naturalism, these rewritings and exemptions can relaunch “the hermeneutic circle” and bring new insights

into the established works of the literary canon.

In consequence, the naturalist novel in Finland appears not to be simply an extension of French models but rather acts by transgressions and modifications of the generic model, as shown in Aho's version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Those novels describing fallen women and prostitutes in Finnish naturalist literature emphasize more the influence of the social milieu than the hereditary degeneration found in Zola's works. In the works of Canth and Pakkala, the working class girls are described as tragic victims of upper class men; these authors portray the gentry as egoistic, cruel, and unscrupulous, while the vices of the poor are figured as the result of a tragic fall and the determinism of adverse social conditions. The motif of the fallen woman is also invested with the cultural values deriving from the national project in which women were obliged to be the moral pillar of society and to bring up their children with patriotic values. The adulterous novels of Aho and Canth thus depict a violation of nationalist values, a feature in Flaubert's and Zola's works that is less

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CONCLUSION

The crisis of comparative literature is easy to describe, but it is much more difficult to suggest a solution. Genre study is certainly not the only option for the future of comparative literature. The Bakhtinian idea of historical poetics offers one possible avenue for new research. On the one hand, historical poetics endeavours to combine history (variety, particularity, and change) to poetics (the general conventions included in the literary tradition) in order to embrace the tension between the local and the global—the particular and the universal—that is central to studies of comparative literature (Guillén 5); on the other hand, historical poetics opens up one possible way of surpassing the weaknesses inherent in the central concepts of the discipline, that of influence and intertextuality.

I still include the notorious concept of influence as a central concern of comparative literature. Even though the guidebooks of comparative literature tend to introduce influence-oriented study as a past phase, in practice it is still firmly rooted in the tenets of the discipline.⁵ When describing the common models of comparative literature, Guillén calls the study of genetic contacts or other relations between authors “the most recent one” (still in 1992) but nonetheless one that describes a good portion of the current comparative work (69, 82). The study of influences may advance the initial stage of research when formulating a research problem. Information on the contacts between writers and on translations frequently suggest what kind of cultural relationships might be worth studying, that is, what literatures might be worth comparing. However, influences only prepare the way for interpretation. If literature speaks in an oblique manner, figuratively, as Hayden White says, the study of influences merely scratches the surface and is incapable of discovering within the

work “deep semantics” and latent meanings that illustrate human experiences, such as time, selfhood, or sociality (219).

In this essay, I also gestured toward the use of literature in nation building, for which the history of Finnish literature is a pertinent example. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important in emerging cultures, as Edward Said describes (xiii). However, despite the use of literature as a political instrument and despite the literary competition between rival nations that Casanova emphasizes, I want to believe (maybe too idealistically) that neither creative writing nor the processes of reading stem from some necessary competition. Instead, I believe that literature springs from other kinds of needs—from the need to express a diversity of worldviews and conceptions of life, for instance, to express the emotional and ethical aspects of life, to bring our pressing questions to literary language, and to search for alternative ways of expression. A comparative reading endeavours to understand and interpret these needs and aspects of cultural production from a perspective that is larger than a single national tradition or language. It demands curiosity and the will to adapt to different ways of thinking; as Chevrel describes, a comparative reading tends to make every reader a curious explorer (123): an explorer who strives to find different means to construct a story, to discover diverse ways to build up identity, and to understand the various existing realities. The impulse to “compare” belongs to the basic functions of the human spirit and is thus indispensable for the progress of knowledge. It may be a banal conclusion, but it may also go far, since the discovery of the new texts challenges us to question the self-evidences of our own culture and to study other literary cultures.

NOTES

1. Finland became independent in 1917.
2. According to Guillén, however, the early comparatist obsession with causal explanation was based on a bad reading of Comte, who himself warned about the “vulgar” interpretation of his theory: instead of merely focusing on the causes, a positivist study should analyze the circumstances in which the phenomena are produced (57).
3. The study of literary influences rose in France; Guillén calls the influence-oriented research period “the French Hour” (46–54).
4. I have also discussed the difficulty of the causal explanation in my article “Did August Strindberg read Émile Zola?”
5. Guillén includes the study on influences especially in the “French hour” of comparative studies (46–59).

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