

Preface

The conference "Literatures of Lesser Diffusion/Les littératures de moindre diffusion" was held at the University of Alberta on the 14th to the 16th of April 1988. The Research Institute for Comparative Literature/Institut de recherches en littérature comparée (RICL/IRLC) organized it as the fourth of the project *Towards a History of the Literary Institution in Canada/Vers une histoire de l'institution littéraire au Canada (HOLIC/HILAC)*. The first aim of the conference was to elicit interest in and stimulate discussion about a particular type of literature, the second to build a basis for its further systemic and systematic study, and the ultimate goal to help the writing of a broad history of the literary institution in this country.¹ The specificities of the Canadian literatures led the team which initiated this research to adopt as its methodological model a particular theoretical framework, derived from contemporary theories of literature as open, dynamic systems of systems and which emphasize institutional aspects of literary life.² The approach privileged by us is Itamar Even-Zohar's *Polysystem Theory*. To complement the Polysystem Theory, the frameworks of the *Champ littéraire* (P. Bourdieu), the *Institution de la littérature* (J. Dubois), and the *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft* (S.J. Schmidt) are also applied in our research.³ Of course, these approaches differ in their roots: the Polysystem evolved from

1 For more information about the project as a whole see Anthony Purdy's "Présentation" and E.D. Blodgett's "Afterword," in E.D. Blodgett and A.G. Purdy, eds. *Problems of Literary Reception/Problèmes de réception littéraire* (Edmonton: U of Alberta, Research Institute for Comparative Literature 1988) 1-8, 168-76. Progress reports are published at irregular intervals in the RICL/IRLC newsletter *Update/Mise au point*.

2 Some of the reasons for this decision are presented in M.V. Dimić, "Models and Paradigms for the Study of Canadian Literature: its internal and external relations as perceived by critics and scholars — a comparatist view," E.D. Blodgett and A. Purdy, op.cit., 144-67, and M.V. Dimić and Marguerite K. Garstin, "The Polysystem: A Brief Introduction, with Bibliography," *ibid.*, 177-96.

3 For those not familiar with such approaches, we are reproducing at the end of the preface dictionary definitions of the Polysystem Theory and Empirical Science of Literature.

linguistically and semiotically oriented studies of literature (such as Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism, and the Tartu School), while the others from the sociology of literature and culture and certain philosophical and psychological premisses about the 'radical construction of meaning.' Nevertheless, they all define the field of their study and its specificity in homologous terms. The main elements of their compatibility are a similar range of phenomena considered as interrelated and therefore designated for description and interpretation: that is the whole field of 'literary life' or of 'the literary communication situation'; heuristic models indebted to semiotics and the modern sociology of literature and firmly based on concepts of dynamic, functional and open systems; and a strong preference for empirical observation and verification, instead of speculation and metaphorical description.⁴

In this context, 'literary institution' is not understood to mean only "an establishment, organization, or association, instituted for the promotion of some object, esp. one of public or general utility, religious, charitable, educational" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1987 VII 1047 7a), but also to include the sense of "a well-established and structured pattern of behavior or of relationships that is accepted as a fundamental part of a culture, as marriage: the institution of the family; the institution of slavery" (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1973 737 7). In this respect, the French usage is particularly clear: "L'institution: l'ensemble des structures organisées tendant à se perpétuer, dans chaque secteur de l'activité sociale. L'institution juridique, littéraire, artistique ... d'une société" (*Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, 1985 V 43 16). Sociologists of culture generally employ the concept of the institution to cover the entire range of factors involved in the production, transmission, and consumption of the 'artifacts' of literature, the visual arts, cinema, music, and other cultural activities. These factors include both institutions in the narrow sense, such as publishing houses, the media, schools, and universities, and the broader institution, that is the system (network, *champ*) in which they participate, dynamically and functionally. The study of the literary institution can be pursued, therefore, both in fairly narrow sociological and economic terms, and in the wider context of the literary polysystem or as part of the empirical science of literature. In most cases, these convergent approaches favour a comparative view of literature in its broadest and most varied, yet

significant parts. In Canada, such theories and methodologies have been applied in recent years with great success in the study of Québec literature (M. Lemire, J. Melançon, C. Moisan, L. Robert, D. Saint-Jacques, and others). The relative scarcity of this kind of scholarship in English-Canada, as well as the paucity of comparative treatments of the totality of literary life in Canada, provided the initial impetus for our project and this series of conferences.

The area of "literatures of lesser diffusion" seemed to be one particularly suited to systemic approaches combining literary and sociological considerations. The essential features of the literary life in Canada call for such an interdisciplinary approach to literary history. The first of these features is the following: Besides literature in French and English, there is in Canada a mosaic of other 'literary uses of words,' ranging from age-old oral traditions of the Inuit and the North American Indians to works in the languages of immigrants, who have been arriving in trickles and waves since the late nineteenth century, such as German-speaking groups, Ukrainians, Icelanders, Jews, Chinese, Norwegians, Italians, and Japanese. After the Second World War and since, various Oriental, Hungarian, Spanish, Caribbean, East Indian, Black, and other ethnic groups and their writing may be added to the list. And the present demographic picture of the country is continually changing, albeit not as drastically as that of the United States.⁵ This important aspect of the Canadian experience, the creativity of minorities has largely remained "the unheard voices."⁶ Although much has been done to map out 'ethnic writing,' their interrelations with the 'mainstream' (in English and French) and among themselves have been incompletely described; their institutional underpinnings are only partially known and have not been analyzed in a systemic way.

The second feature is the dominance of social and political factors in the development of the Canadian literary life; this diagnosis is generally accepted by scholars.⁷ Literary histories and standard reference works still articulate the flow of literary phenomena according to a grid of external circumstances: the colonial administration, confederation, economic transformations of

5 For the demographic situation of Canada see, for example, R. Lachapelle, "Evolution of Language Groups and the Official Languages Situation in Canada," *Demolinguistic Trends and the Evolution of Canadian Institutions* (Montreal: Special issue in the *Canadian Issues* series of the association for Canadian Studies 1989) 7-33, and for the U.S. the popular presentation "Beyond the Melting Pot," *Time* (April 9, 1990): 38-41.

6 Judy Young, "The Unheard Voices," Jars Balan, ed. *Identification: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* (Edmonton: U of Alberta, The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies 1982) 104-15.

7 Cf. C. Moisan, *Comparaison et raison: Essais sur l'histoire et l'institution des littératures canadienne et québécoise* (Québec: Hurtubise HMH, 1987) 117.

4 More about these convergencies in M.V. Dimitić, "Space and Boundaries of Literature According to Russian Formalism, the Prague School, and the Polysystem Theory," D. Fokkema and R. Bauer, eds. *Proceedings of the XIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association* (München: Iudicium 1990) V 30-35 and Itamar Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies*, Special issue *Poetics Today* 11.1 (Spring 1990): 1-7.

1900, the First and Second World Wars, the depression of the 1930s, and the nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Critics have often demonstrated, with ease, the influence of such political and social factors. They are also aware that another material condition upon which Canadian letters are dependent is that of publication: the attitudes of French, British, and American publishers towards Canadian talent, the concentration of mostly foreign and a few Canadian-owned printing enterprises in Montréal and Toronto, the more recent emergence of regional presses, the importance of "little magazines" in a young country with limited cultural resources, the massive financial and at times political intervention of the federal government and of some provincial governments since the 1960s, and the most recent possibilities of desk-top publication. Needless to say, changes in the immigrants' ethnic background, their numbers, and economic and social status, their choice of language strongly influence the production, distribution and consumption of writing representing their point of view, in the heritage tongue or English and French.

According to the Polysystem Theory, interferences among literary systems usually occur in two situations: a) when there are deficiencies in the systems; b) when systems become static because they tend towards full autonomy and inoperability. The first case is frequent in so called young or emerging literatures that are building sufficient resources to be considered relatively independent, but which remain weak, or those which belong to the periphery of stronger systems; both situations clearly apply to Canada. Even the literatures of the two "founding races" have been and still are marginal to those of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and ethnic writing in the heritage languages usually remains marginal to the literary life of the "mother countries" and has a minimal presence in the Canadian "mainstream." In inter-literary interferences translations play major functions, which are either determined by the needs of the source system or, much more frequently, by those of the target one. The Polysystem Theory has been particularly successful in studying translations and using them as a diagnostic tool for the determination of the character of the systems in contact. The polysystem deals with literary dependence and independence, permitting therefore a systemic exploration of the major problem of shifts in the literatures of Canada in relation to Continental, British, American and other roots and contacts, the significant transitions which took place at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and at other periods, and the forms these processes took. The systemic and institutional frameworks also allow for the proper contextualization and placement of so-called marginal forms or genres, such as texts in newspapers, travel writing, prefaces and manifestoes, and autobiography, that are of unusual importance in the early history of literary life in Canada; these approaches are essential for the study of bodies of texts which have been

marginalized as large groups: writing by women, minorities, and others. The notion of contacts and interferences with adjacent systems, or with other cultural systems, is significant not only to the French and English colonial past of this institution, but also to the modern and contemporary exchanges with ethnic literatures, and between literature written in French and English; in the latter case, the functions of translations which are acceptable (within the target system) as opposed to adequate (to the source) are particularly meaningful.

Announcements about, and the call for, papers for the conference on "Literatures of Lesser Diffusion" explained these theoretical premisses of the project and the main expectations for individual contributions. It was made clear, for example, that "lesser diffusion" has to be combined with ideas about certain types of marginality and, particularly, with those of "ethnic minority writing." The need to explain the terms used proves that those chosen are not self-evident. The truth of the matter is both simple and complex. Etymologically and according to usage the term "ethnic" has a wide range of connotations. Some are rather positive: the word is derived from the Greek *ethnos*, i.e. nation, people, and is probably akin to the Greek *ethos*, i.e. custom, which in turn lead to the Greek *ethikos*, i.e. ethical. Others are neutral: relating to community of physical and mental traits possessed by members of a group as a product of their common heredity and cultural tradition. Finally, there are those which are quite unpleasant: the opposition to the Greek *demios*, i.e. populace, common (free) people, and meanings such as foreign, gentile, even heathen or pagan (*Webster's Third International Dictionary*, 1971 780-81, 600). In Canada, the terms of reference of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism have profoundly influenced the prevailing connotations: "to inquire into and to report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution..." (*Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, I xxi. My emphasis).⁸ This statement, which later on explicitly excludes native populations (I xxvi), establishes by its wording and sentence structure a clear hierarchy between "the two founding races" (my emphasis) and the "other[s]." It is interesting to note in this context a report in the *Globe and Mail* (Tuesday May 30, 1989 C8) that the Writers Union of Canada's 16th annual general meeting had rejected a bid to study the role of minorities in publishing; this decision was then

commented upon in the November 1989 issue of *Saturday Night*, in Libby Scheier's article "Phrase Fraud? White writers who create native characters are being accused of misappropriation of language." Many writers thought that the proposal was very timely; among the reasons for the final refusal, as presented in these two articles, stand out pragmatic concerns (cost, complexity) and a question of principle: the possibility that such a study could be patronizing.

The term "lesser diffusion" was an attempt to anticipate and attenuate such concerns. It was also meant to draw attention to the fact that while the corpus of ethnic writing has continually grown since the late nineteenth century, it has remained in a minority, marginal situation, and has not undergone the same diffusion as the English and French-Canadian literatures, either in the form of publication and consumption, or in that of critical assessment. Furthermore, lesser diffusion and minority do not refer exclusively to numbers, but to the implied status of the ethnic communities and individuals, and their artistic expression. These facts suggest a critical interest in issues such as: immigration, preservation of, and search for, ethnic and cultural identity, relations of language, gender and race, acculturation, assimilation, inter-group dynamics, and others. A particularly important and complex question is that of the relations between ethnic writing and that of the English and French-Canadian official, canonical or central mainstream.

Minority writers, both of the *émigré* and immigrant type, may work in one of the heritage languages or in English or French. For example, Marco Micone and Nino Ricci, both Italian immigrants, write in French and English, Stephen Vizinczey, a Hungarian, Henry Kreisel, a Jewish-Austrian, and M.G. Vassanji, an East Indian from Africa, publish in English. Many other ethnic writers, and this type constituted for a time the majority of such voices, prefer their native tongue. This is the case for most Ukrainian writers and poets from Illia Kyriak (Elias Kiriak) to Oleh Zujewskyj; George Faludy writes in Hungarian, Maria Ardzizi in Italian, Josef Škvorecký in Czech (and sometimes in English), Waław Iwaniuk in Polish, Manuel Betanzos Santos in Spanish, and Aziz Ahmad in Urdu. Clearly, important as a language is both to the definition of literary systems and institutions, as well as to demographic decisions about ethnicity, it is not the only factor in determining the identity of the writer. Another factor is the content of the work, its thematic fabric which usually focuses on exile, dislocation, discrimination, acculturation, assimilation, language issues, and problems of duality. An example of this kind of literature is Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981), written in English, in which the author describes from a woman's point of view the experience of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Undoubtedly, national origin and religion also shape the writer. Authors from the West Indies, to quote one example, use English or French

as their first *langue de culture*, but their experiences and work reflect different cultures and origins. This is clear from the anglophone books by Austin Clarke and Neil Bissoondath and the francophone works by Haitian writers such as Jean Jonassaint and Gérard Étienne. Much of this writing has a biographical dimension that introduces the reader to social, political and historical realities of various populations of Canada both in their past and present circumstances. Many ethnic or minority writers are closely related to their communities and act as their spokespeople and collective memory. Some reconstruct the forgotten history of their group, such as Vera Lysenko in *Men in Sheepskin Coats: A Study of Assimilation* (1947), others describe the early experience of immigration, such as John Marlyn in *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957), and still others present social criticism of the values and behaviour of their communities, such as Filippo Salvatore in *La fresque de Mussolini* (1985), which is a critique of the various social groups in Québec.

In considering the specificity of ethnic writing, two additional observations are in order. The thematological features, mentioned in this text and in much of the existing scholarly studies, are not unique; there are important similarities with the canonical English and French-Canadian corpus. The experience of immigration, the struggle with the country's geography and climate, the search for a new identity, the feeling of being at the periphery of the Empire, and, in the case of the French, the memory of the grievances are among the frequent contents of all Canadian poetry and fiction. Somewhat surprisingly, for the time being a stronger demarcation can be found in the domain of literary devices: dependent on a "politics of memory" ethnic writing is opposed to the postmodern and continues to use traditional referential and representational strategies.⁹

Among the articles of the conference "Literatures of Lesser Diffusion," particularly those written from a theoretical point of view (e.g. J. Balan, G. Bisztray, M.V. Dimić, F. Loriggio, E. Padolsky, T.J. Palmer, and J. Pivato) contain elements or debate the merits of the desired systemic and comparative perspective. As planned from the beginning, the majority of contributors present specific ethnic minority literatures and their representative authors: J. Balan and Robert B. Klymasz concentrate on Ukrainian, G. Bisztray on Hungarian, Sheng-Tai Chang on Chinese, M. Dorsinville on Haitian, L. Elliott on Black, J. Etcheverry on Chilean, H. Loewen on Mennonite, M. Maillet on Acadian, N. Mattson on Finnish, R. McGrath on Inuit, E. Mozejko on Polish, J. Pivato on Italian, and M.G. Vassanji on South Asian writing. N. Rahimieh discusses one author, Naïm

9 For an example of this phenomenon see W. Boelhower, "Italo-Canadian Poetry and Ethnic Semiosis in the Postmodern Context," *Canadian Literature* 119 (1988): 171-79.

Kattan and his works in the perspective of his multiple cultural and linguistic spaces. B. Rasporich comes perhaps the closest to a clearly comparative study in her paper on "Native Voices." The full text of W. Riedel's paper on "The Literature of German-speaking Canadians" has been published elsewhere, because of a previous commitment made by the author. To indicate the important corpus of this group's writing, we added instead a selected bibliography with a brief introduction, prepared by S. Tötösy de Zepetnek. Otherwise, the order of the articles and their texts, subject only to authorial and editorial emendations, corresponds to the transactions of the conference.

Two disclaimers are in order. Firstly, neither the organizers of the conference, M.V. Dimić, M.K. Garstin, and J. Pivato, nor the editors of this publication intended to present a full survey of Canadian literatures of lesser diffusion and 'definitive' studies of certain questions. These articles are explorations leading to further inquiries; one of these is the project "The Institution of Ethnic Minority Writing in Canada," sponsored by the Secretary of State Ethnic Studies Program and conducted at RICL/IRLC by E.D. Blodgett, M.V. Dimić, and S. Tötösy de Zepetnek (Alberta), J. Pivato (Athabasca), E. Padolsky (Carleton), and R. Dionne (Ottawa). Secondly, many organizational decisions were pragmatic and had no prescriptive or normative intent. For example, in the conceptualization of the conference, no attempt was made to decide in principle whether the North American natives can be considered as 'ethnic' or as a 'visible minority,' and whether they belong to this area of study in a political perspective. Experiences with women's writing, native folklore, as well as the creativity of ethnic and other minorities, have made us very much aware of the danger of transforming subjects into objects and using one totalizing discourse to replace other discourses of dominance. Therefore, both our particular explorations of ethnic literary institutions and the larger project of a history of the Canadian literary institution do not aim at a new, definitive statement. We are attempting to achieve a polyphonic presentation, which not only makes statements about the diverse voices, but also permits them to speak for themselves. Our intentions are descriptive and interpretative (within the frameworks of systemic and institutional approaches to literature), not prescriptive and normative; we wish to understand, not to judge. After all, this is the justification for the methodological approaches chosen for our inquiry.

Finally, I should like to acknowledge the contribution to the organization and conceptualization of the conference made by M.K. Garstin. Most of the pragmatic editing and all of the type-setting for camera-ready copy has been done by S. Tötösy de Zepetnek, while J. Pivato made a major scholarly contribution to the whole endeavour. I am indebted to these two colleagues

also for help in the preparation of this *Preface*. Two graduate students of Comparative Literature, during their Summer employment as editorial assistants awarded by the federal and provincial programs STEP and SEED to the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, C. Garrett and L.-A. Lavigne, have spent many hours word-processing the articles and ensuring the accuracy of bibliographical information and quotations. I would like to extend my thanks to the University of Alberta's Vice-President (Academic) J.P. Meekison, Vice-President (Research) C.R. James, and Associate Vice-President (Research) R.L. Busch, to the University's Departments of Romance Languages, Comparative Literature, and English, to the University of Alberta Conference Fund, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism. The interest and support shown by the Editorial Committee of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* permitted the publication of the papers as a special issue of the journal, in addition to the usual *Proceedings* of the RICL/IRCL conferences, which will markedly improve diffusion. Last but not least, the enthusiasm of the participants at the conference and their angelic patience in the face of repeated publication delays, made everything possible and worthwhile.

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF THE POLYSYSTEM THEORY AND THE EMPIRISCHE LITERATURWISSENSCHAFT:

Polysystem (Theory). Theory that attempts to interpret literature within a semiotic frame of reference, on the basis of a general operation of laws in a communication system. Since the 1970s, the term has become familiar through the work of a few scholars (inter al. I. Even-Zohar and G. Tóury) at the Porter Institute in Tel Aviv. According to polysystem theory, literature is a complex whole of systems (concepts of literature on both practical and theoretical levels), which mutually influence each other and which constantly stand in new and changing relations as a function of scales of values (norms) and models which dominate in given circumstances. This theory radically elaborates the work of Tynjanov, who repeatedly wrote in the 20s that literature must not be studied in terms of essences, but in terms of relations. The principle of dominant norms and models confers a relative, historical value upon all theoretical positions, whereas the study of literature [Literatuurwetenschap] is charged with the examination of the norms and models according to which writers, texts, and readers function. This theory also radically elaborates the principle of historical reception (historically determined, whether indeed it belongs to dominant or dominating systems). The notion of system is an open, historical and interpretive concept; it points to the principle of an hierarchical order of literary concepts within a complex whole, such that systems and subsystems can be distinguished; the subsystems share fixed norms and models with larger wholes. Polysystem theory thus leads to new insights relative to the description of national literatures and the description of relations

between national literary systems, whereby delimitation on the basis of political and linguistic frontiers becomes relativized (within a particular literature it is possible that, for example, popular genres function rather within international networks, while higher literature develops more along national lines). Thus the central function that literary translation can fulfill becomes clear as a key to relations (interferences) between more national or regional literary systems. Also, the basic mechanisms of literary contacts are studied in greater detail with this theory. Because polysystem theory attempts to take up the interpretation of literary phenomena on a fundamental level, it formulates hypotheses that could work for other forms of communication (such as cinema, social behaviours, cultural systems in general). This theory, considered literary in the first instance, evolves, following the problematics of interference, in the direction of transfer theory and general systems theory. But the descriptive research, that polysystem theory tries to test out, until now has situated itself in a provisory manner in translation and, generally, in literary research. The polysystem approach to literature as a *scientific* method is to be situated in the comprehensive, theoretical paradigms of systems theory. In disciplines other than the study of literature, for example in thermodynamics, biology, sociology, psychology, such concepts as self-regulating, transforming, and interfering systems are operative. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (1968) is an important, standard work that examines thinking in various disciplines from their common points of departure. (Trans. E.D. Blodgett from H. van Gorp, R. Ghesquiere, D. Delabasita, and J. Flamend, *Lexicon van Literaire Termen: Stromingen en Genres, Theoretische Begrippen, Retorische Procedes en Stijlfiguren* [Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff 1986]: 318-19.)

Empirical Science of Literature: new, systemic literary theory, initiated by S.J. Schmidt and others, based on intersubjective testability. It considers literary theory [Literaturwissenschaft] as an empirically oriented social science [Sozialwissenschaft] and its subject the total area of social interaction with and within the literary text(s). It is built on a system of aesthetic communication between the text/producer [Produktionsbereich], the processing of the text [Vermittlungsbereich], its reception [Rezeptionsbereich], and its post-production processing [Verarbeitungsbereich]. In and with this system of aesthetic communication the objective is to combine socially relevant aspects of literary history, and psycho-literary, socio-literary, didactic, and critical perspectives. (Trans. S. Tóth de Zepetnek from Gero von Wilpert, ed., *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur* 7th edition [Stuttgart: Kröner 1989] 233).

Canadian Literatures of Lesser Diffusion: Observations from a Systemic Standpoint

Even a cursory and preliminary scrutiny of the proposed title and topic reveals difficulties. To begin with, neither the expression 'Canadian Literatures' nor that of 'lesser diffusion' are self-evident. As 'Canadian literatures' I designate here the totality of oral and written literature produced in Canada, without judging the 'Canadian' character of the phenomena or making assumptions about the nature and number of identifiable units. The term 'lesser diffusion,' if left without its intended and required complements 'ethnic' and 'minority,' is particularly insufficient and potentially misleading: not all designated phenomena are of small diffusion and not all works which have not reached broad distribution are included in our considerations. The topic rather concerns the literary creativity of non-English and non-French inhabitants of the country, and it includes therefore the native populations. Furthermore, anglophones and francophones are also, at certain times and in particular regions, in a radical minority situation; the clearest example are the Acadians.

The systemic standpoint, mentioned in the title, refers mainly to the Polysystem Theory, as developed by I. Even-Zohar, and to aspects of P. Bourdieu's analyses of culture and art, particularly his concept of *Champ littéraire*, and S.J. Schmidt's *Empirical Science of Literature* ("Empirische Literaturwissenschaft"). In all these cases we are dealing with open, dynamic systems of systems, the basic factors of which can be schematically represented as follows: