

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. Delabasaita, 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:

INSTITUTION [context]

REPERTOIRE [code]

PRODUCER [addresser]
("writer")CONSUMER [addressee]
("reader")

MARKET [contact/channel]

PRODUCT [message]¹

This scheme demonstrates the compatibility of such older approaches to literature as the Russian Formalists' ideas about "literaturny byt" (literary life), the work of the Prague Structuralists and Tartu Semioticians, and contemporary theories of the literary institution and system (*Polysystem Theory*, *Institution de la littérature*, *Champ littéraire* of the French and Québécois sociological studies of culture, and the *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*) because this outline of the literary system concerns not only direct semiotic contacts between author and reader, but also education, metalanguage, distribution, and other elements belonging to this kind of communication.

While the relationship of these factors is functionally interdependent, any given element, or group of elements, occupies at different times different hierarchical positions in the system. The main binary oppositions in these hierarchies are those between the centre and the periphery, and between primary and secondary functions. While these positions usually undergo perpetual changes, slow or rapid, even chatastrophic, all literary systems have subsystems and are in contact with other contiguous literary and extra-literary systems. In principle, the Polysystem Theory is expected to apply its heuristic model to all literary phenomena. It is, therefore, fair to remember that the theory and its formalist, structuralist, and semiotic predecessors have been mainly developed and tested upon the basis of rather stable literary polysystems, such as the Russian since the late eighteenth century, or those which in their acquisition of all required institutional and other factors have obtained strong social and state support, such as the

Czech since World War I and the Hebrew in Israel since 1948. Most subsequent inquiries have also involved stable literatures, such as the French and German.

In this context, 'stable' does not mean a 'static' polysystem, but rather one able to maintain itself in all the system's vital factors. In using the systemic standpoint to elucidate some aspects of Canadian literary life, these possible limitations will be kept in mind. The very definition of the phenomena under scrutiny — ethnic, minority literature of lesser diffusion — relegates them to the periphery of dominant systems, and the vocabulary used to describe and analyse this situation seems to reflect the 'majority' or dominant point of view. This impression is strengthened if one remembers that in general social terms bearers of the so called inner and outer points of view in culture usually situate themselves in the centre and consider themselves to be the 'we,' while they perceive others as the strangers and 'they.'² This hierarchy is clearly at the very core of the terms of reference of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism, which exclude natives from their purview, relegate minorities to the position of "others" and privilege the "two founding races" (emphasis added).³

Needless to say, the Polysystem Theory does not validate hierarchies of literary factors and other social relations; it serves to perceive them better and understand more fully their origin, development and functioning. But no heuristic model or scholarly discourse is completely 'objective' or value free; therefore connotations of critical concepts and terminologies are not irrelevant and should not be forgotten. Nevertheless, there is no scholarly way to avoid questions of status and power in any social and ideological context which generates (fosters?) acculturation and assimilation. Before moving to the question raised at the beginning of this essay, one may want to mention that the inherent difference in status is expressed in the way ethnic characters and cultures are depicted in 'mainstream' literature: the most stereotyped, in the past at least, have been the native Indians, but such popular novels as *The Foreigner* by Ralph Connor (the Presbyterian minister Charles W. Gordon) strongly advocate the perceived need to transform the immigrant. Although all groups of immigrants from the United Kingdom have largely shown mutual solidarity, there was a period in the nineteenth

1 This is I. Even-Zohar's adaptation of R. Jakobson's universal scheme of communication and language, in *Polysystem Studies*, Special issue *Poetics Today* 11.1 (Spring 1990): 31. Needless to say, although all the basic ideas about the polysystem are taken from the work done by I. Even-Zohar and his colleagues, errors and applications are my responsibility. To facilitate access to sources, all references to Even-Zohar's studies are to this new, revised edition, although my paper was prepared and delivered on the basis of previously available versions; the difference between these is significant but not essential.

2 Cf. J.M. Lotman, "Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture (as Applied to Slavic Texts)," *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture*. Jan van der Eng and Mojmir Grygar, eds. (Paris: Mouton 1973) and Irene Portis Winner, "Some Comments Upon Lotman's Concepts of Semiotics of Culture: Implications for the Study of Ethnic Cultural Texts," *Semiotics*. M. Hall et al., eds. (Michigan: U of Michigan P 1984) 28-29.

3 *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* 1-VI (Ottawa: Queen's Printer 1967-70) I xxi and xxvi, also I 155-69.

century, roughly between 1841 and 1855, when English writers were treating the Irish and Scots as 'ethnics' (cf. for instance the very disparaging remarks about the Irish in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*).⁴

What are, then, the main relevant conditions under which the Canadian literatures of lesser diffusion developed and what are the principle features of their literary life? As in most multilingual societies and states, minorities had to share, in various ways and to various degrees, time and space, and certain social, economic, political and institutional realities with members of the majority group. In fact, on the territory of today's country, two majority groups developed, both at first fully dependent on centres of colonial power situated abroad. These groups also engaged in mutual conflicts which resulted in shifts in the power relationship and, for a long time, in a clear dominance of the English over the French. These two groups, and others which arrived later, pushed aside and very drastically marginalized the indigenous populations. (The Canadian hierarchy of the "founding races," and of the "others" — from European immigrant 'relatives' to visible minorities from different parts of the world, — and finally the natives, is typologically not unique; there are similarities, in this respect, for instance with the past Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires and the present Soviet Union.) The precise relationships of the ethnic groups changed significantly and perpetually, sometimes even in historical terms of periods of 'short duration,' for demographic, political, and economic reasons.⁵

The literary life of all these groups can be seen in the form of at least two hypotheses and models. According to the first hypothesis, these are specific, but very weak polysystems, which in many different ways do not have all the factors and functions of strong polysystems; they neither have the 'critical mass' nor the institutions which would assure their full development and stability. ('Stability' is again understood in the sense of the system's ability to perpetuate itself and not in the meaning of stasis.)

According to the second hypothesis, they represent the periphery, sometimes the truly distant one, of larger polysystems, which have their own centre(s).

Both approaches have their heuristic use, because it may be shown that in many cases there exists an ambiguous duality of belonging to more systems than one, or least the appearance of diverse belongings according to the 'inside' or 'outside' perspective preferred by the observer.⁶ There are no absolute numerical values to be assigned to 'insufficiency' in a polysystem; what is meant here is a lack of resources and lack of hierarchical relations and repertoire within the system, factors which are necessary for the essential mechanisms of production and consumption.⁷

When deciding which hypothesis to prefer in a first approach to particular phenomena, a critic may want to take as a starting point the individual author's initial choice of language. In most cases, this weighty choice is between the heritage tongue of the minority group and one of the official languages. A few authors are bilingual, and in exceptional cases, for particular reasons, they may even use a plurality of language codes: Marco Micone, for instance, lives in Montréal, where writers of Italian origin use Italian dialects, standard Italian, French, and English and he has used all four in one and the same theatrical work. Still other authors are readily available in translations: among older internationally recognized writers such as Stephen Stephanson, George Faludy, and Wacław Iwaniuk are being made increasingly accessible, and Josef Škvorecký has achieved exceptional acceptance with his novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, which in translation won the Governor-General's award, and whose detective novels have an increasingly large following in North America. Nevertheless, most translations serve the functions usual for this activity in interferences

6 Even-Zohar observes that "[i]n some cases, especially when the minority group is able to participate (in various degrees) in the literature of the majority, *intra*-literary interferences may be superseded by *inter*-literary interferences. As a result, what used to be just a system within a larger polysystem becomes a (poly)system in its own right." He adds to this statement two explanatory notes: "This is possible, for instance, when the writers produce bilingually, thus contributing at one and the same time to two systems. Unstable, or 'pluralistic,' linguistic canons may also make it possible for a while for a minority to be part of a majority, before stronger standardization prevails in either the one or the other community." And: "No doubt *intra*-literary interference has a great deal in common with *inter*-literary interference, but there are remarkable differences to justify a separate discussion. From a functionalist point of view, the differences between inter-systemic and intra-systemic relations lies mainly in what one may call distance and degree." Op.cit. 56, 16 and notes 3 and 4.

7 Cf. Even-Zohar 81, 123 about decisions how to determine the mechanism of a polysystem.

4 For basic sociological views of the Canadian situation, I have drawn on such studies as Leo Driedger, "Ethnic and Minority Relations," *Sociology*, R. Hagedorn, ed. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston 1980) 261-89 and articles in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* Second edition (Edmonton: Hurtig 1988), e.g. Raymond Breton, "Ethnic and Race Relations," Leo Driedger, "Ethnic Identity," and Bernard Saint-Jacques, "Ethnic Languages." For the essentials of a literary overview one can consult Tamara J. Palmer and Beverly J. Rasporich, "Ethnic Literature," in the same encyclopedia.

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*. Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies 1989) 7-33.

between systems⁸ and represent private gestures or an action sponsored by the state in an attempt to make the minority experience available to other members of society and so to foster mutual understanding and good will. These functions and purposes explain why even relatively important texts are subjected to radical adaptations, for example when Illia Kyryjak's epic trilogy *Syn zempli* became Elias Kiriak's abridged *Sons of the Soil* (or, for that matter, much earlier Pamphile Lemay transformed William Kirby's *Golden Dog* into a more 'acceptable' but not so 'adequate' *Le Chien d'or*).

Most commonly, the choice of language is largely also a decision about the preferred audiences, and these audiences are frequently further subdivided according to the authors' and the readers' acculturation 'strategies'.⁹ In fact, the two groups may have very different allegiances: those writing in the mother tongue are attached to the culture of the old country, as in the case of most Hungarians writing in Canada,¹⁰ or to the traditions of one's own group, as in much of Ukrainian writing.¹¹ Those preferring English or French have mostly opted for the new country, but even this option is the result of a variety of possible contingencies and choices: some writers are simply not able any more to use the language of their ancestors, others want to justify their group's values and experiences (for example Vera Lysenko in some of her texts), others want to make a clean new beginning and join the new environment (for example Henry Kreisel who speaks movingly about the immigrant's language dilemma in his autobiographic pages).¹²

In the case of literary texts produced in the two official languages, it is impossible to speak, from the standpoint of the polysystem, of independent systems, although the thematic aspect of these works may be quite different from the 'mainstream' and the formal aspect may exhibit particularities. In the case of writing in the heritage languages, there is a greater possibility that the specific literary life of individual groups may evolve into a relatively autonomous system. This possibility increases with the importance of the group and its ability to create institutions (schools, publishing houses, newspapers, etc.), which is somewhat the case of Canadian Germans, Jews,

and Ukrainians. Nevertheless, the greater likelihood is that such phenomena belong to, and will remain, in the periphery of the main system in the same language, or that they will become epigonal, 'imported' epiphenomena of the French and English polysystems. The situation of writers using their inherited tongue is further complicated by the fact that some important ethnic groups have used a multiplicity of forms of their language: German immigrants, for example, have employed both High and Low German and a variety of dialects. The situation of authors who are bilingual or trilingual is rare and special: their works belong to different systems, and the repertoires they have drawn upon in their *œuvre* may come from more than one system.

The possibility has been raised that the literary life of a given minority group may grow into a true polysystem, with its own centre and periphery, primary and secondary functions, a polysystem which generates repertoires (paradigms, codes, canons). For all that, it is more likely, perhaps inevitable that this literary life will remain at the periphery of the system of the country of origin until it blends into the dominant systems of the new country. Authors sometimes consciously decide to remain within the orbit of their system of origin. For this, there are at least two motivations. First, the desire to substitute one's Canadian experience to that expressed in the mother country because it is different and because the old country is seen to be flawed; that has been frequently the Ukrainian position, and, much earlier, one of the driving forces behind the evolving autonomy of the French-Canadian and even British-Canadian literature. Second, the need to make statements which for political and social reasons cannot be made, for a time at least, in the country of origin; that has been the case of most politically motivated immigrants, from Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America, for example. In principle, this phenomenon of writing in a variety of languages which have their centre elsewhere raises the question of 'literature abroad' for many national literatures which are usually not considering that possibility, for instance the Italian and Croatian, and not only those which are used to linguistic commonwealths of varying strength and scope. At first sight, the situation of writers who adopt English or French and therefore belong to the periphery of the dominant polysystems of the new environment, and are working their way towards the centre, seems easier to establish. In most cases, what these authors and works are trying to communicate and their readers to experience is, partially at least, similar to the material used by writers of in the heritage languages. It is coming to terms with the new environment and the specific existence, the so called 'immigrant experience' and 'Canadian content,' favoured in historical, social and 'ethnic' studies of the 'ethnic mosaic.' The 'dictionary' (content) of these texts involves specific events, characters and settings, which also

8 Cf. Even-Zohar 45-51, 73-78 and G. Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute 1980).

9 In these proceedings, see E. Padolsky's contribution to this topic.

10 As shown by G. Bisztray, *Hungarian-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: U of Toronto P 1987).

11 Cf. M.I. Mandryka, *History of Ukrainian Literature in Canada* (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences 1968).

12 "Diary of an Internment," *Another Country: Writings by and About Henry Kreisel*. S. Neuman, ed. (Edmonton: NeWest 1985) 13-44.

figure in ethnic writing in other languages. True enough, the content of the mainstream literatures, especially that in English, is not completely bereft of such elements and searches for one's identity; still, there are telling differences between the life and outlook of members belonging to privileged, or at least relatively privileged groups and those who are placed, at least temporarily, in the nether regions of the social structure (the so called vertical mosaic). There are also 'grammatical' (formal) specificities, particular preferences of forms and genres, different hierarchies among the genres, or specific poetic and fictional strategies. Authors writing for a traditional audience, whether in Canada or abroad, do this with an inspiration which is not exclusively literary but historical and social, to bear witness about the ancestors and contemporaries of the group; this may lead, quite naturally, to the continuation of referential and presentational modes and the rejection of postmodern experiments and game playing. This has been observed in diverse groups, such as the Ukrainian and Italian.¹³ An interesting illustration of the phenomenon is the refusal of Futurism and other avant-garde movements in Ukrainian letters both in the Bolshevik homeland and the free Canada. This option to remain traditional, does not apply, of course, to *émigrés* such as the Chilean writers in exile who are catering to Latin-American audiences used to avant-garde writing. Another possible 'grammatical' feature is the special use of language levels or of different languages, including syntactic, semantic, and phonological markers of the minority language or dialectal and sociolinguistic features, even macaronisms. Dialectal and specific sociolinguistic features are frequently used by authors from South Asian, West Indian and African origin for whom English or French are already their *langue de culture*, so that they need other signs of demarcation.

Another source of literary tension within these groups and among them is the extreme variety of relations between oral and written phenomena, and their relative importance. Orality is usually lost to a great extent among small immigrant communities, but it is quite lively in others, for instance the Acadian and Ukrainian, and still of paramount and dominant importance among the Inuit and Indian. For historical reasons, the strongest oral traditions are paradoxically most frequently transcribed, translated, adapted, used and studied by members of the dominant groups. Matters are further complicated by the fact that Canada has so many minorities, and that their strength and interactions are constantly changing. The very possibility of developing a specific system, or maintaining even a modest position at the periphery of larger systems, depends to a great extent on demographic,

linguistic and institutional factors. Particularly important factors are the numbers of people involved and the arrival of new immigrants. Sociologically, it is normal to assume that smaller communities and individuals assimilate within three generations. At this time (1988), reports commissioned by the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and completed so far, indicate the existence of "Canadian literature" in Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Sinhalese. By country of origin the Spanish language authors come from seven Hispanic countries and reasons: Spain, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico, which have profound cultural and systemic differences. The situation of authors coming from the Indian subcontinent is also very complex indeed. In addition, the emergence of these groups, or at least the recognition of their literature, are often very recent events. For example, although there have been Italian immigrants and publications at least since the last two decades of the nineteenth century, there has been no recognition of a specific body of writing before 1978, the year of P.G. Di Cicco's anthology of Italian-Canadian poets and F. Paci's novel *The Italians*.¹⁴ In addition, the two dominant literatures are themselves relatively young systems, which have been for long periods on the periphery of older and much stronger systems. English-Canadian literature has even today particular interferences and shared institutions with the British and American and Commonwealth polysystems, and the Québécois literature has similar special relations not only with the metropolitan French polysystem, but also with the world-wide francophonie and, to some degree, with the U.S. (In the latter case, it is possible to show some unidirectional interferences in the dictionary and grammar of the two polysystems, in 'high' and, more strongly, in 'low' literature, and also some sharing of institutions and markets.) Neither in English nor in French-Canadian literature is there any absolute unity forged through the use of a common language. There are differences between the *champ littéraire* of the Québécois, the Acadians, the francophones of Ontario, and Western Canadians; and in the anglophone literature, there are not only perceptible traditional ethnic voices, but also some recent differentiations of the Irish, Scots, and Welsh and Jewish writing in English has been recognized as specific for quite a while. In his book on the Hungarian-Canadian Literature, G. Bisztray has proposed a general model for the study of ethnic literature which contains five levels of interferences: world literature, the literature of the country of origin, the national literature of the new country, the other immigrant literature of the

14 Only thirteen years later (in 1991) was Nino Ricci named winner of the 1990 Governor-General's Award for *English-language* fiction, for his first novel, *The Lives of the Saints*, published by tiny Cormorant Books of Dunvegan.

13 Cf. W. Boelhower, "Italo-Canadian Poetry and Ethnic Semiosis in the Postmodern Context," *Canadian Literature* 119 (1988): 171-79.

new country, and the literature of the same language group produced in other countries.¹⁵ This is a useful starting point, but it should be adapted to the empirical realities of polysystems. For instance, world literature is not one unified level, but a hierarchy of at least two or probably more literary (and cultural) macro systems (the Western, the Islamic, the South and East Asian, etc.); the literature of the country of origin may consist of a variety of polysystems (this applies both to small countries like Switzerland and Belgium and large ones like the U.S.S.R. and India) or belong to a broader polysystem (Austria, for example); Canada does not have one national literature; other immigrant literature(s) may be typologically akin but, in specific cases, without provable interferences; last but not least, this lack of interferences may also characterize some of the otherwise possible and plausible contacts with foreign literature(s) in the same language.

In spite of all difficulties, complications, complexities, and ambiguities, the systemic approach, prudently applied, permits questions to be asked in a way which should lead to new insights and to a reasonable synthesis. At the end of this conference, during the Round Table, we may see better whether this perception is shared by other participants, most of whom are closer to the ethnic literatures than I, and whether we have gained insights *en cours de route*.

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History, Literary History, and Ethnic Literature

One of the more interesting aspects of ethnic literature as a field of study is the obligations it entails.¹ The critic is forced to work on many levels simultaneously. S/he must name the texts, disseminate them, and, at the same time, at this particular stage of the game, define them, situate them within the literary agenda of the century and the debate it has fostered. Editing, translating, the journalistic piece or the one-page review are not beyond his/her ken. And neither are the more ethereal spheres of his/her discipline. In short, s/he must document the existence of the corpus, of the tradition, while grappling with the criteria that establish them. Plain criticism and theory cannot be disjointed: they are part of one single activity.

There are in this many advantages and many disadvantages. One does not have to continuously check back to see if it is all right, to worry about Coleridge's or Samuel Johnson's cogitations on the topic. The topic — the tradition — is precisely that which is missing, that which one is trying to make appear out of the hat. If one is lucky, one may even develop a strong sense of solidarity with the writers and feel that one is collaborating and adding focus to their venture, that one is somehow partaking of criticism in its ideal form, i.e., is helping to found, to render public a literary vein. On the other hand, not having to show one's respects to the great predecessors of the discipline, while it does quell some anxieties, lets surface many others. Just as they must conjure up the tradition — the writers, the texts, so to speak — critics of ethnic literature must forge their critical vocabulary. With the canon past having no authority, being almost completely silent on the subject, that can be quite a trick to perform, and quite a responsibility. For, obviously enough, not all the perspectives that the present offers have the same degree of adequacy or appropriateness. And when it comes to the criticism of ethnic literature, adequacy and appropriateness are very much at the heart of the matter.

1 An earlier draft of this paper was read by Enoch Padolsky. I would like to thank him for his comments.