

“PARTNERSHIPS AMONG ‘PERIPHERALS’ IN
 JOINT RESEARCH PROJECTS
 AND SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING ALSO
 CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE
 DECOLONIZATION OF LITERARY STUDIES”,
 INTERVIEW WITH MARKO JUVAN

1. *Your research interests focus on the dynamics of the synchronization of Literature from Slovenia and other Eastern European literatures. How did you become interested in this subject, and how do you view this dynamic among “peripheral literatures” within the broader context of World literature today?*

Among the existing concepts of world literature, which were all more or less a corollary of globalization and the emerging crisis of the US-American cycle of the global economy, I felt the greatest affinity for Moretti’s and Casanova’s systemic approach, with their emphasis on power asymmetry between leading, influential literatures and those that attempted to follow or challenge models imported from richer and stronger centers. The main reason I began examining the relationships between Slovenian literature and the literary world was my studying literature as a social system and discourse, which required my attention to social actors, media, and institutions involved in literary discourse as a site of dialogue (both interliterary and interdiscursive) and ideological struggle.

Until the late 1990s, I practiced and developed my (rather eclectic, to be honest) combination of systems theory and Bakhtinian dialogism mainly by examining national literature, analyzing it intertextually and placing it in a comparative context. However, somewhat accidental external stimuli forced me to broaden my perspective: I was asked to teach a university course on world literature because of a vacant teaching position (even though I considered myself primarily a literary theorist and historian of modern Slovenian literature), and I was also becoming increasingly connected with the international CompLit

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community. Rather than lecturing on works and authors of the world literary canon, I presented to my students the history and theoretical implications of the idea of world literature itself. These circumstances, in fact, required me to reorient my approach in a way parallel to what Pascale Casanova did as she expanded Bourdieu's concept of the (French) literary field to the world literary space. Another important incentive came from a bilateral project with my Icelandic colleagues, in which we discovered surprising parallels between the Icelandic and Slovenian national poets, even though the literatures in question were too distant in the 19th century to establish any "*rapport de fait*." I attempted to explain this structural parallel by relating both literatures to the system of world literature. I believed that a systems approach to world literature can explain the "foreign policy" of national literatures better and more holistically than the traditional binary comparison between individual national literatures, especially when such comparisons only consider the influence of "leading" literatures on less visible ones.

Today, peripheral and small literatures are gaining some visibility in global academia, as international publishers such as Bloomsbury have begun issuing book series designed to highlight particular, globally lesser-known literatures as "world literature." However, most literary traffic between these literatures is mediated by metropolises as sites of global consecration: a modern author writing in a language of limited diffusion, such as Gospodinov or Cărtărescu, is typically translated into another "small" language, such as Slovenian, only after being recognized in London, Paris, New York, and similar centers, and translated into a world language. To be sure, an important but less visible and more direct interaction between peripheral literatures has existed for decades, partly through state-sponsored literary exchange between linguistically, ideologically, or geographically compatible literatures (within what Đurišin called interliterary communities, e.g., between the communist, Slavic, Central European literatures), and partly through strategies I call "capillary worlding"—international collaboration between small publishers, exchanges between fellow authors, translators, and literary journals from different countries, as well as sociability at literary festivals. I believe that partnerships among "peripherals" in joint research projects and scholarly publishing also contribute significantly to the decolonization of literary studies in smaller or peripheral environments.

2. *Your work primarily examines Slovenian literature within a global framework. How do you balance national and transnational perspectives in your research?*

I must admit that I am not an exception to the prevailing practice of comparative literature in Slovenia, namely its focus on the relationship between our national literature and other European or world literatures. However, this “peripherocentric” orientation, which I critiqued for its underlying cosmopolitan and nationalist ideologies, primarily involved studying the influences of more or less prominent European authors on Slovenian literature. This often led to repeated conclusions about the dependence, belatedness, or, conversely, the ingenious originality of Slovenian writers in their adoption of transnational models. A more holistic approach to world literature as a “universal” system of “particular” literary ecosystems enabled me to analyze Slovenian literature as a token of the widespread type of peripherality—not as a special case or pathological event, as diagnosed in our modern criticism as “Prešeren’s structure” or the “Slovenian cultural syndrome” (i.e., the function of literature as a substitute for the politics of the national movement), but as a “normal” development within the context of European cultural nationalism under conditions of global peripherality.

Moretti’s claim that most literatures are peripheral and that the development of genres within them is the norm, while the supposed originators of genres in global centers are exceptions, was a relief for us, scholars from the peripheries, because we no longer needed to struggle with our respective complexes of dependence, belatedness, or lack of originality. Moreover, the lessons from Bakhtinian dialogism and Lotman’s semiotics of culture encouraged us to reject the prejudice that the periphery cannot produce innovations and aesthetic values capable of transcending their origin.

3. *What makes Slovenian, Romanian, or Hungarian literature “semi-peripheral”? How did you arrive at this classification?*

In my writings, I believe I have never explicitly defined Slovenian, Romanian, or Hungarian literature as semi-peripheral. In fact, I have hesitated to use the term, as seen in my frequent bracketing of the prefix “semi” in expressions like “(semi-)peripheral literatures.” In several contexts, I have referred to East-Central European literatures with this vague and awkward compound, probably because I have been influenced by the more elaborate distinctions

of core, periphery, and semi-periphery in Wallerstein's and Arrighi's model of the economic world-system. In that model, the literary region of East-Central Europe largely overlaps with the economic semi-periphery, while, for example, the colonized global South represents the periphery. However, in the literary world-system, it seems much more difficult to distinguish between peripheral and semi-peripheral literatures, because cultural capital cannot be as easily measured as its economic counterpart. I am currently participating in an international project hosted by the University of Sibiu, under the direction of Galin Tihanov and Andrei Terian, in which the central concept is the notion of sub-periphery, which further complicates the differentiation. To illustrate these differences in an intuitive way, we can say that English and French literatures represent centers, as their influence is global; German, the semi-periphery (with predominantly regional influence); Czech and Polish, the periphery (with a lesser degree of regional influence); while Slovenian, Bulgarian, or Romanian could be classified as sub-periphery because they have remained unacknowledged even regionally. Still, these distinctions remain open to discussion and are by no means unproblematic.

4. *To what extent can the theory of synchronization with Western European literatures and cultures, programmatically adopted by Romanian literature since the 19th century, be verified for other areas in Eastern or Southeastern Europe?*

In the project conducted in Sibiu, Lovinescu's concept of synchronization plays a central role. Lovinescu's core idea—that seemingly less developed peripheral literatures can catch up with more developed centers by engaging in open interaction with the world republic of letters—is original and merits international attention, though it is not entirely unique. It has precursors, contemporaries, and successors in other countries as well, sometimes less theoretically developed, sometimes even more so. For example, the Romantic philologist Matija Čop, encouraged by the talent of France Prešeren (later canonized as the Slovenian national poet), believed that Slovenian literary culture—whose national language was scarcely used in public discourse, education, scholarship, and literature—could reach the universal standard of more developed nations only through a shortcut: cosmopolitan, highly individualized poetry infused with forms, references, and intertexts from classical and modern world literature. Leo Trotsky proposed the concept of

uneven and combined development—which is currently regaining attention in world literature studies thanks to the Warwick Research Centre—to show that significant leaps forward can occur even in the most backward environments. Similarly, the Bulgarian critic Georgi Gačev wrote extensively on the accelerated development of Bulgarian literature, suggesting that the concept applies to nations undergoing decolonization. In fact, Eurochronology, based on the Western meridian of modernity, is increasingly being challenged today. In my recent work on the global student movement of “the long year 1968” and its literary and theoretical output in Paris and Ljubljana, I argued that the local neo-avant-garde, with its conceptualist, ludic, and structuralist traits, represented a synchronization with Paris and its cultural scene, made possible by their shared and contemporaneous involvement in the global event. However, I am now considering a different approach to synchronicity: Bloch’s “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous,” in which radical synchronicity serves as the starting point rather than the Western-centric timescale that defines what is considered contemporaneous. Roberto Schwarz’s seminal book *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism* prompted me to think in this direction. This is the challenge for my future research.

Synthesis