

An Interview with Professor Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek

Yiu-Nam Leung

ABSTRACT

In this interview conducted by Professor Yiu-nam Leung (National Tsing Hua University), Professor Steven Tötösy (University of Alberta) discusses briefly the systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture as well as the situation and possible future of this approach on the international scene of scholarship. Further, he introduces a new online journal, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* at <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clewebjournal/> and talks about the situation of comparative literature at the University of Alberta. He concludes with a brief description of his plans for the near future.

KEY WORDS

Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture

Comparative Literature

Cultural Studies

Knowledge Transfer

Comparative Cultural Studies

New Media



This interview is a result of Professor Yiu-nam Leung's visits to and involvement with the University of Alberta between 1994-1998. In 1994 he participated in the 1994 Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held at the University of Alberta. In 1996 he received a Government of Canada grant to develop a course, "The Female Bildungsroman with Focus on English-Canadian Literature" and spent four weeks at the University of Alberta working on his project with Steven Tötösy. In 1997 Tötösy and Leung co-organized an international conference on Canadian literature and culture, held at Taipei and Hsinchu. During his stay in Edmonton, Professor Leung conducted interviews with several scholars at the University of Alberta—Professors E. D. Blodgett, Milan V. Dimić and Steven Tötösy—as well as with two Taiwanese-Canadian authors residing in Edmonton, Daisy Chen (Hsiao-yin Chu) and Mr. Fang-pai Tung. The interview with Tötösy is an updated version of the original interview of 1997.

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek was born in Hungary in 1950 of Hungarian and German parentage. He grew up in Austria and finished his high school education in Switzerland before moving to Canada in 1975. He obtained his B.A. in history and German from the University of Western Ontario (1980), his M.A. in comparative literature from Carleton University, his B.Ed. in English and history from the University of Ottawa (1983), and his Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Alberta (1989). Since receiving his Ph.D. in 1989, he has been very active in scholarship—over 130 articles, four single-authored books, a dozen edited volumes, work in new media, etc.—in learned associations and organizations, in teaching, and in

international affairs. He is former president of IGEL (The International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature), vice president of IAEA (International Association of Empirical Aesthetics), and chair of the Committee for Communication and Information of the International Comparative Literature Association. He is currently on the advisory board of several learned journals. His first books were *The Social Dimensions of Fiction: On the Rhetoric and Function of Prefacing Novels in the Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1993) and *The Records of the Tötösy de Zepetnek Family* (1993), and his latest is *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998). In his international activities, he has been a visiting professor at several universities, including the University of Peking in 1995 and 1996, where he published *Wen Hsueh yen chiu ti ho fa hua – Chen t'i hua ho ching yen chu i wen hsueh yu wen hua yen chiu fang fa* (*Legitimizing the Study of Literature. A New Pragmatism: The Systemic Approach to Literature and Culture* (Trans. Ma RuiQi. Beijing: Beijing UP, 1997). He has also visited and lectured in Taiwan six times between 1996 and 1998. One of the results of the above-mentioned international conference on Canadian literature and culture he co-organized with Leung is the edited volume, *Canadian Culture and Literatures: And a Taiwan Perspective* (Edmonton: Research Institute of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta and Hsinchu: Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University, 1998). From among Tötösy's other recent publications, of special interest is the collected volume, *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999).

Among his many activities, Tötösy has edited and desk-top published between 1989 and 1997 the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*. More recently, he launched what is at present the only active online journal of comparative literature, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb*, at <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clewebjournal>. He is also associate director of the University of Alberta Research Insti-

tute for Comparative Literature.

YL: *Steven, we first met at the XIVth Triannual Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held at the University of Alberta in August 1994, of which you were co-organizer. Then, in March 1995, you were invited by our National Science Council to give a series of lectures in Taiwan and since then we have established a more in-depth intellectual and personal relationship. With this interview, I would like to take this opportunity to give more exposure to your work for the benefit of our Taiwanese colleagues and the international readership of Tamkang Review. In your lectures, you discussed several times a less known theoretical framework, the Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture. Would you explain briefly what this theory is about?*

TdeZ: The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture is a fairly new theoretical framework. It is largely the construct of a German scholar, Siegfried J. Schmidt, formerly at the University of Siegen and now at the University of Münster. It is his *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft* I designated in English, since 1993, as the “Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture.” In general terms, the two main factors of the framework are the notion of system and the notion of the “empirical.” The origins of the systemic approach can be traced to Structuralism, the Sociology of Literature, and Russian Formalism. At present, there are several “systemic” approaches on the theoretical landscape, such as the *Polysystem Theory* (Itamar Even-Zohar), the *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft (the Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture)* (Siegfried J. Schmidt), the *l’institution littéraire* (Jacques Dubois), the *champ littéraire* concept of Pierre Bourdieu, and Robert Estivals’ *Science de Bibliologie*. While there are significant differences among these frameworks, they connect on one main point. This is the view that literature is both a self-referential and open *system* and that literature may be studied in a functional and operational manner, including evidence- and rationalist-based research. The notion of the system was adopted for the study of literature from Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s

General Systems Theory and it was later developed in several parts of the world such as by Jurii Lotman and Niklas Luhmann. However, historically, in the study of literature in the West, the incipient notion of system in its varied forms and concepts can be traced to such as Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*. The view of literature as an interrelated field of parts where the parts are considered to be the various national literatures, and within these further parts are the different genres, later evolved into the idea that these literatures should also be *studied* in a certain manner. What I am concerned with in my work is the notion of a certain manner of conducting literary analysis, that is, ways where the text is not the primary concern—although this too can be done, as I have demonstrated several times in my publications—but rather the text and all related manner and processes around and connected to the text. In other words, although said here in a reductive way, this is a contextual approach with precise methodology. While the systemic and empirical approach as a combination is mainly a European concept in research, for instance in the field of cognitive science and literature, it should be mentioned that the epistemological background of the approach is the German-based school of radical constructivism. Interestingly, while the recent death of Thomas Kuhn brought some echoes on his influential “paradigm shift” concept, it is not much known that he was part of a group of scholars in the 1930s at the University of Chicago who published a two-volume work, the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, and there is a strong parallel between the work of the said Chicago School and the approach I am discussing. The *Encyclopedia* contains several chapters, such as Carl G. Hempel's “Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science” or Abraham Kaplan's “The Humanities and Unified Science” which in my opinion were much ahead of their time and, in fact, are still ahead. It is indeed unfortunate that this work has somehow disappeared from the general theoretical landscape of the Humanities. It is my hope and objective that the systemic and empirical approach offers a socially relevant way to study literature and culture. Overall, scholars in literature often object to both “system” and the “empirical.” I am very much aware that objectivity and scien-

tific rigor has come under much criticism and more, into outright disrepute, when it comes to the study of literature and art. The arrival of Deconstruction, various anthropological approaches, Michel Foucault, psychological approaches, etc., brought much afore to dispute the possibility of studying literature “scientifically.” But while I disagree with the negation of the possibility of studying literature within and with scientific parameters, at the same time I do not dispute the validity of any of these other approaches. Rather, I believe that a rigorous “soft” scientific approach is able to provide us with insights about literature equally valuable. Most importantly, the systemic and empirical approach has a built-in postulate of the necessity to apply the framework to problems in literature as a system as well as in specific texts. To illustrate my point I will mention two specific aspects of the approach: one is the question of the current embattled situation of the Humanities in general, and the other is the question of readership and reading with respect to canonization. Especially in North America, the whole canon discussion neglects to pay any attention to readership. In my opinion the question of who reads what and how should be an integral part of any discussion of the canon and there should be data available. And this point brings me back to the difficulties the Humanities are now in worldwide. It is misguided to withdraw from the criticism of politicians and the general public who find the discussions and the publications about literature socially irrelevant. Personally, I believe of course that the study of literature is an essential intellectual activity but I am not sure how, indeed, socially relevant the study of literature *today* is. I believe that politically motivated theories such as feminist criticism, gay and lesbian literary studies, or ethnic minority literature studies are very much socially relevant and work in these areas not only resulted in good scholarship but also made literary study socially relevant. But what I disagree with is the way these studies are conducted, that is, their sometimes almost stringent focus on the politics of the matter and imprecise and implicit—rather than explicit—methodology. In my opinion these studies would achieve better results if they were done exactly with the systemic and empirical approach, for example. More recently there

have been some papers published in the States which employ Bourdieu's framework or Niklas Luhmann's systems concept (both of these frameworks appeared with reference to feminist criticism). But please allow me to offer to our (potential) readers a dictionary definition of the basis of the Systemic and Empirical Approach, Siegfried J. Schmidt's *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*. For a detailed definition of the approach in its comparative literature context, I invite our readers to peruse my book, *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998):

Empirical Science of Literature: Recent movement within the study of literature which is concerned with the study of literature as a social *system of [inter]actions*. The main question is what happens to literature: it is written, published, distributed, read, censored, imitated, etc. The empirical study of literature originated as a reaction to and an attempt at solving the basic problem of hermeneutics, i.e., how the validation of an interpretation can be demonstrated. From reception theory it had already become clear that interpretations are not only tied to the text, but also, and even to a great extent, to the reader (both in terms of the individual and of social conventions). This led to the theory of "cognitive constructivism," based on the thesis that the subject largely construes its empirical world itself. The logical consequence of all this, to be seen in the work [for example] of S. J. Schmidt, is the separation of interpretation and the strictly scientific study of literature (so-called "radical constructivism"). The literary system of actions is observed from the outside—not experienced—and roughly characterized as depending on two conventions (hypotheses) that are tested continually. These conventions are: the aesthetic convention (as opposed to the *convention of facts* in the daily *language of reference*) and the *polyvalency convention* (as opposed to the monovalency in the daily empirical world). Thus, the object of study of the

empirical study of literature is not [only] the text in itself, but the *roles of action* within the literary system, namely production, distribution, reception, and the processing of texts. The methods used are primarily taken from psychology and the social sciences (reception theory). In general the steps to be taken in empirical research are: forming a hypothesis, putting it into practice, testing, and evaluation. More concretely, for the study of reader response a wide array of techniques are used, ranging from protocol techniques and thinking aloud to pre-structured techniques, such as the semantic seven point scale (C. Osgood) and the classification technique (card sorting), and forms of content analysis, association techniques, etc. Some objections that are often raised to the empirical study of literature are the triviality of many of its research results (confirmation of what was already known or suspected) and its reductionism (artificiality of the framework and set-up, and limitation to reader response instead of the study of the text). It is clear, however, that the empirical study of literature by its specific approach of the object and its methodology is an outstanding way to explore the socio-cultural aspects of the literary system. It makes an irreplaceable contribution to the development of a more scientific and socially relevant study of literature (H. van Gorp, et al. *Lexicon van literaire termen*. 5th Ed. Leuven: Wolters, 1991. 116-17).

YL: *What is the status of the approach on the international scene?*

TdeZ: Generally speaking, the approach is under much attack. It is criticized for various reasons even in Germany and in the Northern European countries such as The Netherlands where it is, if anywhere, best known and where the approach actually originates from. The aforementioned Siegfried J. Schmidt originally published his two-volume work *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* in 1980-82 (trans. *Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literature*,

1982) and developed it further since many of his students and colleagues elsewhere such as myself added to and applied the framework. In Germany, the framework is attacked because German scholars reject Schmidt's tight taxonomy, for instance. Elsewhere, for example in North America, the matter becomes more complicated owing to the problematics of knowledge transfer. American scholars have access to European literary theory usually by translation, and Schmidt's original work, although translated into English, appeared in Germany and thus it has had no wide distribution. But the main objection, I believe, is the disaffection with the notion that literature may be studied within scientific parameters, as I have mentioned previously. Here I should like to add that North American scholars specifically but scholars of literature in general, still confuse literature *per se* and the study of literature. In other words, English departments' graduate students write theses about novels like a "novel." Another reason for the objection is what a friend of mine told me years ago: "Steven, this thing is never going to fly, it's too much work!" I agree, to implement the postulates of the approach such as in-depth evidence-based research, precise taxonomy, inter-disciplinary and teamwork, do not match well with the humanist notion of the solitary scholar writing down his/her thoughts. Until scholars of literature give up their generic and often not even realized and obviously mismatched dream that they are "writers," literary scholarship is not going to evolve. Scholarship of literature is one activity, creative writing is another. And there is also the mistrust towards the notion of system. Some argue that a "system" is obviously closed and thus to view literature as such is restricting. This objection, brutally put, is misguided, emanating from the simple fact that many have not studied the notion of system. The membership list of IGEL, the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature, shows that the approach has, on the other hand, a wide international base and, most importantly, the membership is not restricted to the Western hemisphere: we have colleagues in Japan, Korea, Mainland China, Taiwan, Indonesia, etc. It is also of some significance that the secondary literature of the approach is large. In my bibliographies in the Library of CLCweb

(<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clcwebjournal/library.html>) one such bibliography of the approach contains almost 3,600 titles published since the early 1980s. If nothing else, this indicates that while the approach has not found a wide appeal, it still generated and generates an impressive amount of scholarship.

YL: *How do you propagate the approach?*

TdeZ: By trusting that our work will be eventually read and paid attention to owing to the solid scholarship of the work. But we also do the usual such as national and international conferences. For example, IGEL has had, since 1985, biannual conferences on both sides of the Atlantic. As president of the association for 1994-96, I organized its biannual conference at the University of Alberta at the Nakoda Lodge Conference Centre in August 1996 and a substantial volume of selected papers suggests the impressive work of scholars associated with the approach (for the table of contents of the volume, *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Applications*, see <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clcwebjournal/library.html>). There is also the IAEA, the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics that has an equally impressive number and quality of scholars working in the field and organizes biannual conferences.

YL: *What is the future of the approach in your estimation?*

TdeZ: Literary theory is a tool to understand and to teach literature and I am a pluralist here. I view the explosion of theory as a positive thing. The more tools we have to understand this definition-elusive creative activities, literature, the better. Our approach is one of many and while we believe that the systemic and empirical approach is well equipped or better equipped than most for the study of literature, it simply adds a good tool to the other tools. And who says that it is always the best tool that achieves the best results? Seriously, I think that the approach will gain more interest in the future but it will not gain the wide appeal of a Deconstruction or New Historicism unless of course it gets picked up in a major way in North America (but the travel of theory and knowledge transfer and their politics and processes is another story to tell).

YL: *Would you give me some examples of how the systemic and em-*

pirical approach works when applied to literary texts and to Canadian literature in particular?

TdeZ: I tried to show the application to Canadian literature in my first book, on the Nineteenth Century preface to English- and French-Canadian novels. Based on the reviews the book received since its publication in 1993, I am both surprised and pleased. The reviewers, and there are four to date, wrote that the work added significantly to our knowledge about Canadian literature and this despite the united opinion that the approach itself is rather “foreign.” And the book also made an impact in that the bibliographers of Comparative Canadian Literature at the Université de Sherbrooke now added a new category to their list of items, that of the study of the preface. But I also applied the approach to several other areas of Canadian literature, such as Canadian Ethnic Minority Writing (several articles published in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*) or Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (published in the journal *Essays on Canadian Writing* and on the web). I also applied the framework to specific problems in literature as well as literary texts, including novels in German, French, and Central European literature. I am particularly interested in readership research and I published several articles developing the theoretical bases of the approach with reference to readership, for instance with regard to the question of canonization (published in the journals *Poetics* and *Mosaic* and others forthcoming). In theory, I also applied the approach to translation theory and designed a taxonomy for the study of translation (published in the translation journal *Meta* as well as in my book *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*). More recently, I developed the framework to study Central European literature and culture for a team-project in my capacity as advisory board member of and project leader with the newly established Canadian Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies (CCAuCES) at the University of Alberta (the project is funded by the Austrian government). I would also like to add here that in my opinion the approach is particularly well suited to the study of Taiwanese literature, for instance. My reason for saying this is the following. The “macro-systemic” dimension of Taiwanese literature is that it is connected to

the history and also to the various stages of Mainland Chinese literature as well as Taiwan's own indigenous literature and culture, not to speak of the obvious political dimensions of this relationship. Our approach, in my opinion, would provide the perspective and the tools to study Taiwanese literature exactly with reference to this "systemic" relationship.

YL: *You are, in the first instance, a comparatist, and you mentioned that you have a World Wide Web home page you constructed for Comparative Literature. Please explain how you see the significance of this enterprise and its relationship with comparative literature.*

TdeZ: As a comparatist very much aware of how embattled this discipline is at present both intellectually and institutionally, I am concerned with two aspects in particular. One is the constant difficulty of students in comparative literature to acquire the necessary competence to study texts of more than one language with the in-depth knowledge of the culture of and behind the text, and the other is the popularity of cultural studies, a discipline that in many instances "appropriated" comparatist paradigms, both theoretically and in subject matter. The worldwide web page, a tool in and with New Media for scholarly communication and knowledge transfer I launched, is in the form of the above-mentioned online journal, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* (<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clcwebjournal/>). The new e-journal is a peer-refereed quarterly with a distinguished advisory board, its material is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, and it is archived by the National Library of Canada. In addition to scholarly articles, *CLCWeb* publishes a Library for Research and Information in Comparative Literature and Culture. It contains a number of bibliographies, an international directory of comparatists, etc. Some materials now in *CLCWeb* already existed in a web page I made and kept running for the University of Alberta Research Institute for Comparative Literature at <http://www.ualberta.ca/ARTS/ricl.html> from 1995 to 1998. I hope that *CLCWeb* will successfully market our discipline and promote the advantages of new media knowledge transfer. Besides, the title, aims, and objectives of the journal combine the comparative literature aspect with that of cultural

studies and I am in the process of further developing my notion of the approximation of comparative literature with aspects of cultural studies into a “comparative cultural studies.”

YL: *Can you describe the situation of comparative literature at the University of Alberta?*

TdeZ: The comparative literature at the University of Alberta has a checkered history, as all comparative literature departments have a checkered institutional history as it were. More recently, in 1996, the University of Alberta Dean of Arts merged all departments except the Department of English into a mega Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Studies, including Slavics, comparative literature, film, religion, German studies, romance languages and literature and whatnot. This was done with only partial support of the faculty and students. Very soon it became obvious that the new department was too large and unwieldy, not the least because of the resistance the merger created. I myself am not sure that the merger was such a bad thing although I can understand the problems in the areas of administration and the traditional problem of disciplinary boundaries. By 1997 a new separation was organized by the Dean—Professor Patricia Clements (in office 1989-99)—and as of 1 July 1998 we have a Department of Comparative Literature, Religion, and Film/Media Studies and a Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies. The two designations are somewhat contradictory and paradoxical in my opinion but here we are. Comparative Literature itself suffers from chronic under-funding as well as from the lack of faculty appointments. On the other hand, there are some signs of revival: as of 1 July 1999 we have a new chair, a new full professor appointment in the person of Professor Jerry Varsava (previously at Memorial University of Newfoundland). We also have a three-year appointment in Chinese and Western Comparative Literature in the person of Maria Ng as of this year. This position is funded by the Taiwan Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, I am happy to say, as a result of my contacts and visits in Taiwan, and that should become a permanent position after the three years financed by the Foundation. In addition, it is my understanding that in September 1999 there will be an advertisement for a new entry

position with the Department. While these new positions do not amount to filling of all the lost positions owing to retirements in the last 10 years and particularly recently but they are a sign that our Department may be able to maintain its vitality and international reputation.

YL: *Can you tell me about your recent work and interests?*

TdeZ: My major project I have started is to write a book about the intellectual and institutional history of comparative literature and I hope to finish it by the end of 1999 or early 2000. I am also involved with a team-research project, *Central European Culture Today*, funded by the Austrian government. The project also concerns the research and development of "comparative cultural studies" I have mentioned previously and including the theory of "inbetween peripherality" I developed in several publications for the study of Central European literature and culture. Most recently, I presented several papers on this topic during a lecture tour at five Austrian universities. And, of course, I hope to remain in contact with colleagues in Taiwan and hope to be able to participate in upcoming conferences!

Contributors

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