

Matija Murko and Comparative Literature (An Introduction)

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This special issue of the journal *Primerjalna književnost* (*Comparative Literature*) is the result of a three-year research project *Towards a History of Comparative Literature in a Global Perspective: Matija Murko and His International Collaborators* (J6-4620), conducted from 2022 to 2025 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, with financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). Several contributors also presented early versions of their articles at a three-day conference *The History of Comparative Literature in Central Europe*, held in Ljubljana from 5 to 7 September 2025 as part of the Vilenica Literary Festival, under the auspices of the aforementioned project and in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association.

The aim of the collected contributions is to explore the rich comparative legacy of Matija Murko (1861–1952), who during his lifetime was regarded as one of the foremost Slavic scholars, and whose renown, after his death, extended far beyond this discipline, earning him global recognition in the broader field of literary studies and in numerous other branches of the humanities. Murko was born in the village of Derstelja near Ptuj to Slovenian-speaking parents. After completing primary school and classical gymnasium in Ptuj and Maribor, he went on to study *Germanistik* and *Slawistik* at the University of Vienna, where his academic career began. From a *Privatdozent* in Vienna, he moved to professorships in Graz, Leipzig, and, after the First World War, to the chair of South Slavic languages and literatures at Charles University in Prague. Throughout his distinguished academic career, Murko worked across a range of fields: from German studies, medieval philology, and literary studies, to investigating German-Czech Romantic literary relations, studying various Slavic literatures, and folkloristic or ethnological research on folk literature or even architectural heritage. While during his lifetime he was recognized as one of the foremost experts on German-Czech literary relations and South Slavic literatures, he later became known for his research into South Slavic oral traditions. Today, there is hardly a field in the humanities unfamiliar with Murko. His work is known not only among literary historians,

Slavic scholars, classical philologists, folklorists, ethnologists, and musicologists, but also among philosophers (for example, in the works of Mircea Eliade, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong), theologians, archaeologists, sociologists, and many others.

Murko has also frequently been cited as a comparatist. Anton Slodnjak referred to him as the first Slovenian comparative literary historian, Anton Ocvirk highlighted his research on Czech-German literary relations in his *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine*, and the American comparatist Albert Bates Lord called him a “true pioneer” in the study of oral literature. Despite the clear significance of Murko’s work for comparative literature both in Slovenia and internationally, his contributions to the field remain relatively unknown, as does his influence on the discipline’s international development. This publication seeks to fill this gap.

The volume opens with two contributions, by **Tone Smolej** and **Blaž Zabel**, which offer a comprehensive account of Murko’s contribution to comparative literature. Smolej discusses Murko’s early research period, identifying pre-French beginnings of Slovenian comparative literature, while Zabel, through his investigation of Murko’s influence on American comparative literature, demonstrates that Murko’s folkloristic studies of South Slavic epic poetry had the most significant international reception. Then the articles are organized historically and thematically, aiming to present Murko’s academic trajectory in comparative literature as comprehensively as possible. **Petra Kramberger** and **Irena Samide** examine Murko’s early work in German studies, which he pursued during his time in Vienna. **Alen Širca** explores his pioneering studies of Dubrovnik literature from his period in Graz. Murko’s formation as a Slavist is methodologically illuminated by **Andraž Jež** and **Blaž Gselman**. Then the articles address Murko’s Prague period: **Varja Balžalorsky Antić** sheds light on Murko’s previously unexplored collaboration with French Slavic scholars, **Miloš Zelenka** discusses his contribution to the development of Prague structuralism, one of the most influential schools in comparative literature and literary theory, and **Alenka Jensterle Doležal**, through a comparison with contemporary literary studies, highlights his contribution to cultural studies. The contribution by **Jasmina Talam** and **Irena Miholić** examines Murko’s early and post-war research on South Slavic oral poetry, while **Sylva Fischerová**’s article emphasizes the connections between his folklore studies and Czech Slavic studies. The monograph concludes with **Nina Petek**’s contribution, which addresses a hitherto completely overlooked aspect of Murko’s work, his reception of Indo-European linguistics and

literature. Together, these contributions offer a comprehensive overview of the various fields Murko helped shape through his comparative research: from German and Slavic studies, philology, ethnology, to cultural studies, the study of literary influences, and of oral literature.

But researching Murko's legacy is not only important for shedding light on his work and his international influence, it also directly contributes to a broader understanding and continued exploration of the global history of comparative literature. Murko may also be seen as a semi-peripheral scholar: despite his major influence on the development of comparative literature, he has often been cast as a minor local precursor, as someone who merely supplied material to more influential scholars working in academic centers. As a result, his actual intellectual contributions have frequently been overlooked or even deliberately marginalized, for a range of historical, social, and political reasons. Rediscovering the academic trajectory of a single scholar hence not only provides new insights into Murko himself but, through this case study, enables the development and testing of various methodologies applicable to the study of other peripheral and semi-peripheral academic traditions.

To this end, we approached Murko's comparative and literary-historical work in a variety of ways: by close reading his publications and studying his correspondence, through archival research, *longue durée* discussion of his influence on comparative literature, ideological and historical mapping of his research within the global academic space, and by using different approaches in digital humanities. In doing so, we followed the idea that the best method for researching lesser-known yet globally influential comparative traditions is a combination of philological, historical, and archival methods (close reading) with the study of global influences, long-term historical developments, and digital humanities (distant reading). Most articles are thus based on archival materials or close reading of publications, which are then conceptually connected to general theoretical arguments, other international scholarly discourse, and the general disciplinary history. This combination of close and distant reading has proven to be highly productive and, in our view, offers a valuable model for investigating other, lesser-known disciplinary histories.

As part of the project, we also fully digitized Murko's personal correspondence (Ms 1119) and his collection of documents (Ms 1392) held by the National and University Library in Ljubljana, the entire archive of the journal *Slavia*, and much of his correspondence and other documents held in the Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech

Literature (Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví). These materials are available to interested researchers upon request, while the majority of documents will also be published on the online portal *Digital Library of Slovenia* (*dLib*). Finally, to facilitate the study of Murko's correspondence and to offer a new perspective on his international collaboration with other scholars, we have also geocoded his personal correspondence. The geocoded list of letters is accessible at www.comparativeliterature.si/maps.