

World Literature: a Reader
Theo D'haen, César Domínguez, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (eds.)
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373 pages

Starting in the late 1780s and moving chronologically to this decade, this reader presents articles and excerpts of books—some of them classics by now—which have addressed, more or less explicitly, the notion of World Literature. The contemporaneity of the majority of the contributions, with half of the authors writing since the 1980s onwards, attests for the growing academic interest in World Literature in the last decades—of which this volume is but a piece of evidence—including by now canonical texts responsible like Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2002), David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003) and Pascale Casanova's "Literature as a World" (2005), as well as a representation of the most recent additions to the debate, coming from Nirvana Tanoukhi and Mariano Siskind. At the same time, by framing it in a historical itinerary, the editors seem to aim at contextualizing the present usage as a resurgence, rather than as a novelty, a contemporary avatar in a discontinuous but always existing interest in knowing and studying literature from a planetary perspective, and by doing so, to defuse the limitations of linguistic, cultural and political schemes to the study of literature.

In the process of revising World Literature, many of the major issues and complexities of the study of literature, and in particular of foreign literature—whatever that comes to mean—appear repeatedly, like the necessity and role of comparative literature, the (appropriateness or validity of the) canon(s), or the contents of university courses of literature. Only for its wide range of themes and the diversity of authoritative voices (published in a beautiful, radiant combination of serif and sans-serif fonts), this Reader deserves a place in the syllabi of any literature course that wants to generate a reflection on the different (national, cultural, ideological) frames of reference that affect what we read—as, for example, that same hypothetical syllabus. Undergraduate students of literature, comparative literature, and translation studies—and I would also add, secondary education teachers—will appreciate the brief yet clear introductions to the texts, as well as the "Reading paths" that establish cross-reference between the texts under rubrics like "the Goethean debate", "Market, systemic and materialist readings", and "The pedagogical dimension".

We can also locate the academic relevance of the notion of world literature, and of the present volume, in their connection to contemporary developments in other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, which seem to share this 'worldly' approach. I am thinking in particular on the growing acceptance of World History by scholars who might empathize with Mario Siskind's interest in "making relations and imagining unexpected and non-national contexts that may illuminate new meaning in certain literary works" (346). Also, on the trans-disciplinary opening of human and cultural geography, which extending its area of interest to include processes of

meaning formation, mapping and interrelation, seems to coalesce with the proposal of the editors of the volume.

The most engaging pieces in this Reader coincide in underscoring that World Literature demands new methodologies, which are recurrently ciphered in a different way of reading, being it Moretti's 'distant' (as opposed to close) reading, which allows the identification of connections among distant cultures and literatures spreading as waves, or the "detached engagement with world beyond our own place and time" that Damrosch advocates. The global, all-inclusive, and, why not, democratic aspirations which lays at the heart of World History is not reduced to a better, larger comparative literature. It demands to open scholarly research to the 'system' created by all literature (Moretti) or, at least, in a more pragmatic way, to Damrosch's 'ellipse', the space in which a work of World Literature—a work that has traveled beyond its original borders and, in doing so, has gained something in translation—lives, "connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone".

The volume speaks directly to journals of comparative literature such as this one, which addresses a continuous process of redefinition of their area of scope, in parallel to the changing delineations of the field. Hugo Meltzl, the editor of the first journal of comparative literature in late 19th century Rumania, notes in the piece included in the *Reader* that a journal of comparative literature "should not so much consist in definitely comparing the vast (though still insufficient) material at hand as in adding to it from all sides and in intensifying the effort" (19). The most recent and optimistic contributions of this volume seem to think that World Literature, understood "not as a defined corpus, but as a way of reading" (Siskind: 346), is well equipped to do so. Particularly moving is Goethe's account of the birth of *Weltliteratur* as the off-spring of post-war idealism and the improvement of communications, which connected the humanist interests of an elite of transnational intellectuals (exemplified by Goethe's himself) for "whom the truth and the progress of humanity are of interest and concern" (Introduction to *Carlyle's Life of Schiller*, 1830: 14). In that sense, Goethe's reflections bridged across the philosophical cosmopolitanism of Kant, and Marx & Engels' admiration for the internationalist impetus of the bourgeoisie: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and for the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (Marx, *Manifesto*: 17).

However, when read in the light of today's globalized context, in which growing circulation and exchange of knowledge and information does not prevent the corporatist encroachment on the commons and politically motivated populist culturalism—if not reemerging forms of fascism—, some of the most optimistic defenses of World Literature distill a sad aroma of wishful thinking.

In another line of thought, reading across the different contributions, one may get a sense that the all-out assault on the canon of previous decades has somewhat waned. After the academic efforts that rightly problematized the Leavisian/formalist tradition, and worked towards the opening up of syllabi to minority/ minoritized cultures, nations, and their literatures, some of the present contributors seem to gesture towards a politically subdued attitude ("theories will never abolish

inequality, only explain it”, Moretti) that reconciles formal excellence with cultural representativeness. While the *Reader* makes justice to some of the most sophisticated outcomes of subaltern studies, like Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the ‘planet’ and Shu-mei Shih’s defense of ‘post-difference’, the more ideologically-loaded positions of post-colonial studies and critical theory are underrepresented to give space to methodological debates and issues of selection (such as how to assess the internal worth of texts, or how to read everything that has been written), and thus, to the crucial task of establishing a canon that is statistically thorough, culturally inclusive, and at the same time, *literary*; a canon that does not shame the high expectations behind an adjectival ‘world’ nor the substantive ‘literature’—though the surprising absence of reflections on the role of the Internet lessens the importance of the first in favor of the second.

The historical approach serves the editors to establish sources and origins for World Literature in different latitudes. While the articulation of *Weltliteratur* is credited as German (with a selection of excerpts and citations from Goethe, Marx and Engels’ advocacy of an internationalist literature, and Auerbach’s philologically-grounded celebration of difference), the volume significantly opens with the avant-la-lettre comparativism of Spanish Jesuit Juan Andrés in the late 18th century. A similar decentralization is sought after with the inclusion of significant contributions from different linguistic communities, like the piece by Slovak comparatist Dionýz Ďurišin or Hong Kong-based Zhang Longxi, to name a few. However, these gestures verge dangerously on political correctness, as the diversity of native accents, languages and literary traditions—especially as the reader comes closer to the present—succumb to the die-hard generic hegemony of European (that is, French and English) novel, and of US-based, English-speaking professors and institutions. The final piece, by Buenos Aires-born, associate professor at Harvard Mariano Siskind, in which he discusses Verne’s novels and Argentinian writer Eduardo Holmberg in relation to globalization, exemplifies how the field—and the editors—tries to overcome the epistemological preeminence of Euro-American culture, as well as the partial failure of such enterprise.