

XXIII International Congress of the AILC-ICLA in Tbilisi

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The XXIII International Congress of the Association internationale de littérature comparée/International Comparative Literature Association (AILC-ICLA) was held July 24–29, 2022, in Tbilisi, Georgia (Zelenka 2021, 104). This gathering of literary scholars from all around the world, considered a prestigious display of new methodological inspirations, was jointly hosted by the Georgian Comparative Literature Association and the Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University, along with the Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature. The title of the congress, “Re-Imagining Literatures of the World, Global and Local, Mainstreams and Margins”, had emerged as one of the major topics at the preceding Congress in Macao in 2019, and now constitutes a dominant line of comparative thought. The innovative approach to world literature from “the margins” instead of the Anglophone “centers” facilitated the inclusion of a great diversity of general and specific topics in critical debates. These subthemes embraced such issues as minor literatures, the position of “small national” literatures within globalization, colonial, post-colonial, de-colonial and neo-colonial experience in literary communication, words and images across literary and critical borders; the relation between film and literature, comics studios and their links with “graphic” genres, gender and sexuality in contemporary literature and culture, the post-Soviet literary area and the world after the Cold War, and digital culture (media, transmedia, and intermedia). Many other subthemes, such as literary and cultural paradigms of the West and the East, gained their own platform, as well as the issues of the global South against the global North. In conjuncture with this congress, Róbert Gáfrik and the present author (Miloš Zelenka) edited a thematic issue of *World Literature Studies* (2/2022), “World Literature from the Perspective of ‘Small’ Literatures”. The editors respected the global theme of the congress and focused their attention on various expressions denoting world literature, which have been tackled repeatedly in intense debates between comparatists (Gáfrik and Zelenka 2022, 3).

In the three-year interval since the 2019 congress, which included the two peak years of the Covid-19 pandemic, the mutual contacts within international academic community had been considerably impaired. This objective hindrance

notwithstanding, the organizers eventually succeeded in hosting a hybrid conference. The overwhelming number of participants (around 1,000) had chosen virtual participation, with only around 400 scholars joining the congress in person. The precariousness of the situation preceding the event was adequately conveyed by the AILC-ICLA's then-incumbent President Sandra L. Bermann (Princeton University) as "a time shadowed by the pandemic, by economic crises, systemic racism and a surfeit of global inequities, but also energized by innovation, change, and hopes for the future" (2021, 3). Nevertheless, what had a noticeable impact on the conference proceedings was the fact that until the last moment, the hosts did not have the faintest idea of the exact proportion of physical and virtual attendance. The constitution of individual panels continuously varied, as within a single panel, some papers were delivered in person and others online, frequently without a moderator. Moreover, on account of the large number of original applications (e.g. the panel entitled "Words and Images Crossing Literary and Critical Borders" had 83 applicants), some panels even spread over three days, which hindered the interconnection of the content and curtailed the discussion. Frequently, for instance, English and French papers were often put together without prior authentication of the presenters' language competence and the potential discussion was inhibited. Despite the outward impression of the congress splitting into single, disconnected gatherings of small groups, it did serve its primary purpose of enabling the participants to establish common intellectual bonds and to frame a common academic debate.

With the first day of the congress reserved for the administrative agenda and registration, the opening ceremony was held on July 25, 2022, in the congress hall of the Radisson Hotel. The introductory program with the keynote papers was hosted by Sandra Bermann with the principal organizer, Irma Ratiani, President of the Georgian Comparative Literature Association. After the official orations, Ratiani delivered the introductory address on "Georgian Literature as Part of World Literary Heritage", examining the current position of Georgian literature in world literature as the lasting constituent of its cultural heritage (although not very extensive, thanks to its long cultural tradition it aspires to the highest aesthetic quality). Georgian literature is hardly in the position to impose the rules for the world literary area, yet it can point to 15 centuries of struggle to remain in the center of dominant cultural processes. This presentation was followed by the Slovenian scholar Marko Juvan's paper "How to Think World Literature from Its Edge?" based on his monograph, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (2019). Contrary to this publication, where he defended the concept of world literature as correlated with political-economic power, in his lecture, he placed greater emphasis on the importance of aesthetic-philosophical factors. First he outlined the previous concepts of world literature from Goethe to the models developed by David Damrosch (2009), Franco Moretti (2013), Fredric Jameson (1991), Emily Apter (2013), Pascale Casanova (1991), etc. These were derived from prevailing economic determinants and from the status of English as a universal language, and were reflected in the canonical tradition as well as in establishing various trans-cultural "networks". Furthermore, Juvan positively mentioned Dionýz Ďurišin's theory of interliterariness and its significance for discussions about

the aesthetic peculiarity of Slavic literatures. Determining the terminological difference between “global” and “world”, he questioned the common binary opposition of “the center” and “the periphery” alluding to conflicts of values. At the same time, he drew an original outline of potential approaches to the creating and functioning of worldliness: a classical global system based on international literary greats and prestigious publishing houses and a “capillary worlding” which is traditionally perceived as “marginalized” for its minority character, and which occasionally employs or popularizes the activities of minor authors, critics, and translators. This type was exemplified by the initiative of the Austrian Peter Handke, who introduced the Slovenian Florjan Lipuš into world literature through translations into several world languages.

On July 26, Toshika Ellis of Nagoya, Japan, delivered her paper “Voices from the Margin: Poetic Defiance in Japan’s Dark Times”, which explored the strategies of poetical words and their receptive implications during World War II. Ellis analyzed English translations of five Japanese poets who in various ways, namely by deconstructing the lyrical subject, responded to acts of war and violence, as well as to the disintegration of individual and collective human identity. This was followed on July 27 by Jennifer Wallace of Cambridge University, whose paper “Global Plague, Local Pain: Mourning the Tragedy of Covid” searched for common ground between ancient tragedy and the concept of Raymond Williams, one of the British theoreticians and founding fathers of cultural studies. Similarly ambiguous was the metaphorical comparison between the Covid-19 pandemic and ancient drama in the panel she chaired, “Pandemic Imaginations”, which discussed how the paradoxes of the pandemic molded its imaginative sources, and whether these had a positive or negative impact on art and literature.

The regular agenda was pursued in individual panels, among which three special sessions, introduced under the common heading of “Comparative Literature and Social Justice”, assumed a unique position in the congress format because they facilitated wide-ranging discussions on literary and textual issues such as the anthropocene, racial segregation, and general linguistic challenges. Altogether, there were 55 thematically aligned team panels, where the most interconnected with the dominant idea of the congress included “East and West Literary and Cultural Paradigms”, “Worlds and Images Crossing Literary and Critical Borders”, “Colonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial and Neocolonial Experiences: Rewriting Cultural History”, “Minor Literature, Small Literatures, Literature in Small Nations”, as well as the panels “Comparative Literature and Oriental Literary Theory”, “Small and Minority Literatures and Literary Historiography”, and “World Literature and National Literature”. One of the most original contributions was the latter panel, hosted online by the Hungarian scholar Péter Hajdu of Shenzhen University, China, who raised the issue of world literature’s historical development as a discursive, heterogeneous “supersign”, frequently profiled as the global canon. At the same rate, it called attention to the overlooked fact that during the Cold War, the circulation of world literature in the Eastern Bloc offered different opportunities from those in the democratic West. Thus in the socialist states, the whole

of literary production was recognized as world literature, with the exception of vernacular literature. Such were the origins of the concept formulating world literature as a collection of texts circulating beyond the boundaries of national literature. A pleasant return to traditional comparative themes could be found in the panel on “Pedagogy of Comparative Literature: Re-imagining”, which mapped the teaching of comparative literature in various Asian regions. It also discussed the newly emerging subdiscipline of comparative literature didactics, focusing on the position of world literature in teaching national literature, which contributes to the radical transformation of the viewpoints of literary history.

The program was supplemented by panels that have reappeared frequently at congresses in the last two decades, like synoptic examinations of the current condition of comparative literature in particular countries (China, Japan, South Korea, Georgia, etc.). Still, the overwhelming majority of contributions represented the so-called “binary comparative approach” (synchronical comparison of texts from two national literatures and the issues of mutual influences); translational studies (an overview of the translations of a major author in “small” literature), or papers on traditional thematology (e.g. the motif of dreams or urban areas in literary texts). For example, the special session on “Translating Difference: The Other in Other Words” asked whether translation is a means of world literature or a retroactive factor impacting national literature. All of the above-mentioned themes were summed up in one of the final panels moderated by Matthew Reynolds of Oxford University, entitled “Futures for Comparative Literary Research”, which explored the issues of “minority” and “majority” literatures, media, multilingualism of cultures, the theory of interliterary process, and the concept of translation as a free metaphor in comparative literature. There were also provocatively-worded panels, for example, reflecting on the typological analogies and differences between Iranian and Basque literature, or the British historian Geoffrey Roberts’s paper on “Stalin and Comparative Literature”. The traditional area of comparative research comprising East-West Studies was innovatively approached by Haun Saussy in “The Differences that Asia Makes”, where he highlighted the multiform structural profile of “Asian literature” and stressed the necessity to develop adequate theoretical terminology suitable for comparative study. In his subtle polemic against Claudio Guillén, rather than using synchronous typologies, Saussy preferred simple literary historical description of written, translated, or commented works which need not aspire to the attribute of “masterfulness”.

In terms of the nationality of the participants, the trend of previous congresses was confirmed: the continued dominance of Chinese, Japanese, but also Korean comparative studies and a weaker representation of Slavic comparative studies, whose most prominent representative (and essentially their spokesperson) was Marko Juvan. The important position of Korea as a key representative of the Asian comparatist community was underlined by its winning the honor of hosting the XXIV Congress of the AILC-ICLA in Seoul in summer 2025, whose theme will be “Literatures in the Era of Hyperconnectivity: National Literatures, Comparative Literature and Technology”.

Younger researchers were treated to a special welcome arranged by the AILC-ICLA Executive Committee, where they could join the discussion with

Sandra L. Bermann, together with Jaba Samushia, rector of the University of Tbilisi. The Early-Career Researcher Development Committee (ECARE), established in Vienna in 2016, had arranged prizes for the best conference paper in the form of financial support for the first book publication. Shortly before the congress started, the winner of the prestigious Anna Balakian Prize for significant achievement in the field of comparative literature was announced: May Hawas's monograph *Politicizing World Literature: Egypt, Between Pedagogy and the Public* (2019). This work explores a corpus of novels and travelogues written in English, French, Arabic, Italian (but also in Czech) that document Egypt's cultural relationship with different parts of the world in the past and present. Criticizing the ideological limits of postcolonial historicism, she analyzes the phenomenon of "reworlding" of Egyptian verbal texts in order to grasp their manifest and hidden inherent plurality and genre-thematic polyphony. The book awarded Honorable Mention, Joseph Cermatori's *Baroque Modernity: An Aesthetics of Theater* (2021), reflects on the function of Baroque theater in the formation of the avant-garde aesthetics of Modernism at the turn of the 20th century. Through a detailed analysis of direct and mediated influences and contacts, the author convincingly documented the baroque inspirations in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Stephan Mallarmé, Walter Benjamin, and Gertrude Stein.

Several Czech and Slovak comparatists attended the Tbilisi congress, including Josef Hrdlička, Josef Šebek, and Anna Schubertová from Charles University in Prague. Hrdlička presented a paper on the function of dreams in the works of Czech expressionist Richard Weiner, Šebek demonstrated diverse types of "realisms" in the post-Stalinist novels of Ladislav Fuks, and Schubertová drew upon Georg Lukács's concept of socialist realism to evaluate the Czecho-Slovak discussions on this method following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. In his paper on "The Chinese Dream: National Rejuvenation and Suspension of Political Agency", Johannes D. Kaminski (Institute of World Literature SAS, Bratislava) explored the semantic ambiguity of Chinese political rhetoric based on dream metaphor. The panel "Minor Literatures, Small Literatures in Small Nations" included the joint presentation by Anna Zelenková (Institute of Slavonic Studies CAS, Prague) and Agnieszka Janiec-Nyitrai (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest). Their paper, "The Central European Path to Worldliness of World Literature from the Point of View of So-Called Small Literatures" (published in the present issue of *World Literature Studies*) analyzed the works of four interwar writers (Karel Čapek, Witold Gombrowicz, Ivan Horváth, Sándor Márai) with the aim of documenting their varying attempts at reaching the status of world authors through their "Central European authenticity" and pointed to the "structural" mechanism to achieve this ideal state.

The same section hosted Miloš Zelenka's paper "La littérature mondiale du point de vue des littératures 'mineures' de conception tchèque et slovaque" on the discontinuous dialogue of "minority" and "majority" concepts of world literature, which was published as the opening article in the above-mentioned issue of *World Literature Studies* (2022). In harmony with Marko Juvan's reasoning, the author highlighted the importance of reviving the necessity of these areas of research in Central and

Eastern Europe. Regardless of the other terms being used alongside world literature, such as “literature of the world”; “worldliness”; “world literary system”; “the world republic of letters” etc., the methodological framework of the relevant discussion was most explicitly devised by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch. The concept which emerges from their works is that world literature is as a system which texts enter through “big literatures”, i.e. through circulation in a hegemonic language such as English (Gáfrik 2020, 115–116). Even so, the historical experience of Central and East European literatures reveals the fact that methodological discourse does not avail of any method or type of study, in literary research being implemented, by contrast, in different languages and diverse power relations. Theorists in these countries question the notion of such a “network” or standardized canon that would establish inequality as a kind of epistemological framework and the method of presenting the codifying binary antagonism of “developed” and “underdeveloped”, or “center” and “periphery.” On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the real force of this hegemony which proclaims itself as universal and represents world literature as a correlate of political and economic power (Pokrivčák and Zelenka 2020, 182). Hence the latest issue, presented at the Congress as the chief contribution of the Czech and Slovak Association of Comparative Literature to its agenda, aimed at reflecting on the relation of “small” literatures to world literatures, while also raising epistemological and ethical questions.

Overall, the Congress raised a number of topics, primarily continuing to explore world literature as a historically and semantically variable category. Despite its limited hybrid format, it brought participants the pleasure of a beautiful meeting place. At the same time, it provided interesting panel discussions and intellectual pleasure from mutual sharing of research activities. We can only hope that further pandemics or other interruptions will not hinder the possibility of developing comparative literature as one of the crowning disciplines of literary studies. This idea was emotionally expressed by Sandra L. Bermann in July 2021, in the “intermediate phase” between congresses: “We aim for a future of deeper, more widespread collegial connections; of ongoing respect and curiosity about our world’s diverse literary and cultural expressions; of pleasure in the pluralities of language; and of service to the everyday world and its educational institutions” (2021, 3).

When assessing the overall importance of the XXIII Congress of the AICL-ICLA, it is necessary to point out three aspects which plainly ensued from the themes of the papers as well as from the panel and offstage discussions:

1. *The unavoidable reinterpretation of the model of comparative studies from institutional and thematic perspectives*

Before the congress, Haun Saussy observed that the classical notion of comparative literature, as a field mostly concerned with the theoretical-historical aspect of supranational literary relations, is closely linked with the dysfunctional definition of history as a discipline (Saussy 2019). The demand for methodological, disciplinary and thematic expansion in the direction of related humanities disciplines stems not only from a radical change in the research paradigm, but also from the different social situation at the beginning of the 21st century, which led

to a greater intensity of travel, mutual contacts, and migration, with a deeper “intertwining” of languages and ethnic groups, poetics, ideologies, etc. It is obvious that the theoretical reflection of this complex relationship can enrich the traditional horizons and methods of our comparing. Saussy proposed that the Association establish relations with “friendly” or “allied” researchers who are not primarily perceived as “comparatists” but whose approach necessarily includes a comparative dimension: this is a large group of translators of artistic literature, writers and journalists, dramaturgists and editors, who adapt literary works intertextually for the various needs of the public.

2. *The point of view of so-called “small” national literatures, which create their own idea of world literature*

Following the results from Macau 2019, the Congress definitively confirmed (as was evident in the positive response to Marko Juvan’s opening speech) that world literature should be viewed not from the dominant “centers”, but also from its edges. Above all, it is a matter of balancing the ratio of extra-literary moments (the size of the country and the degree of universality of the chosen language) and purely aesthetic factors. Texts from so-called small literatures, in order to permanently enter the imaginary “pantheon”, must be more intensively prepared to base their “worldliness” on the ability to constitute the world in the form of aestheticizing national conditions. Generally speaking: world literature does not exist as a single and monolithic universal, as it does not manifest itself in literary practice in a general form, but it exists always in its local, areal, regional, national and socio-cultural forms.

3. *The revitalization of the term “national literature”, which does not mean the semantic “bracketing” of this traditional category*

Although at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, colonization, global migration, and the emergence of multi-ethnic postcolonial states (especially in South-Eastern Europe and in various parts of the Asian context) destabilized the notion of a national literature derived from both geographical location and language. While in the case of location, national literature represents a multilingual and multicultural conglomerate, i.e. a kind of minimized “world literature”, in the second case, a common language classifies the literatures of different nations into one whole. From these premises, which remind us of Ďurišin’s contradiction between inter-literary communities and inter-literary centrism (1998, 8), a simple conclusion can be drawn that every national literature is, paradoxically, always world literature.

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Comparative literature. World literature. "Literature of the world." Theory of translation. Postcolonialism. Intercultural studies.

This article is a report on the XXIII International Congress of the AILC-ICLA, a hybrid event dedicated to researching various aspects of world literature that was held in Tbilisi in July 2022. It evaluates the keynote papers presented by Irma Ratiani (Georgia), Marko Juvan (Slovenia), Toshiko Ellis (Japan) and Jennifer Wallace (UK). The main lecture on Central and East European literatures, Juvan's keynote "How to Think World Literature from its Edge?" examined worldliness as both a global system based on international authorities and prestigious publishing houses and as a capillary worlding that, due to its minority character, popularizes the activities of lesser-known writers. The Congress's viewpoint not from the perspective of the Anglophone "centers", but from its margins, enabled the reflection of a number of other subtopics such as the issue of so-called minor literature, gender, postcolonialism, digital culture, intermediality, interculturality, etc. The general conclusions reached at the Congress can be formulated as follows: 1. the reinterpretation of comparative literature from institutional and thematic perspectives, 2. the point of view of so-called small literatures, and 3. the revitalization of the term "national literature".

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