

World literature from the perspective of “small” literatures

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The notion of world literature has become a subject of intense debate in the global community of literary scholars thanks to the contributions of theorists such as David Damrosch and Franco Moretti. In addition, several other terms such as “world republic of letters”, “literatures of the world”, and “worldliness” have emerged in the past two decades. However, despite their semantic differences, they conceive of the phenomenon in question as a canon or a system which texts enter through the “large” literatures written in hegemonic languages such as English. This suggests that world literature should be understood as a correlate of political and economic power rather than a purely literary phenomenon. Seen from this perspective, texts from smaller literatures (in general, those written in less-commonly spoken languages) have to fulfill something extra in order to achieve the status of world literature. Their journey to the desired destination – which is complex and often takes place over a longer time – is determined by literary and extra-literary factors, such as translation, genre, an appealing theme, cultural and historical tradition, advertising and media, distribution and reading practices. The scholars who research “small” literatures (especially outside Anglophone academia) often criticize the idea of inequality, which is inherent in this model of world literature, as an epistemological framework and argue against the codification of the binary oppositions of “center” vs. “periphery”, and “development” vs. “underdevelopment”. For them, the epistemological point of departure takes on an ethical dimension.

The present thematic issue of WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES is a continuation of the previous activities of the Czecho-Slovak Association of Comparative Literature on the occasion of the AILC/ICLA triennial congresses. In 2013, at the time of the XX Congress in Paris, Miloš Zelenka and Róbert Gáfrik edited the previous issue *Comparative Literary Studies as Cultural Criticism* (No. 2). Its articles attempted to contribute to the debate on the subject and method of comparative literature understood as an umbrella discipline, which tries to save the deconstruction of its distinctive identity with the stress on “comparison” as a specific way of reading. At the XXI AILC/ICLA Congress in Vienna in 2016, Czech and Slovak scholars or-

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ganized a group session called “Old and New Concepts of Comparative Literature in the Globalized World”. The aim of the meeting was to explore the pluralistic world of theory and methodology of contemporary comparative literature as well as the migration of its concepts in time and space, while pointing out the specifics of local or regional traditions of comparative thinking. On the occasion of the XXII Congress in Macau in 2019, Anton Pokrivčák and Miloš Zelenka edited another thematic issue of *WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES*, titled *Images of Remote Countries in the Literature of Central and Eastern Europe* (No. 2).

The current collection of articles again aims to explore a topic related to the main theme of the AILC/ICLA Congress, “Re-Imagining Literatures of the World: Global and Local, Mainstreams and Margins”, which will take place for the 23rd time at the end of July 2022 in Tbilisi. The editors have chosen methodological studies and analytical interpretations that reflect on the relation of “small” literatures to world literature with the emphasis on local traditions of thinking about this phenomenon. They believe that the phenomenon designated as world literature cannot be viewed from a single cultural and theoretical perspective. Therefore, even in this small collection of articles they have tried to maintain a broad geographical scope.

The first two articles concentrate on general issues concerning the notion of world literature. In the introductory study, Miloš Zelenka expounds on the Czech and Slovak conceptualizations of world literature. In contrast to the currently popular idea of “worlding” literatures, he suggests approaching the notion of world literature from the ontological and the epistemological perspective. As an ontological concept, he sees world literature as a historically evolving form of existence of literary works and their relations. It is based on the morphological determination of world literature as an aggregate of forms and structures of supralocal and supratemporal significance. As an epistemological concept, world literature acts as a specific aspect of literary communication, as a mode of reading. Wook-Dong Kim’s paper criticizes ethnocentric concepts of world literature in general and Sinocentrism in particular. He opposes the recent attempts to reduce literary cultures of East Asian countries, especially those of Korea and Japan, to the Sinocentric viewpoint.

The next two articles focus on the function and significance of world literature for national literatures. Sonali Ganguly and Lipika Das use the example of Odia language and literature to present world literature as a tool for liberation from linguistic and cultural domination. In so doing, they see world literature as a vehicle of universality that manifests itself in various avatars. They show how the book series devoted to world literature, *Biswa Sahitya Granthamala*, is an important contribution to the revival of Odia literary culture in post-independence India. On the other hand, on the basis of 19th-century Latvian culture, Pauls Daija and Benedikts Kalnačs question the idea that world literature is automatically adding value to the receiving culture. They describe how works of European literature were “provincialized” in the complex process of their reception alongside other texts of lower literary quality.

The last two studies of the thematic block are devoted to the works of individual authors in relation to world literature. Using the example of Paul Celan – here inter-

preted also as a Romanian poet – Radu Vancu corrects David Damrosch’s conceptualization of world literature based on the dichotomy of source and host culture, and argues for the concept of cultural triangulation. Charles Sabatos discusses Franz Kafka’s contemporary Jiří Langer and plays Henri Gobard’s tetralinguistic model of language against Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature. He rejects the image of the Prague writers as deterritorialized and, in contrast, shows how the Czech metropolis shaped their identity through multilingualism.

The articles make not only a literary-historical contribution but also a theoretical one to the current discussions on the nature, functions and forms of world literature by rethinking some epistemological and ethical issues. They build on the awareness that the world and its literatures are becoming increasingly globalized and for that reason scholars are motivated to search for universality in individual cultures. However, at the same time, they are mindful of the opposite movement which manifests itself as linguistic, national or ethnic particularism. The editors maintain that both these aspects complementarily become the defining elements of world literature.

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