

## World literature and the future of comparative literature from the point of view of the XXII Congress of the AILC/ICLA

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When Libuša Vajdová reported to *World Literature Studies* about the preceding comparatist congresses taking place under the aegis of International Comparative Literature Association (AILC/ ICLA), she symptomatically called her article “Is Comparative Literature Dead?” (2013). It was a paraphrase of the sceptical statement of Susan Bassnett from her *Comparative Literature. A Critical Introduction* (1993, 43) in which she formulated natural concerns regarding the permanent deconstruction of the subject and methods of comparative studies, “diffusing” its research core in neighbouring disciplines. If Paris 2013 focused on the study of translation as a relevant source of intercultural comparisons and literary theory itself, Vienna 2016 meant a return of comparative studies to literature and language, to European traditions and the past of this traditional discipline (Vajdová 2016). From this point of view the XXII International Congress AILC/ICLA in Macau under the name *Literature of the World and the Future of Comparative Literature*, which took place on 29 July–2 August 2019, can be marked as a breakthrough, since it confirmed that the search for various models and aspects of world literature has its justification and real research perspective and that in comparative literature there is not only one way and type of research. At the same time, the congress emphasized the well-known fact that theoretical and methodological discourse goes on in various languages and various power relations. As if this optimistic vision of a comparative future, preferring a field of value reflections linked with the aspect of “comparing” to strictly regulative ideas, were a continuation of the final, summarizing panel of the Vienna congress called “Theory of World Literature and the Politic of Translation,” where the main speakers were the recognized American comparatists David Damrosch and Emily Apter from New York and Harvard. Emily Apter in her introduction referred to her publication *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013) in which she considered the study of world literature, like the Italian comparatist Franco Moretti (2000), to be problematic and non-solvable in the context of literary scholarship itself, due to the plurality and vagueness of its research object and linguistic disintegration. Although subscribing to the idea of the “world republic of letters” as a virtual “interliterary network” without borders and barriers, as claimed by the French scholar Pascale Casanova in her famous work *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999; *The World Republic of Letters*, 2004), Apter criticized the concept

of universal literature as a set corpus of texts transcending the national, political and linguistic horizons. Similarly, David Damrosch, famous in the Anglo-Saxon context for his work *What is World Literature?* (2003), began his speech in Vienna by a probe into the history of theoretical thinking and world literature where he included, alongside the reduced Euro-American context, also the Orient and Latin America. Quite understandably, he left out the Slavic comparative literature from Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Even though the name of his book directly copies the title of the Slovak scholar Dionýz Ďurišin's monograph *Čo je svetová literatúra?* (What is World Literature?, 1992), one will not find there a single reference to it, which holds true also for the Czech, Russian, Polish, Bulgarian as well as Slovenian comparatists. Nor does he mention the Austrian comparatist of Serbian origin Zoran Konstantinović's *Weltliteratur. Strukturen, Modelle, Systeme* (1979) influential in the German speaking context. Unlike Emily Apter, Damrosch saw world literature as an elliptic refraction of national literatures, as a text that gains in translation, and, at the same time, not as a fixed canon, but as a specific type of reading based on an experience from the world outside our time and space.

If we have pointed out a certain conceptional as well as contextual discontinuity of the discussion in Macau with previous congresses, then this statement is true especially for the reflections about world literature which made up the central thematic axis of most of the relevant papers. The title itself implied the fact that world literature need not be a priori rejected or negated, if its status and the consequent interpretation does not correlate with a concrete discourse. The same is true for the future of comparative literature, since its impact and methods are differently practiced in different countries. What is typical then, alongside the calls for new theories, is also the prefiguration and circulation of comparatist conceptions in time and space, when, for example, traditional terms appear in a new environment determined by the specificity of local or regional borders. If we were to provide a list of some essential moments at the Macau congress, it would include, first of all, a departure from the American concept of world literature perceived as a specific experiential way of reading created in our mind by the circulation and reception of literary texts resulted from translation. After all, the presence of translation (i. e. traductology, as it was labelled at the congress in Paris by French comparatists) was not so intensive, compared with Vienna in 2016. Translation remains the universal instrument of research into culture, however not basic and the only one: it is rather a mediating, "denoting" form, not the essence of world literature understood as a methodologically definable category. On the other hand, it is not possible to substitute the classical comparative literature with the study of world literature, as it commonly happens at many American universities. Dorothy M. Figueira in this relation ironically speaks about a new incarnation of the Pentagon construction of area studies, when "[u]nder the guise of democratizing and moving away from Comparative Literature's supposed 'elitism', World Literature theorists claim to engage the world in a serious fashion, but only if that world speaks English or is translated into this idiom" (2019, 71).<sup>1</sup> Despite this limit, the Congress confirmed the fact that world literature could be theorized through concepts and terms which

may be semantically ambiguous, but still are situated with local connotations in a concrete epistemological framework.

One of the questions that emerged at the Congress was the definition of the function and future of comparative literature, which should preserve its autochthonous essence, but also overlap to other, maybe even exact sciences. The second aspect of the future of comparative literature may be seen in a more radical deconstructing of the Euro-American view of the texts aspiring to be “world texts”, i. e. in the territorial, geopolitical or linguistic-ethnic transfer from traditional continents (Europe and America) to other continents. There are differences in theoretical thinking about comparative literature not only between Europe and America, but other parts of the world, such as South America, Pakistan, India, Japan, and especially, China, logically enforce different concepts of world literature for which it is evident that terminological equivalents with a changeable semantic content need not be value synonyms. At the same time, it seems that one cannot apply here either Tieghe’s traditional French understanding of literature, the compared and comparative one, or the newest American idea of “world literature” as a virtual network of texts translated into English, with every new reading, according to H. Saussy, being in essence already a new translation (2004). Therefore, we are left with a question of whether world literature is realized as universal or global, planetary, transnational, without knowing in advance what these concepts exactly mean. Such basic concepts as world, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, national literature, migration, interliterariness, exoticization, domestication, and so on, age differently or are innovated in different ways in different parts of the world. Another problem associated with this is the fact that there is no binding type of comparative research with a canonized method and subject and that comparative literature, like all literary studies, are of a narrative nature. The question then is this: Is it necessary to keep returning to the redefinitions of the essence of world literature and ask permanently about its definition, function or moving borders? Is it not that comparative literature creates its fictional worlds, moving in a speculative space of metalanguage and metatext? Is there a sense, in this “multivocality”, in a space in which “incomparable” confronts us, for example, to write a history of world literature, which would in fact be a discipline drawing only on the available translations of various texts into English? The individual congress discussions also showed, with reference to the official ICLA/AILC project of the editors J. Neubauer and M. Cornis-Pope entitled *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 18th and 20th Centuries I–IV* (2004–2010), that although the traditional history of world literature is written “internationally”, it is essentially in a form of national history related to other territories and analyzing the interactions among individual literatures through a principle of rational binarism. The calling for some “relational” or “transnational” character of world history should overcome the traditional opposition between “the domestic” and “the foreign” and concentrate, in addition to the search for general models and laws of development, also on the uniqueness of the theme or problem seen from a “non-national” perspective. The essence of the history of world literature thus can be derived from the study of interliterary and intercultural process in its spatial and

relational frameworks, not in pre-defined national categories and units. The concentration on relations and processes in the form of “networks” and “maps” must relativize the existing models of world literature and create conditions for its study in its semantic multivalence and syntactic variability.

The venue of the Congress, Macau – the former Portuguese colony and now Special Administrative Region of China – was not selected accidentally, since it had already been organized in the neighbouring Hong Kong in 2004, just seven years after its transfer from the United Kingdom to China. In both cases, the place expressed the powerful dominance of unified China in politics and economy as well as in science, essentially evoking an impression of a “congress within a congress”. During the last two decades, Chinese comparative literature dominated at the AILC/ICLA congresses with the number of participants, themes, panels and the cleverness of its back-room politics which brought successful nominations to executive organs for several Chinese scholars. One of them, Longxi Zhang from Hongkong, who had also taught at Harvard, was in 2016–2019 President of the ICLA (Longxi 2015). The Chinese Comparative Literature Association, founded in 1985 with its seat at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies of Beijing Language and Culture University, headed by Wang Ning from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, sponsors several specialized prestigious journals, including *Comparative Literature in China* (Shanghai International Studies University), *International Comparative Literature* (Shanghai Normal University) and *Comparative Literature and World Literature* (Peking University Press). The Congress discussions were held in English as well as in Chinese, though quite often one could hear also Portuguese, one of Macau’s official languages, and French as the traditional language of comparatists. It was quite common, however, that individual panels were held in Chinese language only, dealing with purely “national” or regional topics. The “Chinese” character of the XXII Congress was also highlighted by the fact that the ICLA’s meeting of the executive committee took place on 25–27 July 2019 in the neighbouring Shenzhen, which, however, is situated in mainland China.

The central idea of the Congress *Literature of the World and the Future of Comparative Literature* was divided into 15 thematic areas: 1. Conversations across Differences, 2. Diverse Languages of Comparison, 3. Literary, Cultural, and Temporal (Un)Translatability, 4. The Multiple Histories of Comparative Literature, 5. Canons, Genres, and Media, 6. Interdisciplinarity in Comparative Literature, 7. Theorizing the Literary across Cultures, 8. World Literature and China, 9. Global Humanities from an Eastern Perspective, 10. Internationalization of Chinese Literary Studies, 11. Immigrant Literature, 12. Circulation of Information in East Asia: Journalism, Fiction, and Electronic Textuality, 13. The “Sinophone” as a Counterdiscourse, 14. Memoir Literature in East Asia in the Modern Period, and 15. The Obsession With International Literary Prizes: For Whom Is the Reward Important? Of them, more than one third, as the list demonstrates, was affected by Chinese “influence”. Even greater dominance of Chinese comparative literature could be seen in the 34 workshops and round tables where more than half of the themes had in their names either the word “Chinese” or “East Asian”.

The beginnings of comparative literature congresses go back to the mid-twentieth century when a significant role in their origins was played by the American scholar of Czech origin and member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, René Wellek (the 1st congress took place in 1955 in Venice). The congresses, organised in regular three-year intervals, unquestionably belong to the most representative manifestations of the state and methods of literary-theoretical thinking and participation in them is considered highly prestigious (Zelenka 2013, 241). All the more positive then was the election of some Central European comparatists, chairpersons of national associations, creating a symbolic Slavic “mini-bloc”, for the members of the Association’s executive committee (R. Gáfrík – Czech Republic and Slovakia, A. F. Kola – Poland, and M. Juvan – Slovenia). The Czech Republic and Slovakia were represented by the joint paper of Anna Zelenková and Silvia Pokrivčáková (presented by Anna Zelenková) entitled “Some Comparatist Notes on the Categories of ‘the national’ vs. ‘the world’, ‘the historical’ vs. ‘the present’, ‘one’s own’ vs. ‘foreign’”, in which the authors used two Slovak prose works, J. Záborský’s *Faustiáda* (Faustiad, 1864) and P. Viličkovský’s *Večně je zelený...* (1989; *Ever Green is...*, 2001) to reinterpret the sometimes challenged category of “national literature” in the background of the Central European context, which can be understood in the form of an “interliterary network” as a problematic “story” of modern, ethnically complicated (Slavic – non-Slavic) societies with numerous parallels, turning points and “blank spots”.

In addition to the presentation of the joint paper “Image of Remote Countries in the Literatures of Central and Eastern Europe: On the Theoretical Starting Points of Intercultural Comparative Studies” (Pokrivčák and Zelenka 2019, 3–15) as well as participation in several congress discussions, Anton Pokrivčák (Slovakia) and Miloš Zelenka (Czech Republic) had also prepared, as editors, a monographic issue of the journal *World Literature Studies* entitled “Images of Remote Countries in the Literatures of Central and Eastern Europe”, as a joint contribution of the Czech and Slovak Comparative Literature Association to the Macau Congress. The journal’s objective was to attempt to define methodological approaches to intercultural problematic from intercontinental perspective. In its preparation, the editors methodologically drew on the theory of interculturality and comparative imagology, which nowadays modify traditional exploration within East-West Studies towards comparative intercontinental literary studies as a certain value norm in the reflections on multinational literature as such. This epistemological framework can contribute to a de-ideologized understanding of cultural “otherness” treated in wide universal circumstances. It is not only about the knowing of exotic topoi of remote and “non-similar” texts, but, above all, about a deeper understanding of Central and Eastern Europe, since it represents, with its geographical-cultural areas, sociocultural systems with a great measure of exogenous processes where specific cultural constructions, images of identity and otherness, are formed. The impulses of the West and, especially, the East here always worked in a modified form, since the mediating function of cultural value had a “self-referential” nature and therefore was an instrument of national identity, an instrument of the way to state and national sovereignty. The editors who in the selection process gave preference to the texts of analytical, problematic and theoretic-

cally inventive nature based on basic research, aimed at finding out how the image of remote countries and cultures is reflected in Central European and Eastern European literary-critical discourse as well as to what extent the image of the radically “other” is able to change this discourse, for example, its semantics and terminology. In other words, whether it is possible to transfer, for example, imagological conceptions historically created in a certain context to a typologically and structurally different cultural area. With the capturing of ethnic, biological or material difference – especially in the binary opposition “metropolis” x “colony”, either in the past centuries or under the postmodern conditions of globalized provincialism – is also related the revision of critical procedures dominating in the so-called Western literary studies, that is, to permanently ask the question of the sense of defending or refusing the ideological principles of Orientalism, post(de)colonial studies, cultural and social studies, deconstruction, comparative imagology, theory of interculturality as certain selective forms of research into a complicated and multi-layered phenomenon of world literature. The Czecho-Slovak monographic issue of *World Literature Studies*, appreciated by such comparatists as Peter Hajdu, Haun Saussy, and Theo D’haen, was distributed among the individual participants of the Congress.

As far as other papers are concerned, we will restrict ourselves just to the ones on the basis of which one could draw certain more general conclusions about the spirit of the Congress, since due to a great number of participants (approx. 2000) and variability of thematic scope, it would not be possible to analyze all interesting details. As has already been mentioned, perhaps the most persuasive impression, identifiable in most papers, was an effort of individual literatures and cultures, differentiated according to national, ethnic or gender principles, to situate themselves into a particular space of the literature of the world. It is interesting that the concept “literature of the world” was much more frequent (appearing also in the name of the Congress) than the traditional concept of world literature. It is probably associated with the fact that “world literature” implies a more intensive homogeneity, an idea of a certain standardized canon of great works which in contemporary thought on comparative literature “draws on fashion”, while the concept of the literature of the world is less elitist. This could be seen in Haun Saussy’s plenary lecture on the first day of the Congress (“Literature With and Without Borders”) which pointed out that if we look at literature just from one cultural and theoretical aspect, it is a limitation. In his opinion, literary scholars are used to discuss just one group of theorists or particular genres or concepts and forget that under other cultural conditions there exist other theorists, concepts and genres with other content. So, if in biology scholars work with the so-called “model” organisms, in literary studies there are, according to Saussy, also such “model organisms”. However, in biology a model does not mean universality, but rather an expectation of heterogeneity. It should mean the same, then, in literary studies. Therefore, if we speak about the epic or tragedy, we should not assume that their model elaborated by Aristotle is the only one and universal. The same concepts, he continues, have different content, for example, in Chinese or other literatures. A similar situation occurs when the category of the novel is discussed, since its definition based on European criteria may be challenged by,

for example, *The Tale of Genji*. What does all this mean for comparative literature regarding its future? Would it bring a readerly or theoretical disintegration? Certainly not – rather a challenge for further research to fuse the particularities into something which would transcend them, into world literature. Here it is necessary to note that without world literature comparative literature would be impoverished, it would lose its natural tendency towards something supranational, supra-ethnic. Naturally, also world literature can be looked at from several points of view. Saussy here contrasts Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, with European and German culture being in its natural centre, and Meltzl's conception seen as an example of the democratization of world literature.

Re-evaluation of the traditional approach to comparative literature, and, consequently, the essence of what makes world literature a world phenomenon, occurred in several other thematic units and workshops. In the thematic block "Theorizing the Literary across Cultures", Herrad Heselhaus from the University of Tsukuba discussed the so-called "relational studies", that is, a method which emphasises a holistic approach to the experiencing of a literary text at the expense of traditional objectivization of the parts of literary process as well as interpretation of a literary work exclusively from the aspect of the text, context or the reader. The traditional theoretical scope of relational studies was applied by Heselhaus to the teaching of literature across different cultures, i. e. she tried to highlight the heterogeneity of the personal perception of literature determined by different experiential complex of readers. The accent of otherness in relation to the sense of literariness occurred in other papers of this thematic block, including the already mentioned paper. While Anders Pettersson, for example, was speaking at a more general level about the conceptualisation of the difference of literary phenomena, Adia Mendelson Maoz analysed Israeli representations of Palestinian otherness and Jayshree Singh drew attention to the differences in perceiving the concepts of subject and freedom in Western and Eastern poetics.

In the thematic block "The Multiple Histories of Comparative Literature," Chengzhou He from Nanjing University in his paper "How to Do Things with Drama: A Comparative Approach to the History of 20th Century Chinese Drama" (most probably an allusion to the famous work by John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*) highlighted the differences in understanding the symbolism and realism of things between the European and Chinese aesthetics. An innovative approach to something so traditional as literary period characterized the presentation of Svend Erik Larsen from Aarhus University entitled "Landscapes of Realism: Ideas and strategies of a new project on Realism" in which many countries participate. Its aim was to newly read local literatures in a global perspective through the prism of realism as a European phenomenon with global impact, to re-evaluate literatures from a postcolonial perspective, to re-evaluate cultural exchange as a non-hegemonistic process, and, finally, to re-evaluate contextualisation of literatures in a wider mass media space. Larsen noted that realism is not the depiction of reality, but its experimental reconstruction through literary strategies taking into account the impact on readers. What is important for realism is not only something what is behind the text

(reference to be represented), in the text (the representation itself), but also something what is in front of the text (the reader's perspective). All the three aspects are, according to Larsen, important. The conceptions customary in Europe, for example the concepts of literature, world literature, or the traditional understanding of Anglophone literature, was challenged by Stefan Helgesson from Stockholm University in the paper "Note Towards a Decolonial Conceptual History of Literature". As a relevant presentation for this thematic block could be considered the attempt to look at the world history of literature from the aspect of slavery by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen.

Many workshops discussed another significant phenomenon closely associated with comparative and world literature, namely translation. As has already been mentioned, translation is in a certain sense an essential condition for the existence of world literature, since without it we would definitely miss many significant works written in languages we do not understand. Since no one speaks all the languages of the world, some works must be translated. However, translation also creates some essential problems, especially the unbalance with regard to what is global, and thus the importance of some and localness of other languages. Pascale Casanova (1999), for example, claims that what is global and universal in literature was embodied in the French language and in Paris – the literary capital of the world in which many authors lived. Paris, according to Casanova, became a gate to their success at an international scene, which they entered through an important factor – the translation of their works into one of several main "literary" languages. Translated works, however, evoke discussions as to whether the aesthetic qualities of the original were preserved, or whether the target text contains unacceptable semantic shifts, etc. According to Damrosch, however, the shifts in translation cannot be condemned, but accepted as inevitable and enriching for the given cultures and languages, as well as with regard to the possibility of unveiling the depth of meaning of a certain work through its interpretation in national as well as international context. In other words, if something is lost through the depth and quality, it may be substituted by extent and distance (Damrosch 2003). At the Congress, the above-mentioned general problems of translation were confronted especially in the workshops analysing translations between the culturally and ethnically distant languages, with an indication of the relation between the artistic translational methods and cultural identities emerging in the process of transcultural transfer.

To conclude, we may state that despite the fact that from the European perspective the Congress took place almost on the other side of the world, it was close via its inclusiveness, that is, its effort to present individual cultures and literatures as parts of a greater whole. This was symbolically expressed already in the introductory speech by Zhang Longxi, the still acting president of the ICLA, who quoted the Chinese philosopher Confucius: "Isn't it a great pleasure to have friends coming from afar?" One place discussed as the venue for the next congress was the University of Tbilisi, but, paradoxically, Georgian comparatists were not present in Macau, so they could not personally support their proposal. A more promising proposal, however, was the one presented by the American Princeton University whose representative Sandra

Bermann was not only present, but also unanimously elected as the new president of the International Comparative Literature Association.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In English: „What Do We Do When the Other Speaks Her Own Language: Returning to the Ethics of Comparativism“ (*Rocznik Komparatystyczny* 6, 2015, 9–23; <https://wnus.edu.pl/rk/pl/issue/283/article/3943/>).

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XXII Congress of the AILC/ICLA. Comparative literature. World literature. "Literature of the world". Theory of translation. Postcolonialism and intercultural imagology.

The study is an analysis of the XXII Congress of the AILC/ICLA *Literature of the World and the Future of Comparative Literature* which took place between July 29 and August 2, 2019 in Macau. As its name indicates, the lectures and workshops emphasised the concept of "literature of the world", which is considered less elitist than the traditional, and more homogenous, concept of "world literature". The idea that the (world) literature cannot be approached only from one cultural or theoretical point of view also permeated the joint Czecho-Slovak issue of the journal *World Literature Studies* entitled "The Image of Remote Countries in the Literatures of Central and Eastern Europe" published on the occasion of the Congress. Using various literary materials, the issue attempted to discuss modern methodological approaches to intercultural problems from the imagological intercontinental perspective.

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