

World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and Glocal Cosmopolitanism

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Paolo Bartoloni,

"World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and Glocal Cosmopolitanism"

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.5 (2013)***

Special Issue ***World Literatures from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Century***. Ed. Marko Juvan

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Abstract: In his article "World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and Glocal Cosmopolitanism" Paolo Bartoloni reflects on the topos of the crisis of literature and the humanities. An urge to question the status and the relevance of literature; to investigate the relation between literature and literary studies; and the location of literature within the context of a transforming world has emerged in the last three decades. Assuming that a bond exists between literature and the world, what is its nature? Is it possible to take an interest in literature without knowing its potential relevance or its world? These questions are related to the serious state of disrepair in which literary studies departments find themselves in the Western world. This essay aspires to contribute to the debate on the place of literature by focusing on the ideas of comparative literature and world literature.

Paolo BARTOLONI

World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and Glocal Cosmopolitanism

The attention bestowed on world literature in the last two decades produced a good number of books (see, e.g., Casanova; Damrosch; D'haen; Juvan; Moretti; Thomsen; Sturm-Trigonakis; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). One could retort that those who pay attention are colleagues and graduate students who must follow the current debates on the state of literature both as a scholarly discipline and a human desire to knowledge and-or pleasure (*docere* and *delectere*). The rest, our skeptic may add, are disinterested, and if pressed, they might find it difficult to provide not only a definition of literature, but also a coherent reason for its significance and function. Moreover, if asked to provide their views on the meaning, similarities, and differences between world literature and comparative literature, they would probably look disconcerted.

The sense that literature, both as a discipline and a cognitive tool, might be in crisis is more or less acknowledged. William Marx's 2005 *L'Adieu à la littérature* was one of the first books to investigate the alleged demise of literature and its relevance to the world. The crisis of literature and literary studies assumes different forms and connotations ranging from institutional reasons (the erosion and downsizing of literature departments at universities and the attendant sense of uneasiness on the part of scholars) to intellectual positions such as that of Marx according to whom modern and postmodern literature are responsible for the severance of the relations between literature and the world. In 2005 Pascale Casanova asked the question whether it were "possible to re-establish the lost bond between literature, history and the world, while still maintaining a full sense of the irreducible singularity of literary texts" ("Literature as a World" 71). Casanova alludes to a series of ethical, as well as aesthetic values which ensured continuity and reciprocity and cemented the interface between literature and life establishing reliance, complicity, knowledge, and shared experience. This bond, according to Casanova, has been lost. The question, as I see it, must not only revolve around whether it is possible to regain it, but also around the reasons by which the knot has been loosen or severed and what the nature of this bond would or would have been. A possible answer to these questions lies in the significance of the critical discourse in the context of the appreciation and understanding of literature: it is the gradual weakening of the interlocking relation between creative production and analytical investigation and its attendant effects on the world and history, which might have caused the present state of affairs described by Casanova. This appears to be the position of Francesco Muzzioli who in the past few years has devoted a series of volumes on the significance of critical discourse and its impending demise. Marko Juvan writes of challenges rather than crisis, and locates these challenges in the "social and political shifts in literary studies under conditions of globalization" (73). One could paraphrase Juvan's statement through Casanova's by saying that globalization has transformed the bond between literature, the study of literature, literary criticism, history, and the world. If this is true, it is not, then, a case of a lost bond, but of a transforming bond which is in the process of taking different forms and shapes which might be difficult to interpret. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* can be inscribed in this topology of crisis since her account of comparative literature's obsolescence is predicated on the radical changes brought about by a new world order.

Casanova, Juvan, and Spivak argue that the social and political dynamics of globalization have diminished the reliance on literature and its influence both as an academic discipline and creative practice. In parallel to literature departments have emerged interdisciplinary practices relying on transnational and multilingual discourse, the methodology of which is based on the idea of "studies" rather than literary theory. Hence the emergence of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and gender studies whose practitioners reconsider the cultural and political dynamics between center and margin of literary production and power. The issue is here complicated by a series of factors, namely the binary opposition national-international, critical-creative, canon-countercanon, center-margin. One could be easily tempted to read the apparent involution of literary theory through the facile equation of literature with nation-canon-center and that of studies with international or global-countercanon-margin. In "The World Republic of Letters" Christopher Prendergast articulates some of these concerns by discussing Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres* and the pairing nation-literature.

Prendergast subjects the idea of nation to a close scrutiny arguing that the idea of nation is far from being homogeneous, hiding instead a multifarious variety of sub-texts predicated on class divides. David Damrosch has also provided interesting insights in relation to the question of canonic as opposed to countercanonical literature ("World Literature" 52). Damrosch shows that the critical discourse about literature cannot be easily polarized according to political and sociological parameters and that canonical authors (Joyce, Proust, Wordsworth, Keats, etc.) continue to be at the center of critical enquiry even amongst postcolonial and cultural studies experts. At times the crisis is perceived as investing the whole of the humanities of which literature has been offered as the case study *par excellence*. David Ferris takes up this challenge when he asks whether "the humanities are a thing of the past" (78). As in Juvan's, at the basis of Ferris's question lies the sense of a technical and cognitive transformation, which might have changed the epistemological landscape more than we appear to believe.

Technological and economic changes, the dwindling of state's funding to tertiary institutions, and the attendant morphing of universities into kind of corporate business, appear to have conspired against the traditional understanding and function of the humanities. Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, proficiency in more than one language, cultural and general knowledge do not seem to be considered central to the profile of the individual of the future. Parents and institutions alike appear to be more attuned to immediate market's imperatives based on professional skills. It follows that the traditional idea of the humanities as it has developed over the years according to humanist foundations, including the aesthetic category of disinterest, are no longer recognized. It is no surprise, therefore, that the humanities seem to be gasping for air. It may be, however, as Pierpaolo Antonello argues in an article on the perceived crisis of Italian cinema and literature, that crisis is irretrievably linked to the nature of critical discourse. By quoting Paul de Man, who claimed that "the notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis," Antonello points to a possible narcissistic and inward-looking approach on the part of critics who interpret the present from the perspective of assumed and cherished values and categories, which are informed by a generational point of view, and certain ideological paradigms of the past (170). Antonello defines this position as intellectual inertia that fails to understand current social and cultural changes. If this is true, critical discourse is always already permeated by a sense of defamiliarization, which is the result of a fissure between the assumed experience, knowledge, and culture and those which are in the making. And yet the history of the humanities is paved by continuous transformations as generations of scholars make their entrance in the university and learned institutions. This, for instance, is demonstrated by Richard Rorty's "Looking back at 'Literary Theory'," in which he follows the rise and fall of theory in the U.S., which has turned from the paradigmatic in the 1970s and 1980s to almost irrelevant in the last decades. Comparative literature's history itself is an interesting example of a discipline that morphs according to generational cycles, new ideas, and categories.

It remains that in the current university system in the Western world, literature and literary studies are, although tacitly, taboo. Who is going to enroll in a program of literary study when the administrator — and the student — is concerned with the student's prospects of finding work after graduation? Those who have an interest in literature is the answer, but they seem to be less and less by the day. While it may be impossible to define what we mean by literature — Raymond Williams argued that the definition of literature can perhaps only be surpassed in difficulty by the concept of nature (*Keywords* 87-89) — it might be easier to talk about what we mean by "interest in literature." We assume that everyone in our society is exposed to literature either through the family or through education. Everyone seems to know what literature is about or simply takes it for granted and the number of people writing and taking courses on creative writing either at a university, college, or independent cultural centers is not decreasing. There has never been a period in human history when books have been as available as they are today. One only needs an iPad or a smartphone or a kindle, and the worlds of literature are there at their disposal, often free (at least in the West...). And yet this "empire" of literature does not translate automatically into critical discourse, as if the classic connection between criticism and creation, so essential from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, were forever broken. It was especially German Romanticism and in particular Friedrich Schlegel who sought to enhance the relation between artistic production and analytical discourse, between genius

and thinking. And yet, at least following Muzzioli's argument, it appears that the critical analysis of literary texts is perceived today as elitist, incomprehensible, and lacking in spontaneity (*L'analisi* 9). It appears to be the practice of a few obsolete and out-of-touch academics, who are often perceived as stuck up intellectuals. Muzzioli responds to this apparent fracture between literature as enjoyment and literature as critical practice by emphasizing that a fuller understanding of the narrative techniques and literary style and figures is essential to provide a richer experience of the text, and ultimately of life. Muzzioli equates critical awareness with freedom and democracy, offering Italy as an example of the dangers a society runs into when the relation between art and individuals is based merely and exclusively on emotions and feelings (*L'analisi* 10-13).

Is the renewed interest in world literatures a sign that things are changing? Clearly we are not ashamed of the word "literature," not yet. But what is "world literature(s)" and does it have any currency outside the humanities? In other words, what is it that remains to us of literature? Let us go back to 1827, to the day in which Goethe spoke about the idea of *Weltliteratur* to Johann Peter Eckermann: "We Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (5). The great moment of romantic and idealist impulses, in which a great degree of thrust was placed on the genius of literature and the power of imagination, was propelled by a sense of universal purpose and communality in which individual literatures could contribute to the advancement of the general good. It would be too narrow to think of a German genius as self-sufficient: what was necessary, Goethe seemed to express, is instead the encounter of literatures and mutual knowledge. After the ancient Greek, there will no longer be a singular center of literary power, there will be, rather, a series of localities which must look at each other with a sense of cooperation and mutual understanding. This may well be an idealist reading of idealist ideas which were expressed in a particular historical context. Prendergast, for instance, while celebrating Goethe's sincere cosmopolitanism, reminds us that these comments were made at the precise time of widespread French translations of Goethe's texts and his burgeoning international fame. Indeed, was Goethe's call for *Weltliteratur* a non-too-subtle marketing plot to ensure self-visibility and success ("The World" 2-3)?

In the words of Juvan, "In Goethe's case, the historical consciousness of literature's worldwide scope had ... a rather peripheral, partly national biased origin, notwithstanding its cosmopolitan pedigree and claims to universalism" (73; on Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*, see also Birus; Hoesel-Uhlig; Sturm-Trigonakis). Regardless of Goethe's "real" intention, his words have had and continue to have importance for comparative literature and world literature. What has happened in the meantime? Did everyone haste the idea of world literatures? Not really. As a matter of fact national literatures continued to prosper and guarded diligently their borders, always happy to look at the other, but more in the attempt to assimilate it than to give it hospitality. Times were not politically and culturally ripe for the idealist concept of world literature: there was far too much at stake in the context of nation building and national power and hegemony to concern local powers with universal claims which might have appeared far too abstract. In this context, Casanova writes that "The national movement of literatures, which accompanied the formation of Europe's political spaces from the beginning of the 19th century, led to an essentialization of literary categories and the belief that the frontiers of literary spaces necessarily coincided with national borders. Nations were considered to be separate, self-enclosed units, each irreducible to any other; from within their autarchic specificity, these entities produced literary objects whose 'historical necessity' is inscribed within a national horizon" ("Literature as a World" 78)

In 1848, Goethe's idealist call for *Weltliteratur* was echoed in *The Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels heralded the same concept not so much on the belief of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism as on the assumption that literature, and art in general, had been transformed into a commodity: "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and

more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature" (39). From Goethe's creative mind we move to Marx's and Engels's production line where literature is embedded in world economy as any other goods on the world market. Literature is about to lose its aura, something that Walter Benjamin will bring home more than fifty years after *The Communist Manifesto*. Goethe's aesthetic cosmopolitanism is paired with Marx's and Engels' economic cosmopolitanism, the latter perhaps better understood today as globalization. Literature is included in both perspectives as world literature: in the first instance a world literature of ideas and in the second a world literature of consumption.

Certainly one of the reasons which have been put forward to justify the resurgent interest in world literature after Goethe and Marx and Engels is the notion of globalization. In *Mapping World literature*, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen writes that "The idea of globalization and the accompanying changes in geopolitics, media, economy and cultural identity, have only within the past decade and half propelled the idea of world literature into a new era" (3). A few pages later he further clarifies by writing that "World literature is worth taking seriously as a challenge to research and teaching ... because it is an emergent field of its own that takes seriously both cultural globalization and literature that can be characterized as transnational" (5). According to Thomsen, world literature plays an important role because it can navigate the complexity of the globalized world "and what is interesting is the *way in which this complexity is transformed into forms of coherence*" (2; emphases in the original). A few questions arise: 1) Why highlight the prominence of literature in comparison to other art forms, 2) How does the role of world literature differ from the role of comparative literature or postcolonial literature? and 3) How different is the task of world literature as an ordering, mapping and clarifying instrument from, say, literature in the hermeneutic tradition (see, e.g., Ricoeur; Brooks)?

In the age of new media and intermedial textuality it might seem naïve to place so much importance on literature. Indeed, since the rise of postmodernism literature appears to have lost the aesthetic and epistemological prominence it once enjoyed amongst the arts. Not so long ago, Andreas Huyssen claimed that "to celebrate global literature today as a new and expanded form of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* ignores the fact that literature as a medium of cultural production no longer occupies the privileged place it once held in Goethe's age" (196). The decline of literature in the Western world is introduced by the demise of the traditional novel based on close Aristotelian criteria and principles of form and content. The fragmentary and open narratives heralded by modernism were met by a creative approach that privileged pastiche, hybridity, and openness. As Massimo Fusillo illustrates in his book *Estetica della letteratura*, postmodernism challenged the centrality of subjective and individual authority and taste by celebrating mass culture at the same time when any meaning and sense of universality and essentialism was replaced by the plurality of cultures (7-8). In this context, the new discipline of cultural studies questioned the specificity of literature and interpreted it alongside all other forms of social discourse. Gradually the concept and the idea of culture replaced that of literature in both institutional and aesthetic context (Fusillo 7). However, the acknowledgement of the transformation of cultural production, tastes, and aesthetic values does not automatically decree the end of a discipline and art form, and while, as Fusillo argues, it would be futile to defend the superiority of the book or the purity of writing in the age of the web, literature has a significant contribution to make; first because it has always been engaged with the realm of the virtual even before the virtual became a dominant discourse; second because it is well equipped to interpret the world from the multiple perspective of globalization (Fusillo 11).

Assuming that literature has still a function to play, how does it play it in relation to the production and the discussion of literary texts? What is at stake here is not just the creative aspect of literature (what is it that literature achieves through its products), but also the critical debate that supports, disseminates, and integrates the creative process. What is the difference between world literatures, comparative literature, and postcolonial literature, and why is it that we need any of them or all of them? The reason we need a debate that can engage literature critically is borne out by the assumption that literature still plays an important cognitive function in the age of globalization as part of a plurality of art forms which are in constant and mutual exchange and relation. Is there a critical perspective from which this scenario can be captured? The three disciplines I single out — world literatures, comparative literature, and postcolonial literature — might be limited by their explicit focus on literature. This fails to capture the vital interrelation of literature with other art forms (cinema,

theater, dance, photography, visual arts, digital and video arts, etc.). It is not by accident that in the last twenty years or so we have witnessed the proliferation of disciplines such as cultural studies, comparative cultural studies, global studies, European studies, where the term "studies" is employed to indicate an open and all inclusive approach to the study of culture. Culture, and not literature appears to be the quintessential center of creative constructs. Literary theory, following poststructuralism, and especially the work of Foucault, Deleuze, and the sociological writings of Bourdieu, has gradually morphed in the sociology of literature, which in turn has produced the cultural studies shift. Whatever they have done and in whatever ways they have morphed, comparative literature, world literature, and postcolonial literature have maintained the term "literature" to their disadvantage many would claim. Regardless of the changes in approach and perspectives, what interests me here is not so much their stubborn or inane defense of literature, as the ways in which they interpret and define the word literature. By understanding the latter one might be able to provide some insights into the former.

There are many definitions available for comparative literature, world literature, and postcolonial literature, and I am not going to list them here. Instead, I focus on current debates, leaving aside, for instance, the Eurocentric, mostly French and German, origins of comparative literature. According to David Damrosch, world literature is a literature that gains in translation (*What Is* 288-97, see also Thomsen, *Mapping* 16), and, further, that it is not so much a list of works, but an approach to literature (Thomsen, *Mapping* 16; see also Talvet <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/6>>). In Franco Moretti's view, world literature can formulate laws that govern transnational processes of genre development ("Conjectures" 54-68). If on the one hand Damrosch emphasizes the ways in which the reader understands world literature by interpreting individual texts, on the other hand Moretti seeks to describe patterns and typologies of narrative construction in order to arrive at a catalogue of world literature. How does this differ from comparative literature? Thomsen argues that "the basic idea [in comparative literature] was to compare the literatures, rather than individual works, of different nations, in order to determine both the specific nature of the literature and the nature of the culture and nation from which it arose. Over the years, this approach has been abandoned for an increasing emphasis on individual works" (*Mapping* 21). By Thomsen's own admission, today's comparative literature appears to do exactly what Damrosch claims is the task of world literature, namely the investigation of individual works from different cultures and nations. What seems to make a difference, however, is that 1) while comparative literature still places a strong emphasis on linguistic skills amongst scholars, world literature appears to be satisfied with reading and analyzing texts in translation, 2) while comparative literature has turned into an interrogation of critical theories of literature, world literature is strongly focused on primary texts and 3) while comparative literature depends "on the nation as a frame of reference" (*Mapping* 21), world literature approaches the study of texts from a globalized perspective. Assuming for a moment that this is correct, what transpires is that world literature is nothing other than a study of different works of literature through the prism of English. Erich Auerbach's prediction in the aftermath of World War II that English will become the dominant language by simultaneously creating an effective world literature because it would be in one language and destroying the very meaning of world literature by erasing the differences inherent in specific literatures seems to be not too far from the truth (3).

As for postcolonial literature, the difference is quickly drawn by the assumption that postcolonial literature is by definition "attached to young nations that were in the process of establishing their own identity" (Thomsen, *Mapping* 24), which therefore excludes it from the frame of world or comparative literature where the periphery as well as the center must play an equal part. An interesting example of postcolonial literature applied to comparative studies is provided by Huyssen (193-94), where he traces the idea of modernism by ways of its development in so-called marginal literary countries such as Brazil and India. The result is a reconsideration of modernism and its influence within a globalized and transnational framework. It has to be accepted that literature is one of the many modalities of artistic production and that it is in constant relation with other texts which are informed by and inform literature. A study of literature today is an investigation of multimedia processes and collaborations. It is also an investigation of the relation between artistic and critical production and the ways in which creative processes are influenced by evolving economic, social, and cultural transformations. It is in this sense that a redefinition of literature according to a series of methodological parameters could be

useful not so much as a way to define disciplinary specificities as a statement of the significant function that literature can play in the contemporary world. Thomsen is right when he claims that literature can make sense of rapid global changes, yet the reasons which support this argument ought to be pursued more forcefully. In this respect, in the sense of literary studies as a methodological approach that is ideally placed to interrogate the new world, how would literature differ from sociology, anthropology, history, or politics? The answer is that literary studies preoccupies itself with literary texts: but is it sufficient as an answer within a context in which the very nature of literary texts is rapidly evolving? Further, granted that the function of literature today is that of ordering and clarifying an otherwise chaotic world, would this claim not simply re-state the same principle that Paul Ricoeur argued with force in the 1980s? It is well known that Ricoeur stressed that the function of narrative texts is that of mapping the world of reality: "My basic hypothesis, in this regard, is the following: the common feature of human experience, that which is marked, organized, and clarified by the act of storytelling in all its forms, is its temporal character." (2). Literature, therefore, plays an epistemological role, which is presumed on the perception that the world is chaotic and no longer knowable universally according to master narratives or strong truths. However, what this position amounts to is not so much an understanding of the world as such as an understanding of the ways in which we experience the world. Ricoeur's perspective, as well as Thomsen's, who appears to move along similar methodological axis, is informed by the metaphysical tradition that privileges the relation subject-object within which the cognitive priority rests with the subject. In other words, it is assumed that knowledge, understanding, discovery, and creation is the precinct of the subjective ego whose task is that of making sense of the object, whatever this might be: reality, nature, another individual, god, and so on. It is the Cartesian framework according to which the "I" thinks his/her ways through the world. It is important to remember that within this framework, the vital mechanism for the success of the exploration is given by the chosen methodology of investigation. A rigorous, scientifically reproducible, and rational methodology will achieve optimum results regardless of the object that is under investigation. The Cartesian framework prioritizes subjectivity to the extent of neglecting the object of investigation.

Knowledge, experience, and the ways in which these may be affected by literature have been influenced by the metaphysical tradition, with some exceptions. In his last book of fiction, *Mr Palomar*, Italo Calvino imagines a character who spends his days in search of answers to his many existential and epistemological questions. Palomar is obsessed with knowing and in order to make order within the infinite multitude of things to know, he decides to start by interrogating daily phenomena from waves and cheeses to gardens and monuments. His intention is to adhere as closely as possible to the things of reality, or rather, to find a language that can reproduce the things that he experiences as closely as possible. In the tradition of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, this is an attempt destined to fail and produces all sorts of comical effects. Calvino parodies Cartesian methodology by poking fun at the pseudo-rigorous experiments contrived by the subject's attempts to know the surrounding objects. Calvino parodies the methodology, yet does not seem to challenge the principle of knowledge based on the prominence of the subject. As a matter of fact, Mr Palomar is the center of action, albeit indecisive, inept, insecure, and vulnerable. And yet there is a brief moment in the narrative in which Calvino appears to turn his back to the metaphysical tradition. In the story "Il museo di formaggi," Palomar is in a cheese shop in Paris confronted with several cheeses. The question is which one to choose, how to make an objective decision. Cheeses are obviously a metaphor and one could well exchange cheeses with books, people, cities, religions, languages, and so on. Palomar decides to apply the tools which have been given to him as an individual inhabiting the Western world in the twentieth century. In other words he embarks on the path to knowledge and there is confronted by two methodological possibilities: the encyclopedic and the specialist. Either he arrives at a comprehensive knowledge of all the cheeses available or he focuses on a particular cheese becoming the sole expert of that cheese: "Mr Palomar's spirit vacillates between contrasting urges: the one that aims at complete, exhaustive knowledge and could be satisfied only by tasting all the varieties; and the one that tends toward an absolute choice, the identification of the cheese that is his alone, a cheese that certainly exists even if he cannot recognize it (cannot recognize himself in it)" (72). It is at this moment, which is also the threshold between encyclopedic and specialized knowledge, that Palomar has a further thought: what would it be if instead of choosing, he could be chosen? What would

happen if the subject of knowledge and understanding would relinquish power to the object? In other words, is it possible to know by allowing the object to come towards us, and to meet us without making exclusive and essentialist demand over it?: "Or else, or else: it is not a matter of choosing the right cheese, but of being chosen. There is a reciprocal relationship between cheese and customer: each cheese awaits its customer, poses so as to attract him, with a firmness or a somewhat haughty graininess, or, on the contrary, by melting in submissive abandon" (Calvino 72). The question is left suspended by Calvino and it remains as a possibility, a potentiality, a kind of utopian world of impossible encounters that can only be imagined but not realized.

It is in another writer's work that this new ontology of knowledge is explored further and with interesting implications, especially in the context of our discussion of literature in the glocal era. I am referring to Edouard Glissant, who has articulated with fascinating incisiveness the idea of Creolization. Not only is Glissant engaged with thinking a different methodological approach in the context of aesthetic, social, and political encounters between subjects and objects, he also believes that this new methodological approach is suited eminently to the world today and that literature can play a significant role in advancing these new sets of cognitive parameters: "In France they say that poetry is dead. I believe that poetry, or if you like the exercise of the imaginary, the prophetic vision of both the past and remote spaces, is the only mode that we have to write ourselves in the unpredictability of world relations" (90; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). In his *Introduction à une poétique du diverse* and *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant proposes the idea of *tout-monde*, that is, an encounter of subjectivities who are rooted in a locality and who choose to live these localities not in an essentialist and autarchic way which would exclude the other. By contrast, these subjectivities employ their specificity and particularity including language to meet the other and allow for a space in between to be created in which reciprocal knowledge will be nourished. In order for this to take place, Glissant argues that it is necessary to abandon systemic concepts of knowledge as predicated by Cartesian thought and embrace what he calls chaos theory, that is, a set of methods of experience based on unpredictability, creativity, turbulence, and imagination which will bring about new modes of sustainable encounters and co-belongings founded on rhizomatic-roots rather than on blood and territory-roots: "I stress once again the notion of chaos, when I say *chaos-monde*, I return to what I said in relation to creolization: There is *chaos-monde* because there is the unpredictable. It is the unpredictability of world relations that decrees and determines the notion of *chaos-monde*" (37).

In Glissant subject and object meet on a territory that is mutually theirs to share and cultivate according to their own specific experiences. It is not a neutral space, it is rather a space-world and a world of engagement predicated on the idea of sharing. It is a multilingual world, not in the sense that everybody speaks and writes in ten or twenty languages, but a world in which each text and each act of speech takes into consideration all the other languages, and in which the disappearance of even one language, does not matter how remote this might be, is a loss to all languages and the beginning of their demise, and the plurality and diversity that this brings about: "To write in the presence of all the languages of the world does not mean to know all the languages of the world. It means that in the current literary context and in that of the relation between poetics and *chaos-monde*, I can no longer write as a monolingual author. It means that I experience and negotiate my language not so much within a synthesis as within a linguistic openness that enables me to think the relation amongst the languages spoken today on earth — relations of domination, cohabitation, absorption, oppression, erosion, marginalization — as the result of an enormous drama in an enormous tragedy in which my language can no longer be safe and removed from" (40).

It is perhaps from this idea of *tout-monde* and of the multiplicity and mutual empowerment of languages that a new understanding of literature and literary criticism can emerge. This may well be possible, but it must also be matched by a reconsideration of methodological approaches that will challenge the centrality of the metaphysical tradition, and conceptualize anew the relation between the subject and the object of inquiry. Some significant contributions in this direction have been provided in the field of visual culture, for instance by W.J.T. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want* (on interart studies, see, e.g., Finger). The title itself indicates a theoretical program based on the repositioning of the object in the context of the cognitive process. As Mitchell argues, it is not a matter of falling back into animism, totemism, and fetishism (29). This course of action would re-establish a

metaphysical hierarchy denying a process of recognition, which must be predicated not so much on emotional and irrational responses as on the critical acknowledgement of the space and identity of objects. In a book preceding Mitchell's by about ten years, *La Croisée du visible* Jean-Luc Marion describes a potential cognitive process in which objects and the world of reality offer themselves to experience through the artistic exchange. Marion claims that visual arts make the invisible visible not so much through a process of representation as through an event in which the thing of reality enters the canvas as a gift (66-69). Marion is influenced by Jacques Lacan's understanding of thingness as that which is at the center of the work of art yet external to it (Lacan 71), and partakes of the French poststructuralist attempt to de-subjectivize the process of artistic creation. His approach might border the mystical and often invokes a rather antiquate idea of inspiration according to which the artist may at times be possessed by the thing of reality and its unrepresentable objectuality and that this temptation must be resisted by focusing instead on the mutual engagement of artist and object and art and the world. The world is, of course, culture, time, space, location, imagination, symbols, a complex network of meanings which have a direct, as well as indirect connection to the subject. The subject is located in culture, and yet culture locates the subject. In the context of a transnational and global culture the modalities of mutual recognition and interaction have been transformed, and the subject must re-learn its engagement with things. In sum, I posit that it is precisely here, at the threshold of the new millennium, that comparative literature and world literature can play a significant contribution.

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