

On Some Worlds of World Literature(s): A Book Review Article on Ďurišín's, Casanova's, and Damrosch's Work

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Anton POKRIVČÁK

On Some Worlds of World Literature(s): A Book Review Article on Ďurišin's, Casanova's, and Damrosch's Work

Literature, in its many forms, has been with us since the time immemorial reflecting multiple individual experiences of its authors, the lives of communities, or various national or international concerns. Its worlds have been similar or different, beautiful or ugly, realistic or mythological, of a particular, as well as universal significance. The universality of the depicted worlds involves different levels of distance from individual expression moving to a group, community, world, or even, according to some new theories, a planetary level. The concept of world literature(s) is usually taken to be associated with the world or planetary level (although not always since in the past the "world" was often associated with Europe) positioned at the greatest distance from the particular with seeing of literature through its universal aspects, or, as in René Wellek's and Austin Warren's 1949 *Theory of Literature*, through its totality (48).

Traditionally, world literature has been contrasted with national literature which served almost as a justification for its existence. However, in spite of its long and widespread presence in literary studies, the national aspect of literature is not an ancient one. On the contrary, one can say that it is a relatively new "invention," for the beginning of closer association of literature with the representation of values restricted to smaller geopolitical wholes — known as "nations" in their various historical manifestations — can be traced to the Renaissance and the origin of vernacular languages, although it reached its peak in the nineteenth century Romanticisms drawing especially on Herder's thought. Since the nineteenth century national literatures have occupied an important place in literary history providing support for struggles of national emancipation, as well as in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century, for other ideological and political purposes especially in postcolonial expressions. Thus although the concept of national literature plays an important role in the definition of world literature(s), serving as a crucial reference point, there have been attempts to move away from it and explore other concepts revealing different literary realities. The exploration of a literary space covering a supranational reality located in a position wider than the national and narrower than the universal can be found in the thinking of Dionýz Ďurišin in his *Čo je svetová literatúra?* (What is World Literature?) in which he discusses world literature through the concept of interliterariness applying almost phenomenological procedures in an attempt to define literary categories and position them within the rational framework of dialectical interrelationships conditioned by their operation. In trying to define the concept, Ďurišin draws on the premises of the "scientific" approach to the explanation of social and human phenomena prevalent in the former communist countries of Central and East Europe making use of the Marx's base–superstructure distinction in which the base determines the forms and contents of literary (as well as other intellectual) representations. There is a close affinity of the Marxist, or, in case of the literatures of the former Eastern Bloc countries, socialist realist approaches to literary studies with the currently proliferating cultural studies approaches (see, e.g., Gafrik; Pokrivčák).

Although one has to struggle hard to make one's way through the remnants of socialist realism thinking in Ďurišin's language and despite of the terminological vagueness and occasional ideological biases in his orientation towards the Soviet cultural space unquestioned during life in "real socialism" it must be acknowledged that Ďurišin produced one of the first systemic analyses of this supranational literary space and its study. And note that this occurred around the same time when the notion of world literature started to gain attention (e.g., Hynes-Berry and Miller; Lawall), but a decade earlier than David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?*, the book that put the renewed concept of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* on the landscape of scholarship (i.e., in US-American scholarship). Earlier, in his 1989 *Theory of Interliterary Process*, Ďurišin wrote that the interliterary process is based on a general social law: "The movement from the national to the international is an objectively valid law of development in all the fields of human activity and represents a characteristic feature of social progress" (11) and that the interliterary process is a result of a dialectical relationship between the individual and the general, the overcoming of the national or the specific through a progress towards the general. It is

associated with the concept of the international which produces, in the end, the level of the "worldly." However, before that is achieved, we come across smaller geographical and cultural spaces which Ďurišin called interliterary communities, such as, for example, Slavic literatures, Germanic literatures, etc. Interliterariness is a characteristic feature of works which occupy this supranational space.

According to Marián Gálik in his "Interliterariness as a Concept in Comparative Literature," Ďurišin is concerned "with that part of the process at first regional or zonal and in the last centuries global which leaves aside the purely ethnic or national aspects of literatures (or the aspects that define their individualities or individual qualities) and focuses on the trans-ethnic, trans-national, and lately on the geoliterary development as a whole" (<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1089>>; see also Gálik, "Concepts" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1091>>).

Ďurišin's concept of interliterary process was in line with Marxist-Leninist philosophy (as practiced in the former Communist Bloc countries) which, in the end, anticipated the abolishment of national borders and the creation of a general communist "paradise." The fact that Ďurišin elaborated it in several other of his works made it central for his thought, and, despite his frequent ideological framing, paradoxically modern in the light of contemporary trends towards regional and area literary studies. It suited the post-World War II communist world and it also suited the contemporary world displaying tendencies towards transnational and transcultural spaces better than the concepts emerging from and addressing a world consisting of culturally and ideologically separated wholes. It must be said, however, that in Ďurišin's thought it was always a dialectical category resulting from the nature of historical processes and not a standalone construction. In *Čo je svetová literatúra?* he developed the following units: elements of a literary work, the literary text, author, a literary group or school, the literature of the clanship system, the literature of city states, medieval ethnic literature, national literature, modern ethnic literature, other analogical literary historical units, interliterary communities, and world literature (112; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

As we can see, Ďurišin's world literature is the ultimate stage in the progression from the individual and the specific towards the general. It is neither an accumulation of individual works nor any static list of "great works," but a living process made up of "mutually conditioning gnoseological-ontological circles: genetic contact relationships, structural typological circumstances, and interliterary communities and centrism" (41). Ďurišin stressed the importance of live dialectical relationships within the process which highlight the inadequacy of the use of traditional comparative tools to analyse its individual units, drawing on "factual evidence about the relations between literatures" (151) and accentuated more general typological circumstances and their employment in the progression of historical literary process, allowing, however, for the emergence and dynamism of various kinds of supranational multi-ethnic, geographical, and multilingual phenomena as well.

Unlike Ďurišin's theoretical and philosophical systemic approach, Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* offers a discussion of world literature through a slightly different terminology of a largely political and economic struggle. Casanova's distinction is between the economic space and the literary space. Although the two spaces are interrelated, success in one of them does not necessarily mean the same in the other one. To demonstrate this, she took over Fernand Braudel's idea saying that "in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, France, though lagging behind the rest of Europe economically, was the undisputed centre of Western painting and literature; the time when Italy and Germany dominated the world of music were not times when Italy or Germany dominated Europe economically; and even today, the formidable economic lead [enjoyed] by the United States has not made it the literary and artistic leader of the world" (11). The literary space first emerges from the political and the national, overcomes them, and claims its own mode of operation: "The key to understanding how this literary world operates lies in recognising that its boundaries, its capitals, its highways, and its forms of communication do not completely coincide with those of the political and economic world" (Casanova 11).

The general opposition between the political and the literary, between Casanova's two "republics" is on another level modified to structure the literary world along the axis of the national and the universal. The global space is the result of the struggle between various claims for identity within the literary world in which writers and their works inhabit either the literary space of universal values independent of particular national or nationalist concerns or they serve the ideology of nation states.

Historically, the formation of the world literary space is seen to have progressed from the separated regional literary spaces of Middle Ages towards the attempts at the creation of literature in vernacular languages in the Renaissance which, in turn, resulted in a stage of the nineteenth century's national and nationalist concerns creating a scene for international competition of literary values:

Renaissance Italy, fortified by its Latin heritage, was the first recognized literary power. Next came France, with the rise of the Pléiade in the mid-sixteenth century, which in challenging both the hegemony of Latin and the advance of Italian produced a first tentative sketch of transnational literary space. Then Spain and England, followed by the rest of the countries of Europe, gradually entered into competition on the strength of their own literary "assets" and traditions. The nationalist movements that appeared in central Europe during the nineteenth century — a century that also saw the arrival of North America and Latin America on the international literary scene — generated new claims to literary existence. Finally, with decolonization, countries in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Asia demanded access to literary legitimacy and existence as well." (11).

Literary values in the national spaces are seen as subjected to the ideological and political values, to the needs of emerging nations. The ensuing national rivalries, however, create conditions for the emergence of world space transcending the original particularities: "Little by little ... literature succeeded in freeing itself from the hold of the political and national authorities that originally it helped to establish and legitimize" (Casanova 37). Unlike ideologically conditioned values characteristic for national spaces, the world space brings universality and independence from extraliterary concerns and thus according to Casanova, the worldliness and universality of literature was embodied by French language and Paris, the literary capital of the world in which many contemporary great authors lived. Paris became a gate to their success on the international scene to which they entered through another important factor, namely the translation of their works to one of the major "literary" languages.

Although the world literary space is free of ideological and particular nationalistic concerns, it is not "equally available" to all literatures because it, in fact, is a consequence also of an unequal distribution of resources within national literary spaces. To compete with world literary powers is especially difficult for the so-called small nations and small literatures for which it requires a great daring to leave its service to the nation and "ally themselves across national and cultural borders against the omnipotence of Paris in art" (Casanova 253; on this see also, e.g., D'haen <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/9>>; Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>). While the main principle on which Casanova bases her argumentation is the opposition between the literary and extraliterary — the literary being a privilege of artistically free world centres while the extraliterary is reserved for ideologically and politically contaminated art of national or ethnic literatures — she also works with terminology and concepts which are reminiscent of cultural elitism, especially when using such oppositions as center and periphery, great and small nations, or great and small literatures. Even if one must give her credit for presenting the literary process as dynamic and allowing for change of contours and power relations, it still seems to indicate that behind the literary greatness and universality there always lurks its original cause: political and national power. However, this interrelationship between distinctions — including other aspects such as the role of translation, the Nobel Prize in Literature, etc. — illustrating power relations highlights another aspect of literary process to which Casanova pays attention at the end of the book, namely the long-discussed opposition between literature and reality, between the real world and fictional world, or, as she puts it, between historical temporality and literary temporality. As she suggests in several instances, with historical temporality the political and national aspects of literature are associated, while literary temporality is what we can call the uniquely universal side of literature.

In *What Is World Literature?* Damrosch uses similar concepts to discuss the field (what other terms can one use?), but his conception of world literature is slightly different. It is not a stable group of works, either a set of classics, masterpieces, or multiple windows, but a dynamic conception allowing "all three categories their ongoing value" (15). In the chapter entitled emblematically "World Enough and Time" Damrosch offers the following summarizing principles of his approach: 1) World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures, 2) World literature is writing that gains in translation, 3) World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached

engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time (281). We can see that as in previous approaches world literature is again defined through the concept of national literature and translation. What makes Damrosch's approach different is the emphasis on the experience and processes of reading and the dynamism of values. From his discussion of the above features one can realize that his terms are not defined strictly, but allow space for adaptation. For example, it is clear that "specialist" and "generalist" readings are not contradictory, but open to different spaces within a work's potentiality and that the reading of a literary text within one culture opens the work's deeper involvement within the culture's unique values. On the contrary, if one reads a work belonging to a different culture, one necessarily has to lose some depth, but gains a breadth, distance. He also raises interesting issues for translation studies not deploring shifts in translation, but instead accepting them as inevitable and enriching for both involved cultures and languages, as well as for a possibility to uncover the equal depth of a work's meaning through its interpretation both in its national and world context (by a home specialist, "a native speaker," or by a foreign scholar). Of note is that while Damrosch employs Itamar Even-Zohar's theory of the polysystem, he appears unaware of the systemic and empirical approach of Siegfried J. Schmidt and the latter's disciples in German-language scholarship and elsewhere (and the same goes for other systems scholars in the U.S., e.g., Beecroft; Moretti, etc.; for a bibliography of Schmidt's work see Lisiak and Tötösy de Zepetnek <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1581>>; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Bibliography" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss3/7>>, "Systemic"; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

In conclusion, I posit that Damrosch's theory — for all of its emphasis on the dynamism, complexity, and primacy of reading encounters with literary texts — does not depart significantly from previous attempts to define new world literature(s). It only shows that the field of world literature(s) is, in essence, a relatively interrelated set of phenomena posing a relatively similar set of problems for its scholarly examination. For example, Damrosch's last chapter I refer to above, "World Enough and Time" (referring to Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress"), tells us what we already know, namely that the world is too big for us to know it all and that we have too little time to do that: what we can do is to try to learn as much as we can, let ourselves be enriched by the multiplicity of its strange faces even at the expense of losing something, or be lost in the process. On the other hand, the value of Đurišin work — his book discussed here is virtually unknown in West Europe, the U.S., or elsewhere and it would be important to publish *Čo je svetová literatúra?* at the very least to English — lies in his dialectical seeing of the world in maintaining that the general would not exist without the individual or the specific, which means that any concept of world literature(s) would be irrelevant without remembering about the individual units which produced it. Casanova's conceptualization of world literature is perhaps the most literary, aesthetic, and universal despite the fact that it emerges and is conditioned by the force of the concrete and the material.

Last but not least, in turning attention to the concept of world literature(s) all three works discussed here raise also other issues facing literary studies today, especially those of the nature of the literary and the interliterary. It goes without saying that the twentieth century was an exciting time for scholars of literature: it saw the shift of thinking about literature from treating it as part of general philological education through its elevation into the status of an independent subject of scholarship through a period of high theorizing to its application as an instrument in the political and emancipatory struggles of all sorts. No doubt that literature has been put to such uses and that it obviously has a potential of serving each and all of the mentioned purposes. However, I ask the following: Which of the above served it best? What made it fulfil its own constitutive qualities? What allowed it to meet its own end? And where shall we go from here? Can the study of an expanding world of unique cultural expressions bring us back to the realization that there is also a truly universal concept of world literatures and spaces revealing itself everywhere and at all times and that these worlds should not collide?

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