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Comparative Literature in a Global Context: Politics, Academic Literature, and the Future of Comparativism

Lyginamoji literatūra globaliame kontekste: politika, akademinė literatūra ir komparatyvizmo ateitis

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David Damrosch 2020. *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age,* Princeton University Press, p. 392, ISBN 978-069-123-455-7

David Damrosch's book *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (2020) rethinks comparative literature in a global world. Since the emergence of this methodological field, researchers have always questioned which works or methodological assumptions to adopt and include in their research scope of comparative literature. Historical and genetic studies have been important for traditional comparative literature studies: the origins of the work, the biography of the author, socio-historical circumstances, studies of influences, translations, and typological studies (genres, forms, themes, myths, motifs, etc.). With the globalisation of the world and the changes in society, the deepening of the migration and ecological crises and the rise of inequalities, researchers have moved from the traditional comparison of national and foreign literatures to

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studies that analyse multiculturalism, dialogism and openness. Damrosch's work embodies what he himself urged other literary comparativists to do—to go beyond a single historical period, genre, comparison of a few works or conventional theoretical models (2020: 6). In his book, he attempts to defend and seemingly re-legitimise comparative literature, arguing that national literature should not be analysed in isolation from the axis and context of world literature, culture and history (2020: 7). Thus the limits of this methodology, according to Damrosch, are described as a "disciplining poetics" (2020: 11), and the book, as stated in its flap, combines "perspectives from literary comparativism, postcolonial and world literature" (I would add translation or feminist theories, close-reading, etc.) to provide a broad, comprehensive picture of the discipline's status and future prospects.

The book also focuses on the issues of different cultures and identities, and highlights the contributions of women scholars to comparative literature, for example, by discussing Margaret Higonnet's *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature* (1994), Lilian R. Furst's memoir, *Home Is Somewhere Else. Autobiography in Two Voices* (1994) or Anna Balakian's essay "How and Why I Became a Comparatist" (1994). Damrosch thus proposes a comparative literature that is receptive to diverse traditions, suggesting that comparative research should transcend national canons and encompass a more expansive, global perspective. While this is not a novel approach, the question remains: how effective is it, and is it even feasible? Do comparative literary studies truly have no boundaries? As Ben Hutchinson wryly put it, perhaps everything can be compared?

In line with this principle of openness, Damrosch's book analyses a huge and diverse corpus of literary comparativists. With the ease and narrative elements of bestselling literature, he returns to the origins of comparative literature and includes so-called "peripheral" literary histories, which are part of a global literature, despite their lesser international notoriety or recognition. These include the first comparative literary journal, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877–1888), published by the Transylvanian comparativist Hugo Meltzl, and the work of the Irish scholar Hutchenson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (1886), Meltzl and Samuel Brassai's trilingual (Hungarian, German, and French) journal *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok / Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteratur / Journal d'histoire des littératures comparées* (1879),

the essay "Weltliteratur" by the Danish comparativist Georg Brandes (1899). Although we might see such inclusion as, in Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's terms, "lonely canons,"[1] which have not had international recognition and are now only entering the field of world literature because of the general tendency of research to include the "periphery."

In drawing on the perspectives of a new global comparative literature, Damroch seeks to rethink the deeply entrenched issues that have long plagued the field of comparative literature. He reconsiders the necessity of knowing at least a few languages, as appreciated by the early literary comparatists ("In my student days in the 1970s, the ideal for an American comparatist was to have a really good accent in French and German" (2020: 174)), and the resultant tensions between national and comparative research. "Yet the differential nature of a global perspective shouldn't entail abandoning the philological grounding of classic comparative studies; we need to develop better ways of working both with the original texts and in translation" (2020: 177). So here again he returns to the importance of translation, arguing in favor of a comparative literary studies that would analyse the mediating role of translation in shaping the interpretation and meaning of literary texts in different cultures: "More languages, then, as well as more use of translation" (2020: 174). It would appear that the situation is evolving, and there is no longer any possibility of avoiding the necessity of multilingualism. Furthermore, translation is no longer regarded as a mere secondary source of research.

Damrosch also returns to updating the methods, research tools and scope of comparative literature studies, but at the end of the book he comes to what I think is a controversial conclusion—that the method of research is not the decisive factor, because the direction of research in comparative literature studies is not only shaped by the researcher, but also by the institution, the country's policy and funding model. In this case, the aforementioned question remains as to whether comparative studies do have its limits. At this point, I would like to pause and discuss two aspects of Damrosch's book: the formation of the identity of the comparative literature researcher, which is inseparable from the academic self-creation (and in some sense, academia literature genre) and the relationship between literature and politics, which is even more relevant today in a world of turmoil.

1 Mads Rosendahl Thomsen 2008. *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*, New York: Continuum, p. 48.

Returning to Damrosch's book four years later with a dissertation in comparative literature on European identity in the Soviet era, and now analysing PhD students' self-images in contemporary Lithuanian and British prose, I feel the relevance of Damrosch's book for academic literary research: "The difficulties of securing a tenure-track job affect all fields, but they have a special urgency for comparatists: will jobs, never plentiful, dry up altogether as beleaguered literature departments pull back to nationally defined core fields?" (2020: 3). Damrosch does not shy away from discussing personal behind-the-scenes, the details of researchers' lives, or the internal affairs of the university. Not surprisingly, his analysis of the example of the global scholar Anna Balakian also highlights her personal choices: "To change the world as Anna Balakian and her friends sought to do, they would have to begin with an almost equally daunting task—changing the university" (2020: 88). Perhaps this is the contextual biographical material inherent in any research? Or are the links between comparative literature and academia literature even deeper?

The origins of comparative literary studies are closely linked to cultural, social and, above all, historical and political developments. It is itself constantly caught up in political influences and manipulations. This is reflected in its origins, when power relations perpetuated the juxtaposition of major and minor literatures, especially during the Cold War, when the Western and Eastern blocs were divided. In Damrosch's book chapter "Politics," he convincingly shows how politics influenced the researchers' choices and the objects of their research by analysing the examples of Anna Balakian, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Damrosch assures us that these researchers have managed to remain "always suspicious of any dogmatic orthodoxy" and, quoting Said, mentions that "criticism has to think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutionally opposed to any form of tyranny, domination, and abuse, and that its social goals are a non-coercive knowledge that is created in the name of human freedom" (2020: 121).

Politics in Damrosch's work also takes on a dimension of émigré-ness. Naturally, the new school of comparative literature studies in the USA itself began to take shape after the Second World War when various scholars (e.g., Erich Auerbach, René Wellek, etc.) left the Old Continent, when the emigration of theorists led to the emergence of a coherent school of comparative literature, and when many of the émigrés who had reached the shores of the "new world" were studying comparative literature in particular in an effort to unify or speak

anew about the postwar world. According to Damrosch, comparative literature is, at its core, highly émigré "from Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, written during the Napoleonic exile, to influential contemporary critics such as Edward Said, George Steiner, Yulia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak, and Franco Moretti" (2020: 52). Emigration becomes a catalytic factor in comparative literature, placing it in a more global context. However, this vision is not new, but perhaps it does show the universality of comparative literary studies. Although with huge methodological differences and represented by different schools of literary comparativism, the expatriateness of this methodology has been underlined by Emily Apter, even in her rendering of the term "comparative exile."[2]

This brief review touches upon several key aspects of Damrosch's book, including traditional comparative literature and its pursuit of renewal in the context of a globalized world, the trajectory of an academia literature and personal life of comparatists working in this field, and the intrinsic connection between comparative literature and politics. Most importantly, however, Damrosch's book reveals that working in this field can open up a very wide and rich path of pleasurable discoveries for literary comparatists. This path is not necessarily easy, but it is intriguing in its unexpectedness and possibilities, much like this book: "From Herder and de Staël to Auerbach and beyond, the perturbed souls we have examined in this book can help us chart our course forward as we seek new and better ways to compare the literatures of today" (2020: 347). It is also noteworthy that this book not only engages with its intellectual ambition and its attempt to reexamine the origins and perspectives of comparative literature studies, its overlooked contexts, and its position within the global scholarly landscape. It also serves as a valuable source of inspiration, potentially even a model, for the history of comparative literature in Lithuania, which remains to be written.

2 Emily Apter 1995. "Comparative Exile," *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 94.