REVIEW: Stefan Helgesson and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Literature and the World*

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Abstract: The present book review aims at raising awareness about some of the most influential waves of changes in the wide field of humanities, that have contributed to the emergence of over-arching concepts in the field of literary studies and translations studies: a redefinition of world literature endorsed by an authoritative and convincing plea for its understanding and significant role in contemporary literary criticism, translation studies and cultural theory. Furthermore, other related terms reflect the same paradigm: globalization, transnational literature, digital humanities, cultural geography, cultural translation, at a time marked by several "turns": the planetary turn, the cultural turn, to name some of the most recent and equally compelling concepts.
Key words: world literature, comparative literature, translation, wording, worlding

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> "Is Romanian literature a world literature? Are all literatures world literature? ... in the twenty-first century, the ways in which a literature participates in, and actually fosters, a world and acquires a presence and stature in it are no longer a foregone conclusion, a given, or a function of that literature`s historically privileged or underprivileged position in a hierarchically organized and economically-politically constituted literary world system."
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> *Romanian Literature as World Literature*[1]

Changing Paradigms in Literary, Cultural and Translation Studies: Worlding the Word across Culture, Space and Time

Humanities have undergone major paradigm shifts in recent decades, fundamentally prompted by the changes in the areas of literary, cultural and translation studies, spreading virally and with a worldwide impact. A paradigm shift, particularly in the arts, culture, literature, represents a unique combination of massive change and long-term continuity, equally triggered by the imperative need to coin new concepts to accommodate more effectively the new perspectives of life and the world as well as trends in society, on the one hand, and the emerging scholarly preoccupations to articulate the most recent phenomena and recurrent novel patterns in academic terms, highlighting the transition from the "Republic of Professors" (Albert Thibaudet) to the "World Republic of Letters" (Pascale Casanova).

The idea of world literature takes us back to Goethe`s concept of *Weltliteratur* - commonly a harbinger of modernity - and which has gained unparalleled authority in the academia and further benefited from the landmark definitions amply set forth in the books authored by David Damrosch, who summed up: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language."[2]

The book authored by the two renown academics, Stefan Helgesson – professor at Stockholm University – and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen – professor at Aarhus University – is highly topical and relevant in the current

context of the growing demand for reliable, pioneering and scholarly-grounded contributions in the field of comparative literature and world literature studies. Both authors boast a prestigious list of publications in the area of world literature and have come to be regarded as experts in the areas of world literature, digital humanities and translation theory. It is worth mentioning, at this stage, the thorough and continuing scholarly interest in matters of comparative and world literature, testified by other related books, either authored: *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literature* or co-edited: *Danish Literature as World Literature* by Mads Rosendahl Thomsen; and, respectively, the volume *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* co-edited by Stefan Helgesson.

Included by the prestigious Routledge publishing house in its interdisciplinary series "Literature and Contemporary Thought", the book under scrutiny, *Literature and the World,* which came out in 2020, set its sights high and aimed at a providing a highly engaging and thoroughly informed perspective as well as definitions and scholarly approaches to one of the most topical concepts in the field of literary studies: world literature and its relation to translation, media, geography, genre, ecocriticism.

David Damrosch wisely epitomized, "a work of world literature has an exceptional ability to transcend the boundary of the culture that produces it" highlighting the central and pivotal role of culture as connector between distant and familiar, between otherness and similarity, mediated by the unifying, harmonious though comprehensive perspective of the author, giving equal credit to cultural diversity as a rich source of wisdom for literature, as literary texts are always culture bound, imbued with the nuances of time and space. Furthermore, "a great work of literature can often reach out beyond its own time and place, but conversely it can also provide a privileged mode of access into some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin."[3]

The book is well-rounded and coherently structured, including seven major chapters – interconnected and overarching both in the scope and amplitude of topics dealt with – made up of a dense texture of rich information contributing to a thorough plea for world literature endorsed by convincing, minute and elaborate arguments. Each stage of the six chapters is meant to clarify the concept of world literature relying on historical, theoretical and disciplinary motivations in addition to "our current historical moment, shaped by migration, digital media and forms of uneven economic globalization ... in an age of rapid cultural change."[4] More specifically, after a thorough and convincing rationale for world literature set forth in the consistent introduction – co-authored by the two scholars – they subsequently approach matters of contemporary interest, such as: ecologies of literature – focusing on what Stefan Helgesson calls the "driving force in the world histories of literature: the dynamic between cosmopolitan and vernacular scales of literary value"[5]; genre – viewed in terms of strangeness and familiarity; geographies of literature; media and its impact on literature with a particular focus on digitization and the multiple avenues it creates for literary studies; and, finally, translation – one of the most powerful and enduring connectors of cultures by means of literary text - viewed, as transfer and transformation, from the perspective of duration and as cosmopolitan reading. Translation is a key concept and another powerful pillar of the entire study, supporting the entire architecture of the book, which has also become a 'planetary' practice, as defined by Christian Moraru in *The Planetary Turn*:

> "planetarity: our moment. A way of being and a way of measuring time, space, and culture in the human sciences and on the planet at large ... The discourse of planetarity presents itself, in response to the twenty-first century world and to the decreasing ability of the postmodern theoretical apparatus to account for it."[6]

Translation has come to represent the most important vector of world literature and, above all, a facilitator or mediator between the centre and the periphery, alleviating distances and bridging the gap between major and minor literatures, according to commonly acknowledged polarities and recurrent patterns emerging from world-system analysis and long-established power-related differences. As the two authors point out in the introductory part – entitled *Why world literature* – a major challenge was set by untranslatability – to borrow a concept from Emily Apter`s studies – triggered by cultural contexts:

> "The cliché has it that something always gets lost in translation; a more refined understanding claims instead that translation is by definition a transformation."[7]

Mention should be made of the "civilization of the universal" – a synonymous term for "world literature" and undeniably in contrast / opposition to the pejorative concept "universal civilization" echoing imperialist connotations, issues of dominance and colonialism.[8] The rationale of the book set forth in preliminary chapter outlines the landmark scholars of world literature, namely: Pascale Casanova with her book *La République mondiale des lettres*, published in the later 1990s, immediately followed by Franco Moretti`s article "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000) and, soon afterwards, David Damrosch`s study entitled *What Is World Literature?* (2003). This triad of writers coined significant definitions, highlighted fundamental hypotheses and framed innovative methodologies for

the study of world literature.[9]

The final considerations are formulated in a most original manner, a dialogue between Helgesson and Thomsen touching upon the most topical issues: language in the twenty-first century, institutional transformation, national ideals, the status and complexity of literature, postcolonialism, gender and migrants, and cleverly entitled "unfinished business" thus creating the space and the challenge for the ongoing debate and continuing scholarly investigation of literary studies in the world context, as well as opening up new routes for academic analysis of world literature and the worlding of literature endorsed by a minute study of language and translation with a global outreach.

An important contribution provided by the two authors relies in the authors` successful endeavor to revive the concept of world literature accompanied by the challenges to the study of the concept both by independent scholars and literary critics or included in the academic canon. We shall therefore conclude that the book under scrutiny proves insightful to independent researchers, academics and students evincing a scholarly interest in the most recent concepts of literary studies, translation as planetary practice, world literature, comparative literature, digital humanities, distant reading, and revolving around some the most influential theorists nowadays: Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter, David Damrosch and Franco Moretti.

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Notes

1. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian, eds., *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), xiii.
2. David Damrosch, "What is World Literature," in *World Literature: A Reader*, eds. Theo D'haen, Cesar Dominguez, Mads Rosendhal Thomsen, (London & New York, Routledge, 2013), 199
3. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 2.
4. Stefan Helgesson, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Literature and the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.
5. Ibid., 47.
6. Amy J. Elias, and Christian Moraru, eds., *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty First Century* (Evanstone: Northwestern University Press, 2015), vii, xi.
7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid., 11.
9. Ibid., 13-15 passim. "Casanova`s work focused on how dominant centres in the international literary circuit, such as Paris, London and New York, functioned as hubs for the further dissemination of works ... The focus in her book ... were those writers who despite writing from the semi-periphery of the larger nations, made a lasting impact on literature in the centres ... Moretti's diagnosis was that world literature could not be studied by merely reading more, because of the sheer magnitude of printed matter. Hence, he saw it as a provocation to the discipline to find new ways to study literature at a remove ('distant reading')."As regards David Damrosch, his "three definitions emphasized that world literature is a 'refraction of national literatures', whereby the connections to local roots were stressed but also the distance that makes another perspective necessary ... Damrosch`s second definition underlined the importance of translation to world literature studies, which in many ways was the most decisive challenge to the discipline of comparative literature. Finally, the third definition of world literature as a mode of reading rather than a canon was perhaps the most influential idea, suggesting that world literature studies create a space for reading where highly canonized and overlooked works could be compared across time and space."

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