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RECONSIDERING THE COMPARATIVE. DAVID DAMROSCH AND A NEW MODE OF READING

Abstract: The literary domain has suffered several delineations throughout the centuries. No matter if it is perceived from a chronological, theoretical or constitutive perspective, there is a ceaseless readjustment regarding the perception of literature, with its afferent notions, such as the literary canon, translations or its own dynamics. This article outlines one of the major approaches for the literary space, due to David Damrosch, who has made visible the concept of “world literature”. Moreover, this article is an attempt to gradually analyse and understand Damrosch’s manner of relating to the concept afore-mentioned, by bringing into discussion his three main definitions. Thus, this text discusses the manner in which translations become beneficial for world literature, as well as the metaphorical definition (“the elliptical refraction of national literatures”) used by Damrosch with the aim of clearly delimitating this concept, and the transnational way of reading that one can practice in order to get rid of a restrictive or simplistic manner of understanding literature.

Key words: comparative literature, world literature, theory, translation, transnational, national.

Nowadays, when someone mentions the concept (of) *world literature* and its present implications, probably the first name brought into discussion is that of David Damrosch. A teacher at Harvard University and the director of The Institute for World Literature, David Damrosch represents, on account of his books, articles

and many contributions to the anthologies interested in the notion of *world literature*, one of the most complex figures of this field and one of the theoretical voices who have reshaped the comparative domain by focusing on marginal literatures, on the way in which the history of (world) literature can be written and, mostly, due to his efforts of defining a paradigm that, starting with Goethe, has been continually searching for its methodological and theoretical specificity. In the following lines, we will point out some of the most important ideas approached by David Damrosch in his books and articles, outlining those that are related to the discipline of comparative literature. We will seek for the convergent and divergent points proposed by Damrosch in relation to the way in which comparative literature, specifically, tries (successfully or not) to deal with the higher and higher quantity of text entering the dynamics of world literature, the canon's legitimacy or the importance given to translations in the transnational space described by the new paradigm.

In *What is World Literature* (2003), one of the most influential books that tackles the new theory enunciated after the 90's, and probably the most substantial book of David Damrosch, we can identify the starting points of the American researcher, points that were going to gain shape throughout the years, thanks to the attention paid to the permanent interrogations and reassessments dedicated to a domain frequently sensitive to the changes and readjustments caused by globalization and the emergence of new theories and approaching systems. When talking about world literature, David Damrosch is considering

“all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language [...] A work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (Damrosch 2003, 4).

Damrosch states the necessity of translation in the sphere of world literature, as the main factor that intermediates the movement from the original literary system to the foreign one, which brings to life the work around the whole world. Interesting here is that Damrosch's definition implies that the oeuvre's universality is assumed both synchronically and historically (D'haen 2011, 26) – it can circulate at any time, at any moment, as long as the driving force slants to the “external” part

of the original culture and to its active participation in the interior of the foreign system, beyond the oeuvre's novelty or beyond the acknowledgement that may have defined the work previously.

In the beginning of his book, Damrosch also expresses the hypothesis according to which

“world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is? as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike [...] The variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features—one of its greatest strengths when the work is well presented and read well, and its greatest vulnerability when it is mishandled or misappropriated by its newfound foreign friends” (Damrosch 2003, 5).

In these lines, the researcher's concern is related to the risks seen as presumptive whenever the works enter the space of world literature. The tension grasped by Damrosch is established between the old aspects of cultural imperialism, having the tendency of assimilating the foreign literatures in light of some Eurocentric or occidental norms, undermining the cultural difference of the works' original context, and a new way of assimilating the difference by making use of a universal perspectivism, where the peculiar nature is exploited and becomes a referential framework for the whole receiving ensemble. In what way we can avoid “the wrong manipulation” and “the inadequate assimilation”, and how the focus is realised at the level of literary (not cultural, in a wider sense) aspects— as one of Sara Lawall's reproaches sounds like, regarding the new concern of the anthologies *Norton* and *Longman* (the second one conducted by David Damrosch himself), to tackle rather the “cultural complexity”, thus reducing the amount of time allowed to the re-reading of individual texts (Lawall 2004, 83) -, we will see these things by analysing the tripartite definition – which revives the hypotheses afore-mentioned – developed by the American researcher around the concept of *world literature*.

The elliptic refraction of national literatures

Starting with Goethe and the delimitation made by the German author between the national literatures and *Weltliteratur* when he is addressing to Eckermann (Eckermann 1965, 226), and also from the manner in which *world literature* has been perceived in the last half of the century, in opposition to the national literatures in the North-American academic areas, Damrosch firstly defines *world literature* as “an elliptic refraction of national literatures” (Damrosch 2003, 281). In physics, the ellipsis is a curve defined as a geometrical point where the sum of the distances considered for two fixed points is a constant. The metaphor used by the American researcher is also based on a dual principle, where the refraction is realised thanks to two factors. First of all, the American researcher invites us to become aware of the fact that, despite the most recent approaches to propagate the literary works in a transnational space, the national element continues to influence the literary oeuvres (Damrosch 2003, 283). As Georg Brandes was saying about Émile Zola that from the moment when his texts were programmatically addressed to the entire world, so without an implicit contact with a framework that would have given authenticity and cultural specificity to the text, the literary value went down (Brandes 2013, 23-27), Damrosch understands the origin of the texts as being ultimately affected by the original culture. The dynamics established between the source-literature and the target-literature, meaning the one that “receives” the literary work, is one of a bargain between the cultural and the literary tensions, given the fact that “world literature is as much about the host culture’s values and needs [that is the point where the reception of the foreign element is realized], as it is about a work’s source culture”, the accent thus being displaced on the genesis of new meanings according to this refraction (Damrosch 2003, 281-283).

Secondly, the implications of this definition also have a methodological nature. How is it possible for the literary oeuvres that are already part of the world literature’s dynamics to be assimilated and not to be deprived of their cultural identity by the “central” cultures, either by means of tradition, or by means of economic power, that is without suppressing the values of the original culture when it meets the “host culture’s values and needs”? Because if we want to find alternatives to a certain type of ethnocentrism that, for several times, has come as a reproach against comparative literature, we have to search for them here.

Additionally, the next question arising from Damrosch's statement regards the manner in which the researchers can avoid the stagnation in a literary framework restricted by knowing only some cultures (Damrosch 2003, 285). Also, the questions go further, how could the cohabitation of the criticism of nationalism and a nationalism secured by the academic practice be quieted down?

The solution proposed by Damrosch is that of a "collaborative work", in a very similar manner as to that theorized by Franco Moretti in the process of *distant reading*. In order to ensure the experience of receptive lecture in the transitional moments from singularity to representativity (Taylor 2010, 110), what must be implemented is a collaboration between the specialists of local, national cultures, who could provide material for a subsequent indexation. Damrosch also accepts the importance of individual work, of researchers who continue to practice the individual comparativism, but, to administrate the material of the entire corpus of *world literature*, to offer versions of literary histories that tend to totality, *the specific knowledge* (cultural, literary) must be exposed by specialists in local cultures, as part of a team work (Damrosch 2003, 286) that could materialize itself in comprehensive theories. We can find here a separation from the classical comparative methodology, for which such an endeavour might seem superficial and incongruous when it comes to the assumptive cohesion realized within the co-working space. Even though Damrosch's theory is attractive due to its universal position, attentive to differences, adopted by it, such an interrogation (comparative in a traditional manner-of-speaking, but not necessarily in what concerns the comparative-researchers) could also legitimate itself thanks to the accent put on the consequent moment of synthesis, that is the analysis of the way in which a new literary history is being used, by whom, with what kind of purposes, and, especially, in what degree the specificity of the literatures involved remains unspoiled, as long as the absorption and the assemblage of the elements can take place in a Euro(or American)-centric context.

"The generalists", as Damrosch calls the ones who can be found at the end of the selection, that is in the point where the synthesis takes place and from where the transnational theoretical process emerges, can decide if certain elements will be omitted in the case of the final theory, if they consider them to be irrelevant. In the dialectics described between the specialists and the generalists, this aspect, which allows the generalists to exclude works from a broader (canonical or not) system, is

a really easy-one to attack by the opponents of *world literature*. But Damrosch outlines that

“The specialist’s knowledge is the major safeguard against the generalist’s own will to power over texts that otherwise all too easily become grist for the mill of a preformed historical argument or theoretical system [...] Generalists have much to learn from specialists, and should always try to build honestly, though selectively, on the specialists’ understandings, ideally even inspiring the specialists to revise their understandings in turn” (Damrosch 2003, 287-288).

Therefore, in the elliptic structure of world literature, the relationship between the generalist and the specialist is not based on subordination, but rather on interplay, both sides being active participants and helping each other in the repositions that a new theoretical system, avoiding “the prefabricated arguments”, assumes. In order that the generalist will not apply off-the-rack patterns, the specialist’s interference is crucial, whilst, so that the specialist does not excessively make use of (especially if he comes from a marginal culture) the unequal templates, prejudicing the national specific, the generalist’s perspective is corrective, not coercive. Within this dynamics, the “selectivity” mentioned by Damrosch is not a reductive one, but rather built as a “detachment” mediated by the interaction of the specialist with the generalist. In this way, the *world literature* paradigm is positively detaching itself from the field of comparative literature, since the new system is much more comprehensive and is based on boosting the difference and the literary peculiarity, accepting both the features of the original culture and the attributes inherent to the second focal-point of the ellipsis, that is the general plan.

Writing that gains in translation

Traditionally and widely-speaking, from a comparatist view, approaching literary oeuvres coming from a foreign culture for the reader is made by reading in original, hence the polyglot’s position seen as peculiar for an authentic comparatist, the second definition of *world literature* that Damrosch offers, is particularly hinting at the importance of translation, as solution for a society where polyglotism

is limited. “World literature is writing that gains in translation”, Damrosch asserts (2003, 288), thus positioning himself in an evident opposition against the modernist theories of Robert Frost (“Poetry is what gets lost in translation”) or against that of George Steiner, who considers that “a language builds a wall around <<the middle kingdom>> of the group’s identity”. (1998, 231-232).

The American researcher goes from the difference between the literary language and the denotative, factual language, that is normally used with an informational aim:

“A text is read as literature if we dwell on the beauties of its language, its form, and its themes, and don’t take it as primarily factual in intent; but the same text can cease to work as literature if a reader turns to it primarily to extract information from it [...] Informational texts neither gain nor lose in a good translation: their meaning is simply carried over with little or no effective change [...] At the other extreme, some works are so inextricably connected to their original language and moment that they really cannot be effectively translated at all” (Damrosch 2003, 288).

In this paragraph, we can notice that, by making reference to the literary works, Damrosch accepts the fact that there is an impossible to be translated field, but what influences him to insist on his thesis by which world literature benefits from translation is the demarcation between the (impossible)-to-be-translated aspect and that of the value. Because, as Damrosch further admits, “the question of translatability is distinct from questions of value” (2003, 289).

By asserting that translations are necessary for making the new *world literature* field functional and for fulfilling its aims globally, by also asserting that the issue of gaining or losing due to translations is mainly considered in the case of literary texts, the function of a translation is seen from a double perspective: both as instrumental and mediatic, in a similar manner as Emily Apter’s more recent theory (*The Translation Zone: A new Comparative Literature*, 2005), where the act of translation is considered a conclusive humanist deed for the receptive and rendering mechanism of literary oeuvres outside the original linguistic space. The alternative to studying the materials in original, in other words the act of

translation, is seen by Damrosch as undermined by a “critical engagement” (2003, 291), in the sense of Walter Benjamin’s theory (otherwise, Damrosch mentions and sees Benjamin as a forerunner for what was going to lately become an autonomous paradigm, that of *translation studies*) in *The Task of the Translator* (1923). For Benjamin, the translation is the most important means through which the oeuvre can outcome its author and its original nation’s borders, as long as this act is accomplished by “specialists” (Benjamin uses the same word, in a somehow similar meaning as the one used by Damrosch – those who try to investigate as deeply as they can the content of the source-culture) who are always aware of preserving the oeuvre’s specificity and who, as much as possible, should try, by using various tools (foot-notes, indications and so on) to reenact even a type of context that could direct the foreign reader towards the peculiarities that allowed the text’s publication and that generated the linguistic variations in the text.

“Also, translation is a mechanism which reflects the oeuvre’s life sequel, for a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (Benjamin 2002, 254).

Damrosch readjusts Benjamin’s assertion for the new discipline of *world literature*. If in the case of Benjamin, the translation, by mentioning that “continued life” was rather referring to an “afterlife”, to a new existence, an afterwards life of the oeuvre owed to the translation, Damrosch outlines the importance of translation as a phenomenon that strengthens the text for two reasons. Firstly, regarding the exposure, the translated literature enters the circuit of world literature, because it surpasses the linguistic borders of the original literature. Secondly, the “benefit” that Damrosch’s definition alludes to is grounded on a sort of understanding as that of Wolfgang Iser in *The Act Of Reading*, where the semantic “gaps” of the text are filled with the reader’s inferences, depending on his knowledge. In Damrosch’s approach, these “gaps” report on cultural spaces that are resemantized by considering the cultural differences, the translated text being authenticated and revalorized thanks to the interception in the foreign medium.

We must also consider the criticism ascribed by Emily Apter to this manner of relating to translations, the American researcher objecting that there is a

component of the “impossible to be translated”, having the shape of an untranslatable linguistic alterity (Apter 2013), which should make the researchers and the translators see with suspicion the translation of concepts, terms and notions strongly ingrained in the original structure (for an extensive analysis of *the untranslatable as uninterpretable*, see Terian 2013, 27-47). However, as long as Damrosch’s proposal succeeds to intermingle the specialist’s position with that of the generalist, and, with regard to translations, as long as the act of translation does not become a type of domination and of a reductive acknowledgement, *world literature*, as a new field, represents a functional alternative to the comparative polyglotism.

A mode of reading

The third definition of the concept *world literature*, given by David Damrosch distinguishes itself, from an ideatic point of view, from the way in which comparative literature, traditionally-speaking, activates the comparativist principle. In most of the cases, such a survey starts from the national roots of the oeuvre, from the original context and, after that, it operates with the distinctions and similarities of a certain work or works, so that, finally, it reaches a shape that can establish, by taking into account these bench-marks, formal and ideatic distinctions. When Damrosch affirms that “world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own” (2003, 297), he is talking about the potential of the texts that become a part of the world literature’s circuit to be understood by using a different pattern than that imposed by the national literature the texts or the reader come from, because, from the moment when these texts are read in a transnational context, they are starting a dialogue with a multitude of oeuvres from distinct cultures.

In order to define *world literature* as a mode of reading that exceeds the limits of a canon, Damrosch highlights the importance of the individual in intercepting the oeuvres, thus suggesting, besides the creation of a personal canon, similar to “the personal library of world literature” described by Herman Hesse, the possibility of the existence of a canon for each interpretative community (but not by semantic indeterminations, as in the case of Stanley Fish, in *Is There A Text in This Class*), but by outlining the fact that

“At any given time, a fluctuating number of foreign works will circulate actively within a culture, and a subset of these will be widely shared and enjoy a canonical status, but different groups within a society, and different individuals within any group, will create distinctive congeries of works, blending canonical and noncanonical works into effective microcanons [...] A large and multilayered group of foreign works that circulate in a given culture, it is also experienced as a private pleasure by individual readers, in ways that may diverge dramatically from the social goals that usually underlie the defining and formal transmission of a literary heritage” (Damrosch 2003, 298).

Here, we notice that the new type of reading Damrosch refers to assumes and promotes a “deflection” of the individual reception from the pre-existent canon, thus being generated plural and divergent perspectives (positively-speaking, creatively, thanks to which new meanings and modes of approaching literature appear) of the same oeuvre. *World literature*, considered as such, that is as a motion that surpasses the borders of its own culture, can be made up of micro-canons, from where there can appear – as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (Thomsen 2008, 23) was suggesting, offering as examples the sub-systems of the Holocaust’s authors or the immigrant literature, from within the *world literature* ensemble, based on other interpretative structures that West-East, central-peripheral and so on – new forms of literary history. Additionally, going further with Damrosch’s argument, due to the “deflection” from the social aims that are the basis for transmitting the cultural inheritance by means of some prefabricated channels, the subversive character of foreign oeuvres that enter a culture is admitted, able to make structures unstable using the combinatory game created by them, altering an imaginary background perpetuated over the years by an ethnocentric or insensitive to the cultural interaction mentality.

However, what means the “detached engagement” the American researcher refers to? From the moment in which we accept the existence of a discipline that is part of world literature that has to work with a literary content almost hard to imagine, we are confronted with a methodological dead end. How can we gain a truly global perspective regarding world literature? Assuming the fact that “world

literature is fully in play once several foreign works begin to resonate together in our minds” (2003, 298), hence *some* (distinct) works, not all of them, the detachment from an unapproachable project in its own complexity is being realized due to the intensification of the individual project. From this understanding it comes to light a solution for what Damrosch ironically calls “the comparatist’s lurking panic”, because

“world literature is not an immense body of material that must somehow, impossibly, be mastered; it is a mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works just as effectively as it can be explored extensively with a large number [...] Reading and studying world literature, by contrast, is inherently a more detached mode of engagement; it enters into a different kind of dialogue with the work, not one involving identification or mastery but the discipline of distance and of difference. We encounter the work not at the heart of its source culture, but in the field of force generated among works that may come from very different cultures and eras” (Damrosch 2003, 299-300).

By promoting an understanding close to that of the poly-systems (Even-Zohar, 1990), the transition from a micro-system to another being realized through a free dynamics, of interchanges and juxtapositions, and disclaiming any type of preconception regarding the actuality and the force of translations in an era of globalization, Damrosch’s project is based on the dialectics “local-universal”, “uniformity-alterity” (Pizer 2013, 77). The novelty and the functionality of the system proposed by the American researcher (we can infer here even the ambition of surpassing the borders of comparative literature that Thomsen was talking about) consists of the reinvestment of the individual component (even if here the balance is realised with the specialist’s position or not) with an influence at least that high as that of the general (ist) one. Because, if we continue the ellipsis’s metaphor proposed by Damrosch, as long as the aim is to build a mirror that has the shape of an ellipsis, that is a medium in which the ray of light sent by a focal point will reflect on the other one, the differences and the characteristic features

will be accepted, undertaken and then returned to the exposure medium, without them being counterfeit or falsified.

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