

Marko JUVAN, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, ISBN 978-981-32-9404-2, 291 p.

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In the last few decades, World Literature has been a highly disputed subject in the humanities, especially given its points of convergence and divergence with other critical branches like comparative literature, transnational studies or postcolonialism. Oftentimes, the debate revolves around the very definition of the concept (is it a discipline, a status quo brought about by industrialisation and globalisation, a strategic response to the obsolescence of purely parochial literary histories?), as well as its fraught relationship with neoliberalism and the mechanisms of the global market. In this context, Marko Juvan's latest book, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, strives to address some of the most pressing theoretical queries of the moment, taking into account the ever-challenging ethical turn of contemporary theory and fashioning a detailed methodology for the study of peripheral literatures. Juvan does this while conducting an exemplary investigation into the workings of Slovenian literature, as seen through the lens of international cultural production and circulation. Therefore, his analysis of Slovenian efforts to achieve literary self-canonisation starting in the eighteenth century constitutes a concrete example of how the author's theoretical view of World Literature and the amendments he brings to other well-known theories (developed by Pascale Casanova or David Damrosch, for instance) can go beyond abstract or sterile debates and yield innovative research into marginal or marginalised cultures.

A significant part of the volume is dedicated to mapping the current critical landscape, focusing on the simultaneous celebration and critique of World Literature and identifying (in a remarkably well-articulated, almost pedagogical manner) the ideological implications of each critical stance. By re-engaging with Goethe's first descriptions of Weltliteratur, Juvan makes one of the essential points of his research, namely the historicity of World Literature. Not only has the concept changed dramatically throughout the centuries, from a simple repository of literary works (which could no longer be confined to the national space) to a mode of reading and

circulation (Damrosch), a critical method (Moretti) or even a paradigm (Theo D'haen), but the genesis of World Literature was in itself a paradoxical occurrence. Goethe was perfectly aware of the marginal stratus of German literature in the nineteenth century and imagined Weltliteratur as a transnational network in which a peripheral writer (like himself) could gain international recognition and success, taking advantage of the technological and industrial breakthroughs rewiring modernity. Nonetheless, the implicit axiology was largely idealistic, suggesting that World Literature could grow to be a form of democratic dialogue, a cosmopolitan stage in the history of literature, overcoming the fundamental inequalities of the system and placing all literatures at a similar level of accessibility. In other words, Juvan highlights the perennially problematic relationship between universalism (along with the classical humanist worldview) and, on the other hand, the indissoluble hegemony characterising capitalist exchange. Then, he goes on to document the impact of this struggle on the evolution of World Literature studies. On the one hand, World Literature is said to foster multicultural communication and the free circulation of ideas, and, in this sense, Juvan mentions Fritz Strich's 1949 monograph of Goethe and his optimistic view of intercultural dialogue and empathy (an exchange of ideal values that effectively brings people together). Just as Bernheimer did in his ACLA report back in the 1990s, Juvan deems the post-war dialogic enthusiasm of literary scholars (especially comparatists) to be the origin of today's liberal-humanist perspective on World Literature, represented by David Damrosch or Sarah Lawall. Damrosch, for instance, has expressed the – by now – famous belief that peripheral literary products gain a new life through translation and travelling, and that World Literature can ultimately create a *decentralised* cultural space, freeing us from any allegiance to nation, class, or language. While both Damrosch and Lawall have persistently pleaded for the inclusion of peripheral voices in the academic study of World Literature, they also celebrate the triumph of human connection over material disparities within the world republic of letters, rather than focusing on its uneven development. On the other hand, the materialist-systemic interpretation highlights the coexistence of World Literature and the capitalist system, a deeply unequal economic frame which sustains literary consumption and market-selection. This critical current insists on the hegemonic character of the literary system, so that, in Juvan's words, "texts and conventions that are produced or mediated by the major Western languages and cultural metropolises spread throughout the planet, whereas peripheral or dependent cultural spaces only

passively adapt them” (13). Here, it must be said that Juvan is visibly in agreement with most of Moretti and Casanova’s conclusions about the world literary system: he introduces two key-concepts for understanding the situation of peripheral European literatures – *nationalising* (literature being involved in the ideological apparatus of nation-building) and *worlding* (literary export, marginal literatures adapting and travelling to the centre). At the same time, in spite of his objective and balanced account of liberal-humanist theory, he concludes that “in their verbal commitment to the symbolic elimination of global literary inequality, the approaches I have listed so far remind of Freudian denial (*Verleugnung*). Multicultural humanism, textualism, and liberal cosmopolitanism adopt the deceptive view that texts move freely, and that they can be attributed global importance irrespective of their origin” (71). Likewise, Juvan presents the case of the Slovenian modernist poet Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926), whose work, combining Expressionism, Symbolism and Constructivism, makes him an important representative of the Eastern-European avant-gardes. Looking at his failure to capture the attention of any major international publisher, however, Juvan argues once again that aesthetic synchronicity with Western literature or even poetic experimentalism might not be enough to conquer the international book market: “Kosovel’s case confirms my observation that the asymmetric structure of the modern world literary system reflects the economic, political, and linguistic-cultural overdetermination of the global interliterary exchange” (76).

On its own, this perspective on World Literature is directly derived from Casanova’s model and might be read as a mere example in support of her work. However, Juvan’s foray into the Slovenian nineteenth and twentieth centuries is meant to prove that the specificity of an Eastern-European culture can be better grasped through a methodology that ignores neither ethical considerations and instances of economic injustice, nor the strategies that marginal literatures resorted to in order to gain access to the central stage and the creative solutions they found in the process. Accordingly, he engages with the critics of the discipline, who try to renounce the centre-periphery opposition, to substitute World Literature with alternatives like transnationalism or postcolonialism (as if they were mutually exclusive or contradictory), to focus on perspectivisation and decentralisation. Juvan challenges these utopic demands on literary criticism by showing that concrete circumstances such as unequal cultural capital or access to the world market, translation imbalances and marketable (or less marketable) themes cannot be erased through denial and

moralism. Instead, he manages to find a middle ground between two extreme viewpoints on World Literature – diffusionism, which condemns peripheral literatures to a receptive, passive condition, simply imitating the centre and being doomed to a loss of authenticity; and dialogism, which affirms the creative potential and the possible autonomy of any culture, paying little attention to the economic and geopolitical pressure placed on literary production. In fact, this is probably the most relevant theoretical twist brought by Juvan to Casanova's well-known conceptual system: besides exploring the margins of the world republic of letters (thus responding to postcolonial protests against Casanova's Gallocentrism), *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* also undoes the inadvertent homogenisation of the periphery – a global pattern of literary evolution is bound to rely on generalisation and a concentric map, but Juvan proposes a materialist analysis compatible with polycentrism and the variation of worlding techniques.

Two of the major themes addressed in his book are the consecration of the national poet in peripheral cultures and canon formation as a mechanism of nation-building. The former is, in Slovenian literature, France Prešeren, a figure of Eastern-European Romanticism who embodied the missing cultural capital needed by the nation to legitimate its fight for political unification and autonomy. If nations are born as imagined communities (as theorised by Benedict Anderson) and depend on useful fictions like the national spirit or a collective artistic sensibility as much as on a common language, geography, or history, then national poets like Prešeren were supposed to “elevate their native language through quasi-universal aesthetic forms” (39). In other words, Juvan argues, they were not only cultural saints in an otherwise secularised and capitalist world, but they also had to incorporate in their writing those values, themes, images and stylistic patterns which had been already validated by the hyper-canon. This goes to show that universality itself (commonly shared ideals, widespread human experiences) is no more natural than ideologies or normative aesthetic principles: a peripheral work of art is not received in the realm of World Literature by synchronising organically with some generally relevant beliefs, affects or conflicts, but by diligently imitating whatever central voices have canonised as universal and organic. Of course, this does not amount to the instant uniformization of literature across borders and continents. On the contrary, one of the most fascinating aspects of literary circulation discussed by Juvan is the indigenisation of borrowed elements or their recalibration for autochthonous purposes. Prešeren's

national epic, for instance, entitled *Baptism on the Savica*, is one such case of hybridisation: from a Morettian point of view, choosing a narrative poem as the Slovenian foundational text is unsurprising, as the same subgenre was employed in many other peripheral countries; still, although Prešeren seems to have bravely opted for a local form instead of the Western novel (promoted as *the* national genre in the contemporaneous West), Juvan points out that the author was perfectly aware of the ongoing European transition from classical to modern writing, granting writers the freedom to find bolder literary forms, and that the combination of traditional epic elements dating back to the Antiquity and a Romantic story of national defeat in the face of Christianisation and modernisation would actually be a strategic one. Likewise, Juvan gives a detailed account of the adaption of Parnassus and Elysium in Slovenian literature as early as the last decades of the eighteenth century. As classical tropes, well-known in the Western canon and associated with poetry itself (Parnassus was the site of poetic and sacred initiation for Hesiod, amongst others, while Elysium was an eschatological topos reserved for heroes and divine poets, in an age when the ancient Greeks only believed in the underworld and the erasure of consciousness after death), these two literary artefacts were the foundation of several metapoems aimed to encourage the standardisation of Slovenian as a literary language and the establishment of a coherent national culture. In the poems of Anton Feliks Dev, they became allegorisations of autochthonous struggle for political and cultural credibility: “through his intertextual rewriting of the Parnassus topos, Dev imaginarily appropriated the notions of canonicity that had a quasi-universal validity and localized them into the emerging vernacular ecology” (109). Thus, it becomes clear that the formation of a national Slovenian canon (and the same can be said about other Eastern-European literatures) was, in fact, preceded by the Western evaluation of the contending writers. Only those who could represent the best version of Slovenian sensibility, mission, or identity and who could convince the invisible guardians of the hyper-canon (that is, the book market and a literary network involving institutions, publishers, and readers) of their value could then take their place in the autochthonous pantheon. For Juvan, this back-and-forth between the periphery and the centre (consecrating writers *for* the metropolis, as well as *through* its authority, and finally including them in the national canon) shows that Weltliteratur did not simply emerge as a way *out* of the confines of national literature or as a pattern of circulation that could make these parochial divisions irrelevant; rather, it proved instrumental in

shaping our understanding of the nation and has since influenced our collective identities. To quote the author himself, “the idea of world literature (...) reinforced the ideological notion of national literatures in both the dominant and dependent countries. (...) This might be why world literature is always already localized and perspectivized: it can be grasped only through the archives and perspectives of localized literary fields, whereas the distribution of central or peripheral sites of production and consumption of world literature is world-systemic and historically changeable” (6).

Although he declares his allegiance to the discipline of World Literature, Juvan admits that the current conversation about marginality and inclusiveness is incomplete. As already mentioned, one of the subjects that still require exploration is the relationship between peripheries, often overshadowed by centre-periphery perspectives and commentaries on oppression or influence. In *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, Juvan draws parallels between the Slovenian national poet and his Icelandic contemporary, Jonas Hallgrímsson, whose similarities have to do with their chosen mechanisms of self-canonisation. While thematic or stylistic comparisons between writers from such distant cultures might prove unsatisfactory (since there was no visible transfer of information between the two geographical spaces), Juvan’s conclusion – informed by Virgil Nemoianu’s famous studies – is that the figure of the national poet seems to be a typical instrument employed by remote cultures in their fight for international recognition. At the same time, these two poets viewed national literature much in the way Goethe saw it: a cosmopolitan perspective, an outward movement, the import of universal (i.e., Western, classically-approved) aesthetic patterns only so that the end product could be in its turn prepared for export. At this juncture, we are once again in Casanova’s theoretical territory, since the likeness between two poets who never read each other’s work could, indeed, point to a single mechanism of worlding, applied in different geographical areas. Nonetheless, and in spite of these parallels, it must also be noted that Prešeren and Hallgrímsson enacted a slight departure from Casanova’s pattern of worlding through depoliticisation and delocalisation: according to Juvan’s narrative, both poets accessed the international stage and achieved “aesthetic autonomy,” while never abandoning the vernacular, folk themes, or local mythologies. Thus, Casanova’s distinct stages of peripheral literary development (national(ist) engagement and reliance on local themes and motifs, followed by innovation, experimentalism and freedom from local politics) can be seen

partially overlapping in Slovenian literary history. Moreover, Prešeren and Hallgrímsson are also shown in context, opposing the dominant narrative regarding nation-building in their respective countries and opting for Romanticism in an age when realism and pragmatism were favoured as strategies for national awakening. Ultimately, neither accepted to play the game of worlding as prescribed by the national or the international canon of their time, becoming authoritative voices only much later, and, while a strictly diffusionist explanation might shed light on Western influences shaping their work, it is no coincidence that Juvan singled out their hybrid poetry as examples of literary consecration.

Finally, Juvan's volume is an eloquent example of World Literature being re-localised. Using the theoretical instruments of materialist critique and expressing his scepticism towards liberal humanism, he presents and discusses the modulations of Casanova's pattern of worlding when applied to European peripheries like Slovenian literature. Above all else, his work proves that, just as the line between national literatures and World Literature is always blurry and mobile, our concepts for understanding literary dynamics are also interdependent: aesthetic autonomy can paradoxically contribute to political projects, while nation-building can cause a struggle for universality; vernacularisation is, from Juvan's perspective, a post-Enlightenment, Herderian strategy and a variety of cosmopolitanism, whereas cosmopolitanisation is sometimes pursued in the name of local interests – and the list could go on. Navigating different schools of thought – belonging to World Literature, but also postcolonialism and comparative literature – Juvan's metacritical discourse is just as relevant in today's theoretical landscape as his Slovenian case studies.