

*Reading World Literature: Elliptical or Hyperbolic?
The Case of Second-World National Literatures*

In this paper, I intend to examine the manner in which the recent reshaping of the notion of “world literature” reacts on the reading of Second-World national literatures. My first step is to attempt a definition of the concepts I intend to work with. I will begin with the term Second-World national literature, since, despite certain debatable aspects, this notion seems to be less controversial. Thus, Second-World national literature will denote any written literature in a Second-World country, in the meaning ascribed to this phrase in the classification made by the French sociologist Alfred Sauvy, more particularly with reference to the (former) communist – mainly Soviet – bloc countries (Sauvy 1952: 14). In other words, I am dealing with what is termed occasionally, in the current economic discourse, as “developing” countries, opposing both “developed” western democracies and “underdeveloped” former colonial countries. In fact, a similar approach was established, in the field of literary theory, 25 years ago, when Fredric Jameson published his famous article *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* (Jameson 1986).

Certainly, the positioning of certain state organizations in this or that category is a sophisticated matter in the case of countries such as China – a country whose political communist tradition is very powerful, a country that, during the last decades, has become an economic superpower, but which Jameson still ranked among Third-World countries (essentially, a large part of his argumentation is based on the case of the great Chinese writer Lu Xun). However, I believe we can include without difficulty in the category of Second-World literatures the national literatures of the Central- and Eastern-European countries, such as the Romanian, Hungarian or Estonian ones, countries that were half a century under the political and cultural domination of the Soviet Union and which are still, noticeably, in their “post-communist” stage.

What Is *Really* World Literature?

On the other hand, a definition of the “world literature” concept seems considerably more difficult; it is a concept that approaches an age of nearly two

centuries. However, I do not intend to make operations of archaeology of this phrase or to attempt a systematization of all its usual meanings. I will only note that its revitalization took place, in the field of comparative literature, particularly during the last two decades, as a background, but also as an outcome of the famous 1993 Bernheimer Report, which pleaded explicitly in favor of exceeding a “restrictive Eurocentrism” by a multiculturalism able to deal with “contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race and gender” (Bernheimer 1995: 41–42). Or, since there is an extensive range of theories and definitions currently competing for supremacy in the “world literature” field, I will choose to discuss only one of them, perhaps the most popular and the most ambitious, namely the one proposed by David Damrosch in a series of works published throughout more than 15 years, but summed up mainly in *What Is World Literature?* (2003). Thus, to the American scholar, the concept of “world literature” opens up like “a threefold definition focused on the world, the text, and the reader”:

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.*

(Damrosch 2003: 281)

In a manner similar to its 2009 “sequel” (*How to Read World Literature*), Damrosch’s essay, from where I quoted this definition, embraces various examples of subtle comments on world literary works. Nevertheless, they include a very small number of examples of what world literature *is not*. For this reason, I think it is necessary to look closer at Damrosch’s definitions. From among these, the first one seems rather vague or even truistic: in fact, what is meant when saying that “world literature” refracts the “national literatures”? To Damrosch, “works become world literature by being received *into* the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition and the present needs of its own writers. Even a single work of world literature is the locus of negotiation between two different cultures” (Id. 283). Indeed, this is true, but it is equally true that, if by “nation” we denote “any ethnic group or culture” (as Damrosch recommends), then his observation applies to any “national” literary product, and not only to “world literature” works.

On the one hand, any “nation” – in this general meaning of the term – represents, in its turn, a set of heterogeneous communities, whose members are differentiated by a series of “regional” traits (ethnicity, gender, religion, social affiliation, etc.), capitalizing in their own way the marks of their identity and, thus, generating a range of differentiated readings of works within the (sub)cultures to which they belong; on the other hand, a “culture’s national tradition” does not amount to a fixed entity, but sooner to a continuous process of renewal and self-revision, which triggers automatically also a renewal/revision of the mode of reading their own works, from the perspective of the “present needs of its own writers”. Consequently, we may deem valid the geometrical metaphor proposed by Damrosch: “World literature is [...] always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone.” (Id. 283) But we can accept it only with the specification that *any* literary work – be it “world” or “national” – can be read in this elliptical manner.

Could this mean that any national literary work (*i.e.*, any work in general) belongs to world literature? Definitely not. Since the first pages of his book, Damrosch quotes Claudio Guillén in order to reject firmly such a possibility. Furthermore, the second part of his definition – “*World literature is writing that gains in translation*” – seems to narrow radically the sphere of “elliptical reading”. However, in its turn, this criterion raises a series of problems. A first one is that the translation as such of a work is often determined by strictly commercial or political criteria, which share nothing with the value of the book. If we ignored the commercial factor, then Gérard de Villiers or Frédéric Dard (a.k.a. San Antonio) would belong to “world literature” to an extent greater than Paul Valéry or Hermann Hesse – a conclusion backed up by the fact that, although Damrosch dissociates at some place the “world literature” from the “global literature’ that might be read solely in airline terminals” (2003: 25), he acknowledges elsewhere that the rise of the English language as global language depends precisely on “the speed with which popular authors such as Stephen King and J. K. Rowling are translated into dozen of languages” (2009: 65).

If we overlooked the political criterion, then we should assign, for instance, a very important rank in “world literature” to the Romanian novelist Zaharia Stancu, called by one of his fellows the “novelist translated in one hundred languages”, although these translations had been ordered on strictly pro-

pagandistic grounds, and currently Stancu is not even accepted in the Romanian literary canon any longer. Second, it is highly likely that the success or failure of a translation resides with the translator to a larger extent than with the author. For example, the first translation in French of Mihai Eminescu's poems – the author deemed the “national” writer of Romanian literature – was received by Albert Thibaudet as a simple “chansonnier's” work (Streinu 1974: 299), whereas the first translation of *Faust* into Romanian (Goethe 1925) caused numerous jokes and puns among the Romanian writers of the era. Certainly, it can be debated whether, in Mihai Eminescu's case, the issue was with the translator's incompetence or simply with the fact that the Romanian poet would represent a minor author on the “world literature” scale; but it is difficult to believe that Goethe's place in “world literature” could have been irreversibly compromised by I.U. Soricu's disastrous translation.

However, we need to note that Damrosch sees the translation as an important element, but not automatically required for a work to obtain access to world literature (see on that matter Terian 2012), for he states elsewhere: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, *either in translation or in their original language* (Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe)” (Damrosch 2003: 4). At the same time, he adds “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”. But, in this manner, rather than becoming clearer, the issue of the criteria becomes even more intricate. In a chapter of his 2003 book, Damrosch comments on three Nahuatl poetry anthologies from “colonial Mexico”, which he deems worthy to be included in “world literature”. These poems render a special sensitivity and a unique cultural experience; nonetheless, we may ask ourselves to which extent such “wealth of *neglected* older material” (Id. 84) has ever been “*actively present* within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” and whether it has ever had an “*effective* life as world literature”?

An indirect answer to this question could be provided by the third part of Damrosch's definition, where “world literature” is not conceived as “a set canon of texts”, but as a “mode of reading”, which should offer us access to “worlds beyond our own place and time”. The problem here is that this description is extensively vague. On the one hand, literature itself, by its very fictional nature, allows us to connect to “worlds beyond our own place and time”. On the other hand, even if this aspect is not programmatically set, it is obvious that this type of reading determines automatically the validation of a certain “canon”.

Hypercanon, Countercanon and “Shadow Canon”

In fact, Damrosch himself will acknowledge implicitly this fatality in an article published three years later, in which he analyses the effect of “the shift” produced on the literary canon by our recent understanding of the “world literature”. Essentially, “the canon of world literature has morphed from a two-tiered system [i.e.: “‘major’ vs. ‘minor’ authors and works”] into a three-tiered one” (Damrosch 2006: 45). Nevertheless, this is not at all about the division of the canon depending on the three “worlds”, which I could have suggested since the beginning of my paper. It is true that, as pointed out by Damrosch, “the rich have gotten richer” and that the most important authors in “the old Eurocentric canon” – authors such as Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Coleridge, Byron or Shelley, if we deal only with the Romantic period and borrow the American professor’s examples – currently benefit from a *hypercanonical* status. But they have been joined by “subaltern and contestatory voices of writers in languages less commonly taught and in minor literatures within great-power languages” (Id. 45), which are now putting together a *counter-canon* (for the English Romanticism, Damrosch exemplifies the situation by “countercanonical figures” such as Felicia Hemans or Anna Letitia Barbauld, although they did not write in “languages less commonly taught”, nor in “minor literatures within great-power languages”). Instead, the so-called *shadow canon* is not made by “Third-World” authors, but by “minor” writers belonging to great literatures (Robert Southey and Walter Savage Landor are mentioned for the Romantic period).

In any case, one of Damrosch’s very interesting observations, based on the bibliography of the MLA articles of the last four decades, is that the field of “postcolonial studies is reproducing the hypercanonical bias of the older Europe-based fields” (Id. 49). Even in this field of studies, countercanonical *par excellence*, we are able to detect a polarization between writers such as Salman Rushdie and Nadine Gordimer, who seem to have already acquired a hypercanonical status, and authors such as Amos Tutola or Lu Xun, who, similar to Southey and Landor, tend to fill up a “minor place” in the postcolonial canon and, implicitly, in “world literature”. Although I deem it unsafe to draw conclusions on the “world literature” only based on the articles in the MLA Bibliography (for an accurate assessment of the situation, I believe we should also consider authored volumes, as well as literary research in other types of journals), I think that the statistics and interpretations provided until now by David Damrosch give us the possibility of derive conclusions different from those emphasized by the American comparatist:

1. “The threefold definition” proposed in *What Is World Literature?* represents not as much a *methodological guideline* needed in order to better differentiate the “world literature” from the works with a strictly local or national value, as a *justification of his own reading practices*. This aspect is proven, I think, by Damrosch’s difficulty to provide a single clear and coherent definition of “world literature”, as well as by the manner in which, throughout his book, his comments to the works sometimes contradict his own definitions.

2. However, this does not mean that the “mode of reading” applied by Damrosch (and not only) would be random or idiosyncratic. On the contrary, this procedure be further credited as the faithful representative of what he calls “elliptical reading”, with the specification that, in his case (which can be deemed typical to a large part of contemporary Western Comparatistics), this phrase acquired a meaning that is better determined. If we leave aside the – still numerous – examples of comparisons inside the traditional (hyper)canon, we may say that this type of “ellipsis” engages usually, in what we are used to call “world literature”, a hypercanonical focus (one of those “rich [that] have gotten richer”) and a “countercanonical” one (outcome of the extension and equally of the pressure exercised by postcolonial studies on the “old” canon).

3. Nonetheless, while from David Damrosch’s perspective (and that of a “postcolonial studies” researcher as well) this “mode of reading” could be described plausibly as an *ellipsis*, to a writer or literary critic from the “Second World” countries this practice frequently takes the form of a *hyperbola* – a geometrical form related to the ellipsis, but whose centre is empty, because its focal points generate two spaces that never converge. Since they are neither powerful enough to reshape to the Western “hypercanon”, nor sufficiently eccentric to be accepted in one of the many postcolonial “countercanons”, most of the Second-World literatures are, in fact, in a no man’s land situation in which few foreign researchers and literary critics venture. On the “world literature” map, Second World literatures are unmapped territory, which many Western comparatists tend to ignore or, in any case, class under the well-known formula “Hic sunt leones”.

Second-World Literatures: Postcolonialism vs. Post-Communism

Without being isolated, the case of the Romanian literature is perhaps the most striking from this point of view. At present, the Romanian literature is completely absent from the great American anthologies (Norton, Bedford or Longman’s) dedicated to “world literature”. It had nothing to gain from the so-

called “multicultural turn” and, what’s more, it did not even stir the interest of an inveterate conservative such as Harold Bloom, who, in his famous work on the “Western Canon”, leaves completely out the “European” literature like the Romanian, Bulgarian or the Estonian one (Bloom 1994). Things are not brighter in the academic journals either. A simple search in the JSTOR database shows that, during the last century, the most important 5 Romanian poets (Mihai Eminescu, Tudor Arghezi, Lucian Blaga, George Bacovia and Ion Barbu) triggered nearly no interest from the Western researchers: Mihai Eminescu benefitted from only two articles, published in 1948 and, respectively, 1951 (the former being a comparison with Petöfi Sándor, and the latter a simple note on the celebration of one hundred years from his birth); Tudor Arghezi was, in 1967 (the year of his death), the object of an article signed by apparatchik George Ivaşcu and thick with socialist realism clichés; Ion Barbu is present only by a 2-page translation, published in the journal “The American Mathematical Monthly” in 2006; while no article in any JSTOR journal has dealt with Lucian Blaga and George Bacovia. Moreover, such ignorance occurs in a context in which the last credible history of Romanian literature published in an international language dates back to 1938.

Certainly, there are many explanations for this state of things. The plainest one would be that Romanian literature is simply a minor literature, uninteresting from the “world literature” perspective. I could not refute in just a few words this assertion, but I will note that it veils a solipsist type of judgment: an entire literature is thus *sentenced* without being first *explored*. Chioni Moore and others tried to offer a solution to this inauspicious state of things; they proposed that the Eastern European cultures should be explored from the perspective of the “postcolonial studies”, based on the fact that the nations that produced them “were unquestionably subject to often Russian domination (styled as Soviet from the 1920s on) for anywhere from forty to two hundred years” (Chioni Moore 2006: 17). Nevertheless, the situation of post-communist countries is considerably more complicated than that of the cultures that are currently the object of the “postcolonial studies”. Their peculiar conditions is partly acknowledged by the promoters of the so-called “post-Soviet post-colonialism”, who admit that the “Second World” countries do not fit fully any of the usual types of (post)colonialism (the “classical” type, the “Fourth World” type and the “dynastic” type) and, to this end, propose a fourth category called “*reverse-cultural colonization*”:

[...] the standard Western story about colonization is that it is always accompanied by orientalization, in which the colonized are seen by their masters as passive, ahistorical, feminine, or barbaric. However, in Russian-Central European colonization this relation is reversed, because for at least several centuries Russia has, again, been saddled with the fear of belief that it was culturally inferior to the West. *Mittel-European* capitals such as Budapest, Berlin, and Prague were therefore seen in Russia, at least by some, as colonial prizes, rather than burdens needing “civilizing” from their occupiers. (Ib. 26)

However, the differences go further, and one of the frequent mistakes in the analyses similar to the one made by Chioni Moore is the approach of the issue exclusively from the point of view of the so-called “Soviet” colonialists. But, unlike the (post)colonial literatures, most of the Central and Eastern-European literatures have known two or even three “colonizations”, having different origins and outcomes. For example, many of them have first been under a stifling influence from the German literature (and, partially, Hungarian, but the case of the Hungarian literature is more sophisticated and would deserve a separate discussion). Facing such a domination, Eastern-European literatures reacted not only by the invention of their “imagined communities” described by Benedict Anderson in his well-known book (1991), but occasionally by a strategy of “willingly consented colonization”, i.e., by approaching *another* great “colonial” culture, which should counteract the effects of the dominant culture and, at times, exorcise the inferiority complex of their own literature.

From this point of view, the statement made by the Romanian poet and essayist B. Fundoianu is symptomatic; in the foreword to a 1922 book, he considered that the only chance of Romanian culture to get out from its minor position was to become a “colony of French culture” (Fundoianu 1980: 25). Therefore, the evolution of Second World countries and literatures was rather different from that of (post)colonial countries: while for the latter, colonialism means modernization, the former were already in an advanced state of modernization when they submitted to the dominance of the Soviet Union. Moreover, while, technologically speaking, communism was an acceleration of modernization (in the form of industrialization), for the Central- and Eastern-European countries, communism was – culturally speaking (at least throughout the first decades of the regime) – a visible regression to a pre-modern manner of expression, represented by the formula of socialist realism. For these reasons, I believe that, instead of piling up the “Second World” literatures in the already crowded field of “postcolonial studies”, it would be a lot more adequate to continue to approach them as specific objects of the so called “(Post)Communi-

nist studies”, which have represented for several decades a distinct sphere of research, still operating as a reasonable denominator in order to unify the otherwise extremely diversified historical experience of the Central and Eastern European peoples.

Beyond these circumstances, I believe that a considerable share of the responsibility for the current lack of interest in the Second-World national literatures resides in the existing concept of “world literature”. To the extent where it is set to seek by all means “worlds beyond our own place and time”, it faces the risk of favouring eccentricity in the form of exoticism and picturesque and thus slide toward what I would label as *an essentialism of radical otherness*. Or, it is obvious that Second-World national literatures could never fulfil this aspiration, because their identity is first and foremost based on mixture, on fragmentation, on hybridization – which, I believe, are traits illustrated here sometimes to an extent larger even than the already classical “post-colonial” literatures. It is precisely for this reason that I consider the study of their puzzle-like structure could be a challenge both to the post-colonial studies and to the “world literature” in general. It is unlikely that we could find here a new Dante, but it is obvious that, if this cultural space were absent, “world literature” would be incomplete.

In conclusion, and I will refer again for the last time to Damrosch, “it takes three points to define a plane surface and perhaps three works, interestingly juxtaposed and studied with care, can define a literary field” (Damrosch 2003: 299). To the extent where we think of “world literature” as such as a “literary field”, then Second-World national literatures represent a “point” that cannot be absent from the big picture.

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