

# LITERATURE AND GLOBALISM: A TRIBUTE TO THEO D'HAEN

## AFTER GLOBALISM?\*

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In the concluding statements of his *Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2012), Theo D'haen points at some of the most critical challenges facing the literatures of the world: **337**

- For most of its history, world literature has been not only an almost exclusively European, or by extension, Western concern—the discussion of world literature has also almost exclusively been conducted in just a few major European languages.
- This has led to the semi-peripheralization of most “minor” European literatures.
- With the shift of attention in the United States to other parts of the world than Europe, and hence also to other “major” literatures, the semi-peripherality of those minor European literatures has turned into full peripherality.
- In a number of European reactions to this state of affairs, we can recognize attempts to re-contextualize some of these minor literatures within the newly emerging world literature paradigm—quite often, this involves the recovery of native precursors.
- Beyond Europe, we see similar developments taking place in, for instance, Latin America, but also China. (D'haen 173)

This state of affairs requires all institutions, either initiating or undergoing processes of peripheralization, to take a position on issues such as language diversity, literary networks, geocultural configurations, literary maintenance, and interliterary transfer. Of course, this holds true for academic institutions as well: although scholarship naturally strives for theoretical generality against the idea of minority and peripherality in research, it is shaped by an array of committed and more distant or descriptive viewpoints that aim at grasping the actual processes of peripheralization affecting both European and non-European literatures. No doubt, such contemporary efforts are, in turn, highly indebted to a large range of earlier attempts to account for the fac-

tors determining literary positions, as well as the role played by interliterary exchange in the shifting of these positions. Among the widespread means of handling such issues is the recourse to metaphorically extended spatial categories, which are, in themselves, a rather popular domain of interest in the humanities. In literary studies or cultural history, for instance, these categories have pointed to scales of mapping, from smaller units, such as the city, to the largest possible one, the global, as well as to positions such as centres and margins, to directions, such as the vertical and the horizontal, and to issues of mobility, such as circulation or displacement. Several of these matters have been dealt with in close interaction with geography, giving way to both a focus on literary space and literature in space (Moretti 9).

338 Yet, both foci seem to fit topological views with even longer traditions and even broader scopes, including relations of distance, vicinity, continuity, frontier, and directionality. Although exchanges between mathematics and the language disciplines have rarely been given emphasis, in recent times topology has been used by the latter as a cognitive metaphor to open up new perspectives. In literary studies, for example, the symbolic or metaphorical use of topology was advocated from the early 1970s on, notably by Jurij Lotman, for whom textual structures have a spatial basis: “the structure of the space of a text becomes a model of the structure of the space of the universe, and the internal syntagmatics of the elements within a text becomes the language of spatial modelling” (217).

For several decades following the seventies, models of space gradually gained ground in literary studies, although these were not only shaped as textual topographies of spatial relations. Topology also pervaded the study of more complex literary entities such as literary systems: suffice it to refer to the well-known distinction between centre and periphery (cf. D’hulst, “Quel(s) centre(s)”) or to the complex topology of interacting literatures, such as the Francophone (see Halen), or to the social topographies of writers and artists (see Anheier et al.). As is well known, much of the literary research in the systemic vein is sociology-driven. In combination with a more explicit regard for issues of cultural transfer, it has also considerably advanced our historical understanding of the transnational circulation of cultural products at large (cf. Charle).

Current views on literary globalism are, to a varying extent, indebted to such topological modelling, while the growing reactions against the effects of globalism on the possible future avenues for comparative literary research look for further support through the design of different and often quite innovative topologies, either within the field of world literature or within a more integrated view of a new “comparative world literature.” This special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* contains some of the most recent enquiries into new models of literary topology as they apply to a diversity of areas and periods. Needless to say, all reject the conventional spatial distribution of ‘major’ centres and ‘minor’ peripheries.

The opening essay, by César Domínguez, focuses on literary circulation during the

Middle Ages, while calling for a proper subfield for its study: a comparative history of medieval literatures. The paper tackles two central issues of such a subfield. The first of these issues concerns the fate of (pseudo-)autoethnographic texts. These are taken as a case in point to illustrate the specifics of a historical understanding of medieval contact zones based on a view of Eurasia as a zone of intense exchange. In this zone, Europe is, against all presuppositions, the periphery of the Mongol Empire. The second issue is the need for “worlding” a medieval theory and practice of *translatio* or circulation. Domínguez unravels the specific policies underlying, for example, the translation and transfer of wisdom texts into Castilian: for instance, Alfonso’s role in medieval Spain is to promote civic values which escape the control of the Church.

David Damrosch makes a strong plea in favour of the inclusion of a larger range of critical perspectives, including non-Western appropriations of Western literature, basing his argument on a detailed reconstruction of the meandering path followed by two early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals between the US and China. First, Hu Shih’s views on East and West resist any sort of opposition in that they do not call for a layered approach of the national and the transnational. It is precisely the comparative eye that enables his dialogic understanding and reconsideration of Chinese tradition. A similar trajectory leads contemporary scholar Lin Yutang from China to the US and Taiwan, turning him into a comparatist aware of China’s possible centrality facing the self-centering West with a troubling dilemma.

339

Cultural agents facing the dilemma of the national and the transnational are urged to invent new avenues which also challenge our contemporary understanding of world literature. May Hawas disentangles the intercultural network around French comparatist René Étiemble during his stay in Alexandria in the mid-twentieth century. The close interaction between European and non-European agents enables a “normalization,” so to speak, of the understanding and valuation of comparative literary relations. Such a potential has nowadays become rather mythical. Nevertheless, the memory of past comparativities may foster the hope of a return to the universal *valeurs* as advocated by Étiemble.

Taking a view encompassing an entire literature, in this case, Chinese literature, Wang Ning proposes the plural form “world literatures” as a way to correct Western definitions of world literature and as a way to account both for the canonicity and the readability of the many literary works that enter world literature through translation. Next, Wang describes three strategies allowing Chinese writers to enter the future global era: excellence in the native language, the reading of other languages, and being translated and re-translated into other languages. These three strategies may assure the after-life of literature as argued by Walter Benjamin.

Likewise, Michael Boyden scrutinizes the role of translation in the spread of a minor literary language, in this case Yiddish, into a major one, by displaying the complex functions of translation in relation with *Motl*, a story cycle by Sholem Aleichem narrating a journey from a fictional Ukrainian *shtetl* to America: translation is not only a transformation of the source into the target, it should also be

approached as a “born-translated” story, incorporating translation into the design of that source, and it is a narrative trope of migration and plurilingualism permeating both original and translation. Yiddish literature being deprived of a proper geographical space or home, translation understood as a multidimensional process of interliterary exchange thus defies a conventional geolinguistic type of bordering.

The complex topologies of world literature invite more detailed cartographies, of which Jean-Marc Moura presents a contemporary version: the literatures of the Atlantic. Such a configuration opens up new perspectives for the study of both pre-national literatures and transnational constructs based on the principle of oceanic circulation due to European colonization and African diaspora. The multidirectional nature of this circulation as well as the actual involvement of three continents (Africa, America, and Europe) requires different ways of gathering and constructing literary knowledge, distinct from both the abstract centre-periphery paradigms, and a selective postcolonialism focusing mainly on new nations and emerging literatures.

**340** The literatures of the Atlantic have strongly marked the poetics of movement during the longest part of the twentieth century.

The efforts towards transcending national categories and traditions are also manifest in the forms and themes that make up literary writing, as is argued in Buata Malela’s contribution. Malela confronts the experiences of subjectivity and alienation exemplified in two novels by Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, with the Eurocentric systemic views that pervaded Antillean discourse for a long period. The narrative micro-history of the dominated characters in *Le Quatrième siècle* (1964) and *Malemort* (1975) becomes the main tool of a new history in which proximity defies alienation and dispossession, while loss and violence react against the prevalent inculcation of exogenous discourse on Antillean identity.

To what extent has postmodern fiction kept its intense and multifarious dynamic in contemporary Dutch and Flemish fiction? The contribution by Hans Bertens portrays postmodern fiction as a literary mode that—more than some of its metafictional procedures may suggest—remains deeply concerned with ethical and political commitment, and emotional engagement with the world. Correlatively, postmodern fiction turns into a proper continent of Western world fiction, of which some of the most recent Flemish and Dutch novels, such as *De kunst van het crashen* (2015) by Peter Verhelst and *Worst* (2015) by Atte Jongstra, become exemplary tokens.

## NOTE

\* This collection of essays is a tribute to Theo D’haen, a distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature who recently retired from KU Leuven, Belgium. The initiative for this collection was taken by Nadia Lie, Dagmar Vandebosch, and myself, his colleagues from two research groups at the Arts Faculty: *Literature, Discourse and Identity*, and *Translation and Intercultural Transfer*. I sincerely thank Klaartje Merrigan for her editorial help.

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