

## 128th MLA Annual Convention

Boston, 3–6 January 2013

### Perspectivizing World Literature

A special session

Sunday, 06 January, 10:15–11:30 a.m., 202, Hynes

Presiding: **Marko Juvan**, Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Acad. of Sciences and Arts  
Speakers: **David Damrosch**, Harvard Univ.; **Theo L. D’haen**, Leuven Univ.; **Jeanne E. Glesener**, Univ. of Luxembourg; **Kristine Kotecki**, Univ. of Texas, Austin; **Sowon S. Park**, Univ. of Oxford, Corpus Christi Coll.; **Galin Tihanov**, Univ. of London; **Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek**, Purdue Univ. Press

*As a glocalized network, world literature has been produced, disseminated, perceived, used, and canonized through multiple geocultural perspectives. How were particular literary practices (imperial, metropolitan, peripheral, or transnational) positioned and circulated in the asymmetrical system of world literature? How do we study literature’s globalism from a truly comparative perspective?*

### Abstracts

#### **David Damrosch**

*Chronologics: Periodizing the World’s Literary History*

This talk will discuss the vexed problem of how to shape a world literary history into definable and meaningful periods without simply projecting old Western patterns onto new ages and distant areas of the world. This problem becomes acute when one seeks to create a genuinely global literary history. I plan to survey some early periodizations according to patterns of infancy, growth, maturity, and decline, and to discuss the often unrealized persistence of biblical and classical models in modern accounts of the literary histories of nonwestern as well as Western literatures.

#### **Theo D’haen**

*Major Histories, Minor Literatures and World Authors*

Over the last decade or so we have seen how the idea of “world literature” has made a remarkable comeback in literary studies. A major feature of this revival has been increased attention, from a “world perspective,” to literatures until recently little studied beyond disciplinary boundaries, particularly so some “major” literatures such as Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and various Indian literatures. As such, these literatures have come to join what has usually been thought of as “European” world literature. What this move, however to be welcomed in itself, obscures though is the even further peripheralization of a number of “smaller” literatures, amongst them many

European ones, that were always already minorized in “world literature” studies. Thus world literature in its newly-emerging guise is merely upping the ante for such minor literatures, or, alternatively, reshaping such literatures in the image and interest of the few “major” literatures that are deemed worthy of inclusion in the “new” world literature. As example I will use Dutch literature, but I will also refer to other “minor” literatures. I will end with a plea for a “new” European literature as a regionally, or continentally, perspectivized approach, parallel to what we see emerging from other parts of the globe.

**Jeanne E. Glesener**

*The Canon of World Literature According to Multilingual Luxembourgish Literature*

If it is generally held that a small, and therefore often peripheral, literature entertains a strong heteronomic relationship to a given central system, one may also ask to what extent this relationship determines canon-building in the literary system of a small literature. Conceiving of world literature as a set of variants which are temporally and spatially determined – in the sense that they tend to be renegotiated every epoch (temporal inscription) and that every literary system builds its own canon (local inscription) – provides a highly useful framework in which to develop this kind of investigation.

By focussing on the case of Luxembourgish Literature, a small multilingual literature systemically defined as belated and peripheral to German and French literatures, I would like to address the following set of questions in more detail. First of all, what is the role played by world literature in a system that is devoid of its own literary tradition? How does world literature influence and shape the small literature in question at specific moments of its development? More importantly however, how is world literature defined in this case? In other words, which literatures/languages/culture does the word ‘world’ refer to (and which ones are excluded and why)? How is the local canon of world literature influenced by political crises, for instance when the mere existence of the country itself is being threatened by war or foreign occupation? Finally, when and why does the local canon open up to a larger conception of world literature?

As to the material under consideration for this analysis, an in-depth study of the main literary journals and periodicals and the consultation of literature curricula should provide answers to these questions.

**Kristine Kotecki**

*From “Resistance” to “World” Literature: Re-framing the Lyricists of the Sarajevo Siege*

During the siege of Sarajevo (1992-6), poetry for and from the besieged city proliferated. The collections published at the time include ones by now widely anthologized poets like Semezdin Mehmedinović, Ferida Duraković, and Miljenko Jergović. These works gained significance as “resistance literature” during the war; they simultaneously represented resistance to the destruction of culture symbolized by the shelled libraries and museums and resistance to the ‘barbarity’ that had historically and continued to be associated with the Balkans. The poems were originally published when the Sarajevo poets were the voice of a besieged city; poems are especially conducive to being

recontextualized, however. These Sarajevo poems have since been excerpted for inclusion in a variety of anthologies and collections that are unified by frames like 'human rights' and 'poetry by women' rather than 'war' or 'Sarajevo.' Through the process of their translation and publication alongside works by writers from around the world, these poems become part of world literature. This global traffic in artistic productions sometimes reduces cultural productions to the stylistic and thematic interests in the "center." By tracking how Duraković's *Heart of Darkness* poems have been collected into anthologies about human right and womanhood, I argue that the poems' relation to Sarajevo under siege are variously reframed and their significance modified. The texts' surplus value—those effects that exceed their "original" ones—proliferate through their circulation. I argue that the poems accumulate meaning as they circulate; the logic of their order and placement at first publication does not exhaust all of their possible ethical implications. The shift in the logic cohering the poems therefore also entails a shift in the community for which the poems become significant.

### **Sowon Park**

#### *Myths of Surrogate Power: The Rhetoric of Pan-Asian Imperialism and the World Literary System*

The latter half of the last century saw a renewed and increasing preoccupation with processes of intercultural transactions in literary studies but how East Asia, one of the major blocks of the capitalist world system (Wallerstein, 1979), figures in the mapping of world literature remains neglected. This presentation will focus on the literary systems of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere (also known as the Japanese empire/ Pan-Asian empire) within the framework of world literature and ask what kind of exception to the capitalist world system was provided by the process of colonization by Japan; to what extent Japan's model of imperialism was based upon those of the west; and of what significance the reception of the western canon had for the processes of both imperialism and anti-colonialism in Pan-Asia. As a specific illustration, it will consider the works of a leading social critic of the Japanese empire, Ch'oe Chaeso (1908- 1964), whose systematic appropriation of 'western' modernists (T. S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme and I. A. Richards) became the foundation of an imperialist strategy of cultural assimilation in colonial Korea in the 1930s. By examining the role of European modernist aesthetics in the making of the rhetoric of Pan-Asian imperialism, this talk will provide a perspective on the dynamics of world literary cultures that has hitherto remained unseen.

### **Galin Tihanov**

#### *Narratives of Exile: Cosmopolitanism beyond the Liberal Imagination*

In this round-table statement, I wish to add arguments that would help the work of questioning the liberal consensus which still shapes the way we think about exile today. Rather than imagining exile on the plane of individual creativity or suffering, victory or failure, and thus also binding cosmopolitanism as a project to this notion of individual accomplishment (or the lack thereof), I wish to urge the possibility of contemplating a cosmopolitanism that breaks the spell of the liberal imagination and goes beyond the idea of fixed attainment.

My three specific reference points (and also sections) in this statement are: a) the history of modern literary theory and comparative literature as disciplines and the significance of exile in their rise in the interwar decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; b) what I term the 'East-East exilic experience', i.e. the exile of Left Central- and East-European intellectuals in Stalin's Moscow in the same period (1930s-1940s); and c) the historical Romanticisation of exile and the consequent need to de-romanticise and de-liberalise it; hence also the brief reflection, in this final section, on the recent notion of 'enforced cosmopolitanism' and the framework of transnationalism in their relation to exile. The first reference point enables us to appreciate the creative energies of exile (much insisted upon by the liberal consensus that I am interrogating), and to project exile as an ally of cosmopolitanism; the second reference point offers a counter-perspective: exile as the generator of undesirables that the liberal imagination tends to suppress or attempts to think away; exile is here a site of suffering and anguish, and an enemy of cosmopolitanism. The third (final and longest) section carries a wider methodological significance in that it seeks to identify these seemingly divergent scenarios – exile as creativity and exile as suffering – as the two sides of a deeper foundational narrative of transgression and border-crossing.

**Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek**

*About the Difference between Comparative Literature and World Literature*

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek discusses conceptual and practical aspects of the field of world literature and the discipline of comparative literature. His discussion about theories of world literature and comparative literature includes a historical perspective not only with regard to theory and practice but also about the institutional presence of world literature and comparative cultural studies and so within a global perspective. Further, Tötösy de Zepetnek touches upon aspects of the current renaissance of world literature (occurring mostly in the US and in English) and the response of comparative literature scholars elsewhere.