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**JFLC**

WORLD LITERATURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

**Introduction**

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**World Literature and Its Discontents: Futures Past of a Concept**

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**A Concept and Its Complexities**

Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* may offer an innovative way of framing the project behind this issue of the *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*. In Freud's terms, civilization is made possible through a paradoxical structure that at once allows and prohibits, favors and contains, engenders and represses.<sup>1</sup> In other words, desire moves us towards intersubjective relationships but at the same time we can only manage to live in society if we learn to control our drives, and above all if we are able to repress desires that do not fit into social norms. Thus, the civilizing process, to recall Norbert Elias' historical and sociological account of the phenomenon, cannot but produce its discontents, since desires are more likely to be kept at bay than to become reality: to become "civilized" means to detach oneself from gestures and inclinations once regarded as "natural."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, according to Freud, the litmus test concerning mental health will always be a matter of striking a reasonable balance between the contradictory movements implied in the dynamic play of the human psychism. Or to put in his own words:

Thus our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience. We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men. (23-24)

However, before asking what could possibly be understood as "world literature and its discontents," let us then return to the first elaborations of the concept. And, as it is well known, in the beginning was Goethe.<sup>3</sup>

Everywhere we hear and read of the progress of the human race, of the broader view of international and human relations. Since it is not my office here to define or qualify these broad

generalities, I shall merely acquaint my friends with my conviction that there is being formed a universal world literature, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. (89)

[...]

The *Edinburgh Review*, as well as the current *Foreign* and the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, we can only mention them briefly here.

These journals, as they win an ever wider public, will contribute in the most effective way towards that universal world literature for which we are hoping. (92)

From its inception, the mere possibility of envisaging a transnational literary and aesthetic experience implied the need to overcome the rigid boundaries of nationalism; boundaries systematically transformed into trenches in a myriad of local wars throughout the 19th century, which ended up in the apocalyptic world wars of the 20th century. No specialist failed to acknowledge this fundamental dimension of Goethe's vision, which, at least according to his perspective, was not necessarily utopic, although it had not yet come to full fruition in the 1820s—mind that Goethe writes *is being formed a universal world literature [...] for which we are hoping*. The transnational process was already in due course and had two main tools to carry it forward: the task of the translator, as Walter Benjamin defined the act of translation in a famous preface to his own translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*,<sup>4</sup> and a specific material support, namely, magazines and newspapers, that is, the printing press. Indeed, "Goethe is particularly intrigued when the foreign press reflects his own work back to him" (Damrosch, *What* 7).

There are three elements that are crucial for the emergence of the project of world literature: transnationalism, as a *conditio sine qua non*, translation,<sup>5</sup> as the very core of the initiative, and a given material support, without which the (potentially) global diffusion of literary works could not take place. The combination of these elements configures a system that seems to be at the core of the concept (back in 1827 and even today), as it was fully developed by David Damrosch. It is revealing that the writing of *What is World Literature?* was partially triggered by the organization of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, an innovative project due to its wide scope as well as theoretical and methodological approaches. The incorporation of a new means of communication, back then in its first steps, ties the ends with Goethe's acknowledgment of the printing press in the unfolding of the notion of *Weltliteratur*. I am referring to the material support which has become literally omnipresent in our everyday lives, and on a planetary scale:

Our course Website is designed to enhance teaching in a variety of ways. It provides annotated links for our major authors and groupings, giving students guidance in further exploration and research for projects and term papers. We include a glossary of literary and cultural terms and also an innovative audio glossary. This allows students to click on each author's name, and each name or term included in the pronunciation guides at the end of many of our introductions, so as to hear directly how each should be pronounced. (Damrosch, General Editor's Preface viii)

It seems possible to hypothesize that not only the emergence of the notion of *Weltliteratur*, but also the conceptualization of *world literature*, as well as the constant contemporary reframings of the concept, correspond to an acute elaboration of a complex set of circumstances, which necessarily includes a keen consideration of the material support which allows the wide circulation of literary works beyond national boundaries.

Let us conclude this brief introductory note returning to Freud in order to ask ourselves how would the concept of world literature produce its discontents.

Two aspects have often been mentioned as the main shortcuts of the concept of world literature. On the one hand, the supposedly unquestioned privilege attributed to English as a global language; on the other, the challenge of constantly broadening the repertoire of an ideally all-encompassing world literary canon.

How to answer satisfactorily to these critical objections? How to (even approximately) seize the seemingly Fichtean infinite task of always widening the inclusion of new literary works under the umbrella of world literature?

There are no easy answers to this relevant set of problems, but reading the papers in this issue may advance thought-provoking alternatives.

## This Issue

The thematic section deals precisely with this critical dimension, proposing ways of reframing theoretically the concept as well as rethinking the methodological approaches to world literature. The three special interviews address such challenges and reaffirm both the centrality of translation and the need to broaden as much as possible the scope of the world literary canon. Helena Carvalhão Buescu keenly reminds us: “We might want to talk, more accurately, of the worlds of world literature.” David Damrosch acknowledges: “There are many worlds of world literature, and many worlds of world literary scholarship.” Zhang Longxi stresses a key issue: “What we need is a truly open-minded vision of the world.” The other articles of the thematic section contribute to this critical and theoretical appraisal of world literature, seen from the vantage point of the complex circumstances we are exposed to in the 21st century.

In the Latin American section, inaugurated in the last issue, two insightful articles from relevant female scholars are published. Last but not least, we are proud to present, in the Open Section, acute and well-informed articles dealing with an impressive array of topics.

## Notes

1. A circumstance which evokes the epistemological and psychological structure once defined by Gregory Bateson as “double bind.” In Bateson’s words, this is, “[...] a situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win.’ It is hypothesized that a person caught in the double bind may develop schizophrenic symptoms” (Freud 201).

2. “Central to this study are modes of behaviour considered typical of people who are civilized in a Western way. The problem they pose is simple enough. Western people have not always behaved in the manner we are accustomed to regard as typical or as the hallmark of ‘civilized’ people. If members of present-day Western civilized society were to find themselves suddenly transported into a past epoch of their own society, such as the medieval-feudal period, they would find there much that they esteem ‘uncivilized’ in other societies today” (Elias ix).
3. David Damrosch has already keenly returned to this ordinary scene in his groundbreaking *What is World Literature?*, especially in “Goethe Coins a Phrase” (1-13).
4. “Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability. [...]: If translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works” (Benjamin 254).
5. Pascale Casanova has given a pride of place to translation in the canon formation of world literature: “Translation, despite the inevitable misunderstandings to which it gives rise, is one of the principal means by which texts circulate in the literary world. And so I am pleased that this book, aimed at inaugurating an *international literary criticism*, should itself be internationalized through translation into English” (xiii). Susan Basnett has gone even further, proposing: “We should look upon translation as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area” (161).

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