Guest Editor's Interviews

Worlds of World Literature and Worlds of Literary Scholarship

⊙ David Damrosch
Harvard University

Abstract: In this interview, David Damrosch ties the ends of his prolific and relevant contribution to literary studies. From the modern development of the concept of world literature to the organization of ambitious projects of World Literature anthologies; from the embracing of many worlds of world literary scholarship to the consideration of the emergence of A.I. and its possible consequences for the literary experience.

Keywords: world literature, ultraminor literatures, Eurocentrism, writing systems, cultural memory, A.I.

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Guest Editor's Remarks

In the conclusion of a recent and thought-provoking book, David Damrosch ties the end of his theoretical and methodological approach to literary studies:

> Certainly today no scholar is in danger of succumbing to a general stupor of satisfaction, whether regarding our materials, our methods, or the world around us. […] From Herder and de Staël to Auerbach and beyond, the perturbed souls we have examined in this book can help us chart our course forward as we seek new and better ways to compare the literatures today. (*Comparing* 336, 347)

On the one hand, Damrosch's groundbreaking work radicalizes the epistemological

consequences of the detachment from a naturalized Eurocentrism, usually combined with an unquestioned assumption of the centrality of the Anglophone world. This intellectual gesture led him towards a new understanding of the concept of world literature, seen above all as a matrix, which entails a much broader realm of possibilities for the definition (and then fruition) of literary experience. In his 2003 book, *What is World Literature?*, Damrosch had already put into practice the much needed program he implies in this interview: "There are many worlds of world literature, and many worlds of world literary scholarship." After revisiting Goethe's coinage of notion of *Weltliteratur*, Damrosch expanded dramatically the traditional horizons of comparative literature and literary theory:

> By contrast, world literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a very different set of forces by complex relations between people of indigenous, European, or mixed descent; by inter-American relations with Latin America and vis-à-vis North America, and lasting cultural ties to Portugal, Spain, and to France. In works like Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago*, "international modernism" helped form a specifically Brazilian cultural identity. (*What* 27)

On the other hand, Damrosch seems to bring to his contemporary theorization the classical mode of *aemulatio*, which supposed a special relationship with *traditio*, conveyed in his acknowledgment: "We need to understand the ways our discipline's history has shaped and constrained our field of vision, while conversely we may also find alternative roads" ("Rebirth" 99).[1] This demanding and complex balance between past and future as well as among several literary and critical traditions is the trademark of Damrosch's unique contribution to world literature and its possible futures, which, as he envisions, may even include an unexpected interlocutor: "Certainly A.I. is starting to have a disruptive effect in many areas of cultural production."

Openness to Otherness: a motto that defines David Damrosch's worldview and work on world literature.

JFLC: In your seminal *What is World Literature?* you proposed that "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (6). After two decades of the publication of the book, would you like to add new elements to your definition?

Damrosch: The immediate impetus for writing *What Is World Literature?* came in 2000, when I began to serve as general editor for the six-volume *Longman Anthology of World Literature* for use in American undergraduate survey courses, and I had to ask myself just what I would include as "world literature." It occurred to me that this could make a good subject for a book, and *What Is World Literature?* reflected the anthology project's focus on works that had gained a foothold in

undergraduate survey courses in the United States. Hence the dual emphasis on circulation, and on translation.

What Is World Literature? has sometimes been criticized by Anglophone postcolonialists as a problematic expression of the neoliberal hegemony of global English, and as insufficiently attentive to untranslatability, whereas people I have spoken with in locations as varied as China, Denmark, Hungary, Thailand, and Vietnam have been more interested in the benefits for their authors of wide circulation in translation. In recent years, though, I have become increasingly interested in the opposite direction of circulation: not a work's dissemination out into the wider world, but the ways in which the world's literatures can enter into a local context, shaping authors' understanding of literature and the textual universe to which they are contributing. On this perspective, a writer can participate in world literature whether or not their works ever get read abroad.

Additionally, over the past two decades, I have come to think in terms of world *literatures* in the plural, rather than as a single system or entity. I have also read much farther into debates on comparative and world literature beyond the often self-regarding Anglosphere. In my new book *Comparing the Literatures*, I give new attention to Brazilian, Chinese, and Italian scholarship. There are many worlds of world literature, and many worlds of world literary scholarship.

Thirdly, in recent years I have begun to incorporate visual and internet narratives in my teaching and research, including works such as the streaming prose poems of the Seoul-based duo known as Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (www.yhchang.com). This semester, in a course on literary and philosophical responses to tyranny, I am including a week on Volodymyr Zelensky's television show *Servant of the People*, the show that became the springboard for his successful campaign for the presidency of Ukraine. I think that we are emerging from a fairly brief period, lasting for two or at most three centuries, in which literature had high cultural capital distinct from other cultural forms. We are now returning to a time when people have many new sources of poetic and narrative experience. This does not at all mean the death of literature, but a new engagement with music, orality, and visual modes of storytelling such as cinema and the internet-based forms that are only now emerging.

It is a quite modern phenomenon to think of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as 300-page books to be read silently in solitude, or studied in a class. When the bard Demodocus ("Guide of the People") performs in the *Odyssey*, he has musical accompaniment for his recitation, and even a floor show of dancing boys. Not all of our classic authors will continue to be read a century from now, but that is nothing new. Few professors of Classics in 1860 would have imagined Jane Austen and Charles Dickens displacing Statius and even Horace from undergraduates' attention, nor could they have imagined the many cinematic and television adaptations of both Austen and Dickens that today not only give new life to their tales but also bring millions of readers back to their books.

JFLC: In 2011, you recalled that traditional comparative literature approaches "had a real distaste for translation" (Damrosch and Spivak 458).[2] How do you see the strategic importance of the "task

of the translator" to the full development of the project implied in the concept of world literature?

Damrosch: At the time when I wrote *What Is World Literature?*, I had been wrestling for a quarter of a century with the problem of how to put together my varied interests, which included European modernism and postmodernism, the ancient Near East, and colonial Mesoamerica. Those latter two areas were decidedly off the map during my student days in Yale's Department of Comparative Literature in the 1970s, partly as a result of Eurocentrism, but equally as a consequence of the discipline's philological commitment to working closely with texts in the original languages. In keeping with that ethos, I had acquired a modest competence in Middle Egyptian, biblical Hebrew, and Nahuatl in addition to several European languages, but as time went on I was regularly teaching works in languages that I could not hope to master in one lifetime, from the Arabic of *The Thousand and One Nights* to the Japanese of *The Tale of Genji*, Lu Xun's Chinese, and the Serbo-Croatian (as it was then called) of Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*. I had never taken—or even seen—a course in translation theory, but as I planned out the book it became clear that I would have to read my way into the field of translation studies, which became the focus of the book's middle section.

The ideology of original-language work has been so strong among comparatists that it can lead them to think they are reading scholarship based on original texts even when translations alone are being discussed. This assumption appeared on the back cover of my own book. There, the medievalist Wlad Godzich generously says that I was discussing "cuneiform-inscribed shards, Egyptian hieroglyphics, medieval German female mystics, Inca Chronicles, Kafka translations and contemporary Native protest literature with equal philological attention, poise, and erudition." I did make use of the originals in most of my case studies, but not for my chapter on Pavić's born-to-be-translated *Dictionary* or for a chapter on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where my focus was on the imperial and class politics of the epic's recovery in the 19th century. In these chapters I do not quote a single sentence from Pavić in Serbo-Croatian, which I cannot read, nor a single line from *Gilgamesh* in Akkadian, a language that I only studied several years later. Evidently, Godzich simply assumed that I was reading originals that I never used.

In my teaching, I have always emphasized the importance of language learning as well as the value of reading in translation, which itself can often lead an avid reader to learn a new language. There was a strategic value in the early 2000s to emphasize the ways in which literary texts can gain in translation, against the longstanding tendency of comparatists to limit themselves to studying works in the small handful of languages an individual can master. Translation is essential for any wide-ranging study of world literature, but the translator's task is never simple. Peripheral or subaltern writers are often made hostage to the agendas of their translators and publishers, and works that do not suit some cultural gatekeeper's agenda rarely get translated to begin with.

I believe that everyone who cares about expanding our literary field should become a translational activist. In my own case, in *What Is World Literature?* I had regretted that a wonderful Congolese novel, Georges Ngal's *Giambatista Viko: ou Le viol du discours africain*,

had never been translated, as it satirized nationalists and cosmopolitans alike and served no one's agenda when it was published in 1975. I remarked that world literature would really be coming into its own when we would see translations of a work such as this. Fifteen years later, I decided that it was time for me to put my assertion into practice myself. *Giambatista Viko: or The Rape of African Discourse* has now come out in the United States in the Modern Language Association's series "Texts and Translations," for which I prepared an edition of the French text as well as an English translation.

JFLC: Recently you were, along with Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, one of the two general editors of an ambitious editorial project, a collection of 4 volumes entitled *Literature: A World History*. From *world literature* to *world history* (of literature): how would you qualify the broadening of the scope of the enterprise?

Damrosch: *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* was challenging in terms of deciding on selections, finding good translations, and writing introductions and notes for more than four hundred writers, but it was comparatively simple in editorial terms: I worked with eleven colleagues, all but one based in the USA, and we accomplished our work over the course of some three years. *Literature: A World History* was a much more extended and complex project, involving a group of four dozen scholars from around the world, often with very divergent ideas of how to approach their material, and the work ended up taking nearly two decades in all. The primary organizers of the project were two Swedish scholars, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, a specialist in Japanese literature, and Anders Pettersson, author of several books on European literature and literary theory. Both they and most of the group they assembled felt that the field of world literature was too focused on a small number of internationally famous works, and while existing literary histories attended to a wide range of works within a given tradition, most such histories were devoted only to a single country.

So the group's ambition was to offer a truly global history of the world's literatures, giving equal attention to six "macro-regions" around the world, and further dividing the project into four volumes on a broad historical basis: literature before 200 CE, from 200 to 1500, from 1500 to 1800, and from 1800 to the present. The collection also includes a number of "cross-cutting essays" in each volume, on topics such as court cultures, utopias, and imperialism. To quote from the General Introduction that I wrote together with Anders Pettersson:

> In today's world, all literary cultures live in contact with each other. That was not quite the case as recently as two hundred years ago, so in a sense there is no world history of literature held together by a close net of mutual historical relationships. It would be more adequate to speak of individual literary traditions across the globe, emerging and disappearing. One basic feature of our approach is that it is regional: *Literature: A World History* is neither a collection of

> hundreds of national literary histories nor the history of a global system of world literature. Our approach thus departs from much prior literary history, as history since the nineteenth century has been chiefly national history. This is especially so after the so-called postcolonial era of the twentieth century, particularly in historically colonized areas of what is now called “the global South.” Literary history in turn has been principally the history of national literatures. Yet with the possible exceptions of the early Sumerian and Egyptian cultures, no literature has ever grown up in splendid isolation from its neighbors, and what we regard as the world’s major literary systems were all established long before the rise of the modern nation-state. (lxxviii)

All of us who worked on this collection hope that it will serve as a useful reference work for scholars, teachers, and students who wish to gain an overview of areas or eras outside their own expertise, and to have a genuinely global, non-Eurocentric presentation of the world’s major literary traditions.

JFLC: In this same project, you authored a chapter entitled “Writing Systems and Cultural Memory.” You highlight the inextricable relationship between literary tradition and the material support: “writing systems remain crucial proving grounds—and sometimes battlegrounds—for poetic identity and for cultural memory, vital components of the world’s literary histories” (140). Could the world literature project benefit from a thorough consideration of the materiality of the literary experience?

Damrosch: For much of the past century, “world literature” was often treated in an idealized fashion, as a set of timeless masterpieces floating free of material conditions. This picture has changed substantially with the new emphasis on the politics and economics of international and circulation. Along with this change, there is a growing interest in the materiality of texts themselves, from bamboo strips and cuneiform tablets to the material substrates of such seemingly immaterial entities as e-books and websites.

My essay on writing systems and cultural memory grows out of an earlier essay entitled “Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature,” in which I began to think about the ways in which a writing system helps to shape literary production and circulation. Learning a script connects readers and writers to an entire cultural heritage, and often works circulate more readily across languages and countries within an overall script system than from one system to another. Whether in the case of ancient cuneiform writing or of Chinese characters or the Roman alphabet, a hegemonic script can far outrun the boundaries of its homeland.

Once it is adopted in satellite or peripheral areas, a dominant script often functions in two quite different ways at once, both suppressing local traditions and yet often also stimulating them in new ways. The introduction of literacy, or simply the adoption of a more practical or prestigious technology for writing, brings in foreign texts and traditions that may override the

indigenous tradition. Yet the new script can also become a powerful force for cultural cohesion in its adopted territory, giving a common literary culture to groups who formerly had differing scripts or none at all. When they were forced to adopt the Roman alphabet in colonial New Spain, the Mexica, Zapotecs, and Maya gained a common writing system far easier to learn and employ than their incompatible hieroglyphic systems. They could more readily learn and read each others' languages, and over time, literacy could spread far beyond the elite circles that had formerly mastered the old glyphs.

In addition to the cultural content they convey, scripts often have a direct material base, grounded in the materials on which they are inscribed—clay tablets, bamboo strips, wood blocks, parchment, paper, silicon disks—as well as the tools used to make the inscription: stylus, brush, chisel, pen, keyboard. Thus in northern Europe, runes were had been developed in angular forms suitable for carving on grainy boards, but were not thought of as a vehicle for extended literary composition. When the Roman alphabet and the use of parchment spread northward toward the end of the first millennium CE, Scandinavian and British writers realized the advantages of preserving formerly oral tales and poems in writing. This discovery that stimulated new compositions in runes in the 9th and 10th centuries before the Roman alphabet definitively won out, and led to the preservation in the Roman alphabet itself of pre-Christian tales in works such as Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*.

Various scholars have found this concept useful since I published my initial essay on the topic; for example, in 2016 Sowon Park of Oxford University edited a special issue of the *Journal of World Literature* devoted to "The Chinese Scriptworld and World Literature." I am currently working on a book-length project on this theme, in which I am giving particular attention to the literary and cultural consequences of shifting from one "scriptworld" to another, whether in colonial Mexico, 19th-century Vietnam, or Turkey in the 1920s. I am also thinking about the consequences when a foreign technology is introduced for writing and publishing within a country's own script. Thus a revolution in literary production occurred in Meiji-era Japan with the introduction of movable type—a transformation that can be compared to the consequences of the development of typewriters for Chinese, as Jing Tsu has discussed in her consideration of changes in Chinese writing systems in her books *Sound and Script in the Chinese Diaspora* and *Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution that Made China Modern*. These are just some examples of the many ways in which literary production has always been closely tied to its material bases.

JFLC: How do you see the future of world literature in a world ever-more globalized, with its inevitable standardization of patterns, and ever-more pervaded by artificial intelligence, with its current presence even in the literary expression?

Damrosch: Already in 1952, Erich Auerbach wrote an essay titled "Philology of *Weltliteratur*," in

which he asked whether globalization would work for or against Goethe's dream of worldwide literary exchange and communication. He expressed a fear that soon "only a single literary culture may survive in this homogenized world. It may even happen that, within a comparatively short period of time, only a limited number of literary languages will continue to exist, soon perhaps only one. If this were to come to pass, the idea of world literature would simultaneously be realized and destroyed." Yet Auerbach saw this as a challenge that could be met, if a young generation of linguistically competent literary historians would give the same close attention to the variety of the world's literatures as comparatists had traditionally devoted to the literatures of Western Europe.

World literature today can still mean the international circulation of major authors and their works, as Goethe thought, but it can also mean a deep study of the variety of the world's literary cultures, both in hegemonic or world languages and in minor and even what we can call *ultraminor* literatures—the literatures of very small countries such as Malta and the Faroe Islands. I owe the concept to the Faroese scholar Bergur Moberg, of the University of Copenhagen, who presented the idea at a panel of the Institute for World Literature in Hong Kong in 2014. We subsequently co-edited a special issue of the *Journal of World Literature* on the topic, now published by Brill in book form (*Ultraminor World Literatures*, 2022).

Globalization does involve elements of standardization, but it also helps readers and writers experience a much larger and more varied literary landscape than when world literature largely meant the literatures of just a few hegemonic powers. It now encompasses writing from Indonesia, Thailand, and Oman, as well as contemporary writing from India and from East Asia, whereas until recently it was mostly Asian classical works that were widely read elsewhere. It also includes many writers from the smaller but long neglected European countries, from Finland to Albania. My Belgian colleague Theo D'haen has remarked that Dutch literature used to be neglected by scholars in comparative literature because the Netherlands was not a major modern power, and now it is being neglected by postcolonialists because it is not in the "Global South." But world literature provides a new framework for looking at individual literatures in broader contexts, and in fact Theo D'haen has recently edited a collection of essays titled *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature*. Both small and large literatures can now be seen together.

Globalization also gives authors new opportunities to experience foreign cultures directly, and even to make themselves at home in more than one culture, without having to abandon one continent when emigrating to a new one; writers as different as Bei Dao and Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie are world citizens as much as they are deeply grounded in their homelands' literary traditions. This process can already be seen in the late nineteenth century in the work of Rudyard Kipling, who I think of as the world's first truly global author—someone who was writing for a worldwide audience when he was still in his mid-twenties. Though Kipling is known for his pessimistic line "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," he himself was deeply involved in giving Western readers insight into India. Many writers today go far beyond him in connecting East and West, even as they build on his legacy. Salman Rushdie has

a wonderful collection of short stories, *East*, *West* that features three stories set in India, three in England, and three in both places. Haruki Murakami has been a prolific translator of American fiction, while even a very locally rooted writer such as Mo Yan has engaged deeply with world writers from Faulkner to Gabriel García Márquez.

I believe that globalization in the coming years will likely enable increasing contact of writers with each other around the world, now aided by internet platforms such as Zoom as much as by long-haul flights. I doubt that artificial intelligence will ever supplant human creativity, though I must add that for my birthday, last week, my son-in-law gave me a haiku that a chatbot had composed for him in a couple of seconds. Though it was not very imaginative, it was formally correct, and was personalized in keeping with the command that he had entered into the program.

Certainly A.I. is starting to have a disruptive effect in many areas of cultural production. On the day I am writing these words, *The New York Times* has an article titled "It's a Hit. Is It Real, or Is It A.I.?" (April 22, 2023), which reports on a song that used A.I.-generated simulation of the voices of two popular Black musicians, Drake and The Weeknd, to create a fake duet between them. It was widely shared (and purchased) on several streaming services, before the artists discovered their unauthorized avatars and got the song taken down. So A.I. is already changing—or distorting—the landscape of popular culture, and the literary landscape will surely be altered as well. But I tend to agree with the perspective of a musician, Holly Herndon, who is quoted at the end of the article: "As an artist, I am interested in what it means for someone to be me, with my permission, and maybe even be better at being me in different ways. The creative possibilities there are fascinating and will change art forever. We just have to figure out the terms and tech."

I am confident that novelists and poets, as well as song writers and performance artists, will continue to navigate the shifting currents of our globalized world, and will find new ways to work across the porous boundaries of both material and virtual reality.

Interviewed by João Cezar de Castro Rocha

Notes

1. The full quote: "In charting the forward trajectory of comparative literature, one way to get our bearings is to look to the past. We need to understand the ways our discipline's history has shaped and constrained our field of vision, while conversely we may also find alternative roads opened up by early comparatists and now ripe for further exploration" (Damrosch, "Rebirth" 99).

2. The full quote reads: "If you wanted to work in another language, the surrounding language departments would provide that training, and if the university didn't offer, say, Bengali or Nahuatl, then you simply wouldn't work on those literatures, as these programs had a real distaste for translation" (458).

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