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David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* Princeton & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. (£18.95 Hb.). Pp 324. ISBN 9780691049861.

Eminent professor at Harvard University, David Damrosch resumed, in his 2003 study *What Is World Literature?*, a problem that was first raised by Goethe: the problem of world literature. According to Damrosch, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the problem can be formulated in the following terms: “Which literature, whose world? What relation to the national literatures whose production continued unabated even after Goethe announced their obsolescence? What new relations between Western Europe and the rest of the globe, between antiquity and modernity, between the nascent mass culture and elite production?” (1). Damrosch traces the evolution of this literary discipline, preparing the reader for a new intersectional approach: “the foreign reader is likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work” (4). The quest for this new approach begins with a refusal of the old denomination of “universal literature”. In its wide pretended meaning, “universal literature” does not exist. In fact, “the ‘universal’ is only a cover for an unconscious process of assimilation to one’s own prior values” (138).

Enjoying worldwide reception involves being subject to certain disquieting transformative operations. “All works are subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception” (24). The arguments brought by Damrosch are compelling. World literature should not be regarded only from the centres of power (of both the literary and the real world), but also from the margins. World literature is the result of give-and-take operations where all sides introduce their own cultural and ideological agendas. Damrosch concludes that world literature is “always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture” (283), i.e., an interactive, dynamic exchange.

For the Romanian reader, be s/he professional or not, some of Damrosch’s comments may irritate open wounds. “The writer from a marginal culture is in a double bind. With little to go on at home, a young

writer can only achieve greatness by emulating foreign models ... yet these models can have a crushing weight” (9). As a Romanian reader, I am not very sure if “little is going on at home” but I agree that often we only take into account what is going on at home if foreign models reinforce or parallel the domestic evolutions. A huge problem for Romanian literature and its servants is that Romanian literary works, Romanian literary criticism enjoy little notoriety. Damrosch is sincere and entertains no illusions regarding the disinterested nature of the translation project. “Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question” (Damrosch 18).

Working in the context of one of the great literary powers of the world<sup>i</sup>, David Damrosch realizes that the solipsistic perspective that has dominated literary studies in the most influential literary zones, the so-called literary First World needs to change. He finds the solution in the circulation of the literary text, namely in reception studies, as a necessary, inevitable component of literary studies and world literature. In Damrosch’s own words, the study of any literary text should also include “the ways the [literary] work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts” (24).

After this strong argument, Damrosch gives several examples how translation and reception studies can offer a richer perspective on world literature. This new approach is justified by the globalization of our civilization. It is obvious that the internet pushes us farther and farther towards a planetary culture where national differences become local(izing) differences.

The new perspective is actually metaphorically announced by the Nahuatl poetry quoted by Damrosch in an ample chapter on the interaction between the conquered and the conquerors after the fall of the Aztec Empire. Nothing dies completely, there is only transformation over transformation. The meek, the defeated are more awares, in this respect, because for them this is a strategy to avoid cultural extinction.

“So let us now rejoice within our hearts,

all who are on earth;  
only briefly do we know one another,  
only here are we together.  
So do not be saddened, my lords:  
no one, no one is left behind on earth.” (98)

Damrosch explores an impressive variety of texts: ancient Egyptian poetry, the epic of Gilgamesh, Dante, Nahuatl poetry after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, the mystic literature produced by Metchil von Magdeburg, Kafka, P.G. Wodehouse, the autobiography constructed by Rigoberta Menchu<sup>ii</sup> alone or with her editors. In time, reception makes Dante’s poetry change both inside Italy and when it is translated (140). From Central and Eastern Europe, a literary space often neglected in the great Western literary syntheses, Damrosch chooses Milorad Pavic’s *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Reception thus becomes part of the analytical literary practice, not something that is studied after some kind of apparently neutral close reading. When we say close, we mean closing upon the national borders.

The introduction of “the shifting lens of translation” (169) is necessary and even inevitable. “The study of world literature should embrace translation far more actively than it has usually done to date” (289). David Damrosch gives a very good definition of the translator’s work, the site of a real balance between cultures and languages. The translator must “understand the work effectively in its new cultural or theoretical context while at the same time *getting it right* in a fundamental way with reference to the source culture” (288).

The conclusion after these multiple comparative exercises is that world literature can be viewed as “an elliptical refraction of national literatures, a mode of reading, writing that gains in translation” (283). Arguments come in waves and in exquisite wording: “texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation” (295). We all have to be aware of these mediating frames. In other words, world literature should also study “the ways in which a literary text reaches out and away from its point of origin” (300). David Damrosch has the merit of finding a very adequate trope for the exchange that, ultimately, forms the basis of world literature: “an elliptical refraction”.

A Romanian reader can only agree with this new viewpoint, with one minor major amendment. In Romanian cultural tradition, the recognition of the importance of translation, this “heroic interpretative leap” (293) over the “abyss between languages” is not something new. Translators have been included in important reference works at least since 1979. See, for instance, *Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900*, compiled in 1979<sup>iii</sup>, the dictionaries of Romanian literature compiled by Eugen Simion, the Zăciu, Papahagi, the Aurel Sasu team, or by Aurel Sasu alone, the chronological dictionaries of the Romanian novel, the chronological dictionaries of the foreign novel in Romanian translation. It is obvious that a minor literature, such as the Romanian one, is less solipsistic than the literatures emerging from the great centers of cultural power. Consequently, the refraction view has existed in certain national contexts long before globalization became a slogan. And Romanian researchers were not the only ones eager to embrace the national and the international in the same handshake. In 1991 Huck Gutman compiled a very interesting collection of international perspectives on American literature valorizing the work of foreign Americanists. The element of novelty the study by David Damrosch brings is the awareness of this exchange from Harvard.

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<sup>i</sup> We use here the terminology of Pascale Casanova as formulated in her study *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. David Damrosch criticizes Casanova for being too grounded in the French tradition in her demonstration (cf. 27). In our opinion the two studies converge in their effort to understand how power works in the literary field that is not only a quest for aesthetic values but also a toil to reach the respectability given by power.

<sup>ii</sup> Mayan militant for the rights of indigenous peoples in Guatemala and all over the world. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Dictionary of Romanian literature since its origins to 1900*.

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