

REGIMES OF RELEVANCE: THE NEWCOMERS

Maria CHIOREAN

Universitatea „Babeş-Bolyai” din Cluj-Napoca, Facultatea de Litere
Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Letters
Personal e-mail: chiorean.r.maria@gmail.com

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Starting from Galin Tihanov's thesis that a regime of relevance breeds a particular manner of thinking critically about literature, this essay looks at the birth of World Literature and compares its genesis with that of Russian Formalism. Then, the discussion moves to the evolution of World Literature from a set of apparently universal reading methods to a more localized form of criticism, often intersecting decolonialism. The final section is dedicated to the possible emergence of a new, still obscure regime of relevance by means of participatory art.

Keywords: World Literature, literary theory, bird's-eye vs. close-up, decolonialism.



In his most recent book, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, Galin Tihanov goes against the rumoured and ambiguous timelessness of theory, replacing it with a more rigorous delimitation between the practice of thinking critically about literature (which has, indeed, been around for centuries) and literary theory per se. The latter, he argues, is a localized phenomenon – both in history and in space – being born around the First World War through the articulation of Russian Formalism and slowly losing ground in the late 80s. Since then, although it has persisted as an academic object and has continued to impact scholarly debates, theory has made room for other brands of literary research – other reading methods, other central goals. At first glance, Tihanov's premises might seem simply exotic or prophetic (as Spivak's announcement of comparative literature's demise must have appeared in the beginning). Alternatively, this periodization of metaliterature could be viewed as just another chronology, which, no matter how valid or well-documented, does little more than give an organized account of literary criticism.

However, Tihanov's theses – the temporary nature of literary theory and its reverberations into contemporary research – are based on another instrumental concept, namely on the *literary regimes of relevance*. In short, Tihanov demonstrates that a certain understanding of literature (a contextual status, its perceived function in a specific historical period) does not only produce a particular type of literary works, but also the dominance of a complementary meta-discourse.¹ In the case of literary theory, it was the Romantic view on literature that allowed Formalism to develop: as literary discourse was valorized as autonomous and distinct from all others (philosophical, journalistic, scientific), literariness automatically became the focus of literary enquiry. This was especially important after Romanticism lost its strong metaphysical and mythical component, which had made the author into an exceptional receptacle for inspiration. Because as soon as the focus shifted from the writer's condition to the nature of language and to whatever grants it the possibility to become literary discourse, the works of Shlovsky, Tynianov and Eikhenbaum took



centre stage. At the same time, Tihanov highlights the role played by exile in the elaboration of Formalism and, later on, Structuralism and Poststructuralism. Besides the Romantic tradition of marginality (literature as a by-product of social peripherality and ontological singularity), the migration of theorists from marginal geographies to the centre of Western scholarship – especially France and Germany – gave rise to their independence from Plato-Hegelian frames of thought, on the one hand, and from strictly national, organicist literary historiographies on the other. Formalist theories on language, literariness and estrangement were widely applicable. They were not necessarily universal – as the anti-Eurocentric movements of the following decades made sure to point out – but nonetheless, literary reflection was freed from reductive categories like national identity, spirituality, or style.

Literary Theory and World Literature

According to Tihanov's timeline, the late 80s brought about a shift in the valorization of literature, making entertainment and market value more important than the autonomy and uniqueness of literary discourse. With it, ways of thinking and writing about literature had to adapt, as well, which is where World Literature came into play. One of the most intriguing claims made by Tihanov is, then, that the current popularity of World Literature stems from its appropriateness to the new regime of relevance – one that we could broadly term a *postmodern regime*. As for literary theory and especially the work of the first Formalists, they are no longer dominant as a school of thought, but remain a powerful influence on contemporary criticism, sometimes determining decisions about some of the most pressing debates in the field – reading in translation, approaching peripheral literatures, the issue of *travelling theory*.

Since Tihanov's focus is represented by literary theory and its legacy, the link between World Literature and the correspondent regime of relevance is not explored in depth, as in the case of Formalism's roots, to be found in Romanticism. Therefore, a few questions remain under debate. Firstly, Tihanov singles out several genetic processes that led to the birth of literary theory: the proposition of a new, scientifically-informed way of regarding literature, the refusal of extrinsic valorization, as well as the causal connection between philosophy and literary praxis – more exactly, Tihanov shows that, upon travelling to America, Poststructuralism, for instance, was imported as a form of narrative analysis (no matter if the narrative was literary, political, or religious), because analytical philosophy dominated its own field and tolerated no rivals.² With World Literature, these vectors of development are obviously different. If literary studies today are, indeed, dependent on a postmodern regime of

relevance, on market-circulation, publicity, and mass-appeal, one has to wonder which axiology or cultural philosophy – if any – first oriented contemporary criticism. Or, conversely, it may have been the case that new reading methods were directly required by the globalization of literature and that the outlook on culture of World Literature scholars was a by-product of such advances in information- and product-distribution. Initiating factors notwithstanding, World Literature strategies for reading across cultures, time, space, and genre are definitely not arbitrary and the principles that regulate them cannot be reduced to a larger volume of texts or to comparative, connective reading. In order to truly make sense of World Literature's relationship with its regime of relevance, a minimal critical ethos must be formulated. On this lack of theoretical articulation, Tihanov himself actually comments that “like so many other discourses of liberal persuasion, the discourse on world literature, too, often passes over its own premises in silence, leaving them insufficiently reflected upon, and at times even naturalizing them.”³

Lastly, it is the liberal label attached to World Literature that requires an investigation. Tihanov explicitly associates it with such presumptions as mobility, transparency and the free circulation and consumption of literary products. In other words, there seems to be a liberal worldview at work in World Literature studies, which, although it generates no agenda or generalized ideological nuances, still ignores core-periphery disparities in terms of literary distribution. Globalization has, indeed, created a network of communication and intercultural discovery, but this alleged *openness* of the World System is as deceitful as Wallerstein's nemesis – the homogenous concept of modernization. To paraphrase Wallerstein, any clean-cut distinction between (Western) modernity and another, unnamed stage of development in a culture's history harbours the implicit suggestion that the same type of modernization will ultimately triumph around the world, so that intercultural exchange is automatically bidirectional, equitable and unencumbered by age-old power dynamics.⁴ Paradoxically, it can be argued that, at its beginnings, World Literature – characterized by generalization and abstraction – had assimilated the lessons of systems theory, with its interdisciplinarity and interest in contextualization, but had not yet integrated the insights of world systems analysis. This was in no way intentional, but the first debates of World Literature were meant to deal with choosing the actual corpus of texts to enter the new, much-expanded canon rather than with the critique of cosmopolitanism and its ignorance of oppression. Indeed, the very existence of World Literature as a concept and then an academic field depended on its founders' keenness for transnationalism and transcultural connection. Goethe himself – the famous inventor of *Weltliteratur* (its many contradictory

meanings notwithstanding) – viewed this newly available wealth of literature not as an expanded set of texts, but as a network.⁵ Marx and Engels, in their turn, announced that World Literature was as an inevitable creation of modernity.⁶

Therefore, one of the main temptations of World Literature studies was to bring together extremely different literary artifacts, based on a common theme, genre, time of emergence, form, or style. Their source-cultures did not have to be related or similar through social structure or political evolution, because the method (*compare and contrast*) could easily become an end in itself or the exciting proof of diversity. In some cases, the approach has a pedagogical function, serving as a fist-contact exercise in the face of the unmeasurable volume of texts produced within hundreds of civilizations throughout millennia. David Damrosch's 2009 *How to Read World Literature*, for instance, is an introduction into the parallels one can draw between European works of literature and their Oriental counterparts. The obstacles⁷ he addresses include time, cultural distance, language, translation, and different configurations of each genre – as he had previously stated in *What is World Literature?* our response to alterity is always comprised of the discovery of likeness, the shock of difference, and, most productively in terms of creating a new perspective, the like-but-unlike.⁸ Yet, it must be noted that Damrosch opts for a “Europe-and” frame of comparison, selecting a major work of art from the Western canon (the ancient Greeks, British Romanticism etc.) and pairing it with a seminal Asian one (*The Tale of Genji*, Indian love poetry and so on). In a collection of essays meant for students, this choice is justifiable, and it only serves as proof of the impossibility of accessing the foreign without first filtering it through the familiar. But in the eyes of decolonialists,⁹ increasingly vocal and eloquent since the beginning of the new millennium, the dichotomy must be transgressed, as it promotes the assumption that our Western mother-culture is bound to remain not only our first – chronologically – but also a stable system of reference. Besides the obviously positive valorization of the Bloom-approved canon, which reduces Europe's fringes to exotic cultures and prevents them from ever challenging the autochthonous worldview, the old pattern of comparison also implies a certain Western homogeneity and an organic evolution, while favouring simplistic categorization: opposition or convergence, radical difference or reduction to the same basic coordinates.

World Literature Gets a Makeover

This is why, in later, more nuanced stages of evolution, World Literature research abandons this dualism, exploring the relationship between peripheries and

admitting that, in truth, there is no single world that produces literature and selects its best contenders, but only a series of intersecting worlds, the development and the popularization of which depend on a particular history, an internal structure (where authority is distributed in specific ways), power relations with other worlds and cultural capital accumulation as seen from the so-called centres of the World Republic of Letters. Not only is this second-wave perspective pluralistic (in relativizing the meaning of a *world*), but it also confronts the fallacy of equal dissemination, according to which literary circulation is a universal process, in which the West and its peripheries are engaged in a mutual, egalitarian exchange of aesthetic content. Of course, well-established literatures, which have been *travelling* abroad for centuries, are, in fact, much opaquer to exterior impact, and might internalize foreign works of art as mere accessories or instruments of contrast. Marginal literatures,¹⁰ on the other hand, are prone to importing and adapting authoritative patterns, not least because this could guarantee some form of synchronicity and global relevance. As Tihanov wrote, the circulation of literature is the main presupposition of World Literature studies, but, at least in the first decades of this critical trend, the condition is postulated from afar, as a natural consequence of technological advancements and globalization. In Damrosch's words, a text is disseminated “by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. A given work can enter into world literature and then fall out of it again if it shifts beyond a threshold point along either axis, the literary or the worldly.”¹¹ Undoubtedly, awareness with regard to the importance of cultural capital and transnational dynamics is virtually the starting point of today's most relevant brands of literary criticism, from World Literature to decolonialism and translation studies. But the most interesting and innovative niche of World Literature is only born once circulation is viewed from within marginal literatures as well and once the phenomenon of dissemination ceases to appear as an autonomous, self-serving mechanism, much like the capitalist market economy. Through the exposure of its agents, its subaltern actors, and their strategies for accessing the centre, circulation is revealed to be far from a process of natural selection.

While early attempts at commenting on circulation easily overlooked the dangers of liberal humanism (Sarah Lawall, Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova are among those criticized for oversimplifying transnational cultural exchange, for not questioning their own cosmopolitan agenda and highlighting competition without sufficient contextualization),¹² recent contributions to World Literature studies usually verbalize these pitfalls and manage to transcend them. Marko Juvan's 2019 *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, for example, opens with a return to Goethe's time and terminology, just



as many other books in the field. However, the author then focuses on Goethe's circumstances rather than on his project and rhetoric. Namely, Juvan argues that, at the time of its conception, World Literature was actually a peripheral concept born out of a peripheral culture. Not only was Germany a budding national state and an instable political power, but Goethe himself used cosmopolitanism as a self-canonizing strategy:¹³ along with his repertoire, German literature itself had more access to authority and worldwide distribution. Similar to the birth of literary theory, which Tihanov links to the Eastern European context around the First World War, World Literature is surprisingly devised as a marginal instrument of power-acquisition. The fact that the resurgence of the concept in the 1980s was prompted by globalization and was thus infused by a liberal ignorance of local situations can be partly explained through Goethe's success story – his work and his literature *did* become central, as the discrepancy between then-major cultures and the German one was not difficult to surpass. Juvan brings forward another actor, though: Slovenian national poet Prešeren, who serves as a case study in theorizing the ambivalence of World Literature: a marginal writer might try to make a name for themselves by joining a central stage, but, all the while, they will also define their still evolving national identity in light of this interaction. Being part of the network means worlding and nationalizing at the same time, especially since there is a combination of dialogism and centrifugally exerted power.¹⁴

The same lucidity regarding the ambiguity between collaboration and hegemony can be witnessed in the recent Bloomsbury series devoted to national literatures as world literatures, coordinated by Thomas O. Beebee. In his introduction to *German Literature as World Literature*,¹⁵ the editor first distances himself from the understanding of World Literature as a canon – no matter how new and inclusive – or as a set of comparisons (practiced by Damrosch in *What is World Literature?*). Rather, Beebee proposes the image of a Venn-diagram where World Literature represents the *contact zones* between national repertoires overlapping through translation – this does not refer solely to certain common titles, though, but to an interval phenomenon and a type of (unbalanced, problematic) reciprocity. More precisely, the author engages Damrosch's definition (World Literature as an elliptical refraction of national literatures) and demonstrates that the reverse is also true – national literatures are elliptical refractions of wider networks and the result of continuous transnational dynamics.

At this juncture, it becomes obvious that panoramic explorations of World Literature are hardly enough when it comes to capturing the intricacy of intercultural exchanges, and that this double bind of nationalizing through the prism of cosmopolitanism and

simultaneously worlding through national projection onto the dominant literature can only be addressed by means of close-ups. Beebee's collection does just that. For instance, Mihai Iovănel's essay¹⁶ in *Romanian Literature as World Literature* comments on the success of Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Eugène Ionesco on the French literary stage of the mid-20th century. His chapter analyzes their strategies for self-rebranding in a new cultural arena (Cioran's switch from a virulent style in Romanian to an almost classicist – and, thus, unexpected – one in French would be just one of them) and the circumstances that facilitated their fame: the complexity of the web they entered (including not only Paris, but also Germany and the United States), the innovative nature of their writing (Ionesco's absurdist theatre, difficult to stage; Cioran's nihilism, presented in the language of 17th century moralists; and, finally, the universalism of Mircea Eliade, still intriguing in an age when micronarratives had not yet gained recognition). Notably, Iovănel's approach focuses on the temporal aspect of literary circulation, showing that the game of exporting oneself abroad involves an element of arbitrariness – avant-garde writers like Ionesco might gain prominence alongside apparently anachronistic ones, such as Cioran. Ultimately, the relevance of case studies like this one lies beyond the accuracy of localized historicism, since the minute retracing of Eliade, Cioran and Ionesco's second life abroad allows Iovănel to challenge Pascale Casanova's assertions on the autonomy of the literary field, to highlight the instrumental role of political and historical articulations with one's biography and bibliography and to demystify the idea of automatic assimilation into the world system, presenting instances of voluntary rebranding or cultural resuscitation¹⁷.

A symmetrical analytical thread can be found in *Romanian Modernity and the Rhetoric of Vacuity*¹⁸ by Bogdan Ștefănescu, published in the same volume. Here, the main focus is the problem of self-representation as a consequence of colonial regimes (either Western coloniality, economic exploitation or Soviet dominance). Ștefănescu identifies what he terms a case of *nodal convergence*, that is the presence of certain topoi (absence, vacuity, deficiencies) in the rhetoric of many former colonies, sometimes completely unrelated – geographically nor historically. This occurrence of traumatic language as a *transhistorical and transregional* phenomenon generates unpredictable, previously unnoticed sub-systems of World Literature precisely because postcolonial trauma presents no particular ideology or localization.¹⁹ Thus, while Mihai Iovănel discusses the outward dynamic of literary circulation and the active self-export of writers into wider cultural webs, Bogdan Ștefănescu is interested in the internalization of the subaltern condition and, at the same time, in the methods through which this passive transformation is

catalyzed and used for the construction of a national identity.

These are just two examples out of many from both the Bloomsbury collection and elsewhere which seem to indicate a sort of coming of age of *Weltliteratur*. They are no longer concerned with the mere study of influences or with bird's-eye narratives about diversity or the centralized, automatic system of canonization. Instead, more attention is paid to the coexistence of nationalizing and worlding, the actual heterogeneity of the world literary system, the importance of *where* voices of *Weltliteratur* speak and criticize from, as well as the intervention of both personal agency and arbitrariness in intercultural interaction and competition. While still rejecting the national(ist) tradition of criticism practiced before the Formalist consecration of transnational literariness, World Literature cannot avoid a cautious step back from the temptation of universalism. Because, to quote Beebee's intentions²⁰ for the Bloomsbury collection, presented in his introduction to the German volume, partial and discontinuous literary histories are crucial for a non-monolithic, evolutive perspective. Broad brushstrokes might have been a necessary starting point and, as Damrosch put it, a first solution against the incapacitating unfamiliarity of distant cultures. In *What is World Literature?* he wrote that it "is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike."²¹ His claim remains true, but it turned out that a comparative methodology in itself might not be enough and that initial familiarization attempts are now up for revision.

A Partnership with Decolonialism

In his book, Tihanov singles out two writers from the age of literary theory whose concepts and interests still inform the pursuits of World Literature. Shlovsky, to begin with, had argued that literariness depended on composition instead of language and could therefore withstand translation.²² This resonates with Damrosch's belief that reading in the language of socialization is as beneficial – if not more so – as in the language of production.²³ His claim is the result of moving from debates on the essence of literature to analyses of its behaviour in various cultures, societies, and economies. But it also proves that, at least at its beginnings, World Literature implied the existence of transnational, universal modes of reading and critique. Then, Tihanov mentions Bakhtin and his preference for pre-modern literary phenomena like folklore, epic narratives, traditional genres, unrefined, verbal masses, all of which existed and gained popularity before the canonization

of European culture: "his is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space, but in time."²⁴

However, it is my contention that the legacy of both Shlovsky and Bakhtin only comes into full effect in later stages of World Literature. First, it must be said that – upon studying the travelling of literariness between cultures – Damrosch begins with an analysis of content: dominant themes, the representation of the human condition, social structures, and subversion, etc. For instance, in *How to Read World Literature*, he compares Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* in order to highlight their similar preoccupation with supra-personal forces like fate or unpredictable disasters and to invalidate the cliché of Western art being profoundly individualistic, as opposed to the cosmocentric worldview of the Orient.²⁵ Similarly, he comments on *Love Suicides at Amijim* by Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu, written in the same period as Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. While the French play caricaturizes the newly enriched classes of French society and thus makes a concession to the nobility that Moliere wrote for, the Japanese play has true subversive potential, depicting lesser, ordinary members of society as capable of true emotional depth and sacrifice²⁶. Only later, and especially in recent decolonial praxis, would the same attention be given to the specificity of local *poetics*. Critics like Revathi Krishnaswamy point out the West's apparent incapacity²⁷ to accept the fact that peripheral cultures have also produced *literary theories* (though not in the sense used by Tihanov and often latent or implicit) and that a perspective on poetry molded by European productions alone might not grasp all the implications of bhakti poetry, for example, a strand of counter-cultural Indian literature, distinct from the well-known Sanskrit tradition already appropriated by colonists. Bhakti poetry²⁸ – one of Krishnaswamy's case studies – is defined by its performative and spontaneous character, as well as by a very particular understanding of gender (as a sum of ritualized gestures), the representation of frustrated and oppressed social categories (women, for instance) and the centrality of the speaker (who is by no means an abstract, impersonal entity). All these require a conceptual de-linking from the Western history of poetry and a gnoseological, as well as an aesthetic reterritorialization²⁹.

In fact, awareness regarding the risks of distorting peripheral literary works – in terms of content *and* form – by approaching them with unsuitable instruments might be the surest sign of World Literature's evolution, as the travelling of Shklovsky's literariness is seen in its concrete, manifold manifestations. Likewise, decolonialism's dialogue with World Literature and the impact it had on scholarly reading modes also mirror Bakhtin's interest in marginality and the possibility of relative independence from the canon (when literary works are twice removed from the centre, belonging



not only to a peripheral national culture, but also to the periphery of that civilization, the canon that dominates the First World book market or academic trends remains a point of reference, but not a crucial one). Ultimately, the whole map of World Literature is redrawn and decentralized – after questioning the legitimacy of Eurocentrism, the *centre* does not move, but is completely dispersed, and the history of *Weltliteratur* is broken into a multitude of localized narratives, organized around their own centres. At the same time, the tensions and the convergent lines between marginal cultures are made visible, replacing the single focus on centre-periphery dynamics. Krishnaswamy's analysis of various sub-traditions of Indian literature³⁰ and Bogdan Ștefănescu's cited article are suggestive examples. So is the literary and anthropologic research of Sylvia Marcos,³¹ who investigates Mezoamerican communities, highlighting the role of women, their poetic productions, and the intersections between indigenous worldviews and Western minoritarian activism (feminism, protection of race-minorities in the United States etc).

The Problem of Axiology

In spite of World Literature being recently connected to decolonialism and inheriting its essentially ethical roots, establishing an axiology for this direction in literary studies has always been problematic. When looking back on Tihanov's thesis, namely the birth of World Literature as a response to the postmodern regime of relevance, the difficulty becomes obvious, since, between elitist cosmopolitanism, mass-production of cultural goods to be sold and a competitive distribution of art, there is not much left for ethics to lean on. But the paradox of art vs. its own supposed axiology goes back at least to the interwar period, when the avant-gardes criticized the separation of culture from the actual lives of the masses, but ended up secluding themselves in the same high tower that only elites had access to.³² Then, the ascension of pop art in the 1960s managed to finally bridge the gap between creators and the wider public, but did so through a compromise with capitalism and its disregard for anything but profit and efficiency. It is in no way a coincidence that, in her book on *Surrealism as World Literature*, Delia Ungureanu chooses to discuss in detail the rivalry³³ between Breton's political ideas and moral rigour and, on the other hand, Dalí's endless collaborations with the American artistic industry. Because it was this conflictual situation involving underground art and the forces of globalization that eventually made World Literature studies necessary.

Among the reasons for ethical indeterminacy, the temptation to make World Literature into a neutral account of moral quests and tensions located in fiction is quite enduring. According to Peter Hitchcock,³⁴ such

descriptions of literary content only obscure the real problem at hand, namely the philosophical implications of the concept of *world* employed by the critic, which subsequently determines the lens through which they regard fictional constructions and their relationship with extratextual reality. It is, first and foremost, a matter of selection – which is the world that provides the literary material? Is there only one, continuously expanding? Or does every minority have a correspondent centre? Even within fictionalist criticism, which holds as a premise³⁵ the cognitive function of possible worlds, it remains unclear whether alternative worlds are meant to help explore and comprehend one's contingent reality or, by contrast, to propose ways out of all predictable patterns. It comes as no surprise, then, that Peter Hitchcock's conclusions about the desired *methodology* of World Literature refer to limits and traps rather than to a positive axiology. He warns against³⁶ the illusion that celebrating diversity through the inclusion of peripheral literature into academic research would be a sufficient solution to the concrete crises of the *world* and that even the idea of *openness* to alterity lacks inherent value.³⁷ A preferred concept is Said's *worldliness*, which also considers the historical and political circumstances in which differences between cultures first occurred.

By this point, it has become clear that the generalized reluctance and moderation of World Literature, especially in terms of its ethical stance, derive from the post-deconstructivist condition of criticism and theory. Back in the 1910s, Formalism appeared in a dichotomous frame, explicitly proposing a new understanding of literature and language instead of the previously impressionistic one and drawing closer to scientific objectivity (a dynamic that would intensify with Structuralism). Formalists also refused to allow ideological authority to enter aesthetic judgment, so that their project was distinct from the Marxist, state-approved one, which had inherited the pre-Romantic belief that literature's utility lied in its social, economic, and pedagogical benefits. The poststructuralist genesis of theory was different, though, as it started from a place of suspicion and self-reflexivity. There was no theoretical approach that the poststructuralists could have advertised as a perfect solution to previous failings, only lucidity regarding the imperfection of one's own critical tools (Derrida), the ontological inconsistency of concepts embedded in Western thought and, lastly, our inability to function without said concepts.

This is the inheritance that World Literature is built on: rigour and internalized suspicion of one's own critical language. And there is perhaps no better materialization of deconstructivist anxieties than the articulation of *Weltliteratur* and second-order systems theory, which also explains World Literature's permanent shifts and self-problematization. While classical systems theory was formulated in the 1950s, the age of cybernetic

logic, and proposed an interdisciplinary and network-structured perspective on knowledge, its second variant entered the narrative a few decades later and introduced the notion of self-referential systems (whose very existence is, in fact, relativized): recursive patterns and oscillation take the place of linearity – as is the case with the canonization, obsolescence and rediscovery of many literary works; there is a continuous process of closing any system by reducing the complexity of its environment to a coherent meaning, only to re-open it later on and to question previous conclusions – one can see this reflected in World Literature’s pendulation between nationalizing and worlding, universality and specificity; finally, second-order theory also pays more attention to systems differentiation (inter-periphery relationships and micro-world systems are pertinent examples).

After World Literature

In terms of ethics, it must be said, however, that – alongside reluctance and skepticism – World Literature studies have also known attempts at recovering certain basic humanistic principles, such as the universality of human experience. Damrosch, for instance, begins his series of essays from *How to Read World Literature* precisely with a motivational reflection on the transcultural circulation of affect and aesthetic expression,³⁸ arguing in favour of the communicability of emotion in spite of different poetic conventions. Of course, this goes hand in hand with the pronounced ethical turn of theory and criticism after the age of poststructuralism, which informs several schools of thought, such as feminism or decolonialism. But the efforts to find a minimal axiology which cannot be accused of essentialism or conceptual mystification

also stem from the various cultural deadlocks of the last decades.³⁹ Ethics without ideology – this fantastic creature of the 21st century – could maybe undo the vicious circle of ossified ideologies, on the one hand, and the mirage of flawless, non-ethical and non-dogmatic scientific objectivity, on the other.

This brings me to the last question of my article, which refers to the birth of yet another regime of relevance and its correspondent type of literary studies. Ever since the 80s, postmodernism met with harsh criticism both from the partisans of high culture and from another group of concerned intellectuals, eloquently represented by David Foster Wallace in his famous essay, *E Unibus Pluram*.⁴⁰ There are many elements that come under fire in Wallace’s analysis, such as Image Fictions, seen as narratives which simply mirror American society and replace emotional empathy with passive recognition of clichés, superficiality, deconstructive irony, and cynicism. Today, the artists that set out to correct postmodern “flaws” have been known to resort to community projects, participatory art,⁴¹ or metamodernist experiments,⁴² all of which focus on social justice and identification with the other. Interestingly, this does not amount to a return to the pre-Romantic regime of relevance, when art was dependent on social or political goals,⁴³ because there is no ideology behind the work of the new artists – nothing but the already-mentioned humanistic principles of respect, equality, and empathy. One can therefore only wonder if such a disconcerting, still underground artistic direction could eventually result in a new regime of relevance and a new form of criticism. It would have to be a paradoxical one, equally characterized by an explicit recourse to ethics⁴⁴ and the self-reflexivity of deconstruction – a spectacular hybrid, by all means, the functionality of which is still debatable.

Notes:

1. In Tihanov’s own words, a regime of relevance is “a historically available constellation of social and cultural parameters that shape the predominant understanding and use of literature for the duration of that particular constellation.” Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 6.
3. *Ibid.*, 181.
4. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 8.
5. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3-4.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Oxford: Wiley & Blackwell, 2009), 3-5.
8. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 12.
9. In a 2010 essay, Revathi Krishnaswamy notices that *Europe and* comparisons endure even in the field of postcolonialism. Revathi Krishnaswamy, “Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization”, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Fall 2010): 399-419, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40962926>, 402.
10. Marko Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 13, 15-16.
11. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 6.



12. Marko Juvan, *Worlding*, 12-14.
13. Ibid., 3.
14. Ibid., 16.
15. Thomas O. Beebee, "Introduction: Departures, Emanations, Intersections" in *German Literature as World Literature*, ed. Thomas O. Beebee (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2-3.
16. Mihai Iovănel, "Temporal Webs of World Literature: Rebranding Games and Global Relevance after the Second World War – Mircea Eliade, E. M. Cioran, Eugène Ionesco" in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 217-233.
17. Ibid., 229-230.
18. Bogdan Ștefănescu, "Romanian Modernity and the Rhetoric of Vacuity: Toward a Comparative Postcolonialism" in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 255-269.
19. Ibid., 265.
20. Thomas O. Beebee, "Introduction," 1.
21. David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 5.
22. "The current debate on "world literature" is part and parcel of this dispersed legacy of literary theory, reenacting the cardinal debate about whether one should think literature within the horizon of language or beyond that horizon." Tihanov, *The Birth and Death*, 181.
23. Ibid., 182.
24. Ibid., 176.
25. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, 47-51.
26. Ibid., 56-62.
27. Revathi Krishnaswamy, "Toward", 399-400.
28. Ibid., 410-412.
29. In his 2010 book, *Epistemic Disobedience*, the decolonial critic Walter Mignolo borrows the concept of *delinking* from the Egyptian sociologist Samir Amin, who had coined the term back in 1985. Mignolo adds an epistemological dimension to the concept, in order to fully defy the logic of coloniality. Walter Mignolo, *Dezobediința epistemică* (Cluj: Idea, 2015), 26.
30. Krishnaswamy, "Toward", 408-415.
31. Sylvia Marcos, *Femeile indigene și cosmoviziunea decolonială* (Cluj: Idea, 2014).
32. Antoine Compagnon, *Cele cinci paradoxuri ale modernității* (Cluj: Echinox, 1998), 107-108.
33. Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 168-178.
34. Peter Hitchcock, "The Ethics of World Literature" in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (New York: Routledge, 2012), 366.
35. Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1-2.
36. Peter Hitchcock, "The Ethics", 367.
37. Ibid., 369.
38. David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, 2.
39. One that comes to mind is the paradox of multiculturalism – If liberal democracies are supposed to defend each person's right to choose their own definition of morality and a good life, is such a government allowed to interfere in the non-liberal, discriminatory practices of ethnic or religious minorities?
40. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no.2 (1993), 151.
41. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 18-26.
42. The trio of Turner, LaBeouf, and Rönkkö is representative through their manifestos and public performances.
43. Ștefan Baghiu, "The Relative Autonomy of Literature: Romanian Literary Criticism and Theory before World War II," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2020); Daiana Gârdan, "One Theory's Underdog is Another Theory's Treasure: The Novelistic Genre in Different Regimes of Relevance," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2020): 15-19.
44. One of the trio's experiments is titled *I'm a hypocrite, but I'm still trying*.

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