Rethinking World Literature Studies in Latin American and Spanish Contexts

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Rethinking World Literature Studies

This issue presents a collection of essays which address, from the perspectives of distinct critical traditions, the epistemological framework and central problems of World Literature Studies—both its most original contributions (de-Eurocentering Weltliteratur, addressing various levels of culture, centering the circulation of texts and their translation, the role of the market), as well as its dialogue with classic comparative approaches. The term “rethinking” used in the title of the issue is not meant in the sense of adding fuel to the debate—lively enough as it is—around the very notion of World Literature (Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova, and David, among others), but denotes an operation that is essential to any critical endeavor: the interrogation of theories and methods that underlie the reading of a text (as Raymond Williams and Edward Said have argued). We assume World Literature as a mode of comparativism that integrates the classical concerns of Comparative Literature about supranational relationships between texts, with the “secular” criticism of Cultural Studies and its attention to context.

In order to make our position clear, it should be noted that this issue for the most part does not question the concept of World Literature as a field of study, and leaves out the discussion of its pedagogical value in the teaching of literature, as well as the related debates on the controversial redrawing of literary canons encompassed by this critical approach. The essays gathered here do not address World Literature as a method that might draw upon a gathering of big data for organizing the undifferentiated magma of all literary
texts, produced at all times and in all places (Moretti “Conjectures”; “More Conjectures”; Graphs, Maps, Trees). They mostly take literary texts in their contextual relations, or “ecologies,” but they do not consider language as the central axis to which reflection is mostly moored (Beecroft “World Literature”; An Ecology).

Our approach consists in adopting World Literature as a mode of thinking the literary text in its circulation in different geographical and critical contexts. We take World Literature as originally formulated by David Damrosch: “My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (Damrosch What 5), rather than the concept as it appears in his later work “World Literature as an Alternative Discourse.” Our notion is also in line with Gisèle Sapiro’s “How do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?”; however, we do not necessarily understand circulation and reading as exclusively dependent on translation either, something that Emily Apter has objected to in Against World Literature.

We concentrate specifically on the problems in the circulation of literature in critical contexts and critical traditions, and in particular on how circulation produces different histories of comparativism, or comparativisms, related to national critical traditions—on the frictions between literary and geopolitical maps, between notions of literary citizenship and foreignness, between real and imagined places, and between political strategies and diplomatic actions.

Latin American and Spanish Critical Contexts

These issues are predominantly considered from the Latin American and Spanish perspectives, as the title suggests, although a clarification would not be amiss. We work from the Latin American and Spanish contexts, but our primary goal is not to add a few more regional or national bricks to a global wall. Rather, our wish is to make visible some critical traditions rooted in Latin American countries and to underline their suitability for World Literature Studies. Indeed, this collection of texts is, among other things, evidence of the active participation of Latin American and Spanish scholars in the definition, translation, and diffusion of comparativism, as well as in the expansion and the reformulation of this field of study. Nevertheless, the contributions of Latin American critical traditions have been frequently understood as derivative of European or North American debates, and peripheral to these. Or, as Fernando Cabo Aseguiñolaza notes, this comparativism has been inscribed in the history of the discipline as a “world regionalism [that] goes hand in hand with the impossibility of accessing visibility and mainstream flow of circulation.”