

Yao Mengze (Beijing Normal University)

It is a long story of the conflicts and entanglements between Eurocentrism and de-Eurocentrism in literary historiography and scholarship. From mid-20th century on, almost all kinds of scholarly “re-thinkings” — about literature, world, and world literature—are always for de-Eurocentrism, explicitly or implicitly. However, Eurocentrism still exists here and there. For Eric Hayot, Professor of Comparative Literature and Asian Studies at Pennsylvania State University, who has written two books on the literary relationship between China and the West, the essential problem of Eurocentrism is that “the categories governing the profession’s sense of literary history insist on the vital importance of such notions as originality, novelty, progress.”(6) Based on this idea, he wrote his third book, *On Literary World*, in which he tries to draw “a new way of thinking about modern literature that makes the study of the non-West (and a more generally comparative literature) necessary.”(7)

Hayot explains in the “Introduction” how categories and terminologies rule our scholarship, and what he intends to do with his deep interests in modernist literature at the beginning of this project. As he finds that the questions regarding modernism are rooted in the history of modernity, he decides to expand his project into a grand survey of the literary world, to produce “a new way of thinking about the literary history, not just of modernism, but of the entire modern period.”(7) At the end of this part, Hayot adds a list of questions and answers to offer clarifications “about this book—about its choices and limitations, about its position in larger conversations.”(8)

Part I, “Literary Worlds,” serves as the cornerstone of the whole book. At the beginning of this part, Hayot reviews different understandings of the “world” by two philosophers, i.e., Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy. In his perspective, the two philosophers tend to view the world as a “self-enclosing, self-organizing, self-grounding process,”(24) and regard the literary work as the world itself, hence a “world-forming quality.”(25) At the same time, “literary critics have usually, however, focused on the artwork’s world-content, not world-form, trusting the general concept of aesthetic or generic form to address the work’s relation to worldedness.”(25) So Hayot wants to create a new way to “cast one glance toward world-content (history, but also the idealized expression of world in the work’s preconscious) and another, simultaneously, toward world-form (philosophy, but also the material self-organization of the work as act).”(25-26)

Then Hayot turns to contemporary debates on world literature and world system by reviewing ideas from Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti and David Damrosch. He thinks that “no one has a very good theory of the world,”(40) so he explains his task as “to come up with a better [that is to say, a more integrative] theory of the world, and of the relationship between the world and literature.”(40)

By “literary world,” which is the title of the book, Hayot refers to two different layers of meaning: the world within a single (or a bundle of) literary work(s), or the whole world outside literature. However, he believes that the tension between these understandings “might be thought of as a feature of literary worldedness.”(45) Here Hayot refers to the essence of his “literary world”, and then he uses six variables to measure and describe this essence—amplitude, completeness, metadiegetic structure, connectedness, character-system, and dynamism, and supposes they “would allow us to categorize and describe aesthetic worlds opens up two possible future directions for research in the history of literature.”(86)

In Part II, Hayot gives himself three tasks: (1) “to come up with” “a good theory of the ‘total social history of the world as a ground for human life and human activity’” with which it “should become possible (2) “to develop a historically minimalist framework that (3) will permit the production of the history of the work of art as a history of worldedness.”(88) This part should be the kernel of this book. However, it is quite weak. By discussing the developments of astronomy and geography in the Western world, Hayot finds that it is “modernity” as a modern world-view that dominates our perspectives of modern literary history and suggests that in order to reflect or deconstruct Eurocentrism within modernity, it is better to historicize

its universalism rather than bringing out various alternative modernities. Therefore, Hayot employs three traditional terms of novels as three dominant modes of modern novels and mini frames of modernity as a modern world-view. They are: Realism, the mode of affirmation and conceptualization; Romanticism, the mode of creation and destruction; Modernism, the mode of negation and refusal. Hayot explains that “the mode becomes what it is at any given moment through the interaction between variables, the other modes, social norms, and histories of content and theme,”(136) and these modes permit “a return to the larger historical picture that has been the subject of part 2, namely the pre-modern to modern shift,”(140) which “can also be parsed as variations in the values of the six variables.”(140)

In Part III, Hayot examines the ideologies of literary institutions, including institutions of scholarship, education and profession. By quoting Spinoza’s dictum “every definition is a negation,” Hayot points out that those definitions are “the enemy of clear thinking,” and periodization is the most harmful one among all. For scholars who are familiar with the scholarship of world literature, “periodization” is always one of the central problems of world literary history, and it always gives light to something while dimming the others. That is why Hayot notes that “the near-total dominance of the concept of periodization in literary studies, a dominance that amounts to a collective failure of imagination and will on the part of the literary profession.”(149) To solve institutional problems, we need institutional solutions. One solution as suggested by Hayot is “to create new periods,”(161) and this book could be recognized as one manifestation of such an effort. Moreover, he suggests methodologies against periodization: “to *produce work that creates models* for the kinds of literary historical work we hope to institutionalize in the curriculum and especially in the training of graduate students,” “to *stop advertising and hiring exclusively in period-based job categories*,” and “to *reshape the undergraduate and graduate curricula* in ways that undermine the assumption that our current model of periodization is the natural frame for literary study.”(167)

The last part, Appendixes, is quite peculiar. In this part, Hayot discusses some concepts like “medium and form”, “the history of reality” and “modern”, which are, in his words, “a number of questions, whose elaboration in the main body of the text would have disrupted the line I was trying to follow,”(8) and therefore he addresses them in this part. It is understandable that these questions can hardly be solved within the limit of one single book, not to mention in the form of Appendixes. Therefore more questions remain unanswered.

This book wants to challenge and revise the entire literary scholarship and institution. Although one could say that all the “new” stuff that it promotes (such as realism, modernism, and the six variables) is in effect not new, the author does provide some inspiring ideas for further inquiries. To approach this purpose, however, the key word of this book still needs clearer interpretation: although the whole book talks much about the “world”, and the author notices that the term has various meanings, he nevertheless does not explain clearly what his literary “world” and “worldedness” truly mean, and his explanation of these two concepts seems to have fallen into a circular argument.

After all, the book revitalizes some old terms, and shows possibilities to use them to inquire into our contemporary issues that are rooted in the long history. And for this history, the book raises good questions with deep skepticism toward the entire academic institutions, and urges us to find new ways to look at world (literary) history, and to take actions to make a better future.

Author Profile:

Yao Mengze is a PhD candidate of the School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University. He majors in Comparative Literature and World Literature. His research interests include world literature studies, as well as modern Chinese intellectual and academic history under comparative frameworks.