

David Damrosch. *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2020. ISBN 9780691134994. 386 pp.

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Since the comparative literature is always connected to the world literature in Chinese academic regime and the latter is doubtless one of the most promising undertaking in the international literary academia nowadays, it is little wonder that some Chinese comparatists tend to picture a scholar who specializes in the world literature comparing the literatures. But it doesn't follow that the theoretical construction of comparative literature is somewhat neglected in China. Quite the contrary, the comparative theories are consecrated here to the extent that the most of scholars in this field are haunted by the taboos and commandments of the discipline and some comparatists are so obsessed with finding, sharing and following the recipes for comparison that they barely have the opportunity to give the underlying model a rethink despite all their efforts to innovate the theoretical frame. In a word, what's missing here is not a creative passion, or the theoretical commitment, but a sort of alienation effect, a sense of alienation from the myth of theory, which can indeed be found in *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* which Damrosch published in 2020.

However, looking back on Franco Moretti's famous paper, *Conjectures on World Literature*, we will realize that it was not the first time that a specialist in the theory of world literature imparted his understanding of comparative literature. Backed up by his eloquence on the construction of the analytical model of comprehensive literary history, Moretti stated that there is only one simple reason for being a comparatist: that viewpoint is better (Moretti 61). Anyway, the viewpoint that Moretti mentioned is rather a theoretical perspective centering around the metaphors about tress and waves, a perception of the law of literary evolution which is also an abstraction constantly calibrated by the localized researches. If Moretti seems an author in favour of theoretical prescriptions, it is definitely not the general impression about Damrosch. With plenty of brilliant polyglot case studies, Damrosch's seminal work, *What is World Literature*, just gave a triple definition

for the world literature in the end, which in fact merely demarcates the scope of his subject. Nevertheless, persisting in his all-inclusive writing style in *Comparing the Literatures*, Damrosch re-examined the relationship between the various theoretical conjectures and the comparative literature as an academic field, leading to assimilation of propositions of literary theories, translation studies, studies of world literature and interdisciplinary researches. What is noteworthy is that although the reflection upon diverse academic paradigms does certainly not amount to the simple rejection of theories, it also doesn't indicate entire absorption of them. Rather, it is a revisiting with critical consciousness at varied assumptions whose valences are now re-evaluated in a holistic context, exhibiting a self-constraint attitude towards utilization of any single theoretical frame. Thus, Damrosch actually took an in-between position between different theoretical propositions, and more importantly, between the material standpoints and the theoretical perspectives.

As it is known to all, the dichotomy between the empirical and the abstract is a vital issue for Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* which intends to overcome the supposedly insuperable antinomy between internal criticism and external criticism. For Casanova, the literariness as a mysterious quality can be disenchanting when the single work is checked according to its relation to the entire literary universe of which it is a part (Casanova 3-4). It seems that totality of the research of world literature could endow the researcher with a vantage point through which one can transcend the general epistemological limit to relocate, renovate and even revitalize the trite academic notions. The same goes for Damrosch's *Comparing the Literatures*. With a seemingly chaotic outward appearance, the book investigates nearly all prevailing issues of comparative literature such as its-to quote the titles of each chapter-origins, emigrations, politics, theories, languages, literatures, worlds and the last but not the least, comparisons. In fact, the logic behind the sequence of chapters is rather narratological than academically speculative, and in consideration of the writing style which is quite entertaining and appealing, the arrangement could be reckoned as Damroschian which means that the line of reasoning dormant inside the text needs to be reconstructed by engaging readers who could actually take the proper position between the sheer fragmental and the absolute systematic.

After all, Damrosch delineated the internal struggle of Herder, that is, the contradiction between systematic thinking and a deep suspicion of all systems, in the opening chapter of his book. It seems to Damrosch that the intellectual irresolution inflicting Herder throughout the whole life led to his open-mindedness which not only facilitated the constant mutation of his thought but also drove his

philosophical introspection into continuous collision with the varieties of social reality (Damrosch 21-22). And Herder's impatience with the received ideas and methods was historicized by Damrosch who depicted meticulously Herder's personal experience within the panorama of his world. In other words, the spirit of the life in the end of 18th century was projected on the pioneering comparatist whose portrait could finally be sketched by a series of oxymorons: a localized universalist, a secularized pastor, an internationalist nationalist... Thus, his complex character should be regarded as, to appropriate Damrosch's words, "the fruit of deep reflection on the uncertainties of cultural belonging in a radically relativistic world" (Damrosch 19). However, at the same time, Damrosch suggested his own world is also a "radically relativistic" one: a world suffering from varied disasters "from the crisis of migration and of the environment to the worldwide rise of inequality, together with violent conflicts that have the United States involved in an Orwellian state of perpetual war" (Damrosch 4). In a word, the *Zeitgeist* of our life in the present moment gave Damrosch an irrefutable reason to reinterpret the significance of comparative literature which is supposedly able to respond to the crises of our time.

Let's be more dramatic: it is the epoch of belief, and it is the epoch of incredulity. Anyway, a world rushing off the rails cannot be imagined with any existing consensus and the rampant rises of xenophobia and populism are real threats which signal the danger of ideological void without timely filling of sound judgement. It was why Damrosch highlighted the internationalism, realism and humanism of comparative literature in his book. To trace the discipline's origins (a plural term), Damrosch re-established the foundations of comparative literature on the progression of emigrations in the global context, which arouses my interest to juxtapose the readings of the first two chapters, "Origins" and "Emigrations". In the narration of Damrosch, the rise of comparative literature was also a process of emigrations which cannot be presented without the demonstration of the diasporic experiences of the predecessors such as de Staël, Posnett, Hu Shih and Auerbach, to name a few. Thus, the discipline's universalism was rooted in the situation of its birth that was not a transient incident but a story of long duration, which remind us of Walter Benjamin's illumination that the origin "is meant not the coming-to-be of what has originated but rather what originates in the becoming and passing away" and as a category it is not "purely logical, but rather historical" (Benjamin 24-25). For instance, the historical consciousness was clearly manifested in Damrosch's statement that the comparative literary history "gained a sure footing only with the inclusion of the Oriental" (Damrosch 14), amending the stale one-sided impression

about eastward spread of western knowledge and visualizing the relevance of the contact between the occident and the oriental in the global academic history. Just like Herder's internal conflict between the secular philosophy and the mystical theology, besides the opposition between the absent genesis (a singular term) and the origins, the tension in Damrosch's thought also found other expressions in the dichotomies such as the institutional politics versus the wider political scene, the close reading versus the distant reading, the globalization as a mega trend versus the principle status of nation-states, and finally, the viewpoint of theories versus the viewpoint of materials. Although most of the issues by no means broke away from the traditional concerns of our discipline, they were still given new prominence in the context both academic and ideological which Damrosch offered.

In Damrosch's opinion, the correspondence between institutional academic research and construction of public consensus constitutes the basis for further discussion of other issues, and this was probably the reason that "politics" came to his attention just following "origins" and "emigrations" which as suggested above actually together unfold the historical map of the discipline in the early stage. As far as the American comparative literature, Damrosch pointed out again that the broader-based studies of American school had always been carried out "at the price of a pervasive dissociation from American literature and from the country's cultural and political debates" (Damrosch 97). The consequence of the turning inward of most American comparatists was the absence of the discipline from the most part of the history of radical ideological struggle during the second half of 20th century. However, Damrosch still brought an unnoticeable line of the disciplinary history to the fore, an obscure politically engaged marathon proceeded by succeeding generations of (American and non-American) brilliant scholars including Northrop Frye, Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Gayatri C. Spivak who played important roles in the recent comparative literary history and who built organic connections between their academic careers and political concerns. As a senior professor surviving the drastic struggle of institutional politics, Damrosch also devoted many pages to discuss the strategies of comparatists for acquiring the greater share of budget, but obsession with "the storm in a teacup" would be against Damrosch's own intention especially because the core of institutional politics is ultimately an issue of disciplinary orientation whose permanent settlement need turn to the constantly further intervention of the department into the cultural politics of the United States and beyond.

To raise the prestige of comparatists, Damrosch declared that "a committed internationalism remains a hallmark of comparative studies today" (Damrosch

102), but in specific studies, the internationalism undoubtedly implies the polyglot competence which remains a challenge for many researchers though it is definitely one of the primary weapons for them to defend their own research against the accusation of “amateurishness” from other departments. For Damrosch, the prime concern is rather an ideological one: Will the sacred original-language texts be desecrated by the translations? Should the various translations be excluded from the field of comparative studies to maintain the purity of philological interpretation? As for the opposition between the close reading and the distant reading which are respectively promoted by Emily Apter and Franco Moretti, is there any possibilities of integrating one with the other? Obviously, Damrosch, a polyglot himself, is an opponent of dogmatism of sticking to original-language texts and quite different in this regard from his forerunners such as Harry Levin and Thomas Greene who insisted on the linguistic elitism of comparative literature in their reports on professional standards to the ACLA (Bernheimer 21-23, 29-32). What’s more, a sense of alienation from any exclusive preoccupations with a certain methodology, be it the close reading or distant reading, was suggested in the book. In Damrosch’s narration, as the reflective semifluency in language could be endowed with a critical consciousness of pre-set cultural roles in the milieu, the distant reading which makes full use of various renditions and existing research was highly rated for its undeniable value for expanding horizons of comparative studies. Nevertheless, without an intermediate knowledge of a language, the utilization of translations would work successfully only when the researchers have the basic reading ability “to check key passages” of original texts and the sufficient knowledge to pursue the topic at issue (Damrosch 191). So, Damrosch really appreciated Spivak’s idea of a sliding scale of language learning which help researchers develop the ability to read scholarship in other languages and to work their way “through literary texts in a bilingual edition or with a translation at hand” (Damrosch 192).

The duet of globalization and the closed state of nation-states was another subject for Damrosch. In fact, it’s no surprise that the story of internationalism of comparative literature need be retold in an era of fierce competition of major powers, particularly because the trend of reverse globalization has become a simple fact in the days of Trump. If the globalism is no longer a self-evident truth in the international opinion environment, how should our discipline be re-oriented toward the cultural debates in the moment? “Increasingly I’m thinking in the last ten years not so much about circulation globally but in the way the world comes into a given national market,” declared Damrosch in an interview, “so I actually think that world literature should not be thought of primarily in terms of

globalization or global literature, which is only one kind of literature, but there are many kinds of world literatures” (Chen & Damrosch 4). The world literatures aside, for comparative studies, the attention paid to the given national markets which is also an independent unit of global literature circulation promoted the conception of internationalism of the single national literature. On the one hand, Damrosch recognized national literatures as a major force in our age; on the other hand, perceived as an assemblage of works influenced by foreign literature and even containing various literary translations as a part of it, the national literature with the sense of isolation was also deconstructed in the book. For Damrosch, the point is that “a dismissively antinationalistic stance can’t do justice to the internationalism of many national literatures” (Damrosch 208), and he took the British Literature as an example to show the role of literary translations in the ideological construction of a nation-state. In some senses, the strategic goal of national ideological construction Damrosch represented here recalls the “cosmion” of Eric Voegelin which “is as a whole a little world” albeit with “externality as one of its important components” (Voegelin 27). For with the world literature cultivated in the national market, the elaborate symbolism of a nation-state could more probably be experienced by its people “as of their human essence” instead of “an accident or a convenience” (ibid.). Thus, the workable subject of comparative studies is neither a totally open society nor the absolutely closed one, but a society which is working continuously on literary symbolism inside and outside its national boundaries to elaborate its ideological tradition. When Damrosch talked about “understanding the importance of multilingualism within national cultures” and “works that genuinely become part of the literary culture into which they are translated” (Damrosch 213-4), he had, consciously or unconsciously, referred to the underlying political philosophy of comparative literature of our time. In other words, although the international democratism and cultural liberalism remained Damrosch’s basic positions, these propositions must be dealt with against the pragmatic knowledge of the various social realities. Anyway, in the vision of comparatists, the heterogeneity of nationalist culture is a theme as interesting as the homogeneity of globalization is, but talking about both of them doesn’t imply the conformity to the logic of authoritarianist or imperialist politics. Rather, it is an attempt at apprehending the state of hybridity rooted in the modernity. At the same time, it also indicates the revolt of the empirical knowledge to the accepted rules of existing theories, which was discussed as a major concern later in the book.

The critical literary theories such as post-colonialism are usually supposed to be theoretical weapons of researchers to eliminate the hierarchies of literary

reading and liberate the suppressed meanings of literary texts. However, Damrosch demonstrated the sub-hierarchy of literary texts which was replicated by the post-colonialist reading, indicating that even within the post-colonialist criticism the old-economy authors “continues to be more strongly represented in the survey anthologies than almost any of the new discoveries of recent decades” (Damrosch 224). For example, the old modernist James Joyce is now shifted to the representative author of the semicolonial society meanwhile the writers working in the nonhegemonic languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese and Turkish are still not appealing enough to change their status as the lower major authors. Besides, the blind spot of theorists is also manifested in the Hermeneutic circles of theoretical interpretations which is embodied in the case studies of Michael Ondaatje and Amitav Ghosh whose value for criticism has always been reduced to their blame for imperialism or capitalism. Then, for the marginal figure such as Kukrit Pramoj who has little relevance to the predominant theories, a large range of academic discussion is almost unattainable though he is verily quite interesting in many aspects. In addition, Damrosch also wrote about the violence present in the cross-civilizational comparison and recommended the Osaka-based scholar Takayuki Yokota-Murakami’s work, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature* (1998), on the subject, for it is not uncommon that the comparatist distorts the material from a distinct civilization to pander to the theoretical model which he employs and hence cancels off the basic connotations implied in the text and its context. So, in the sense, the “tremendous impoverishment of literary studies” that Damrosch mentioned is not only the consequence of prevailing obsession with “contemporary world literature”, but also the end result of the fetish of invincible theoretical interpretation (Damrosch 298-9). To advocate a positive attitude for comparison, Damrosch cited Ming Xie’s words from *Conditions of Comparisons* (2011) that “critical comparativity is not just about comparing existing ways of thinking but also, more important, comparing against them”, and finally it is about “how meaning is constituted” (Cited in Damrosch 316).

However, in Damrosch’s own narration, it appears that the critical comparativity is more concerning about a sort of perspective through which one comparatist can digest literary texts as many as possible, including new works as well as the classics, with little reduction in their aesthetic and ideological richness. Thus, there seems to be sufficient evidence to believe that Damrosch’s construction of comparativity was centering around the materials rather than the theories. It should be at least noted that in Damrosch’s comparative study of Joyce, Ibsen and Higuchi Ichiyo, the comparability of Joyce and Ichiyo is relatively weak especially in consideration of

their quite indirect historical connection. It could be said that the inclusion of Ichiyo in this case was rather based on the compassion for her marginal status in the world literature. And the problem is, in such a manner, Damrosch actually preserved the crisis of comparability of the American school which has never provided a solid foundation for the parallel studies of aesthetic comparison. Anyway, Damrosch never took the crisis of comparability seriously in his book to say the least.

All in all, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* is a very impressive, inspirational and instructive book on comparative literature. Damrosch would never like to confine the discipline in any methodological systems, as he confirmed in the conclusion that “a theme running throughout this book has been that the different strands of comparison that we find today have long been intertwined” (Damrosch 336). However, for the comparatists whose distress is usually as profound as the joy is, what is needed is the courage to maintain their diversity “in archives, approaches and perspectives” (ibid.). Moreover, we witnessed that Damrosch as a humanist infused his strong sense of political responsibility into his academic writing which also exemplified the “secular criticism” Said once promoted. As a comparatist, he shared his knowledge as well as his sensibility with all of us.

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