World Literature as Method: An Interview with Professor Theo D'haen

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Abstract:

In this interview, which took place on November 11, 2024, in Le Royal Café, Antwerp, Prof. D'haen shared his insights into world literature studies and his own approach to the field, referring to the rise of world literature studies in Europe, the various theoretical models, and the methods of spatialization and historization in this field. He also made meaningful connections between world literature and other terms like decolonization, postcolonialism, Geopolitics, and global literature. Moreover, the situation of Dutch and Flemish literature in world literature was touched upon as a special case to show the general condition of minor literatures. In conclusion, He recommended that world literature, comparative literature, and translation studies should work together with specialists in national literature to achieve a combination of methods in the field.

Keywords: World Literature, geopolitics, Dutch and Flemish literature, Translation Studies, Global Literature, Comparative Literature

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Jiang: Professor D'haen, thank you very much for accepting this interview request. You enjoy a high reputation among Chinese literary scholars, and it is not the first time that you have been interviewed on world literature by a Chinese scholar. Yet, when I look at the field of world literature, especially the field of Western world literature studies, I still find many questions. I hope you can share your answers not only with me but also with other readers. I think we can divide our discussion today into three parts. First, let's focus on your interpretation of the history of "what has been written about world literature",[1] about which we read in your new book, *A History of World Literature* (2024), a revised and expanded version of *The Routledge*

1 Theo D'haen, *A History of World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 1.

Concise History of World Literature from 2012. Then, I think we should examine some issues derived from *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics* (2021) to focus on your methodology of world literature research. Last, I would like to ask you briefly about the condition of Dutch and Flemish literature in world literature. However, let's start with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In *A History of World Literature*, you take Goethe's use of the term *Weltliteratur* as the real starting point of the discourse of world literature, though the term may not have quite originated with him. Why?

D'haen: The term *Weltliteratur* had indeed been used already some fifty years before Goethe, but this never had become common knowledge throughout Europe. Goethe was the most influential writer in Europe at the time he came to use it, and this familiarized European intellectuals with the concept. That is why, in accordance with established usage, I date the beginning of the effective discussion about world literature, rather than the sheer mention of the term, from Goethe.

Jiang: You mean that it is simply a historical fact, don't you?

D'haen: There is also a reason why Goethe picked up the term and made it popular when he did. The time was right for it. Europe had just come out of the Napoleonic wars which changed Europe very much. At the same time, there had been some technical innovations in journal production and distribution, and this facilitated the spread of ideas around Europe. Goethe was keenly aware of this. What also played a role is that the advent of Romanticism had fueled interest in the most diverse literatures in Europe.

Jiang: I see that the historical condition was right for Goethe to make the term well-known around Europe. But as we know, the contemporary trend of world literature studies arose basically in North America rather than from Europe, and it is primarily connected to the pedagogical arrangement of departments of English and of comparative literature in United States. As you mentioned somewhere, "[u]ntil recently, in Europe interest in the subject was mostly limited to research."[2] Could you elaborate a little on the context and practice of world literature discourse in Europe? Based on my own experience of visiting KU Leuven in the past year, I guess comparative literature classes in Europe are also starting to incorporate some introduction to world literature research. As a senior teacher and one of the most important literary comparatists in Europe, could you please review briefly for us the vicissitudes of the pedagogical arrangement of comparative literature in Europe throughout your long career in teaching?

2 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 3.

D'haen: Comparative literature originated in the nineteenth century in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. For the longest time, though, if it was taught at all, this was on a very small scale. Literature in most European countries was usually taught in departments of either Romance or Germanic philology, and sometimes Slavic philology, where the emphasis was on the historical study of both the languages and literatures of the various language families in Europe. Romance philology comprised the languages deriving from Latin: French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian, although the latter was only rarely taught. Germanic philology covered German, English, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages. Slavic philology concentrated on Russian, Polish, Czech, and so on. In a sense, these departments were already engaged with comparative literature, albeit confined to the various literatures within a specific language family, and without using the term comparative literature. In the United States, things were different, which explains why scholars such as Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who in Germany (and in Turkey, to which they exiled themselves when the Nazis came to power in Germany) had been active in departments of Romance philology, were considered comparatists when they moved to the US after the Second World War. Of course, until the Second World War, a university education was the privilege of a small elite in Europe.

After the Second World War, and especially during the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of democratization swept through European higher education. Many more people could pursue higher education studies, and this led to the expansion of university departments—among them the foreign language departments. Mostly, these foreign language departments continued with studying and teaching the languages and literatures of one language family, or they confined themselves to only one language and literature, as was the case in Holland. Only comparative literature scholars worked on combinations of literatures from several of these fields. They were very few, though, and they were looked upon with some suspicion by national literature departments that perceived them as competitors. As a result, comparative literature scholars, and their departments, if they existed at all, were not very popular.

Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, comparative literature, as the study of several literatures simultaneously, was replaced by theory. In many countries departments of comparative literature were renamed departments of general and comparative literature or departments of comparative literature and literary theory. Only over the last twenty-five years has there been a return to comparative literature as the study of several literatures, this time spurred by the renewed interest in world literature.

Now, in Europe, as I said, there had always been an interest in world litera-

ture, but this was mostly limited to research. Change happened for two reasons. On the one hand, there was the influence of developments in university teaching in the United States. Whether we like it or not, what happens in American academe has influenced European higher education ever since the Second World War. On the other hand, some structural changes occurred in European higher education. In 1999, the European ministers of education met in the Italian city of Bologna to discuss the harmonization of European higher education. Until then, higher education around Europe had been very diverse. In some countries, a university degree required four years of study, sometimes divided to two plus two, sometimes in one plus three, or other variants. In others, an undergraduate degree took three years, followed—or not—by one or two years for an MA. In all countries, you could add on a PhD, again with varying lengths of study after the BA or MA. In 1999, in Bologna, it was decided to harmonize all this into three years for a BA, one or two years for an MA, and then a PhD. This facilitated educational exchanges between the different European countries via the European Union Erasmus program, named after a famous sixteenth-century Dutch scholar. Further, whereas in many countries, it was customary for a university course to run for an entire year with exams at the end, from now on semester courses would be the rule. This enabled students to go on an exchange for one semester or one year, depending on what they wanted to do. But it also raised the problem of language. Hungarian students in Denmark or French students in Poland most probably were unfamiliar with the local language of instruction. Hence, it became mandatory that a lot of courses should be taught in a language that was comprehensible and usable for most students around Europe. For practical reasons, universities started offering courses in English to accommodate foreign students. And you needed courses that were broad enough to appeal to students from different countries, interested in different literatures, and using different languages, and that could also include students from your own country.

Around the same time, many countries started encouraging students to opt for so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) courses, which led to falling enrolments in the humanities, especially in language and literature courses. In addition, governments argued that it was too expensive to offer so many different literatures and languages in separate departments. A combination of all this led to the cutting of personnel in language and literature departments, which also meant that at a given moment the number of people offering courses in separate languages and literatures became too small to really continue as usual. Add to this the influence of multiculturalism and postcolonialism and geopolitical developments forcing Europeans to look beyond the borders of their own little continent.

Altogether, this made a convincing case for no longer teaching national literatures exclusively but switching at least to some degree to courses taught in English and addressing various literatures. In several countries, then, there arose an interest in how to teach European and world literature, often relating the two. In Denmark, for instance, there were initiatives in this direction by Svend Erik Larsen and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen at Aarhus University. In Spain, César Domínguez at the University of Santiago de Compostela, and in Portugal, Helena Buescu at the University of Lisbon developed similar interests. After that, it spread to the rest of Europe. This is also one of the differences between the book I published in 2012, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, and its revised and expanded 2024 version, *A History of World Literature*. In the former, I only mentioned the examples of Denmark, Spain, and Portugal. In the twelve years since that book was published, in many more places in Europe, courses in European literature and world literature are being offered. That is a big change in European higher education.

Jiang: This is a quite fresh and interesting view according to which we should pay more attention to the rise of world literature discourse in Europe in the last decades, taking into consideration the institutional changes and pedagogical impetus behind European scholars' renewed enthusiasm for doing more research in and teaching of world literature.

D'haen: As I said, it has to do with institutional changes in the university landscape but also with geopolitics. There is not only the rise of China as a contender for economic and political and military power with the United States, but also the emergence of several other powers such as India, Brazil, and soon also South Africa and Indonesia. In the old days, France, Great Britain, and Germany were world powers. This is no longer the case. They may still think that they are but in reality they are not. After all, from a global perspective, they are small countries. France and the United Kingdom have some seventy million inhabitants, Germany eighty-five. In Europe, that is a lot, but next to China, India, Brazil, Mexico, or Indonesia, it's nothing. Europe is still relatively rich, still relatively powerful, but every decade its power diminishes. You can also see this in demographic terms. In 1800, the time of Napoleon, the population of Europe made up about 25% or one-quarter of the total population of the world. Now, it has dropped to something like 8%. In terms of power, Europe reached its pinnacle around the turn of the twentieth century, but ever since then it has been on the wane. The only way for Europe to still carry some weight in today's world is united, which of course is what the European Union is all about. But this also means that to continue to study separate national European literatures today is to deny the reality of Europe's position in the changed world order.

And the only way you can give the literatures of Europe their rightful place, next to Chinese literature, Indian literature and so on, is to look at European literature as a whole and to teach it as such.

Jiang: Yes, I see that we should always take geopolitics, whether historically or at present, into consideration. Let's turn to the third question. In *A History of World Literature*, you connect the failed revolutions of 1848 with the reference of Marx and Engels to world literature, which in your opinion and that of many others, signals the end of the idea of *Weltliteratur* as a utopian model for society. However, when we take the thought of world literature as a strategy of the bourgeoisie, we might also remember that Marx and Engels sometimes praised the bourgeoisie as a historically revolutionary class, which makes us try to believe that they would also hold a dialectical view on world literature. Would you please give us more ideas about the significance of the legacy of Marx and Engels in the field of world literature?

D'haen: Obviously, Marx and Engels thought of world literature as reflecting the uniformization and globalization of all markets under bourgeois capitalism. In this sense, they saw it as a bad thing because it signaled the power of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, they considered the bourgeoisie as a necessary step in the historical evolution towards the final coming of the rule of the proletariat and ultimately of a classless society of equals. I think they are relatively ambiguous about the role of literature in this. From a dialectical perspective, it makes sense to see realism, which was basically the ruling form of literature under the bourgeoisie, as a necessary step towards bringing literature closer to the lived reality of real people, which in this case would be the middle classes. The next step would be naturalist literature, which concentrated not on the middle classes but on the working classes, although often from a deterministic point of view. But, of course, Marx and Engels only lived to see the beginning of that. The final achievement would then be the advent of proletarian literature by somebody like Maxim Gorky at the end of the nineteenth century and ultimately the rise of Soviet-style social realism. I don't know what Marx and Engels would have made of social realism, for they died long before this became a reality, but you can see the whole thing as part of the dialectical process, which, of course, they inherited themselves from Hegel. It is Hegel who sketched the process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which then becomes a new thesis, which leads to a new antithesis, which then leads to another compromise synthesis, which in turn functions as a new thesis, and so forth. Marx and Engels imposed their own teleological perspective upon this process. For Hegel, the dialectical process would resolve itself with the ultimate freedom of the individual

achieved under the Prussian nation-state. For Marx and Engels, the end of the whole exercise would be the rule of the proletariat, which would do away with all class differences, and which would leave only the class of humans, which amounts to another form of Utopia again.

Jiang: Yes, I think we must make an effort to get their idea about world literature, which is a little complicated, and you show us one important path to start. Well, the next question is related to the previous one in a way. I myself would like to take a dialectical view when dealing with Euro-American models of world literature like those of David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova. Although, as you mention in your 2012 book, they all three have a certain bias related to a single point of view from America, France, or Europe in general, they definitely made an effort, at least in my eyes, to break through the limitations of Euro-Americanism, for it seems to me that Casanova and Moretti described an unequal structure in order to fight against the current hegemony in the field, and as for Damrosch, he did pay special attention to the reading of works beyond the Western canon. Whether or not they succeeded in this effort, I would rather believe that their models are exemplary just because they are always willing to problematize their own models. For those who want to follow in their footsteps, what is illuminating and challenging is exactly this pattern in which one establishes one model and then actively problematizes it oneself. Do you think this is a fair way to look at it?

D'haen: We should also not forget that Casanova, Moretti, and Damrosch wrote their groundbreaking texts some twenty-five years ago now. I think that things have changed since then, with other scholars reflecting upon, criticizing, and adjusting their models from different perspectives. But what you say is correct in that they are all aware of their limitations. But on the other hand, there is no way you can describe anything, or analyze anything, without taking a particular position. There is no such thing as a neutral approach to anything. So, I think what they did is that they chose a model, and they tried to apply that model, but always being aware that any model is only valid as long as it holds and that it is always open to improvement. I have great admiration for all three of them because I think they brought something new to the field of world literature studies and comparative literature, and they did so at a moment when several other approaches to literature were running out of steam. I am thinking, for instance, of multiculturalism, of postcolonialism, and so on. In a sense, world literature set itself up as an alternative to these movements, but at the same time it also led these movements to rethink themselves in terms of world literature, and that is again why especially since 2012, when I published the first version of my book, what we see is a whole plethora of attempts

to combine these movements with world literature. I am thinking of someone like Pheng Cheah who published *What Is a World: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* in 2016, but there are many others. For instance, in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) rethinks world literature in economic terms, incorporating insights from postcolonialism and neo-Marxism. In some instances, they are picking up on work that had already been done earlier in the century. The Cuban Fernando Ortiz, for example, already in 1940 wrote a book on the importance of tobacco and sugar for the development of the Caribbean and how that is reflected in literature. The same thing has been going on with other movements that since then have developed. For example, eco-criticism is also being rethought: Either you can say that it is being rethought in terms of world literature, or you can say world literature is being reconceived in terms of ecology. That is what Ursula Heise is doing, for instance, or Martin Puchner, a colleague of Damrosch at Harvard. They are all writing and thinking about world literature from an ecological point of view, and when they reflect on climate change, they do so not just with respect to the present but also historically, relating it to older literature. This is what Puchner has done in a little book he published two or three years ago.

Jiang: One more specific question concerning David Damrosch. In your opinion, Damrosch adopts the philology of Erich Auerbach, for you say that he "finds his *Ansatzpunkt* in his elliptical or triangulated reading of the past and the distant, or the present and the near."[3] I find this very interesting. Could you offer more explanation? Is the term *Ansatzpunkt* always useful in the field of world literature?

D'haen: *Ansatzpunkt* means how you get to grips with a piece of literature—the English translation is usually given as "entry" or "entry point." In this case, it would refer to how you approach world literature. Comparative literature and world literature have repeatedly been critiqued for being too broad, in the sense that they would keep you from reading any work of literature in sufficient detail. By what he calls triangulation, Damrosch tries to defuse this criticism. He admits that from a comparative or world literature perspective, you indeed say less about a specific work than a national literature specialist would do, especially in its local context, because you don't go as deeply into the work's history and language, also because in world literature you often deal with works in translation and not in the original. On the other hand, because you read the work in question from a point of view that is located outside the national literature, you can see it from a different angle, in

3 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 126.

the context of other works, other literatures, and other languages. This may lead to the discovery of unexpected similarities or differences. Obviously, when you read something in translation, you are not going to get the full linguistic experience compared to when you read it in the original. But on the other hand, if you don't know the original language, the only way to get to know that work is to read it in translation; otherwise you would never know about it at all.

Jiang: Let's talk about Franco Moretti. How would you rate the presentism of Franco Moretti? For me, one sees the genuine origin of the new world literature studies in the establishment of modern systems of world literature proposed not only by Franco Moretti but also by Pascale Casanova and others. My point is that at first one finds world literature in its modern format, and it is only after this finding that one could deduce different premodern versions of world literature from the modern model at hand. And, if you forget the initial liaison between the term "world literature" and capitalist cultural modernity, you will obscure the significance and many concerns of this term even though you definitely expand its historical scope. What is your idea? I am very interested.

D'haen: Both Casanova and Moretti admit themselves that they practice a form of presentism. Moretti is very clear that he only talks about literature after 1750 and only about the novel. Casanova picks as her starting point Du Bellay's *Défense et illustration de la langue française* of the mid-sixteenth century. This, for her, signals the beginning of truly national literatures as we now think of them, with French literature in the lead. From then on, she says, we witnessed the development of a literary system which aims at the autonomy of the literary sphere from economic and political intervention. This argument is debatable, of course, and I think she mainly talks about the French literary system, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who developed this idea of the literary system striving for, and eventually achieving, autonomy. I think she has a point with respect certainly to European literature. Whether it stretches beyond European literature is a question mark. But I think she was aware of this, and she never pretended to really say something about Indian literature, Chinese literature, or non-European literatures.

Jiang: At least, we are sure that she never did that in a concrete way.

D'haen: Damrosch is different in that he doesn't really develop an all-encompassing model. What Damrosch offers is a way of reading. What I see him doing is updating the close reading model typical of the American pedagogical system, now with respect to not just the original but also translated literature, and not just applied to English or American literature, as was the case previously, but with regard to literature from all around the world. In this sense, he is very different from Moretti

and Casanova, and that is also, I think, why finally he has had perhaps more success with commentators around the world. It is precisely because he does not argue the eminence or the pioneering role of French, English, or more broadly European literature. The only thing he offers is his triangulated reading, and we can apply this to all works that satisfy his basic criterion for works of world literature should be works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, whether in translation or in the original.

Jiang: Actually, much in the same way you do, I would rather believe that there are two beginnings for the new discourse of world literature, and the first beginning refers to both Casanova and Morett and then the second one is about David Damrosch. I mean, obviously, Casanova and Moretti elaborated their own methods of systematic reading for world literature and definitely bring back topics like literariness, literary forms, genres and so on, to this field. However, they didn't bother to attach any kind of universalist agenda of cultural politics to the term "world literature" and sometimes they would rather highlight the commercialized and thus negative dimension of the term. However, it was Damrosch who established world literary research as a positive agenda with his concern that we should endorse the universalism and multiculturalism implied by the term. Although Damrosch's way of setting the agenda of universalism in this field still invites many controversies, I think we must admit the significance of Damrosch's re-departure.

D'haen: I think you are correct in that.

Jiang: You know, partly because we barely find the politics of recognition in its positive form in the hands of Casanova and Moretti, we see that this politics is back only in the second beginning of new world literature related to Damrosch's works. Of course, the presupposition of this observation is that the politics of recognition is very important to start a universalist and democratized agenda of cultural politics in the Western context as we know from the end of Second World War, if not from the elaboration of the whole idea by Hegel.

Then, another question is about the connection and comparison between the spatial and temporal approaches to world literature. Taking WReC as a typical case, I find many projects in this field prefer to grasp the spatial structure of world literature in a historical course. It seems that the temporal dimension has the priority in the field to decide and interpret the spatial configuration of world literature. Then, could we say that the discourse of world literature is at last a discourse of historical judgment? Or, is it above all an approach of literary criticism derived from a historical narrative?

D'haen: I think the study of world literature is mostly a literary-historical prac-

tice. Of course, one of the things you have to say about this is that, at least as I have been thinking about it for a while, what you call world literature depends upon the particular period you are talking about. To use Damrosch's term again, what circulates now are on the one hand very recent works, especially in the commercial circuit, and on the other hand older canonized works. But, of course, if we try to see what world literature was in, let's say, 1900, we would probably find that the list of canonized classics would be only partially identical to today's list. Some works considered classics then we may no longer think of as such, while we may now consider classics works they did not think of in these terms. More popular works circulating globally at the time (although for obvious reasons the real extent of "global" needs qualification here) we most probably do not read and very possibly do not even know anymore. And even more so if we go back yet another one hundred years. So, I think at the given moment, what somebody should do, which is quite a job of course, is to look at different conceptions and extents of world literature in different periods and different places, and perhaps also to look at them from different points of view. For instance, what did Chinese intellectuals in the middle of the Ming dynasty consider as world literature?

Jiang: I am far from an expert in that, but actually I don't think they paid a lot of attention to any conception of the term "world" as in our context [laughing]…

D'haen: Maybe not, but that is already interesting in itself, isn't it?

Jiang: Of course, I mean, it's very interesting as you raise it. And in *A History of World Literature*, I read your, I want to say, excellent, close, and comprehensive analysis of the paradigms of postmodernism and postcolonialism. My impression is that, compared with the term "postcolonialism", you are more appreciative of the term "decoloniality". And, as you pointed out, "if world literature has included discussion of Latin American works of literature, this has been much less the case with Latin American decoloniality theory, and decoloniality has paid even more scant attention to world literature"[4]. Why is this the case? Do you see any path to integrate the two different discourses? Or, any path simply to make the tension between them productive?

D'haen: Actually, African writers and intellectuals such as Chinweizu and Ngugi wa Thiong'o already used "decolonizing" and "decolonization" in the 1960s, but the term "decoloniality" only gained firm ground from the 1990s on. I think the reason that until recently it has not gained the same popularity as the term postcolonialism is that the latter emerged within the anglophone context. Initially, it was

4 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 196.

used only to refer to works written in English in former British colonies or by writers coming from former British colonies. It is only later, that it has also been adopted for French literature written by, again, people from the former colonies, and to a lesser extent, for other literatures. Decoloniality came to be used in Latin America in the 1990s, especially by Anibal Quijano, and it was then picked up by critics working mostly in the United States, such as Walter Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, to talk about Latin American literature. So, there has been a dichotomy: Postcolonialism was and is mostly applied to literature in English, lately also in French and some other languages; decoloniality mostly to literature produced in Latin American, in Spanish, and in Portuguese. I think that in world literature studies, both will continue to be used not as interchangeable but rather alternative formulations.

Jiang: The reason why I raised this question is that, as I know, many people in Chinese context think that the term "postcolonialism" is above all a mask of neocolonialism.

D'haen: Sure.

Jiang: The next question is about postcolonial world literature. As you mentioned, after postcolonialism had for too long neglected questions of aesthetics, "[t]he rise of world literature could at least in part be explained as a move to reintroduce these concerns into the field of literary studies."[5] I think Christopher Prendergast held the same view when he, in commenting on Casanova's great contribution to the field, highlighted that Casanova had "put the question of literature back in the spotlight."[6] Would you please explain a little more about what the discourse of world literature brings to postcolonialism?

D'haen: Well-known proponents of postcolonialism, such as for instance Robert Young, have said quite clearly that the first concern of postcolonial literature is not aesthetics, but ethics, or more bluntly politics. It has to do with the resistance and emancipation of colonized or ex-colonized peoples. Somebody who has also originally argued along these lines is Elleke Boehmer, but in 2018 she published a book in which she tried to put aesthetics back into postcolonialism. And, yes, to a certain extent, world literature was an attempt to return to the idea of aesthetic distinction and to read literature again from the point of view of aesthetic and not just ethical-political value, but this time with an eye also to literatures beyond the West. The way postcolonialism is now recuperating world literature tends to put politics

5 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 181.

6 Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), vii-xiii.

back into it. Pheng Cheah in *What is a World* argues that world literature should be postcolonial in the sense that it should be normative. It should advocate change in the right direction, meaning emancipation and resistance to oppression and discrimination. Cheah's book has been quite successful, and a lot of people have taken up his idea. WReC aim to look at world literature from an economic and social perspective angled toward the have-nots of the world. In other words, the way they see economics playing out in world literature is precisely as a sign of either oppression or emancipation. Members of WReC pay particular attention to works that are neglected, forgotten or half-forgotten, because they have been written by authors from the working classes and have as their subject the plight of these working classes. I distinctly remember essays on, for instance, mining communities in Wales, and you can see how this perspective might lead to renewed readings of world literature classics such as D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, which is a story about a son-mother-father relationship, but it is also a powerful novel about working-class life in a mining community in Britain around the turn of the twentieth century.

Jiang: Let's turn to *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*. In this book, you suggested that there is a causal connection between the recent rise of the discourse of world literature and the fact that "America is losing the position of political, military, economic, and cultural hegemon it has held since WWII."[7] I believe this is an important statement to help readers grasp the significance of "an age of geopolitics" for world literature. Would you please elaborate?

D'haen: One of the events that triggered the return of world literature in American academe was the 9/11 attack on the world trade center in New York because it made Americans realize that their country had become vulnerable to attacks from outside. Intellectuals realized that Americans didn't know enough about the rest of the world because for the longest time they had felt safe behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and therefore didn't really need to know very much about the rest of the world. This is when people like Emily Apter, for instance, started arguing for more attention to translation, and Gayatri Spivak advocated for a renewal to area studies, including knowledge of local languages, to know more about countries and parts of the globe little known to Americans, not just intellectuals, but also ordinary Americans, and of course also the military [laughing]. The world became more important also to people in literary studies, and this translated into greater attention to literature from around the world.

Now in a sense, you can say that by making world literature an American con-

7 Theo D'haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 35.

cern, especially in the form of anthologies of world literature such as the Longman, under the general editorship of Damrosch, or the more recent versions of the Norton, with Puchner as general editor, Americans found one way to get a grip on the world, or even to master the world. Of course, I believe that people working on world literature in the US, Damrosch, Puchner, and all the rest, do this in good conscience and genuinely aim to teach their students about literatures they didn't know before. At the same time, Apter in her 2013 book, *Against World Literature*, argues that if they are doing this in English translation, and given the fact that English is not only the world's leading language for the moment but also that of the world's most powerful nation, this also means that everything in a sense becomes Americanized. For Spivak, in her book *Death of a Discipline*, America, while pretending to open itself to the world, via the new world literature studies, is appropriating the literatures of the world to itself.

Personally, I have a more nuanced opinion. Yes, to a certain extent, you can say that things become Americanized. On the other hand, without translation and anthologies such as the Longman and Norton anthologies edited by Damrosch and Puchner, a lot of literature in languages other than their own would remain inaccessible and therefore largely unknown to Americans, and by extension to those for whom English is the gateway to literatures in languages beyond them. The idea that America is appropriating the literatures of the world to itself by way of world literature can be a point of critique, but if you are alert to this, you can mitigate things by always keeping a certain distance, for instance via the triangulation propounded by Damrosch. By approaching the idea of world literature as elaborated by Damrosch and as embodied in the anthologies on world literature used in American colleges, we can gain access to the literatures of the world and at the same time keep reflecting upon them, and upon the very idea and practice of world literature, intellectually, consciously, and critically.

Jiang: Now, I remember that in your essay, "How Many Canons Do We Need? World Literature, National Literature, European Literature," which you wrote for the 2011 book *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, you mentioned that multiculturalism in world literature is closely related to the domestic policy of the US. To be more exact, Americans made attempts at changing their pedagogical list of great books time and time again since the 1920s to keep their teleological ideals of American exceptionalism working well, which means they worked hard to endorse the American dream of success and the daily mechanism of a political melting pot. A very interesting point you made in the essay is about the difference between the domestic context of the US and the various

contexts of other countries all around the globe. For instance, when Americans keep making an effort to establish a domestic political order based on "mindless celebration of difference for its own sake"(30), Flemish society, with the rest of European societies alike, is desperately looking for the reaffirmation of a collective identity to make good on the EU's promise of "unity in diversity"(33).[8] It seems that one should always pay attention to this tension when he or she receives the influence of the US in this field.

D'haen: Sure. I also think that precisely the study of world literature and all the rest play different roles in the US and Europe and probably in China because I know that people are also working with this in China.

Jiang: Sure, we have always been looking for what is best suited to the Chinese situation. In my opinion, your book makes an effort to create a European discourse of world literature, which is different not only from the discourse of the United States but also from the discourse of the Global South. In your own opinion, what are the most distinctive features of this European discourse of world literature?

D'haen: Well, I think one of the issues precisely is that, at least in my opinion and as far as my concerns go, it leads to an approach to European literature as an entity. Together with a Swedish colleague, Anders Pettersson, I am just finishing a history of European literature in which we try to incorporate insights from world literature and still uphold a European view of the world. People in Europe are thinking about world literature, but they are also trying to incorporate what they value themselves. Again, I am thinking of somebody like Helena Buescu in Lisbon, who has edited a six-volume anthology of world literature in Portuguese. In a sense this is doing what Damrosch and Puchner are doing in America. But she is doing it from a European and in this case Portuguese perspective, which leads to the incorporation of different works, different views, and a different emphasis. What we see shaping up is a different application of the idea of world literature coming from a different place and perhaps also a different moment in history, because her anthology comes almost twenty years after Damrosch's Longman anthology. I think I can return the question. What about China? Is there a Chinese vision of world literature being developed and being elaborated right now?

Jiang: Professor Hongtao Liu 刘洪涛, also my supervisor back at Beijing Normal University, worked with other scholars to publish an anthology of world litera-

8 See Theo D'haen, "How Many Canons Do We Need? World Literature, National Literature, European Literature" in *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, eds. Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, B. V.), 2011, 19-38.

ture in Chinese two years ago, which I believe shows one of the visions of world literature from Chinese comparatists. It has five volumes and basically each volume is devoted to one continent, so we have volumes on Asian, European, American, and African and Oceanic Literature, and then there is a volume on Diaspora, Ethnicity, and Linguistic Literature. Personally, I think the editing was influenced by various traditions. For instance, from the first volume to the last, the order of arrangement is based on how closely the literature in the volume is linked to Chinese literature, and thus the volume about Asian literature comes first, followed by the volume on European literature, and so on. At least in my opinion, this view of concentric rings of world literature, with Chinese literature in the center, has to do with the traditional Chinese mindset when we deal with the ethics in one big family and even with imperial politics. Besides, we can think about, not unreasonably, the presence of the heritage of socialist world literature in the anthology because editors in the socialist camp during the Cold War were always willing to highlight the literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, very often making a separate volume on "peripheral" literatures and in this way affirming their value. And of course, when you notice "Diaspora, Ethnicity, and Linguistic Literature," you know that also in this field we Chinese cannot escape the influence of the American paradigm and yet I don't think we need to avoid that influence…

D'haen: Sure, I mean, there is no way in which we can escape the influence of American academe, but again, we can think about it critically, reflect upon it, and see how we can use it in our own context.

Jiang: Yes, let's say you change several pieces of a puzzle, and then you probably find that you already have a completely different vision.

D'haen: Indeed.

Jiang: And the next question. As you mentioned in the book, if we look into the cases of some ex-colonized writers, for instance some Western Indian writers, "we see at work here is a dual process of differentiation and identification" between "mother" and "ex-colonized."[9] I believe it is in this complex of "double insider/outsider" we find the strength of geopolitical narratives, especially compared with any simple tags indicating civilizational affiliation and postcolonial dedication. In other words, the geopolitical lens offers us a more complicated vision of world literary mapping than ever. Could you talk more about it for us?

D'haen: West Indian or Caribbean authors are an interesting case. Because the Caribbean was the first part of the world to be colonized by Europeans, it was also

9 D'haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics,* 116.

one of the first to yield authors writing in colonial languages, along with some Indian writers. How are we to read Caribbean authors? As a part of the presumed mother literature the language of which they are using, at times in a creolized version of, or should they be considered as belonging to different literatures entirely because of what they say? Or should we perhaps read them first and foremost as world authors? Take Derek Walcott. He came from a Caribbean island, Saint Lucia, where the majority of the population speak a French-derived dialect or *patois*. He was educated in English because the island at a given moment changed hands. He wrote in English. *Omeros*, usually considered his major work, refers to Homer, and is a partial rewrite of the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Or take another writer who draws on literary works in many languages and who in his own work incorporates almost the entire history of western literature: Jorge Luis Borges, not from the Caribbean, but from Argentina. In a short essay from the 1920s, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," Borges claims that an Argentine writer, precisely because he does not belong to any established tradition harking back to pain or Europe, has the liberty to exploit all of European literature, indeed all world literature, for his own work.

Jiang: Let's talk about the aesthetics in the field. As we know, the international literary criticism that Casanova proposed aimed at overcoming "the supposedly insuperable antinomy" between internal criticism and external criticism,[10] which could be taken as a seminal character of the new world literature studies. In *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, we see you offered, among others, a brilliant comparativist reading of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Don Quixote*. In so doing, in which specific way could you keep the communication between internal and external criticisms?

D'haen: Usually internal and external criticisms refer to whether one restricts analysis to the intrinsic structure of a work or considers also contextual elements such as the author's biography, the social and political background, etc. In this instance, I assume that by internal you mean within a national context and with external, a world literature one. In the chapter to which you refer, I apply a form of triangulated reading à la Damrosch informed by Casanova's theories. In American criticism, *Huckleberry Finn* has traditionally been read as a novel about the American frontier, race relations, and the old American south. At different times, and from different perspectives, it has been praised as the greatest American novel and reviled because of its use of the so-called N-word to refer to Black people. However, you can read the book differently from a world literature perspective. In the first

10 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2004), 4.

couple of pages Tom Sawyer, the boy-hero from another book by Mark Twain, proposes to Huck and his other friends that they rob a caravan of Arabs carrying valuable goods. Huck soberly retorts that he does not see any caravan but only a bunch of schoolchildren on an outing. To which Tom Sawyer replies that if Huck would have read *Don Quixote,* he would realize that the schoolchildren *are* Arabs, but that a wizard makes him see them as schoolchildren. Now, you can say that this is just an anecdotal passage. However, if you stop to think about what Mark Twain is doing here, you find that he is allying his novel about a rural village in the middle of America and in the middle of the nineteenth century to one of the most renowned works of world literature, namely Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. By doing so, he is angling for the kind of recognition on the world literary scene, which simply operating on an American playing field could not give him. American literature at the time carried little prestige on the world literary scene, and by explicitly appealing to a recognized work of world literature, Mark Twain is trying to worm his way into the rank of world authors by way of comparison. The internal view posits *Huckleberry Finn* on the American literary scene. The external view resituates it on the world literature scene.

Jiang: In your book, you also promote a global literature perspective, that is to reread literary works from a global literature perspective without therefore necessarily reneging on readings from other perspectives. Why do you insist on the need for a global literary perspective in addition to a geopolitical one? What is the relationship between the two perspectives?

D'haen: World literature has sometimes been criticized for aligning itself with globalism, a term current in the field of economics. In the piece I wrote about this, I was saying that there is probably a point in calling literature, next to world literature, also global literature because it is also part of the global economy. Perhaps one of the most important levels at which literature functions is as a commodity. Next to a literary or intellectual good, a work of world literature is also a capital good that circulates as part of a global economy, and thus world literature in at least one sense is also global literature.

Jiang: I think this is a very good point. Should we turn to the specific condition of Brussels as a metropolis for world literature? In describing Brussels as a transnational node for world literature, you also referred to other European metropolises for world literature in the long nineteenth century, cities such as Vienna, Berlin, and Munich. The problem is that, although these metropolises seem more useful than focusing on any single world literary capital in facilitating the democratization of world literature, one can't ignore the fact that Brussels as one of the most famous

transnational nodes so far hasn't changed the poor condition of Flemish literature in world literature. Then, I would be wondering if a metropolis of world literature really has a positive effect on the democratization of this field. Would you please elaborate more on this?

D'haen: Again, I think it depends on different historical periods. Certainly, between 1900 and 1940, German-language literature, with centers in Vienna, Berlin, and Munich, played a very important role in what we now call world literature. The coming to power of Hitler in 1933 and the Second World War eclipsed the influence of German-language culture and literature. We now see a partial return of this, and over the last twenty years or so, a lot of books have appeared that discuss especially the role of Vienna as a capital of world literature before 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian empire was one of the largest political entities in Europe. After the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian empire was divided into smaller entities, which put an end to Vienna as a cultural capital. Between the two world wars, especially in the 1920s, Berlin took over that role. Munich always hovered in between. Casanova, focusing on Paris, and Moretti, concentrating on Paris and London, do not say much about these other literary capitals of Europe.

Brussels is a minor case in point. Belgium, although very small, before 1914 was one of the most important industrial and financial countries in the world. Because Belgium had a very liberal constitution, Brussels became the place to which authors that were in trouble in their own countries fled to continue their careers unhampered. Marx lived in Brussels when he and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto. Victor Hugo for many years lived there at least part time. It is Brussels that Multatuli, the most famous nineteenth-century Dutch author, wrote his seminal *Max Havelaar*—the only Dutch-language novel by the way that at least occasionally makes it into lists of world literature. Baudelaire for several years lived in Brussels.

Flemish literature is literature in Dutch originating from the northern part of Belgium where the people, constituting some 60% of the total population of the country, have Dutch as their mother tongue. Because of specific historical circumstances at the time we are talking about, the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, the official language of Belgium was French, even though the majority of the population, as I just mentioned, always has been Flemish. The French-speaking elite of the country looked down upon the Flemings, who primarily belonged to and the working class and upon the Flemish language, a dialectically tinged variant of Dutch. There was the beginning of a Flemish struggle for emancipation, but this would take time to make itself felt. Brussels, as the capital of the country, by and

large was a French-speaking city, certainly as far as politics, economics, finance, and culture went, and this is another reason why a lot of these foreign writers fled to Brussels. French was the language most elites around Europe shared anyway. The First World War largely put an end to Belgium as an important country. It also finished the role of Brussels as a cultural capital with a more than national reach. However, between 1860 and 1914, it functioned as an alternative capital to Paris for the French-speaking world and to some extent also for the rest of Europe. My critique simply was that Casanova and Moretti paid little attention to any literary capital or metropolis beyond Paris or London and that this is a shortsighted view of world literature.

Jiang: Of course, I agree with the point, but I think, at least in one place of her book, Casanova did mention Brussels as a quite important literary capital in Europe.

D'haen: Casanova of course was well aware that Baudelaire and Hugo for part of their careers lived and worked in Brussels, but her point is that their works needed to be validated in Paris in order to be accepted as world literature. By the way, one of the reasons why some French writers came to live, or in any case publish, in Brussels was because they wholly or partially made their living by writing erotic literature. There was strict censorship on this kind of writing in France, whereas Belgium was so liberal that almost anything could be published there. These publications were smuggled into France where they were sold illegally of course … [both laughing]

Jiang: Really?

D'haen: Yes, and everyone knew [laughing]…

Jiang: That's new to me, and I must say that if anyone wants some real historical sense for world literature, he or she should look into that. Now, since we are discussing the role of Brussels as world literature, do you mind giving me some idea about Flemish literature or literature in Dutch in the field? As the editor of *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature*, if you would need to point Chinese readers to some specific paths to get acquainted with Dutch and Flemish literature, which writers and poets would you prioritize? And why?

D'haen: Well, as in any literature, so too in Dutch-language literature, there are interesting authors. The thing is that Holland (or the Netherlands as is the official name of the country) and Belgium have always been rather uneventful. Before the eighteenth century, all of Europe came to what is now Belgium to fight their wars. During the First World War Belgium, and during the Second World War both the Netherlands and Belgium, were overrun and occupied by the Germans. Beyond

this, hardly anything shocking has ever happened here. This means that literature from or about these countries is in general not very interesting to people from other cultures. One of the most successful Dutch novels abroad is The *Assault*, by Harry Mulisch. It is set at the beginning of the Second World War in Amsterdam. A German soldier is shot, and the people in front of whose house he was shot move his body in front of another house. So, it is the people from that other house that get arrested by the German authorities, and then everything develops from there. Relatively successful has also been *The Sorrow of Belgium*, by Flemish author Hugo Claus. It describes a boy and his family's experiences during and after the Second World War. Another book that has had some success is *War and Turpentine*, published in 2013 by a Flemish author, Stefan Hertmans. This is a novel about his grandfather during the First World War. What happened to the two countries during the two world wars is one of the few things that makes Belgium and Holland interesting in the eyes of outsiders, or externals, as you called them before. The most famous Dutch book in world literature is…

Jiang: By Erasmus?

D'haen: Well, Erasmus, yes, but he wrote in Latin, not in Dutch,

Jiang: Oh, Right!

D'haen: No, it's the *Diary of Anne Frank*, about a Jewish girl and her family in Amsterdam during the Second World War. They hid for years from the Germans, but in the end they were caught and sent to a concentration camp in Germany where they were murdered. But as you can see, all these Dutch and Flemish books that have had some success in translation abroad are about the First or Second World War.

Jiang: You mean people are interested in the events, not in the writing.

D'haen: Right. Dutch-language literature, or at least Dutch and Flemish writers and intellectuals, did play an important role in the transmission of culture and ideas from the south to the north of Europe, but this was primarily during what we now call Early Modernity. One of the reasons was also because especially during the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic adopted a rather liberal attitude in politics and religion, and a lot of things that could not have been published in France, England, or elsewhere in Europe could be published in Holland, and were then disseminated throughout Europe.

Jiang: This was in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, wasn't it?

D'haen: Mostly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Jiang: I see. In China, comparatists working in world literature don't pay attention enough to literature in Dutch, though not without a reason as you just sug-

gested. However, I think we should try to change the situation. Let's turn to the next topic which is relative to this one in one way or another. As we know, the democratization of the relationship between major and minor literatures is one of your concerns. Yet, there is another democratization of world literature since Goethe referring to the literary integrity and independence against the commercialization of cultural modernity. Should we establish any epistemological connections between these different categories of democratization?

D'haen: Again, that's a point for debate. When we talk about world literature as literature that is commercially successful from a global perspective, we talk about things like airport literature, the kind of books that are sold in airport shops around the world. I have in a number of instances argued that literature with the widest reach worldwide these days is literature in popular genres such as crime or detective fiction, thrillers, adult romance, and Chick lit. "Chick" is a popular term in English to refer to girls in their late teens and young women in their early twenties. "Chick lit" is literature that specifically aims at this category of readers. It is very popular and sells by the millions everywhere. There are a couple of good English language bookstores in Antwerp, where I live, and they have a whole section devoted to this kind of literature. This is what people, or in any case most people, if they read at all, actually read these days. Of course, this literature is very ephemeral. It is in fashion for a year or so and then drops out of sight and disappears from the bookstores. That is also why authors of this kind of fiction need to produce a new book every year or every few years. By then the previous book has run its course at the till, and they need to sell a new book. Some authors are very successful at this.

Jiang: Would you see anything positive in this?

D'haen: Sure. Because I have argued already several times that a lot of this literature is not just, as has often been said, sheer entertainment. Notwithstanding the clichés with which some, or even most, works in these genres are loaded, or precisely because of how they handle these clichés, they can usefully be read as indices of what ordinary readers yearn for in this day and age. That is one way of defining present-day world literature. The other way is of course the classical view, which is that of works that endure over time, that keep being translated and retranslated, and that play a role in the general intellectual debate over a longer period. However, I think things are changing now, and I have just recently given a couple of lectures on recent developments in world literature studies, in which I argue, and of course I am not alone to say so, that the actual circulation of classical world literature these days no longer happens in print, but via other media, such as movies, YouTube, podcasts, and even via sound bites or single words, sentences, or expressions quoted

on X or TikTok. If you mention *The Iliad* to students these days, they may recognize the title, but few would know what the work is actually about, let alone have read it, even in parts. But if you ask who played the title role in the movie *Troy*, they would all immediately scream, "Brad Pitt!" This is how they know about *The Iliad*, not through reading the book. If contemporary students know anything at all about ancient Greek literature, it is probably through a movie or a Netflix series such as *Kaos*, which is a retelling of the Greek myths in a contemporary setting. Something similar—I assume—applies to a classic from your own culture, *Mulan*. There are versions of the story of Mulan going back at least a thousand years. Yet, most people know about Mulan from the movies. This is how world literature circulates nowadays: via popular media versions.

Jiang: But what about the distortion of classical information from ancient times? Would you simply say that you only see something positive happening in the process of adaptation?

D'haen: You can say that in one sense it is watering down the original classics. On the other hand, if they wouldn't circulate in these popular versions, world literature classics risk being forgotten. So, it is one of the ways to keep students but also the public at large, interested in these works. One can always hope that at least a few people will move on to the original, whether it's the classical version of the *Mulan* legend, the original Greek of Homer, or whatever. And again, it is a process of democratization, but it's also a process of preservation. If nobody reads the original anymore and there is no popularized version, it risks disappearing.

Jiang: It's the first step for further reading.

D'haen: Right.

Jiang: Now, we can turn to our final question for this interview. Last but not least. When we talk about world literature, we always look to translation. Many years ago, as we know, Susan Bassnett proposed a new comparative literature with translation studies as its focus. However, today, we see that world literature discourse holds the upper hand. Why did it turn out like this? Should we find some specific merits of world literature discourse in this context?

D'haen: Susan Bassnett has always been a great proponent of translation and translation studies and that is at least partially because she has a multilingual background herself. In the 1980s and 1990s, she had very strong connections with what was then called the Tel Aviv-Leuven-Amsterdam school of translation studies. In Israel, the main scholars involved were Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar. In Amsterdam, there was James Holmes. In Leuven, José Lambert and Hendrik Van Gorp, and in Antwerp André Lefevere. Susan was in touch with all these people,

and collectively they invented something called descriptive translation studies. Until then, translation studies had mostly been concerned with whether a translation is faithful to the original or not. Descriptive translation studies instead look at what is translated and how it is translated, because this says something about the receiving culture, about what is possible in this culture and what is not. In other words, you are comparing how the original and the translation function in their respective cultural and even wider social environments. This means you are basically treading on the ground of comparative literature. Because Susan was very much invested in translation studies, and because descriptive translation studies was exciting and new at the time, when she published her *Introduction to Comparative Literature* in 1993, she claimed translation studies not as a branch of comparative literature but rather the other way around: comparative literature as a branch of translation studies. In a 2006 article, she admitted that maybe she had been exaggerating a little [laughing]. But it is certainly true that translation studies, which now usually actually means descriptive translation studies, has earned itself a prominent place in literary studies. In world literature studies, it becomes even more important because a lot of world literature happens through translation, precisely. I think there is a lot to be said for including translation studies as one of the approaches to world literature studies.

Jiang: But translation studies cannot replace comparative literature or world literature, right?

D'haen: No. In my opinion, three or four approaches should work together. World literature, comparative literature, and translation studies should work together with specialists in national literature, who usually know more about a specific work than people working in the other three approaches. Ideally, you would get a combination. Then you would get four perspectives on one work, and that, I think, would be very interesting.

Jiang: Can we take the view that the four terms converge in the field of world literature? Can we say that?

D'haen: Yes, maybe, why not?

Jiang: I ask because I know that you once pointed out, in another interview, that comparative literature is a method and world literature is a practical application of that method. Now, I am wondering if you would like to accept a term like "world literature as a method," which refers to the convergence of the four terms above.

D'haen: We could if we describe it in such a way. Yes, we could. Actually, in the history of European literature, which I mentioned before, I am doing together with a Swedish colleague, I wrote the part between 1500 and the present, and I pay

a lot of attention to translation and also to the influence of non-European traditions on European literature, which is a sort of world literature approach to European literature.

Jiang: That is the title I would like to use for our interview, "world literature as method." Thank you very much!

D'haen: Thank you!

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