Comparative Criticism Discussion Group, 27 January 2014

Damrosch, Moretti and World Literature

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**Introductory observations (Kasia Szymanska)**

- Two definitions/approaches to world literature
- Both projects stem from a challenge to the idea of national literature and extending this beyond the approach already taken in comparative literature
- Damrosch begins with Goethe and the concept of weltliteratur as an imaginary museum, which may still be problematic: if everything is available how do we approach it?
- Metaphors: Moretti considers the metaphors of the tree and the wave; Damrosch uses Eckermann himself as a metaphor. Are these useful?

**Discussion**

**National/Local**

- Reflections on Goethe prompted by reference to Ritchie Robertson’s paper at the Comparative Criticism conference in September 2013 opened questions about how fluid the difference is between national and local. National is a dangerous word.
- Should we think of the local within the national? Of the national as canonical—represented in a way that the local is not? But the local can also exist with and resist or work against the national.

**World Literature or Comparative Literature?**

- Moretti argues against comparative approach in favour of a one-but-unequal model: his aim is to theorise without homogenising, i.e. not to theorise the social whole in a totalitarian way. Literature registers this unevenness and accommodates difference and variety.
- Questions raised about the point of comparison: the project is no longer about comparing things to/by literature in/of the critic’s own language/tradition.
- How can you study multiple literatures without knowing what you are going to compare? Surely arguments have to emerge from the specific text, work of art, etc?
- Doesn’t comparison offer more potential to find the unexpected than single or totalising models?
Both polemical and provocative pieces. Is Damrosch’s Q ‘What is World Literature?’ slightly disingenuous seeing as what he says about world literature probably has (had) a causal effect on what it is?

NB evolution of connotations of “world” since Goethe’s Welt. “World” wars, “world” music, “global”...

Critic’s position/point of departure always implicit in discussions of the “world”

What about World Literature as post-postcolonial practice? As a way for theorists in the Anglo-American academy to not have to immediately unearth the politics, Qs about centre and periphery, as in postcolonial studies.

But one of the critiques is the power they have in making world lit. Cf title of Said’s The World, the Text and the Critic: the critic does have a political role—which involves a critique of their own position

FM writing in the Marxist tradition is political, closes his argument with call for the erosion of national literature. But there’s no trace of the history of that in Moretti—he doesn’t acknowledge this in his use of critics who have addressed all those national questions

Distant reading

Moretti’s notion of distant reading: does it work? Does he really mean his apparent call not to close read anymore?

Or can we view close and distant reading as complementary projects?

Is it that World Literature represents distant reading and comparative literature close reading? Can you draw a line between them?

Moretti is attempting to make world literature a science, an object of study, to read/extrapolate a number of principles and extract them as characteristic. Is this symptomatic of a certain pressure in the humanities?

Potential dangers in looking at a distance without textual analysis to prove anything—which connects to the Q about translation

Hierarchies

It’s impossible to study literature without hierarchies.

Cf Moretti’s remarks about the canon

NB how both critics use power words: register of economics etc

While Damrosch is more questioning still he always takes us back to a canon of European texts with a few exceptions—non-European Nobel Prize winners etc—but what he offers is not representative of the “world” at all (cf lectures he gave in Oxford and London in 2013)

Language, Translation and Circulation

Damrosch and globalising English

Moretti’s frankness about his linguistic (in)competence meaning that the argument can only be taken so far

Conflation of comparative linguistics and comparative literature in Moretti: problematic—former is about causal relationships; the latter is not

A different vantage point is that of book and publishing history: understanding world lit as a mode of circulation
- Damrosch doesn’t evade translation—though he doesn’t engage with it
- Can’t be coincidence that Against World Literature—Apter’s major tract against these positions—is subtitled On the Politics of Untranslatability
- Where’s the agency in FM’s discussion of circulation? The text as an active thing...

Metaphors

- Cf Moretti’s wave to his discussion elsewhere of correlation and causation—which he arguably doesn’t understand
- Tree/wave metaphors certainly make sense for e.g. Turkish literature—but maybe less so for Western lit