
What is world literature? David Damrosch. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003, 324 pp.

The disarmingly simple title of David Damrosch's book, *What is World Literature?*, might lead the reader to respond that, of course, world literature is simply comprised of writing from around the world. Yet, Damrosch offers a much more in depth and interesting view of what he believes this literature to be. He helps the reader understand that a piece of literature changes when it stops being a national work and becomes an international work. Literature is transformed, he says, once it crosses the border from one country into another. He begins his book with a quote about world literature from the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels: "The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."

In his introduction, he uses Goethe's coined German phrase

Weltliteratur, or world literature, as a starting point to examine the phenomenon as he sees it. He explains that as globalization has begun to take a larger role in the world, it is easier for individual works of literature to cross borders. When they find themselves in a new cultural setting, they develop a different meaning. Damrosch traces this change back to translation and wonders how literature maintains the same meaning when it is transformed by translation and placed in a different setting.

Damrosch divides the book into nine chapters, which are then divided into three sub-sections. He also includes a complete index. The title of each section, 'Circulation', 'Translation' and 'Production', suggest the process by which a literary work becomes world literature. In each section, Damrosch has chosen 'exemplary' literature to demonstrate how each piece exists in a historical timeline from Gilgamesh to Rigoberta Menchu.

Damrosch develops some of his most intriguing points concerning world literature and translation in his conclusion, where he describes three patterns that he has noticed in world literature. His discussion begins with his theory that "world literature is an elliptical refraction of

national literatures.” This speaks to the idea of how literature changes once it crosses borders. Damrosch maintains that a literary work never really leaves its place of origin but simply has two foci, one in the host country and one in the original country. This way, the flow of information is constantly moving and transporting ideas and concepts in two different cultures. He goes on to explain that there is not only one ellipse, but, in fact, several ellipses with one focus in the host country, constantly stemming out through space and time.

His second point is that “world literature is writing that gains in translation.” He explains that several different types of literature can either maintain or lose meaning when they become a translated work. For example, treaties and informational texts are maintained in literal translation because the language they use is simple and concise. They neither gain nor lose when translated. Meanwhile, other literary works such as poems are difficult to translate because they are so tied to their original language that they can lose meaning in their translation and read poorly in the other language. This, he decides, is national literature. He believes that a literary work can only become

world literature when it gains in its translation and is a balanced piece of literature. He uses *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as an example of a literary work that has been opened to a wider audience through its growth in translation.

His last point is that “world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.” By this he means that these works should not be credited too much for being world literature, but rather that they be considered as a way to connect to cultures and times other than our own. Because of this interconnection, Damrosch believes that translations are constantly being influenced by different outside forces. Again, he uses the metaphor of the ellipse and clarifies that because these ellipses are coming from every direction, every culture, and every language, they are bound to interact and influence one another. Marx and Engels describe this type of contact as “intercourse in every direction.” For Damrosch, then, literature from every walk of life intertwines to create the literary works that we consider world literature today.

In *What is World Literature?* David Damrosch clearly defines

what he believes world literature to be. He poses a seemingly obvious question and presents passionate potential answers. Although his theories are very interesting, some readers might find the author's vast knowledge of world literature somewhat daunting. Damrosch proves himself to be an expert on the topic of world literature and uses literary

works from around the world and from several different eras to exemplify his point. The examples and stories that he draws upon to produce this study can sometimes seem off topic if one does not have a good understanding or background in world literature.

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