

**David Damrosch. *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*.  
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392 pp.**

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Ever since the publication of *What Is World Literature?* in 2003, David Damrosch has never ceased reflecting on comparative literature as well as world literature. In that book, Damrosch proposed an understanding of world literature as a mode of reading, an elliptical refraction of national literature, and a work that gains balance in translation. In his new book *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Damrosch takes up a genealogical study of the discipline of comparative literature from the nineteenth century to the present with particular attention to the scholarly activists whose concerns and debates remain relevant for our present study, and responds to the crisis that this discipline faces in our time, or as Gayatri Spivak called the death of comparative literature. Meanwhile, he offers a comprehensive scrutinization of American comparative literature and world literature pedagogy based on his own teaching experience at Columbia and Harvard and his long-term engagement with the American Comparative Literature Association. In my opinion, this book is based on a rewriting of the history of comparative literature, unfolds with an inclusive and evenhanded vision that compares and learns from different comparative approaches around the world, and finally points to the future development of this discipline based on its pedagogical conditions.

In “Introduction,” Damrosch presents a series of questions that the book seeks to address, three of which deserve our primary attention. Firstly, what do we really mean by “comparing the literatures” when many other subjects are also doing comparisons, thereby threatening the distinctiveness of this discipline? In other words, why are we still comparing literatures? Secondly, how should we conduct “comparison” and what tools do we need to have as we respond to the changes across literary studies and other subjects of humanities? Thirdly, what can the origins and history

of comparative literature tell us and how should we relate to our predecessors? For Damrosch, the third question seems to be the answer to the former two questions, as the book combs through the entire history of comparative literature to find answers to the questions of today. Finally, although not directly mentioned, another task of this book is suggested by the chapter arrangement, that is, to rethink “What Is World Literature?” and the relationship between world literature and comparative literature. In so doing, Damrosch demonstrates a firm belief in the discipline’s capacity for rebirth. In an effort to include as comprehensively as possible the many critical angles that are working together to form the studies of comparative literature as we know it today, this book is divided into eight chapters, apart from “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” respectively entitled “Origins,” “Emigrations,” “Politics,” “Theories,” “Languages,” “Literatures,” “Worlds,” and “Comparisons.”

The first chapter traces the burgeoning stage of comparative literature studies from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, citing the works of the German scholar Johann Gottfried Herder and the French scholar Madame de Staël as representatives. Chapter “Emigrations” takes on a comparative historical approach to the interwar eras between 1915 and 1950. The third chapter traces the establishment and development of comparative literature studies as a discipline in postwar America. In this way, the first three chapters not only reflect the retrospection of the history of comparative literature but also serve as the material and logical foundation of the whole book. Starting from the fourth chapter, the book is no longer strictly arranged in chronological order but paratactically discusses the core issues of comparative literature from the postwar period to the present day along the nexus of some key terms of the discipline, with each chapter building on the previous ones.

One of the most important features of this book is Damrosch’s way of writing history. While making a broad historical sweep from Herder and de Staël, through overseas scholars like Hu Shih and Lin Yutang, through the wartime exilic generations of Auerbach and Spitzer to major critics of our day such as Spivak and Moretti, Damrosch breaks the linear time order, intersperses the educational background with social activities and familial condition of these earlier scholars from which readers can take a peek into the real historical condition where comparative literature came into bud and grew, reviving the original context where people made comparisons.

In reviewing the disciplinary history, Damrosch pays particular attention to the reconstruction of “beginnings.” Deeply influenced by German philology himself, Damrosch claims that “the foundations of comparative literature were established

by the comparative philology that began in Renaissance Italy and spread to many parts of Enlightenment Europe” (Damrosch 2020 13). The role of German philology in the initial stage of comparative literature makes a powerful argument for the intrinsic pluralist overtones of the discipline, serving as a powerful refutation to the popular “single French origin” theory to which so many scholars have clung. Moreover, the methodological legacy that classic philology left on its apostles is also the original driving force behind the development of comparative literature as a discipline. Both Herder and de Staël’s early studies on comparative philology and the attempts of Auerbach and Spitzer at comparative literature in the process of emigration or exile suggest the historical background and basic composition of American comparative literature. In other words, American comparative literature stems from the legacy of immigrants who brought with them a sense of diversity and mobility.

As an old discipline, classical philology, which always connects to ancient times, attaches great importance to the history and written materials, being a good counterpoint to “the creeping presentism in much of our work today” (9). Its pursuit somehow echoes the deconstructionist concern for language and text and therefore witnesses a return in today’s century. Damrosch frequently refers to premodern texts such as *Gilgamesh* or *Kalidasa* to discuss problems like the applicability of literary theories that have a modern or even contemporary origin. Thus, another layer of the “history” in this book goes for a rediscovery and appreciation of historical materials.

The second feature of this book is its way of exploring “comparison” as both the disciplinary approach and basic standpoint. It not only means that Damrosch reconsiders the methods and materials of comparative literature but also that he literally compares literatures. While discussing why and how to compare, he consciously and regularly compares theories or literatures of scholars of a given era with that of earlier or contemporary scholars, and these comparisons are never confined to one culture or language. In short, his opinions about “comparison” are supported by his own comparisons.

In addition, Damrosch updates his ideas on the methods and materials of comparison. Referring to the “Introduction,” we can regard chapters “Theories” and “Languages” as the “tools we need to have in our toolboxes today” (Damrosch 2020 6). Above all, Damrosch holds a consistent and impartial attitude toward any theories and languages. He tries his best to break up boundaries and to include materials as many as possible. However, he cautions that, as the ancient methods of our discipline, theory and foreign language learning should serve specific research questions and should not descend to a source of burden or a self-contained

academic game. In fact, both the enclosed theoretical debates within several major Euro-American forces and the ignorance of national literature have resulted in the theoretical hegemony and the loss of vitality of many theories, with the former being inextricably linked with linguistic imperialism. In response, Damrosch calls for abandoning the division based on territory and using language as the unit of comparison. The multiple languages spoken within one territory and the same language spoken in different countries enable us to do comparisons not only “at home” but also between regions or continents. The idea of using language rather than nationality as the comparative unit echoes concepts like “Sinophone Literature” (Song 91) or “la littérature d’expression (de langue) française” (Che 38) that have emerged in recent years.

Suggestions on language learning are followed by a discussion of translation. Although Damrosch does not allocate a separate chapter for translation, he puts translation in the same place as the original texts and correlates it with other methods. He points out that the primary task of translation is to better contextualize as cultural, political, and historical contexts change. Different from *What Is World Literature?* which regards “benefits by translation” (Damrosch 2003 6) as a condition for a work to become world literature, in this book, Damrosch puts more emphasis on the enriching and constructive effect of translation on national literature. Behind this updated understanding of translation, a more urgent task of this book is to dispel misconceptions in any theory or language. Pascale Casanova has cautioned in her new book *La langue mondiale* that bilingualism and translation may aggravate linguistic inequality and enhance linguistic domination since languages are socially hierarchical rather than equal: there will always be a world-wide dominant language while other languages can simply abide by the rules settled by the former. Therefore, although Damrosch is ostensibly lowering the requirements for theory or foreign language learning as he equally valorizes semifluency and basic reading ability, he is in fact giving sufficient attention and affirmation to the research that is based on one nation or one language.

The highlight of national literature and Damrosch’s research on comparative literature and world literature pedagogy leads to the third feature of this book—a deep educational concern. The aristocratic de Staël and the populist Herder paved the way for cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which became the two impetuses of the development of comparative literature. Yet a latent paradox is what was once considered as national literature was not so “national,” and the world literature not so “world,” scilicet not so “international.” Drawing from the scrutinization of American comparative literature and national literature education, Damrosch con-

cludes that although the two departments often have a cooperative relationship, the common focus of national literature departments has long been on traditions of high humanism rather than on American local literatures, and the comparative literature discipline was awkwardly immersed in a West Eurocentrism where “not only the émigrés but even American-born comparatists rarely worked on American literature” (Damrosch 2020 97). This disciplinary ecology, on the one hand, encouraged interdisciplinary communication, and on the other hand, succumbed to textuality and paid little attention to American native literatures, forming a gap between the cosmopolitanism aspiration, structural hierarchy, and the elitism of education. Consequently, theories that were imported by comparative scholars could not have the kind of “insurrectionary” quality that continental theory had when they were conceived in Europe, nor could they be localized under the influence of national consciousness based on a recognition of American literature.

It is clear that the emphasis on the study of national literature has not brought Damrosch back into the nationalist rut. On the contrary, he further demonstrates the possibility and necessity of a new world literature study by revealing the cross-cultural and international perspective inherent in the study of national literature. For a long time, the definition of world literature has been vague. It can refer to a concept, a body of texts, a pedagogical program, or a field of research. As with languages and theories, Damrosch advocates using different definitions of world literature for specific purposes. But the question before “What is world literature?” is “What is world?” In the opening page of *Worlds*, Damrosch distinguishes the worlds created by literary works and the world outside them, namely the imaginative world built up by an author and the real world where we live. This division shows Damrosch’s rejection of the long-taken definition, which considers “world” only as “the outside world.” Because of this univocal and unquestioned cognition of “world,” world literature has always been regarded as a goal that national literature needs to achieve in some way. From this angle, the three definitions of world literature in *What Is World Literature?* serve more as a selection or classification method than a perspective or a quality. To update his definition, Damrosch raises three levels of world literature: comparatist’s world literature, world writers’ world literature, and world literature in the classroom. Through this renewed definition of world literature, Damrosch not only reinforces the conviction of the transformative power of literature itself but also gives equal credit to the participation of writers, comparatists, students, and teachers in the construction of world literature. Compared with *What Is World Literature?*, it seems like Damrosch does not provide a special page on “readers” as he used to. I prefer to understand this arrangement as Damrosch actually acknowledg-

ing that the reader can play either of the above roles. Moreover, thanks to this redefinition, which highlights comparatists' dedication, the connection between comparative literature and world literature has become closer than ever before. A conclusion can also be reached from the analysis above: it is "comparison" that fundamentally links national literature, comparative literature, and world literature. This linkage reaffirms the significance of "comparing the literatures" as the title displays.

It is noteworthy that Damrosch's discussion has never been divorced from the American comparative literature education and research context, and the primary addressee of his writing is also students and faculty in American comparative literature programs. Meanwhile, he has never ceased broadening his vision to a global scale, which is consistent with the turn taken by world literature of today's comparative literature research. Therefore, this book can serve not only as a textbook of disciplinary history, a terminology dictionary but also as a reservoir of new research questions. For example, apart from the Euro-American linguistic and theoretical hegemony that many want to resist and overturn, should we reconsider the intentional self-enclosure or self-isolation of some regional experts? Then, as world literature has been developed much since Goethe coined the term, should there be a world literature critic? Lastly, since Damrosch finished this book at the beginning of the global pandemic, it is worthwhile to reflect on the new political and economic conditions that comparatists have to face from now on. Maybe Damrosch's attempt at the dawn of this century's third decade can still be a valuable example.

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