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Toward a New Possibility of World Literature

Grbić, Igor. The Occidentocentric Fallacy: Turning Literature into a Province. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. pp. 155.

One might perhaps feel that the question of the other has been extensively theorized, especially (though far from exclusively) within postcolonial and gender studies, and the processes of othering already illuminated from different perspectives. On the other hand, there are probably those who think that the question deserves constant attention and careful (re)considerations, and Igor Grbić's book The Occidentocentric Fallacy: Turning Literature into a Province poses a provocative challenge to both stances. What if – the book's underlying hypothesis seems to suggest – the entire notion of the other is nothing but, as the title states, a misconception narcissistically promulgated by what we commonly refer to as the West although it in effect counts not more than a couple of states, a mere province in any map of the world? What if, namely, numerous scholars and researchers who are concerned with the question of the other in the field of literary studies, criticism and theory only perpetuate, however unintentionally, the established misconception, simply by working within the norms of Western and neglecting all traditions of non-Western literary criticism? The occidentocentric fallacy is, according to the author of this book, particularly prominent and problematic when at work in literary arts, the humanities branch that is supposed to offer a holistic and universal evaluation of imaginative expressions. Therefore, while exposing different facets of the occidentocentric fallacy, this book engages, through its eight chapters, in offering a new description of the scope and idea of the elusive concept of world literature.

The first chapter, "No Exceptions, Rule Only: Turning Facts into as Many Problems," provides an overview of the history of the occidentocentric bias, questioning at the same time the very concept of the West and its reliance on downsizing the world. The symptom of this process, of the "disease" of occidocentrism, is most commonly found in anthologies, which, while purporting to encompass

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the works of world literature, actually base their selection on a blatant disproportion between Western and non-Western literature, quite often reducing the latter to "ancient" texts and disregarding any literary merit in the modern ones (specific examples can be found on pages 9 to 13). Chapter Two, as stated by its very title: "The Special Case of Literary Studies within the Special Case of the Social Sciences and Humanities," goes on to examine the somewhat paradoxical position of literary studies within the equally paradoxical position of the humanities in contemporary science. The question here tackled (which, incidentally, deserves a lot more space than a single book, however insightful, can provide) is that of what makes the social sciences and humanities, therefore also literary studies, so prone to provincialism and fragmentation. It seems to be a paradox that the fields which strive toward universality are thus segmented, which never happens, as the author observes, in sciences such as climatology or geology (15). The answer can again be found in the occidentocentric fallacy, and the symptom again in anthologies: one of the examples provided to sustain this embarrassingly indicates that non-Western authors are included in anthologies only insofar as they articulate ideas related to postcolonial and race issues (17).

The third chapter, "The Birth of an Ideal," details the origin of the idea of world literature, tracing it back to the late eighteenth-century Romanticism and Goethe in particular. By the end of this chapter, however, Grbić has already acknowledged the failure of the ideal, the essence of which was to make all of world's literature available and equal, feeling one's way into another's literature in order to "[e]mpathize into another's imagination" (30). The failure can be attributed, in the author's words, to the fact that globalizing literature into world literature resulted in "spreading a particular kind of parochialism" (36) – and globalization in a more general sense has been yielding such a result ever since the eighteenth century, to this very day. Fortunately, Chapter Four, "Cultural Specifics and Literary Universals," comes to defense of world literature, focusing on the still present and persistent need for it. Chapter Four outlines some of the universals, "constituent elements that participate in the making of a work of literature, world round" (40) (whereby the author praises Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism for its efforts in searching for the common denominators of imagination expressed through words). At the same time, Chapter Four warns against over-universalizing, that is, finding analogies where there are none, which in turn only solidifies occidocentrism through the use (and not merely literary!) of phrases such as "Venice of

the East" or "the Indian Shelley." As such analogies might on the one hand be expressive of cultural imperialism or appropriation and on the other hand still provide some relevant insight into the poetics of various writers, Grbić concludes that they should be handled with care so that, in a nice turn of phrase, a useful landmark would not become a fatal destination (47).

It is, therefore, not "the Indian Shelley" but rather, by his proper name, Rabindranath Tagore that gives impetus to the ideas expounded in the following chapter, "A Closer Look at the Forces at Work." Grbić has a whole syndrome named after Tagore, and it details how the forces of cultural appropriation work in the context of international, global (or world) renown. Non-Western authors seem to be highly valued in the eyes of the West only if they have some influence on the number of poetics of the West (51-52), if they have lived or been educated in the West, or if they receive some support from the West – as was the case with Tagore and W.B. Yeats. (It should be noted that most of the examples concerning non-Western authors in this book come from the literatures of India, due to the fact that these have been the focus of Grbić's lasting research interests.) The problem that the occidentocentric fallacy generates is that these criteria are naturally adopted by non-Western authors: they, too, tend to believe that their work has merit only if it is written in English; non-Western anthologists, too, tend to include considerably more Western than non-Western authors. The so-called "third-world" cultures, as Grbić states, do "not always need 'first-world' (former) masters to become marginalized, but do it [themselves]." (54-55) What the (fallaciously?) prestigious awards such as the Nobel Prize, therefore, honor when they occasionally reach non-Western authors (such as Tagore, the first such Nobel Prize winner) is precisely the "qualities acquired from the West" (57) – and vice versa: it is not uncommon that non-Western authors become highly valued in their countries of origin only after their work has been "approved" by the West. (An interesting case which is worth mentioning and deserves more attention than can here be given is what Grbić calls the 'small-nation syndrome'. It is elaborated on pages 52 to 53, with an example from Croatia – a non-anglophone country that formally forms part of the West, a specific case the analysis of which might yield some useful generalizations.)

Chapters Five and Six, the longest ones, form the core of the book as they deal in great detail with two phenomena that world literature is largely built on: international accolades won through prestigious awards and the number of languages a work gets translated into. The sixth chapter,

"What Is Lost in Translation Is the Self" offers numerous examples of the practice and ethics of translation, arguably a crucial activity when it comes to defining any scope of world literature. The long-debated translation issues of domestication and foreignization are here dissected ('translation' and 'cislation', as respectively termed by Grbić [74]), whereby the latter is presented as more ethical, its purpose being to carry the reader hither, into the world created by foreign authors and inhabited by their characters. It is symptomatic – as in the examples of anthologies – that the West has always relied more on the former, using translation as a means of affirming its occidocentrism (instead of building bridges) by domesticating the wide literary varieties of the world into its provincial borders (Grbić 97).

"Lessons for the Mentor," as the title of the seventh chapter goes, presents a set of messages from non-Western literary world to its self-proclaimed mentor that the West is. In this curious and long-awaited reversal of roles, guidelines are provided as to – to give only a few examples – how the issues of literature and representation, literature and religion, or literature and ethics can attract a range of possible new views if non-Western experience (and literary criticism) are taken into account. The final chapter ("Final Remarks: Towards Tying the Diverse Threads Together") sets out with the author's dialog with David Damrosch and his proposed definition of world literature as all literary works that circulate, in translation or not, beyond their culture of origin. This definition is challenged by Igor Grbić with the paradigmatic example of neglected Hungarian author Béla Hamvas, whose works remain largely unavailable in the English-speaking countries despite their unquestionable quality, confirmed by the scholars from Croatia and Serbia, where the translations of many of Hamvas's manuscripts have been in circulation for a while due to the individual efforts of translators. It is perhaps this individual effort, coming from not only translators but also numerous other participants in the literary community, that might offer a singularly new possibility of defining and reading world literature. Following again Tagore, Grbić describes the metaphor of literature as a temple and individual writers the laborers of the master mason – the universal man (115). This is at the same time his tentative conclusion: a call for contesting the widespread belief that "[t]o study literature for the ways it makes itself different from all other ways of employing the word … has become obsolete" (123). What this book stresses throughout, and especially in its final chapter, is the need for a revival of studying literature as such – literature as text, independent from

its non-literary context of any kind; literature as a universal phenomenon that is above the multitude of fragmentations and specializations which constitute literary criticism as we know it today. This book is, finally, a call for establishing the study of literature for the art of words per se – the study that, as the present conditions dictate, still does not exist.

While such a call might seem utopian, it is nevertheless more needed today than ever. The long-standing process of turning literature into a province – just one of its possible provinces, accidentally the West – has turned against itself: it has become provincial metaphorically as well as literally, limited, narrow-minded, and self-centred. Releasing literature from the shackles of provincialism should be a constant struggle and, with this in view, this book marks the winning of a significant battle.



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