

CHALLENGES IMPOSED ON WORLD LITERATURE, COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THE “OTHER” THROUGH THE EYES OF JÜRI TALVET

Lenka Štangová

Independent researcher

Jüri Talvet. 2019. *Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature and the “Other”*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN 978-1-5275-3868-9

Prof. Jüri Talvet’s book *Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature and the “Other”* provides a complex as well as innovative insight into literature studies as well as current trends in literary and comparative research. The thirteen essays attempt to outline different theoretical definitions as well as practical applications of conceptions such as “World Literature”, “Comparative Literature” and others. Talvet’s opinions and treatment of these conceptions stem from his own academic and literary experience in Estonia alongside literary practices coming from world-renowned authors including those of Spanish and Latin-American origin. The Estonian poet and academic also provides a deeper insight into the relationship between “centres” and “peripheries” and introduces the notions of aesthetic “infra-other” and “transgeniality”.

The initial essays of the book react to the fragmentarization of comparative literature and the constantly growing demand to incorporate cultural studies into it. Talvet is inspired by the works of Russian philosopher, literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and Russian-Estonian literary scholar, semiotician, and historian Jüri Lotman. In addition to that, he provides reasons why it is necessary to counter think the “institutionalized narrative”.

The belief of comparison being closely related to episteme and edaphos is strongly emphasized and described in the first part of the book since the comparative edaphos activates and dynamizes the episteme of comparative literature and enables to find new perspectives and usage when a work of art is introduced at the national and international levels. Enlarging comparative edaphos and activating the episteme is crucial if we want to come across new observations.

Henceforth, Talvet suggests the approaches that could be taken if we want to avert the simplification and restrictions of world literature. His stance on a symbiotic approach seems to be the starting-point in resolving this current literary issue. The author supports his ideas by providing an interesting timeline of world and comparative literature definitions, incorporating new energies and tendencies coming from East and Central Asia. Interesting aspects encompassed in the essays are Talvet's personal testimonies of world literature practice at Tartu University alongside the documenting of limitations and consequences that being part of the Soviet Union imposed on this Baltic country. In the run-up to the previously discussed matter, Talvet also draws on the issue of the lack of exploration of the reception of Western literature in the former Soviet Union and tracks the changes of terminology and understanding of world and comparative literature that took place at Tartu University ever since then.

To a greater extent the critical essays serve as a continuation and reflection on issues that are already being discussed in international literary and academic spheres. Talvet contributes to them by providing his own ideas about literary simplification and generalization as well as his own understanding of "comparative literature", which based on his perception needs to research literary works and phenomena in contexts that transcend a determined national linguistic area of culture – and everything is dependant on this perception. Talvet's division of literary canon into active, passive and a potential one enables us to understand and bring to our attention many Estonian writers and their respective and critically acclaimed works of art that remain to be unknown internationally.

Apart from getting to know Estonian literature, Talvet uses comparison and tries to find parallels between Estonian writers and the most important figures of world literature. For instance, he provides a complex analysis of Renaissance Humanism, its main features and the most important representatives – Thomas Moore and William Shakespeare. During this process he brings to the reader's attention the ideas of Juri Lotman, the former head of Tartu School of semiotics. Talvet searches for parallels between authors of different origins and Estonian writers, who were inspired by them and used similar or the same paradigms, such as Pedro Calderón de la Bara, Luis Vaz de Camões and Estonian authors Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and Juhan Liiv, who are according to him semiospheric and paradigmatic poets. This semiospheric openness to the "other" serves as the base for the establishments of symbiotic dialogue between the author and the interpreter.

Subsequent essays present reflections about the possible origin of Western ethical literary criticism in Dante Alighieri's philosophical treatise *Convivio*, parting from ethicability and aesthetics as the nucleus of literary creation

and centering on the moral function and challenges of comparative and world literature. Talvet also provides an interesting view on the role of ethics in the possibilities of criticism and research of literary phenomena because it can lead to a new symbiotic perspective. The author opiniates to keep both world literature and national literature canons in a healthy state of permanent openness, discussion and mutual inter-dynamics.

Talvet's essays are also concerned with the detailing and highlighting of some of the most important pieces of art that have given women a voice. The reader is acquainted with various insights of a woman's portrayal in the works of Bocaccio, Fernando de Rojas, Desiderius Erasmus or Francois Rabelais. All of these works take on the role of a "handbook" instructing its readers how to understand the role of gender with regards to the "other".

The author also presents a very intriguing topic of ethical-legal relation between authors and translators and the importance of literary translation, drawing attention to the fact that small literary cultures can poetically communicate only through translations. This imposes limitations and complications when small nations and their respective literatures intend to penetrate into the active canon of world literature.

The book *Critical Essays on World Literature, Comparative Literature and the "Other"* is a pioneering work that demonstrates Talvet's ability to react to current literary and comparative issues and debates. It offers numerous and complex viewpoints on a subject matter, that has already been discussed and analysed by many before, however, it enriches the whole topic with an Estonian perspective and therefore enables us to look at the subject from a completely different angle and mindset. Alternatively, it can serve as a base for other minor nations and literatures that are struggling to promote their most distinguished national works of art and infiltrate them into the active canon of world literature.

Mgr. Lenka Štangová, PhD.
ex-doctoral student
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava
Račianska 59
813 34 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
sekretariat.krjl@fedu.uniba.sk