

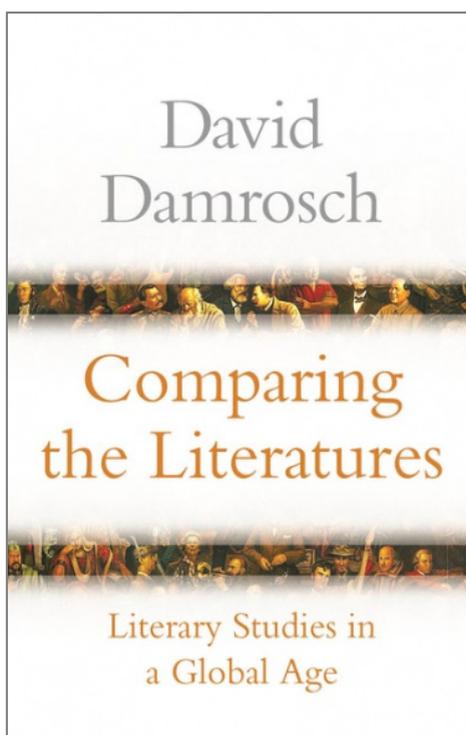
BOOKS

David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, 392 p.

Harvard professor of comparative literature, director of the World Literature Institute, and researcher in comparative studies, David Damrosch is one of the “founding figures” of World Literature. His latest work, *Comparing the Literatures*, published in 2020, seems to start from the following idea: “Comparative literature today is experiencing a paradigm shift of the sort that occurs only once or twice in a century, and an effective response will require

us to rethink the grounds of comparison from the ground up” (5). This study may appeal to all those interested in engaging in comparative approaches, regardless of their field. Thus, *Comparing the Literatures* is announced as a book about the comparative *method*.

From the very beginning, the paper raises several questions about comparative literature. These questions are



asked either by the author himself or by other writers and theorists he quotes and discusses: “what do we really mean by comparing” the literatures? [...] what resources should we draw on as we respond to the changes sweeping across literary studies, the humanities, and the public sphere? [...] what is the unit of comparison? Is it language community or its awkward sister, the race?” (2) etc. The answers to these questions are articulated around the main theme of

the volume, which the author himself announces as “the long-standing tension between inclusive and exclusive visions of comparative study” (9).

Regarding literary theory and its relation to comparative studies, Damrosch states that “given the many varieties of theory, what each of us needs to know is not a set theoretical canon but how best to use whichever theories are

most suited for the questions we want to ask. Used badly, a theoretical lens may distort as much as it reveals" (126). The inherent danger asserts the very power of literary theory. In this context, literature is also seen as a way of dislocating the gaze on the real, which means that studies of comparative literature will only double this effect: "Literature's alternative worlds can help us see through the repressive conventions that society presents as the natural order of things and to envision other ways our world could be" (108). An additional aspect through which Damrosch highlights the connection between the theoretical lens of comparative studies and reality resides in the analogies he makes. They "translate" the raised issues into easy-to-understand terms: "today the careful reading of challenging literary works has something of the oppositional force of the slow food movement in a world dominated by artery-clogging fast food" or "In world literature, as in some literary Miss Universe competition, an entire nation may be represented by a single author" (229).

Clarity is certainly a feature of Damrosch's style, which has been evident since his earlier works. In addition to this clarity, and from a stylistic point of view, the author seems to follow a kind of pattern—which always has worked—in addressing all the issues he discusses. He usually starts with the presentation of the discussed subject's context. Every time new writers are introduced, their biographies and interventions in the field are presented. Writers' gestures and attitudes can be understood precisely through this process of contextualization and of putting everything *in relation*: "De Staël developed her ideas on literature and society under the shadow of her exclusion from the Parisian circles

essential to her intellectual vitality and even her mental health" (15) and "Posnett doesn't appear to have known of Meltzl or his journal," etc. (39). Then, the context is detailed until the links between the events become visible. Thus, by re-establishing the "path" by which a certain situation was generated, one can understand, in fact, the presented situation.

This pattern stands out as the way David Damrosch works in terms of both content and form. On the one hand, the author defines his construction and the possible lenses through which he relates to the presented topics: "My own perspective is that of someone raised and teaching in the United States, though also with a strong awareness of German Jewish immigrant roots, and with parents who vividly recalled their early days in the Philippines, where they met. I am a liberal humanist by outlook [...], I am a structuralist in recovery" (8). Of course, this presentation is completed by the personal appreciations he makes in the book, the recommendations he proposes etc. Damrosch presents the filter through which he is going to examine the ideas discussed. He is well aware of the differences between him and his readers: "every reader of this book will have an individual set of formative figures to explore" (8). On the other hand, the same technique can be identified in the way the whole book is structured. It begins with a historical overview of the discipline of comparative literature, so that the present state of the art can be understood. The author insists on the areas of *becoming* precisely to make the connections between events clearly visible and to support comprehension as a *process*. He captures the moments before and after writers became known in the field of comparative literature studies, for example, in the case

of Michel Foucault or Gayatri Spivak. The areas of becoming are therefore highlighted because they do not follow canonically consecrated figures or texts, but ideas.

The fight against the canon is evident, in terms of both content—the types of canon (canon and hypercanon) and literature (national, international and supranational)—and the text itself. Damrosch demonstrates his mastery of an enormous area of literary studies, offering examples of literature considered minor and non-European. Through his own text, Damrosch epitomizes comparative literature research.

Through the detailed analyses he carries out, Damrosch follows the history of comparative literature in its unfolding and, praising or sanctioning various writers' practices or critical attitudes towards them. An example of the latter would be omitting graphic accents in the names of certain authors. Although this may seem an insignificant detail, it highlights the difficulties of assimilating cultures perceived as (too) foreign. Damrosch treats this issue with the same seriousness as he approaches weightier topics, which indicates a democratized gaze and understanding of literature. Many of these critiques concern attitudes towards feminism: every time he discusses the case of a woman writer, he presents the problems she had to face in becoming a writer; when discussing works of comparative literature, he emphasizes the absence of female authors in them, etc. In addition to these revisions, which are always formu-

lated in a "politically correct" spirit, Damrosch often makes more personal assessments, grounded in irony or humor, with the same purpose: for example, "wouldn't it be better to stick with two neighboring national traditions, one period, one genre, a manageable comparison of three or four novels, using the familiar theoretical framework your advisor was taught thirty years ago?" (6).

Solutions to these historical issues are often offered directly and presented in a clear way: "in this chapter, I propose three ways of dealing with the problems that arise when theory travels to new times and places" (130). These solutions can be deduced from the actual text he proposes, the examples he uses, his openness to non-European cultures, his constant attempt to understand events in their contexts, the quotations he provides both in the original and in translation, the numerous examples of writers, etc. The book itself becomes a paragon of comparative literary studies, epitomizing the principles that Damrosch supports.

In conclusion, in *Comparing the Literatures*, David Damrosch explores comparative literature and world literature especially as a *method* for both doing research and understanding the surrounding reality. The book is also a guide for the application of this method. For any reader, *Comparing the Literature* is certainly a real opportunity to come into contact with an impressive variety of literatures and with an extremely broad view on the subject.

ADINA LUCA

Independent researcher

Email: adina.luca23@yahoo.com

