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The Transnational Trajectories of Dutch Literature as a Minor Literature: A View from World Literature and Translation Studies

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ABSTRACT

This introductory paper discusses recent theories concerning the phenomenon of world literature and its connection with translation, the main focus of this special issue. Subsequently, the article relates the contributions to the theories discussed and indicates in which institutional framework the issue was realized.

KEYWORDS

Literary transmission; Dutch-language literature; world literature; translation; minor literatures; East-Central Europe

This issue of *Dutch Crossing* deals with the transnational circulation of Dutch-language literature. The importation of foreign literary works to minor linguistic areas – a process that relies heavily on translations – has been widely discussed by sociologists and historians of literature. Their work shows that literatures written originally in the major languages of English, French and German appear to export far more than they import, while literatures written in minor languages, like Dutch, import far more than they export.¹

The articles in this issue investigate the reverse dynamic: a minor European literature exporting to other (minor and major) European literatures and new cultural contexts. They engage with the academic discourse of world literature. It is an area of study which has received renewed attention in the last few decades in response to two main challenges: globalization and its implications for literary expression, and an internal crisis within comparative literature. This crisis is spurred on by influential voices in postcolonial studies ‘focused on wrenching the comparative enterprise away from its Eurocentric home in the trans-Atlantic fraternity of English, German, and French national literatures’ – in other words, the major literatures mentioned above.² Our focus on Dutch, a minor European language, reflects these recent debates on world literature and builds on recent endeavours to look at Dutch-language literature as world literature.³

Dutch Literature as World Literature

Over the past two centuries, world literature has come to mean many things to many people. As Damrosch points out, it has been variously defined as (1) an established canon

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of classic works from Ancient Greek, Roman and West European literary history; (2) one or more canons in the process of becoming established, with recent masterpieces joining established classics⁴; (3) a broader selection of literary works, which Damrosch describes as ‘windows on the world’.⁵ Sometimes the phenomenon of world literature is expressly understood in one of these three forms, other times the concept is used to refer to a (partial) amalgamation of these three definitions. To wit, an idea of world literature as referring to the collective body of all literary works ever produced by mankind can be traced back to the early nineteenth century.

Damrosch prefers – as do we – the third, comprehensive interpretation of the term. He defines world literature as a *mode of circulation and of reading* individual literary texts and collections of texts.⁶ This meaning, which is both process-oriented and text-oriented, is contained in his influential description of how a work enters into world literature, that is, ‘by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin’.⁷ The crucial point here is that the emphasis is squarely on works ‘that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language’.⁸ Such an approach offers new perspectives for the transnational study of literature.

Damrosch has repeatedly emphasized that world literature is multifaceted and fluid. Not only does there exist a variety of canons, but literary texts are read and valued differently in different periods and circumstances: ‘World literature is multitemporal as well as multicultural’.⁹ This kind of literature has both local and/or national traits (in that it is written and received in a specific context), as well as trans- and international traits (in that it simultaneously transcends the local context). This allows it to function as national literature for some and as world literature for others. Additionally, a work that circulates internationally may eventually fall out of one or another circuit, only to return to it at another point in time.

The transfer of a literary work from one context to another involves a process of decontextualization and recontextualization whereby many of its original characteristics change. Most often, the source language and the norms that prevail in it serve as the main frame of reference. And while a work that has undergone this process clearly carries the traces of its origins, it also gains new features. As Damrosch argues, when a text enters the wider world it is given a new existence.¹⁰ Authors, readers and listeners stand to gain from this, too, because it offers them a way to break free from their own tradition and expands the number of ‘windows on the world’ available to them, thus making possible encounters with literature from outside their comfort zone, including literature from peripheral language areas. Whether a literary text is transformed into world literature depends in large part on the cultural needs and norms of the receiving culture and its national tradition.¹¹ Demographic, economic, political and religious factors can also shape international transfer and can bring a literary work into contact with multiple foreign cultures at once. It is in this way, as D’haen points out, that dynamic networks take shape in time and space.¹²

The circulation processes that form the basis of these networks require precise description and analysis. The best way to go about this, according to Damrosch, is to carry out case studies examining the multiple transformations and framings of individual exemplary works, the specific circumstances that led to these transformations and framings, and the various ways these works entered circulation and were read outside

the source culture.¹³ What have they gained and lost in terms of language, time and place, ideology and other forms of context? In providing answers to such questions, a close reading approach is perhaps more suitable than the distant reading method Franco Moretti has used to map general developments in international literary culture.¹⁴ However, Damrosch sees case studies as an opportunity to bridge the distance between the two approaches; they are a way to make shared patterns of global literary traffic visible. Such studies contribute to a history of world literature that recognizes the diverse (local, national, regional, global) levels at which world literature manifests itself.

Damrosch has argued for the writing of a modern history of this diverse literature, a history that is both accessible and appealing to a large audience of readers.¹⁵ To achieve this, two obstacles must be overcome: the immeasurable vastness of the corpus to be studied and the absence of a literary-historical tradition that can encompass the 'world' of world literature. As far as the former is concerned, Damrosch is confident that the case study-based approach can produce a lively picture for a varied audience. The second obstacle is somewhat more problematic. So far, the writing of literary history has been a largely nation-specific affair, and this includes efforts undertaken in the comparative mode. A truly 'worldly' point of view must do away with the primacy of national literatures. At the same time, the researcher cannot ignore the influence national literatures continue to exert. Furthermore, national literary histories contain vast stores of useful historical material. Histories of world literature, in turn, offer the promise of placing national literary life, however it may be constituted in a given community or region, in a new and illuminating light.

In order to draw connections to peripheral and other lesser-known cultures, literary historians must resist the domination of the 'hypercanon', says Damrosch, even while the canon cannot be ignored.¹⁶ Texts from the canon comprise an important part of world literature and still have the power to captivate students and the broader reading public. They can be used to create associations with lesser-known literature and thereby expand readers' horizons. Canonized texts are also the easiest to access via anthologies and translations. This is particularly helpful for the allophone researcher whose interpretive work relies on overcoming the language barrier either by concentrating on texts in world languages like Arabic, English and Portuguese, or resorting to translations.¹⁷

World Literature and Translation

Translations merit special attention in (historical) research on the circulation of world literature not only because they are an important methodological aid but also because they are a valuable object of study in their own right. In both national and transnational literary history-writing, the essential role of translations and adaptations has thus far remained woefully understudied, even ignored.¹⁸ Bassnett goes so far as to speak of an 'abyss between the study of world literature and the study of translation' in her book *Translation and World Literature* – itself an effort to bridge that abyss.¹⁹ As Lawrence Venuti argues, world literature cannot be conceptualized without taking translation into account.²⁰ After all, more often than not readers encounter works of world literature in translation.

Like Damrosch, Venuti has a reader- or reception-oriented vision of world literature. They both argue for a case-based approach which, for Venuti, always involves two texts: the source text and the target text, or the original and the

translation. He does not so much reject Moretti's distant reading approach as seek to complement it with careful readings of translated texts in order to make visible 'the role of translation in the construction of world literature'.²¹ Such an exercise enables one to see how the transfer of literary texts through translation can influence literary traditions in the receiving culture. More specifically it lays bare how a translator's interpretations actually *exert* that influence. Venuti also acknowledges the importance of translations for canon formation. Translation flows and translation strategies help determine what 'belongs to' world literature. It is therefore important to study the contours of these flows and how they come to be, and the discursive regimes that condition possible translation strategies.

Similar questions have been raised by another authority in the domain of world literature, Pascale Casanova. She sees translation not as a horizontal, peaceful transfer but rather as an unequal exchange that takes place in a strongly hierarchized universe.²² For her, translation is a form of consecration of authors and texts and is inextricably linked to power and domination. Casanova divides the world into 'dominated' and 'dominating' literary languages. Among the dominated languages, she distinguishes between four groups according to their degree of literariness. The first group consists of oral languages, that lack any literary capital and are unknown in international space. The second group consists of languages of recent creation, with few speakers and few literary works. Dutch belongs to the third group: 'that have relatively few speakers (...) and though they have a relatively important history and sizable stock of literary credit, are unrecognized outside their national boundaries, which is to say unvalued in the world literary market'.²³ The fourth group consists of languages of broad diffusion such as Arabic and Chinese with great internal literary traditions but largely unrecognized in the literary marketplace.

One of the strategies by which dominated languages can obtain legitimacy is translation: it makes a literature visible. Translation not only provides an author with an international position; it also strengthens his/her position in his/her own national field.²⁴ Literary polyglots play an important role in consecration-through-translation: they are the link connecting dominant and dominated literatures. The more literary polyglots there are receiving and distributing a literature, the more dominant it becomes. Because today's literary polyglots par excellence are literary translators, translator training has become essential to consolidating a language's international position.

The consecratory effect of translation into a dominant language like French, German or (particularly) English is much stronger than translation into a less-dominant language. Harish Trivedi first acknowledges and then laments this in his contribution to Bassnett's above-mentioned book: '[L]iteratures are constantly being translated from their original versions into many other languages, both neighbouring and distant, but it is not until they appear in English translation that they begin to be deemed as a part of World Literature, at least in Anglophone discourse'.²⁵

This would suggest that Dutch literature in Polish, Hungarian, Czech or even German translation stands no chance of being called world literature. Circulating (being translated and read) in another culture, to recall Damrosch's criterium, apparently does not suffice. A book must also be consecrated in a hyper-dominant language – English – in order to be considered world literature. Or does it? As we indicated above, everything depends on one's definition of world literature.

Indeed, the focus need not always be trained on the most consecrated works and authors. As Emily Apter argues in her influential book *Against World Literature*, this kind of consecration leads to homogenization and flattening – literature either begins to resemble itself and become interchangeable, or it is niche-branded as typical of a specific culture or language.²⁶ Both tendencies lead to a monoculture that swallows up diversity and difference and renders it innocuous.²⁷ Her catchphrase against this is *cultural untranslatability*. Lima summarizes the concept as follows:

Apter defends the linguistic specificity and the cultural incommensurability of foreign texts against what she characterizes as the tendency in current literary studies in the US and Europe to ‘anthologize and curricularize the world’s literary resources’ (2013, 3). She reminds us that not everything is translatable, that mistranslations and translation failures complicate the assumption of communicability between languages. Apter’s critique of the homogenization and commoditization of literary otherness, thus, amounts to a defense of linguistic and cultural difference.²⁸

Lima did have one criticism of Apter’s argument, however: that she underestimates the power of peripheral cultures. In her study of the Brazilian critic-translator Haroldo de Campos, Lima argues that peripheral literatures must use translation now more than ever in order to participate in global processes of circulation. Via Campos, she draws a direct line to the discourse of postcolonialism: a small literature can use untranslatability as ‘an opportunity to expand the capacity of foreign texts to “infiltrate” into and take ownership of the “universal” literary library’.²⁹ Anna Stowe, in her entry on ‘Power and Translation’ in the *Handbook of Translation Studies*, argues that the balance of power can tilt in one of two directions: ‘The first is that translation can act either as a tool or a manifestation of power by those who already have other kinds of power, or it can be used by those without other types of power as a means of resistance’.³⁰ This turns on its head the idea that a literature can only gain the qualifier ‘world’ if it acquiesces to prevailing literary norms (in terms of genre, stylistic features, themes, etc.). It also inverts the dominant/dominated discourse that is itself dominant in academic debates about world literature today. Here again the discussion turns on how one conceptualizes world literature – either as a concept that prioritizes ‘worldwide’ consensus or one that emphasizes the world’s literary diversity.

For our research on Dutch literature in German, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Slovakian and Serbian translation, it is less useful to work with a concept of world literature that requires consecration in a dominant language as a categorical prerequisite. The notion of world literature becomes much more interesting when it encompasses peripheral literatures that, through circulation to other (peripheral) languages, contribute not to the homogenization of the ‘world’s library’ but to its diversification and, we would argue, enrichment.

Six Eastbound Studies

The contributions in this volume are part of the research project *Eastbound: The Distribution and Reception of Translations and Adaptations of Dutch-Language Literature, 1850–1990* (2016–2020), jointly funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). The researchers involved in the project investigate how, when and through whom Dutch

literature circulates in the German cultural field and in the so-called peripheral cultural fields of East-Central Europe. The project focuses not only on textual derivatives (editions, retellings, translations, etc.), but also on adaptations in other media (film, theatre, music, comic books, etc.). The objectives of the project are threefold: to gain insight into the complex mechanism of bringing literature into circulation in a transnational context, to investigate – and through this process also to challenge – the widely accepted dichotomy and hierarchy between centre and periphery in the literary space, and to explore if and how works of literature lose their nationality and cultural identity during the process of circulation.

The articles compiled here focus on the eastbound trajectories of Dutch literature (from both Flanders and the Netherlands): to its dominant neighbour Germany, with which it shares strong linguistic and cultural affinities, and to other East-Central European countries and languages (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Russia). Germany is the most important market for translated literature from Flanders and the Netherlands.³¹ It is an important direct importer of Dutch literature, but it is also, indirectly, an important exporter of Dutch literature: the German language has long been a crucial intermediary language facilitating the transition of Dutch literature into other languages, especially those of Central Europe. In the world market for translations, there is a difference between the status of these two areas: while German's literary trade balance makes it a central language in Heilbron's terms, the majority of Central-European languages are peripheral. This invites comparative, relational investigations of how Dutch literature travels to central and peripheral languages, respectively. The articles presented here analyse the transfer and transformation processes of specific cases spanning the nineteenth century to present. All are situated within a conceptual framework that leans on the study of world literature, the sociology of translation (centre/periphery, translation flows, institutional factors), translator studies (mediation, agency, human factors) and transfer studies (entangled history, indirect translations, cultural identity).

Both the question of world literature and the function of translation are addressed by **Johan Heilbron** in his article 'Obtaining World Fame from the Periphery'. Without taking a position as to what he understands under world literature, he discusses the patterns through which authors from a peripheral literature achieve world fame, using Dutch as his case. He shows how world-renowned authors and other artists typically proceed through three successive circuits of recognition. The first of these is the semi-official, protected circuit comprised of Dutch-speaking groups outside the Netherlands, while the second consists of the respective national literary fields of the receiving cultures. Translation plays an important role in transitioning from the first circuit to the second, but it is governed by the internal logic specific to the receiving field in question. Only once an author has gained access to the second circuit can he/she aspire to ascend to the third, which only a select few manage to do. This is the province of internationally renowned artists and authors: Nobel Prize hopefuls, artists who exhibit in the most prestigious museums and performers who play the most coveted concert halls in the world. Heilbron calls for more case-focused studies exploring how authors progress from one circuit to another. Such work would not only improve our understanding of how authors obtain world fame (that is, ascend from the second to the third circuit), but also of how authors stake out an international position (that is, move from the first circuit to

the second circuit). It is here, at the threshold between the first and second circuit, that translation plays a key role.

It is also here that most translations of Dutch literature come into being. In his article, 'Dutch Literature in Translation: A Global Analysis', **Jack McMartin** explores a database of more than 11,000 translations out of Dutch since 1998 in order to map recent outgoing translation flows. He finds that the language hierarchies that hold in the world system of translation are strongly reflected in translations out of Dutch as well: one in two of all translations were to the central languages of German, French and English. This also reflects strategic decisions by the Dutch and Flemish governments, which prioritize translations into these languages, partly as a means to stimulate translations into third languages. At the same time, just as many translations came about in peripheral languages, underwriting a key claim made in this issue: that periphery-to-periphery literary transfer is more widespread than often assumed. McMartin goes on to look at translation grants for foreign publishers and the often-pivotal role they play in shaping translation flows. He examines how translation grants are also used to guarantee the quality of translations and support the socio-economic position of literary translators. He closes with a critical discussion of the 'market-correcting' function of translation grants, a main justification used by the Dutch and Flemish governments for dispensing translation grants to foreign publishers. While it is indisputable that many foreign publishers rely on translation grants in order to publish a Dutch literary work in translation, current grant criteria – and particularly the criterion of 'literary quality' – can also exert an exclusionary effect that disadvantages certain books and authors on the threshold of international circulation and exacerbates power asymmetries within the Dutch-language field.

Following these two broader expositions, several of the articles answer Heilbron, Damrosch and Venuti's call to explore the circulation of world literature through case studies. In '*Rückübersetzung*: The Fates of Nico Rost's Diary *Goethe in Dachau*', **Jan Ceuppens** looks at the consequences of the translation of the diary of the Dutch writer Nico Rost into German. Rost wrote his diary based on the notes he took during his internment in the concentration camp of Dachau, Germany in 1944–45. Beside telling the story of the vicissitudes of the translation and reception of the diary, Ceuppens focuses on the specific problem of the change of addressee from source text to target text, and the problems arising from the heterolingualism of the diary in translation. The controversies around the reception of the book in the German Democratic Republic, which were mainly due to the problem of the change of addressee, were ultimately decisive for its negative reception in East-Central Europe. Ceuppens' discussion of the problems of intended readership brings to mind the broader question of Apter's 'cultural incommensurability'. Though the translation of a Dutch literary work into a more central language did not in this case result in the ascension to a wider popularity, Ceuppens ends his article with an expression of hope about the fate of the book in the future. This optimistic note reminds the reader of the dynamic, or, in the terminology of Damrosch, 'multitemporal' nature of world literature.

The effects of ideology on translation histories of the Cold War is the main theme of **Orsolya Réthelyi's** contribution. In her article, 'A Cold War Literary Mystery: Agents, Manipulation and Patterns of Ideology in the Translated Oeuvre of Theun de Vries', she shows how the workings of ideology are visible in the larger translation patterns of the oeuvre of this Dutch communist writer. After looking at some big data, she zooms in on

the circumstances of the writing and the translation trajectory of *Hoogverraad* (1950), a historical novel about the Russian hero, Captain Gusev, who refuses to advance with his division against the Hungarian people rebelling against Habsburg oppression in 1848. The case study examines textual and contextual traces of Cold War deception and historical manipulation and sheds light on the mechanisms and mediators involved in literary transfer under a dictatorship. The underlying methodological questions throughout her study address how translation sociology helps us understand the power relationships governing the circulation of literature from periphery to periphery, and what the limitations are of this methodological approach.

Uncovering the mechanisms of literary transfer processes within a communist dictatorship and emphasizing translations between peripheral literatures are two aims shared by **Wilken Engelbrecht**. In his “‘A Good Way to Propagate Communist Thought’: Czech Translations of Dutch Historical Novels During the Communist Regime or Orwell in Practice’, Engelbrecht uses archive sources to describe the institutions responsible for deciding whether a foreign book was allowed to be translated or not in communist Czechoslovakia. The article focuses especially on the books which were ultimately not published. After providing a general, historical background of the different phases the publishing and translation industry underwent in communist Czechoslovakia, Engelbrecht explores several cases of Dutch literary translations into Czech and Slovak. He provides several case studies about the fate of different books by Theun de Vries, Madelon Székely-Lulofs, Felix Timmermans and others, all of which demonstrate the complexity and absurdities of communist censorship.

The investigation of translation flows from periphery to periphery also plays a central role in the article of **Bojana Budimir**, ‘Peripheries in the Global System of Translation: A Case Study of Serbian Translations of Dutch Literature between 1991 and 2015’. The questions of how literature is transferred from the periphery and to what extent these works can be considered as part of world literature are implicitly present in the article. Budimir examines a large body of data using analytical tools from translation sociology to answer basic questions about what was translated from Dutch to Serbian, when, how, and who was responsible. Budimir’s contribution adds valuable insight about the complexities and interconnectedness of political, economic and cultural circumstances as they relate to the selection and production of translations in East-Central Europe.

Inspired by Franco Moretti’s macro-level approach to literary history, **Theresia Feldmann** leaves the Dutch canon behind. She investigates the circulation of *Stijfkopje als grootmoeder* (1904), one of the most successful German translations of a work of Dutch literary fiction. It was written by the early twentieth-century writer Suze la Chapelle-Roobol who – despite being a prolific writer – has been all but forgotten in the Low Countries. Nonetheless, a translation of her novel is part of a classic series of German novels for girls, first initiated by the German writer Emmy von Rhoden (*Der Trotzkopf* (1885)). By means of a functionalist analysis of the texts of the *Trotzkopf* series, ‘The Untameable *Trotzkopf* – Commerce and Canonicity in the Curious Circulation of a Classic of German Children’s Literature in the Low Countries and Germany’ investigates the border-crossing circulation mechanisms of the *Trotzkopf* texts and its productive reception especially in the Low Countries. Feldmann touches upon questions of canonicity, commerce and authorship in the context of children’s literature.

Some of these articles were presented and discussed at the expert meeting of the *Eastbound* project on 31 January and 1 February 2019, organized in cooperation with the research network *Cutting Edge* coordinated by Eric Metz at the University of Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Institute in Saint-Petersburg (NIP) under the direction of Olga Ovechkina. The intensive discussions on the transnational circulation of Dutch-language literature, the role of translation and the position of Dutch in the system of world literature at this expert meeting have contributed significantly to this issue of *Dutch Crossing*.

Notes

1. See Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire"; and Heilbron, "Towards a Sociology of Translation."
2. Cheah, *What Is a World?* 23.
3. Cf. D'haen, *Dutch Literature*.
4. Damrosch distinguishes between a hypercanon comprised of masterpieces by mostly male authors from dominant European language areas, a countercanon with works by authors from peripheral language areas and literatures, and a shadow canon comprised of works by minor masters that have since fallen out of view for all but an older generation of specialist-scholars, see Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," 44–46.
5. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 5 & 281; Damrosch also calls world literature a 'framework within which individual literatures are formed', see Damrosch, *World Literature in Theory*, 9.
7. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 12.
8. Damrosch, 4; see also Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," 48: '[...] we define "world literature" [...] as works that are read and discussed beyond home-country and area-specialist audiences [...]'.
9. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 16.
10. These insights are not new. They have been staples of Descriptive Translation Studies, which owes much to the work of Gideon Toury, since the 1970s.
11. Cf. Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Studies," 45–52; and Toury, "Nature and Role of Norms."
12. D'haen, "Mapping World Literature," 416.
13. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 6.
14. See Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*; Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*; and Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature."
15. Damrosch, "Toward a History of World Literature."
16. Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," 49–51.
17. Damrosch, "Global Comparatism," 624–26.
18. D'haen, *Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, 3.
19. Bassnett, "Rocky Relationship," 1.
20. Venuti, "World Literature and Translation Studies," 180.
21. *Ibid.*, 186.
22. Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire," 7.
23. Casanova, "World Republic of Letters," 256.
24. Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire," 14.
25. Trivedi, "Translation and World Literature," 15.
26. Apter, *Against World Literature*, 2.
27. *Ibid.*, 83.
28. Lima, "Translation and World Literature," 468.
29. *Ibid.*, 468.
30. Strowe, "Translation and Power," 135.
31. Heilbron and van Es, "In de Wereldrepubliek der Letteren".

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