Peer Review

Review of: "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures"

Aleksandar Mijatović[1,2]

1. University of Rijeka, Croatia; 2. "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania

Calculus of World Literature: Comparativity beyond Measurability

The article "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures" (henceforth TDSL) written by Jeanne Glesener, Marko Juvan, and Benedikts Kalnačs is rigorously elaborated with incisively presented argument.

According to the authors, the small literature is a fuzzy concept. Its meaning is not fixed; it is flexible. The flexible concept of small literature is delineated based on its various functions. Its scope of application extends in multiple directions, contingent upon context and the manifold conditions under which it is applied.

A key point of the article is the authors' distinction among the small, minor, peripheral, marginal, and migrant. The article proposes that these concepts should form a spectrum, shifting from small to large, minor to major, peripheral to central, marginal to core, and native to migrant. They established the concept of smallness as a new hallmark in world literature studies.

Smallness might be a new strategy for de- and re-worlding literature (see Ming Tiampo "Pluriversal Avant-Gardisms: Deworlding, Reworlding, and Worlding the Avant-Garde", *Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, David Ayers et al. (eds), De Gryuter, 2025). This flexible notion of smallness is constructed as a combination of qualitative and quantitative criteria. As shown in TDSL, rethinking the category of smallness introduces a different perspective on using global-local and central-peripheral axes in conceiving world literature.

World literature is fixed on a grand scale—large nations, powerful countries, influential politics, and prosperous economies. Within this geopolitical framework, the greatness of literature is attributed, which limits the diversity of the world's voices with their concomitant diversity and variability. This re-engagement with the world from the point of view of small literature is its re-patterning from a globe

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divided by 'the Greenwich meridian of literature' to a myriad of monads, creating a simultaneity of possible literary worlds.

The scientific background for world literature can be traced to Goethe's *Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1798), *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810), and its literary counterpart is found in *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809). With Goethe's idea of *Welt*, Newton's mechanics of global and single space-time is re-assessed as a variety of worlds folded within the world and unfolding it. When Goethe developed the concept of world literature (*Weltliteratur*), he aimed to replace the cosmological (Newton), historical (Napoleon's wars), and economic (free trade) ideas of the world with a morphological idea grounded in the multiplicity of worlds.

Following TDSL, I see that as the infinitesimality of small literature. The infinitesimal character of small literature is in its being less than a real number and bigger than zero. The global curvature of world literature consists of imperceptible yet existing straight lines – small literatures. Thinking on a small scale enables reassessing the world from the bottom to the top and providing us a different/ial cartography of new literary spaces.

Hence, the term "small literature" does not simply refer to works outside the canon that reflect the dominant center. Small literatures should not simply be added to the canon, thereby becoming a large literature. Instead of opposing, we need to scale the literature. Small literature is not opposed to large literature (that is compiled of a large number of works, writers) and great literature (that is made up of works of universal value). Small literature is neither outnumbered nor undervalued.

World literature is a multitude of small literatures. Its combination of qualitative and quantitative aspects is comparable to calculus in mathematics. Contemplating small literature necessitates extending the concept from finite boundaries to infinitesimal scales. Before exploring the analogy between world literature, viewed as a fraction delineating small literatures ($WL/_{inf}sl$), it is essential to ask how small the divisions should be when deconstructing the complex concept of world literature into its simpler constituent parts.

How small should we go in breaking down world literature, as a complex idea, into small literatures as its simple parts? In other words, we are concerned with "different degrees of smallness." This phrase introduces Silvanus P. Thompson in *Calculus Made Easy* (1910):

> "Then we see that the smaller a small quantity itself is, the more negligible does the corresponding small quantity of the second order become. Hence we know that in all cases

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> we are justified in neglecting the small quantities of the second - or third (or higher) - orders, if only we take the small quantity of the first order small enough in itself.
>
> But it must be remembered that small quantities, if they occur in our expressions as factors multiplied by some other factor, may become important if the other factor is itself large. Even a penny becomes important if only it is multiplied by a few hundred." (I quote from the 1998 edition by Martin Gardner)

I will adapt the intricacies of calculus for our purposes. From a quantitative perspective, we can deal with exceedingly small literatures, such as the Croatian, Slovenian, Belgian, and Luxembourg literatures, and so on. When we introduce a qualitative factor, negligible literature is taken into account. However, small literature already exists, but it is imperceptible due to its size and the variety of qualitative criteria.

If the world literature is fractioned into small literatures ($WL/_{inf}sl$), the question is what degree of smallness we are taking into account. The components of world literature should neither be too small nor too large. If they are too small, due to lagging behind qualitative and quantitative criteria, they are invisible, absorbed into the world literature.

If small literature is considered as an infinitesimal object, it is simultaneously beyond measure, but not zero. No matter how inapprehensible it is by qualitative and quantitative criteria modeled on great literature, small literature possesses the attribute of existence. Therefore, we must reconsider how we measure literature and categorize it as large or great works versus smaller ones. As we reject excluding small literature from world literature, we also avoid integrating it through assimilation.

As Galin Tihanov highlights in "The Location of World Literature" (2017), we operate with a "grid that should assist in the effort of locating world literature as a construct." Hence, it is unnecessary to conceive a separate set of rules designed for a small literature. It would be inclusion through exclusion. With that idea of literary reservation, world literature would occupy a dimension of big, notated as $L^{\hat{}}1$, and another dimension would be inhabited by small literature, notated as $0<l<1$.

However, building on Tihanov's formulation and the hypotheses presented in this TDSL, we view world literature as a dynamic grid within a single dimension but with different scales, in which the world literature changes as each of its components changes. Instead of the postulation of another dimension intended for small literature, we scrutinize our means for measuring literature.

To adapt Thompson's idea quoted above, what in one calculating framework approximates zero, in another one turns out to be closer to 1 or equal to it. The existence of a small literature is due to a kind of

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‘measurement error’ in literary studies. I believe this article encourages us to reconsider and reorganize how literary studies approach literature beyond the conventional conceptual framework, which appears biased. Following arguments in TDSL, the concept of literature as disposition, not essence, propels us to seek an error margin in literary studies,

For instance, if someone measures world literature in hours, small literature might be measured in minutes, seconds, or even in euros and cents, dollars, pounds, and pennies. It is possible to translate from small literature to world literature just as we can convert from seconds and minutes to hours, or from cents and pennies to euros and dollars.

Rather than using the measurement framework developed from world literature for other types of literature, consider that a small literature has its own distinct measurement framework. This new axiom may be stated as follows: Conduct a study ('measurement') on the scale of small literature and assess whether it can be translated into a global scale. Moreover, that scaling (with Tihanov and Apter in mind) is mutual, as we reevaluate the translation of global into local contexts. Following Susan Stanford Friedman, exploring the small literature operates according to the dynamic pull of commensurability and incommensurability. This scaling of infinities and limits invites re-mapping the world literature and re-shaping it in the cartography of still uncharted and unheard-of literary spaces and chronologies.

As I tried to demonstrate, I found reading this article (TDSL) to be extremely engaging and intellectually rewarding.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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