

The Importance of World Literature

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I would like to thank three people. First of all, Massimiliano Mazzanti is a colleague and a very dear friend with whom I share the PhD Programme in Environmental Sustainability and Wellbeing that we launched in 2019. It has nurtured our friendship and strengthened our cross-disciplinary collaboration.

I would also like to stress the importance of the intellectual lineage that connects Massimiliano Mazzanti, Roberto Zoboli, and Alberto Quadrio Curzio. I am thankful to Massimiliano, Roberto, and Alberto, whom I had the pleasure of meeting earlier today, for inviting me. I have not prepared a posh PowerPoint presentation, having decided, as I said to David Damrosch, to listen carefully and respond to what I thought would be of particular interest to me.

I will start with a broad statement: literature has traditionally been regarded as a system of representation while science has been viewed and praised as a system of knowledge. In my work I have challenged this idea, emphasizing that literature is also a system of knowledge and science is also a system of representations. This separation, that David mentioned at the beginning of his speech, is non-existent, or rather it is an artifact and it is dangerous. The sciences and the humanities are systems of knowledge and representations: they know the world, make sense of it, decipher and represent what they have understood of the world in their own specific ways.

The second point I would like to share with you is related to David's outstanding work with world literature. I always use one of his essays in my courses. World literature is something that we cannot do without nowadays, and people in the humanities are now well aware that studying literature entails studying world literature. This was not the case a few decades ago. If you decided to study literature twenty or thirty years ago, it would not have been so evident. It has become very

clear now, as you cannot talk about the subject without talking about world literature or literatures in the plural. Along with this, I would also like to highlight – maybe a little provocatively – the importance of national and regional literatures. World literature exists, and it is very important to acknowledge its existence, because world literature has allowed us to move away from Eurocentric and localized views. At the same time, world literature is as important as national literatures and regional literatures are. The missing link is comparative literature. Comparative literature is exactly what allows us to move across domains.

The third point concerns ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, or ecological humanities, as I like to call them. A few years ago, many colleagues questioned why the humanities were becoming environmental. It is a question I have been asked more than once: why do you want to study literature and the environment? It is instrumental, it takes away the value of literature *per se*, as literature exists *per se*, regardless of whether it dialogues with the environment. It exists as an entity and does not necessarily involve challenging the discourses of the environment. So why would you want to do that? If you do, you might diminish the pure ontological value of literature by connecting it to ideological discourses.

The aesthetic value of literatures exists and remains where it has always been while we engage in discourses of the environment. They are far from being mutually exclusive. Studying literature with a focus on the environment does not take anything away from literature *per se*. The ecological humanities are the humanities engaging with the environment in ways that appreciate literature as an aesthetic creation and a form of creativity, while raising ecological questions. Aesthetics and ethics can certainly coexist without challenging or diminishing each other.

The opposite problem affects junior scholars who are expected to study the environment and environmental studies out of moral duty, overturning the skepticism we experienced a few years ago. It is high time we neutralized the bipolarity still persisting among academics who are expected to decide whether the environment should become a research priority. Wanting to study literature and ecology because this

turn is trendy, fashionable, and good to do so, or not wanting to study literature through an ecocritical lens – all options are open.

The importance of genres has been stressed by previous speakers. People in the humanities and literary studies think in terms of genres. It is a sort of unconditional reflex: we cannot think outside the realm of genres because they help us move through the oceans of literature. While I believe in the importance of genres, I also think that, when we talk about the environmental humanities and ecocriticism, a more important question should be: what ecological narratives stand out? I totally support scholars who want to focus on climate fiction or poetry. There is also ecological theatre, as well as the media. David Attenborough has produced green documentaries that blend narrative and the screen. While the focus on genres is still significant, thinking in terms of ecological narrativity is more productive. What are the ecological narratives that stimulate our thought, critical thinking, and agency? There is a difference between narratives that make us think about the environment and narratives that make us act on the environment. In both cases, thinking about how narrative can stimulate us is a crucial question that we should ask ourselves.

I have two final points. One is about decolonialism, the importance of which I support and share, while also stressing the importance of continuing to work within the canon. As we talk about decolonial literatures in the ecological humanities, we should not forget the canon, which has existed for thousands of years and must be challenged, disrupted, and reaffirmed. The canon and canonical literature exist along with decolonial literature, generating a strong chemistry. Working within the ecological humanities would be detrimental if the canon were suppressed. Having studied canonical male authors for many years, I believe that no justification or disclaimer are required, as any chosen corpus is equally valid. Again, coexistence is crucial.

My last point is about ecological narratives and cross-fertilizations. A coexistence of different perspectives and frameworks is fundamental to articulating multifocal and multilayered discourses on literature and the environment. I appreciate how we moved from David Damrosch, who talked about theories and world literature, to Nandita Mahajan, who refined the focus on a range of texts, and John, who has developed a

strong focus on regional literature. World literature, comparative literature, and national and regional literature: inclusivity is at the core.