LETTERS

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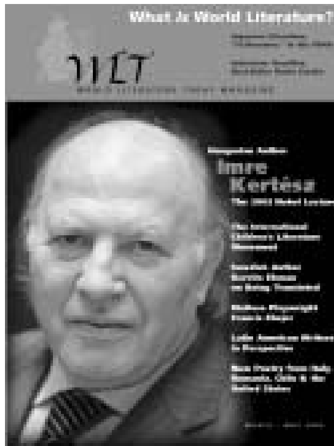
A LETTER FROM KIRSTI SIMONSUURI

THANK YOU VERY MUCH for your issue of April–June 2003. Considering the number of interesting essays and lively reviews in *WLT*, my thoughts about David Damrosch's article—"What Is World Literature?"—may appear as footnotes to marginalia. Damrosch has given us inspiring and profound, at times painful reflections on the concept of world literature. Painful, because seen from the perspective of small literatures of the world (or from the background of two millennia of once powerful, now dead literatures), the problems that Damrosch thoughtfully raises are even more poignant than can possibly be imagined from his own North American comparatist viewpoint. These problems culminate in two questions: the raison d'être and practice of translations, and the rise of a kind of common parlance, a kind of *koiné* that so much of literature written today has become.



Koiné, as pointed out by Roland Barthes, who uses this term in a figurative sense (not in its original sense of denoting the historical phase of Greek language from the end of the classical era to Byzantine times), is a language that contains no style. It facilitates communication between people of widely different backgrounds, levels of education, and geographical locations, as indeed *koiné* did in ancient times. As writers, scholars, and translators (as I am one myself), however, should we not be deeply worried if poems, novels, and plays of all the regions of the globe begin to resemble one another, and this even as a willing act by the writers themselves? The first casualty then would be style—the individual, idiosyncratic voice that is the result not only of the writer's own personal development and sensibility but also of the influences of the people around him/her, their language and history. These are subtle influences, as I am not thinking of a world of closed borders or narrow national interests, but I think that writers in various parts of the world are carriers of memory, and they can only do that by developing a language that has style and can convey this memory.

From the viewpoint of small languages with flourishing literatures and energetic translation activity, it makes sense to talk about literature as "windows" on the world, as Damrosch does, a true New Yorker. The Finnish poet Mirkka Rekola once expressed this idea in an evocative aphorism: "The poet stands like a narrow gate in a landscape." We have to see the Finnish countryside in our mind's eye to really understand the meaning. This gate gives a particular angle to a unique world. Writers of small and less well-known languages have a much clearer sense, maybe, than their colleagues writing in major languages do, that they have to act as a consciousness and a conscience of those who share the same language. This means living permanently on a razor's edge. Every act of translation into that language will expand the horizon, open the gate a bit wider; and every act of translation from that language will mean just one more slight chance of survival in an open stormy sea of world literatures.

So the problem does not seem to be so much that we live in a multicultural world, for this is what human history has been about since the beginning; no culture or human being is originally monocultural. Multiculturalism does not make that much sense in the world of literature. Rather, we have differing notions of literature in search for a logos and a topography. Cosmopolitanism—a descendant, in my view, of the ancient philosophical school of cynicism—offers one valid notion of literature: namely, that literature belongs to the lofty inns of logos that are beyond time or place. There are many other notions, however, among them those often expressed in the literatures of smaller languages, that literature should give a voice to human experience in extreme situations and conditions, to give a voice to those who cannot claim it themselves (as in the writing of the Hungarian Imre Kertész, for example).

In the end, maybe, it is the translators who will continue to play the crucial role in the field of world literature. Such translators will understand the unique specificity of both the target language and the source language and will give translations (in contrast to adaptations) that are both authentic and enriching in new cultural contexts. The translator will be a true guardian of cultural interchange in a very complex world that, despite powerful globalizing tendencies, has not been made any simpler or more uniform, because literature itself originates in difference.

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KIRSTI SIMONSUURI has published some fifteen books of poetry and fiction in Finnish and has translated into Finnish works by Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath as well as Greek tragedy. Her translation from ancient Greek into Finnish of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* was published in 2003. She served as a juror for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2000.

RUSSIAN BOUQUETS AND CUBAN NOIR

I VERY MUCH ENJOYED Kerstin Ekman's discussion of translations and translators in your April–June issue. It was particularly interesting to learn that the occasion for this was a meeting between this author and a number of her translators. If only this could be done more often, as both authors and their translators would benefit from these kinds of encounters.

Ekman, although not a translator herself, seems quite perceptive as to what is involved in a translation that tries to express the author's ideas in another language. Literal translation is important, of course, but too much of this and the reader may become lost in the verbiage. Ekman's suggestion that the translator should apply a "light touch" and "a bit of love and a sense of humor" is excellent advice.

Some years ago, I worked with an attorney in Seattle who was the agent for Russian writers living in the former Soviet Union and publishing in the West. In going through the files I found a letter from Vassily Aksyonov, a client, to one of his translators, the late Max Hayward. Aksyonov discussed the importance of a close and cordial relationship between author and translator, which helps the latter's understanding of what the author is trying to say in his work. When this relationship flourishes, Aksyonov calls it a "fantastical bouquet." Meetings between authors and their translators would surely give a chance for such "bouquets" to thrive.

Thinking about the quality of translations leads me to consider the quantity of translations available here. I work for a small international crime writers' organization, one of whose aims is to promote translations of our members' works, and we've come to understand some of the difficulties for foreign authors of getting published here. While our North American members are frequently translated abroad, the reverse is far from true. For one thing, many American editors don't read foreign languages and thus have to rely on readers and/or translators for advice on publishing foreign novels. Usually their budgets don't permit sample translations or readers' reports unless a work has attracted a lot of attention. In some cases, an author will pay for the translation himself. Some of these works are fine, but others are not so fine, depending on the skill of the translator. Of course, translations don't pay well, and with few translation subsidies available, even the most successful of translators usually has to rely on another career in order to survive.

Nevertheless, there are some positive signs in the crime literature field, especially with translated novels coming from small presses like Akashic Books in New York, which publishes a series called Cuban Noir. Two of their authors have been nominated for the Edgar Award, and one of them received the award. Swedish author Henning Mankell won the 2001 best novel award from Britain's Crime Writers Association, and his *One Step Behind* was recently nominated for the Los Angeles Book Prize. Thanks to the dedication and efforts of editor Janet Hutchings, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* has launched a series called "Passport to Crime," featuring a translated short story from a different country in each issue. All these developments are good signs that translated literature is at least making some impact these days in the world of crime fiction.

Mary A. Frisque
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THE MANY WORLDS OF WORLD LITERATURE

LIKE SO MANY OTHER READERS of this newest member of the *World Literature Today* journal family (as reflected in the letters section), I am most impressed with the beautiful design and production features of the magazine; but there is also much of substance and interest in these pages. As one who has toiled in the "World Literature, 1700 to the Present" trenches at least once a year for more than thirty years, it was David Damrosch's "What Is World Literature?" that most engaged my attention in the April–June 2003 issue.

Unlike comparative literature, world literature has almost nowhere achieved departmental status. Rather, it usually is the name of a course or series of courses in an English department. Thus the question of what it *is* is certainly open and relevant—especially since, in early editions (at least through the 1970s), the Norton anthology of "world" masterpieces was drawn entirely from western Europe and North America. To use the word *world* to describe such a course or the "masterpieces" in such an anthology is a key instance of what Damrosch cites (in Steven Owen's description) as "the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal."

To its credit, since its inception as *Books Abroad*, *World Literature Today* has not so defined the world. Nevertheless, Damrosch's complex and thoughtful discussion has much to suggest about the inevitable problems, complexities, ironies, and complicities that come in to play in the relations between writers and writings in what is sometimes (unfortunately) called the "Third" World and the massive power and presence of that dominating component in the Anglo-European tradition, the United States of America. For example, as Damrosch points out, Bei Dao or any of the Chinese poets and novelists that we associate with Tiananmen Square, or writers from other countries, sometimes must find their primary audience abroad because they are censored by their governments. Damrosch does not quite extend his discussion as far as pointing out that such writers may experience success in the United States or Europe partly as the result of the ideological needs of the hegemonic power—as fuel, for example, for a smug, self-satisfied complacency about Western "freedom," which conveniently ignores the disastrous effects on writers' freedoms of the concentration and monopolization of publishing in the hands of a few (primarily transnational) corporations.

Occasionally, Damrosch seems to betray certain assumptions that have been discredited by modern critical thought—as when he seems to assume that what makes a modern work a masterpiece (his example is Goethe) capable of converse with a classic is "the great ideas express[ed] anew." Might it not sometimes be the great ideas themselves that are new? But always his discussion is important and thought-provoking and a good example of what makes this magazine an important voice in the world of literature and culture.

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