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RESEARCH

Peripheral articulations of world literature: de-westernizing a discipline in Soviet Russia and beyond

Maria Chiorean[1]

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Abstract
This article reviews Galin Tihanov, Anne Lounsbery, and Rossen Djagalov's recent book, *World Literature in the Soviet Union* (2023). It discusses the ways in which Soviet world literature became a distinct literary field through socialist internationalism starting in the 1920s, proposing a different understanding of *Weltliteratur* and enacting different patterns of literary production, circulation, and transnational consecration than those enshrined in Western-centric models of world literature. I highlight the role of nation-building within the USSR, as well as in Soviet networking with the newly decolonized world post-WWII. I situate the work of Soviet intellectuals in the broader context of contemporary theoretical debates about world literature and postcolonial studies, and argue that their perspective on the historical function of literature might help us address some of our disciplinary crises today. Finally, I suggest that the same kind of research should be carried out into South-Eastern subperipheral literatures such as Romanian and Bulgarian literature.

Keywords World literature · Soviet Russia · (sub)peripheries · Regimes of relevance

The most recent volume edited by Galin Tihanov, Anne Lounsbery, and Rossen Djagalov, *World Literature in the Soviet Union* (henceforth *WLSU*,[1] Academic Studies Press, 2023), contributes to an ongoing project of localizing and historicizing world literature, both as a corpus of texts that ended up being translated and circulating—to quote David Damrosch's famous definition in *What is World Literature?* (2003)—and, crucially, as a theoretical paradigm.

Writing about world literature in 2025 involves grappling with a host of epistemological and methodological issues arising from the polycrisis that we are facing today. For example, since xenophobic nationalism and its associated far-right rhetoric seem

[1] All references to the book under review and its distinct chapters will use the "WLSU" abbreviation.

✉ M. Chiorean
maria.chiorean@ulbsibiu.ro

[1] Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania

to be on the rise on multiple continents, we find ourselves reevaluating the relationship between world literature and national culture (Chaudhuri 2021). On a related note, as Europe's colonial past still impacts every aspect of contemporary geopolitics and especially the economic situation of the Global South, we recognize that the dialogue between world literature scholars and the field of postcolonial and decolonial studies is far from over; instead, the "world" in "world literature" is still being questioned and expanded (Cheah 2015). Finally, since Immanuel Wallerstein's center-periphery model for understanding the world and its power dynamics (2011) has been complicated through the study of literary (semi)peripheries, inter-peripheral exchanges, and polycentric networks (see Juvan 2019; Baghiu 2019; Bartosiewicz-Nikolaev and Krupa 2024 for Central and Eastern European examples), new approaches emerge regarding minor or marginal literatures and their position in the world, such as the investigation of mediated literary influences (Terian 2019) or the remapping of Europe based on cultural attitudes to modernity and coloniality (e.g., Boatcă's "multiple Europes," see Boatcă 2022).

Thus, although the *concept* of world literature has been around for almost three centuries, since Wieland, Schlözer, and Goethe (Pizer 2006), the tenets of the discipline are now being more ardently debated than ever. Not only have world literature studies progressed from an uncritical celebration of cultural diversity to the scrutiny of power imbalances and from the veneration of Western masterpieces to the relativization of the canon, but the very meaning of "world literature," once unitary by definition, has been proven to contain multitudes: geographical and historical variations and variants which no longer allow us to entertain the illusion of world literature as a single way of reading, a stable set of universal values, or, in Aamir Mufti's words, "a unified perspective on world culture" (2016, p. x). As a result, multiple critics and editors have taken up the mission to decenter world literature by focusing on its subunits, from national literatures to literary genres: the recent series from Bloomsbury ("Literatures as World Literatures") issues this very methodological challenge. In the final section of this article, I also look at different articulations of world literature and literary worlding in modern Romanian and Bulgarian criticism, drawing, among other sources, on *Romanian Literature as World Literature* and *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature* and arguing that peripheral variations of theoretical concepts and models are an undervalued resource of literary history.

Soviet literature as world literature

The contributors to *WLSU* focus on the Russian engagement with world literature during the twentieth century and especially after the 1917 October Revolution. They aim to show that the institutionalized—mostly European and Eurocentric—conceptualizations of world literature do not fit comfortably with the recent history of Russian literature, failing to grasp and explain its internal contradictions or the functions assigned to literature by the Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors do so by providing information on the cultural infrastructure of the Soviet Union (institutions and institutes, publishing houses, subsidized translation programs, anthologies, research collectives), while also identifying

the "lessons" we can learn from the study of this period, i.e., the ways in which Soviet insights into literary nation-building, on the one hand, and transnational networks, on the other, anticipate or even solve some of the questions, conundrums, crises, and shortcomings of contemporary world literature studies. Throughout the book, the contextualization of world literature (its simultaneous localization and historicization) amounts to a process of explicit decentering and de-Westernization: as critics have pointed out, concepts sourced from the European theoretical tradition and the English language "seem to be the not-quite-invisible ether that permeates this space" (Mufti 2016, p. xi), and world literature is mostly being taught in English departments, reflecting "the transition from British to American world hegemony" (Cleary 2021, p. 164); by contrast, *WLSU* sets out to tackle the central concepts and frameworks of the discipline and to explicitly address their Western origins. As a result, what may initially appear as a very particular, very niche revisitation of a century of Russian literature under a specific regime turns out to have far-reaching implications in terms of what world literature is or should be.

Nowadays, the mission and the scope of world literature studies seem more relevant than ever, given the effects of globalization, widespread migration, and right-wing policies against it. Indeed, as Rossen Djagalov points out in his chapter, it has been claimed that world literature scholarship has replaced "postcolonial studies as the main approach to transnationalism in literature," offering greater geographical openness than the East-West asymmetrical dynamics explored by postcolonialism (WLSU, p. 210). The field also took a materialist turn when scholars like Pascale Casanova (*The World Republic of Letters* (2004)) and Franco Moretti ("Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), and "More Conjectures" (2003)) started focusing on literary circulation, international competition, and the impact of the book market and cultural capital on the "wordliness" of any literary text or tradition. Despite their still-Eurocentric models (with Paris and London as the consecrating fora of world literature), this interest in the material forms of inequality which ultimately dictate symbolic inequality goes hand in hand with the similarly materialist or Marxist strain of postcolonial inquiry (Burns 2019, p. 169), represented, among others, by Benita Parry and Aijaz Ahmad or, more recently, by Vivek Chibber's work and his critique of poststructuralist discourse analysis (2013, 2020). However, the meaning of world literature is still strongly attached to Western history, determined by the European adherence to capitalism and its hegemony, which is why most mutations within the discipline happened within the coordinates of Western modernity (viewed as the *only* possible form of modernity) and ignored entire cultures and literatures which did not observe the same trajectory. Therefore, the development of world literature projects in other spaces and according to other ideologies and values is yet to be researched and added to the incomplete semantic map of *Weltliteratur*. Because, while there are common elements in all theoretical frameworks of world literature—e.g., the crossing of national borders, transnational cultural influence, and an emphasis on translation and circulation—questions regarding its purpose, history, and limits have received contrasting answers at various points in time and under distinct political regimes. In Venkat Mani's words, "what is identified as world literature undergoes transformations in different historical times and in different geographical locations and linguistic traditions. World literature is historically conditioned, culturally determined, and politically charged" (2016, p. 13).

Soviet Russia is the subject of Tihanov, Lounsbery, and Djagalov's book, as well as a prime candidate for a new and non-Western-centric cartography of world literature. The reasons have to do with postrevolutionary history and the utopian drive of Soviet reforms and institutions in the immediate aftermath of the regime change, when a period of rapid modernization and socioeconomic change coincided with an unprecedented focus on cultural and artistic issues: as Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko explain, "culture was always in the purview of Soviet leadership" (2007, p. xi) and basically coincided with "the sphere of the legitimation of the state" (p. xii), especially given the armed revolution which had brought about the new regime. Literature had long played a central role in Russia, ever since the process of secularization during Peter I's reign and the sacralization of the written Word, which culminated in Soviet times with the transformation of literature into "an overtly politicized and ideologized institution" (Zalambani 2011, p. 251). As the young Soviet state was being constructed as a communist utopia, so was its literary field defined by internationalism and global solidarity through the cause of socialism. In their chapter on the journal *International Literature* in the mid-1930s, Elena Ostrovskaya, Elena Zemskova, Evgeniia Belskaia, and Georgii Kor argue that, while "world literature" had been announced as an inevitability in the nineteenth century, "a utopia on the brink of becoming reality" (WLSU, p. 137), after 1917 an entire system was mobilized to actually create a Soviet world literature, whose mission was deemed highly important: to validate the new state, to educate the masses in the spirit of transnational brotherhood, to replace bourgeois art with literary products which spoke for the people, to foster Soviet influence in decolonized countries, etc. As recent research has shown, these tasks were constantly being proposed, discussed, and negotiated in a great variety of texts and speeches, from the decisions of the Soviet Politburo and the correspondence between Maxim Gorky and Stalin to speeches given at the Writers Congress and introductory articles in the catalogs compiled by Gorky's publishing house, *Vsemirnaia Literatura* (henceforth *VS*) (Clark and Dobrenko 2007). Moreover, as Clark, Maria Khotimsky, and Sergey Tyulenev also detail in their contributions, the cultural infrastructure of the Soviet state was complex, centralized, and geared towards fostering internationalism and world literature: it involved, among many other institutions and publications, the state-supported *VS* (1918–1925); the eponymous translation project (which aimed to render into Russian the literary masterpieces of the world, making them available to a wider public); the Institute of World Literature (founded in 1932 and initially named The Maxim Gorky Institute); the multiple Western authors invited to visit Russia; Russian delegations to various international events, such as international congresses of writers taking place in the West; conferences of Soviet literary scholars who strived to establish a methodology for a non-Occidentocentric historiography of world literature, etc. As shown by Djagalov, connections between Soviet intellectuals and authors from the so-called "Third World" also developed after WWII due to organizations such as The Afro-Asian Writers Association (1958–1991). Through its infrastructure—its congress, permanent bureau, publications, and the Lotus Prize—a network was formed not just between the two continents, but Soviet Russia, as well, facilitating "South-to-South literary traffic" (WLSU, p. 212) and "literary connections unmediated by British or French publishing houses" (WLSU, p. 229). In short, whereas world literature stud-

ies have benefitted from the sociology of the book market, the sociological investigation of Soviet world literature leads to different conclusions and models, given its falsifiable reliance on the project of the Soviet Union and its geopolitics rather than the rules of the free market. It can safely be said that postrevolutionary Russia produced its own brand of world literature: a new understanding of the concept itself, certainly, but also new structures, new mechanisms, new hierarchies, and new center-periphery relations which did not involve Paris or London. This vision was undoubtedly rooted in Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, with its focus on literary transnationalism, and Marx's "commodity of universal literature" (Khotimsky 2013, p. 120), but it was truly revolutionary in its non-Eurocentric drive and thus constitutes a bridge between nineteenth-century articulations of *Weltliteratur* and today's simultaneous interest in word literature and its developments "after postcolonialism" (Burns 2019). To quote Harsha Ram, whose work also informs Clark's chapter (WLSU, p.117), Soviet literature was "the first state-sponsored multilingual and multiethnic literature of the twentieth century, anticipating by half a century the re-emergence of world literature in the west as an expression first of postwar liberal multiculturalism and then of neoliberal globalization" (Ram 2020, p. 32). A double process was under way: bringing the world into Russia (through translations, adaptations, and networking), while also establishing Soviet literature as a powerful, multinational literature (WLSU, Clark p. 117).

The project of Soviet world literature. Competing regimes of relevance

All the chapters in Tihanov, Lounsbery, and Djagalov's book set out to detail and discuss the project of Soviet world literature: its ideological outline and tensions, its goals and institutions, the status of the national literatures within USSR, and their dialogue with other literatures from far-flung spaces. In "The Treasure Trove of World Literature," Khotimsky writes about *VS* and its translation practices, "aimed at creating an innovative, state-supported canon of world literature addressed to the new reading public" (WLSU, p. 91), especially the working class. This involved putting out a catalog outlining the publication plan, a preface by Gorky, and two series of books: the Main Series (*Osnovnaia seriia*) and the People's Series (*Narodnaia seriia*), which would include Russian translations of European and, later on, Eastern classics. Although the economic problems of the young Soviet state hindered the achievement of these objectives, Khotimsky highlights their specificity, namely "the perceived opportunity of creating this cultural enterprise from the ground up" (WLSU, p. 100). Of course, the selection of the texts was ideologically motivated, replacing the bourgeois canon of Western Europe with a Soviet canon. The principles governing this process of substitution are outlined in Schamma Schahadat's chapter, "World Literature and Ideology," in which the author looks at some of Gorky's and Karl Radek's famous speeches and extracts their particular definitions of world literature. For example, Gorky's presentation at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow (1923) presents Soviet literature as "an all-Union literature" (WLSU, p. 189) and anchors its international potential in a literary history (from Greek mythology to the

literature of the future) traversed by a materialist thread. Similarly, Radek uses the term "proletarian world literature" to describe the texts published after WWI which opposed bourgeois aesthetics; thus, Schahadat explains, "Radek connects the development of world literature with the fight against capitalism; for him the decline of 'bourgeois world literature' and of capitalism are parallel processes" (WLSU, p. 190). Moreover, as Tyulenev also reports, while Gorky did believe that the proletariat was to inherit the best and most emancipated literary products which the world could offer, he also defended the critical engagement with bourgeois art, suggesting, during the same congress, that it was literary history that needed reframing from the point of view of progress towards equality and socialism: "following the dialectic principle of the new growing out of the old by negating the negation, the new had to engage with the old, albeit in a critical fashion. The interaction of the new with the old was to be conducted from the point of view of the world revolution" (Tyulenev in WLSU, p. 125). So, the early Soviet attempts to define the concept of world literature and create a new canon through translation did not simply reject the literature published under capitalism but took their cue from Marx's own writing on *Weltliteratur*, in which many literary texts are seen as the "products of the bourgeois state of production and ownership" (WLSU, p. 191). This makes Schahadat hypothesize that "Marx is the link between Goethe on the one side and Gorky and Radek on the other side," with Goethe and Gorky sharing the belief that world literature can have a political function (either peace-making and intercultural closeness or education) (WLSU, p. 192).

Thus, the authors of *WLSU* describe the development of a new, geopolitically determined and ideologically inflected concept of world literature. To quote Schahadat, "world literature in its Soviet version was explicitly and decidedly political" (WLSU, p. 193), working towards transnational socialism and using literature as an educational tool for the masses, as well as the object of research, tracing the manifestations of capitalist inequality and revolutionary struggle alike. As Khotimsky also points out, the legacy of *VS*, although ignored by contemporary scholarship, was a privileged site of negotiating the historical role of artistic production and circulation; more exactly, it was "described as a prime example of a great culture building initiative, which can be used as pro-Soviet propaganda" (WLSU, p. 100) and embodied the result of combining an interest in literary internationalism with the Marxist view of history. This inevitably brings to mind the work of another author and editor of this volume, Galin Tihanov, who, in 2019, published *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* and coined the phrase "regimes of relevance" to describe "the prevalent mode of appropriating (both interpreting and using) literature in society at a particular time" (p. 20): the meaning and role assigned to literature, which dictated a certain axiology, hierarchy, and canon. Addressing the current state of the discipline, Tihanov indicates that we are now largely operating within a regime of relevance dominated by the market and entertainment value of literature. He then points out that "this regime of relevance has engendered an interpretative framework that has recently grown and gained enormous popularity, not least in the classroom, as 'world literature"' (2019, p. 175). Obviously, this hegemonic and institutionalized notion of world literature is very different from the Soviet model, in which pedagogical and ethical concerns took precedence.

Tihanov discusses these different models of literature at length throughout his book, in which he compares and contrasts the contemporary meaning of world lit-

erature, its Soviet iteration, and the earlier belief in the autonomy and intrinsic value of the literary discourse, which dealt with form, style, and literary devices rather than the circulation of texts or their position in a specific cultural field. According to Tihanov, it was the latter regime of relevance which allowed literary theory to be born in Russia in the first half of the twentieth century. Explaining the emergence of Russian formalism and especially Viktor Shklovsky's work, he shows that "under pressure from the grand narratives of Marxism [. . .] literary theory was eventually to be canonized in the Soviet Union in the 1940s as what it didn't want to be: a perspective on literature that would go back to the old regime of relevance, highlighting the social and political significance of literature" (2019, pp. 4–5). Therefore, some of the most important names associated with interwar literary theory, from Shklovsky to Mikhail Bakhtin, were caught up in a critical yet highly productive nexus, between a regime of relevance favoring "literariness," the Soviet regime valorizing the political role of literature, and a widespread interest in its "global production and consumption" (Tihanov 2019, pp. 176–178).

International literature. Competing world republics of letters

In their contribution to *WLSU*, Ostrovskaya, Zemskova, Belskaia, and Korotkov also write about Soviet culture as a battleground for revolution, ideological negotiation, and historical change in their text on the multinational journal *International Literature* (henceforth *IL*). In the mid-1930s, this publication appeared as an official mouthpiece of IURW (International Union of Revolutionary Writers) and was initially designed as a four-language journal, including Russian. In many ways, it channeled the transnational and trans-Atlantic dimension of previous, smaller magazines, which could be classified as modernist or avant-garde, adding the state machinery which ultimately supported the Soviet ideal of internationalism (WLSU, p. 163). *IL* was a global project, with four separate sub-journals or editions: English, German, French, and Russian. It aimed to provide Marxist analyses of cultural phenomena from *all countries*, discussed in relation to Soviet literature (WLSU, p. 143). For instance, it showcased revolutionary authors who wrote in English, German, and French but could not be published at home due to censorship, as well as other revolutionary writers from various regions and regimes (WLSU, p. 144).

Thus, the journal maintained a global ideological network and became "an ideal space of a utopia in construction [. . .] a coherent unit, a multilingual and multifaceted publishing project meant to reflect the processes going on in world literature and to construct a new model of it" (WLSU, p. 140). In doing so, it shed light on two characteristics of Soviet world literature as a whole—or, as Djagalov calls it in his chapter, "the Soviet Republic of Letters" (WLSU, p. 211): namely, the re-centering of the world literary system, replacing Paris with Moscow, and the preeminence of ideological imperatives over the economic rules governing the Western literary field. Regarding the former, the intention to make Moscow the new epicenter of world literature (the new Greenwich Meridian) is noticeable in multiple statements made by Soviet intellectuals and in the policies of the Soviet state. In 1936, critic Aleksei Selivanovskii announced that Moscow had become the "heart" of world literature, confirming that, while world literature was still an ideal in the making, the USSR was

already living "in this future utopia" (Ostrovskaya et al. in WLSU, p. 138). The re-centering of the world republic is acknowledged by several contributors to Tihanov, Lounsbery, and Djagalov's book: Ostrovskaya, Zemskova, Belskaia, and Korotkov use Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's concept of the "sub-center" from *Mapping World Literature* (2008) to explain that Soviet intellectuals were actively pursuing this status, especially through cultural and literary policies focused on internationalism but which assumed that all the roads eventually led to the capital of socialism. Edward Tyerman demonstrates that the history of *IL* coincides with an attempt to recreate world literature in the Stalinist period, using the institution of the literary journal to reorganize the world system around Moscow. Yet perhaps Schahadat explains it best when she writes that "when we shift the focus from those Western concepts to the Soviet debate of the 1930s, we can observe a globalization *á la soviétique*, a *république mondiale des lettres* (Pascale Casanova), whose center is not Paris, but Moscow which is a political center that prescribes how to write (world) literature from a Soviet, proletarian, socialist perspective" (WLSU, p. 193).

Since so much of the recent criticism against world literature studies has to do—and rightly so—with the Eurocentric framework still dominating the discipline, and since Casanova herself came under fire for her Gallocentrism (Prendergast 2001; Thorne 2013; Beecroft 2015), it is certainly high time that Soviet world literature was taken more seriously and analyzed as an alternative model of literary organization and hierarchization, dictated by a non-Eurocentric perspective on history and modernity: in this model, a literary text or a national literature did not become part of the world pantheon through de-nationalization, de-politicization, and delocalized aesthetic innovation, as Casanova would have it (Casanova 2004, pp. 199–200); on the contrary, it was their contribution to a materialist understanding of history, their potential to speak to and educate the working class, their focus on the inherent inequalities caused by capitalism, or their general political—i.e., revolutionary—ethos which brought them into contact with other members of "the world republic." Casanova's map did not overlap with its Soviet counterpart, and it is this discrepancy that could prove useful and generative for literary scholarship today.

As for the second characteristic of the Soviet literary field, i.e., the explicitly political function of literature, it also departs from dominant (be they materialist) models of world literature advanced by the likes of Casanova and Moretti. Admittedly, the Western development of the discipline involved acknowledging the centrality of the market in the formation of a world literature and its canon in the processes of literary production and circulation, which ultimately made the sociology of literature such an integral part of our research today. Ever since Goethe's and Marx's articulations of *Weltliteratur*, it was implied that literary competition would cause literature to travel across borders, and these "'higher' forms of labor" would also become "commodities" (Prawer 1976, quoted by Schahadat in WLSU, p. 191). By contrast, Schahadat explains, "the market [...] as well as the value are not literary in the case of the socialist-Soviet-proletarian concept of world literature, but normative" (WLSU, p. 193). In short, the economic criteria which determine the structure of the World Republic of Letters do not hold the same power once the system is re-centered and the value of a literary text is given by its political impact or its pedagogical mission. While Casanova wrote that every writer was faced with "an inescapable dilemma"

when having to choose either to remain a regional or national author who affirms one's difference or to betray one's "heritage" and, "denying their difference, assimilate the values of one of the great literary centers" (Casanova 2004, p. 180), the prophets of the *new* world literature presented it "as a way to expand the spiritual horizons of the Russian readers" and "emphasized the difficulty and the importance of appreciating unfamiliar aesthetic forms" such as those from "Eastern" texts (Khotimsky in WLSU, p. 107); thus, the "inescapability" of Casanova's well-regulated republic was and is called into question.

Finally, Anne Lounsbery's contribution, "On the Worldliness of Russian Literature," also demonstrates that the perceived incompatibility between Russian literature and "the standard contemporary accounts of World Literature that have been developed in the West" (WLSU, p. 25) might stem from the ambiguous concepts of time and history which dominate Russian literary texts. Lounsbery wonders: "Could serious acknowledgement of Russia throw a wrench into Western models of World Literature? Must Russian literature be absent from systems like Casanova's?" (WLSU, p. 26). Then, she proceeds to argue that nineteenth-century Russian texts are characterized by a "disordered, unstructured, confused" (WLSU, p. 29) temporality and by an obsession with the province, both of which contradict the notion of exponential progress and the Eurocentric concept of "modernity" as something to be desired and achieved by "backward" cultures: while "Russian literary texts often represent temporality in ways that undermine Eurochronology's totalizing claims," the province itself cannot be labeled as either modern or "behind," since it refuses to conform to linear time (WLSU, pp. 29–30). In Russian literature, unlike its Western counterparts of the nineteenth century, this sense of temporal incoherence not only characterized prose but also the attempts at national characterology made by intellectuals like Pyotr Chaadaev in the 1820s. Here, Lounsbery's argument is reminiscent of Christian Thorne's own criticism of Casanova's theory, as he claimed that *The World Republic of Letters* clearly praises "abstraction and falsely universal writing, routinely declaring international modernism superior to rival literary modes" and values writers from the periphery (such as Caribbean or Asian literatures) only when they "take up European intellectual tools against their own peers" (Thorne 2013, pp. 61–62). Lounsbery goes one step further and notes that "here as in *most other* Western theories of World Literature, spatial peripheries are dependent and sterile because they are temporally behind" (my emphasis, WLSU, p. 26). It can even be argued that Casanova's centrifugal account of world literature eventually helped her critics notice the problematic interdependence between the discipline itself and a Eurocentric, hegemonic worldview which is by no means non-ideological or politically neutral. At the same time, Lounsbery writes about the meaning of these different temporalities as an "inchoate awareness" contained in Russian prose, as theoretical knowledge or intuition manifesting itself in non-theoretical texts. Even just this suggestion, alongside Tihanov's observation that "very early on literary and translation theory went hand in hand in Soviet Russia [. . .] in productive symbiosis with creative writing" (WLSU, p. 6) can be highly instructive in addressing the blind spots of world literature theories: as Revathi Krishnaswamy wrote in a since-often-cited article, "the assumption that the non-West cannot produce any independent form of abstract thought is perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of Orientalism" (Krishnaswamy 2010, p. 141); the notion

that world literary knowledges could be expressed in non-theoretical writing, in latent or emergent forms, and without relying on a philosophical tradition that looks *exactly* like the Western history of abstract thought is in itself revolutionary (2014, p. 143). In this sense, some of the case studies and analyses from *World Literature in Soviet Russia* could be seen as a steppingstone towards Krishnaswamy's non-Eurocentric vision for literary theory.

Translation policies and the canon

Since the Soviet understanding of world literature was decidedly non-Western-centric, so was its new canon. In their chapter on *IL*, Ostrovskaya, Zemskova, Belskaia, and Korotkov point out that the editors of this publication and the Soviet critics alike rejected the belief that world literature was a collection of masterpieces (WLSU, p. 143), taking an even more democratic stance than Gorky at *VS*. In their words, "while the Marxist utopian model implied a masterpiece uniformly reproduced in, or translated into a number of languages, the real journal project brought about a network of texts meant to create a corpus of communist world literature" (WLSU, p. 162). This model relied on the premise of "total translatability" and simultaneity between multiple national and regional literatures (WLSU, p. 141), which also determined the design of the publication, involving four languages working together for the achievement of a cultural utopia. The authors published by *IL* were meant to have diverse backgrounds, reflecting "the communist thesis of the right to national self-determination" and establishing "a map of the world literature, on which even small nations were marked" (WLSU, p. 149).

Translation was at the center of this project, building on the premise of translatability to encourage transnational and trans-linguistic communication within an ideological continuum. From the perspective of current disciplinary tensions between the celebration of intercultural dialogue and that of local specificities, the Soviet model certainly emphasized the former (Tyerman in WLSU, p. 167), as long as the world literary system was re-centered around Moscow. However, despite the theorization of translatability and the negotiations about *how* to translate for the masses, the utopia itself failed to materialize. As Tyerman points out, *IL* remained largely Western-centric: more was translated from Pearl Buck (including her novel about China) than from any Chinese author except for Xiao Jun (WLSU, p. 186). Moreover, the national diversity of the names listed as permanent contributors is significantly greater than the actual diversity of the source languages of the texts published in 1934–1935, the period analyzed by Ostrovskaya, Zemskova, Belskaia, and Korotkov (WLSU, p. 154). A number of factors contributed to this: the political circumstances, culminating with the culture of late Stalinism and its incompatibility with the utopia of literary internationalism of the 1920s and 1930s (WLSU, p. 162); the financial limitations; changes in editorial policies at the office in Moscow, etc.

At the same time, the very ideal of universal translatability was faced with practical problems. First, while the critical articles published in *IL* were more or less rendered in all four languages at the same time, the same cannot be said about the literary texts, which only appeared in certain editions; thus, although "the outstanding revolutionary authors were to achieve the world at the same time, as if transmitted by radio

waves, the reality proved this model not very feasible" (Ostrovskaya et al. in WLSU, pp. 144–145). In his turn, Tyulenev discusses the limitations of the *VS* translation agenda, as well as the paradox of constructing a new world literature while rendering a conservative canon of Western masterpieces (WLSU, pp. 125–126). Tyulenev concludes that absolute innovation was simply not possible even in the Soviet Union, as most questions raised by the Soviet intellectuals had to do with choosing which *older* texts to translate into Russian and with reevaluating bourgeois cultural products through a critical lens inspired by the dialectical understanding of history. Finally, as Tyerman shows in his case study of "the first large-scale translation of modern Chinese literature into Russian" (hosted by *IL* in the 1920s and 1930s), this project prompted debates about "literalist" translation vs. free adaptation to the needs of the target audience—i.e., *the people*. While Tyerman notes that both strategies "serve to affirm the fundamental principle of translatability on which rested the journal's model of a Soviet-centric world literature" (WLSU, p. 167), by the end of the 1930s the second approach had become dogma. In other words, translatability was seen as a possibility but still required methodological choices; it referred to the rendering of content—themes, values, ideologies—but implicitly acknowledged the necessity of formal or stylistic "infidelity." This becomes even more apparent when looking at the model of world literature that was being translated from Chinese to Russian, "a process in which meaning is both lost and created," as *IL* prioritized the ideological connections between the Soviet and the Chinese leftist literary worlds and "downplayed those aspects of the relationship that could not be aligned with a stylistically smooth and ideologically legible mode of social realism" (WLSU, p. 187). Therefore, while trying to consecrate the principle of cultural translatability, the Soviet editors and critics were actually proving the inevitability of *imperfect translation* and the incommensurability of cultural experience.

In recent decades, translatability has once again become a point of theoretical contention, especially since Rebecca Walkowitz's theory of the contemporary novel being "born translated" (2015) and Emily Apter's plea "against world literature" (2014). Apter has produced a very pertinent critique of how the field of world literature operates today, particularly "the reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability," with cultural differences being commodified and traded in the capitalist world system (2014, p. 346). And, while her writing may seem to respond directly to the current process of globalization and "combined and uneven development" (WReC 2015), it actually goes back to Marx and Engels' formulation of *Weltliteratur* and its German version referencing "*Verkehrte Weltliteratur*, or screwed-up literature"; in Apter's view, the process of "standing the world on its head" is intrinsic to the interaction of national literatures and generates a model of world literature in which the challenge is to "translate untranslatably" (2014, p. 355). Of course, the "Soviet Republic of Letters" was not governed by the same market logic in which cultural specificity could be conveniently turned into a product, because, as previously stated, a different regime of relevance dictated different rules and hierarchies. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a statewide project based on translatability and internationalism faced its own obstacles starting in the 1920s and up until late Stalinism, ultimately proving the *limits* of translation and the need to approach cultural transfer with an ideologically inflected methodology (rewriting for the masses) rather than claims of

cultural equivalence. Moreover, when Tyerman writes that the Soviet translation of Chinese literature effectively invalidated the opposition between the foreign and the domestic, since the most widely translated Chinese authors (Xiao and Lu Xun) had already been influenced by Russian literature (Tyerman in WLSU, p. 187), he reveals a phenomenon of transnational hybridization which did not only characterize the capitalist, globalized West but which certainly took a distinct turn once the capitalist regime of relevance was in place: precisely the turn which Apter criticizes and warns against.

The Soviet literary megapolysystem

Using Itamar Even-Zohar's terminology and adapting it to the Russian context, Tyulenev proposes that we look at Soviet literature as a "megapolysystem": a polysystem containing multiple genres and their subsystems, multiple languages and national literatures, in which translation is not prompted by the "weakness" or "crisis" of the polysystems but rather by the aspiration "to create a new proletarian literary tradition that would absorb all what (sic) was considered signs of the dreams that have finally come true" (WLSU, p. 128). In this complex structure, nation-building played a crucial role, "inventing" several cultures within the Soviet Union as "national units" (Frank in WLSU, pp. 35–36). As Susanne Frank proves in her case study, Armenian literature was one such object of "severe re-canonization" (WLSU, p. 36), in which it was not Western Europe that dictated the evolution of the periphery (as Casanova posited) but rather Moscow. Frank looks at the history of the famous anthology *Poeziia Armenii*, showing that, through its editor, Russian poet Valerii Briusov, and by rendering texts into Russian, Armenian poets sought to place their own literature on the world literary map *via* Russia, either through "the history of a development towards European modernity" (in the first edition) or through the orientalization or folklorization of Armenian culture (in the second edition) (WLSU, p. 66). In this sense, the worlding of peripheral literatures within the USSR defied the center-periphery model long-upheld by world literature studies. The Armenian case was a prime example of mediated consecration, which scholars have only recently begun to explore (see, for instance, Andrei Terian's theory of "cultural triangulation"—Terian 2019).

Regarding the relationship between the Soviet megapolysystem and the literatures outside its borders, Djagalov's study of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association enables him to identify even more flaws in the Western, centralized framework of world literature and postcolonial studies. Not only do these presumably "global" accounts of world culture often exclude Russia and the Soviet Union, implicitly leaving out their very particular patterns of literary production, circulation, and competition (WLSU, pp. 210–211), but they also fail to acknowledge the competing internationalisms emerging in the wake of decolonization, which "opened up a multitude of venues for Cold-War era African, Asian, and Latin American writers in ways unimaginable before" (WLSU, p. 217). Moreover, Djagalov notes that the Soviet interest in the so-called "Third World" began even earlier, in the interwar years, through translations from Eastern literatures or the presence of Claude McKay, the pioneer of

the Harlem Renaissance, at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922. Thus, going back to the leitmotif of the entire book *and* of this review, Djagalov uncovers the alternative model of world literature that was being forged especially starting in the 1950s, seeking independence from "the colonial metropoles of Paris, London, and New York. That [Afro-Asian] field was also meant to amplify the writers' voices in the common struggle against (neo-)colonialism and the processes of nation-building" (WLSU, pp. 220–221). Indeed, Djagalov addresses a gap in the research, namely the need for an inspection of "the reverse side of the (post)colonial-(post) socialist relationship," highlighting "the implications of the October Revolution, of Russian and Soviet culture, for postcolonial culture and thought" (WLSU, p. 210). This topic has only recently come into focus, through works such as Monica Popescu's *At Pen-point* (2020), which investigates the impact of the two spheres of influence (American/Western and Soviet) on young African nations during the Cold War and the local forms of resistance to geopolitical pressure. Djagalov's chapter and Popescu's book go hand in hand to help us visualize previously ignored networks of cultural communication and domination which cannot be explained away through a Western-centric, center-periphery logic. The post-1990 literary landscape might be a "hollowed-out One World" (Djagalov in WLSU, p. 233), in which capitalist relations are ubiquitous and world literature deals with the literary encoding of global inequalities (as WReC defined it in 2015), so that the postcolonial scholars still studying these generalized forms of oppression are no longer courted by world powers with contrasting ideological projects (WLSU, p. 233). However, a historical understanding of the internationalist Soviet agenda—with its utopian dimension and especially its faults, flaws, and limitations—can provide different, albeit imperfect, answers to the question asked by Lorna Burns in her book, *Postcolonialism after World Literature*: "What if, rather than posing a theory that hopes to explain inequality [. . .] we turn our attention to that which stages the primary equality of actors within the world-literary assemblage?" (2019, p. 172).

Conclusion: peripheral and subperipheral conceptualizations of world literature

All the contributors to this volume analyze how Soviet world literature departed from the Western-centric model of literary circulation and influence, focusing either on the new transnational networks forged starting in the 1920s or the ideological coordinates of the new literary field and its relative independence form the economic constraints of Casanova's World Republic of Letters. Tihanov offers the most detailed account of the peripheral articulation of world literature in his opening chapter. From the very beginning, Tihanov announces that "many of [the] major trends [of Russian literary theory] were, obliquely or more directly, relevant to 'world literature' as a framework of understanding and valorizing literature in the regime of its global production and consumption" (WLSU, p. 14). He then proceeds to describe three ideological horizons which generated the non-Eurocentric conceptualization of world literature in Soviet Russia: Gorky's humanistic horizon, which reconciled egalitarian principles and a focus on educating "the masses" with an elitist view of the canon; a global leftist horizon, which prompted Mikhail Pavlovich to redefine "the East" to include all

the oppressed peoples; and the anti-colonial horizon, reacting to the ongoing process of decolonization, promoting Soviet influence in these young nations, and fostering the cultural bond between the USSR and Latin America, Asia, and Africa (through translations, through the Institute of World Literature, aiming to study the correlations between Western and Oriental literatures, through the renaming of the University of Peoples' Friendship after Patrice Lumumba, etc.). Similarly, Maria Rubins asks a crucial question in her chapter—can the "worldliness" of literature be inscribed in the text itself?—and does so from the margins of the world literary system, looking at Russian diasporic literature published in the last century. Just like Tihanov (2009) in his work on exile, Rubins concludes that it was the authors' diasporic experience "beyond the geographical, ideological, or aesthetic purview of the Soviet and post-Soviet literary establishments" (WLSU, p. 239) that allowed them to create "diverse linguistic strategies to dissociate language, territory, and national identity," and thus incorporate cultural dialogue in their writing (WLSU, p. 261); their incompatibility with any perfectly-centered model of world literature contributed to their "wordliness." A third example is provided in Clark's chapter, where she also demonstrates the productive nature of peripherality, interpreting Shklovsky's most radical formulation of the relationship between form and content ("new form gives birth to new content") as a result of the internationalist moment in Soviet history (1918–1919) and of Shklovsky's own preoccupation with world literature and the "morphology of techniques" making the novel a world genre. Noting that Shklovsky read everything in translation and disregarded the cultural specificity of the literary text, Clark concludes that, despite the geographical and historical distance from the present, the Russian theorist made a similar error as Moretti in recent decades: minimizing "the problems that arise in trying to import a form or plot from what Moretti calls the 'core' to a 'periphery', across cultural and linguistic boundaries" (WLSU, pp. 89–90).

Finally, *WLSU* can be read in conjunction with the contemporary scholarly effort to uncover and valorize the theoretical production of non-Western cultures, which often anticipated and prospectively challenged the understanding of world literature at the "center" but rarely exported the questions, answers, and models they operated with. Many of these "minor" cultures advancing theoretical work in relative obscurity are what has been recently called "subperipheries" (STRASYN CFP 2025): cultural and economic peripheries "characterized by a hybrid regime of relevance that diverges from those defining the literary cultures of East-Central Europe during the same period," remaining in an "aestethnic" state. One such example is the Romanian and Bulgarian literary criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where authors like Titu Maiorescu, Krastyo Krastev, and Pencho Slaveykov elaborated very similar theories of aesthetic autonomy but did not, as far as we can tell, exchange ideas or read each other's work. Just like the Asian and African writers at the 1958 meeting of Tashkent realized "they knew all the nuances of Western European literatures but had never spoken to each other" (Djagalov in WLSU, p. 208), the South-East-European subperipheries were historically defined by mutual disinterest, yet their articulations of national specificity, literariness, and worlding often had a lot in common: for instance, Maiorescu, Krastev, and Slaveykov were all educated in the tradition of German aesthetics and philosophy (Dumitru 2023; Pundeff 1972; Dobrescu 2017, pp. 88–89); they all believed that poetry was not meant to deal with

social and political issues, formulating theories of "aesthetic autonomy" that would prove highly influential in the following decades (Pundeff 1972; Maiorescu 1867); and, perhaps most interestingly, they all struggled with the tension between local specificity and international consecration, generating paradoxes and contradictions which complicate our (subperipheral) engagement with world literature.

To give but an example, in the Romanian case, "Maiorescu's contradiction," i.e., his conservatism and his "vocation" for "new beginnings" (new critical projects), was famously discussed by Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu (1970) but was also symptomatic of a Germanophile intellectual being faced with the task of nation-building in an inter-imperial context; even earlier, Maiorescu's contemporary, socialist critic Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, had identified a contradiction between Maiorescu's belief in the "personal prism" of the poet, enabling him to see the world in a unique way, and impersonal aesthetic emotion, which he saw as the true moral mission of literature (Dobrogeanu-Gherea 1967). Across the southern border, Slaveykov also produced his share of paradoxes, similarly born out of the subperipheral negotiation of contrasting cultural influences and national ambitions. By advancing "the idea that poetry must bypass the social context and the political time of actual events in an effort to reach the imaginary time and space" (Kirova 2020, p. 83), he moved towards a more universalizing notion of world literature. He also made room for the next generation, the Bulgarian symbolists, to argue that synchronization with the West can only happen through de-historicization (Kirova 2020, p. 83–84), effectively anticipating Casanova's framework. By contrast, Maiorescu's focus on aesthetic autonomy did not exclude national originality; on the contrary, he claimed that it was precisely the local specificity and authenticity of the best Romanian texts that made them appealing to a Western (especially German) audience (Maiorescu 1882); so, while seeking modernization and Europeanization (Ursa 2017, p. 312), the most exportable quality of Romanian literature was not its familiarity but its cultural difference.

Viewing these Romanian and Bulgarian examples in relation to the research avenues explored in *WLSU*, one thing becomes clear: many decades before the most well-known conceptualizations of world literature, most of which strived to offer comprehensive accounts of literary production and circulation, the tension between the nation and the world was already being felt and differently theorized by (sub)peripheral critics, be they Soviet, Romanian, or Bulgarian. In addition to the existent critiques of global world literature theories, a lot can be gained by historicizing the disciplines of world literature and postcolonialism, while also interrogating their tenets *from the margins* of the world system, i.e., from the perspective of (sub)peripheral literary criticism in its various iterations.

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