

THE POSSIBILITY AND MEANING OF AN AESTHETIC APPROACH TO WORLD LITERATURE

Paola Loreto

Abstract:

The essay explores the possibility of applying an aesthetic approach to the study of World Literature. In order to do so, it tries to define the meanings and uses of the “aesthetic” within World Lit, and to suggest some tools of analysis, together with possible research directions. Thus, starting from Alexander Baumgarten’s proposal of aesthetics as the science of the sensible apprehension of an art object – and assuming that the literary partakes of the artistic – the discourse distinguishes three levels of analysis: aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic comparison and aesthetic evaluation. The methodological toolkit proposed includes close reading, philology and translation, assisted by the heuristic device of the hermeneutic circle as a technique for bridging between levels and scales and modes of investigation. The gradual shaping of a world aesthetics is also advocated, accompanied, as all other procedures, by collaborative work.

Keywords:

aesthetics; World Literature; hermeneutic circle; close reading; translation; philology; language learning

I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars—and they were *immediate* particulars.

Jorge Luis Borges

1. The literary & the aesthetic

The word “aesthetic” and the word “literature” are two of the most debated terms in the field of literary studies. For the word “aesthetic,” things have been aggravated by a century-long history of philosophical reflection upon a discipline whose relatively young age makes things even worse: the discomfort comes from a difficulty in understanding what it means exactly, because its applications have multiplied along the development of the theory. For the word “literature,” things have been aggravated by the fact that in a much longer tradition, no attempt to find a definition has ever succeeded, to the extent that the latest definition is that no definition is possible (Attridge) – a less radical solution, nonetheless, than affirming that it does not, in fact, exist, literature being, ultimately, and exclusively, a cultural product. Because of this common impasse, both the literary and the aesthetic have often been ostracized, and sometimes on the ground of a suspicion of kinship. I have myself recently made the re-insurgence of the interest in the literary, in World Literature, an expression of the need for the aesthetic (46), the literary being one of the domains in which our aesthetic faculty is exercised, as well as one of the spaces in which the aesthetic

dwells. The probing of the possibility to apply an aesthetic approach to the study of World Literature offers an opportunity to reconsider the relation between the aesthetic and the literary, and to assess the available uses, in the field, of both terms. Can we posit the idea of an “aesthetic approach,” together with a “cultural studies approach,” or a “systemic approach,” to World Lit? What might that mean? And what would we be meaning by it?

Before I try to answer these questions, though, I should define the scope of my investigation, which may appear too wide and ambitious. While I am not embarking on a philosophical reflection on aesthetics, I will be using some ideas from the early philosophical tradition inaugurated by Alexander Baumgarten, and developed by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel, on which some other thinkers, such as Friedrich Schiller and Martin Heidegger, elaborated. I am also not so bold as to challenge the latest results of the research into the nature of the relationships between aesthetics and literature, or the related attempt to define the literary per se. My notations will rather be uttered on the margins of both these fascinating discourses, and my argumentation is going to make use of other scholars’ results, and – above all – apply them to my particular, very specific interest, which is the desire to explore the possibility of thinking about World Literature in aesthetic terms. What I will be trying to do then, is to fill what I sense as a gap in the field by positing the hypothesis of a further perspective, in World Lit, whose first requisites are some definitions and terms, and some suggestions for future directions. Hence, my research questions.

First of all, what do we mean when we use the word “aesthetic”? Because we *do* use it, despite the fact that it seems to have become an unpronounceable word. We use it implicitly, as when David Damrosch talks of “the beauties” of language, form and theme (*What Is* 288), but also explicitly, as when Elaine Showalter belligerently declares that she “would prefer to see criticism based on aesthetic principles rather than such time-bound reflections of political sensitivities” (195), and that she makes “selections, distinctions, and judgments” (xv), even while she calls them “literary judgments” (xiv, xvii). Younger scholars may prove more naïf, in stating that “I would like to conclude my analysis with an aesthetic judgment” (Invernizzi 49; my transl.) Sometimes we do not say what we mean, as in the Editors’ Preface to *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, which maintains that “it has become possible to select versions that are clear and accessible as well as literary and aesthetically faithful to the original...” (Davis 21). Sometimes we do: Showalter talks about “Jewett’s problems with the frame narrative,” for example, which the local colorist doesn’t close sophisticatedly enough, while Valeria Invernizzi is concerned with “the strength of the most authentic rhetorical inventiveness,” “the power of the signifying organizations that belong to great literature,” “the unfolding of cognitive complexity” of novels, and “the undefinable energy that transpires from the prose of a work of art” (49, my transl.).

Why do these kinds of evaluative statements keep on surfacing? What is the critical impulse they betray? And – if this study wants to have a productive relation to our critical practices, and a utility for them – how are we making literary criticism, in World Literature, and why: for the satisfaction of what need, and to what effect? The most reasonable answer is that those statements betray a demand for an evaluative distinction among the literary materials we observe, and that the kind of distinction they cannot help making does not rely mainly on an argumentative demonstration, but rather on a sensible and intuitive apprehension. This is one of the meanings of “aesthetic” that I would use to point to a way of reading (World) Literature. When we use the word “aesthetic,” in our time, we may be meaning many things, which range

from a branch of philosophy to a belletristic appreciation of whatever consumer good, but the two that may prove useful in our literary field are an original philosophical concept and a derived cultural one. The latter includes notions of taste, and aesthetic categories (mainly notions of beauty, but also of the sublime, for example, or the grotesque, or the uncanny, etc.), i.e., concepts that are produced by a given community at a certain time, are shared for a certain time, and then change over time: in other words, that are historical. In order to carve a space for the aesthetic in our World Literature criticism, though, it is more useful for me to resort to the philosophical idea of the aesthetic that was coined by the “father” of the discipline, Alexander Baumgarten, in 1735. Baumgarten gave aesthetics its name because he meant it to assume its object, the work of art, through *aisthesis*, i.e., aesthetic apprehension (Heidegger 11). He wrote of a “sensible cognition,” which was a perception of the shape of things that is the work of sensibility, is different in kind from intellectual cognition, but is concurrent with it in producing, and improving, “the whole of the understanding”. In his *Reflections on Poetry*, he distinguished between sensible cognition and intellectual cognition as produced, respectively, by the human faculties of sensibility (*sensitiva*) and intellect (*intellectus*), and originating, respectively, poetry and logic (or metaphysics) (qtd. in McQuillan 184). We are already, momentarily, in the field of binary oppositions, which is the analytical tool I am initially going to use for the sake of clarity. I am interested in this first and fundamental definition of the aesthetic apprehension, *sensitiva*, because I want to make out distinctly what specific and unique skill can contribute to our reading of literary texts. After which, I mean to reconcile the opposites and solve my own binaries, as Baumgarten did, when he concluded that sensibility and the intellect would have to work together in order to achieve a complete understanding.¹

For the moment, though, I have already on my plate a sensibility, which is opposed to an intellect, a philosophical idea, as opposed to a cultural one, a human faculty, as opposed to a human historical heritage. If I simply reap from the few statements I was quoting in the beginning of my argumentation, and from the brief quote from Baumgarten, I can make out another, crucial binary, which is art versus culture. What would the allusions to the “beauties” of language and form, or to “rhetorical inventiveness” and the “undefinable energy” of prose refer to, otherwise? Moreover, I could draw the same implication from the work, for example, of one of the most prominent theorists in World Lit & Translation, Lawrence Venuti, who, despite his definition of literary texts as “heterogeneous cultural artifacts,” talks of the job of the translator as one that *creates* intertexts, that are *texts in their own right*, which need an informed *sensibility* in order to become such (*Translation Studies* 185, 191; *Translation Changes* 113). This is where the aesthetic and the literary come together: there seems to be a need, in the field of literary criticism, to conceive of literature as,

¹ My use of Baumgarten is of course very circumscribed because it is instrumental to the purpose of establishing a shared sense in which we may use the original idea of an aesthetic apprehension and appreciation of things. The German philosopher’s intuitions, though, would be corroborated by the recent findings of cognitive literary studies, and could be translated into their updated terminology. Profiting from the “cognitive turn” and the “second cognitive revolution,” contemporary neuroaesthetics is relying on the development of the notion of the “situated cognition” (i.e., an *embodied, embedded, extended and enactive* cognition). This has overcome the binary opposition between intellectual cognition and sensory perception by revaluing the role of sensate perception, emotions, and affect in intellectual thinking (Martínez Benedí 36). Moreover, cognitive historicism, in emphasizing the interplay between “cognitive universals” and specific historical and cultural circumstances, seems to offer a sound basis for my attempt to envisage a “world aesthetics” (David Herman and Lisa Zunshine, qtd. in Martínez Benedí 50).

at least *also*, art.

1.1 *Literature as also art, art as also craft*

When I assume that literature is also art, I am implying, too, that art is also craft. By so defining the object of our criticism, I suggest that it should be approached through a knowledge and method that take into account – at least in some measure – the knowledge and method through which it is created, that is, put into the world. The focusing on poetry, and an analogy with the composing procedures of music, may smell of Romantic nostalgia, but are still very effective for building more useful binaries and making out ideas that are facts. When a poet writes poetry, he/she is bringing to it, not only a literary tradition – which is a cultural understanding of the aesthetic tradition – but also a know-how, a craft, that comes from apprenticeship and from a knowledge acquired through experience. Most important, he/she also brings to it a personal sensibility, which often accounts for the degree of inventiveness with which the artist may mix and use all these components. Baumgarten's idea of sensibility seems to imply that this faculty is communal in its potential, but individual and unique in each of its acts; that it may be partially trained, and educated, but is in the first place a personal endowment (if not a talent). A double notion can be discerned, then, in the philosophical idea of the aesthetic, which is both the faculty of apprehending shapes sensibly, and that of combining them with the memory of all our former apprehensions. When a composer sits down to turn his/her musical idea into a piece, he/she very often follows a rational, sometimes exquisitely logical procedure, which will bear, or at least initiate, the structure of the composition. The final result, though – the object of the future enjoyment of an audience or of critical evaluation – will be... music, an art product that will enter the ears of its listeners, and be perceived, as deprived of all the scaffolding that was auxiliary to its creation. The common audience will be more or less trained – culturally, experientially – for the listening; the critics will be more, but it's likely that several of the conscious operations that prompted the writing are lost on both publics (unless the composer chooses to reveal them). Much culture will have disappeared in the process – and even more of a personal, individual culture or experience in the case of contemporary music, which relies less on a shared, highly encoded tradition of composition. The main implication of the analogy is that there is an individual, personal, partly unconscious – at least originally – and less definable element both in the creation and in the enjoyment of a work of art that it may be useful for us to point to as both its initial aesthetic apprehension and its immediately ensuing aesthetic appreciation.

The advantage of looking at literature as art, and understanding it through a Baumgartian aesthetics, is that we may move from the analysis of distinct faculties and operations to the observation of the recomposed human personality at work in the creation or enjoyment of art, when those faculties and operations are simultaneously activated in the form of an individual apprehension of the shape of things effected by personal sensibility, in conjunction with a personal history of experienced artistic forms. The cultural and the aesthetic need to be brought together again to account for what really happens (aesthetic appreciation) when we consume art, and what should happen when we evaluate it (aesthetic judgment). In his later *Kollegium über die Ästhetik* (1750 ca), where Baumgarten defines sensibility and intellectual cognition as complementary in the production of a complete understanding, he presents sensible cognition as the ground of distinct cognition; “if the whole understanding is to be

improved,” he writes, “aesthetics must come to the aid of logic” (qtd. in McQuillan 184).

2. Aesthetics & World Literature

Because literature is *also* art, it shares with this kind of human activity a special combination of the aesthetic and the cultural, where the aesthetic can be in itself understood as an interaction between the ability to apprehend forms – which can only partly be learnt through training – and the accumulated memory of the experienced forms. In this sense, at least – and at least at a first, elemental, level – the aesthetic, in literature, may coincide with the literary, that is, with the defining features of the object of analysis: what makes it what it is. Derek Attridge has spent a scholarly life to establish that there are no objective descriptors, because the literary is the experience of an event that stages “the mobilization of meaning by formal properties” (165). This experience needs to be (re)lived, again, each time, by an individual, personally, but implies as well a “familiarity with the conventionalized routines of the literary institution” for a full response (122). This brings the literary back to cultural specification – for Attridge a specification in terms of Western culture, which reduces the recognizable traits of the literary to a few concepts, such as creation, originality, literary invention (in the writing as in the reading), performance (event-ness), and ethnicity. We could resort to a more liberal (and older) notion of literary competence, like Jonathan Culler’s, within which many more features might be listed, but the community sharing the competence would have to be further reduced. Boundaries, though, narrow or broad, don’t hold anymore. They are not the framework within which we have decided to move. What happens, then, when this theory is applied to the study of *World Literature*?

Because an aesthetic approach would also entail (and serve) the making out of distinctions, within the literary, which may result in a value judgment, it would offer an alternative to systemic analyses – of the Morettian kind, for example – to which it is practically opposite (unless one means to conduct a survey of a certain aesthetic category across the global production). An aesthetic approach might consider *whatever* text is being produced and marketed as “literature” in order to assess its value, but not *all* the texts that are being produced and marketed as “literature,” only because they are made *consumable* as such, regardless of their quality. Its aim would not be descriptive of a genesis or development – as Moretti’s examinations have done with genres, for example – but evaluative. An aesthetic approach to World Lit would come to the aid of Damrosch’s distinction between what he calls global (or airport) literature and world literature, implying a difference in literary value.

Because an aesthetic approach to literature is meant both to perceive what is there, physically, often through the close reading of its formal features, and to evaluate texts comparatively, when it is applied to World Literature it requires that simultaneous consideration of individual sensibility and shared culture which is the essential quality of art, plus a collaborative method. If other approaches, within World Lit, may recommend this latter one, an aesthetic approach can’t do without it. In a really comparative aesthetic appreciation, or evaluation, no one may be able to master a second language to the degree that is required in order to make aesthetic observations, especially if we assume the reconceptualization of form proposed by Attridge, who sees it as a sequence of sounds and shapes that are “*nexuses* of meaning and feeling, and hence deeply rooted in culture, history, and the varieties of human experience”

(152, my emphasis). The treatment of form is too subtle and in some measure innovative, i.e., non-orthodox, and demands a knowledge of the linguistic orthodoxy in the grammar, syntax and especially use. One needs to be able to grasp the ways and degrees of the resulting effects of a writer's twisting of the language and the literary conventions, and of the shifting of his/her uses of both: that's "style," and it's literary and aesthetic. My example will be taken from my own experience as a Colloquium Leader at the 2015 Institute for World Literature in Lisbon.

2.1 *Speaking in Tongues*

Let's say that literature is also art: how do I deal with a Chinese *ci-poem* from the 12th century? I was unwittingly – and happily – shown a way out by Liying Lao, a Chinese student in the Colloquium on World Lit & Translation I led at the 2015 session of the Institute for World Literature in Lisbon. Liying was grappling with four English versions of "Sheng Sheng Man," by Li Qingzhao, and in the attempt to give us a sense of the formal difference, and the identity, of this genre, she said she would have to read it out to us to show how the literary conventions derived from a linguistic system that was radically different because it relies on tone. What followed amounted to – at least for me, but I think I can't be wrong in assuming that it was the same for most of the group – an aesthetic experience, in which I thought I was hearing a beautiful piece of foreign poetry, and responding to it both emotionally and intellectually, which is the way Anne Sheppard – who has inquired into the relation between aesthetics and literature – characterizes aesthetic appreciation (64). I realized, then, that first of all an aesthetic approach to World Literature requires collaboration among experts because the only real poem I could have experienced, aesthetically – i.e., sensibly and sensually –, was the one Liying read to us; secondly, that for the purpose of an aesthetic appreciation of the *ci-poem* I needed not only the ordinary cultural contextualization – which Liying had given us by locating the poem within its own literary tradition – but also an extraordinary cultural information, the idea of the function of tone in a tone language. This made the sound of repeated lines in my ears assume the value it had, which was that of the first clothing with sense of the sensible apprehension of a form (the musical texture of the poem and its denouement).

This is probably the closest we can go to the moment when a writer – an artist – twists and bends a phrase or a line in an expressive direction, in order to formulate a new meaning, which may be new, perhaps, only as far as it is articulated in a new form. According to Attridge, the literary is an act of reading that is never entirely separable from the act of writing, and which is experienced by both the reader and the writer (who is the first reader of the words he is articulating, as they emerge) "*as an event of the opening of new possibilities of meanings*" (84-85). This is the moment when, in artistic production, sensibility starts becoming thought (*sensitiva, intellectus*), and intuition, feeling, or emotion evolves into idea – and, through language, into semantic content. Immanuel Kant, who developed Baumgarten's aesthetics in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, saw it as the contribution of imagination to knowledge. Imagination worked as a mediating faculty between sensibility and intellect, erasing the heterogeneity between the receptivity of intuition and the spontaneity of thought (Heidegger 25). There's a grappling with language, then, and form, which may become the site of an aesthetic appreciation, in the first place, within

our critical reading of World Literature, when we do this together – and more together the wider the distance between literary traditions and languages.

3. The uses of the aesthetic in World Literature: appreciation, comparison, evaluation

The enjoyment of literature through its physical experience, as an event of art, together, is a practice I would see enlarged to a wider community of consumers and scholars of World Lit. In teaching, we need this even *within* our own literary tradition: my students don't see, nor hear things in a text until they are shown how to awake to their formal features. In research, this needs to become a methodological requisite. But aesthetic *appreciation* – in the sense of perception, apprehension – is not the only function of an aesthetic approach to the field. The disciplinary task of World Lit is that of *comparing* texts, to which an aesthetic approach may reintegrate the possibility of an *evaluation* of their (literary) quality.

We might be comparing aesthetic issues, problems, or phenomena, starting from what we know in order to interrogate what we do not know (yet). The World Lit methodology that scholars such as Erich Auerbach and Marcel Detienne have made out may be a good starting point for making the tense stretching of the comparison across the farthest literary or cultural traditions productive, and turn it into a powerful tool of analysis. In his reflection on how to construct comparables among very distant terms, Detienne suggests that even the apparent absence of grounds for comparison may lead to an unforeseen harvest of reciprocal and mutual knowledge: it becomes the occasion for asking oneself, and the other, about an interpretive possibility, or how a possibility may find its parallel, if not an equivalent, or a motivation for the lack of it, or a substitution for it. The enabling, strategic move is the asking of a question, or better, as Auerbach would say, it is *the* question we ask. It has to be good. It has to be an *Ansatzpunkt*, or a point of departure into the other aesthetic world (Auerbach 14). I may imagine asking myself – and sharing the task of solving the riddle with a team of fellow researchers – what the role of rhyming effects might have been in a given phase of development in a group of literary traditions; or pursuing an inquiry into how the quality of being a tonal language may affect the aesthetics of a literary tradition; or exploring the different degrees of orality in a group of world literary traditions, and how they bear on the correspondent aesthetics, or how they might make it possible for us to compare texts formally. The method would activate difference and make it meaningful as a tool for the understanding of one's own culture through the understanding of the other, and vice versa, as in the most pristine Goethean ideal.

Collaboration would be indispensable also in the third and further use of an aesthetic approach to World Lit, which is aesthetic evaluation. When a novel becomes a global best-seller overnight, we may come to desire not only to understand why, but to take a position vis-à-vis our explanations in terms of production, reception and circulation. That is, we might desire to make distinctions, and establish priorities among *also* aesthetic values. The delicate point in the methodology would be the extent of the literary competence that would be called into play: how wide can we make the range of our sharing of the criteria for an aesthetic judgment? I suggest a viable path for the present, and the hope for a more scenic route for the future.

Supposing I locate myself in performing this task in World Literature, I need to take into account that I belong to – and share – a Western literary tradition, for which

my literary competence would suffice to judge the aesthetic value of much that is being produced in Europe and the United States (my specialty being US literature and my origin Italy, Europe). The whole of Europe would probably be safe ground for me thanks to the close opportunities for collaboration offered by my colleagues from the different linguistic and literary sections of my Department at the University of Milan, which specializes in Foreign Languages and Literatures. The sudden appearance, on the international market, of a previously overlooked Western classic is unlikely, but it would simply require some research into a familiar field. On the other hand, the sudden dawning of a new bestseller from a semi-peripheral area would have to be tackled with an update on a less familiar but still approachable area.

Should some new work – or a previously overlooked classic, for that – impose itself to the world’s attention coming, instead, from a literary space outside my Western comfort zone, I would definitely need to collaborate with experts in the given literature. The collaboration would have to cover a wider process of contextualization, including both the historical-cultural and the literary-aesthetic; the conversation over the evaluative process (and procedures) would have to be led in English, and would be allowed exclusively by the participants’ mastering of the mediating language. No profitable discussion of the nuances of style in a foreign literature could take place, I imagine, under different conditions.

3.1 Towards a world aesthetics: historical traditions and current paradigms

The utopian projection of a wider frame within which we might be able to evaluate works globally in the future is a globally shared literary competence, that is, the gradual formation of a World Lit aesthetics. This would probably include both a generalized knowledge of an increasing number of particular traditional aesthetics, and an “international” aesthetics that builds upon itself in the wake of the rapid and expanding circulation of literary works, and of the accompanying criticism. This world aesthetics would necessarily combine elements emerging from local aesthetic traditions with international, delocalized paradigms in formation. It would be a space of negotiation of the aesthetic. Should it become, itself, an object of study in its development, Moretti’s wave-models for large-scale analysis, or Pascale Casanova’s model of the world literary space could be applied to it, which might account for the mixture of local and international pulls in the context of a global (and uneven) struggle for literary presence.

My present object, though, is not the application of theory to aesthetics, but the application of aesthetics to literature. To my knowledge, the only similar attempt to envisage a world system of values has been conducted by Zhang Longxi on poetics. His essay on “The Poetics of World Literature” (2011) is a comparative interrogation of different world poetics, where by “poetics” Zhang Longxi means what makes the literary literary (procedures like allegorization, for example, and ideas like the conception of the origin of poetry). The partial results of his first comparative survey interestingly suggest that a route dedicated to world poetics (to extend my metaphor) is already in place, and we may use it if we follow his directions: Zhang Longxi shows us that literary traditions that have been supposed to be far away share, in fact, at least some crucial principles, and that they can be brought together in the formulation of a general position as, for example, to the inspirational/imitational theories of artistic creation.

Poetics, though, is not aesthetics: it tries to define the literary (often by way of the exquisitely poetic), but it does not train to perceive formal values, nor does it make distinctions between formal features and degrees of formal success. Poetics is not evaluative, because it is not an axiology, a value system, and has nothing to do with the *enjoyment of art*, even though it certainly has something to do with the idea that we *derive knowledge* from literature, and that this is one of its pleasures. The need I find expressed in so many places of our reflection on World Literature is for knowing whether what we are reading can be enjoyed – and thought of – as a work of also art and why. Why has A Yi’s novella *Xiamian Wo Gai Ganxie Shenme* (下面我该干些什么, China, 2012) been translated into English (*A Perfect Crime*, by Anna Holmwood for Oneworld, UK, June 2015), and then into Italian (by Silvia Pozzi, for Metropoli d’Asia, 2016)? The real name of A Yi is Ai Guozhu, and he was 36 when he wrote the novel, which, apparently, gained some reputation among a select group of readers and writers but hasn’t reached any success, yet, with the wider Chinese public. The blurbs on the jacket of my Italian edition report some of the impressionistic criticism that might pass for “aesthetic” observations, but of the worst kind: that which never justifies its assertions: “an unlikely page-turner and provides a chilling insight into the mind of a psychopath” (*Irish News*); “shimmering sentences and jolts of original thinking... break through the taut, descriptive prose like shafts of sunshine in a strip-lit room” (*Big Issue*); “Startling... sheds light on a country undergoing huge social, political and economic change... one of the most important voices to emerge from the People’s Republic in years” (*Daily Express*). Some of these responses coincide with those of the World Lit reading group I am running with some colleagues at the University of Milan: among all the possible aesthetic reactions to the book, a certain appreciation of the suspense, the weird point of view, and the little bit of local color (or “window on the world,” Damrosch would call it) did emerge. But the general feeling was one of overestimation – and artificial promotion – by the international publishing industry. If this is a work that has overcome its national boundaries, it still remains to be demonstrated, for us as international (or at least Italian) readers, if it was for marketing reasons or for its aesthetic value, which should have made us feel more immediately that its reading was worth our while. The challenge, along the present viable path, would be of course to lead a collaborative inquiry into its original aesthetic motivations; the hope for a future, wider, route would have us imagine that an international system (or rather space) of aesthetic paradigms may one day provide the grounds for a much readier evaluation.

If we want those grounds to be made of both our Western literary paradigms and the work’s original Eastern formal nexuses, we will probably need to abstract, in the way that Susan Stanford Friedman has done in order to be able to extend the applicability of the aesthetic category of modernism to World Lit. In her exploration “of the shapes and forms of creative expressivities” engaging each particular modernity, which she wants to “open to different kinds of aesthetic innovation” (*Planetarity* 488), she turns to “figures – that is, tropic keywords for figuring out the shared meanings of multiple modernities articulated through their differences” (*Planetary Modernisms* 142), admittedly a “planetary aesthetics of modernism [that] needs to be transformative rather than merely additive” (*Planetarity* 487). A Western,

20th-century paradigm is thus de-essentialized and sublimated into a metamorphosing conceptual configuration that may be discerned in other parts of the world and moments in history.

Or we would need to abstract in the way that Attridge has done in order to be able to indicate the literary in the face of the impossibility to describe it in universal terms. His attempt is bounded to Western literature, but in his preface to the last edition of *The Singularity of Literature* he advocates for an extension of his investigation to “world literature,” although he seems to be suspicious of the recent approach. Nevertheless, some of his focus may be relevant to the envisioning of a world aesthetics: it may produce categories whose applicability might be tested in farther literary traditions. I am thinking not so much about the already mentioned ideas of creation, originality, literary invention, performance, and ethnicity, some of which may prove totally foreign to non-Western cultures, for example, although some might prove useful, and all worth consideration. I am rather thinking of his belief that literary criticism should assess language’s potency by performing a text’s engagements with linguistic power, a task that would produce its ethnicity: “indeed, I, or the ‘I’ that is engaged with the work, could be said to *be performed* by it. This performed I is an I in process, undergoing the changes wrought by, and in, the encounter with alterity” (137). A collaborative experience of the being performed by the formal nexuses that release a work’s linguistic power may become the scenic route leading us to a world aesthetics, the panorama in which one day it might be possible to translate – i.e., transfer, and transform – modes of reading into shared values.

4. The toolkit for an aesthetic approach to World Literature: close reading, philology, translation

In 2010 Jane Gallop was announcing one more of the turns we are testifying in our age, a Close-Reading Turn, which I found very interesting because it pertains to the very material level of language. On the ground of the observation of the persisting, generalized use of the originally New Critical practice, and of the conclusion that it has survived all the criticism addressed to it over almost a century, Gallop suggested that the method might turn from a literary mode of reading into a mode of reading all texts that involves attention paid to details. In her intentions, this would de-essentialize it and make of it a rigorous method, which promotes an ethical attitude. My specialty being poetry, I pay attention to formal details in the first place by professional bias, and know – more than believe – that the implication of *seeing* details is that, once they are there, you cannot superimpose on them your prejudices or pre-set views: you cannot project – or shouldn’t, because the choice at that point is between intellectual honesty and ideological affiliation (if one is working from a political stance). Gallop’s argument was that: “In the New Critical framework, the value of studying literature lay in literature’s intrinsic value, which justified the method of close reading. I suggest here the very opposite: it is the value of close reading that justifies the study of literature” (16). This kind of reading is what I mean when I suggest that we should first of all be able to apprehend literature aesthetically, i.e., sensibly: that we should see it and smell it and hear it and taste it – and touch it, Whitman would recommend. Close reading may be the tool that serves this approach (which at this very first stage is more of a disposition) by activating our attention toward certain objects which are precisely formal, and very much material, as the

shape of a sculpture is, and the texture of marble, or copper is, or a kind of brushstroke is, as compared to another. This is what Sheppard means, I believe, by distinguishing between formalist criticism and formalist theory in order to recommend the first, for producing detailed examinations of particular works, and warning against the loss of touch with actual works of the second, which is too ready to become lost “in vague generalizations about ‘organic unity’ or ‘significant form’” (53). This is also what Attridge probably means when he differentiates between form and formalism (166), and attributes the task of answering the question “at the heart of literary criticism” to “the best close reading” (137). This could be assumed in a new, World Lit, perspective as a tool for the screening of the aesthetic (formal), instead of the “literary” in the old, New Critical, small world.

In World Lit, the know-how of close reading may become the instrument for applying one kind, at least, of analysis that may prove at the same time transcultural in its procedure of data gathering, and ethical in its intentions and results: the effort, and achievement, of mutual appreciation and understanding. Reading aesthetically, that is, world-literarily, may allow us access to the writer’s intentions, at least as far as they are embodied in the language that is actually before us, and from which we may derive our evidence.² This means that we need first to see *the form* of our objects – that is, to pursue an aesthetic *perception* of them; secondly, to make out all the nexuses that our forms have with meanings (bearing in mind that form and meaning happen at the same time) – that is, to pursue aesthetic *appreciation*; and finally, once we have learnt to see our objects within their own aesthetic contexts, we need to proceed to aesthetic *evaluation*, on the basis of more and more shared values. An aesthetic approach to World Lit may become the lens through which we may apply our whole personality (sensibility and intellect working together) to our attempt to *see* what is there – the other – and to understand its alterity, at whatever distance its meaning is located.

Other tools from the kit for approaching World Lit from an aesthetic perspective should assist close reading in its attempt to see what is *actually* there. No appreciation of the sounds and shapes of words could be valid without a consciousness of their philological reconstruction and of the reconstruction of the rhetorical tradition they belong to, both of which are cultural notions. No aesthetic appreciation of a work of art may avoid being grounded in history. The transcultural faculty of perception needs to become a cultural act of recognition. Subjectivity – the human element – must set out on its way toward the objectivity it will never reach. This paradoxical aim is what is always at stake in the humanities: it is a balance that needs to constantly be re-found in the space of rhetoric, which persuades rather than convinces, and it is their specific call, and task. The use of philology for World Lit has profitably been explored by Michael Holquist in his essay for *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, where he has correctly located the space for the application of the discipline “at the opposite end of the spectrum from the fuller extensions of world literature” because of the *how* it studies texts, which is a deep mode and not an extensive one: “Deep study of texts is possible in any language and it is too often missing in studies of world literature today” (155). In an attempt to redefine it after its

² According to Anne Sheppard, the artist’s intentions may be pursued because “Works of art differ from natural objects precisely in being produced by a particular person, or by particular people, at a particular time, in a particular society.” This obviously implies that we may think of a work as being produced by a person expressing a set of attitudes and beliefs that we may recognize as consistent (99-100).

partial eclipse from literary studies, Holquist presents philology as the critical self-reflection of language and the discipline of making sense of texts (148), and extends its object from ancient works to “a vast new body of works,” which may be different not only in age, but also in the materials and modes of their production (155). His own prospective route to World Lit is a philology that has morphed into a science devoted to the neurophysiology of literacy and has turned to the physical act of reading itself.

Some other tools from the same kit may be coupled with close reading – notably, translation, which obviously cannot be performed without a very detailed textual analysis. In his “World Literature and Translation Studies,” Venuti advocates a use of close reading in translation for the purpose of disclosing the relations between translated literary canons and individual translations (186). According to Venuti, translation may help redefine the study of literature in the most material way, and needs to combine close with distant reading: “To understand the impact of translation in the creation of world literature, we need to examine the canons developed by translation patterns within the receiving situation as well as the interpretations that translations inscribe in the source texts” (191).

4.1 Bridging practices: the hermeneutic circle and language learning

Close reading, philology and translation are some of the tools in the kit for an approach to World Lit that may keep the aesthetic value alive and thriving. They are means for working on the word and its minute – sometimes apparently infinite – details. They are a way of looking at literature as an art *object*: a material artifact we perceive through its physical elements, that are formal features – words, in the case of literature, and their arrangements. In World Literature, the recognition of what is before us may come either as a dangerously quicker process – when we are rushing towards an interpretation that will assimilate the text to our particular literary competence – or as a heuristic slower and awkward process – when we are traversing the distance to the object of our appreciation endowed with our sensibility and our intellect, our perception of the shapes that surround us and our memory of our previous interpretations of their meanings for us.

How may we travel equipped with care? How can we keep going from close to distant reading? How can we access the cultural, and the theoretical, from the physical – that is, how can we proceed from aesthetic perception to aesthetic appreciation through aesthetic judgment? How can we build a World Lit aesthetics? I have already pointed out, elsewhere, the places and moments where we may detect the hermeneutic circle being used as a method in World Lit studies (Loreto 39-41; 47) I have called it a new cognitive paradigm, and a new model for producing knowledge out of the way we think of difference and plurality (39). What I would like to emphasize here is that it may allow us to do so from our subjective point of departure, and that it is not simply a tool, or a method, but needs to and may become a practice induced by a way of thinking, a mindset, a disposition of the mind, a way of looking at things. The hermeneutic circle is the heuristic device which establishes the understanding of a whole by reference to the individual parts and the simultaneous understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole: it is the logical move with which we may go from the I to the world, from the self to the other, and *back*. We need to be able to think forward, to look to the world, and back, to us, until the exercise becomes

spontaneous, unreflective, natural. We need to be able to move, in our analyses, between different scales, different perspectives, different planes and different discourses, in a circular navigation that seems to me to be the real, new, necessary method of World Lit. This is the practice, anyway, that may allow us to lead whatever aesthetic discourse we may intend: the going from the perception of a formal feature to the tracing of its nexuses with a formal configuration that links the physical to the cultural, and from these to particular aesthetic traditions, and then theories, and then a developing repertory of world aesthetic values, which may, in the future, evolve into a view, or a constellation of temporarily stable paradigms.

An ongoing study of foreign languages has also more than once been recommended – and from different sides – as another tool for keeping close to the reality of our object of analysis, which is the basis for an actual bridging over our aesthetic differences. Of course a knowledge of a foreign language adequate to an aesthetic judgment of its use may be reached very few times in one's life – maybe one or two. *Some* knowledge, though, of a foreign language would be sufficient to give us a sense, again, of its materiality: its sounds, the way they are articulated, and how they feel, when they are. An appreciation for the figures of sound, in a text, or for sound symbolism, or synesthesia wouldn't be the same: it would come quicker and clearer to our observing mind, i.e., it would heighten our power to listen receptively. The rest would be, again, rich matter for collaborative work.

I want to close by recounting an episode that may be significant proof of the advantage of working collaboratively even across disciplines that are as far away as within and outside the humanities. A month ago I was organizing an interdisciplinary open class for the overbrimming program of *BookCity Milano 2017*. I was collaborating for this, for the first time, with some colleagues from the Department of Biosciences and from that of Earth and Environmental Sciences, an ecologist and a zoologist. The day before our joint presentation, the young researcher who was going to talk about the interaction between urban soundscapes and birds sent me a quick text assuming that: "There will be a way of playing some sounds, of course, since we're talking about soundscapes..." I was dumbstruck. "We," humanities scholars, were supposed to be talking about soundscapes in US transcendental literature, and I suddenly realized that I had been talking about them in class without, ever, letting my students actually *hear* any. As much as I believe that it is good to have our imagination play its part in our business, which is literature – the abstract, and artful, representation of objects – I am also persuaded that it would be healthier to remind ourselves, at times, that our activity should bear some relation to our lives – especially when they go global, and need to mind their worldliness.

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