

# How to Write about Literature as a Universal Phenomenon: A Recapitulation

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BOOK REVIEWS

## HOW TO WRITE ABOUT LITERATURE AS A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON: A RECAPITULATION

*Bo Pettersson, How Literary Worlds are Shaped: A Comparative Poetics of Literary Imagination, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 326 pp.*

To study world literature comparatively is a feat in itself, but to try to find a common ground for literary worlds across global literature is remarkable. This is especially the case in the context of contemporary literary studies, which tend to view literature as specific phenomena occurring in relatively isolated national and temporal contexts. According to Bo Pettersson's *How Literary Worlds are Shaped: A Comparative Poetics of Literary Imagination*, this results in highly specific and specialised, but also – to a certain extent – myopic approaches to literature. Part of The Contributions to Narrative Theory series, Bo Pettersson's book is a welcome, although not particularly innovative, addition to the study of narrative. It is preceded by Jan Johann Albin Mooij's *Fictional Realities: The Uses of Literary Imagination* (1993), which also focuses on the imaginative use of language in literature from a comparative and universalist point of view. Mooij discusses the relationship between mind, reality, and unreality, and looks at the nature of narrativity, fictional discourse, and fictional objects. Like Pettersson, he

focuses on metaphor as one of the central figures in fiction. Interestingly, Mooij's last chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the value of literature in relation to science, whereas Pettersson concludes his study with an examination of why literature matters and why we should study and teach it. Given the amount of thematic overlap between the two works, it is surprising that Pettersson does not acknowledge Mooij's work, nor list it in his bibliography, although his study would surely benefit from an informed insight into it.

As mentioned earlier, Pettersson uses the “big picture” approach in order to encompass literature as a whole, and as a human phenomenon. Thus his work displays features of structuralist narratology, as he focuses on imagination and “literary worlds, their origins in the human imagination and literary representation, their thematic and formal features and their relations to the actual world in which they have been created” (Pettersson 2016: 265–66) as a specific structure immanent in world literature. As such, it can be “an aid to any literary theory” (2016: 266). While this is true, Pettersson's book reads like an introduction to literature. Rather than being a work experienced literary scholars will embrace, it seems to target students or junior literary scholars, and possibly other philologists, such as cognitive linguists interested in the uses of metaphor and figurative language, or in how imagination and language shape literature and our perception of life. The author's language is accessible, and for the most part provides an overview of available theory on imagination. This contributes to the impression that the book is dedicated to scholars early in their careers, to motivate them for further study of literature or of imagination as

a cognitive phenomenon that influences human narratives. Working on the basic narratological assumption that narratives are a crucial part of human lives, Pettersson focuses on literary narratives across time and cultures, to identify the common ground from which they spring. Literature, he suggests, is based on both individual and shared human imagination, making plausible the assumption that literatures across cultures and ages will have the same makings. The task is ambitious in its aim to remedy the lack of a wide-ranging comparative analysis of ancient and contemporary and Western and non-Western literatures, but successful in that it gives us an exhaustive account of the makings of literary worlds, or rather a comparative synthesis of the established hows and whys of literature. Rather than bringing something new to the study of literature, Pettersson offers a systematized survey of existing research. This makes it a convenient starting point for various other (differently focused) analyses.

*How Literary Worlds are Shaped: A Comparative Poetics of Literary Imagination* consists of nine chapters, the first of which is dedicated to the universal concept of human (popular and literary) imagination, be it a faculty or an aspect of cognition. Pettersson's approach is marked by Auerbach's "The Philology of World Literature" in which the latter advocates the need for a synthetic approach to literature based on a particular starting point. Pettersson subsequently identifies literary imagination as his point of departure (Pettersson 2016: 2), and the centre around which he synthesises his view of literature. Starting with a historical overview of the most important theorists of imagination, cognition, and creation, the chapter reaches the conclusion that imagination

is a universally shared characteristic, and – referring often to S. T. Coleridge's ideas about imagination and symbols and the *esemplastic*, as well as to I. A. Richards' subsequent discussions of the concepts in Coleridge – that figurative language, particularly metaphor, is the basis of all thought and thus of literature as well. The imaginative use of mimesis implies a blend of the fantastic and the real, the extent of which interrelates with the concepts of genre and unreliability, which the book investigates in Chapters 2 and 3. Mimesis implies a degree of both imitation and creation, always demanding a determination of how true a representation is, since "all language use aims to persuade in one way or another" (Pettersson 2016: 79). Should we find narration unreliable, it undercuts our perception of the accuracy of representation, and subsequently influences our interpretations.

The subsequent three chapters deal specifically with literary worlds and their inflections. Chapter 4 discusses three different modes of literature (oral, visual, and written), suggesting a development of mimesis from singing and telling, through performing, to writing stories about human life. In addition, three major (and universal) literary themes are identified (challenge, perception, and relation), which represent the three basic phenomena that shape human lives on a daily basis. We perceive life and people, interact with them, and are faced with the various challenges that, in fact, comprise life. While Pettersson provides adequate examples from various (ancient and contemporary, Western and non-Western) literatures to illustrate his valid points, his argument lacks innovation and relies on repeating what has been said and written before. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss figures of speech (predom-

inantly metaphor) and other imaginative inflections (hypothetical action and the hierarchical use of genres and text types) that shape narratives and literary worlds.

The final cluster, consisting of Chapters 7, 8 and 9 represents a kind of apology for literature, in that it illustrates how literature shapes humans, human life, and thus the world in which we live (Chapter 7). In Chapter 8, Pettersson explains why literature matters and how we benefit from the delight and wonder that literary texts provoke. He concludes the study with ten reasons a comparative study of the creation of literary worlds can benefit students and teachers of literature, highlighting its unchallenged universal and humanist importance (Chapter 9). Pettersson's claim holds true that, despite the hardships and concerns that make up our lives, people have persisted in creating, performing, writing, listening to and reading literary stories. He adds to his

argument that it still makes sense to adopt a universal (and predominantly structuralist) approach to studying the phenomenon of literature.

In summary, *How Literary Worlds Are Shaped* represents a successful synthesis of the available research on literature as a uniquely human phenomenon, which is a result of the human desire to understand, represent, and preserve human experiences in oral, visual and written forms. As such, literature is simultaneously a source of pleasure (or delight and wonder, as Pettersson suggests) and knowledge. This study can help the less experienced reader (even one whose professional interests lie outside the humanities) understand how crucial literary imagination is to shaping our human identities, and reminding us why literature (still) matters.

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## AN INVITATION TO INTELLECTUAL COOPERATION ON TRANS/NATIONAL WORK IN PROGRESS

Doris Bachmann-Medick, ed., *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 271 pp. (paperback)

This collection of papers, edited by distinguished cultural studies scholar Do-

ris Machmann-Medick, brings together authors from different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, to discuss the complexities of translating transnational cultural traffic into an international cultural project, by relying on an analytical tool that can accommodate the transformative nature of cultural studies: translation in its widest sense.

Bachmann-Medick's introductory contribution raises a series of issues the volume attempts to answer: does the study of culture considered in a global context lead to a specific hybridisation or, alternatively, does it lead to various points of departure from the measuring rod of the Anglo-American theories?