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The Language of World Literature

Nikolai Marrs Utopian Linguistics

The most controversial Soviet linguist Nikolai Marr (1865-1934), was one of the early critics of Indo-European linguistic theory. In his view, Indo-European theory served the political, indeed imperialist, the interest of a particular group who limited its study of languages to the written sources.

Instead, Marr assumed that linguistics should study all world languages and do not limit itself to written sources. Marr believed that language first developed as a sign language and was only later replaced by a spoken language. He did not consider language families impermeable and claimed that each language was related to another to some degree. All humans were involved in the collaborative language creation process. Since language was not a natural feature of humans but an instrument that humans had created during their evolutionary development, it had changed and evolved along with material development. Thus, in a classless society, people will speak only one world language, but not one of the imperial languages such as English, French or Russian. The world's new language would be an artificial creation based on elements of all the written or non-written languages of the world. Regardless of how utopian this idea was, it addressed the problem of inequalities and asymmetries in world literature that persist and are repeatedly discussed in postcolonial theory and were implicitly or explicitly addressed in the soviet project of world literature.

Marr's critique of Indo-European linguistics was recently taken up by Siraj Ahmed in his book "Archeology of Babel. The Colonial Foundations of the Humanities", though without naming Marr. Marrs and Ahmed's criticism of the humanities leads me to another point relevant to the Soviet project of world literature. Despite the well-known criticism of Marrs new science of language, Marrs theory expanded the boundaries of the understanding of literature, which I want to explore in my paper. According to Marr, language in its entirety should move from its origins through non-written languages to its culmination in literature in our modern sense. Thus, literature was only the tip of the iceberg in a broad work on language. There was work on language with speech as a minimal form of literature, and elaborated aesthetic language was its maximal form. This controversial but broad understanding of literature included gropes hitherto excluded from the discussions about world literature. By these groups, I mean language groups without a tradition of writing and social groups within established literary nations with hitherto no access to writing and aesthetic culture - think of the experiment of proletarian literature. Both groups formed a "pool" for "small literature". Small literature, understood in this way, means maximising a social group's generally available minimal literary potential with a robust emancipatory connotation.

In this way, world literature and small literature concepts can be linked together: they complement each other. The overcoming of the national understanding of literature is inscribed in both. Both imply the necessity to take a position on the conventional forms of literature as their rejection, overcoming, productive appropriation, further development, or new forms.