

Mapping World Literature

International Canonization and
Transnational Literatures

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Introduction

The term *world literature* has received a significant renewed interest in the past decade, perhaps more than anything as the companion to the central keyword of the times, globalization. As most people have experienced in one way or another, globalization is no illusion, but real, and propelled by strong forces – particularly those of economics and the media – and for better and for worse. Globalization is not creating a uniform change around the globe, especially not within the domain that has been loosely termed cultural globalization, where it generates new diversity when global tendencies are expressed as local manifestations. The same logic applies to world literature, which will always be a world literature as seen from a particular place, even though some aspects are shared.

World literature has been put on the agenda, as more than a few scholars have set out to rejuvenate the term Johann Wolfgang von Goethe first introduced in 1827. At least four major publishing houses – Norton, Bedford, Longman and HarperCollins – have published large anthologies of world literature (Caws and Prendergast, 1997; Damrosch, 2003; Davis, et al., 2003; Lawall and Mack, 2003), and a number of noteworthy scholars, such as David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Christopher Prendergast, Pascale Casanova and Haun Saussy, have published works on the subject (Casanova, 2004; Damrosch, 2003; Moretti, 2000; Prendergast, 2004 and 2007; Saussy, 2006). At universities, departments are being merged, or they collaborate in joint courses. This is not least the case with English departments, where the boundaries between British, American and Post-Colonial literature are undergoing a profound shift towards integration. National curricula are being scrutinized and adapted to a situation in which knowledge about the world is as important as knowledge about the nation. It is also very telling that the American Comparative Literature Association's decennial report from 1995 was focused on multiculturalism, but did not mention world literature, whereas world literature is the pivotal concept in the report of 2006, just as the Modern Language Association (MLA) is publishing a comprehensive instruction for teaching world literature (Bernheimer, 1995; Damrosch, 2008; Saussy, 2006).

Above all, it is difficult at present to give convincing arguments as to why anybody should be interested in studying the literature of just one nation, not only because of the attractiveness of reading works from diverse cultures, but also because the traditional trinity of history, language and literature that provides the basis for many studies seems to be untenable. At the same time, there are

few ready answers at hand, regarding how the literary studies should adapt to this new situation. The interest in world literature may be seen as an attempt to determine such answers.

The concept of world literature is notoriously difficult to define. It obviously refers to a way of approaching literature that may exclude works by Martians and other extraterrestrials, but which, in principle, is open to all kinds of literature. This is the not-very-ambitious way in which the term has often been used, as a simple gesture towards an all-inclusiveness that contrasts strongly with another influential, but also simple, idea, namely that *world literature* is the best of the world's literature. As such, the term itself does not state whether it encompasses all the literature of the world, or only a certain kind of literature that stands out due to its formal qualities, thematic universality or some combination thereof. Some might ask if world literature is like world music, blending various local expressions into a new kind of literature that cannot be referred back to a single nation, although local and national traces can be found in it. The ideas of transnational or postnational literature are also akin to this, and although these are too narrow to cover the idea of world literature, this raises questions about whether the distinction between national and international is tenable.¹

Any approach to world literature must also take into account that the historical development of literature has varied around the globe. Some literatures are old, but have had limited exposure to foreign literatures, while others have been perpetually impacted and changed by outside influences. Other literatures are very young, with mostly oral traditions preceding them. However, the important thing is that, no matter which definition one prefers, *the literature of the world will always be too broad to comprehend*. One cannot have world literature as a whole, in the same way that the world cannot be perceived as a whole. It can be mapped and navigated in order to address its complexity, and what is interesting is *the way in which this complexity is transformed into forms of coherence*.²

The focus of this study is world literature as seen in the Western world, because the interest lies not so much in working with an ideal variety of works from all over the world, but, more realistically, to ask questions about how world literature is structured and evolving in the Western world. The intent of this book is to present ideas for analyses of this transformation, and its relationship to the *international canonization* of works and authors. The main arguments can be summarized in the following points:

- World literature is a paradigm that encompasses both the study of internationally canonized literature and the ambition to investigate and to be interested in all kinds of literature.
- The history of international canonization in world literature is marked by considerable discontinuities: temporal sub-centres that blossom, isolated canonical writers and new epochs that change the canon. The continuity is

- The importance of formal and thematic properties to international canonization has been underestimated and understudied, especially as national canonization has a different logic and different values than international canonization. World literature is consequently not a reflection of national literatures.
- The international canons consist of several constellations of works that share properties of formal and thematic character, where canonized works can bring attention to less canonized, but affiliated, works, and draw them into the scene of world literature. By studying such constellations, a challenging and realistic mapping of world literature is possible. There has been too much antiquarian criticism, in the sense used by Friedrich Nietzsche, of world literature, and too little critical thought based on the mapping of social selection combined with a textual approach that seeks constellations across time and space.
- It is only within the last decades that the concept of culture has gradually been more and more widely defined as non-essentialist, hybrid and contingent, something that has not been reflected in the practice of literary history, but which in all likelihood is one of the main reasons behind the renewed interest in world literature.
- The immense complexity of world literature does not pose a problem different to that with which other paradigms, such as comparative literature and post-colonialism have been confronted, but which they in turn have neglected, in terms of reflecting on the form of reduction of complexity they make. World literature is an emerging paradigm that works as a supplement to comparative literature and post-colonial studies, as, due to its overwhelming amount of subject matter, its complexity is bound to be taken seriously.
- The idea of globalization and the accompanying changes in geopolitics, media, economy and cultural identity, have only within the past decade and a half propelled the idea of world literature into a new era. This change also results in a significant change in the lengthy history of world literature.

Four chapters investigate these points, the first two dealing with principal aspects of world literature as an object of study, and the uses of international canonization. This is followed by two chapters addressing identity, and formal and thematic properties of transnational literatures.

Chapter 1 describes the paradigm of world literature with respect to its relations to cultural globalization, its history as a concept, and, in particular, to its relations to two dominant paradigms in the study of literature: comparative literature and post-colonialism. This is followed by an inquiry into an important aspect which has not been given much critical attention, namely the temporal differentiations in the idea of world literature. It makes a considerable difference whether one is interested in the extensive history of literature, in the contemporary scene of world literature, or in the changes that globalization may bring

about in the future literary system, and all three aspects should be given their due when discussing world literature.

Chapter 2 traces the focal points in the historical canonization of world literature. The canon of internationally dispersed literature is more stable than is often presented, but at the same time it also displays a historical variability of its centres. By tracing such centres, the foundations are laid for further investigations into the patterns of the formal and thematic properties of world literature, which are facilitated by the relatively easy task of indicating which works have been internationally circulated and canonized beyond their own time. Jorge Luis Borges is, in this context, taken as one example of an author who wrote in the space between world literature and his own national culture, and stands as an example of one of the nationally isolated but internationally canonized authors in world literature.

Chapters 3 and 4 combine studies, in particular those of literary phenomena, with discussions of methods for analyses of world literature with regard to thoroughly international literatures. In Chapter 3, literature written by migrants is at the centre of a discussion of formal innovation and cultural appreciation. Since both modernist and contemporary literature have received significant contributions by migrant writers, a survey of their achievements, both in terms of their international impact and their formal inventions, is also informative with respect to processes of international canonization. Moreover, migrant writers provide a historical trace of the development of the ideas of culture, identity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, which are brought up in a discussion of the contributions to this debate by Pierre Bourdieu, Ulrich Beck and Homi Bhabha.

Chapter 4 discusses fiction that addresses the denial of individuals' right to live, whether this happens through genocide, war or natural disasters. The chapter explores how the theme has had a great impact on its reception, and addresses the aesthetics of this literature, as expressed in five theses that seek to explain why this subject stands out in the international literary culture.

The Conclusion argues that the search for constellations in world literature is a mode of analysis that investigates ways in which very different texts share features that make them stand out on the literary canopy. The concept and use of constellations of works is central to this approach to world literature, namely by seeing patterns in world literature through the shared properties of works written, perhaps, far apart in time and place.

World literature only makes sense if one recognizes that each reader brings his or her own history to it, and that history has to present a coherence which is both shared with the literary community, and unique to the reader. Constellations can bridge genres and, most importantly, they can attach less canonized works to the more canonized. Thus, constellations balance a sense of the identity of the literary system's selections with a methodological curiosity that suggests answers as to why we read texts written by strangers.