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**LITERATURE
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History | Theory | Analysis



EDITORS

**Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and
Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen**

WORLD LITERATURE
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Edited by

Karen-Margrethe Simonsen & Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

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World Literature. World Culture

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INTRODUCTION: WORLD LITERATURE AND WORLD CULTURE

Karen-Margrethe Simonsen & Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

The concept of world literature is both old and new. It is old in the sense that it has “always” been used to designate literature from around the world, and that at least since the time of Goethe it has been used not only to specify a literary canon but also to engage in the ethical project of enlarging our literary horizons to include more than just a few national literatures. As Franco Moretti argues, however, the project outlined by Goethe has never been properly implemented. Only now are we beginning to see the contours of a new scholarly field dealing with world literature, and only recently have we begun to develop new methods, a fitting terminology and a new perspective on the world of literature. In that sense, world literature is an entirely new notion, and innovative investigations into its various modes, histories, institutions and aesthetics have increased considerably in number and variety within the last two decades.

If it is true that world literature is now developing into a renewed area of interest, the first question is why. An obvious answer is that the development is due to globalisation. However, this cannot be the whole truth, since globalisation is not an entirely new phenomenon. Over the centuries different waves of globalisation have swept over the globe, from the crusades of

the Middle Ages, the conquest of the Americas and the later colonisations of Africa, Asia and Australia, to the exploratory travels and the capitalist, industrial and technological expansions of the Modern age. Globalisation has shaped societies and individual lives around the globe throughout our history, and interactions between different parts of the planet have been a recurring phenomenon: brutal when it takes the form of warfare and colonisation, productive when it involves the trade of goods and the blending of peoples, languages and cultures. However, as one can see from this brief but symptomatic list, globalisation seemed, for many centuries, to proceed in one direction only: from Europe out towards the rest of the world.

Not until about the middle of the twentieth century did this change. Europe is not necessarily at the centre of the global expansions taking place at the moment, and globalisation has itself taken on new forms and dynamics. Metaphorically speaking, one could say that globalisation today looks less like an octopus – a head with many arms – and more like a spider’s web: a dynamic network. The most important characteristic of such networks is that they are, in Carlos Fuentes’ term, “polycentric”, and that each part of the network, as Frank Schulze-Engler has pointed out, has the capacity for self-reflexivity and an ability to influence the entire system. To suggest that today’s globalised cultures form this type of network is not, of course, to deny the existence of significant power structures and hegemonies (the occasional spider pulling the threads), but it allows for a more precise understanding of how people, literatures and cultures in fact interact, and how different cultures and texts translate into one another in complex and often unpredictable ways.

A renewed engagement with the “old” concept of world literature, in a markedly changed, multi-directional and networked global age, is one way in which literary and cultural studies may contribute to a fruitful understanding of how the globalisation of literary expression, production and reception has taken place in the past, how it is shaping our world today and what directions it may possibly take in the future. We need to keep in mind that globalisation is not something that *happens* to literature. On the contrary, literature itself is one of the driving forces behind globalisation, interacting as it does with other cultural expressions, policies, technologies and communication networks across national borders and oceans. But seeking to understand the dynamics of literature in a globalised age by mapping the ways in which the

literatures of the entire world flow across geographic and temporal borders is a daunting task for specialists and generalists alike.

The American Comparative Literature community has attempted to respond to this challenge. Already by 1993 the Bernheimer Report on the state of comparative literature was presenting multiculturalism as the new paradigm for literary studies, a paradigm that saw the need to integrate more non-European and non-Western literatures into the national curriculum. By the time the next such report was published in the new millennium (*Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 2006, ed. Haun Saussy), this was seen to be a more challenging task. In Saussy's volume the concept of world literature is seen as a tool to assist in the otherwise impossible task of navigating the vast libraries of a global literature in all languages, and moreover of charting the more violent, displacing hegemonic realities that have proved to be the darker side to globalisation.

Since the late 1990s, a number of scholars have responded to the challenges of globalisation within literary studies, not so much by widening the canon – which was surely needed, and to some extent accomplished in certain areas – but by looking at the institutionalised national literatures from new, and various, global perspectives. Thus Franco Moretti, in his “Conjectures on World Literature”, offers the apollonian vision of a “global atlas of the novel”, in which waves of genres and literary forms wash back and forth over the history and surface of the earth, forming a complex, centreless map in which difference reins; others – notably David Damrosch in his *What is World Literature?* (2003) – find literary value in the translated and transformed languages of literature: languages that were formerly held to be corrupted renderings of the original, localised and national versions. The idea of according a central place in world literature precisely to translation is radicalised still further in the work of Emily Apter, who uses the term “translation zone” to designate sites that are profoundly *in-translation* and universally differential and which have had an enormous impact on contemporary life around the globe: on “diaspora language communities, print and media, public spheres, institutions of governmentality and language policy-making and theatres of war” (Apter 6). Pascale Casanova meanwhile offers a similarly cosmopolitan view of the world of literature, describing a networked system in which diverse languages and cultures are attracted to cultural centres of literary capital such as Paris, and in the process produce a cosmopolitan reformation of the literatures

and cultures of both the centre and the periphery. Looking at the national literatures from a global perspective may also, as in Wai Chee Dimock's work, mean approaching them from a *de-nationalised* point of view, seeing them within what she calls (in a term borrowed from Spivak) "a planetary literary system" that is a primary agency in undermining nationalism from within. According to Dimock, "planetary" literature has always been trans-territorial and as such has operated as a driving force behind globalisation.

These different approaches to globalisation in literary studies today – variously encountered in translation studies, in post-colonialist approaches, in planetary literary studies, or in theses positing a world republic of letters, an atlas of the novel or other cosmopolitan visions of world literature – regard the decentred, networked globe as a new paradigm and a new challenge to the study of comparative and national literature. The present anthology lends its own, primarily European, voices, visions and literary locations to the task of addressing this global challenge.

In this new situation, Europe has to rethink its role and position. Ulrich Beck has argued that the European tradition is cosmopolitan in its very essence, but in his view it was not until after the Second World War that European nations accepted the consequences of this, primarily by giving up some of their national sovereignty. In Beck's view, therefore, there is not necessarily an opposition between the national and the global. Still, cosmopolitanism must be the adversary of traditional nationalism. As Franco Moretti writes: "there is no other justification for the study of world literature (and for the existence of departments of comparative literature) but this: to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures – especially the local literature" (68). The study of world literature is, first and foremost, an invitation to rethink the relationship between, on the one hand, the local, national and international anchoring of literature, and, on the other, literature's function within a wider cultural context. In terms of inspiration and effect, literature has always crossed borders and been international, but historically the critical reception of literature has tended to be confined by the borders of particular languages and scholarly disciplines.

In offering further reflections on world literature, therefore, we need to rethink our methods and the scope of our investigation. By merely expanding our literary canon we may not necessarily achieve the humanistic goal of greater knowledge and tolerance that Goethe envisaged when he urged

upon us the study of world literature. Damrosch, responding to Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutic version of tolerance, argues on the contrary that: "The result [of reading world literature] may be almost the opposite of the 'fusion of horizons' that Friedrich Schleiermacher envisioned when we encounter a distant text; we may actually experience our customary horizon being set askew, under the influence of works whose foreignness remains fully in view" (300).

It is a risky business to *read* world literature, and even more so to *study* it, and it immediately raises a whole set of questions: what is world literature, what texts/literatures should be studied, what kind of world are we talking about, how does literature circulate and what is the purpose of studying it? Answering these questions means making some very serious choices. As Damrosch emphasises, it is not possible to know everything that one ought to know if one were to claim a comprehensive knowledge of world literature, and that is true almost irrespective of how one defines that field. One is therefore forced to balance the value of close reading against that of contextual knowledge, comparative range, historical framing, linguistic understanding and institutional considerations. Not everything can be studied in depth, and some books will have to be read in translation. While Moretti recommends a method he has termed "distant reading", Damrosch will not give up on close reading, and opts instead for a reading of world literature through the study of heterogeneously combined *microcanons*. Whatever your choice, you have to define the field of research. The natural frame of the world will not delimit the object quite as neatly as the old national frames once did.

In this anthology, we investigate the possible meanings of the concept of world literature in a new era of globalisation, looking at the range of the concept, the degree to which it will reorient our approaches to new literature and the ways in which it may lead us to reconceptualise and reorient our approach to older literary periods. We have chosen to divide the anthology into four inter-dependent sections, each focussing on, though not limited by, one of the four themes that we regard as common and central to a reconfiguration of the study of world literature in a globalised age: Histories, Translation, Migration and Institutions.

HISTORIES

The recent interest in world literature must be seen in relation to an historical development that gained momentum in the late eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, that is, with the outset of modernity. This development has redefined the relationship between individual *Bildung* and national history, between local history and global interactions. Modernity, even in its most local forms, is closely linked to a global mental space (see Svend Erik Larsen). Thus our modern mode of historical reflection, based on a certain philosophically defined humanism, the notion of national identity and the positivist method, harks back to eighteenth and nineteenth century thinking, and so does our concept of literary history, which reflects a given period's view of the geographical and cultural context of literature. Literary histories with an international scope can be found as early as the late eighteenth century, when Juan Andrés Morell wrote his *Origen, progresos y estado actual de toda la literatura* ("Origin, progress and the contemporary status of all literature", 1782-1799). For Andrés, the aim of literary history was both to restore the reputation of Spanish literature outside Spain and to reinscribe the influence of Arabic culture on European culture, thus diminishing the importance of Greek and, especially, Latin cultures (see Tomás González Ahola). Histories of world literature will inevitably favour some national literatures over others, but they are also bound to frame the understanding of national literatures within a particular worldview. The particular texts, historical lines and influences that a literary historian chooses to highlight in describing the development of a given national literature will reveal his or her implicit view of world literature.

The aim of the section entitled "Histories" is thus not only to offer pertinent perspectives on the chronological development of world literature, but also to show that the concept of world literature demands a new perspective on historical developments and on historicity as such. Historical perspectives hardly ever serve as mere background material; they are guided by the implicit aim of any given study and should themselves be seen, therefore, as the object of methodological reflection, just as any given method needs historical contextualisation. The question is how to maintain a balance.

In the mid- and late twentieth century there was a tendency within the discipline of Comparative Literature to replace historical studies of literature with philosophical reflections. French *post-histoire* cultural analysis and the

dominant trends within postcolonial studies were highly theoretical and sceptical in their attitude towards historical narrations. Such narrations were thought to be *altmodisch* and for the most part too narrowly European. However, history does not simply come to a halt, and scholars of world literature need to reopen the discussion of how we can “historise” in new ways today (see David Marno). In re-evaluating our approach to history we also need to question the kinds of access the individual has to history and how such access is mediated. It is no accident that memory studies in recent years have attracted so much attention, both at the popular and the academic level, and there is a growing interest today in the related study of witness literature. The fascination of such literature lies to a large extent in the fact that the individual, particular story may mean something to a wider public and, simultaneously, offer a more general understanding of history (see Michel de Dobbeleer’s article in the “Translation” section). A parallel development in literary studies is the growing interest in the ways in which we actually experience literature. The increasing scholarly interest in the meaning of nostalgia, and especially nostalgia as presented in literature, seems to elevate personal, idiosyncratic and emotional involvement in history to a productive strategy for coming to terms with the traumatic and incomprehensible elements of our past (see Fiona Schouten).

TRANSLATIONS

According to Damrosch, world literature is writing that gains in translation (281). From a traditional national perspective, this observation seems counter-intuitive. Any literary work, one would think, must surely lose some of its linguistic expressiveness and meaningful cultural references when it is translated and circulated in a different culture; translation can offer at best an inferior, at worst a distorted copy of the original. From a national perspective, indeed, a translator is seen as a traitor (Larsen 245). But from the perspective of world literature, the opposite is true: here, the translator is the hero, a central actor in the world of letters. She acts not only as a “cosmopolitan intermediary”, in Casanova’s terms, but also, as Goethe recognized, *creates* literary value by her work (Casanova 21, 14). Literature not only survives in translation but gains new meanings and relevance every time it crosses geographical, cultural and linguistic borders. Goethe held the