World Literature: The Unbearable Lightness of Thinking Globally

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1.

Does literature have anything interesting to say about globalization? Is the work of literary critics germane to those analyzing today’s transnational flows of people, ideas, and goods? Many students of globalization, who work primarily in economics, political science, cultural studies, and journalism, would be skeptical of the claim that literary study could address their concerns. Indeed, they would be surprised to learn that Comparative Literature has been championing cosmopolitanism for more than a century, or that it had developed an international perspective on literary relations decades before they had. Comparative Literature, in fact, prefigured today’s transnational consciousness through its attempt to transcend the limits of individual national traditions and to investigate links among them.

This makes the current malaise of Comparative Literature baffling. A discipline that promoted polyglossia and comparison for 100 years now finds itself in decline. Rather than emerging as a leading light in an academy so preoccupied with interdisciplinarity and difference, Comparative Literature has lost its glow. Most alarming of all, it has allowed English, Cultural Studies, and Globalization Studies to pursue a scorched-earth policy with respect to foreign languages. The discipline that spearheaded transnationalism in the humanities now finds itself in the rear guard.

With some justification, Gayatri Spivak speaks of the death of the discipline. Her book, like so many studies of Comparative Literature today, is written in an elegiac tone. So persuaded are critics of Comparative Literature’s demise that they have resurrected the idea of world literature as a way of analyzing global literary production. To be sure, the proliferation of courses in and anthologies and studies of world literature all seems to indicate the rise of a fresh, more up-to-date approach to the study of the literatures of the globe. But is world literature really that novel? Or is it a case of old software in new computers? Has it learned from the lessons
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of Comparative Literature, the discipline it seeks to replace, or is it destined to repeat its errors?

In order to address these questions, I need to consider briefly and at the outset the ideology and history of Comparative Literature. At the very heart of Comparative Literature is the promotion of the comparison of various traditions, close reading of texts, polyglossia, and ecumenicity. Indeed, if one looks at the texts inaugurating the discipline, one finds two justifications for the new project: the desire to understand the connections between literary traditions in the original languages and a defense of cosmopolitanism. While these may seem self-evident truths today, a sign no doubt of the successful consolidation of the discipline’s central message, they were not so in the nineteenth century, which witnessed the rise of the various national literatures in Europe as objects of disciplinary study.

Early comparatists responded to the compartmentalization of Enlightenment letters by seeking links among these traditions. In what is perhaps the first presentation of comparative literature in the United States, Charles Chauncey Shackford wrote that all “great poems” are “structurally and vitally related” (42). The task of Comparative Literature was to trace the analogies between traditions and identify the peculiarities of each (48). Joseph Texte, a French critic and pioneer of the discipline, contended that, since European literature had borrowed from the “ancient literatures of the Orient, of Greece, and of Rome,” it was imperative for the “historian of modern literatures” to study “their mutual relationship” (110). The comparative study of literature is necessary, Louis Paul Betz insisted, because no national literature had emerged on its own (148). A half-century later, René Wellek reaffirmed this position, namely, that the “great argument for ‘comparative literature’ is the obvious falsity of the idea of a self-enclosed national literature” (“The Concept” 5).

Not satisfied to look for affinities between literatures, these critics often discovered totalities, at least in Europe. In an influential text tellingly titled “La littérature européenne,” the great French critic Ferdinand Brunetièr spoke of a “European literature” that subsumed all the national literatures into one category (1–5, 49–51). He and other critics offered the idea of general literature to which all national literatures belonged. Writing at the same time on the literary traditions of Western Europe, Frédéric Loliée proposed that, although distinct in origin and character, these literatures constitute an “all embracing unity” (358). In response to the fencing practices of national literatures, comparatists rushed to prove that European literatures embraced the same aesthetic principles. Wellek insisted that “Western literature, at least, forms a unity, a whole.” “Literature,” he argued, “is one, as art and humanity are one” (“The Concept” 5).
This construction of unified bodies of textuality, however, turned out to be one of the fatal errors of the discipline. On the one hand, the ultimate goal of these critics was to transcend division by reconstructing the idea, prevalent for centuries, that poetry was a universal construct. On the other hand, the creation of totalities resulted in a celebration of western European literatures at the expense of other traditions that undermined the very transnationalism Comparative Literature sought to promote.

To be sure, one of the reasons people today have become disenchanted with Comparative Literature is that it failed to live up to its own ideals. Unlike Goethe, who packed texts ranging from Serbian epics to Chinese novels into his notion of world literature, the practitioners of Comparative Literature confined themselves to Europe. Brunetière, for instance, saw little point in looking for relations between Western and other literatures (3). Goethe’s capacious world literature had in time become a collection of masterpieces. Following this logic, the American critic Robert J. Clements concluded that because African authors have contributed fewer works fulfilling the “criteria of international acclaim,” they would play a “minor role” in the curricula of comparative literature (32).

It is often forgotten, however, that this perspective did not include all of Europe in its compass. I have argued elsewhere (Belated 2–3) that Comparative Literature was primarily interested in the literatures of Britain, France, and Germany, paying secondary attention to the traditions of Italy, Russia, and Spain, and making passing reference to the others.

In addition to its restricted cosmopolitanism—which world literature tries to redress—Comparative Literature suffered from theoretical vagueness. This was apparent even in the birth of the discipline. In an early essay, “The Comparative Study of Literature,” Arthur Richmond Marsh attempted to outline the comparative method to PMLA readers in 1896. The task of comparative literature, he explained, was to examine “the phenomena of literature as a whole, to compare them, to group them, to classify them” (128). But he cautioned that the methods of these procedures had not at that time been “systematically formulated.” As a result, comparative literature remained “underdeveloped in theory and limited in practice” (126). More than fifty years later, Wellek came to a similar conclusion. Despite landmark works in French, German, and English, the discipline was in a “precarious state,” incapable of establishing a “distinct subject matter and specific methodology” (Concepts 282).

Ten years after Wellek, Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein grumbled about the difficulties of practicing comparative literature and about the absence of disciplinary identity (vii).

The reason for this lack of clarity lies in the very concept and practice of literary comparison. There has been agreement that the
basic method of the discipline is to compare works of literature from different traditions. Paul Van Tieghem stated this emphatically in 1931 in *La littérature comparée*, generally regarded as the first theoretical treatment of the subject (57). But what does comparison of diverse literary traditions actually mean? The search for sources? The detection of influences? The isolation of peculiarities? The examination of parallel structures? At various stages, it has meant all of the above. But on what basis could these diverse phenomena be compared? In other words, on what table could these features be laid out, examined, and systematized?

Early practitioners borrowed the comparative approach from the natural sciences with the intent of making it an exact science. Marsh, for instance, pointed out that comparatists had appropriated this methodology from comparative anatomy, language studies, and the sciences (126). By acquiring this methodology, Posnett believed, literary study would become a science itself (235). These early theorists failed to note differences between the two approaches. The purpose of comparison in the sciences is to look at difference, to note traces of underlying similarity, to place like with like (even when surfaces look un-alike), and to lay the foundation not just for synchronic categorization (Linnaeus) but also for historical development (Darwin). But literary texts do not stem from one source in the way that human beings or even languages do. Forgetting this, many comparatists spent their time trying to prove descent by looking for points of origin and tracing influences of one author on another. The metaphor they provided to illustrate their disciplinary work was the tree.

Comparative Literature, as Haun Saussy has shown, was organized around the logic of “tree-shaped” disciplines of comparative anatomy and philology that explained typological diversity through a common historical narrative with many boughs (137). But literature lacks the shared anatomical body or trunk of one language. Modern Greek literature is not to ancient Greek literature as modern demotic is to classical Greek. When Constantine Cavafy, James Joyce, or Derek Walcott return to Homer, the relationship they establish between themselves and the original text, and among themselves as modern readers of an ancient epic, is one not of shared descent but of shared interest. The Odyssey does not lead ineluctably to Tennyson’s “Ulysses.”

Although Comparative Literature developed sophisticated methodologies for reading texts, it never succeeded in building a sound theoretical base. This theoretical instability has been aggravated by recent calls for it to abandon the discipline’s primary preoccupation with literature so as to resemble Cultural Studies. For example, the third report of the American Comparative Literature Association,
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In 1993, Comparative Literature, chaired by Charles Bernheimer, broadened the field of comparison to such an extent that it is in danger of losing its focus on literature. This is also true of Spivak's attempt to revive the discipline by fostering collaboration with Area Studies. Non-specialists might wonder what the objectives of Comparative Literature actually are.

Given the theoretical aporias of Comparative Literature, its vestiges of Eurocentrism, and its lack of disciplinary identity, it is understandable that critics are seeing in world literature a means of making sense of literary relations and of organizing the undergraduate curriculum. It is fitting here to ask whether world literature can rise to the occasion: Has it really overcome the two main problems of Comparative Literature—limited transnationalism and theoretical vagueness?

In order to address these questions, it will be helpful to return to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749–1832) introduction of this term. Rather than writing a treatise on the subject, Goethe actually tossed out this concept to his disciple, Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854), who had arrived in Weimar in 1823 for an audience with the great man and stayed as his private secretary until the master's death. Having transcribed his conversations with Goethe, he published them in two volumes in 1836. The exchanges between them, imbalanced by Goethe's age and international status, somewhat resemble the tête-à-tête talk between the two protagonists in Louis Malle's film My Dinner with André or the dialogues between Socrates and his hapless interlocutors. Goethe's wisdom, urbanity, and immeasurable knowledge nearly silence the young Eckermann into acquiescent adoration.

The conversation of 31 January 1827 began with Goethe's comment on a Chinese novel he had been reading. "Chinese novel!" Eckerman uttered with surprise; "that must look strange enough." Not so, answered Goethe; "the Chinese think, act, and feel almost exactly like us." What had enabled Goethe to make this juxtaposition of the two texts was his belief in a shared humanity, a product of Enlightenment universalism. Goethe then compared this novel with the Chansons de Béranger, asking Eckermann whether it was not remarkable that the Chinese text was so moral and the French text exactly the opposite. Then, as another expression of his cosmopolitanism, Goethe remarked that the Chinese had composed many such romances at a time when his German ancestors "were still living in the woods." Regarding poetry as a "universal possession of mankind," Goethe worried that Germans might easily fall into a conceit, not looking "beyond the narrow circle that surround us." Then he uttered that magic statement that has propelled a thousand pens: "I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, 107
and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (132-3).

This was not Goethe’s first reference to Weltliteratur, as he had been thinking about the topic for some time and had mentioned it previously in letters and his diary. But this has become the most renowned utterance.9 Goethe believed that a universal world literature was in the process of formation in which Germans would play a vital role. Since he never developed this concept systematically, it is appropriate to ask what he meant by Weltliteratur.

It seems that he understood by it less a collection of masterpieces than a state of mind and, more generally, a course of literary traffic and a vehicle for inter-cultural understanding. It was this idea of process, Fritz Strich argues, rather than texts containing “universal changeless content,” that Goethe had in mind (6, 14). Since world literature was for Goethe a means of intellectual intercourse between peoples, anything that expressed the relationship of nation to nation belonged to this category. World literature, Goethe explained to Eckermann, enabled people to correct each other’s errors by learning from the perspective of others. Thomas Carlyle (his disciple in England), he explained, had understood Schiller better than the Germans, while “we can judge Shakespeare and Byron, and know how to evaluate their merits perhaps better than the English themselves” (175).10 In this practice of reciprocity lay the progress of humanity. For world literature, he argued a year later, entailed not just reading but building a universal society; it was a “matter of living men of letters getting to know each other and, through their own inclination and similarity of tastes, finding a motive for corporate action” (qtd. in Strich 11).

This need for “corporate action” was made inevitable by his turbulent times. While Goethe acknowledged that literary exchange had existed since the dawn of literacy and that a form of universality was first achieved by the Greeks, he saw his own age as exemplifying and requiring ecumenical thinking. The Napoleonic Wars demonstrated to him the necessity for better communication among peoples. Looking at the horrors of these wars, Goethe, like critics today flinching at ethnic cleansing, conceived of world literature with a hope for greater understanding. Yet these wars, launched in the name of universalism, had paradoxically the opposite effect, namely the accelerated formation of nation-states by people who resented the imposition upon them of French Enlightenment values.11 It could also be argued that Goethe’s call for an expanded ecumenism was his attempt to counter the spread of French culture that had come to dominate court societies in eighteenth-century Europe. Reciprocity would mean that the dominant nations would have to recognize the achievements of minor ones; in this case, the
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French would have to acknowledge the cultural contributions of Germans, as they were coming to do, especially after the two books by Madame de Staël. To be sure, Goethe himself exemplified the virtues of world literature in his prodigious reading, his sincere interest in the literatures beyond Europe’s frontiers, his extensive writings on various topics, his promotion of translation, and his collaboration with European writers and scholars.

Beyond these aesthetic concerns, Goethe saw in his epoch what we today would call globalization—the rapidity of communication made possible by the “age of speed,” “rotation,” the steam engine, and the postal system (Strich 31, 40). In this sense, Goethe prefigured our thinking about globalization. For global studies today expand on Goethe’s sense of intellectual intercourse and political coexistence by looking into economic transnationalism and movements of people. These global developments persuaded Goethe that a world literature was crystallizing around him, a process that for him represented both the literary manifestation of globalization and an instrument toward the latter’s further consolidation. The starting point for world literature, however, was national literature, though not nationalism. Goethe loved the former while fearing the latter (Guillén 41). World literature expressed, for him, the diversity of literary production and enhanced understanding among nations. It was a way, paradoxically, of preserving the various literatures. In this, of course, his concept was shaped by Johann Gottfried Herder’s idea that the globe was composed by unique and incommensurable cultures.

Despite its growing influence, the concept of world literature remained theoretically vague even at its nascent stage. Theodor Mundt, a German writer, griped about this ambiguity as early as 1838 during his travels in England. He complained of being so accosted about world literature that he tried to avoid the topic entirely; yet this idea pursued him relentlessly in every inn “like a Marlborough-tune” (Strich 281). All poor Mundt could do was plead for a greater “clarity” that has eluded the concept from the beginning.

Writers like Mundt attested to the quick spread of Goethe’s coinage throughout Europe. It even worked its way into the Communist Manifesto, which was published in 1848. Its haziness, however, has not dissipated with time. On the whole, world literature has meant for people the awareness of literatures beyond their own, an
openness to work composed in other languages, the appreciation of cultural difference, the need to see the interconnection between literary traditions, the necessity to promote translation. In time, however, it lost the political and social signification Goethe attributed to it and came to mean what he had always avoided: a collection of great works.

This meaning was encouraged in the United States, where, after World War II, anthologies of and courses on world literature for undergraduates proliferated. Although informed by the Goethean ideal of global awareness and transnational cooperation, these anthologies and classes necessitated the creation of reading lists. The teaching of world literature in American universities, Sarah Lawall argues, was based on the Great Books model that had emerged in the 1920s. It promised students a greater understanding of the world. Such courses were gradually abandoned in the 1960s as a consequence of the critique of the canon and the attack on literature in general. Some of these Great Books were incorporated in interdisciplinary or general humanities classes in which, significantly, literature no longer played the leading role (Lawall 8–9).

This should serve as a word of caution to schemes, most recently proposed by Spivak, to fuse Comparative Literature with Area Studies. When seated at the same table with the social and natural sciences, literature occupies the least desirable seat.15

Yet world literature is making a comeback among critics today as a result of interest in globalization, trepidations over nationalism, the privileging of the diasporic and transnational, disenchantment with Comparative Literature, and the continued compartmentalization of literary study in departments of national literature.16 The impossibility of a structuralist poetics, the fragmentation of Theory into theories,17 and the challenges posed by multiculturalism and postcolonialism prompt critics to return to the ecumenical category of world literature. The term allows them to propose the relevance of literature in our global age, unencumbered by the ideological robes of Comparative Literature. World literature makes a better fit with our Zeitgeist.

2.

The idea of world literature has recently received an enthusiastic endorsement from David Damrosch in What Is World Literature? While Damrosch introduces an essentially Goethean conception of world literature, he gives it the nuance demanded by our more complex global environment. Recognizing the term's elusiveness, Damrosch defines world literature as encompassing “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original languages” (4). Like Goethe, he refuses to limit
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world literature to a collection of masterpieces, preferring to see it instead as “a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike” (5). Damrosch wishes to explore what happens to a work once it leaves its point of origin. This is important because, as he explains, literary texts “take on a new life as they move into the world at large” (24). His aim is to understand the process by which the works become reframed through their translation into both other languages and other societies. Specifically, he wants to clarify ways in which these works can be read as they move out of their national home (5).

Damrosch’s range is as breathtaking as his polyglossia. A passionate reader of world literature, in translation or in the original, he also goes back in time. Unlike many practitioners of global studies who do not think it necessary to look what came before Arjun Appadurai or Homi Bhabha, Damrosch actually believes in history. His mode of travel is as much a time capsule as a jet plane. Thus it is refreshing to begin a book on world literature with the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Sumerian poem composed on cuneiform tablets discovered by British archaeologists in 1853. Damrosch also reads ancient Egyptian love lyrics; Aztec poetry; poems by the thirteenth-century mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg; prose by Franz Kafka, P.G. Wodehouse, and Rigoberta Menchú; and, finally, the Dictionary of the Khazars by the Serb author Milorad Pavic. It is a generous mix.

By considering works from varied times and places, Damrosch complicates Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur. For he intends to argue that texts of world literature “are always particularly liable to be assimilated to the immediate interests and agendas of those who edit, translate, and interpret them” (25). Goethe’s notion was highly idealized, a marketplace of literary exchange conducted by gentry or gentlemen who, on the whole, believed that women’s literature was incapable of escaping its domesticity to enter the world. Although a vision of intercultural awareness motivates his project, Damrosch knows too well that the worlds in world literature are quite often worlds in collision (14). In other words, he wants to highlight the iniquitous relationship between the various literary traditions, namely, the fact that they do not all exert the same influence and that some have infinitely more authority than others. We have learned too much since Goethe’s congenial conversations with Eckermann about the formation of literary canons, the institutionalization of national literatures, the evaluation of texts, and the apportionment of status to believe in a world of refined reading communities. Although Goethe emphasized a highly mobile model of world literature, he did not raise questions about the rules of
traffic and their enforcement, the necessity of travel documents, and the differentiating means of movement available to different national traditions.

The world literary system is, as Franco Moretti puts it, “profoundly unequal” (“Conjectures” 56). That is to say, there has never been any symmetry in global literary relations. There are broad expansive literatures supported by vast linguistic networks and promoted by the wealth and power of strong states and economies. These literatures may be relatively young, as in the case of the United States, or have a centuries-long tradition, as in the case of France. On the other hand, other literatures may be equally old, such as the Greek, but written in small, not frequently heard languages. Some, such as Palestinian literature, may have emerged as a national institution in the last half of the twentieth century. They do not all have the same access to the global literary market.

The capacity of English and French literatures to have an impact on literary developments elsewhere is extraordinary, backed up by the force of their respective languages, the prestige of their traditions, and the muscle of their culture industries. English writing makes its presence felt around the world in a way unimaginable for most national literatures. It has been promoted by the hegemonic positions of Great Britain and the United States, which have served for two centuries as flag-bearers of English. In any particular year translations of literary works from English into, say, Bulgarian, Dutch, or Arabic vastly outnumber Bulgarian, Dutch, or Arabic works translated into English. In fact, translation currently comprises about 2–4% of the annual output for British and American publishers. This contrasts with 14% in Hungary, 15% in Germany, and 25% in Italy. In Brazil, an astonishing 60% of new titles consist of translations, 75% English. Since World War II English has been the most translated tongue worldwide (Venuti 88, 160). The paeans to globalization drown out a fainter but sobering moan—the major literary networks seek out the smaller systems less than the other way around.

This has always been the case. In the period between 1750 and 1850, as Moretti shows, most European countries imported a large portion of their novels from Britain and France, which, by contrast, translated few works of fiction from other languages. The majority of novels read by Europeans at the time were actually translations. This imbalance undercuts the claim made by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto that the various national literatures were yielding a world literature. In truth, according to Moretti, what took place was a “planetary reproduction of a couple of national literatures” (Atlas 151, 187).

Moretti’s contention is borne out by the Greek case. Greek scholars and poets who traveled to Europe in the eighteenth century and
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read the works of British, French, and German authors discovered how “backwards” Greek society was. They encouraged the translation of these works into Greek even as they advocated the creation of a Greek national literature. That Byron and Goethe took an interest in Greek folk poetry at that time, or that Claude Fauriel and Werner von Haxthausen collected and translated examples of this poetry into French and German, respectively, in the early nineteenth century, does not balance out the accounting sheet of global literary exchange. Greek writers knew then and continue to know now more of the major European literatures than Europeans know of Greek writing. Greek literature has been a product of this negotiation between local realities and European models (Jusdanis, Belated). The Greek case provides an early example of what has become the rule in the emergence of literatures: rapprochement between indigenous traditions and global paradigms. F. Abiola Irele has shown, for instance, that African literature exists “in the context of a recognizable corpus of texts and works by Africans, situated in relation to global experience that embraces both the precolonial and the modern frames of reference” (7).

Damrosch is cognizant of these issues, as he is of the fact that world literature is produced in a dialogue between the local and global. We require, he contends, new modes of understanding cross-cultural exchange and novel ways to read texts so as to avoid “old essentialisms” (84). The challenge, for him, is how to conceptualize the literary text once it enters the global world of literary exchange. In other words, how do we imagine what this world literature looks like? What metaphor are we going to use to help us understand it?

Clearly, writing after thirty years of theory, Damrosch does not support the precepts of the original comparatists, namely that, despite differences, the various literatures followed the same aesthetic principles. He is Herderian in his embrace of the uniqueness of each culture. But Herder proposed a theory of world history that gave meaning and dynamism to society. Damrosch cannot offer anything similar. He does not favor the “polysystems” approach developed by Itamar Even-Zohar or the “world-systems” theory assembled by Immanuel Wallerstein. While he refers to Moretti’s systemic method of charting the spread of the novel throughout Europe, he dislikes Moretti’s lack of attention to the close reading of texts (25–6). Ultimately, Damrosch believes that we do not have to choose between overarching summation and detailed examination. Yet, by not formulating a theoretical model to navigate through world literature, Damrosch effectively abandons his readers to the vagaries of globalization as they search for unrelated texts.

A central problem faced by Comparative Literature, I argued earlier, was that it was comparing genetically independent phenomena or that it lacked concepts and standards to make this comparison
meaningful. It tried to overcome this by narrowing the object of study. In Moretti’s case, this narrowing leads to the geography and dissemination of the novel in Europe as the dominant object of study; Erich Auerbach looked at the changing modes of representation in the western tradition; Ernst Robert Curtius investigated the literature of the Middle Ages. In each example the critic posed a constant object to which the others were compared or from the perspective of which they were investigated: the novel, modes of representing, a historical period. Damrosch builds no lighthouse from which to look out upon the amplitude of world literature. Without a particular point of view, we are left with a project of indiscriminate reading.

To the question, Why should any one read this motley assembly of texts? Damrosch answers that he wants to trace “what is lost and what is gained in translation, looking at the intertwined shifts of language, era, region, religion, and literary context that a work can incur as it moves from its point of origin out into a new cultural sphere” (34). This is a splendid goal. But can it really be accomplished when one has to read texts spanning the globe and three thousand years of human history for which one has to supply much background material? Should the openness of world literature not be balanced by the narrowing of methodology? These are important questions, for Damrosch himself recognizes the dangers of uncritical eclecticism. Scholars of world literature, he warns, run the risk of becoming “ecotourists” (5). Or, to change the metaphor, they are in danger of falling through a thin-ice universalism.

Damrosch’s chapter on the Epic of Gilgamesh comes to mind here. Fully half of it is devoted to a traditional account of the discovery and subsequent fate of the cuneiform tablets. About one-third concerns the text itself, during which Damrosch wonders how we should approach the poem. “What would it now mean,” he ask, “to read the text as a work of world literature” in light of the specific information we have now about its original society (65, 66)? Damrosch’s concern is really part of a greater question that readers have been asking for centuries, namely, how we should approach antiquity. Classicists, for instance, have grappled with these questions since the founding of their discipline in the nineteenth century. Instead of reinventing the wheel, we might want to see how they approach this problem.

Damrosch’s solution states the obvious: that we should “try to understand the poem’s psychology, and its ‘humanism,’ without collapsing these terms into our modern understanding” and that we have to “look at the epic’s Sumerian prehistory” (71). I don’t know the intended audience of this advice—perhaps presentist cultural critics preoccupied with current events—but it seems perfectly standard practice in the analysis of any literary text, let alone one...
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from the distant past. We do not get many answers, however, to more pressing questions: What do we learn about world literature by looking at the epic? How, in what sense, is it an example of world literature? Above all, how does his chapter on Gilgamesh differ from one he or another specialist might write for a book on, say, ancient Near Eastern literature as opposed to one on world literature?

The difficulty lies in the conception of world literature, which, by definition, is ambiguous, and in Damrosch’s decision to serve up a salade Macédoine of texts. This recipe is understandable, given his cosmopolitan ideals. A book that studies world literature should be ecumenical in taste and grasp. World literature, Damrosch believes, enriches our lives. “We feel ourselves brought into a dynamic engagement with an actual other world ... a world dramatically distant from us in time, space, and culture” (164). But this ecumenism of attitude anchors what may be an inherently impossible project. Having extended the scope of world literature from Akkadian epics to Aztec incantations, Damrosch poses a negative question—“What isn’t world literature?”—to which he provides no adequate response (110). Damrosch opens his concluding chapter by asking again, “And so, what is world literature?” (281). His answer is again murky. World literature, he writes, “is fully at play once several foreign works begin to resonate together in our mind” (298). He states that he has given us his world literature “while recognizing that the world now presents us with material so varied as to call into question any logic of representation, any single framework that everyone should adopt and in which these particular works would all have a central role” (281).

It is not only the variety that may cause readers anxiety but the vast number of texts to be read. This amplitude induces the kind of awe that Romantic painters sought in their depiction of landscape or Herman Melville in his attempt to portray the immensity of the sea in Moby Dick. Who can know enough, Damrosch asks, to do world literature well? For good reason, he cautions that a specter of amateurism hangs over comparative literature today (284). Students of world literature have to address this issue. For all its faults, Comparative Literature implied an intellectual activity—a reading, interpreting, and systematizing activity conducted from a particular occidentalist outlook—that constructed an object of knowledge out of the world’s texts, which it then investigated through a process of close reading. By contrast, at the current stage of its development, world literature simply identifies its raw material—texts drawn from everywhere—without creating a perspective or offering a methodology.

Can one practice world literature with unconditional ecumenism? And is this ecumenism, by definition, also a problem for any
concept of world literature as a whole? We have to find ways, Damrosch argues, “of assessing and working with texts that now range from the earliest Sumerian poetry to the most recent fictional experiments of the Tibetan postmodernists” (111). He poses an unrealizable Romantic goal, that is, to express the totality of world literary production in one book. After the ontological failures of Friedrich Hölderlin, Dionysios Solomos, Gustave Flaubert, and Stéphane Mallarmé to compose the absolute Work, one is suspicious of such projects. So when Damrosch asks, “How can we have it all?” one might respond: Why should we? Why do we need to evaluate in one breath Sumerian epics and Tibetan postmodernism? What would be the point of a study that moves from book to book, age to age, society to society, so indiscriminately? What would be the risk here? Who is the intended audience? Even though Damrosch limits, for practical purposes, the practice of World Literature—to a “mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works” (299)—it remains, in theory, beyond anybody’s grasp. The issue is not so much the personal failures or amateurism of critics, real as these may be, but the theoretical shakiness of the entire project.

Related to this is the presumed novelty of world literature. For basic to Damrosch’s understanding of this concept, as with Goethe’s, is that it is a different phenomenon, unprecedented in human history. Although Goethe recognized Greek literature as universal, he proposed that the literature of his age was new. He believed that his age fostered the reciprocal relations between nations and the exchange of ideas which enabled the rise of world literature (Strich 54). In other words, world literature would be inconceivable outside the modern process of globalization. Damrosch follows suit. Like Goethe, he assumes that contemporary globalization is historically unique and that it makes possible the creation of world literature. Damrosch provides some fascinating readings; he shows the interrelations of texts; he demonstrates the inherently syncretic nature of all literary creation. But he has not shown that what is occurring today is really different from what has always taken place. If world literature is nothing other than the attitude of “a detached engagement with a world beyond our own” (297), then there has always been world literature.

The view of globalization as a modern phenomenon is a conceit of our times. The rise of Comparative Literature in the late nineteenth century, as I noted earlier, was a manifestation of transnational thinking. Works of literature themselves attempted to come to grips with and to represent this thinking. For instance, the idea of a shrinking world, a central tenet of current globalization theory, motivates the plot in Jules Verne’s Around the World in Eighty Days, which was published in 1872. “The world is getting smaller,” asserts a gentleman in Phileas Fogg’s private club, “since
a man can now go around it ten times more quickly than a hundred years ago” (21). To be sure, it is the rapid steamers plowing the globe and the railway lines connecting distant cities that enable Mr. Fogg to undertake the audacious journey of traversing the globe in eighty days, along with his loyal servant Passepartout, whose very name suggests border crossing. In the last half of the nineteenth century, John Keane writes, “the planet began to feel more tightly knitted together by the threads of people, capital, commodities, and ideas in motion” (45).

Certain aspects of globalization are, of course, modern, such as the new techniques of communication and transportation, capitalism, the United Nations. Ideas, goods, and people travel around the world with a velocity unimaginable before. But the compression of time and space possible today should not blind us to the existence of universal structures and phenomena before the nineteenth century, or even before modernity. One can point to the multiethnic empires of antiquity, the transportation system of the Roman Empire, the silk route, global markets, and universal religions. Trade, war, and disease have always brought people together and ripped them apart. The forces pushing today for more integration, and the dialectical reaction to them, are a continuation, albeit at greater speed, of ancient developments.

The same can be said of literature. The most celebrated example of world literature in antiquity is that of the Greco-Roman period. Less obvious, but more relevant to Damrosch’s perspective, is the extraordinary exchange that took place between Greek and Persian cultures with respect to romances. As Dick Davis has shown in Panthea’s Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances, the thematic overlap between Greek and Persian romances demonstrates a reciprocal relationship rather than one of simple influence exerted by Greece on Persia. The period in which the Greek novels were written, c. 100 BCE to c. 300 CE, corresponds to the Parthian Empire in Iran, the most hybrid and syncretic moment in Iranian history. The exchange taking place between the two literatures is consistent with Goethe’s and Damrosch’s descriptions of world literature. One can point to many parallel examples from other periods and societies.

Of course, the situation today differs as to the speed with which people can gain information from all possible sources and the heightened sense of simultaneity this creates. Readers today, for instance, may read book reviews published in a Somalian newspaper on the Web; they may receive a book of Japanese poetry from Japan within a week through the mail; they may listen to Iranian verse on the radio. That we can get an instant snapshot of current literary production, however, should not delude us into thinking that our age is exceptional. Can we discount the existence of a
common literary market for the novel in the nineteenth century, Enlightenment universalism, Renaissance poetics, Greek, Latin, or French as global literary languages of their time, the international success of Don Quixote, medieval scholasticism, the classical heritage, the manuscript tradition, or the King James Bible? Are these not examples of world literature in the manner described by Damrosch, that is, writing that circulates in the original or in translation beyond its point of origin, works that were received into the space of a foreign culture, texts that were refracted in their new contexts (281)? If this is the case, then this broader historical understanding should be incorporated in the very theoretical apparatus of world literature.

Critics point to the self-consciousness of contemporary works of world literature; in other words, to novels that either are consciously prepared for the global market or are attentive to and thematize this market. Pavic’s Dictionary of the Khazars, for instance, is certainly new in this self-awareness. “Pavic’s book is one of a growing number of recent novels that take the writing and circulation of world literature as an explicit theme” (Damrosch, What 261). Such a novel, like postmodern metafiction or the self-referential words of modernism, is an artifact unique to its age. To be sure, today’s writers understand global literary fashions, the intricacies of the transnational book trade, and the current obsession with exoticism in the West. They may write with these in mind. More to the point, they often treat as subject the globalized world of jet travel, satellite TV, and American popular culture.

Emblematic of such novels is The God of Small Things by the Indian author Arundhati Roy. Written in English, the language of our globalization, it is planetary in every possible sense—content, marketing, and sales. Promoted by a hype that reduced the usual meaning of this word to an understatement, it became an overnight success, catapulting its first-time author to galactic stardom. That it was in English guaranteed access to a huge audience without the need of translation. To be sure, this language constitutes part of the novel’s globalizing trait. It is not an accident that almost all examples of the new wave of Indian writing splashing on the shore are composed in English rather than in any of India’s other literary languages. This English-only rule of success points to the limits of globalization and to the reason why world literature has to rethink its dogmatic position on language.

It also exemplifies what Graham Huggan calls the “postcolonial exotic,” the fashionable and facile promotion of cultural otherness (201). Roy’s novel thinks about itself globally by making Indian life accessible to a Western audience. This is made possible by the characters themselves, who either have lived in upstate New York and London, as Rahul has done, or readily consume Western products
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and culture. In a memorable scene, the grandmother, uncle, and twins go to see *The Sound of Music* in 1969. Three decades later the grandmother can watch Donahue, MTV, Clinton, and Oprah on her satellite television. The novel thus celebrates these border-crossing, identity-twisting characters and features of globalization. At the same time, it makes the exotic familiar to readers in the West. How strange can these people be if they watch MTV? While we are skeptical today of Goethe’s search for a universal humanity through literary mobility, should we not question how the industry of world literature promotes an effortlessly accessible Otherness?

The media-driven process that converted the yet unproven author into a Weltstar cannot be separated from the novel’s plot, language, and characterization. Riding a “wave of heady journalistic clichés, *The God of Small Things,*” Huggan writes, “duly emerged as the latest (post-) Orientalist blockbuster—the latest Westernized novel of the East” (76). Important here, he continues, is how the novel anticipated and participated in the global “process of its own commercial promotion.” The novel reveals the connection, so essential to its triumph, between the representations of the Other in the West and the marketing of Indian fiction in English.

Although few writers have their ships propelled by the star-making winds of the global culture industry, many do write with this industry in mind. The Turkish author Orhan Pamuk comes to mind. Why, Güneli Gün asks, is he touted as the new Turkish literary prodigy, when there are other Turkish writers who are as “good or better?” One reason is that he translates well into English. Another, equally important, is that he has a “finger on the pulse of world literature” (59). Pamuk has borrowed “the attitudes and strategies of Third World authors writing for the consumption of the First World” (62). He has incorporated two characteristics that Third World writing must have to succeed in the West: cleverness and fantasy (63). Interestingly, these two traits are outside the concerns of mainstream realist tradition of Turkish literature, specifically the so-called Village Novel. Although they deal with exotic themes, these novels are not sufficiently international for translation into Western languages. In other words, their depiction of peasant life through traditional, transparent prose is not what international readers want today.

Knowing the significance of translation for the acquisition of a wider readership, many authors write with the intention of promoting a successful translation of their novels. These novelists, even those writing in broadly extended languages such as Arabic, understand that English or French translation gains them prestige at home and abroad and the potential of reaching a huge audience in both. Jenine Abboshi Dallal points to a number of Arabic-language novels in which authors leave unexplained references to Western
culture even as they comment on Arab customs and practices that would be familiar to local readers. This “writing for translation” clearly responds to the pressures and promises of the Western marketplace (8). These authors take an active role in the possible translation of their work by writing for a world rather than a local audience.\textsuperscript{24}

To a certain extent this is not entirely new. Authors, particularly those writing in lesser-known languages, have always had to work according to aesthetic, political, moral, and economic rules and regulations set by metropolitan centers. Indeed, these “minor” literatures have to confront the skyscraper supremacy of dominant literatures. The career of the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957) provides a good example of how such an author faces this reality. A world author in the Goethean sense, he was fluent in many European languages; read voraciously; translated European literature into Greek; traveled widely; took an interest in non-Western societies; wrote lyric poetry, an epic, novels, dramas, criticism, and travelogues; and lived most of his life outside of Greece. It is significant that he was more successful abroad than at home, where his native Crete and its dialect seemed as exotic to some metropolitan Greeks as Greek literature looked to readers in Paris and New York. Kazantzakis clearly wrote for a global audience, consciously striving for universal themes even when his material was about Greece. Like today’s postcolonial authors, domesticating the differences of their homelands for a global audience, he attempted to make Greece, still an exotic place to most Westerners in the first half of the twentieth century, familiar to them.

His celebrated 1946 novel Zorba the Greek is a good illustration of this strategy. Set on Crete around the 1920s, it chronicles a year in the life of Alexis Zorbas, a man representing the chthonic force of history, and of the narrator, a Western-educated liberal who has come to the island to discover himself and conduct a socialist experiment. The narrator, who is significantly transformed into an Englishman in the hugely popular film by Michael Cacoyannis, acts as our interpreter, making sense of the primordial Zorba and the wild, unformable peasants. He supplies the language and logic of the Enlightenment with which we can understand this alien world. The novel depicts as many images of Otherness as any of today’s “non-Western” texts: ethnic cleansing in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, a mysterious widow clad in black, orgiastic dancing on the beach, the priapic Zorba, lecherous monks, vendetta murder, the villagers’ xenophobia. Making sense of this is the cool, self-controlled commentary of the narrator, as shocked by what he sees as we are.

What differentiates the situation then from that of today is the transnational culture industry that markets fictional exoticism and
makes authors into overnight celebrities on the basis of a single book. Anyone wishing to look back before the frenzy of our global swirl knows that we have seen all this before. Writers from marginal societies have always had to negotiate between the local and the universal, to come to terms with the lingua franca of the time, to seek out translation, and to represent their indigenous societies in a language and through metaphors graspable by Western readers. Kazantzakis knew he had to work with the strange-familiar dichotomy representing Greece: a European country but on the borders between East and West; a Christian society, yet neither Catholic nor Protestant; a nation ruled by the Ottoman Empire rather than by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That his writing does not inspire international readers as it once did shows, among other things, that the points of reference for exoticism, like tourism, shift constantly. No longer charmed by the magic of the Greek islands, people look for a cheaper holiday in Turkey, or go further to Bali or Nepal, taking their literary tastes with them. Thus, when Damosch (unintentionally echoing the words of Phileas Fogg) claims that “the world is looking much wider today than it did twenty-five years ago” (143), he is only partly right. The canon of world literature is indeed opening up to new texts, but it is at the same time dropping old ones. Halldór Laxness’s portrayal in Independent People of the struggle by sheep farmers in the early twentieth century to gain financial and personal autonomy in the forbidding Icelandic countryside may no longer excite Western readers. By the same token, who is interested today in Knut Hamsun’s depiction of Norwegian folkways? Readers will have to decide for themselves whether the canon is richer for having jettisoned these authors while acquiring new ones from farther afield.

Nations and their literatures become relevant to international readers because they seem to correspond to these readers’ current passions, fears, or curiosities. The Greek case again demonstrates this very well. Europeans took an interest in modern Greece in the eighteenth century partly as a result of the discourse of Hellenism. They began to think about the modern inhabitants of Greece because of their real and alleged connection to the past. Their concern, in other words, was incidental to the antiquarian preoccupation of the time.

During the 1821 Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire, liberals all over Europe and America enthusiastically supported the Greek uprisings, which they saw as a struggle between West and East, democracy and empire, Christianity and Islam. The philhellenism roused by the Greek effort for independence was a global phenomenon not to be seen again until the Spanish Civil War. It led many to take an interest in Greek literature itself. Goethe, for instance, encouraged his fellow German Werner von Haxthausen to
translate and publish his collection of Greek folk poetry. Goethe himself translated six folk poems in his Kunst und Altertum in 1823. He corresponded on the topic of Greek literature with scholars such as Rizos Neroulos and K.Th. Kind (Strich 314). While Goethe’s interests were ecumenical, they were also motivated by ideological factors like philhellenism.

More recently, outsiders turned their attention to Greece during the Greek junta’s rule of 1967–1973, horrified at the widespread use of censorship, torture, and mass incarceration in “the birthplace of democracy.” Specifically, they saw in Greek poetry part of the fight against dictatorship. With the eventual return of democracy in the 1970s, readers found in other countries material for their political anxieties and aesthetic preoccupations. Understandably, those interested in the struggle for human rights and the creation of liberal civil societies, for instance, now look to Eastern Europe or South America. Critics concerned with the struggle for freedom will more likely read Rigoberta Menchú, Isabel Allende, or J.M. Coetzee than such Greek authors as Alki Zei, Maro Douka, or Aris Alexandrou. The Greek authors are talented, practice postmodern writing, and are widely read in Greece, but they will never acquire an international audience, for reasons outside their control. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the Nobel Prizes awarded to Greek authors, George Seferis in 1963 and Odysseas Elytis in 1979, were given at this time of heightened interest in Greek things. The prize sought, as is often true, to bring wider attention to authors from marginal traditions whose writings correspond with broader European concerns, in this case modernist and postmodernist aesthetics and democratization.

World literature, Damrosch claims, is as much about the metropolitan host culture’s values and needs as it is about the work’s source culture. The receiving society may use the foreign work as a model for emulation, a negative case to be avoided, or an image of Otherness (282). What is bought, what is hailed as universal, what is read outside its borders, has to do with rules and issues beyond the specific work. This is particularly true of translation. A text is translated, as Lawrence Venuti argues, always according to the values of the target language. The selection of foreign texts, then, can establish peculiar canons of foreign literature in each country. Venuti points to the “boom, usually, not boon” of South American novels in the 1960s and 1970s. This explosion represented less a sudden increase in the quantity and quality of South American literary activity than an abrupt jump in translation into English of South American novels. It was a North American creation, supported by critics, scholars, and writers who were interested in the fantastic experimentalism of South American novels (169).
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Today the criteria for determining whether or not a text is world literature have to do with its place of origin, which increasingly is located in Europe’s former colonies. Emily Apter argues as much when she says that the territorial skirmishes within the field of Comparative Literature “have to do with the way in which postcolonial theory has ... usurped the disciplinary space that European literature and criticism had reserved for themselves” (86). World literature is embracing those literatures that the Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature ignored.

There is a great danger, however, that world literature will present a restricted, and ultimately inadequate, view of the world, much as Comparative Literature did. Whereas its precursor limited itself in theory and practice to Western European traditions, world literature may come to signify, if it does not already, the literatures of North America, of Western Europe, and of its colonies. Other literary traditions—say, Armenian, Bulgarian, modern Greek, Hebrew, and Icelandic—that do not fit into either the cosmopolitan or the postcolonial template will not be part of the draft. Even Damrosch, despite his very capacious conception of world literature, ends up underwriting this bipolar understanding of the term. He does, of course, devote chapter 9 to Pavic’s Dictionary of the Khazars. But he analyzes this “poisoned book” as a “cautionary tale” of what happens to world literature when critics disregard the social context of the novel, in this case the extreme nationalism of the author. Moreover, since this is the only text he is demonstrably critical of in his book, Damrosch unwittingly reinforces the stereotype of the Balkans as a place of ethnic hatred and murderous nationalism that is anathema to the liberal cosmopolitanism of world literature.

Such a conception of world literature will end up repeating the blinkered transnationalism of Comparative Literature by erasing from view a large part of the planet that does not fit the Western/Third World and colonial/postcolonial binary oppositions. Ultimately, this postcolonial schema cannot comprehend and deal with the complexity of today’s globalized world with its multiple centers. We have only begun to realize that the idea of empire in the post-1989 but also post-Gulf War II world will require some rethinking.

An exclusive focus on empire not only misses many aspects of literary production but is also chronocentric, portraying today’s writing as exceptional. Since it relies so heavily on the postcolonial moment, world literature grants this experience illustrative but, ultimately, ahistorical significance. Much has been said, for instance, about the syncretism of contemporaneous novels such as Zadie Smith’s White Teeth. These novels certainly depict the cultural mixing brought about by empire and capitalism. But neither empire nor polyethnicity is unique to the last two centuries. An examination of
the empires of antiquity, for instance, shows that they spawned comparable fiction. I refer again to the ancient Greek romances, particularly the novel Aethiopica, by Heliodorus, about whom we know nothing other than his name and his place of birth, Phoenicia, then a province of the Roman Empire. Although set in the classical period of the fifth century BCE, it was written sometime in the third century CE in Greek, still the lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean. A provincial author such as Heliodorus had to write in Greek if he wanted access to the readers of the Empire. The situation today is not so different.

The romance follows the tribulations of Theogenes and Charicleia as they evade pirates, robbers, and kidnappers, escape torture and imprisonment, and persevere through ritual trials while maintaining their love and chastity. We are truly in the ethnic, racial, and religious cauldron of the late Roman Empire, which blended people as never before. For unlike the writings of the classical period, in which the Greek perspective was privileged and the dominant conceptual opposition was between Greeks and Barbarians, here the view is kaleidoscopic. This is a global novel of late antiquity, inhabited by Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Persians, and Ethiopians, all now citizens of the Roman Empire after Caracalla extended citizenship in 212. The novel begins in Egypt, returns to Greece in a flashback, but ends in Ethiopia, the birthplace of the protagonist, Charicleia, where she discovers that her true parents, the king and queen of Ethiopia, are black. She also learns the source of her own whiteness. Her mother, horrified that, having given birth to a white child, she would be accused of adultery, decided to expose her daughter on the mountain, hoping that the child would be rescued by a passerby, as indeed she was.

The Aethiopica is every bit an example of world literature, not only in the course of its transmission to us through time and space but also in the depiction of its contemporaneous global society. This and other similar works show that world literature, rather than being a product of the last few centuries, has always been in existence, though not in its modern self-conscious manifestation. If this is the case, world literature may turn out to be an overly roomy category, trying to be all things to all people. How useful can a term be that brings together Aethiopica and Midnight's Children, Aztec lyric and Serbo-Croatian epic, slave narratives and avant-garde fiction?

This is an important question for the future of world literature in light of the failures of Comparative Literature. I argued earlier that theoretical diffuseness and restricted cosmopolitanism were the two flaws of that discipline that contributed to its current situation. World literature has inherited these weak spots. It attempts to accomplish too much without an adequate theoretical infrastructure.
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With some justification, Roland Greene writes that world literature is a name without a concept (1244). Moreover, it has yet to develop methodologies for reading the amplitude of texts it identifies as its raw material.

In the absence of theoretical infrastructure and requisite methodologies, world literature runs the risk of turning into another celebration of global difference, much like the idols of current academe—multiculturalism, hybridity, and diaspora. It could become simply an alternate way of marketing exoticism, of making readers feel good about their cosmopolitanism just as visitors to American ethnic festivals are proud of their openness. Rather than a valuable tool for comprehending global literary relations and for encouraging readers to look beyond their literary homes, it could be converted into another American universalism, a globalism lite to be forced on the world. In short, there is a danger that world literature may develop into the planetary extension of liberal multiculturalism, disseminating around the globe the American experience of cultural difference.

This is why the issue of language is so significant. For all its imperfections, Comparative Literature was adamant in asking students and teachers alike to acquire languages in order to understand the literatures and the people in question. The emergent field of world literature is largely silent on language. For entirely practical reasons, it promotes translation. But does this mean that world literature will speak only English, just as globalization does? Would a text be considered world literature only if it is translated into English? Will this not foster the impression that world literature constitutes one world and one language? If this is the case, we should at least be open to the skepticism that this English-only will provoke in other parts of the world.29

With the decline of Comparative Literature and the conversion of literature departments into departments of cultural studies, which entity in the university will be left justify the study of language? This is crucial, since the Department of English is emerging as an empire, even if, like the American empire, it is in denial. Not only does it incorporate new approaches like Queer Studies and Ecocriticism, it also expands its borders to include the writings of all the former British colonies, from India to Canada. While both these developments are welcome, complicating the definition of English, the sheer growth of the discipline, in conjunction with Cultural Studies, supports a take-no-prisoners monolingualism. Both disciplines pose specific dangers. While Cultural Studies undermines the idea of literature, English undercuts the necessity of learning another language. The extension of English into postcolonial studies, for instance, advances the idea that it is the heir of Comparative Literature.30 While Comparative Literature may be dead elsewhere,
English critics may argue, it is alive in the English Department. These developments further solidify the perception promulgated by multiculturalism that diversity is a matter of culture (race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) rather than also of language. There is a great risk that world literature will ask students not to discover a complex, interconnected world but rather to draft for the world an American, Anglo-Saxon, English-language template.

This would be an unhappy outcome. World literature has set itself noble goals. In order for it to live up to its ideals, it has to address four conceptual or ideological blind spots: it lacks methodological focus, trying to be all things to all people; its postcolonial orientation does not do justice to the complexity of today’s transnational ecumene; it presents an American version of globalization; it unwittingly fosters monoglossia. Practitioners of world literature would do well to reconsider both the failures and the successes of Comparative Literature in this regard. Otherwise world literature runs the risk of becoming yet another postmodern catchphrase.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Julian Anderson, Nina Berman, Bruce Heiden, Vassilis Lambropoulos, Khachig Tololyan, and Jim Zafris for their helpful comments.

2. There is no need to provide a history of the discipline. Claudio Guillén’s The Challenge of Comparative Literature is the most up-to-date and comprehensive. The comparative method, as Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett noted in 1886 in the first book-length study of comparative literature, is older than Comparative Literature (73). See also Texte (109).

3. On the internationalism of Comparative Literature see Remak; Welles, Concepts; Aldridge, Comparative; and Weisstein, Comparative. The three reports on the field commissioned by the American Comparative Literature Association (1965, 1975, 1993) all applauded this cosmopolitanism (see Bernheimer).

4. Never having been fully realized, the objective of this general poetics was left to structuralism, which aspired in the 1960s to fashion a more exact, quasi-scientific theory of literature. In its attempt to develop the laws governing literature, structuralism worked with the category of general literature that Comparative Literature had already invented.

5. The situation began to change in the 1980s. A. Owen Aldridge remarked in his 1986 study of the relationships between East and West that Comparative Literature had begun to accept the literary traditions of Asia and Africa (Reemergence 9).


7. It did not, as I argued earlier. This “failure” is expressed in the title Comparative Literature, which does not convey the real practice of the discipline. A more appropriate designation would be Comparative Study of Literature, as in the German Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft.

8. It is ironic that Welles, identifying the problem in a lack of definition, recommended sharpened focus by distinguishing Comparative Literature “from the study of the history of ideas, or religious and political concepts” (Concepts 293).
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9. Fritz Strich has included an appendix to his Goethe and World Literature that contains all the references Goethe made on this subject.

10. Goethe's position here stands in contrast to the multicultural realism of identity politics, which argues, in its most extreme form, that only people within a particular ethnic or racial group can understand the utterances of that group.

11. I demonstrate this in greater detail in The Necessary Nation.

12. Madame de Staël, who presided over one of the most influential literary salons of her time (1766–1817), wrote two books, De la littérature (1800) and De l'Allemagne (1813), that contributed significantly to the dissemination of German ideas in France and England.

13. He was fascinated, for instance, by the warm response he received in France, where even Napoleon read his work. In a conversation with Goethe, the French leader reported having been moved by his reading of Werther in front of the pyramids. He actually read it seven times (Strich 163).

14. “The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (Marx and Engels 8).

15. This sad truth casts a shadow on the entire discussion of Comparative and world literature. It turns out that comparatists are not alone in failing to provide adequate justification for their profession. Critics, in general, are at a loss to explain to themselves, their students, and the university the importance of literary study. I discuss this topic at length in “Two Cheers for Aesthetic Autonomy.”

16. The departments are themselves being renamed as German or French Studies to signify their openness to film, music, and other products of popular culture.

17. This development itself heralded the decline of Comparative Literature, for it was the most hospitable home to new theories in the 1960s and 1970s. With the expansion of these theories to all departments in the humanities, Comparative Literature has lost an important raison d'être (Godzich 23). If we all do theory now, why do we need Comparative Literature?

18. Yet the Longman Anthology of World Literature, for which Damrosch serves as general editor, certainly does encourage the perception of world literature as a compilation of masterpieces. So does the series “Approaches to Teaching World Literature” published by the Modern Language Association (see http://www.mla.org/publications/bookstore/bookstore_categories/bookstore_cat_teach_lit).

19. In the United States the climate for foreign fiction is particularly hostile, as confirmed by an article in the New York Times. A publisher of a small house compares the bleak situation today with the enthusiasm for translation fifty years ago: “Now the doors are virtually shut.” The reasons for this predicament, the author writes, are an absence of staff editors for translation, “the high cost of translation, the local references in many non-American books and the different approach to writing that many foreign authors take” (Kinzer).

20. This asymmetry in translation patterns corresponds to the marginality of translation in the United States and Great Britain, where it is underappreciated and underpaid.

21. This dialogue with respect to literature is one of many conducted by intellectuals in modernizing societies. These intellectuals, as I have argued in The Necessary Nation, who confront the technological advance, the cultural developments, and military superiority of powerful states, recognize the “backwardness” of their societies and propose a program of modernization. Their politicization of ethnicity and its transformation into a national culture is one important part of this project.

22. Damrosch’s generalities often force him to do this. When he castigates European critics for enthusiastically embracing Pavić’s Dictionary of the Khazars without paying attention to the local
context, he concludes that "understanding the cultural subtext of Pavic's Khazars is important for foreign readers, as otherwise we simply miss the point of much of the book" (276). When is this not true?

23. I argue this in The Necessary Nation (chap. 6). It is nationalism that is historically unique rather than globalization.

24. Interestingly, the two types of Arabic novels that most often succeed are those dealing with Arab women and the Islamic resurgence, two subjects of intense interest to Western audiences.

25. I have examined these arguments in greater detail in Belated Modernity.

26. Pavic's novel resembles, to the extent that this is possible for a printed book, a hypertext—the fluid, interactive, Web-oriented material made possible by the computer. Published simultaneously in masculine and feminine versions, which are exactly alike except "that one paragraph is crucially different," the novel comprises a series of dictionary entries, divided into three sections (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish), all dealing with the history of the Khazars. Since there is no linear narrative, the reader "can use the book as he sees fit. As with any other lexicon, some will look up a word or a name... Whereas others may look at the book as a text meant to be read in its entirety" (Pavic 12).

27. I am grateful to my colleague Victoria Wohl for sharing with me her ideas on this novel.

28. At a loss to explain the birth of a white baby, the Queen ultimately concludes that while "I consorted with my husband I was looking at the picture which represented Andromeda just as Perseus had brought her down from the rock, and my offspring unhappily took on the complexion of that body" (94).

29. An interesting study could be conducted on this phenomenon that would pose the following questions: How do other societies view global literary relations? Do they have the need for anthologies of and courses on world literature? Is a monolingual world literature a peculiarly American phenomenon? If so, what does this say about its development during the reassertion of American power all over the globe?

30. The same argument can be made about the emergence of Francophone Studies.

Works Cited


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