

Toward a History of World Literature

Author(s): David Damrosch

Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 39, No. 3, Literary History in the Global Age (Summer, 2008)
, pp. 481-495

Published by: [Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20533098>

Accessed: 09-10-2015 22:37 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Toward a History of World Literature

David Damrosch

THE CHALLENGES ENTAILED IN WRITING a global literary history are threefold, involving problems of definition, design, and purpose. Can the field of inquiry be defined in such a way that a meaningful history can be conceived at all? If so, could an effective organization and a manageable plan of work be devised to give concrete shape to a project of global scope? Finally, and hardest of all, could a history of world literature be written that anyone would actually want to read? In the following pages, I will seek to reach affirmative answers to these questions.

Definition

Our globalizing age makes this either the easiest or the hardest time to write a history of world literature. Until recently, the practice of literary history was so heavily dominated by national paradigms that the very idea of a global literary history would have appeared implausible and even—worse yet—uninteresting. It seemed perfectly reasonable for Ian Watt to call his study of several British novelists *The Rise of the Novel* rather than *The Rise of the British Novel*.¹ A few reviewers noted that remarkably novel-like entities had been written elsewhere by such influential figures as Cervantes and Madame de Lafayette, but it was generally accepted that the British novel had a distinctive national history that could well be studied—or could even best be studied—on its own, independent of developments in France or Spain. Still less did it seem necessary to go back to Heliodorus and Apuleius, or northward to *Njals Saga* and eastward to *The Tale of Genji*. Even if one had found a way to finesse the differences between the novel, the ancient romance, the saga, and the monogatari, perhaps under the rubric of “prose fiction,” it would have been hard to imagine that such disconnected times and places could yield anything resembling a common history, or at least any history in the linear, teleological mode implied by a phrase such as “the rise of.”

The situation was similar for institutional as well as literary history. Gerald Graff’s pathbreaking study thus bears the title *Professing Literature*

New Literary History, 2008, 39: 481–495

rather than, say, *Professing English and American Literature in the United States*.² Graff does include the early history of classical studies in America, and he acknowledges that other modern literatures have long been taught in this country; yet the national specificity of his study could go without saying in his title and is assumed from the outset in the body of his book. Indeed, had Graff written a global history of the study of all literatures in all countries, *Professing Literature* would likely have found far fewer readers than it did, and most people would only have looked at the chapter or two most relevant to their field of study. The nation was the natural frame for an institutional history, just as the conjoined national literatures of England and America seemed the logical focus within the American setting.

When people did look beyond the boundaries of a single nation, they usually stayed within a particular region, as in Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* or Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.³ Even within their announced focus on Europe and on Western literature, Curtius and Auerbach concentrated largely on the literatures of just a few countries. So often praised for its remarkable range across Western literature, indeed, *Mimesis* might just as well have been subtitled *The Representation of Reality in Italy and France*—home to fifteen of the book's twenty central texts.

Survey courses, too, constructed tacit literary histories with a national or at best regional scope. For most of the twentieth century, the typical American "Intro to Lit" course drew entirely on Western (and mostly English and American) materials. World literature courses, and the anthologies that served them, saw no incongruity in defining "the world" purely in terms of Western Europe and its classical and biblical antecedents, sometimes with a few Russian or American writers thrown in for good measure. This situation has changed dramatically since the mid-1990s, beginning with Caws and Prendergast's *HarperCollins World Reader* that included some 475 authors from all over the world, closely followed by the "Expanded Edition" of *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* that included two thousand pages of non-Western material along with four thousand pages of European and American texts.⁴

The waning of the hegemony of the national paradigm and the opening out of a burgeoning global perspective, then, make this an auspicious time to contemplate the project of a history of world literature. Yet this best of times may also be the hardest of times for such a history, for globalization may undermine the very history that it underwrites. This can occur in one of two quite different ways. First, by making available an ever-increasing literary field, the globalization of world literature creates an explosion of works that by all rights should be included, in a kind of *expansio ad absurdum*, into a boundless intercontinental space.

If world literature is the sum total of everything ever written, we have to deal not only with an endless array of texts but also with a plethora of local histories and competing literary cultures, which may not have anything resembling an overall history even if such a mass of material could be mastered and presented.

An equal and opposite problem is the fact that a global world literature may not have much history to begin with. The “New Global History” championed by the historian Bruce Mazlish, for instance, sees globalization as a phenomenon dating back fifty years at most, involving not only new economic relations but a fundamental shift in our sense of ourselves and our world.⁵ The literature of such a new world will necessarily differ greatly from what has come before it. If world literature is defined as literature of genuinely global scope, whether in authorial intention or in its circulation among readers, then we are only just now seeing the birth of this literary form, whose true history lies in the future rather than in the past. This is far from a new idea; Goethe assumed the futurity of *Weltliteratur* in his very first uses of his inaugural term. He clearly thought of world literature as a new kind of entity, a successor to the older national literatures that he believed to be withering away. As he told his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”⁶

Following Goethe’s line of thought, we can say that the first adumbrations of world literature began to appear in the late nineteenth century, in the work of figures such as Rudyard Kipling, who was being read—and was writing to be read—on four continents while still in his late twenties. Yet even Kipling’s readership was largely limited in the 1880s to the English-speaking world, and his works continued to focus on Englishmen (and the occasional Irish adolescent) at home and in their imperial relations abroad. Only since the 1960s have we witnessed the full flowering of the kind of *Weltliteratur* envisioned by Goethe, postnational in conception and fully international in reception, created by such globe-hopping writers as Kipling’s successor, Salman Rushdie. Defined in this way, world literature has hardly any history at all. It encompasses only a subset of works written even today and includes almost nothing written more than fifty years ago, which is to say anytime during the first 99 percent of the five thousand years of the world’s literary production.

Yet not all historians suppose that globalization is a purely contemporary phenomenon; its fundamental mechanisms can already be seen in early modern patterns of exploration, conquest, and trade, with far earlier examples in such routes of trade and cultural exchange as the Silk Road. It is particularly appropriate to allow a considerable historical depth to world literature, given the importance of language for literature.

The crucial stage in a work's movement from a national context to the sphere of world literature is its reception within a different cultural and linguistic realm, as occurred with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as early as the second millennium BCE when it was translated into Hittite in what is now Turkey. The Homeric epics took on a new life in imperial Rome, even though Horace and Virgil still read them in Greek.

To be sure, a book's movement into the sphere of world literature can occur with dramatic speed today: foreign rights can be sold at the Frankfurt Book Fair for translation into ten or twenty languages while a work is still in manuscript. Yet this literary globalization represents a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind from long-established processes of textual travel and transformation. Voltaire's *Candide* entered world literature when it crossed the English Channel to become *Candid* in English translation, a voyage that took place in the very year of its original publication in 1759.⁷ Within a matter of months, *Candide* was being read across Europe and beyond, either in French or in one of a rapidly increasing number of translations. In some respects, indeed, the absence of copyright laws in Voltaire's day meant that works could circulate abroad more freely than they do today: *Candide* was translated into English not once but twice within a year. Within the book itself, *Candide*'s South American travels include a stop to meet slaves in Surinam, in a tip of Voltaire's plumed hat to Aphra Behn, whose *Oroonoko* had recently received its *seventh* translation into French.

Candide's rapid circulation in different regions and languages marked an extension of the worldliness inscribed within the work itself, not only in *Candide*'s transatlantic misadventures but on the very title page of the book. Having suffered censorship and imprisonment for earlier works, Voltaire published *Candide* anonymously, or, more precisely, in the form of an anonymous translation "de l'Allemand de Mr. le Docteur RALPH," supposed author of the narrative shortly before his death on a battlefield of the Seven Years' War. Not caring what trouble Voltaire's anti-Catholic polemics might get him into at home, the London publisher placed Voltaire's name prominently on the title page of what truly became the translation it had only pretended to be in French.

Doctor Ralph's work thus openly became Voltaire's book for the first time only in translation. The choice of a German "author" for *Candide*'s adventures is particularly apt since *Candide* is in many ways an updating of Grimmelshausen's *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668), set in the Thirty Years' War, predecessor to the Seven Years' War that brought about Doctor Ralph's death.⁸ The endlessly naïve Simplicius Simplicissimus wanders around war-torn Europe and ultimately visits a hidden utopia, the sunken city of Atlantis; like *Candide*'s stopover in El Dorado, the detour provides an opportunity for satire against the vio-

lence and corruption of modern Europe. Drawing on Grimmelshausen as well as Behn from his vantage point on the Swiss border, Voltaire was an ineluctably international author from the outset.

World literature has always been created through a dynamic interplay among national and regional literatures. Indeed, world literature can be said to have preceded the birth of the modern nation-state by many centuries. This was already the view of Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, who published the first book entitled *Comparative Literature* (he claimed to have coined the term in English) in 1886.⁹ Posnett sketches the history of literature as a progression from local, clan-based literature to the wider spheres of the nation and empire. Significantly, however, he places the birth of world literature in the Hellenistic world of late antiquity, long before the age of national literatures, which he discusses after he treats world literature. In Posnett's account, the transcultural reach of the Roman Empire paved the way for new, nonlocalized modes of writing, no longer closely connected to any given community and its traditions, and readable in a host of regions around the empire.

A good example of a writer of world literature in Posnett's sense would be Apuleius of Madauros. Apuleius grew up speaking a local North African language, Punic, but was sent as a boy to study in Greece. He wrote his *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass* in Latin, so as to entertain readers from Syria to Spain with his asinine hero's adventures in Thessaly and Egypt.¹⁰ Comically apologizing at the outset for his unconventional Latin style, Apuleius compares himself to a circus rider who jumps from one galloping horse to another. He asserts that his linguistic metamorphosis mirrors his hero's physical transformation and promises his readers delight if they will attend to "a Greekish tale" written on papyrus "with the sharpness of a reed from the Nile" (3–5).

A full history of world literature should draw as much on Posnett as on Goethe—or on Immanuel Wallerstein—and should include Apuleius, Murasaki Shikibu, and Voltaire as well as Kipling and Rushdie. It should unfold the varied processes and strategies through which writers have individually and collectively furthered the long negotiation between local cultures and the world beyond them.

Design

What should such a history look like, and how should it be written?

The possibilities are almost as various as world literature itself and could be located anywhere on a sliding scale from monomania to Wikipedia. At one extreme, a single polymath could undertake to write this history, either in the abbreviated form of H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*

or in the more expansive mode of Arnold Toynbee's twelve-volume *Study of History*.¹¹ Daunting though such an enterprise might seem, Posnett already attempted it in his *Comparative Literature*, the fruit of a decade of intensive reading in everything from Sanskrit epics to Arabic qasidas to Navajo tales. Posnett's book was a remarkable achievement, offering a genuinely global account of the evolution of literature from its earliest eras and its most basic manifestations up to the literatures of his day. Posnett naturally relied heavily on the work of specialists in the various cultures he was surveying, but there is nothing wrong with scholarship that synthesizes more specialized work. A version of this procedure has been revived recently in Franco Moretti's call for "distant reading," a broad-based form of study that would build on the results of local literary histories to construct a full picture of global literary wave patterns. "Literary history," Moretti says, "will become 'second hand': a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional to the distance from the text."¹²

Posnett's project is thus newly current today, though we wouldn't want to repeat Posnett's achievement on his own terms. Surveying the entire history of the world's literary production in only three hundred pages, Posnett inevitably left out a great deal and oversimplified what he put in, forcing the world's literary traditions into a one-size-fits-all model of social evolution borrowed from the theories of Herbert Spencer. Even so, the fact that he could write his book at all, and with as much success as he did, shows that the thing can be done. More recent attempts at a broad-based literary history have tended to involve collaborative working groups, whose members collectively have the expertise that Posnett alone could never acquire. Moretti's five-volume project on the history of the novel, *Il Romanzo*, had seventy contributors, their work coordinated with clear editorial direction from Moretti, and it succeeds in combining sweeping accounts of the global spread of the novel with extended close study of individual literary cultures and even single works. Distant reading joins hands with close reading in this exhilarating project.¹³

Yet the global history of the novel already presents severe problems of scale. *Il Romanzo* runs to five hefty volumes in its full Italian edition, yet it treats a single genre of only relatively recent prominence, and it is necessarily selective even so. And how many people will ever read through the five volumes? Not Moretti's English-language readers, at any rate. Full translations are appearing in Korean and Spanish, but Princeton University Press demurred, opting instead for a two-volume abridgment. To extend Moretti's procedure to the full history of the world's literature, one might need two or three hundred contributors and an entire shelf of volumes. Not that a history necessarily needs to be

readable from cover to cover, but at some point a project can become so large as to defeat the fundamental purpose of offering an overview, and we are dealing with something approaching a compendium of the histories of the world's national literatures.

Over the past quarter century, the International Comparative Literature Association has sponsored a series on the "Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages," which could eventually become the nucleus of a large-scale literary history, or rather a bookcase full of literary histories. Together with volumes on movements such as romanticism and symbolism, the series includes volumes on Caribbean literature, a creatively conceived history of Eastern European literature, and a three-volume history of Latin American literary culture.¹⁴ These histories admirably attend to smaller as well as larger nations and to the varied relations among peripheral regions as well as to direct metropolitan/peripheral relations. Beyond the ICLA's work, other literary historians have begun to rethink regional literary histories. An ambitious first attempt to reconceive the boundaries of European literature can be found in Annick Benoit-Dusauso and Guy Fontaine's *History of European Literature*, to which 150 scholars contributed. As the editors say at the outset, "A persistent obsession with nationhood, limiting an author to one particular area, linguistically and geographically, is a mindset, passed on to us by the nineteenth century, that dies hard."¹⁵ In place of nations, the volume offers pan-European movements (humanism, the Enlightenment, romanticism), genres (the traveler's tale, the picaresque novel), and broad themes ("Sensibility and Genius," "Woman and Myth").

Though still somewhat top-heavy in its representation of French writing—the Marquis de Sade, for instance, is given major-author attention, unlike Friedrich Schiller or Alexander Pope—Benoit-Dusauso and Fontaine's volume represents a major shift from most earlier practice, freely interspersing Hungarian, Dutch, and Catalan writers among the great power figures. Discussing the symbolist movement, for example, the contributors include the Czech Karel Hlaváč, the Greek Konstantinos Hadjopoulos, the Swede Vilhelm Ekelund, the Hungarian Jenő Komjáthy, the Bulgarian Ivan Vazov, and the Flemish August Vermeylen along with such standard figures as the French poets Rimbaud and Verlaine, the German Stefan George, and the English aesthetician Arthur Symons (498–502).

The *History of European Literature* is impressive in its sweep, and yet it is difficult to sit down and read through. The 150 contributors worked largely in isolation from each other, and the results are often more disconnected than one might wish in a book devoted to showing the interconnectedness of Europe's literary cultures. Further, by so firmly bracketing the long-emphasized category of the nation, Benoit-Dusauso

and Fontaine's volume ends up scanting a major ground of much literary production, often making exaggerated claims for the European importance of little-known figures whose real sphere of activity and influence was local. The volume's thematic categories such as "Woman and Myth" sometimes seem to be catchalls that can be applied at need to paper over the absence of any substantial connection among far-flung authors and works. And even within the relatively bounded dimensions of Europe, the book often becomes a blizzard of names and passing references, not always revealing much beyond the sheer fact—certainly worth knowing—that there were Icelandic humanists and Hungarian symbolists. Ideally a reader of the volume will be inspired to look into some previously unknown names, but the book often starts to shade over from a history into an encyclopedia.

These problems all emerge with European literature alone; a full history of world literature faces comparable challenges on a much larger scale. These challenges can be seen in a recent four-volume collection, *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*.¹⁶ This was a project of a Scandinavian group funded by the Swedish Research Council, whose preparations included several meetings and a large conference that produced a volume of position papers by members of the working group and a range of foreign contributors.¹⁷ Anders Pettersson and Gunilla Lindberg-Wada and their colleagues envisioned their volumes with a double focus: first, as an introduction to non-Western literary cultures for Western readers and, second, as an exploration of patterns of contact and transculturation. Their first volume is devoted to concepts of literature in different cultures; the second volume discusses several non-Western genres; the third and fourth volumes look at interactions in the modern world, particularly the adaptation and transformation of European literary models in Asia and Africa.

As its subtitle indicates, the project represents a preliminary effort "towards a global perspective" on literary history, rather than a full-scale version of such a history. The project's two dozen contributors worked closely together and focused primarily on writing extended case studies, thereby avoiding the problems of telegraphic brevity and disparity of purpose seen in Benoit-Dusauso and Fontaine's *European Literary History*. But the specificity of their case histories creates a sort of stroboscopic effect, outlining selective models of literature and genre and illuminating intriguing moments of cultural transformation, rather than providing the overall literary history proposed by the project's title. The fourth volume's essays, for example, concern the following topics: the Ghanaian novel in English; Amerindian and European narratives in interaction; hybridity in Indian English literature; modernism under Portuguese rule; Communist-bloc detective stories; Asian appropriations

of European theater; cross-cultural writing in Oman and the United Arab Emirates; and cultural encounters in contemporary Turkish children's literature. A concluding afterward discusses globalization. At most, such a collection provides a typology, rather than a history.

The collection's first volume, on notions of literature and literariness, is more synoptic, but it focuses exclusively on non-Western concepts, chiefly from the "major cultures" of China, Japan, and India, together with an essay on classical Arabic poetics and two on African orature. Selective though it is, at eleven hundred pages—and at a cost of \$475 for the set of four volumes from de Gruyter—the Swedish group's project is probably about as large as a literary history should be if it is intended to be read and not merely consulted from time to time. A history that would include Europe and the Americas, that would include a broader range of Asian and African cultures, and that would give a fuller presentation of the cultures discussed will need to be constructed in a new way.

A new mode of presentation would need to meet a set of structural challenges: to offer an effective overview in a manageable number of pages; to find ways to fill in the broad outline with case studies that can bring the material to life; and to allow for use by readers with considerably varied levels of interest in a given author, genre, area, or era. Here is where the Wikipedia model could well come in, enabling the basic history to expand via hyperlinks into nested levels of greater depth and specificity. Such a project would be significantly, though not only, Internet-based. Printed volumes have by no means lost their usefulness today, and students of literature in particular have a more than merely nostalgic attachment to the printed book. On its own, the anarcho-syndicalist Wikipedia model tends toward the encyclopedic and even the chaotic; an underlying print volume would provide a valuable anchor for the project, offering a manageable overview that would be readable in itself while also serving readers as the portal for further exploration.

A good model for such a double enterprise already exists, appropriately developed by scholars of the world's oldest literature. Over the past decade an international team based at Oxford has assembled the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, or ETCSL as it is known to its small but devoted worldwide following. Transcriptions and translations of all known Sumerian literary texts may be found on its site, www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk; the electronic medium allows for regular updating of texts and translations as new cuneiform tablets and fragments are found and obscure passages are clarified. At the same time, the most important texts from the database are available in a companion printed volume, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*.¹⁸ A comparable dual format would work well for a global literary history. A printed volume (or two or three at most) could give an overall history together with a modicum of specific

examples and case studies; the Web site would then offer readers the opportunity to go into greater depth at any point. The print volume(s) could be written by a team of perhaps a dozen specialists (the number commonly used in today's survey anthologies of world literature), and they could then serve as an editorial board to review proposals and entries for the Web-based expanded history. The Web site could have various levels, the first corresponding to the print version, opening out to other levels allowing readers to go further by region, country, genre, author, or various thematic categories. The project could expand in whatever directions, and in whatever detail, its contributors desired, while the print version would serve to ground the project and give it an overall coherence.

Purpose

What, really, would be the point of writing a history of world literature? Wikipedia already allows readers to look up Sumerian poetry or Murasaki Shikibu, and if the site's entry on romanticism is not yet as capacious in its range of reference as we might like, that limitation could be solved simply by revising the existing Wikipedia entries (as the site readily allows its users to do) to include the appropriate Brazilians and Bengalis. There would be no sense in undertaking the arduous project of writing a full-scale history of world literature unless the project had a real value in giving readers a new purchase on the dynamics of the world's literary production, not only informing them but challenging them to ask new questions and work in new ways. What might be the basis for a compelling narrative of world literary history?

One way to approach this question is to put it differently: what would such a history oppose? It seems to me that its prime targets would be two: a narrowly bounded nationalism and a boundless, breathless globalism. The opportunity that world literary history offers the national traditions is something better than their dissolution into a globalized hyperreality. Equally, a global literary history could do much to combat the insistent presentism of so many discussions of globalization, and it could underscore the longstanding and continuing importance of the local and the national within the global. By opening up the *longue durée* of literary history, a global history could reveal the broader systemic relations between literary cultures, not opposing world literature to national literatures but undertaking to trace the cocreation of literary systems that have almost always been mixed in character, at once localized and translocal.

Posnett had an important insight when he realized that a first form of world literature antedated the modern nation-state, though we needn't

see literature as moving in the orderly progression of socioliterary stages that Posnett supposed. Rather than a succession of the literatures of the clan, the city-state, the empire, and the nation, a fuller account of world literature would show that literary cultures have always been mixed phenomena comprised of several such levels. The world impinged on the city-state and the nation long before the creation of the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, and nations and subnational regions continue as crucial venues of literary production and reception today. However "global" a work may be, it is sold in local markets and is primarily read by people who have been educated within a national system. In a modern translation, indeed, even an ancient text becomes in a real sense a contemporary work: Robert Fagles's *Iliad* adopts and adapts a contemporary American idiom, even as Homer's temporal and cultural distance continues to challenge the expectations of the contemporary reader.¹⁹

From the first, literature has been at once local and translocal. From the second millennium BCE onward, it has only rarely been the case that a polity would create its literature in isolation from its neighbors and from other, more distant cultures. In the ancient Mediterranean world, Old Kingdom Egypt was exceptional in developing a unique script and creating a literature that developed almost entirely within that writing system, apparently absorbing few foreign influences and rarely being read outside the Nile Valley. Far more typical was the experience of the cuneiform script developed around 3100 BCE by the Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia. Their culture was rapidly subsumed by the powerful cities of Akkad and its allies; as Akkadian became the region's dominant language, the Sumerian script was adapted to use in Akkadian and other languages throughout Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. Babylonian literature developed during the second millennium as a bilingual system grounded in a single script, which spread throughout the city-states and empires of southern and northern Mesopotamia, eastward into Persia, and then to Anatolia and the Levant.

In all these localities, written literary production began within the realm of an international script, written by scribes trained both in their own language and in Sumerian, which remained the basis for cuneiform literacy long after the Sumerians had ceased to have any independent existence. Indeed, Sumerian was studied for centuries after it had ceased to be a spoken language, much as literary Latin long outlasted its link to the life of a specific people. What I have come to think of as the cuneiform scriptworld thus became the matrix within which there emerged the individual literatures of Babylonia, Assyria, Persia, Ugarit, and the Hittite empire.²⁰ Even Egypt could not forever retain its splendid isolation from what can be called the Near Eastern world-system; in time, hieroglyphics'

hieratic shorthand gave birth to the West Semitic alphabetic script that spread throughout the Near East and on to Greece and Rome, eventually returning to dethrone hieroglyphics in Egypt itself. Over time, the alphabet evolved into several distinct scriptworlds of increasingly global reach—the Roman, the Arabic, and the Cyrillic—and, in country after country, literature first began to be written in the broader context of a script and its world.

A comparable story could be told of the invention of writing during the Shang dynasty, after which the system spread throughout what came to be known as China; for many centuries, China was not a nation so much as a conglomeration of languages and polities, linked (even in divided times such as the Warring States period) through the medium of a single script and its literary culture. The spread of the Chinese characters to Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and elsewhere further extended the translinguistic presence that the script had had from the earliest period of what we would now label the writing of literature.

If literature has always already been international, it remains ineluctably national in today's global world. Even far-flung languages, such as Arabic, English, and Spanish, are locally inflected and have regional centers of publication and distribution. "Global" writers such as Rushdie, Derek Walcott, and Orhan Pamuk may be read in many countries and may themselves divide their time between differing locales, yet each of these authors remains closely connected to his homeland, even as he engages principally with one or two new countries, in ways not ultimately different from Apuleius's movements from Madauros to Athens, then to Rome, and finally home to North Africa. Equally, their far-flung readership is comprised of readers in many distinct localities. Pamuk's Turkish novel *Kar* enters into new relations with a national culture whenever a bookseller in Barcelona stocks *Nieve*, a student in Berlin is assigned *Schnee*, or a Los Angeles book club discusses *Snow*. Local differences retain their importance as well: readers in Catalonia will have a different take on Pamuk's cross-cultural themes than will readers in Madrid, while snow itself has a foreignness in Los Angeles that it would not possess for readers in Wisconsin.

In its double and even multiple nature, literature provides a prime case of the simultaneous localization of the global and globalization of the local. As Wallerstein himself has remarked, "the history of the world has been the very opposite of a trend towards cultural homogenization; it has rather been a trend towards cultural differentiation, or cultural elaboration, or cultural complexity."²¹ Nowhere are such complex elaborations better studied than in world literature, today as throughout its history.

To look beyond the nation involves modifying our mode of historical analysis as well as our view of the objects we study. We will not always be

able to find genetic links or influences among the varied phenomena we examine, whether we are looking at the origins of writing, the growth of scribal cultures in court and temple circles, the history of prose fiction, or the processes of transculturation, all of which have occurred differently in differing times and places. This very difference, however, is one of the great advantages of the study of world literary history. All too often, histories of “the rise of the novel,” or romanticism, or the Sanskrit *kavya* have proceeded as though a given culture’s range of choices was the only one possible. Just because the monogatari and the Arthurian romance were written in separate literary cultures, the study of either form can benefit by an awareness of what was possible elsewhere in the world at that time. Molière never heard of his contemporary Chikamatsu Mon’zaemon, but he and the great Japanese dramatist were both writing plays that responded to the rise of a middle-class commercial culture in an aristocratic milieu, and their works are comparable on many levels. Molière’s bourgeois gentilhomme is the son of a cloth merchant, while the hero of Chikamatsu’s *Love Suicides at Amijima* is a paper merchant; both plays’ protagonists fall in love beyond their station in life, and both are forced to confront the limits of social mobility that their own families will allow. Both playwrights revolutionized popular art forms to give a new depth to dramatic representation, and their plays are markedly metatheatrical, using acting and costume as metaphors for social identity in an unstable time—in *Love Suicides at Amijima* as in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, characters directly describe themselves as feeling like actors in their unfamiliar roles.

Parallel and alternative histories are not only important to recover for earlier periods. Doing so can also help attune us to the varieties of relations possible within a single region and even a single nation. Far too many studies of modern British literature have seen the period from 1900–1930 almost entirely under the rubric of modernism, discussing writers who were (or could be made to seem) modernists, while sidelining almost everyone else. Forced to abandon the narrative of organic connectivity and linear progress, the history of world literature opens out alternative modes of understanding that are locally applicable as well. Molière and Chikamatsu prove to have a good deal in common, thanks to comparable social developments in distant regions not yet subsumable under a unified global system; conversely, Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett had nothing to say to each other on the rare occasions when they couldn’t avoid meeting. A three-dimensional account of modern British literature, as of modern world drama, must come to terms with a wide range of interrelations and nonrelations, becoming as attuned to the *concordia discors* of Molière and Chikamatsu as to the *discordia concors* of Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf.

A global history of world literature will allow us to situate our particular interests within the larger frame of the world's literary production. Far from ceasing to be important subjects of study, national literatures will be seen in new ways, as will the individual authors who work within and across them. The study of world literature can thus extend the salutary effects that literary theory has had on criticism over the past several decades. As Northrop Frye observed in 1957, even when scholars focus on an individual work, "it is not necessary that the thing they contribute to should be invisible, as the coral island is invisible to the polyp."²² The scholarly ecologist may very well study a local cluster of polyps, but it is well to be aware of their place in the surrounding atoll, and then of the atoll's position in the broader ecosystem of its archipelago. A history of world literature worth writing will provide an invaluable map to locate our work in the wider world.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NOTES

- 1 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957).
- 2 Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 3 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953).
- 4 Mary Ann Caws, Christopher Prendergast et al., eds., *The HarperCollins World Reader*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Maynard Mack et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, expanded ed., 6 vols. (New York: Norton, 1995).
- 5 Bruce Mazlish, *The New Global History* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 6 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford (San Francisco: North Point, 1984), 132.
- 7 François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme*, in *Romans et contes*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris: Garnier, 1966), 179–259. Translated as *Candid: Or, All for the Best* (London: J. Nourse, 1759).
- 8 Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *Der Abenteuerlicher Simplicius Simplicissimus* (Munich: Goldmann, 1964). Translated by George Schulz-Behrend as *The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993).
- 9 Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (1886; repr. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970).
- 10 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 44 (hereafter cited in text).
- 11 H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1927); Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1934–61).
- 12 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 57 (Moretti's emphases).

- 13 Moretti, ed., *Il Romanzo*, 5 vols. (Turin: 2001–3); *The Novel*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).
- 14 Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: J. Benjamins, 2004); Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir, eds., *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).
- 15 Annick Benoit-Dusauroy and Guy Fontaine, eds., *History of European Literature*, trans. Michael Woolf (London: Routledge, 2000), xxvii.
- 16 Anders Pettersson, ed., *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, 4 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).
- 17 Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, ed., *Studying Transcultural Literary History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).
- 18 Jeremy Black, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).
- 19 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1990).
- 20 David Damrosch, "Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 68, no. 2 (2007): 195–219.
- 21 Immanuel Wallerstein, "The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?" in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 96.
- 22 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 12.