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Transcultural Literary History: Beyond Constricting Notions of World Literature*

Anders Pettersson

I

LITERARY-HISTORY WRITING has very often stopped at national or cultural borders: it has been French literary history, or Western, or Arabic, or Chinese literary history. There is nothing wrong with that, but transcending such boundaries is certainly possible and sometimes important.

By “transcultural literary history,” I mean literary history with no pre-determined national or temporal limitations.¹ This is a vast field, and it allows for investigations of very many kinds. What I wish to emphasize and defend in this essay is, primarily, the very openness of the field. In my view, many different foci, research agendas, and methods are justified in the transcultural study of literary history. We should expect research in the area to pose significant questions and to pursue these in an enlightening manner. That aside, however, we should be wary of all general declarations of what transcultural literary studies “must” be or “cannot” be.

One’s own research interests will largely determine what literary-historical questions one finds significant. I will begin by explaining what aspects of transcultural literary history I myself have been occupied with and why, and then point to a number of other types of transcultural literary studies following entirely different paths. This is the positive part of my essay: an affirmation of the breadth and interest of transcultural literary history.

What I call transcultural literary history has often been referred to in terms of world literature and the study of world literature. There is, however, a tendency, which has been rather pronounced over the last decade, to portray the study of world literature, or what I call the study of transcultural literary history, as something much narrower, in scope or in method, than I have indicated above. The second half of the essay is a reflection on the concept of world literature and, not least, a critical

* I wish to thank Pat Shrimpton for checking my English.

discussion of some recent arguments about it; that is the negative part of the essay and the explanation for its subtitle.

II

The Swedish academic subject within which I am working, *litteraturvetenskap*,² is in principle supposed to comprise both the history and theory of literature in their entirety, but this is not what it is like in practice. There are no separate chairs in Swedish literature in Sweden, so all study of Swedish literature is incorporated into *litteraturvetenskap*, where it plays a very dominant role. When presenting my academic subject in English-speaking contexts, I call it “Swedish and Comparative Literature.” My real academic specialty, however, is something I call “fundamental literary theory.” For me, the fundamental theoretical questions about literature concern what literature is, how literature functions (linguistically, psychologically, socially), and wherein the value of literature consists.³

I have long found pleasure in reading literature from different ages and cultures, finding it an antidote against cultural claustrophobia, but my research interests in transcultural literary history, if one can call them that, were sparked by a definition of “literature” that I constructed in the late 1980s.⁴ This was a definition of the term as it is used in the West about modern times—as is well known, the term’s reference is much wider where earlier periods are concerned. Nevertheless, I could not help wondering how the definition would apply to other times and to non-Western cultures, and how the pragmatically distinct use of language to which the definition made reference could be traced in older texts. In pursuing such questions, I gradually arrived at a way of thinking about types of literary culture and about the place of what we call literature in these cultures. Put very briefly, it is this.⁵

Oral cultures usually display a number of genres that we customarily call literary: songs and narratives of various kinds—entertaining, practical, mythical, magical, or religious, often at one and the same time.⁶ They do not, however, have a concept of literature.

In literate cultures, genres multiply with time. Religious, administrative, and economic texts of many kinds are created; some of them are viewed by the culture itself as part of its central heritage. Texts that might be characterized as philosophical or historical can be written down, as well as poems and perhaps also songs and stories. Personal letters will abound, and texts of an autobiographical nature may also come into existence. Oral genres, naturally, also persist.

The very early literate cultures—such as those of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt—appear to lack notions that are in any way comparable

to the concept of literature. Such concepts begin to emerge in various civilizations during the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of the Common Era. Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft date the relevant Chinese concept to the third century CE.⁷ The Greek concept of poetry (*poiēsis*) is an even earlier example.⁸ In the words of Idema and Haft, the literature-like concepts cover those texts that are “felt to be of general educational value and which are, accordingly, regarded as part of the necessary intellectual baggage of every cultured person.”⁹ If we call this literature, it is literature in a sense palpably different from the modern one: prestigious writing, rather than imaginative, noninstrumental writing.

This is the structuring of the literary field that we have in classical literate cultures—basically, in all literate cultures up to the eighteenth century. (It is, I believe, an indisputable fact that cultures before the eighteenth century did not possess a concept of literature. Not only did they not have the word “literature” in its present sense or any word with a significantly similar meaning, there was also no idea significantly similar to the idea of literature.)¹⁰

After classical literary cultures, however, comes a gradual but very decisive shift. In the West, complex social, economic, and intellectual developments successively create a new situation, and new categorizations, in the field of texts. The modern Western concept of literature is the outcome of these developments.¹¹ There is no simple explanation for what happened, but factors such as increased social differentiation and more pronounced individualism tended to push genres such as lyrical poetry and (the earlier, little respected) fictional prose narrative into the foreground in the latter kind of discourse at the expense of the epic and the drama. This helped to create the new concept of literature, which successively came to be centered on fictionality and on the novel. The modern concept of literature already formed an integral part of the Western culture with which African and Asian societies were confronted in the course of the nineteenth century. Eventually the concept was spread worldwide, often under indigenous designations.

To a large extent, my own purely academic questions about transcultural literary history have been concerned with a wish to be able to achieve an overview, such as the one presented in very broad outline above. The real point here is not whether that account is factually correct or whether its emphases are defensible. In the present context, the account is there, primarily, to exemplify a kind of interest that one can take in studying this area.

One may ask, more generally: what purpose or purposes does it serve to be informed, profoundly or superficially, about literary cultures around the world and through the ages? Part of an answer could be that such

knowledge can instill some understanding of cultures other than one's own and an attendant ability to take them seriously and view them with some respect, which may usefully be combined with criticism—things of considerable importance in our contemporary world.

Furthermore, where literary studies are concerned, I cannot help thinking that ignorance of literary traditions other than the Western one leads to the risk of parochialism in a scholar's or critic's outlook and writings. We cannot know everything, certainly. But I would expect a historian, regardless of his or her precise specialty, to have some modest grasp of world history, and I do find it strange that a modicum of transcultural literary-historical knowledge is not regarded as a *sine qua non* in a person professionally occupied in the study of literature.

Thus far I have spoken as if familiarity with other traditions was a question of learning facts about them, facts conceived within our own established categories of thought. But other traditions may perceive the world through grids of notions that differ more or less from our own. Acquaintance with other cultures' conceptual schemes will also make it evident that one's native way of carving up social and material reality is arbitrary, at least in the sense that it could have been very different and still workable. Personally, I find insight into other taxonomies to be of genuine importance in the literary-theoretical contexts where my main research interests lie. For instance, what I have learned about the thinking about texts in other times and cultures has, in fact, changed my own understanding of the Western concept of literature considerably. But I will not go into that here.¹²

III

What I call transcultural literary history is sometimes regarded with suspicion by students of literature. There is a tendency to think of the united literatures of the world as something that is simply too vast to contemplate. For two reasons I find this skepticism largely misplaced.

First, attempting to encompass the literatures of the world as a whole is certainly a huge undertaking. Yet world histories of literature have, in fact, been written since the 1830s. The genre is little known in the English-speaking world, no doubt due to the fact that it has been cultivated mainly in continental Europe—as far as I know, there are no major modern specimens of it in English—but it is still fully alive. Three contemporary examples are the twenty-five volume German *New Handbook of Literary Studies* (*Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*), the eight-volume Russian *History of World Literature* (*Istorija vseмирnoj literatury*), and the seven-volume Scandinavian *The Literary History of the World* (*Verdens litteraturhistorie*).¹³

World histories of literature are gold mines of information, but they are also beset with problems of various kinds. In most cases, they suffer from more or less pronounced Eurocentrism—often, around 80 percent of the literature discussed is in European languages—and also from a certain methodological laxity. In particular, works of this kind are usually quite inconsistent in their employment of the concept of literature. Methodological weaknesses such as these can, of course, be overcome, in principle.¹⁴

Second, being engaged in work in transcultural literary history does not necessarily imply that one has to address all the literature of all times and cultures at once—any more than working with English literary history must mean that one has to confront simultaneously all literature ever written in the language. To me, transcultural literary history, understood as an area of study, certainly consists of all literature, from all times and cultures. Yet transcultural literary history, understood in its other sense, as the study of that area, does not necessarily consider all literature as a whole. It can do that, as we just saw, but it can also focus on smaller segments.

Considering smaller segments, the first thing that comes to mind is perhaps studies tracking the transcultural development of historical phenomena—let us call such research “historical reconstruction.” For instance, Western literary history and criticism have taken great interest in the exporting of Western literary culture to other civilizations that has taken place particularly over the last two centuries, and in the consequences of that development.

The Western influence, and the reactions it met, can be regarded as an aspect of the history of colonialism and imperialism. That is what happens in the field usually referred to as postcolonial studies.¹⁵ Think, for example, of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, or of works like Elleke Boehmer’s *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*.¹⁶ More or less the same historical complex can also be approached from other angles. Franco Moretti has discussed the spread of the Western novel to other cultures and the new forms that the novel has acquired there.¹⁷ In Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (*La République mondiale des lettres*), the development figures as the addition of new nations to the global literary field, a field that, according to her, has its historical roots in the French Renaissance and its most important global capital in Paris.¹⁸

But transcultural historical reconstruction can also, of course, deal with older periods and be comparative in an entirely straightforward and traditional sense. Did the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic play any tangible role in neighboring civilizations during the millennia before its rediscovery in the nineteenth century?¹⁹ Was Greek drama instrumental

in the emergence of the Sanskrit drama in India in the first centuries CE, and if so, how?²⁰

In addition, it is worth emphasizing that literary phenomena from different cultures can also be studied without regard for their possible historical interconnections—let us call that “pure comparison.” (It may be objected that this does not fall within transcultural literary *history*, but I will employ the concept of history liberally here without looking more closely at the notion.) Thus Earl Miner has compared different “origivative poetics,” that is, different independently developed ways of conceiving of literature, maintaining that they are either lyric-based (“affective-expressive”), such as nearly all poetics in the world, particularly the Asian ones, or “mimetic”/“mimetic-affective,” such as Western poetics, originating with Aristotle.²¹ Patrick Colm Hogan’s discussions of possible literary universals and of transculturally typical narrative plots is another case in point.²² And, to mention one more example, Mineke Schipper’s *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet* is a large, transcultural, analytic collection of proverbs about women, giving rise to reflections on the genre of the proverb and on similarities and dissimilarities between cultures in their view of women.²³

A recurring question when transcultural issues are raised is the possibility or impossibility of transcultural understanding. Many people have had sensible things to say about such matters; I would like to end the part of my essay dealing with transcultural literary history with two quotations from Zhang Longxi.

Zhang combines historical reconstruction with general reflection on the relationships between cultures in his *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, where he has much to say concerning Western ideas about China and about the Chinese reception of Western literature and literary theory. Another deeper concern in his book, however, regards the attitude commonly taken to alterity. Zhang wants us to see the so-called Other as another subject—not just as an exemplification of his or her culture but as a person similar enough to ourselves to be drawn into a dialogue about things that matter to us both. Several passages in his book revert to the possibilities and problems of doing precisely this.

For any dialogue to happen between at least two voices, for any bridging of gaps and any temporal relationship to occur, there must be a common ground, a shared frame of reference and ways of communication, by means of which new experience and novel concepts can be articulated, appropriated, and transformed from one linguistic and cultural context to another. In understanding different cultures, and especially non-Western ones, however, the main problem today is not so much denying the presence and alterity of those cultures as an excessive emphasis on their difference and alterity, and it is precisely the notion of

a common ground, the idea of a shared frame of reference, which is seriously contested in much of contemporary critical theory.²⁴

The fact that a text is written by a foreign author in a foreign language, responding to specific concerns of a foreign culture and history, does mark it out for special attention as articulation of a different perspective, but we should engage it in a dialogue just as we engage many others, and regard it as an individual utterance rather than some representative specimen of an entire culture. This is not to deny the importance of cultural representation; but representations are diversified, and no single one can claim to speak for all others. Once we recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of the Other, as we do of the self, cross-cultural understanding can be seen as part of our effort at understanding in general, of our endless dialogue with others, with ourselves, and with the world at large.²⁵

IV

After this admittedly unsystematic exemplification of different kinds of trans-cultural literary history, I now pass on to the second item on my agenda: the notion of world literature and its sometimes problematic role in connection with the idea of literary study unlimited by preset temporal or cultural confines.

In its earliest usages, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, “world literature” seems to have been used to refer to a transnational or transcultural literature, existing in a transnational or transcultural context, which was felt to be in the state of emerging. In 1827, Goethe famously expressed his conviction that “a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted.”²⁶ Almost equally well-known is the pronouncement by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party (Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei)*: “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.”²⁷

What concerns me here is not the exact meaning of “world literature” (*Weltliteratur*) in the two quotations, but the more general circumstance that they speak of world literature as of something of recent origin and still in the process of formation. Apparently, transcultural literary history cannot be the history of world literature in this sense unless we wish to leave out everything that occurred before, say, 1800.

A century after Marx and Engels, in 1949, René Wellek takes cognizance of three meanings of the expression “world literature.” One is what I will call, for short, “the Goethean sense.” Another is “world literature” as referring to “literature in its totality,” “on all five continents, from New Zealand to Iceland.”²⁸ Here, “world literature” is obviously a synonym

of “(all) literature,” the adjective “world” functioning as a marker that no limitation such as French, Western, or the like is in place. Wellek’s third and last sense is that of “masterpieces,” “the great treasure-house of the classics, such as Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Goethe, whose reputation has spread all over the world and has lasted a considerable time” (*TL* 49). Thus understood, “world literature” stands for an imagined totality of world literary masterpieces.

As Wellek himself points out, the “masterpieces” sense of world literature must be of limited use in the writing of ordinary literary history (*TL* 49). But it is worth noting that he does in fact hope for a genuine, traditional literary history that will transcend national, linguistic, and cultural barriers, while thinking of it as the history of “literature” rather than of “world literature” (an expression that he seems to find problematic because of its polysemy) (*TL* 49–50).

In his book on the idea of world literature from 2006, John Pizer introduces three different basic meanings of the term. He is interested, not least, in reviewing and reflecting on the tradition of thinking about world literature in, more or less, Goethe’s sense, “a hoped-for contemporary concert of all nations, an epochal formation still in the process of being constituted” (*WL* 3); to denote this concept he introduces the German name, *Weltliteratur* (*WL* 1). But Pizer also acknowledges the meaning “all literature.” In fact, he uses the expression “world literature” to refer specifically to “the notion as understood by . . . most individuals, as the comprehensive signifier for all creative writing produced at all times by all peoples, even when popular and often scholarly imagination reduces its proportions to manageable dimensions through recourse to such signifiers as ‘great books’ and ‘canonic literature’” (*WL* 3).

As we can see, the “masterpieces” interpretation of “world literature” figures at the end of the last quotation, understood by Pizer as a reductive variety of the “all literature” sense of the expression. Yet Pizer, too, discerns a third meaning of “world literature.” He speaks of “an academic subject” that he calls, with capital letters, “World Literature” (*WL* 3). If I understand him correctly, this is the study of world literature or of *Weltliteratur*.

It seems to me that “world literature” does in fact—much as Wellek and Pizer indicate, when we consider them together—have four major, established denotations in more modern usage within literary studies. It can refer to an emergent or still emerging global literature (the Goethean sense), or to all literature (the all literature sense), or to the set of world literary masterpieces (the masterpieces sense). In addition, there is also the “academic subject” sense, in which “world literature” stands for the academic study of world literature in some of the first three senses. (Or perhaps not for the study of world literary masterpieces?)

V

“World literature” is not a term that I myself employ in my research, except, of course, when I comment, as I did above, on how others use the expression. When I make use of any of the four concepts that “world literature” traditionally covers, I call the concept by another name (referring to “literature” rather than to “world literature” when I am speaking of all literature, and so on). Not that I would like to ban the expression “world literature,” but I do not find it particularly useful in more theoretically demanding contexts and, unlike “literature,” it is a term that one can easily do without.

With the increasing interest in what I call transcultural literary history, the term “world literature” has come under new pressure. “World literature” carries a certain tradition as a pointer to this field and attempts have been made to define or redefine the field via definition or redefinition of the expression “world literature.” I am skeptical of the results and also of the strategy as such, and that is the theme of the rest of my essay.

In his article “Conjectures on World Literature,” Moretti defends the idea that world literature must be studied using specific methods—large-scale and social sciences-inspired—that differ markedly from methods used in the study of national literatures. As an example of the kind of research required, Moretti points to his own studies of “the wave of diffusion of the modern novel (roughly: from 1750 to 1950)” based on what he calls distant reading.²⁹ Moretti backs up these methodological recommendations with an argument about world literature that is supposed to demonstrate their soundness, and I would like to take a closer look at that argument.³⁰

Moretti emphasizes how impossible it is actually to read all literary texts, and then goes on to say that

perhaps it’s too much, tackling the world and the unread at the same time. But I actually think that it’s our greatest chance, because the sheer enormity of the task makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The *categories* have to be different. “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnection of ‘things,’” Max Weber wrote, “but the *conceptual* interconnection of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method.” That’s the point: world literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method.³¹

It is surprising to be told that world literature “is not an object, it’s a *problem*.” As we have seen, “world literature” has been used in different senses, but traditionally it refers to something in the outer world: some

complex object or some aggregate of objects (or the study of that object or objects). One could say, of course, loosely, that world literature is a problem in the sense that how we should study it is a problem for us. But that does not make world literature and a problem identical. If world literature is identical to a problem, what is that problem? Moretti does not say.

If we are to understand what is going on in the passage quoted, we will have to construe it less literally. My impression is that Moretti wishes to maintain that we should take problems rather than objects as our starting points when studying world literature. He is, in fact, arguing that the study of world literature must be defined not in terms of its object but in terms of the research questions (problems) it poses and of the methods with whose help it pursues them. He also maintains that the research questions are such that they necessitate "a new critical method."

How does Moretti motivate these views? Obviously he thinks, like Weber, that sciences are defined by the problems they investigate and by the methods they employ in studying them. But let us say that we accept Weber's idea. We can still ask: Is Weber at all relevant here? Is the study of world literature a science? And if we call literary studies a science or a family of sciences, why is the study of world literature a variety so unique that its methods must be radically different from those used in the study of various national literatures?

"It has to be different," says Moretti of the study of world literature, because of "the sheer enormity of the task"—he is obviously referring to the task of "tackling the world and the unread at the same time." I cannot see this as a good argument. As I pointed out earlier (at the beginning of section III), there are works dealing with the literature of the world: world histories of literature. These are, in fact, much like histories of national literatures, regarded from a methodological point of view—not markedly different in their general intellectual outlook or couched in different categories of thought because of the enormity of the task. Moreover—and this, too, is a recapitulation of an argument from section III—doing research into transcultural literary history ("all literature") does not have to mean tackling everything there is to tackle all at once, just as little as doing English literary history makes such demands on the researcher. I find Moretti's arguments too sweeping and unsubstantial to establish the fundamental difference that he says exists between global literary history and national literary history.

There is also another problem with Moretti's reference to "the task." He makes it sound as if transcultural literary history, or the study of world literature, must be the carrying out of one specific mission, but I doubt that that is a productive way of looking at the matter.

As already indicated, I conceive of transcultural literary history as a vast field of study, and I can imagine a large number of very different

kinds of investigations into it. To some small extent, various possibilities have been illustrated in earlier sections. In my opinion, such studies can all be legitimate, notwithstanding the differences in object, method, and underlying intellectual interest. Thus, unlike Moretti, I do not believe that the study of world literature has one definable objective. I doubt that anyone would want to describe the study of English literature as the attempt to carry out one concrete task. And if such cannot be said of the study of English literature, why should it be true of the study of world literature? I find no tenable explanation in Moretti's article.

Moretti apparently considers that the formulations cited in the block quote represent good arguments for viewing world literature as a study with a specific task and a specific method, geared to some kind of macro-understanding of textual realities. I cannot see that they do. Not only do I think that Moretti fails to analyze the concept of world literature, and that he fails, a fortiori, to derive a method for the study of world literature from the analysis, but I already regard it as a mistake to pose the question of what world literature "is" as a factual question; I will return to this a little later. Regarding Moretti's positive example of research into world literature, namely his own studies of the diffusion of the modern novel, it seems reasonable to say that the topic is very important and that macro methods may very well prove useful when we study it. But I do not think that Moretti has given us any good reason to say that the study of world literature should be conceived in the image of his research project.

VI

Let us see, now, how the subject of world literature is treated in another conspicuous essay in the field: Christopher Prendergast's "The World Republic of Letters," originally published in 2001 but reprinted in 2004 as a kind of introduction to Prendergast's edited collection *Debating World Literature*.³²

Prendergast's title alludes to Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres*—later translated into English precisely as *The World Republic of Letters*—of which his essay is a critical assessment. The concept of world literature is commented on en passant, but Prendergast expresses a quite definite standpoint. This is his key pronouncement on what world literature is:

In the perspectives of world history, one might be tempted to classify the "literatures" of the world into three broad kinds: folk literatures (that is, orally transmitted unwritten literatures), traditional literatures and modern cosmopolitan literatures. The study of "world literature" does not typically seek to incorporate

all of these, and it is difficult to conceive of a methodology which could cope with such a vaulting ambition (for one thing, it would be impossible to avoid the inbuilt ethnocentrism of literary-historical periodizations, what Appadurai calls “Eurochronology”). Rather it has in practice concerned itself with printed literatures that, by some mechanism or other, have entered into “relations” with others, whose historical point of departure is usually the European Renaissance and the development of national literary traditions, and whose terminus (so far) is the literary world “marketplace” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. “World” here (including the term *mondiale* in Casanova’s title) thus does not mean “global” (in the sense of all the literatures of the world) but rather “international” structures that arise and transactions that occur across national borders. (WRL 6)

Prendergast’s basic move is to refer to something he calls the study of world literature. Students of world literature are said to be, typically, uninterested in incorporating any kind of literature; they mainly focus on literatures from the European Renaissance onward. Prendergast describes this as a wise decision, since no methodology seems available for dealing with all kinds of literatures. Hence “world” in “world literature” does not mean “global” but refers to something that is “international” in the sense that it crosses national borders.

Prendergast makes it sound as if he is describing existing research that we know as the study of world literature, research that has certain characteristics and employs the term “world literature” in a given way. There is also a normative side to what he says: a partly explicit, partly implicit claim that it is worth supporting the study of world literature as it exists, and the meaning of “world literature” as it is already employed. I would like to question both the descriptive and the normative content of the passage.

What Prendergast says of the study of world literature is true, more or less, of postcolonial studies and of other research dealing with the successive, worldwide spread of European literary dominance and its aftermath. But there is no established way of speaking according to which “the study of world literature” is reserved for studies of that kind. Prendergast tacitly fills the expression “the study of world literature” with a content it does not generally have, arbitrarily narrowing it down. In earlier sections, I mentioned a good deal of research in what I call transcultural literary history that transcends the temporal and cultural limits envisaged by Prendergast. Most obviously, the world histories of literature certainly deal, in principle, with all literature, from all times and cultures. Why do they not exemplify the study of world literature?

This is not merely a verbal point. Prendergast is not making a distinction between two kinds of what I call transcultural literary history: the study of world literature in his sense and more global literary studies.

Clearly, he means to say instead that it would be a misguided ambition to venture outside of what he calls the study of world literature and take an interest, in principle, in the literature of all times and cultures. The methodology is not there—for instance, we do not have defensible means of periodization.

The reference to a missing methodology suggests, as does Moretti's talk of "the task," that the study of world literature, unlike for instance the study of English literature, should have one specific objective and require one specific method—but, as before, I see no reason to make such a supposition. Nor can I understand why periodization in transcultural literary history should have to rely on the traditional period divisions of Western literary history.

Later in his essay, Prendergast returns to the alleged fact that "whatever the study of 'world literature' can be taken to mean it can't mean *all* the literatures of the world" (WRL 9n3).³³ But why not? "All literature" appears to me to be one of the main senses of the expression "world literature." And why should it be impossible to study world literature in the sense of all literature?

VII

Someone might wish to ask, at this point: "What, then, *is* world literature?" My answer is that it depends on what one chooses to mean by "world literature." There is not one concept of world literature but many; many writers have filled the two words with widely differing content.³⁴ I have reviewed a number of uses of the expression found or explicated in Goethe, Marx and Engels, Wellek, Pizer, Moretti, and Prendergast—and the list could be extended.³⁵ One can discuss the usefulness of the respective concepts, or the suitability of providing them with the label "world literature," or one can argue for new uses for the term. Such deliberations will not be merely verbal, far from it: substantial literary-historical issues will be involved in addition to the purely terminological. But there is nothing more to the question of what world literature is than what I just said. There are no hidden conceptual secrets to unveil. Reasoning about what world literature "is" or "cannot be" cannot be expected to help advance the transnational or transcultural study of literary history.

To my mind, both Moretti's and Prendergast's arguments about world literature narrow down the field of transcultural literary history, but in different ways: Moretti's by singling out specific kinds of problems and methods, Prendergast's by relegating to the sidelines all literary history not related to the West and to its key role in the literary field during the last few centuries.

Toward the end of Moretti's article, it becomes clear that he regards the study of large-scale literary diffusion, of "waves," as the proper object of the study of world literature.³⁶ (This explains how he can point to his own investigations into the diffusion of the novel as exemplary for the study of world literature.) It is not obvious to me why large-scale diffusion should be accorded this status. But if it is, it becomes understandable why Moretti advocates—and has continued to advocate—methods designed to create an overview of large amounts of data.³⁷ Presenting this not as *a* way of studying what I call transcultural literary history, but as *the* way, appears reductive to me. On the other hand, Moretti is certainly ready to embrace all the literature there is, "hundreds of languages and literatures"—while Prendergast is not.³⁸

When Prendergast says that the study of world literature "can't mean *all* the literatures of the world," I cannot resist drawing an analogy to the study of world history. It would sound strange to say that world history cannot include *all* times and cultures, that some of these should be excluded on principle. And it would hardly be acceptable to suggest that world history should be limited to times and cultures "that, by some mechanism or other, have entered into 'relations' with others, whose historical point of departure is usually the European Renaissance." I can see no reason why non-European cultures and their literatures—Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Arabic, African, Native American, and others—should not be of great interest to the globally minded literary historian throughout their entire history.

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NOTES

1 "Transcultural" should be understood, here, as meaning "transcending (major) cultural divides." "Transnational" is a more established term, but it appears to say much less than what I have in mind. In Europe, for example, many important things are transnational (such as the European Union, consisting of twenty-seven countries), but few are transcultural.

2 The literal meaning of *litteraturvetenskap* (cf. German *Literaturwissenschaft*) is "literary science." "Literary studies" might be the most natural translation.

3 Fundamental literary theory is not literary theory in the often-employed sense in which literary theory is the same as Theory. Fundamental literary theory is literary theory in the more traditional sense that, for example, René Wellek had in mind when, in the early 1960s, he described literary studies as consisting of literary theory, literary history, and literary criticism. See Wellek's "Literary Theory, Criticism, and History" in his *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), 1–20. I am not alone in still defending the traditional sense of "literary theory" and the distinction between literary theory and Theory. See Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 246.

4 Anders Pettersson, *A Theory of Literary Discourse* (Lund, Swed.: Lund Univ. Press; Bromley, UK: Chartwell-Bratt, 1990), chap. 7.

5 The literary-historical sketch in the following is presented in a broader fashion, and better referenced, in my article “Introduction: Concepts of Literature and Transcultural Literary History,” in *Notions of Literature across Times and Cultures*, ed. Pettersson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 29–34.

6 Cf., for example, Jan Vansina’s interesting taxonomy of what he calls “oral traditions” (that is, traditional oral utterance) in his *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (1961; Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), 142–64 (the expression “oral traditions” is found on p. 142).

7 Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, Univ. of Michigan, 1997), 9.

8 According to Andrew Ford, the idea of *poiēsis* as “a craftsmanly kind of ‘making’ [of songs]” arose in the fifth century BCE, and a notion of literature (in a wide sense rather removed from the one used about present-day Western texts) in the fourth century BCE. See Ford’s *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), esp. 93 (with the quote) and 231.

9 Idema and Haft, *Chinese Literature*, 9.

10 There are other views. For instance, Jonathan Culler recently questioned “the attempt to define a modern concept of literature in opposition to those of earlier times” since it “oversimplifies the range of modern possibilities and neglects powerful historical affinities.” Culler, “Commentary: What Is Literature Now?” *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (2007): 234.

11 Cf., for example, Wellek, “What Is Literature?” in *What Is Literature?* ed. Paul Hernadi (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 16–23 and Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999), chap. 2. The broader cultural and historical picture is painted, with an impressive diachronic span, in Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001).

12 For my general current understanding of the concept, see “The Concept of Literature: A Description and an Evaluation,” in *From Text to Literature: New Analytic and Pragmatic Approaches*, ed. Stein Haugom Olsen and Anders Pettersson (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 106–127.

13 *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Klaus von See et al. (Wiesbaden/Frankfurt am Main: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion; Wiesbaden/Wiebelshheim: AULA-Verlag, 1972–2008); *Istorija vseмирnoj literatury: V devjati tomach*, ed. G. P. Berdnikov et al. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Nauka, 1983–94); *Verdens litteraturhistorie*, ed. Hans Hertel (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1985–93).

14 About world histories of literature and their problems, see my introduction to *Notions of Literature*, 1–35.

15 About postcolonial studies, see, for example, the general introduction and the introduction to the second edition by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–4 and 5–8.

16 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995).

17 See Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 152–58; first published in *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68.

18 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004); see esp. chap. 1.

19 On this, see A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 54–70.

20 See, for example, Steven F. Walker, “The Invention of Theater: Recontextualizing the Vexing Question,” *Comparative Literature* 56 (2004): 1–22, and the literature cited there.

- 21 Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), see esp. 7–9. Quotations from p. 7 (“originative poetics”) and p. 9.
- 22 See esp. Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).
- 23 Mineke Schipper, *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from around the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), esp. 8–17 and 387–92.
- 24 Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 7–8.
- 25 Longxi, *Mighty Opposites*, 83.
- 26 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche: 28. August 1949*, ed. Ernst Beutler, vol. 14, *Schriften zur Literatur* (Zurich: Artemis-Verlag, 1950), 908. I quote John Pizer’s English translation. Pizer, *The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2006), 23 (hereafter cited as *WL*).
- 27 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei,” in Marx and Engels, *Werke*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964), 4:466. I quote the standard English translation of the text from Harold J. Laski, *Harold J. Laski on the Communist Manifesto: An Introduction; Together with the Original Text and Prefaces by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 137.
- 28 Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd rev. ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 48 (hereafter cited as *TL*). Wellek was the main author of the chapter in question (*TL* 8).
- 29 Moretti, “Conjectures,” 153. About distant reading, see esp. 151–55.
- 30 The attention given here to Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” is motivated not least by my belief that the article has been widely influential. Note, for example, the section devoted to Moretti’s ideas, “Rethinking World Literature,” in *Studying Transcultural Literary History*, ed. Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 109–51.
- 31 Moretti, “Conjectures,” 149 (Moretti’s emphases).
- 32 Prendergast, “The World Republic of Letters” (2001), in *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004), 1–25 (hereafter cited as *WRL*).
- 33 Prendergast also offers a third reflection (*WRL* 21): “the idea of world literature cannot practically be taken to refer to all the verbal arts around the globe (amongst other things, it typically excludes cultures whose only or main form of self-expression is oral recitation unless and until they become transmissible through transcription).” The beginning of the quotation, before the first parenthesis, seems to say that it is not practically possible to take the idea of world literature as referring to all the verbal arts around the globe. That is a surprising statement, since one of the main meanings of “world literature,” illustrated here with quotations from Wellek and Pizer, is, precisely, “all literature.” The formulation in parentheses appears to be meant as an argument underpinning Prendergast’s statement, but what is said there is that the idea of world literature “typically” excludes oral literary cultures. I find the remark misleading: I would say that one of the three “object” senses of “world literature” includes oral cultures, while the other two do not (in practice, but hardly on principle). More importantly, however: the formulation in parentheses is clearly an observation about current usage—even if it were indisputably correct it would not show that “world literature” cannot practically be used differently.
- 34 See esp. the discussions of the use of the expression in Pizer, *World Literature*.
- 35 Another example worth mentioning is David Damrosch’s substantially different definition of world literature as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin.” Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 4.
- 36 Moretti, “Conjectures,” 160; on pp. 160–62 Moretti insists that world literature should be a study of literary waves.

37 See Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).

38 Moretti, "Conjectures," 149. See, also, the truly transcultural and transhistorical five-volume collection of articles on the genre of the novel, *Il romanzo* (2001–3), that Moretti has edited—English version: *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).