What Is World Literature?

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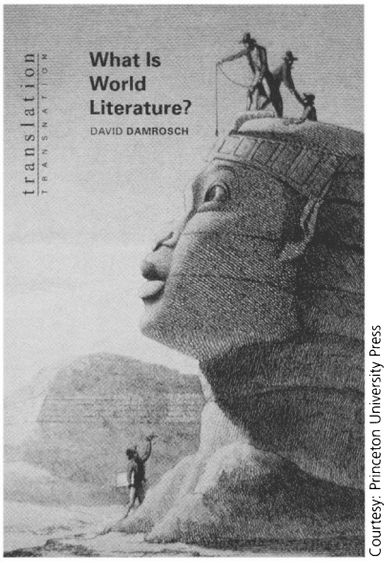
A CRUCIAL FEATURE OF WORLD LITERATURE is that it resolves always into a *variety* of worlds. These different worlds vary by era, region, and cultural prestige, and the works that come to us from these varied worlds can in turn be read in a variety of ways. This sort of variability involves constantly competing ideas of literature, and our contemporary definitional debates can be seen as an episode in the shifting relations among three general conceptions. Literature in general, and world literature in particular, has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*. The "classic" is a work of transcendent, even foundational value, often identified particularly with Greek and Roman literature (still taught today in departments of Classics) and often closely associated with imperial values, as Frank Kermode has shown in his book *The Classic*. The "masterpiece," on the other hand, can be a recent or even contemporary work and need not have had any foundational cultural force. Goethe, for example, clearly considered his own best works, and those of his friends, to be modern masterpieces. The "masterpiece," indeed, came into prominence in the nineteenth century as literary studies began to de-emphasize the dominant Greco-Roman classics, elevating the modern masterpiece to a level of near equality with the long-established classics. In this literary analog of a liberal democracy, the (often middle-class) masterworks could engage in a "great conversation" with their aristocratic forebears, a conversation in which their culture and class of origin mattered less than the great ideas they expressed anew. Finally, Goethe himself also read with interest all sorts of works from outside the realm of the masterpiece; in his conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann, he is reading translations of Serbian poetry, and praising them to Eckermann, in the very days in which he is formulating his term *Weltliteratur*. Goethe's fondness for Serbian poetry shows the nascent interest in works that would serve as "windows" into foreign worlds, whether or not these works could be construed as masterpieces and regardless of whether these differing worlds had any visible links to each other at all.

These three conceptions are not mutually exclusive, though sometimes people of decided taste champion one over another and even attempt to portray their favored mode as the one true definition of literature. Goethe, however, held all three conceptions together, as have many readers since. There is really no good reason why we shouldn't allow all three categories their ongoing value, particularly as a single work may effectively be classified under two or even all three headings. Virgil's *Aeneid* is the very type of a timeless classic, but it is also a masterpiece of its genre, registering one stage of development in the long series of works from *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* up to *Ulysses* and *Omeros*. Equally, the *Aeneid* is a window on the world of imperial Rome; though it is set centuries before Rome's founding and treats legendary materials, in its

underworld scenes and epic similes the epic opens out with unconcealed directness toward Virgil's contemporary world.

In the nineteenth century, devotees of the classics were distressed that modern European masterpieces were shouldering Anacreon, Statius, and even Virgil aside. In recent decades, lovers of the European masterpieces have felt a comparable alarm in turn, as literary studies in an increasingly multicultural North America have opened the canon to more and more works in the third category, both within English and American literature and beyond: hence Dinesh D'Souza's outrage, in his polemical *Illiberal Education*, at the widespread adoption of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in many world literature and "Western Civ" courses. Conversely, however, in *Against Literature,* John Beverley championed Menchú's *testimonio* precisely for its creative explosion of traditional literary categories. In an influential 1993 report to the American Comparative Literature Association on the state of the discipline, a committee chaired by Charles Bernheimer urged that comparatists be actively engaged in reconceiving the canon, paying particular attention to "various contestatory, marginal, or subaltern perspectives" (*Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* 44). Introducing the report and a set of responses to it, Bernheimer emphasized the contemporary relevance of comparative study: "In the age of multiculturalism," he concluded, "the comparatist's anxiety has finally found a field adequate to the questions that generated it" (16).



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The Bernheimer report was intended as a call to expand rather than abandon the older canon, and in the last decade there has been a growing consensus that all three categories are still useful. It is important to continue to engage each of them and their characteristic works, for world literature is multitemporal as much as it is multicultural. Too often, shifts in focus—from classics to masterpieces to windows on the world—have underwritten a concomitant shift from earlier to later periods. John Guillory has remarked that the traditional European canon has been a white-male affair in large part because, until fairly recently, few women and minority writers had access to literacy, much less publication. He goes on to say that in order to "open" this canon, one would have to *modernize* it, obviously, to displace the preponderance of works from earlier to later. And there are, of course, many good reasons for doing so. The pressure to modernize the curriculum has succeeded again and again despite the inertial conservatism of the educational institution, and it is this pressure that is largely responsible for many historically significant *exclusions*: the fact that we read Plato but not Xenophon, Virgil but not Statius, has nothing to do with the social identities of Xenophon or Statius, but the necessity of choosing between them has everything to do with the modernization of the curriculum, with the imperative of *making room* for such later writers as Locke or Rousseau (*Cultural Capital* 32).

Though this modernizing tendency has been widespread, it need not and should not entail the sheer overwhelming of the past by the present. All too often, students of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization define their topics in such a way as to restrict their investigations to just the last five hundred years of human history, or the last hundred years, or even the last few years. By doing so, however, we reproduce one of the least appealing characteristics of modern American—and global commercial—culture: the insistent *presentism* that erases the past as a serious factor, leaving at best a few nostalgic postmodern references, the historical equivalent of the "local color" tipped in to distinguish the lobby of the Jakarta Hilton from that of its Cancún counterpart.

Not only does this presentism deprive us of the ability to learn from a much wider range of empires, colonies, polities, and migrations; it also neglects to account for the dramatic ways in which canons of the earlier periods themselves are being reshaped through new attention to all sorts of long-neglected but utterly fascinating texts. Thanks to the modern recovery of the great ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, indeed, world literature today actually goes much further back in time than it did a century and a half ago. It now spans more than four thousand years, as well as more regions across the globe, than ever before.

The opening of so many windows into such varied times and places has driven the enormous expansion of the field of world literature in recent years. As welcome as it is, though, this expansion raises serious questions. It is not only cultural conservatives who have expressed qualms about the process—many scholars to their left are deeply ambivalent as well. Are these newly visible texts a testimony to a new wealth of cultural diversity, or are they being sucked up in the Disneyfication of the globe? The problem here is partly one of reception. Masao Miyoshi (in *Off Center*) and Lawrence Venuti (in *The Scandals of Translation*) have shown how the postwar reception of texts from Japan or Italy often had more to do with American interests and needs than with genuine openness to other cultures. Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question.

The problem of reception is compounded today by questions of production as well. In recent decades a growing proportion of works has been produced primarily for foreign consumption. This is a fundamentally new literary development: for the first time in history, authors of highly successful works can hope to have their works translated into thirty languages within a few years of publication, and foreign audiences may even provide the primary audience for writers who have small audiences at home or who are censored by their governments. In earlier centuries, writers like Dante rarely thought of themselves as writing anything resembling this sort of free-floating world literature; though they might hope to be read abroad, their patrons and most immediate audience were at home. Dante, indeed, that great icon of world literature in modern times, wrote his *Commedia* in the vernacular precisely in order to be read by the widest possible audience in Italy, instead of using Latin to reach a large European audience.

Photo: Hu Rui. Courtesy: New Directions

Bei Dao

Writing for publication abroad can be a heroic act of resistance against censorship and an affirmation of global values against local parochialism; yet it can also be only a further stage in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism, and this leveling process may affect the writers themselves as much as their readers. According to Tim Brennan,

> Several younger writers have entered a genre of third-world metropolitan fiction whose conventions have given their novels the unfortunate feel of ready-mades. Less about an inauthenticity of vision than the context of reception, such novels—typically grouped together in the display cases of library foyers—unjustly come off as a kind of writing by numbers. . . . Placed in the company of other hybrid subjects, they take their part in a collective lesson for American readers of a global pluralism. (*At Home in the World* 203)

This is almost the opposite of the long-recognized problems of cultural distance and difficulty: these new globally produced works may be all too *easy* to understand. Brennan places the blame chiefly on distributors and readers, but others have criticized the writers themselves. According to Tariq Ali, "From New York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television, and, increasingly, read the same junk novels. . . . Instead of 'socialist realism' we have 'market realism'" ("Literature and Market Realism" 140–44). Non-Western works from earlier periods have often been excluded from world literature courses on the grounds that they are too difficult to understand and absorb in the time available; now the converse fear is often expressed—that contemporary world literature isn't worth the effort it doesn't require.

Brennan and Ali tactfully avoid mentioning any new-global-economy writers by name, but others have been less discreet. The prominent Sinologist Steven Owen provoked a severe reaction when he advanced a comparable critique of contemporary Chinese poetry in a 1990 review essay significantly titled, "What Is World Poetry?" Owen's occasion was the publication of *The August Sleepwalker*, the collected poetry of the prominent dissident poet Bei Dao. Writing for nonspecialist readers in the *New Republic*, Owen argued that Third World writers increasingly are running afoul of the literary hegemony of the major Western powers, with the result that they begin to write a "world literature" that is little more than a watered-down Western literature.

> Poets who write in the "wrong language" (even exceedingly populous languages like Chinese) not only must imagine themselves being translated in order to reach an audience of a satisfying magnitude, they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it. And, although it is supposedly free of all local history, this "world poetry" turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism, depending on which wave of colonial culture first washed over the intellectuals of the country in question. This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal. (28)

In Owen's view, this surrender to Euro-American modernism—often imported into China in the form of mediocre translations several decades ago—entails the erasure of local literary and cultural history, leaving the writer with no vital tradition from which to work. This new world poetry floats free of context, merely decorated with a little local (ethnic) color. Though such poems lack real literary power, Owen says,

> it may be that the international readers of poetry do not come in search of poetry at all, but rather in search of windows upon other cultural phenomena. They may be looking for some exotic religious tradition or political struggle. These Western fashions in exotica and causes are ephemeral things. Who now reads Tagore? He is a bargain that fills the shelves of poetry sections in used bookstores. (29)

Having established this broad, depressing framework, Owen proceeds to discuss Bei Dao's poetry as second-hand American modernism, given momentary currency thanks to its author's close involvement in dissident activities leading up to the Tiananmen Square massacre. Owen sees Bei Dao's lyrics as

sporadically vivid but ultimately empty: "Most of these poems translate themselves. They could just as easily be translated from a Slovak or an Estonian or a Philippine poet. . . . The poetry of *The August Sleepwalker* is a poetry written to travel well" (31).

Owen's position has been widely criticized, most notably by Rey Chow, who opened her 1993 book *Writing Diaspora* with a wholesale attack on his essay. Calling Owen's views Orientalist and even "racist" (2*n*), Chow argued that the problem is not with the poetry but with the Western critic's loss of authority.

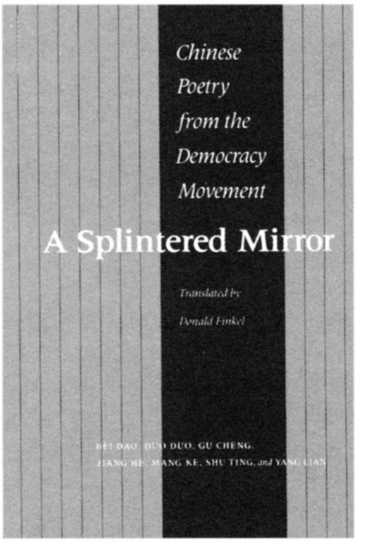
> Basic to Owen's disdain for the new "world poetry" is a sense of loss and, consequently, an anxiety over his own intellectual position. . . . This is the anxiety that the Chinese past which he has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the Sinologist himself is the abandoned subject. . . . Concluding his essay sourly with the statement, "Welcome to the late twentieth century," Owen's real complaint is that *he* is the victim of a monstrous world order in front of which a sulking impotence like his is the only claim to truth. (3–4)

The problem for a nonspecialist reader—apart from the danger of the critical prose bursting into flames in your hands—is that Chow is so deeply committed to her position that she does not see any need to combat Owen's views by discussing a single line of Bei Dao's poetry. Owen's article does give some brief quotations, but he spends little time on them. Further, having taken the position that Bei Dao's poems "translate themselves," he says little about the work of the poems' actual English-language translator, Bonnie McDougall. Readers unable to consult Bei Dao in the original may wonder how we can possibly assess these radically differing views.

We can make some headway by looking directly at *The August Sleepwalkers*, and if we do so, we can find verses that show Bei Dao's own acute awareness of the difficulties his poetry faces abroad. Thus, his poem "Language" begins by saying that

> many languages
> fly around the world
> producing sparks when they collide
> sometimes of hate
> sometimes of love. (121)

Appropriately enough, I first encountered this poem in Jayana Clerk and Ruth Siegel's 1995 anthology, *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*, whose back-cover copy (no doubt written by the HarperCollins marketing department rather than by the editors) positions the collection as just the sort of literary jet-



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setting that Owen condemns: "Travel to sixty-one countries and experience a vast selection of poetry, fiction, drama, and memoirs," the cover urges us; "make stops in Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. . . . Your passport? *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*." Bei Dao's own poem, however, ends by deconstructing this very process of circulation.

> many languages
> fly around the world
> the production of languages
> can neither increase nor decrease
> mankind's silent suffering.

Bei Dao may be less confident of his work's value abroad than Chow herself is; at the same time, he may have a more thoughtful, ironic stance toward home tradition and foreign audiences alike than Owen allows. To pursue this question in detail, it would be necessary to look at a range of issues: the ways in which Chinese poets in the generation before Bei Dao translated American and French poets as a form of self-expression as they sought to rejuvenate an ancient image repertoire; the ways in which mid-century American and Chinese poets alike were influenced by translations of such earlier Spanish-language poets as Rubén Darío and Federico García Lorca; the ways in which the surface simplicity of Bei Dao's prosody may be taking up and subverting Maoist calls to abandon the complexities of aristocratic poetry and return to the purity of the old *Shih-ching* (Eng. *Book of Songs*, 1937), that ancient classic marked, as Eugene Eoyang has said, by simple diction and "intensely commonplace sentiments, with a universality which the song does not try to hide" ("The Many 'Worlds' in World Literature" 249).

Such investigations could take us deep into specialist territory, but it is important to realize that we do not face a strict either/or choice between total immersion and an airy vapidity. Even a modicum of specialized knowledge can do wonders to attune us to a work's inner workings, and an effective reading of world literature requires a leavening of local knowledge, an amount that may vary from work to work and from reader to reader but that will remain much less than is needed for a full contextual understanding of a work within its home tradition. As such, world literature can be aligned with the nuanced and localized cosmopolitanism championed by Bruce Robbins: "No one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere. . . . The interest of the term *cosmopolitanism* is located, then, not in its full theoretical extension, where it becomes a paranoid fantasy of ubiquity and omniscience, but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications" ("Comparative

Cosmopolitanisms" 260). Far from being a rootless cosmopolitan, Bei Dao is doubly or multiply linked to events and audiences at home and abroad; indeed, as an exile since the early 1990s, he has occupied an increasingly multiple relation to the very terms *home* and *abroad*.

To read Bei Dao's poems in English, we should be alive to relevant aspects of the context of their production, but we don't finally need the Chinese context in all its particularity. When all is said and done, Bei Dao in English *isn't* Bei Dao in Chinese, and Steven Owen is really describing the life of any work of world literature when he asks, "Is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the Chinese language?" ("What Is World Poetry?" 31). Owen means to express the poet's limitations by this formulation, but the criticism only holds if Bei Dao's poetry is in fact superficial in the original. Not only is this something that people who don't read Chinese cannot judge; it is actually irrelevant to the poem's existence abroad. *All* works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only "began" in their original language.

The crucial issue for the foreign reader is how well the poems work in the new language; such cultural information as may be practical to acquire and relevant to apply must still make sense in the translation if it is to be useful at all. Here we can gain in understanding by looking at different translations of Bei Dao's work. Thanks to his global popularity, he has already been translated by a number of people, and even individual poems can be found variously translated. Here, for example, are two versions of the opening stanza of his most famous poem, "The Answer," which became a rallying-cry for the Tiananmen protestors:

> Debasement is the password of the base.
> Nobility the epitaph of the noble.
> See how the gilded sky is covered
> With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead. (tr. McDougall, 33)

> The scoundrel carries his baseness around like an ID card.
> The honest man bears his honor like an epitaph.
> Look—the gilded sky is swimming
> with undulant reflections of the dead. (tr. Finkel, 9–10)

McDougall's translation clearly tries to convey an underlying wordplay in the original, but the result is stilted and unpoetic English; Donald Finkel's translation is freer but also more readable, and without the constraint of the need for the end of the opening lines to echo the beginning, he is able to set up a more effective contrast of identity card to epitaph, moving on to a more eloquent end to the stanza.

As the poem continues, Finkel also brings out motifs of American modernism that are not visible in McDougall's version. Where McDougall has "I don't believe in thunder's echoes," Finkel has "I don't believe what the thunder says," ironically recalling the heading in Eliot's *Waste Land* in which the speaker turns East for timeless wisdom to refresh his dried-up Western roots. In Bei Dao's concluding stanza, a constellation that McDougall renders as "pictographs" become in Finkel "that ancient ideogram," using Ezra Pound's term of choice for Chinese characters. Of course, Finkel may have simply invented these echoes, but they assort well with the debt to American modernism that Owen and others have identified in Bei Dao's work. Rather than connecting the poem to modernism in this way, McDougall continues to do her best to suggest Chinese theories of correspondence and history, as in her version of the concluding stanza:

> A new conjunction and glimmering stars
> Adorn the unobstructed sky now:
> They are the pictographs from five thousand years.
> They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

Compare Finkel:

> The earth revolves. A glittering constellation
> pricks the vast defenseless sky.
> Can you see it there? that ancient ideogram—
> the eye of the future, gazing back.

Compared to McDougall's cautious and literalistic renderings, Finkel's version is at once more eloquent and more creative in holding Chinese and modernist contexts together in view. The prosaic prosody and lurking sentimentality that Owen dislikes in Bei Dao's poetry are much more evident features of McDougall's translations than of Finkel's, which actually increase in poetic effect by emphasizing the modernist connections that Owen regrets and that McDougall plays down.

THE EXAMPLE OF BEI DAO can suggest a crucial feature of world literature: works take on a new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work is newly framed, both in its translations and in its new cultural contexts. If we do want to see the work of world literature as a window on different parts of the world, we must take into account the way its images have been multiply refracted in the process of transculturation. World literature can be described, to borrow a phrase from Vinay Dharwadker, as "a montage of overlapping maps in motion" (*Cosmopolitan Geographies* 3), and this movement involves shifting relations both of literary history and also of cultural power. Works rarely cross borders on a basis of full equality; if the classics and masterpieces long dominant in world literature have typically enjoyed high prestige and authoritative weight in their new homes, the power relations are often reversed when noncanonical works come into North America today. Tim Brennan and others have criticized the manipulations by which the political edge has often been taken from works imported into the American context, but it is not enough to have our politics in the right place. All works are

subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception, but established classics usually gain a degree of protection by their cultural prestige: editors and publishers will be less likely, for example, to silently truncate the text or reorganize it outright, a fate that is commonly experienced by non-canonical works even at the hands of highly sympathetic translators. Indeed, works by non-Western authors or by provincial or subordinate Western writers are always particularly liable to be assimilated to the immediate interests and agendas of those who edit, translate, and interpret them.

To do better justice to our texts, whether perennial classics or contemporary works, we need to attend closely to what we are doing when we import them and introduce them into new contexts. Today we are making more and more translations from and among an unprecedented range of literary worlds; done well, these multiple translations can give us a unique purchase on the global scope of the world's cultures, past and present. All too often, though, things slip in the process, and we can gain a work of world literature but lose the author's soul. Our sophisticated critical methods and refined cultural sensitivity have not yet sufficed to keep us from falling into errors and abuses that were common a hundred and even a thousand years ago. We ought to do better, but this will require a better sense of what it is we do when we circulate works through the shifting spheres of world literature.

To understand this process, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art. A work changes in nature when it moves from a national sphere into a new worldly context; works become world literature by being received *into* the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers. Even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures. The receiving culture can use the foreign material in all sorts of ways: as a positive model for the future development of its own tradition; as a negative case of a primitive, or decadent, strand that must be avoided or rooted out at home; or, more neutrally, as an image of radical otherness against which the home tradition can be more clearly defined. World literature is thus always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone. Works of world literature can very well be understood as windows on the world, so long as we understand that they serve as windows on two worlds at once: the world beyond us, and our own world as well. Attending to this double refraction can help us in bringing works—both more creatively and less destructively—into our own cultural space. Not only the works but we ourselves have much to gain in the process. WLT

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