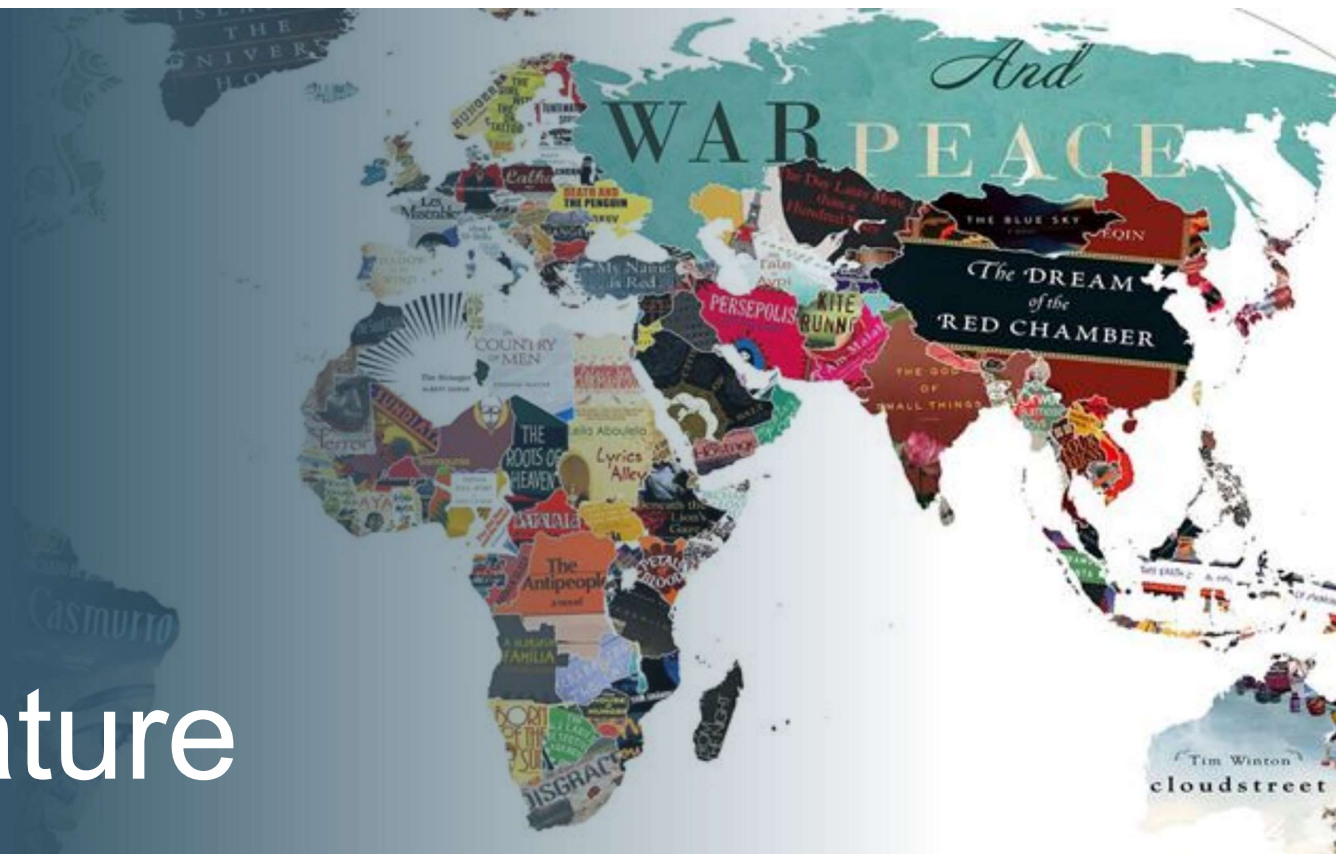


world literature

concepts and questions



world literature

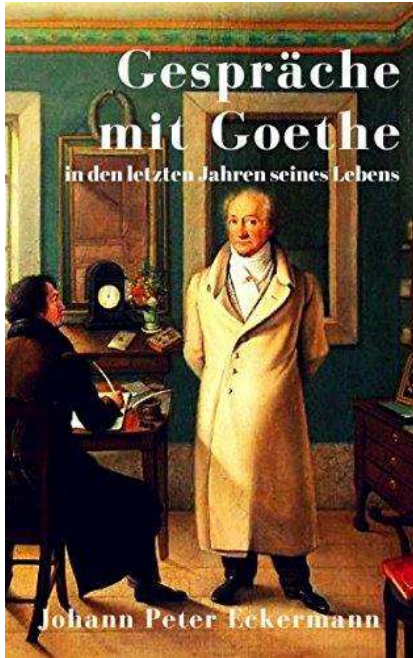
what does the term mean? What does it *do*?

- How is the term used in recent scholarship?
- What are its critical gains? Its possible oversights?

three examples of scholarship in world literature studies:

- David Damrosch: revives an old term with new meaning
- Gloria Fisk: world literature as (aesthetic, political, economic) 'good'
- Roberto Dainotto: 'slippage' between various meanings of WL

origins in Goethe's concept *Weltliteratur*



Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe* (1827):

I am more and more convinced that **poetry is the universal possession of mankind**, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men... I should therefore like to look about me in foreign nations and advise everyone to do the same. **National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand**, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”
(quoted in Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 2003, 1;12)

revisiting Goethe

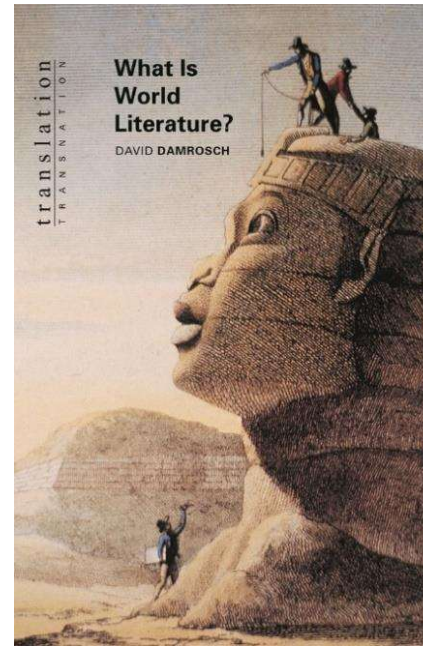
for instance, John Pizer, “Goethe’s World Literature Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization” (2000):

- “Goethe recognized **the birth of the “Weltmarkt”** (44), which... continues to establish the monetary, material, and communicative conditions underlying cultural transnationalisms” (pg. 214)
- “He predicts that **world media** (and by extension world markets) **will weave a writer’s products into a** transindividual, indeed **transnational grid**, a grid Goethe terms ‘world literature’” (pg. 215)

revisiting Goethe

David Damrosch in *What is World Literature?* (2003)

- draws on Goethe to define world literature **“less a set of works than a network”** (pg. 3) and “a traffic in ideas” (3) enabled by circuits of transfer and translation
- “[world literature] **encompasses all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin**, either in translation or in the original language... A work only has an *effective* life as world literature, whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original system.” (pg. 4)
- **“A work enters into world literature**... by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (pg. 6)



the 'new' world literature studies

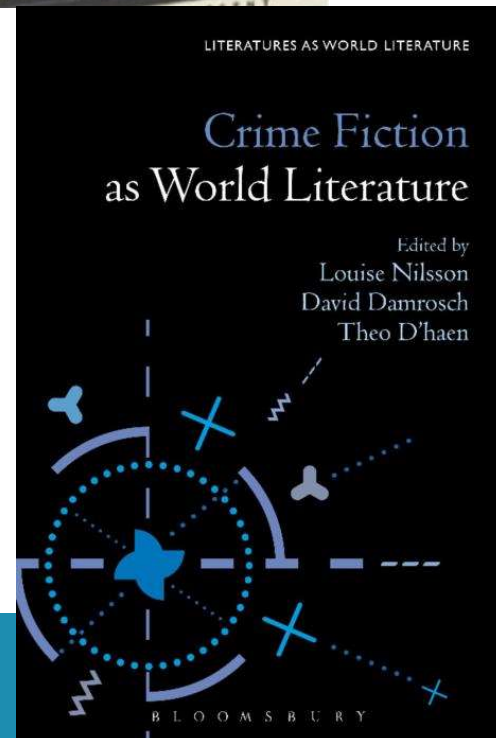
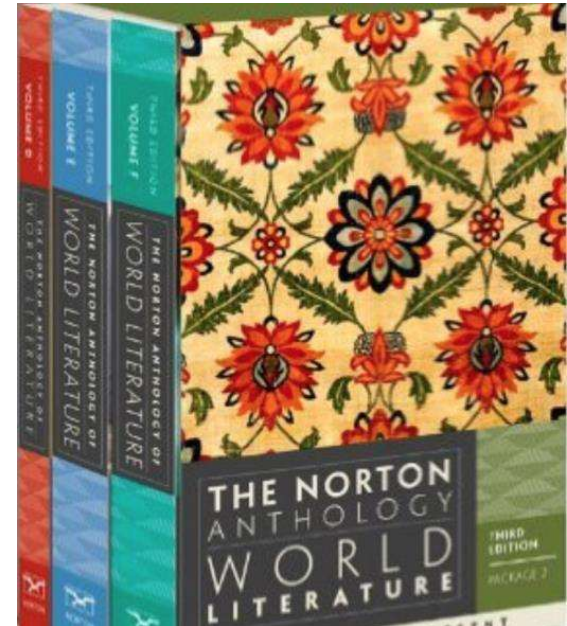
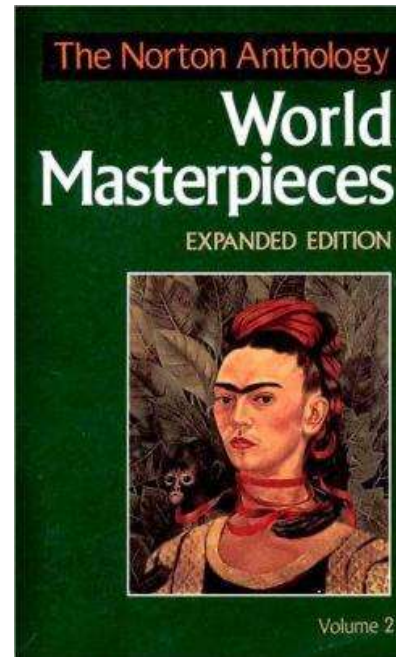
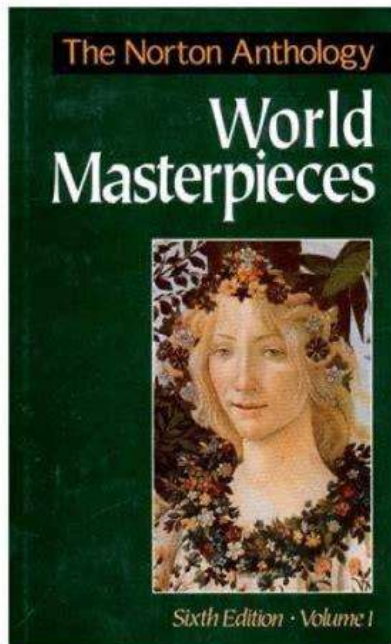
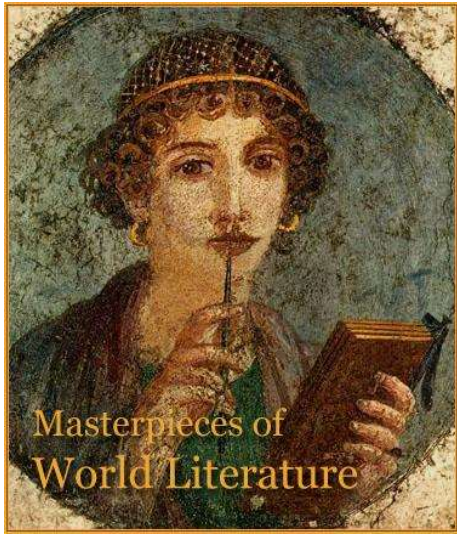
new research topics:

- new canons: extension in time, space, and subject matter
- circulation & transnationalism
- reception
- from works to networks

implications for study of the west and the western canon?

- new methodologies: see Damrosch, Moretti (and their critics!)
- broader cultural implications:
 - ❖ contemporary calls to 'provincialize Europe' (Dipesh Chakrabarty) and 'de-colonize'
 - ❖ postcolonial critique

world literature: a changing concept

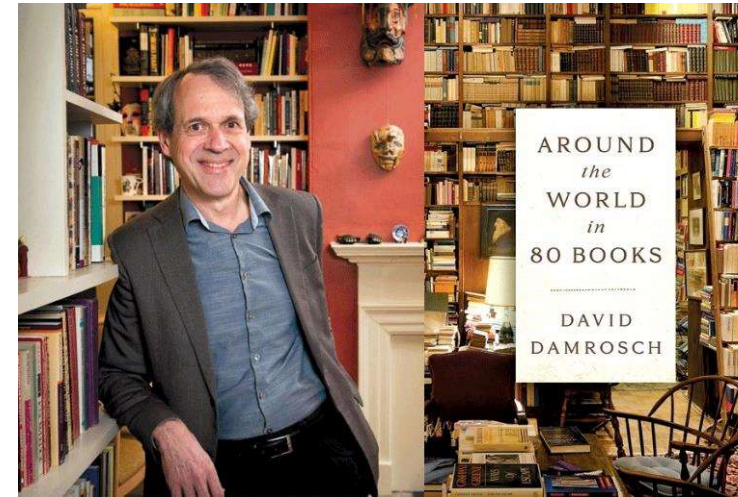


David Damrosch

professor of comparative literature, Harvard U

author of among other

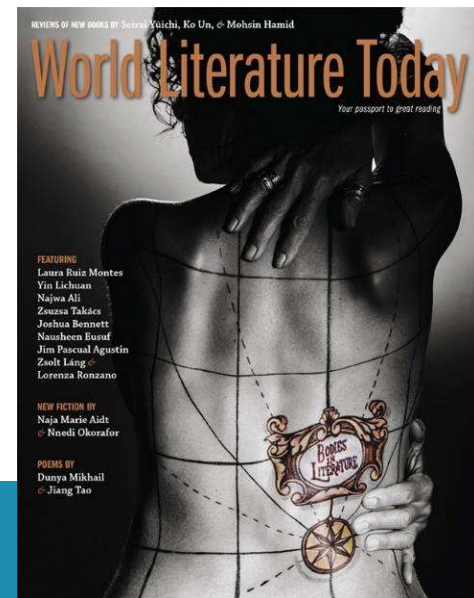
- *What is World Literature?* (2003)
- *How to Read World Literature* (2008)
- *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (2020)
- *Around the World in 80 Books* (2021)
- + editor *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004)



contribution to *World Literature Today* (2003)

explains key concepts of world literature studies

- three coexistent definitions of world literature
- expansion of canon
- new methodology: reception



1. three definitions of world literature

“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 comes 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...” (pg. 9)

Which of the three definitions offered by Damrosch for you best describes the content of contemporary debates on the (western) canon?

Can these definitions be complementary to address blind spots in the western canon?

To what extent does Damrosch’s conception of world literature directly critique the construction and study of the western canon?

2. expansion of canon

Damrosch is critical of “an insistent presentism that erases the past as a serious factor” (pg. 10)

“Not only does this **presentism deprive us of the ability to learn** from a much wider range of empires, colonies, policies, and migrations; it also neglects to account for 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.” (pg. 10)

Do you read this statement as a plea for tradition?

How different is Damrosch’s scholarly approach from previous responses to the canon we discussed (ex. Auerbach, Curtius, Eliot, etc.)?

3. new methodology: reception

on the one hand:

attention for translation and cultural reception as crucial component of WL

on the other hand:

the term WL also accentuates our contemporary multicultural moment

- context of globalization and its criteria of marketability
- critiques on 'market realism' of 'global novel' (pg. 11)
- for instance, controversy surrounding poetry Bei Dao (pg. 11-13)

3. new methodology: reception

position Damrosch:

“Bei Dao in English isn’t Bei Dao in Chinese” (pg.13)

“**World literature** is 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**” (pg.14)

Roberto Dainotto



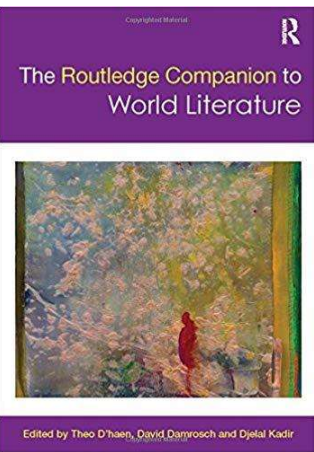
professor of Italian and Romance Studies, Duke U

comparative research on relations between 'local' , 'national' and 'culture' in European literatures:

- *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (2000)
- *Europe (in Theory)* (2007)
- *Gramsci in the World* (2020), ed. with Frederic Jameson

contribution to *Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2011)

- "World literature and European literature"



European literature?

historical overview: genealogy of term ‘European literature’

→ contradictory impressions

- on the one hand: idealistic picture

recurrent ideal of European literature as “not just a sum, but a unit and a totality” (pg. 426)

- on the other hand: reveals a merciless history of national conflicts

“the history of the notion of European literature would be **the story of the protracted attempts to synthesize rivalries and struggles into imagined unities**” (pg. 427)

Which examples do you find most insightful, or compelling?

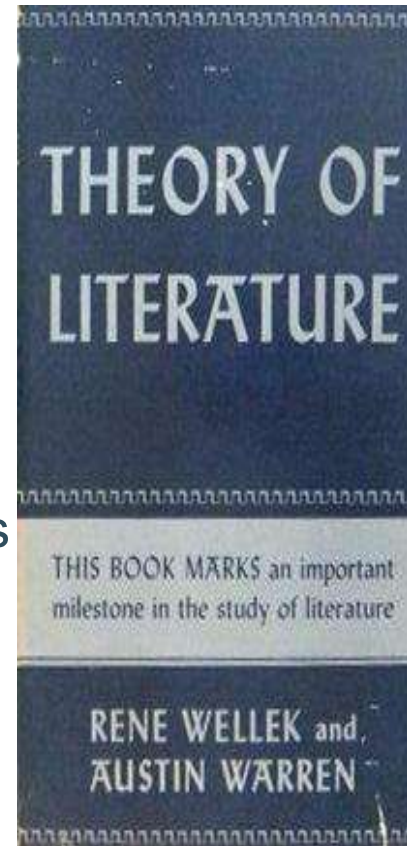
European? General? Universal?

After 1940 'European literature' moves to US literary studies departments

→ academics in exile

ex. René Wellek & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (1956)

- **'general' and 'universal literature'** replaces philological models
- promotion 1950s **notion of 'world literature'** that encompasses 'general literary historiography'
- 'scholarly ideal of "literary history as a synthesis, **literary history on a supernational scale**" (pg. 432)



→ problematic slippage of terms like 'comparative' 'world' 'general' 'universal' (pg. 432) – till today?

Hence: "European literature, a tautology" (pg. 425)

Gloria Fisk

associate professor English, Queens College NY

Orhan Pamuk and the Good of World Literature (2017)

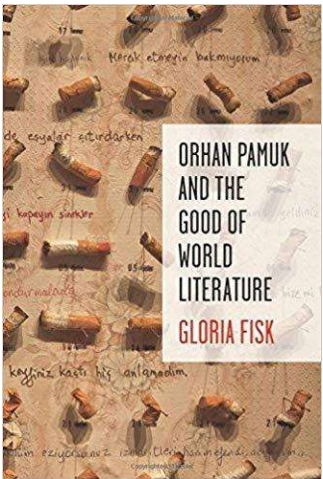
argument:

Orhan Pamuk exemplifies the commercial and cultural values ('the good') associated with contemporary world literature

institutional analysis:

world literature is constructed by various agents and institutions, such as:

- academic discourse
- literary critics
- publishers
- audience expectations
- literary prizes



chapter “Orhan Pamuk wins the Nobel Prize”

Nobel Prize: central instrument in the creation of world literature

- approves a global canon
- creates a universal audience
- circulation creates value – economic and symbolic

past decades: conscious efforts by Nobel Prize Committee to expand the canon

! however:

“The inevitability of the expansion makes the Nobel Prize interesting as an **index of something larger than itself**: of the ways that literary value works across culture and over time, amid the **structural inequalities** that trouble our relations with each other in the present” (pg.128)

How does Fisk support her argument?

group 1:

- “What do Western Publics want from a Non-Western Laureate” & “The Swedish Academy as an Arbiter of Local Value”

group 2:

- “Particularity, Representation, and Quality” & “Marketing Writers to Guilty Tourists”

group 3:

- “The Nobel Prize that Serves the People” & “Everybody is a Patsy”

group 4:

- “Literary Autonomy and the Freedom to be Silent”, “The Bully Pulpit in Stockholm” & “Mo Yan’s Literary Quality and Political Good”

group 5:

- “Translating Critique” & “Complicity is a Universal but Relative Condition”

conclusions?

Fisk:

- direct link between sensibilities western readership and Nobel prize
- specific values inform the process of selection and evaluation
- Eurocentric values – passed off as universal?

Dainotto:

- historical phantasy of European unity supports a specific form of (European) universalism
- is European literature the unquestioned norm for studying (world) literature?

Other? ...