

BEN ETHERINGTON
AND
JARAD ZIMBLER

Introduction

World literature can arrive on your doorstep in any number of guises. Always seeming to come from afar, it may present itself as an adventurer, displaying the exotic spoils of distant lands; as a missionary, professing universal values; as a commercial traveller, peddling the wares of a global market; or even as a broadband technician, offering instant worldwide connectivity. In spite of their differences in costume and itinerary, and in the goods and services they deliver, each of these figures attests to a world in which human societies are connected. If the first few come with a whiff of Victoriana, they do so as a reminder that, even in our day, world literature travels by routes established in the moments of industrialization and imperialism.

This is all by way of saying that writers, scholars, critics, and students may well share reasons for grappling with the question of world literature, including the facts of existence in a globalized economy, but this does not mean that they are always speaking about the same thing. For some, world literature means exotic literature, verbal art of the world beyond their own; and, given the dominance of North American and European academic and literary institutions, such usage typically refers to literature produced beyond 'the West'. For others, world literature means a universal canon of masterpieces: the proverbial best that has been thought and said across histories and cultures. For still others, world literature consists of innumerable works that travel globally, exposing themselves to readers in new places and languages and taking part in the flows of transcultural interaction and exchange. In their contemporary manifestations, such notions inevitably take us into the web of the global market. World literature, some therefore insist, compels us to reflect on the ways in which works are caught up in an unequal world-system made up of highly developed centres and underdeveloped peripheries.

These differences in understanding are not simply matters of choice, because the manner in which world literature appears depends very much on the address at which it finds us, and where it is supposed to begin.

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It certainly makes a difference how we interpret the two concepts of which world literature is compounded, but we need to keep in mind that these are both fluid and highly capacious, and act upon one another in such a way as to ensure that the meaning of *world literature* is irreducible to its constituent elements. If we wish to say what world literature is, we must also be prepared to think through fundamental questions concerning the shifting relationship between literature and the social world in which it is produced and experienced. These questions animate and give purpose to world literary studies, whose objective is nothing less than conceptualizing the entire sphere of literary activity. In view of these considerations, we cannot hope through this *Companion* to reach some kind of negotiated compromise between positions, for what we face is a *problematic*, not a stable object of study.¹

World Literature as a Totality

As a starting point for confronting this problematic – and for exploring the conceptual frameworks implicated in conceiving *world literature*, as well as the ideological environments they entail – we suggest beginning with the following working definition of the term: the verbal arts of the human domain considered as a whole. This is admittedly very broad, and seemingly tautological, since verbal arts are usually deemed human by definition. It does, however, capture a constant aspect of *world* that we believe is important. There is a tendency today to think of *world* as being closely related to, or indeed much the same as *planet* or *globe*; to treat it as a synonym, in other words, for the spatial extension of the earth. But ‘world’ is both more and less than this. If we are able to speak of multiple planets, this is because ‘planet’ does no more than describe a certain kind of object, one of the celestial wanderers that ancient astronomers could distinguish from fixed points of the night sky. It is only by a later deduction that earth itself comes to be placed in the same category. As for ‘globe’, any planet can be one of these, and the number of globes in the universe approaches infinity.

The term world, however, tends to attach specifically to the domain of the human; where it does not – the animal world, the world of fashion, and so forth – it typically requires modification. It is also a temporal as much as a spatial concept. Indeed, the word originates from a sense both of the particularity of humanity’s experience, and of the here and now, rather than the far and distant. It is one of a number of cognates belonging to Germanic languages – *Welt* (German), *wereld* (Dutch), *värld* (Swedish), *verden* (Danish) – that trace their roots to a nominal compound meaning something like ‘age of man’.² Their meanings thus come to include: the

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material world; humanity's present, temporal state of existence; earthly things, or temporal possessions; an age; a person's conditions of life; the course of human affairs.³ These meanings are extended in the kinds of compounds that Germanic languages delight in, all related to humans existing in secular time. In Old English, these include Aelfric's *weorold-cræft*, meaning a secular art; and Bede's *weoruld-gewritu*, meaning secular or profane literature. In Modern English, the sense lingers in the adjective 'worldly'.

If, in our time, we tend to confuse 'world' with 'planet' and 'globe', this reveals something about the current state of the imagination: humanity has subjugated the planet to its needs to the extent that we now unconsciously mistake the (human) world for the earth itself; at the same time, we conflate the world with globe because we tend to forget that, like the word human, world is an emphatic concept, being at once descriptive and qualitative. (An 'inhuman world' is an oxymoron; it has lost the qualities that make it a world.) It is therefore no coincidence that the surge of scholarly interest in 'world literature' over the last twenty years, a surge that has given rise to this *Companion*, has coincided with the popularity of 'globalization' and 'transnationalism', terms now used across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. For many contemporary critics 'world literature' is simply shorthand for 'literature and globalization studies'.⁴ They believe that the field's purpose is to reflect on the relationship between literature, however conceived, and the planetary expansion of capitalism, with its attendant forms of communication, market exchange, and statecraft.

This recent scholarship has been extensively discussed and picked over, and the chapters of this volume engage with it from a variety of angles.⁵ There is no need, therefore, to tell the whole story again. However, it is worth remarking that the concerns of contemporary world literature studies have arisen largely from the exigencies of our present, and hardly encompass the numerous ways in which 'world literature' had been conceived previously. The influential work of Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and David Damrosch should neither be passed over nor overemphasized. Without doubt, these scholars made distinctive contributions in conceptualizing the systems and processes by which literature moves through the world. Yet what is more striking today is that interventions in comparative literary sociology (Casanova's 'republic of letters'), translation studies (Damrosch's 'mode of circulation and reading'), and what would come to be called the digital humanities (Moretti's 'distant reading') were perceived as significant *qua* theories of 'world literature'. Above all, this testifies to the atmosphere of literary studies at the turn of the millennium. The apparently sudden promulgation of world literature as a field of *research* (displacing the term's

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predominant usage as a banner for ‘literatures of the world’) was not instigated solely by these scholars; rather, their efforts reflected a renewed appetite for addressing the question of literary *totality*. In a ‘rapidly globalizing’ world, it was felt that literary studies too would need to adopt ‘one world’ thinking.⁶

We will say more shortly about literary totality, but it is helpful, first, to consider the kinds of conceptual genealogies used by scholars in the new world literary studies to frame their collective project. In general, they have zeroed in on passages in which the formation of world literature appears as the inevitable consequence of ‘globalization’ thought of in the *longue durée*. For instance, critics treat as foundational fragmentary comments by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on ‘*Weltliteratur*’ that concern the intensification of high-level exchanges between cultures, especially in an industrializing Europe, and they routinely cite a speculative aside from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* that mentions the term *Weltliteratur* in connection with the rise of international markets. This outline of the concept’s trajectory – one born of the growing awareness of the impact of the expanding world-economy on literary communities – supplies the form into which the variety of subsequent uses of ‘world literature’ are then inserted as detail.

However, if we think of the term *Weltliteratur* as one conceptual manifestation of a question germane for literary communities across history – what is literary totality? – a broader set of reflections and methodological possibilities come into view. To take one example, the nineteenth-century Russian philologist Alexander Veselovsky developed a critical approach he called ‘historical poetics’ which looked to trans-historically attested formal practices in order to speculate on deep relations between the morphologies of verbal art and social processes. Veselovsky made use of the term world literature when he was an exchange student in Berlin, but he has been absent from the scholarly discussion, no doubt because of the field’s current transnational predilections and conceptual strictures.⁷

The notion of ‘totality’ itself has a certain theoretical hue, bestowed by the tradition of dialectical thought in particular. We use it here in a relatively neutral sense to denote ‘that which is concerned with the total’. Whether articulated in terms of a ‘domain’, ‘sphere’, ‘realm’, ‘ecology’, ‘zone’, or, indeed, ‘world’, totality brings to the fore the dynamic relationship between parts and whole; that is, the ways in which the interrelations and interactions of particulars cumulatively constitute a single intelligible entity. Totality in this sense is not the same as the *universal*, which includes all that has existed, currently exists, and might possibly exist, and which we might call the totality of totalities, but instead denotes the always active configuration of

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every particular at any given point. With this in mind, we might stop to formulate a second iteration of our definition of world literature: *the totality of verbal art*.

This iteration is offered with the proviso that any given framework may limit the set ‘verbal art’ in ways that restrict the number and the kinds of works that could be considered as world literature. Inevitably, these restrictions have to do with questions of value. This is especially apparent in the case of the canonical view of world literature, for which a basic criterion is that admissible works be acknowledged as great across many (if not all) cultures. The number of elements comprising the totality therefore becomes relatively small, but since greatness can be achieved regardless of where and when the work was made (at least in theory), the use of the term ‘world literature’ is justified in these instances. This also helps to explain something important about the other part of our definition: ‘verbal art’ is at once expansive, pointing beyond the printed text and received notions of what counts as properly ‘literary’, but also restrictive, insofar as it connotes works that are subjected to judgements of quality.

Making World Literature

‘World Literature has to be made; it cannot simply be found’, Chris Andrews remarks in this volume, echoing the formulation of Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen:⁸ ‘As readers, students and teachers of world literature, we construct literary worlds by discerning relations at a range of scales.’ Those coming to this field for the first time will find themselves faced with very different constructions of literary worlds, involving scales that often are incommensurate. One efficient way of sizing up any given theory of world literature is to ask how it conceives of i) the discrete elements of literary totality; ii) the nature of the movement and interaction of these elements; and, iii) the composite whole that these elements cumulatively constitute, as well as the temporal logic they assume.⁹

We might consider three recent accounts by way of demonstration. Alexander Beecroft proposes a trans-historical model of world literature for which the discrete elements are acts of verbal art across human history, and the nature of their circulation and interaction is determined by the socio-linguistic ‘biome’ in which they exist (local, national, cosmopolitan, global, and so forth). World literature thus consists of a meta-ecology of co-existing biomes.¹⁰ The Warwick Research Collective proposes a materialist model for which the discrete elements are all literary works produced in the modern world-economy. These elements are shaped by their location within and interaction with this world-economy, one which is constitutively marked

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by uneven and combined development. World literature thus is rendered ‘the literature of the modern world-system’.¹¹ Pheng Cheah proposes a normative conception of world literature for which the discrete elements are literary works which strive to establish a different temporal existence, and hence a different sense of totality, to that which globalization prescribes. These acts of temporalization project into ideal alternate worlds, and do not so much interact with as purposively disrupt the world created by global capitalism; thus, world literature is that which the fallen, globalized world necessitates.¹²

Clearly, each of these accounts offers a radically different conception of literary totality. They disagree on almost everything: how literary totality is related to the broader social totality; whether it consists of specifically literary elements; whether it is particular to the modern capitalist era; whether its existence is real or ideal. They also entail very different kinds of literary critical practice, although, in truth, criticism itself has often seemed secondary when it has come to thinking about world literature, with literary works frequently serving merely as illustrative examples. World literature can sometimes seem to be only one more battle-ground on which to renew enduring conflicts between materialism, phenomenology, historicism, anti-humanism, empiricism, and so forth. It is, however, a concept older than many current theoretical approaches, and the concern with literary totality is much older still, as Timothy Brennan explains in this volume. Whatever the reasons for its current popularity, the term brings with it a semantic halo, especially from humanist traditions, of fruitful literary exchange and a world-historical archive of human achievement. As such, the critical debate is also a battle for the term’s soul: to redefine world literature is to commandeer literary ideals (or to disenchant them). The tensions we repeatedly encounter between different conceptions of world literature ultimately have to do with the direction in which literary studies itself is travelling.

The purpose of this *Companion* is not to advocate for any particular model of the totality of verbal arts, but to enable readers to navigate the diversity of approaches to world literature so that they themselves might wield the critical possibilities these make available. If the tendency has been to *debate* world literature, this volume is committed above all to *doing* world literature. It is committed, in other words, to exploring the totality of verbal arts through engagements with literary materials. *World literature* will be deemed a necessary concept or category only if it proves vital to understanding actual literary practices. In this respect, there is no reason for us to feign neutrality, especially since several theories of world literature place criticism itself out of court. The essays in this *Companion* attest to an overriding conviction that literary materials provide the best evidence of their

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worlds, both those which they constitute and those which shape them. This is a *Companion*, then, to world literary criticism.

We will shortly explain the organization of the volume in more detail; but before we do, we will take our bearings from a literary work. We do this to make tangible what world literary criticism demands as well as to introduce some of the ways in which familiar theorizations of world literature can be brought to bear in practice.

The Location of Cosmopolitanism

Some poems are born global, it would seem. The one we will read in a moment certainly gives that impression. It comes from *Songs of Kabir* (2011), a volume of translations by the Allahabad-based poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, which was published by New York Review Books in its 'nyrb Classics' series.

The choice to translate Kabir – the most celebrated of India's medieval *bhakti* poets – immediately brings Mehrotra into the ambit of several conceptions of world literature.¹³ For Kabir has taken his place among those heroic figures of early modern demotic literatures (Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer) whose works have attained the status of classics alongside the sacred and secular masterpieces of the ancient world. An anti-clerical mystic caught up in the cultural struggles of northern India in the late fifteenth century, Kabir nevertheless seems to address universal problems and values. Moreover, his oeuvre, and not only his stature, is very much the product of processes of translation and circulation, both within and beyond South Asia. There is no authentic text or set of texts we might identify with Kabir, who was in all likelihood unlettered; there is even some disagreement about the language in which he composed (probably 'the ancient composite idiom known as Hindui: the language of the bazaar');¹⁴ but the poems, songs and sayings he uttered in public have found a place in the canon of great books through centuries of oral transmission in several dialects, of transcription in a number of different literary traditions, and of translation into a great many South Asian languages, as well as into languages such as Italian, French, German, English, Polish, and Russian. And with each moment of diffusion, his reputation, and the richness of his oeuvre seem to have been enhanced, not least because he has been taken up and translated by other significant poets, including Rabindranath Tagore, Ezra Pound, and Czesław Miłosz. Such headline acts did much to circulate Kabir's name in and out of the hypercentral language of English,¹⁵ but it was the philologically rigorous translations of the French scholar Charlotte Vaudeville, produced in the postwar period, that enshrined Kabir in the metropolitan Academy, that laboratory of global prestige.¹⁶

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In his introduction to *Songs of Kabir*, Mehrotra makes clear his debt to these metropolitan traditions of translation. This is in keeping with a long-standing and durable cosmopolitan disposition. Mehrotra has insisted for some time that the progress of his career depended on taking ‘bearings from distant stars’;¹⁷ and, in a 2014 essay responding to the notion of world literature, he celebrated the ‘globe-encircling stride’ of three fellow Indian poet-translators.¹⁸ These commitments do not find purchase only in his decision to offer another English-language rendering of Kabir. On the contrary, in his own practice as poet and translator, Mehrotra signals and amplifies the expansive cosmopolitanism of his source. The following is his translation of a *pada* – a short rhymed poem or lyric – found in several of the manuscripts of the ‘western’ tradition:¹⁹

*Though only death has baffled him
 he owns the universe, the stars . . .*
 – Tom Paulin, ‘Chorus’

‘Me shogun.’
 ‘Me bigwig.’
 ‘Me the chief’s son.
 I make the rules here.’

It’s a load of crap.
 Laughing, skipping,
 Tumbling, they’re all
 Headed for Deathville.

It takes only the blink
 Of an eye, says Kabir,
 For a king to be
 Separated from his kingdom.²⁰

From its epigraph, the poem juxtaposes the human world with the unknowable expanse with which death confronts us. ‘Death,’ says Vaudeville, ‘appears to be at the core of Kabir’s thought. He speaks about it in the most vivid and blunt manner, using a variety of images and symbols mostly borrowed from popular tradition and direct, matter-of-fact observation.’²¹ This characterization holds for Mehrotra’s choices: ‘Laughing, skipping, / Tumbling, they’re all / Headed for Deathville’ is a matter-of-fact if playful reminder of humanity’s common end. But the poem is not simply about death; it is about the transience and boundedness of human dominion, and thus the world, a familiar figure for which is offered in the final word, *kingdom*.

Lest the theme’s universality elude us, Mehrotra provides a prompt in his choice of epigraph. The lines he selects from Tom Paulin’s poem follow its opening distich: ‘There are many wonders on this earth / and man has made

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the most of them'.²² Taken together, the four lines key us into a concern with the challenge mortality presents to universalizing human endeavour. It is not incidental that Paulin himself is offering a version of lines from Sophocles's *Antigone*. The original likewise is concerned with the extent and scope of human power, and the limits imposed by death.²³ The epigraph thus links Kabir (and Mehrotra) with another figure of world classics, and Mehrotra (and Kabir) with a contemporary Northern Irish poet-translator working in English, weaving a web that starts to encircle the world spatially and temporally. It also intimates a shared Indo-European linguistic and even cultural heritage. In a note which follows the poem, Mehrotra makes such connections explicit, informing us that the figuring of an instant in time as a 'blink/Of an eye' (*palak*, पलक) 'goes back 3,500 years and occurs universally. It is there in the *Rig Veda* and the *Ramayana*, in Sophocles and Euripides, and in the Armenian oral epic *Sassountsy David*'.²⁴

Mehrotra's translational practice and poetics seem to enact this world-encircling paratextual framing. His lexical choices carry Kabir over into not just another linguistic-cultural domain, but another time. *Bigwig*, *load of crap*, *headed* and *Deathville*, and contractions such as *they're* and *it's* are somewhat idiomatic and colloquial, ensuring a sense of near-contemporaneity. They also seem to avoid imbuing the verse with any detail that would require specific regional knowledge. There is no linguistic marker of the poem's subcontinental origins (even the poet's name can be traced to Arabic rather than Indic roots). As for the versification, the lines may not scan as regular feet, but they are all short (three to five syllables) and grouped neatly into quatrains; and in the first two stanzas, line-breaks correspond with syntax. There is nothing very unusual about this structure. In fact, the poem could be read as a modified Shakespearean sonnet, with Kabir's maxim coming at the turn, and the epigraph serving as a pre-emptive couplet. At the same time, the line-break on 'blink', which renders time also as space, exploits techniques associated with imagism, conjuring Pound, another of Kabir's translators. This will be approachable fare for readers schooled in the strategies of twentieth-century free verse.

In a number of ways then, Mehrotra seems to assert the universality of Kabir through the cosmopolitanism of his own practice. The poem's theme, its paratexts and allusions, and even its language and prosody apparently perform a kind of de-localization; something all the more pronounced when we consider the circumstances of its publication. It would be easy to advance the claim that Mehrotra exemplifies a world literature consisting of innumerable works that travel and circulate globally, taking part in the free flow of transcultural interaction and exchange; or to treat him more sceptically, by focusing on how, writing from a semi-peripheral position in the world

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republic of letters, he lays claim in various ways to a metropolitan inheritance and its associated symbolic capital. Another perspective might see the poem's unusual mixture of sources and literary styles as testimony to asynchronous orders of experience bearing the pressures of an unequal global system. Whichever framework we adopt, the poem appears as the manifestation of the literary totality wrought by globalization to which it transparently attests. Kabir's maxims are updated and made available to the modern English-speaking citizen of the world ('it only takes a tweet for an autocrat's stocks to tumble').

The preceding paragraphs give some flavour of world literary themes and approaches that might be brought to bear when reading a poem such as Mehrotra's, although these certainly do not exhaust or put an end to interpretative possibilities. Thus far, we have loosely characterized the poem's language as colloquial and contemporary, but this is only partially true of the first stanza. Here, the syntax of the first three sentences evoke a pidgin (a contact language usually devised for purposes of trade).²⁵ The phrase 'chief's son' seems to allude in particular to the stereotyped form of American Indian Pidgin English, popularized from the 1930s onwards in radio, film, and television westerns.²⁶ The other predicates of the first stanza – *shogun*, *bigwig* – may not originate in America, but both words are associated, like *chief*, with a kind of outmoded, even antiquated form of authority. Japan's shogunate was abolished in 1867; and, since male wigs were unfashionable by the end of the eighteenth century, *bigwig* was used in a satirical, comic, or derogatory sense almost from the outset. A thoroughgoing and derisive scepticism about claims to power, towards which the remainder of the poem will push, is already lodged in the lexis and syntax of these opening lines. They evoke situations of agonistic encounter between different cultures, and the clichés these produce. As Mehrotra explains in his introduction, Kabir was himself the product of an encounter (and conflict) between Hinduism and Islam, and the way in which the poem articulates, shapes, and satirizes these claims to power are relevant to Mehrotra's own situation, as a poet writing in English in the lingering aftermath of British imperialism.

There are other ways in which the poem resists a blithely cosmopolitan reading. One of these can be followed if we return to the theme of death. *Deathville* is a fairly hokey figuration of humanity's end as some kind of townlet or suburban neighbourhood; a fitting way to terminate a stanza in which worldly actions and activities are viewed as the antics of a parading troupe of clowns and acrobats. The phrase translates *jamaपुरी*, which means, literally, the town or city of Yama, the god of death and the underworld.²⁷ Other translators have preferred the sombre and sonorous 'City of Death', or the more matter-of-fact 'Death City'.²⁸ Why Deathville?