

Teaching Worldly Literature

I.

My approach to world literature has been shaped by two experiences: teaching world literature, mostly but not exclusively in Columbia's great books program, and my work as the general editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). The chief challenge I have had to confront in both endeavors is world literature's apparent aspiration to include, quite simply, all of literature. "You mean, *everything*?!" is what people often ask, incredulously, when I tell them that I am interested in world literature. But even though "world literature" does seem to aspire to such an impossible totality, it has in fact always been concerned with considerably less than the whole. The formula "less than the whole" is of course necessarily true in the case of world literature anthologies (and syllabi) for the immensely practical reason of limited space, even though it should be added that the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* has grown from about 400 pages to over 6000. But it cannot and should not grow indefinitely. Despite the logic of expansion, world literature cannot mean the increasing inclusion of more and more literatures, and not only for practical reasons. To arrive at a proper concept of world literature, we have to restrict its meaning, specifying in what sense it is something other than a process of accumulation that aims to include the whole.

I have come to take this incompleteness not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as a principle to be embraced in the classroom, in the work on the anthology, and also when it comes to articulating the conceptual framework that underpins both. Indeed, incompleteness goes back all the way to the origin of the concept of world literature: for Goethe, the age of

world literature was always in the making, always in the process of arriving, but never quite here yet: "the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Eckermann, 211). We have a paradox here that would continue to characterize world literature to this day: world literature is at hand, it is ready to be grasped, and yet we cannot quite get hold of it yet; we cannot take it and its arrival for granted. On the contrary, we, every one of us, must strive to hasten its approach. Without such striving, which is reminiscent of Faust's most salient feature, the arrival of world literature will be delayed, perhaps indefinitely. This futurist temporality of world literature seems to have been resolved when Marx and Engels pick up the term just a few decades later, in their account of bourgeois capitalism. Now world literature has arrived through a process described in one of the *Communist Manifesto's* most famous paragraphs. The revolutionary effects of bourgeois capitalism are rendered in the dramatic present tense, as culminating in the arrival of world literature: "and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature" (11). But despite the present tense, the *Communist Manifesto* describes an ongoing process, one that has not quite played itself out yet. World literature is still in the process of emerging.

In my experience, teaching *Faust* and the *Communist Manifesto* side by side with an eye towards world literature works well. *Faust* opens in the Doctor's study, which is to say, a library containing all kinds of literature, including Greek tragedies, a staple of world literature. From this concentrated accumulation of world literature, however, we move soon out of the library: with Mephistopheles as his guide, Faust wants to see the world, and does. The very plot of the play moves from the book to the world. The *Communist Manifesto* lends itself to being taught as world literature equally well, and not only because it mentions "world literature" at a crucial moment. More important is the form and genre of the *Communist Manifesto* itself, which created a whole new genre. For the *Communist Manifesto* not only

talks about world literature, it itself, through its urgent form and tone, seeks to hasten the approach of world literature. When I teach the *Communist Manifesto* as literature, I emphasize this performative dimension of a text that more than any other wants to intervene in the world. But there is one more dimension that is even more important: the *Communist Manifesto* is a performative genre that presents itself as a peculiar form of world literature. It is calculated for instant translation and distribution in many languages, a new international world literature in the making (Puchner, 47ff). Marx and Engels even downplay the fact that it was originally written in German: it is almost as if it were not written in any particular language, but meant for translation from the beginning.

## II.

Goethe, Marx and Engels show that world literature is open temporally, that it never considers itself complete and therefore is oriented towards the future. At the same time, one must confront the challenge of totality, that world literature seeks to incorporate all of literature, in terms of geography, this after all is built into the conjunction that makes up this term: literature and world. My approach here will be to understand "world" not as an aspiration towards totality but as a term that restricts the other: literature. World literature is not, simply, all of literature. Rather, world literature is that subset of literature that maintains a crucial relation to the world. World literature is literature insofar as it pertains to the world: a worldly literature.

If "world" modifies "literature," then world literature would have to be literature written for the world, literature that is relevant to the world and engaged with the world. It would also mean literature that has been taken up by the world, emerging in the struggle for dominance. This does not mean that world literature is the literature of the victors. Rather it is the literature arising from this struggle itself. My conception of a worldly literature goes back

to Edward Said's essay on Auerbach, in which he calls Auerbach a "critic of the earthly world."

It is from this vantage point that I would like to revisit the debate that has haunted world literature, especially anthologies of world literature and the syllabi drawing on them, from the beginning: the canon debates. I am talking here specifically about the situation in the United States, where world literature took the form of ever expanding world literature anthologies. Here, too, it turns out to be true that world literature is an intensely local affair. Conceptions of world literature pertaining to anthologies such as the Norton exist primarily in the United States for reasons that have to do with the importation and flowering of Humboldt's conception of the university, the history of multiculturalism, and the demands of large introductory culture and literature courses. (Claims that American world literature anthologies are imperialist instruments through which "Students in Taiwan or Nigeria will learn about the literatures of the world through English translations organized by the United States" (Spivak, xii) have no basis in the reality of anthologies, their distribution, or their actual use.) In the United States, world literature historically emerged as collections of the so-called Western Canon, usually called Western Masterpieces, which were then slowly supplemented by non-Western masterpieces, until the very term "Masterpieces" was dropped and replaced with the title: "World Literature." (I will only note in passing that, interestingly enough, the term "world music" underwent the opposite process and describes precisely non-Western music.) In any case, it was the canon debate that led to the extreme expansion of anthologies of world literature, initiating a phase dominated by a cumulative model: more and more literature had to be included, and not only so-called masterpieces.

On the whole, the teaching of world literature has followed suite, with many formerly "Western literature" or "Western masterpieces" courses giving way to world literature. My own experience at Columbia was dominated by a different, more openly supplemental model.

The two-year sequence, called Literature Humanities, had begun its life as a kind of remedial course, ensuring that students from various backgrounds would know the basic canon of Western literature. In the eighties and nineties it retained its exclusively Western orientation, but over the years companion courses were added to represent other literary traditions and cultures. In my teaching experience, this had both good and bad effects. The first semester of Lit Hum, as the course is commonly called, is tightly organized around Greek literature, plus the Bible and thus makes for a coherent set of readings. Where it fails is generating a sense of the interconnectedness of cultures as well as creating surprising connections across different cultures. This is the advantage of genuine world literature courses, which can track the movement of genres, for example the frame narrative from India to the Arab World and then to the Western Middle Ages.

The canon debate was immensely valuable and necessary: in Goethe's and Marx's sense, it hastened the approach of world literature--certainly as a title for anthologies. At the same time, the canon debates led world literature down some wrong paths, certainly when it came to world literature anthologies, leading to the inclusion of more and more short excerpts that obeyed a representational logic and threatened to become merely tokenistic. World literature anthologies tended to become samplers, seeking to represent totality—now in the name of diversity--through snippets. This goal of comprehensive totality without restrictions needs to be abandoned and we need to return to the Hegelian challenge--without the Eurocentrism. Put in terms of the canon debate this means that we need to arrive at a notion of world literature as something other than a sampler of the whole, something based on a restricted notion of world literature. In my suggestion, the concept worldly literature offers such a restriction, aiming to tell a story not of the whole but of a conjunction, a story about literature *and* the world.

This conjunction can be viewed also from another angle as well: not only what literature does to and with the world; but also the capacity of literature to create worlds and therefore to engage the existing one. I am thinking here of Nelson Goodman and his inquiry into the art of "worldmaking." When I started to work on the anthology, I did not expect this feature to be of importance, but increasingly it turned out to be central. In fact, it was this emphasis on world making that led me in the opposite direction from the sampler, reminding me and my collaborators of the importance of including long excerpts and even complete works: in the last analysis, only complete works unfold and create complete worlds. Worldly literature as I understand it is also that: literature that is world-making.

In teaching literature, I increasingly find myself remembering that the primary experience of students reading works of literature for the first time is the experience of entering a world. They seek to orient themselves in that world, trying to figure out what rules apply there, how it is furnished with propos and characters. Plot often comes in as a secondary consideration, as a vehicle for unfolding this strange new world that they are asked to inhabit for many hours. Surely, world literature must also take account of this, to my mind, primary function of literature: that it creates literary worlds.

Let me press on to another facet of this term. Literature that is taken up by the world is also literature that is appropriated, adopted, distorted, used and abused by the world. It is literature located at what Lionel Trilling once called the "dark and bloody cross-roads where literature and politics meet" (11). Worldly literature is literature in the thrall of empires, victim and facilitator of conquests. In our anthology, we therefore seek to foreground this aspect of literature. Worldly literature is not discrete, delicate, and benign, but embraced by the world, is made for the world, and put in the service of worldly purposes. Worldly literature must take empires, both ancient and modern, to be part of the making of world literature.

Literature's worldly entanglements include conquest and empire, narratives of collective origin and national destiny, but they also include economic matters. Here I come to another aspect of world literature that is often decried, but also often misunderstood. Frequently one hears complaints that world literature is all-too-worldly in the sense that it is too wised up to the world, too calculating with respect to the force that already Goethe knew to be at the center of world literature: the world market. For Goethe, world literature meant that through translation texts produced by different nations and locales were made available to all and thus would enhance mutual understanding: World literature as a contribution to world peace. This, of course, is often the justification for teaching world literature, that it enhances mutual understanding among cultures.

The other reason why translation is so central for Goethe is because it concerns Germany's particular contribution to world literature. What Goethe envisions for Germany is that it will provide the translations. Here is what he writes some time after the famous remarks on the age world literature I quoted above: ". . . whoever knows and studies German inhabits the market place where all nations offer their products [Ware]; he plays the translator even as he reaps profit [sich bereichert]" (86). Goethe does not consider world literature to be something that concerns only the production of literature, but also its distribution and translation. In other words, world literature is not written, but made—made by a marketplace in translation. This world market that makes world literature was, of course, something to which Marx and Engels accorded a central place in their notion of bourgeois world literature. David Damrosch's definition of world literature as literature that "gains in translation" also aims at the nexus of distribution and translation (Damrosch, 281). At this point, detractors of world literature will feel vindicated: this is what we have been suspecting all along: world literature is a marketing ploy!

The best example of this all-too-worldly aspect of world literature is, of course, American: I am thinking of Mark Twain, an all-too-worldly promoter of literature if ever there was one, a good example of the writer as entrepreneur. His *The Gilded Age*, co-written with Charles Dudley Warner, is a novel about the period that is sometimes called the first age of globalization in the late nineteenth century. A powerful indictment of greed and politics, *The Gilded Age* seems timely in more than one way in this our own gilded age; appropriately enough it is focused on land speculation, featuring an heiress who tries to persuade the government through intense lobbying efforts to buy up her land. The deal goes sour. The novel itself, by contrast, made it, selling 35,000 copies in the first two months after publication. Twain couldn't resist and exploited this success by subsequently using the character Colonel Beriah Sellers for a popular play that was performed all across America.

The fact that *The Gilded Age* was actually successful is not my main point. What is remarkable is that Twain and Dudley actually marketed their book as "world literature." They did so by placing short quotes from different languages and in different scripts, including hieroglyphics, Chinese script, and Icelandic, among many others, at the top of each chapter, seemingly without connection or explanation; and also without translation. What were they thinking? In their preface, they give us the following explanation:

No apology is needed for following the learned custom of placing attractive scraps of literature at the heads of our chapters. It has been truly observed by Wagner that such headings, with their vague suggestions of the matter which is to follow them, pleasantly inflame the reader's interest without wholly satisfying his curiosity, and we will hope that it may be found to be so in the present case.

Our quotations are set in a vast number of tongues; this is done for the reason that very few foreign nations among whom the book will circulate can read in any



language but their own; whereas we do not write for a particular class or sect or nation, but to take in the whole world (xxii).

As so often with Twain, one must be careful not to take this at face value. In the first instance, the "attractive scraps of literature" are said to be there in order to whet the readers' or buyers' appetite, without satisfying it completely. So far, so good. But certainly, Twain and Dudley cannot seriously suggest that their book was meant for people speaking Egyptian? And even when the two authors use quotes from spoken languages, a few scraps of literature at the top of the page certainly would not attract readers, or buyers, who do not know English, deplorable as this may be. No, these quotes were not meant for those unfortunate readers who only know their own tongue, and *The Gilded Age* is therefore not meant for the "whole world" but indeed just for English speakers. Twain is playing here with an emerging rhetoric of world literature as a multi-lingual literature beyond the nation. For us this is a familiar definition of world literature, fragments of text in ancient and modern languages. Twain takes this notion of world literature, parodies it, and transforms it into a marketing ploy intended for the home market.

I'm not going to defend Twain. But if we want to arrive at a good definition of worldly literature, I think we need to include Twain, along with Goethe and Marx, as a writer who recognizes the relation between world literature and the world market. I am convinced that this aspect, too, should play a role in the teaching of world literature, especially of contemporary world literature. For example, I often include "The Novel In Africa," a chapter in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, in which the Australian writer and an old acquaintance find themselves lecturing about literature on a cruise ship, a perfect metaphor for the role literature and its teaching plays in a world market.

Another dimension of worldly literature is bound to be even more controversial than world literature's relation to the world market: namely its relation to religion. This, after all, is

the original meaning of "worldly": an attitude directed towards *this* world, rather than the next. The question of religion also touches on a very concrete problem of world literature anthologies, namely the fact that the understanding of literature changes dramatically and radically from one time and place to the next. Indeed the notion of literature itself is a relatively recent coinage. And even within the Latin tradition of the word, our notion of literature is a distinctly post-Romantic one. In gathering different writings, from classical Chinese wisdom literature through the foundational epics of the Mediterranean basin and to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an, not to speak of the various oral traditions that were transcribed in the modern era, we are clearly imposing a modern notion of literature onto an extremely diverse array of texts.

In our work on the *Norton Anthology*, my collaborators and I have been trying to turn this problem into an asset: we are including texts that speak directly to these differing conceptions of literature so that students will find in the anthology material that will address this problem head-on. This is a practical solution: rather than imposing a single conception of literature, we are simply gathering different texts and emphasize their different forms of literariness, including the ways in which they cannot be captured by a recent notion of literature or literariness.

The same approach works for the classroom. I have taught the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament several times to students ranging from orthodox Jews to evangelical Christians. I announce the project right away: we are reading texts as literature. I remember one semester when an orthodox Jewish student, who had transferred to Columbia from Yeshiva University, really got into it, applying his knowledge of the text and his interpretive skills to this literary project. There is no doubt that this is "worldly" reading project is anachronistic: the Hebrew Bible was not written to be discussed as literature in a twenty-first century classroom at a U.S. university. But as a matter of fact, none of the texts on the Lit

Hum syllabus or in other world literature syllabi and anthologies, with the possible exception of very recent work, were written for this purpose or even with this possibility in mind.

On a conceptual level, however, this solution is only partial. It does not address the way in which world literature stands to this problem, including and especially to the problem of secular literariness (but also to the religious overtones of modern literariness, the so-called "religion of art" etc.). Does including religious texts in a world literature anthology mean imposing onto them a secular notion of literature? Here I hope that the notion of worldly literature can help us mediate between religion and secularization. Speaking of worldly literature as I understand it is not the same as simply insisting on a secular notion of literature. This difference is crucial. As a concept, worldly literature does not oppose itself to religion the way the secular and the project of secularization do. Rather, by pointing to *this* world, the worldly acknowledges the possibility of the *other* world; it merely says that it will only (or at any rate equally) be concerned with *this* one. In the same way, worldly literature does not seek to secularize religious literature; it simply says that within the purview of its concept, literature will be looked at in a worldly way. This includes the ways in which literature mobilizes the other world for this one. The religious valence of a text will be considered, but it will be considered in its worldly effects.

The this-worldly aspect of literature brings me to my last point. I have been stressing the crucial relation of literature to this, our world, rather than the next. And yet, one of the ways in which literature—all literature, but perhaps particularly world literature—concerns itself with our world is by constructing alternatives to it. Open any page in any anthology and you enter a new world. These worlds are in many ways tethered to our world, but they also, deliberately, seek to leave it behind. Even though all literature creates worlds, there are particular genres that foreground this function. Among them are creation myths, and for this reason, Emily Wilson and Wiebke Denecke created a cluster in the new edition of the Norton

anthology a cluster called "Creation and the Cosmos" to capture this world-creation aspect. Now, one might well say that creation myths had, and sometimes still have, an explanatory function directed at our world. At the same time, however, what they do is create, giving us a rendering of a world on a cosmic scale. The point here is that this world, along with all other worlds of literature, are possible worlds, alternative worlds, but this also means worlds that are presented as existing ones. To the extent that the possible worlds created by literature are worlds in the first place, they demand to be related to our world: they remain worldly.

A good example of several of the features of world literature I have emphasized, including the interest in cross-cultural traffic and connections, the relation of literature and empires, and finally the role of world creation is the Mayan epic *Popol Vuh*. Based on material from the Mayan classical age, the *Popol Vuh* existed in the form of Mayan glyphs. The writing functioned primarily as a mnemonic device to be actualized in oral performance. This original, written form, in any case, is quickly lost, or hidden away, when the Spanish land and begin burning cultural artifacts. The destructive realities of the Spanish empire here intersect quite starkly with the life of the *Popol Vuh*, which has to go underground. It does not remain there, however. Some time between 1554 and 1558, a Mayan trained in the Latin alphabet writes down a full, actualized version of the *Popol Vuh*. In the early eighteenth century, Francisco Ximénes, a friar working as a parish priest in the town of Chichicastenango encountered the transcribed version, copied it and added a Spanish translation (Tedlock). The Spanish empire almost destroyed the text; but then, by bringing Latin literacy to some Mayans, it also facilitated the transcription and then translation of this text, which ensured its eventual status as world literature, as a text read all over the world. It has an important place in our anthology, as it does in other anthologies.

The *Popol Vuh* also is an example of cross-cultural influence and echoes. Elaborated and written down after the conquest, it contains a layer of Christian influence, especially from

the Hebrew Bible. More intriguingly, there is a story of the flood, which may have been imported by the Spanish. The biblical version of the flood, of course, may itself have been derived from the older *Epic of Gilgamesh* or at least parallels it. In any case, we have here a story that exists in one of the earliest works of literature that is echoed in the Hebrew Bible, and in Mesoamerica.

Finally, it is a story of world creation. First, the *Popol Vuh* does begin with a creation story, involving not one but several successive creations. One of the most fascinating aspects of this text is the creation of humans. Several aborted attempts led to various mannequins and monkeys, before proper humans emerge. Finally, once the epic moves from gods and god-like ancestors to humans and their generations, world creation acquires yet another dimension: the naming of the world. The epic names and in this sense creates the world of the Maya, takes possession of it, makes it their own. That this act of naming is crucial in this text's relation to the Maya world is clear from the very last line of the text, written in a retrospective glance by its scribe and translator. This scribe leaves us with a lament: "This is enough about the being of Quiché, given that there is no longer a place to see it" (198). I hear a feeling of loss in these last lines, a lament. The original book is being hidden, or lost; in any case, it is being replaced by the transliteration we are reading. But not only the book, the Mayans themselves are hiding, and their culture is under threat. The *Popol Vuh* had created a world, describing the process by which important places within it were named. That world, the world of the *Popol Vuh*, has changed: it is no longer there to be seen .

To sum up: I've been trying to arrive at a concept of world literature that would evade some of the critique traditionally launched against world literature's aspiration to totality by understanding it in a restricted sense as literature for the world, adopted and made by the world, oriented towards the world market, and oriented towards *this* world rather than the next while remaining non-committal with respect to literature's possible other-worldliness;

finally, world literature foregrounds the world-creation power of literature, which is expressed in world creation myths but also whenever literature presents a world *as* world. This definition is both conceptual, but also practical, arising both from an analysis of the history of the term "world literature" as well as from my work on the *Norton Anthology* and my classroom experience. It is, to be sure, an incomplete definition, but then again incompleteness is and remains one of the fundamental characteristics of world literature. It is a characteristic that we should accept as one of its most salient features.

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Teaching Language through Literature. 285. meaningful contexts full of descriptive language and interesting characters. Unlike the informational text the literary text provides fluid and dynamic reality.