

## The end of world literature?

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2023.15.3.7>

Implicit in the project of a world literature is the dream of a unifying basis for world order. If this goal might seem to be hopelessly utopian, it also outlines a long-term project of global transformation, whose attractiveness stems from the link to a larger process of globalization. For the idea of a unified global culture seems at first glance to coincide with the development of a world history. Yet, because the beginning of a truly global history was only made possible by the European circumnavigation of the globe, there is a political aspect to this history that threatens to undermine the universalist idea of a world literature. Global history did not develop in a neutral way, but through trade and conquest, initially through Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch colonial expansion, which established European political and military relationships across the globe. The intensive colonization of the world and the creation of interrelated economies in the era of industrialization created a global history that was based on a set of unequal relationships. More and more local conditions and processes became dependent upon global developments dominated by European colonial structures. Since this world order developed with increasing European penetration into all areas of the globe, “world” history did not encompass everything happening on Earth but rather only those aspects that had to do with the relationship between local, non-European processes and globally relevant European ones. The development of a global perspective coincided with the spread of a European-based conception of order.

In economics, global relationships in general are based on complementarity, in which an imbalance of resources and productive capacities between two or more regions creates the possibility for profitable trade. The initial development of a global economy was based on these imbalances, in which resources in the early modern period (like silver, labor, or arable land) and technologies (such as porcelain production, textile production, or navigation skills) were distributed across the world unevenly. Yet, the historical development of globalization did not simply involve a neutral linking of civilizations to each other but rather the expansion of European civilization to become the defining framework of a single global order. Economically and politically, the development of capitalism allowed Europe to establish the parameters

of a global system of trade, production, and consumption within its own framework of political and military domination (Pomeranz 2000, 194–206).

Both the development of economic globalization and the lifting of previous constraints have had repercussions for the functioning of world literature. The situation of world literature depends on the way in which economic globalization established a Europe-oriented framework for economic and political relationships. Yet theories of world literature often do not take into account this political framing of literary exchange. The result is a suppression of the differences in perspective that stem from the separation between center and periphery in the world of literature. As the opposition between a single center and periphery declines in significance in an increasingly multipolar world with multiple centers, the idea of a single world literature will become less relevant, replaced by the separate traditions that are established by new relations of sovereignty.

### THE DISCOURSE OF WORLD LITERATURE

The current discourse of world literature is closely linked to globalization insofar as it has oriented itself around the dictum from Goethe that “[n]ational literature is now rather a meaningless term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” ([1836] 1984, 133). This statement assumes that national literature is parochial in comparison with the universal perspective of a world literature. Accordingly, David Damrosch has indicated that works enter into a canon of world literature when they are read as literature and then circulate beyond their local context (2003, 1–36). This definition, in attempting to treat world literature as a neutral phenomenon, does not address the question of why a work from anywhere else might be received in a particular context. Yet, the historical circumstances that determine this interest are defining for the movement of texts, just as the colonial context was crucial not only for the movement but indeed for the very creation of raw materials and manufactures.

Damrosch sums up a view on world literature from a position at the “center” of international literary culture without, however, indicating the positionality of that perspective. When he argues, for instance, that world literature includes three modes of reading – classics, masterpieces, and windows onto the world – he presents these modes as if they were neutral, even though they depend on a center-periphery distinction. Consequently, he presents classics as an objective list. But if classics are foundational for a culture and limited in number, they will be defined by a particular tradition and its political dynamics rather than as a universal canon of world literature (Guillory 2013, 3–8). Similarly, the concept of masterpieces in a great conversation elides the problem of separate traditions and public spheres that would define the questions and parameters of such a conversation in each tradition. Finally, if foreign literature is understood as a set of windows on the world that provide insight into a foreign culture, this function expresses the particular desire of the center to look at the periphery. Such windows are generally unnecessary for a periphery that is accustomed to orienting itself around the relationship to the center.

Damrosch argues that immersion in another culture involves a direct engagement that implies an effacement of one's original culture. But in making this argument, he abstracts from the perspectival differences between cultures in order to imagine a concatenation of works from different cultures that exist within an abstract neutral space of world literature. "We encounter the work not at the heart of its source culture but in the field of force generated among works that may come from very different cultures and eras" (2003, 300). But the reception of a work from another culture in fact always involves a continuing distance and difference from the new culture, in which the new is interpreted in terms of one's original culture. While Damrosch's later work makes more allowances for such intercultural dynamics in his survey of the thoughts of earlier comparatists (2020, 7–11), the unifying impulse to create a global tradition of comparatists mirrors the world literature project of building a global canon.

This unifying vision defines a particular cultural project that we can contrast with Johann Gottfried Herder's understanding of the way in which different traditions relate to each other in a way that does not set up a hierarchy of cultures but rather sees each culture as its own center, into which other cultures can be assimilated. Herder outlines a process of cultural reception in which various traditions from the past serve as the models for culture in the present. This fund of tradition is not limited to a specific language, and cross-cultural borrowings are the norm rather than the exception. However, a culture will only borrow that which is already similar to it:

everything that is still *similar* with my nature, that can be *assimilated* to it, I cover, strive for, make my own; *beyond that*, kind nature has armed me with *feelinglessness*, *coldness*, and *blindness*; this can even become *contempt* and *disgust*, but only has the purpose of forcing me back *on myself*, of making me satisfied on the *center* that bears me. ([1774] 2002, 297)

In referring here to blindness, contempt, and disgust as reactions to the unfamiliar, Herder is not attempting to promote discord. Rather, he is recognizing the ways in which cultural reception functions according to similarities that foster exchange, in spite of foreignness. Cultural reception maintains a central core of interests that is determined by the conditions of a particular time and place, and this core culture is the condition for the possibility of cross-cultural borrowing. National identity remains at the center in this borrowing and provides a filter for viewing other cultures.

Herder's approach to cross-cultural interactions provides an alternative framework for imagining the relationships between the world's literary traditions. Even as we immerse ourselves in a new culture, we do so from the perspective of our existing culture, and this difference impacts the meaning of the text from the point of view of the recipient. When Damrosch emphasizes world literature, not as a set canon of texts, but as a mode of reading involving a detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time, he neglects the way in which every example of world literature involves a refraction of the source culture through the host culture's values. This interaction between source culture and host culture becomes defining for the way world literature develops, suggesting that it might not have a unified trajectory but is fragmented into many binary relationships.

Other approaches to world literature have also ignored the character of this interaction between host culture and source culture. In a variation on Damrosch's approach, Franco Moretti attempts to establish a unified global history of literature by imagining that literary forms that are developed in one time and place can be treated like technological inventions, such as the crossbow or the cotton gin, that then spread throughout the world. He uses the center-periphery model in order to equate the center with advancement in literary technique and the periphery with all those who are continually trying to catch up with the center (2000, 55–56). While he recognizes how the center-periphery distinction has affected the development of literature across the globe, his approach fails to take into account the way in which a work interacts with its context in order to attain its meaning. A particular literary form changes its meaning and function through the move to a new context or even to a new time in the same culture. As a result, there is no constant meaning of a literary work that would transcend the context in which it is received, and literary techniques do not progress the way technology does. Rather, different formal techniques become more or less useful at different times and in different places like the words of a language, which go in and out of style without there being any meaningful way to understand these shifts as a form of progress.

Rather than seeing world literature as the result of either the freeing of literary works from local constraints or a globally unified history of literary progress, an analysis of world literature must take into account the specific relationship between two cultures when one culture receives a work from another culture. If the receiving culture gains a new perspective to the extent that it finds something new in the source culture, this shift does not create a single world literature but rather a change in the relationship between the two specific traditions. This changing relationship is shaped by both literary and political factors.

Pascale Casanova is able to take this dynamic into account to the extent that her analysis considers the political subtext of world literature and situates the development of a world discourse of literature within a political dynamic of center and periphery. The periphery does not simply copy the center, but in the attempts to establish its own independent legitimacy, the periphery seeks to gain the attention of the center. In the course of this endeavor, texts from the periphery in fact often become the defining ones for the center. According to Casanova, a world republic of letters has developed historically as the establishment of an international literature in which literary creation has been freed of political and national dependencies ([1999] 2004, xii). This world republic developed beginning in the 16th century when French began to establish itself against Latin as an independent literary language (48–67). At the same time, Herder's ideas promoted the development of national literary traditions that would continually challenge the centrality of a universalizing culture (75–81).

In the 20th century, attempts at establishing national literatures have had to make the detour through a Parisian literary elite because, according to Casanova, Paris had a culture of consistently supporting literature as an autonomous sphere independent of national and political concerns (86–87). Casanova emphasizes that the dom-

inance of Parisian literary authority depended on their detachment from political authority. Yet, she also indicates that the autonomy of the world republic of letters was built upon structures of sovereignty that determined the meaning of literature and its history. The literary authority of Paris, while claiming to be detached from political concerns, still functioned as a corollary to the more general Western European claim to be the carrier of an international order that is based on universal norms that include on the one hand freedom of speech and the accompanying autonomy of literature and on the other hand popular sovereignty and the corresponding need to define the identity of the people through literary rather than dynastic or religious traditions. The goal of literary autonomy is itself part of a political dynamic oriented around popular sovereignty and secularization.

The spread of the idea of popular sovereignty engendered the search for national literatures in the periphery that would challenge the authority of the center. James Joyce's work must be understood within the context of a developing Irish nationalism, whose development as a political idea created the impetus for the project of an Irish literary culture. If Joyce's particular version of this project was rejected in Ireland and accepted in Paris, his writing did not arise out of the project of expanding a general notion of literature but of establishing an Irish national literary tradition that would challenge the authority of the center of literature in Paris (Casanova 2004, 303–324). But this challenge was also an attempt to transform the trajectory of Irish culture in a way that was not immediately accepted in Ireland, forcing Joyce to turn to Paris, which indeed provided a temporary home for Joyce's work.

Joyce's work is an example of the way in which the development of a national tradition can exclude important works (such as his) that do not conform to the attitudes dominant at a certain point in that tradition. In this situation, Paris provided a haven for Joyce in which his work could be disseminated outside the restrictions of the Irish context. Paradoxically it is often the works that establish a national tradition that have been received as examples of world literature itself. While the works of John M. Synge and W. B. Yeats were innovative in their embrace of an Irish popular culture, Joyce's work set itself apart from this very development in its biting portrayal of this popular culture. It may be that works begin to be accepted as world literature primarily when they create caesuras within their own traditions.

The success of the project of developing separate national literary traditions in the periphery has resulted in the decline of the center's influence, to the point where those national traditions in the periphery start to become arbiters of their own standards of quality. Once this point is reached, a new dynamic begins that frees itself from the influence of a global literary center and in which the unity of a literary center might cede its authority to different literary traditions. This outcome could only realize itself to the extent that it would be possible to establish new criteria for quality that would diverge from the literary center's insistence on innovation in literary technique as the measure of literary quality. In this case, national literary traditions would become emancipated from a central arbiter, even if they could not isolate themselves from developments in the rest of the world. Such a shift in interpretive authority for determining the development of a literary tradition depends, however, on a political

shift in which the global structure of political sovereignty becomes decentralized. Such a development depends on the context of political sovereignty within which culture develops.

### SOVEREIGNTY AND REPRESENTATION

Literature cannot be separated from questions of political sovereignty because sovereignty itself has a representational component. Carl Schmitt describes how political sovereignty depends not simply on power but on a representation that establishes the authority of a political order. Because every political order requires that specific decisions be taken, it contains decision-makers as leaders. At the same time, these decisions need to be carried out, and therefore every political order requires a people. Consequently, every order must be established on the basis of a relationship between the representation of the sovereign decision-maker and the identity of the people who recognize the sovereign's authority. The representational aspect of order can be most easily seen in the way a monarchy contains a representation of the monarch that becomes the basis for sovereignty. The aspect of identity consists of the way in which there must always be a people to be the audience for the representation, affirming the legitimacy of the representation. The representational trappings of monarchy are thus directed at the people, even though the representation serves to establish the monarch as the source of sovereignty (2008, 241–243).

When the source of sovereignty is held to be the people itself, however, the identity of the people is not immediately given, but must take on some representational form that then becomes the basis for sovereign authority. Because the “people” cannot construct itself as a basis of political authority until it can represent itself, popular sovereignty requires a cultural tradition that can develop this self-representation. Such a tradition can be based on religion but alternatively, especially in the case of nationalism, can also be linked to literature. The link between literature and politics stems from the function of literature as a means of cultural self-understanding. Self-understanding becomes important politically to the extent that sovereignty is understood as popular sovereignty, which requires the development of a people with a representation of its own identity and thus a self-understanding of its own character and history.

Samuel Huntington has described this shift in the structure of sovereignty away from a single global center as a move away from the universality of a Western global order and towards a global order that is structured by the clash of civilizations. According to Huntington, each of several regions will develop hegemonic status in their own part of the world based on the continuity of the civilizational culture in each region. Accordingly, the conflicts of the future will not be based on economics or ideology, but on culture. In this view, civilization will become the basic unit of culture because of globalization and de-secularization. Huntington argues that, while nation states have been the principal actors of world history for the last few centuries, for most of world history the key actors have been civilizations. With increased mobility and communication having made local and national differences less primary, civilizational identity, as the largest unit of identity short of the identity of all humans

as opposed to other species, is returning as the basis for sovereignty and political identity. The importance of civilization coincides for Huntington with a return to religion going on in all parts of the world that creates a focus on “universal” civilizational traits over national and local ones. Because it is linked to a religious conception of the world, civilizational identity cannot be easily changed, and Huntington indicates that global political conflict is no longer an issue of “Which side are you on?” but of “What are you?”. Because they are based on both long-running historical continuities and religious commitments, the differences between civilizations for Huntington are real and basic (1993, 23–26).

In this view, with the end of the Cold War, non-Western areas of the world are now becoming actors in their own right. Before that, world politics were carried out as a set of conflicts within the Western world, including the Napoleonic wars, World Wars I and II, and the Cold War. The rise of the West to the peak of its power has created a complementary turn to fundamental cultural-religious issues in other parts of the world. Huntington’s prognosis is that civilizational identity will define the fault lines of future conflicts. On the macro-level, civilizational groups will compete over economic and military power, control of international institutions, and political and religious values. On the micro-level, there will be conflicts over territory in areas at the fault lines between civilizations. Eventually, each of several regions will develop hegemonic status in its own part of the world based on the continuity of the civilizational culture in each super-region.

While Huntington paints a grim picture of increasingly irresolvable global conflict that occurs along civilizational fault lines, both the history of world literature and the example of today’s alliances also provide alternative trajectories for world order. On the cultural level, the historical orientation of world literature around a Western center indicates that a literary dynamic can develop that disrupts civilizational continuities. Indeed, important works of literature often highlight how a particular culture lacks an identity with itself. As Casanova has shown, Joyce’s work was part of an Irish cultural movement to establish a concept of Irish identity within a literary tradition. If Joyce’s work was not accepted as such by the Irish and had to be published in Paris, this circumstance does not detract from the value of Joyce’s work for both reflecting on Irish identity and expanding its bounds. Similarly, Faulkner’s depiction of racism in the southern U.S. could not be appreciated in his native country until after his work was heralded and published in Paris. In both these cases, works of literature gained their importance, not through an adherence to a cultural or civilizational trajectory, but through the disruption of such a trajectory. In fact, to the extent that the Irish and U.S. national contexts were dominated by an informal form of censorship that did not allow key issues to be addressed, Joyce and Faulkner, and the critiques of their cultures that their works expressed, depended on Parisian literary authorities to establish a forum for their work. Since the truth about the situation of racism in the U.S. could not be depicted properly in the U.S., Faulkner profited from the turn to Paris as the place where his work could find an audience that was free of the constraints of the U.S. public sphere. Yet, this dynamic does not necessarily attest to the development of a single world litera-

ture. Rather, the possibility of leaving one's own culture temporarily only indicates that a single national tradition can be discontinuous within itself. Such complexities in the relation of a work of literature to its own context indicates that, as important as discussions of sovereignty are to understanding cultural dynamics, it is not enough to reduce cultural developments to the pressures of sovereignty or the simplifying notion of a clash of civilizations. To understand the relationship between literature and sovereignty, it would be necessary to develop a more nuanced analysis of how cultures relate to each other.

### THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR

Walter Benjamin's analysis of the process of translation helps us to understand the mechanisms of cultural exchange and the way they relate to cultural trajectories. His 1923 essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (Eng. trans. "The Task of the Translator", 1968) focuses on the way in which every language has its own manner of meaning, which cannot be translated, even when the meaning itself can be translated. The manner of meaning lies in the constellation of words that surround a particular word and that give that word in a language its own resonance. He uses the example of the word for bread in German (*Brot*) and in French (*pain*) in order to show that, even though the meaning is the same, the manner of meaning is different because of the other words that are unspoken but connoted by *Brot* or *pain* (Benjamin 1996, 257). Such manners of meaning are untranslatable because each language has built up the connections between different words in its own specific way. The translation of a poem, for instance, will never be able to recreate the manner of meaning of the original. The result of the translation will instead be a new manner of meaning that would contrast with the manner of meaning of the original. One of the key achievements of a translation, then, is to allow the manner of meaning of the original to be perceived. Without the juxtaposed translation, one would be unaware of the particular manner of meaning of the original, which is linked to the peculiarities of the original language in contrast to another one.

The unfolding of the manner of meaning of each language tends to exclude and obscure other possibilities for the manner of meaning. The translation brings these different possibilities into view, but only as different language trajectories in which the different languages will "strive to exclude each other" (257). The process of translation allows the two languages to confront each other, and this confrontation illuminates their relationship to each other. The translator thus describes the relationship of two languages to each other, but only at one point in time.

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point – establishing with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity – a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (261)

The translation and the original only touch at one moment at the point of meaning, and each language then develops further along its own separate trajectory based on each language's manner of meaning. Benjamin indicates thereby that each lan-



guage has its own history and that this history of its manner of meaning becomes defining for the work of art itself in determining the trajectory of meaning.

A tension arises at this point in Benjamin's analysis between the history of a language and the history of the work of art. The work has its own "life" in the original language and an "afterlife" in the translation. But if the work has a continuing afterlife in the translation, this continuity would be subject to the trajectory of the new language, which has its own history. Since it develops within the medium of the new language and its history, this afterlife of the translated work would indeed be an existence that is entirely cut off from the life of the original work, as if that original work had already died. Because each language excludes the manner of meaning of other languages, the translation is cut off from the original and must begin life anew within the new language.

Though Benjamin attempts to maintain the unity of the work of art through his imagining of a pure language that would be a combination of all the individual languages and their separate manners of meaning, in fact each language means the entire world and has its own trajectory. Because each language has its own manner of meaning, every language expresses the world in its own way. Each language presents the totality of experience from its own perspective. Since there is never simply a meaning but also a manner of meaning, the totality that is expressed by the whole of every language will never be neutral but always slanted in some way. This slant of every language in its manner of meaning results from its particular history, and the key category when considering a literature would also be the history of the tradition rather than the unity of the individual work, whose meaning is dependent on the manner of meaning of the language into which it is translated.

The history of a tradition, and not of individual texts, is thus the relevant history when thinking about world literature (Pan 2017, 40–45). The translation of a text from one language into another does not preserve the text across traditions. Rather, each tradition remains within its own trajectory and integrates a foreign text into its own trajectory. There is no identity of the text across the two traditions, as the creator of identity would have to be a reader who would belong within the receiving tradition, situating that text within that tradition. The text does not have an inherent meaning but depends upon the process of tradition in order for the meaning to develop. This process is a backward-looking one in which the meaning arises out of the interaction between present concerns and the characteristics of the text which make it relevant or irrelevant for those concerns. The backward gaze establishes the selection criteria by which texts from the past and from different cultures might become part of a conception of world literature. But because each gaze is grounded in a situated present, the definition of world literature will shift according to this situatedness of the gaze. The result is a multiplicity of world literatures, in which each cultural space will produce its own view of the world.

### THE FRAGMENTATION OF WORLD LITERATURE

The development of a discourse of world literature cannot be compared to the development of a global economy, in which different regions compete to cre-

ate “world-class” products for the world in a particular industry and in which the links between different regions are maintained through complementarities. If the connections in a global economy are predicated on the competition that eventually excludes certain regions from particular industries, with literature and culture there is no necessary relationship of complementarity leading to connections based on dependence. Each public sphere has its own trajectory that cannot be merged into a global trajectory unless we move toward a unified language and government with a single cultural space of development. Such a move would be a political development that would establish a single public sphere with a single sovereign, merging separate historical trajectories into a single one through a political union that would most likely have to be imperialist in nature. Though one tradition may orient itself around another one, as with the center-periphery relationship in the past, each tradition can within its own public sphere establish its own emphases and models for development. The key to this ability is the political sovereignty that would allow an independent public sphere to develop. If we accept the specific understanding of the public sphere that can be derived in its cultural aspect from the work of Hans Georg Gadamer and its political aspect from the work of Carl Schmitt, the cultural texts of a canon do not have an equal status with each other (Pan 2014, 70–76). Rather, certain key texts will exercise a defining role for the construction of political identity and the view of the world from that perspective.

Consequently, if the global economy begins with the trade that links regions to each other through relationships of complementarity, world literature cannot similarly become global through such a shift to a global perspective. The situation is different because literature from the beginning presupposes a conception of the entirety of the world from the point of view of the local, and the move to a global context does not necessarily change this locally centered conception. Neither is there a sense in which one culture might have what another culture lacks. Every culture includes an all-encompassing cosmology and sees the entire world through its own perspective. Because a view of the world always depends on one’s standpoint, such a view is not just an opinion that can be changed at will but includes an entire canon of texts that make up the basis of a developmental history. During the Roman Empire, the world could consist of Rome and its territories, at the same time as the Persian or Chinese worlds could consist of their empires. Each region could be considered a world in itself, and a world history and world literature could refer to the entirety of each cultural space. World literature could exist before the advent of global history because even before there arose a consciousness of the world as the entire globe, one could speak of the world in order to refer to the known world of any particular region that defined its cultural perspective. At the same time, each culture could refer to the history of the world, going back for instance to Adam and Eve in the Hebrew cosmology or to Prometheus in the Greek one. By maintaining its own understanding of what the world is, each culture could remain within its own view of the world. Each cultural history amongst many was complete as a history, perspective, and trajectory.

Globalization affects this structure of multiple conceptions of the meaning of the world, not by merging them into one global development, but by forcing each culture to understand itself as one understanding of the world amongst many in order to establish a relationship to other cultures and texts. A Western world, a Chinese world, an Arab world, or a South Asian world might set some parameters in terms of common texts, but these civilizational divisions are also intersected by texts from other civilizations based on different reception histories and ideologies. Consequently, it would not be appropriate to divide the world into civilizations but into the public spheres that currently reflect the division of sovereignty across the globe in terms of nation-state identity. While each separate public sphere will be defined by issues of sovereignty, once defined a public sphere will have its own historical development that will set the priorities for reception of works from its own past and from other traditions. The centrality of the public sphere for the identity of a tradition creates both a proliferation of conceptions of world literature across different public spheres and a stable context in each public sphere through which texts from other traditions can be evaluated and received.

If this development of separate public spheres forms the context for conceptions of world literature, we can understand the idea of world literature as itself the outgrowth of a particular national tradition. Literature as a unified global phenomenon developed first as a European-based republic of letters that attained global reach through the political sovereignty that Europe exercised over the rest of the world. While an early discourse of world literature *per se* developed from Goethe's initial conception, it only developed as a widespread approach to culture in the last 40 years as a U.S. American phenomenon that established a view of the world from that perspective. Its development arose out of the uniquely American "melting pot" situation in which an understanding of cultural identity had to adapt to the changing mix of ethnic groups that immigrated to the U.S. as well as to the needs of a developing national identity. In the 19th century, cultural identity in the U.S. was strongly oriented around the Bible as well as Greek and Latin classics, and the focus of higher education, particularly before the Civil War, was on the training of the clergy. After the Civil War and into the 20th century, a notion of Western culture and civilization developed that served the need to create a more unified national identity that would include aspects of different parts of Europe. It was not until the 1980s that this Western canon was then expanded to include literature from across the world. But this development was not simply the beginning of a more cosmopolitan perspective, but in the first place a consequence of domestic U.S. processes that included increasing immigration from Asia and Latin America as well as the civil rights movement, granting more rights and recognition to U.S. minorities and women.

The recent spread of the world literature idea began then as an evolution in U.S. teaching curricula that followed domestic demographic and political trends. It became a worldwide phenomenon only due to the political and cultural dominance of the U.S. in world affairs, leading to the teaching of world literature as an accompaniment to the growth of global English as a common *lingua franca*, as opposed to an earlier understanding of the world literature idea that was more grounded

in methods of comparative literature involving knowledge of different languages (Gillespie 2017, 44–45). As a product of U.S. political and cultural power, the present discourse of world literature continues to present a view of the world from the U.S. perspective, and today's canon of world literature continues to be defined by the particular historical and political exigencies of American higher education.

Attempts by other countries such as China to insert works from their cultures into this canon of world literature are hampered by the circumstance that the creation of canons is a reception phenomenon. A consequence of Herder's understanding of cross-cultural influences is that the attempt to insert works into the canon from the outside is nearly impossible because canons are not objective. It will be U.S. concerns that determine the works that will become most relevant to an American audience. Here, Chinese scholars familiar with the U.S. context might be able to make some suggestions of Chinese literary texts that would have some relevance, but the process will ultimately depend on the "pull" from Americans.

Consequently, a more productive project for Chinese literary culture would be to simply ignore to a certain extent the trajectory of the U.S. cultural tradition and consider instead the Chinese national public sphere and reflect upon its possibilities and limitations in order to understand the relevant canon of world literature that is specifically suited for addressing Chinese concerns today. This Chinese version of world literature would differ from the U.S. one, including of course more Chinese works but also a different selection of Western works than the ones relevant in other regions.

In the end this entire question of criteria for inclusion of works in the canon cannot be considered as a prescriptive judgment. Instead, canons form themselves as a part of processes of reception that must be treated as unpredictable, with a life of their own. Critics do not determine canons but only follow their movement. They do not prescribe the criteria by which they are formed but can only describe the factors that have gone into the establishment of an existing canon. Rather than gaining their international status through some special technique or outlook, works become significant to the extent that they alter the flow of culture within a particular tradition, which today is generally defined in terms of a nation-state public sphere. That is, the significance is not based on any objective "advance" in literary technology, but rather in the way that a work intervenes in a particular local historical tradition. Here, the local context within which a work appears is in fact determining for its significance. The key measure would be the extent to which a work revises thinking in a particular area that is of current concern.

Let us consider some examples of how this might work. Clearly one of the most significant works of modern Chinese fiction has been Lu Xun's "Kuáng rén Rìjì" (1918; Eng. trans. "Diary of a Madman", 1990). This story had a profound effect on China because it placed into question an entire tradition of thinking about sacrifice and filial piety, bringing up the possibility that this tradition was self-destructive. The interaction between the story and this tradition creates the story's particular power. At the same time Lu Xun's work, by re-orienting the literary tradition in order to open it up to outside perspectives, participated in changing the course of Chinese literary

history, and so it is clear that it would be difficult to consider that history without this work.

Franz Kafka's "Das Urteil" (1913; Eng. trans. "The Judgment", 1948) had a similar re-orienting significance for the trajectory of German literature in that it problematizes the modern establishment of the individual over the community as the basis of social structures. As Casanova argues, the significance of Kafka's work lies in the way it presents the perspective of a peripheral culture, Eastern European Jews, in conflict with a dominant culture, the tradition of German literature (2004, 269–273). While Casanova might also have opposed the "world literary" context of German literature to the local Czech context in the evaluation of Kafka's significance, the broader point remains the way in which the universal aspect of the story is bound up with the process of modernization and the increasing focus on the modern individual rather than traditional groups as the basic unit of society. The impact of the story derives from its interaction with this dynamic of center and periphery.

The key in both cases is the way in which the individual work interacts with the trajectories of different traditions. To the extent that a work has an important impact on that trajectory, it will become significant for a canon of literature in that tradition. Similarly, the impact which the work might have in the development of a different literary tradition will affect the extent to which it will be taken up in translation in that tradition. These interactions are defined, not by particular literary forms or techniques, nor by numbers of readers, but by the way in which a work undermines the expectations in a particular tradition and thus shifts these expectations in a way that illuminates a truth about that situation. While the "home" culture of that work does not have any particular priority in this process, it is also not the case that the alternative is a generalized global culture. Rather, the decisions about what constitutes a separate tradition are determined by the issues of language and sovereignty that define a particular public sphere as such. Consequently, issues of tradition are inseparable from the political dynamics that have led to the primacy of the nation-state organization of public spheres.

If the Chinese should eventually realize that they do not need "world literature" as established in the US, but in fact that they themselves have their own version of world literature, this shift could nevertheless be prevented by the fact that this new orientation would throw light on the Chinese national public sphere and its specific conflicts and contradictions, to be clearly distinguished from other national public spheres in the region, such as that of Japan, Taiwan, or Indonesia. For the development of a literary tradition requires the development of the self-understanding of the people. Literature can only establish this self-understanding to the extent that it can authentically reflect on popular experience and represent with integrity a recognizable truth of this experience, independent of pre-conceived notions of what this truth might be. The situation of censorship presents a difficult problem for such a development because censorship does not allow people to perceive and understand their own history. Similar to the situation of Faulkner in the era of Jim Crow, it may be that perspectives and literature from the People's Republic of China that would eventually become interesting for other parts of the world would only be that literature that is ul-

timately of interest to China itself in a fundamental way, except that it cannot be disseminated in China due to censorship. The result is that Chinese literature that is read outside of China may in fact consist of works that cannot be read inside of China. The Chinese government condemnation and censorship of the work of Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian would be a primary example of this dynamic.

### BEYOND WORLD LITERATURE

The structure of world literature will follow the structure of political sovereignty. Though the world has always consisted of a variety of public spheres that define the boundaries of historical consciousness, these boundaries were not deemed to be relevant so long as one presupposed the hegemony of a liberal political discourse and an accompanying universal culture that could be linked to the idea of world literature. To the extent that economic globalization might be undermined by political divisions that threaten to divide the globe into separate economic regions and political sovereignty might itself fragment due to national and religious divisions, a world-encompassing notion of literature may lose its legitimacy as a viable project.

Unlike the movements of economic globalization, in which winners take over the global economy, literary winners are only defined by their interaction with a particular tradition. To think about world literature is really to immerse oneself in the contradictions and opportunities for change in one's own public sphere. There is ultimately an ethical and political decision-making process involved that will determine the most relevant works from one's own tradition and other traditions for constructing meaning in a particular time and place.

If we are moving toward the independence of different literary historical trajectories, such differentiation would not necessarily follow the civilizational lines that Samuel Huntington describes as a "clash of civilizations". In spite of civilizational differences, the U.S., Europe, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, for instance, are able to maintain strong political ties. Rather, structures of national sovereignty, in setting the boundaries between political orders, will determine the boundaries between linguistic and literary traditions. Such boundaries can cut across single languages, as has been the case in German with respect to East and West Germany and Austria, or a single public sphere might include more than one language, as is the case with countries such as Canada and Switzerland.

If public spheres determine literary boundaries, there will also be recurring problems that would privilege certain works over others in certain periods or places. When specific works, such as Kafka's "Judgment", are received by the publics in different traditions, the spread is not simply a result of the work's universal appeal, but of a set of problems that are addressed by the work and are current concerns in other times and places. The conflict between tradition and modernity embodied in Kafka's story is also common to a number of cultures throughout the world today.

At the same time, the role of literature in expressing the particular truth of a situation, in spite of explicit or implicit censorship of such truth, indicates that literature that becomes relevant for a particular tradition may in fact have to first be published outside of the political space of that tradition and gain acceptance internationally

before it can be appreciated in its own country. The disparities between different public spheres might in fact contribute to the possibilities for change and development within each separate tradition. Even if world literature cannot maintain itself as a unified totality, the separate worlds of literature defined in different public spheres can provide the basis for a kind of complementarity on a cultural level in which each tradition's manner of meaning can provide both resources and havens for others.

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## The end of world literature?

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World literature. National literature. Globalization. Johann Gottfried Herder.

The idea of world literature arose as a cultural counterpart to the process of globalization. However, since literature is organized within discrete traditions, the possibility of a world literature depends not just on increasing economic ties, but upon the formation of a global tradition. Since a tradition can only maintain its unity to the extent that it forms a single public sphere, the lack of a global public sphere undermines the possibility of a single world literature. The measure of this fragmentation is differences between public spheres defined by nation-state sovereignty.

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