second edition

david damrosch

# how to read world literature

WILEY Blackwell

**How to Read World Literature**

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*David Damrosch*

Second Edition

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*To my students*

# Contents

## Preface to the Second Edition

The study of world literature has developed at a rapid pace since the turn of the millennium. Just since this book first appeared in 2008, many new courses and several entire programs in world literature have been established, while a growing number of sophisticated studies have contributed to the expansion of world literature as a field of scholarship. These developments have also given rise to renewed debates concerning the politics of world literary study amid the ongoing stresses of globalization, including crises of migration, economic inequality, and tensions between local or national belonging and regional or religious identification. In such difficult times, it is more imperative than ever to find productive ways to read across cultures, gaining a better purchase for critical engagement both with the wider world beyond our shores and with our own home culture – or cultures. It has been a pleasure to be able to return to this book now, and I took this opportunity to expand a very succinct account into a more capacious but still accessible introduction to the key issues involved in the study of world literature today, as illustrated through a range of remarkable works from across the centuries and around the world.

In preparing this new edition, which is half again the size of the first, I've brought in a range of new writers and have expanded the treatment of others. In particular, I've opened out what had been a single chapter on travel and empire into two full-length chapters. The chapter "Brave New Worlds" now includes discussion of the Italian merchant Marco Polo, the Moroccan jurist Ibn Battuta, and the Chinese monk Master Xuanzang, together with the hilarious fictional *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, loosely based on Xuanzang's arduous journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures. "Writing Empire" features expanded discussions of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Derek Walcott, along with several newly added writers: the great Renaissance poet Luís Vaz de Camões, the Shanghai modernist Eileen Chang, and the Israeli Arab satirist Emile Habibi. Issues of orality and literacy are highlighted in new or expanded

discussions of Homer, Virgil, Margaret Atwood, Alice Oswald, and Bob Marley, while questions of migration and of center–periphery relations are more fully addressed in cases ranging from Nikolai Gogol and Lu Xun to Jorge Luis Borges and Clarice Lispector and from Wole Soyinka to Salmon Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

For this new edition I've drawn on the illuminating experience of co-teaching survey courses with my colleagues Stephen Owen and Martin Puchner over the past seven years at Harvard and on the new perspectives brought from around the world by the faculty and by participants in the sessions of the Institute for World Literature in our month-long meetings in Beijing, Istanbul, Harvard, Hong Kong, and Lisbon. There is no better way to study world literature than to get out into the world. This second edition is dedicated, like the first, to my students, both past and current, who have introduced me to many of the works I discuss here and have given me new insight into all the issues I take up. Yet I offer this dedication with some hesitation: Can I really speak so simply of "my" students when I am also theirs?

# Introduction

Reaching back more than four millennia and extending today to almost every inhabited region of the globe, world literature offers its readers an unparalleled variety of literary pleasures and cultural experiences. Yet this very variety also poses exceptional challenges, as we can't expect to approach all these works with the fund of cultural knowledge that readers share with writers within a single tradition. A reader of Balzac will come to know a good deal about Paris even without visiting the city, and as a result will be better able visualize scenes in Baudelaire and Proust; similarly, a good knowledge of the Qur'an is a prerequisite for a full appreciation of Arabic poetry. It can take many years to develop a close familiarity with even one culture; how are we to deal with the multitude of the world's literary cultures?

Literary traditions are often highly culture-specific: the plays of Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard insistently recall Shakespeare, while the early Japanese *Tale of Genji* is filled with references to ancient Japanese and Chinese poetry – and modern Japanese novelists keep referring back to *Genji* in their turn. Along with differing literary references, cultures develop distinctive assumptions about the ways literature should be created and understood. If we read a foreign text in ignorance of its author's assumptions and values, we risk reducing it to a pallid version of some literary form we already know, as though Homer had really wanted to write novels but couldn't quite handle character development, or as though Japanese haiku are would-be sonnets that run out of steam after seventeen syllables. If we are reading a foreign work in translation, we are at a further remove from its original form and we need to be attentive to the ways in which it has taken on a new life in a new language – a process that can involve both losses and gains.

The context in which we read these works raises issues of its own. As the comparatist Franco Moretti has remarked, world literature "is not an object, it's a *problem*" ("Conjectures on World Literature," 55). The

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problem isn't just a matter of scope or scale, but equally of politics and economics. In today's global culture, it may be possible to think of national traditions as part of a single worldwide system, but this system is marked by deep inequalities; Moretti himself describes the world system as "one, but unequal." As Emily Apter argues in her 2013 book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, literature rarely flows freely across borders. And that's just modern literature; once we look at earlier periods, we have to think more in terms of largely separate regional systems, often little connected to one another: world literatures in the plural.

Neither classic nor contemporary works reach us all by themselves, dropped into our laps by Homer's rosy-fingered Dawn or winging their way effortlessly through cyberspace, ready to be downloaded free of any cultural baggage, their own or ours. Complex and often troubled histories of imperial conquest, along with the unequal flows of commerce and capital today, have profoundly affected the selection of works that reach our shores; and these processes influence how we read them as well. When they are well translated and read with care, great literary works can open up new vistas, challenge our unquestioned assumptions, and promote dialogue and understanding across cultures. Yet often works from distant times and places have been presented and read in stereotypical ways, reinforcing the reader's cultural self-satisfaction and a two-dimensional view of the world.

What's a non-specialist reader to do? If we don't want to confine our reading within the narrow compass of literature written in our own home country and by our immediate neighbors, we need to develop ways to make the most of works from a range of distant times and places. Writers have always been in dialogue with contemporaries and predecessors beyond their own borders; hence even to understand a national tradition means attending to its place in the wider world. This book is intended to meet this need by offering a set of modes of entry into the many worlds of world literature. Each chapter highlights a key issue that we face in confronting foreign material and showcases conjunctions of major works that can exemplify fruitful approaches to reading world literature, as individuals or in the classroom.

The challenges we face in dealing with the world's many literatures are very real, but I've written this book in the conviction that works of world literature have an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of the cultures that produced them. Even some very great works are so culture-bound that they can only be meaningful to a homegrown audience or to specialists in the area, and those texts remain within the realm of their original national or regional culture. Yet many works find readers in distant times and places; they speak to us with compelling immediacy, even

as we may be variously puzzled, tantalized, or attracted by their persisting foreignness. No literary culture is more distant from us today than the court of King Šulgi of Ur, the world's first known patron of literature, who reigned in southern Mesopotamia from 2097 to 2047 BCE. His very language, Sumerian, is unrelated to any other known language. It had already ceased to be spoken a thousand years before Homer, and its cuneiform script was unreadable for a full two thousand years, until the late nineteenth century. Yet now that modern scholars have painstakingly deciphered the ancient language, no specialized knowledge whatever is required for us to respond to the charm of a lullaby written for one of Šulgi's sons:

> Sleep come, sleep come,
> sleep come to my son,
> sleep hasten to my son!
> Put to sleep his open eyes,
> settle your hand upon his sparkling eyes –
> as for his murmuring tongue,
> let the murmuring not spoil his sleep.
> ("Šulgi N," lines 12–18)

This ancient lyric already offers us the possibility of reading more than the literal statement itself: Is it really the infant whose murmuring tongue will spoil its rest, or is it the sleep-deprived parent who wants the kid to finally quiet down?

A literary work can reach out far beyond its own time and place, but conversely it can also provide a privileged mode of access into some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin. Works of art refract their cultures rather than simply reflecting them, and the most "realistic" painting or story is a stylized and selective representation. Even so, a great deal is conveyed through literature's kaleidoscopes and convex mirrors, and our appreciation of a work can be enormously increased if we learn more about the things it refers to and the artist's and audience's assumptions. This is already the case for music and the visual arts, and it is all the more true for verbal creations, which recode so much in differing languages: Japanese and English people don't see different colors but categorize them differently, assigning color names along different points on the spectrum. We can learn much about a culture from its art and its architecture, but we learn immeasurably more when we have written records as well.

If we read more of the poems that King Šulgi commissioned, for example, we soon find ourselves surrounded by an entire pantheon of Sumerian gods and goddesses and by a plethora of historical and literary allusions.

Šulgi's poems give us an important mode of access to his culture, and that cultural knowledge, in turn, helps us appreciate the poems. Four millennia ago, Šulgi himself understood poetry as giving a privileged mode of access to the past. "I am no fool," he declared,

> as regards the knowledge acquired since the time that heaven above set mankind on its path: when I have discovered … hymns from past days, old ones from ancient times, I have never declared them to be false, and have never contradicted their contents. I have conserved these antiquities, never abandoning them to oblivion.

He ordered the old poems added to his singers' repertoire, "and thereby I have set the heart of the Land on fire and aflame" ("Šulgi B," lines 270–80).

Šulgi's motives for expanding his literary holdings were political as much as aesthetic. He commissioned a series of poems about Gilgamesh, legendary king of nearby Uruk, whose prestige he used to bolster his own authority as he created an early regional empire. In one poem he announces that he has been adopted by Gilgamesh's divine mother Nunsun, thereby becoming his great predecessor's foster brother. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which would later be based on those poems, is the first great work of world literature; and it has often been read as a timeless tale of friendship, adventure, and a quest for immortality. Yet it was very much a work of its time and place, the product of imperial ambitions in its origins, and then a prize find for the British in their imperial rivalry with France, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, when it was dug up in Iraq in the mid-nineteenth century from the ruins of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh.

We can think of world literature either in terms of a work's production or in terms of its circulation. Whereas many authors have written primarily within a national or regional setting and have become world authors only years or centuries later, others create their works in a much wider context. Even if such writers aren't translated, or even read abroad, they are already actively participating in world literature, and our understanding of their works benefits from our knowledge of the writers with whom they are in dialogue. The person who first gave prominence to the term "world literature," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, was a cosmopolitan writer in this sense. He infused his work with ideas and strategies drawn from a host of classical and modern European authors; he took a close interest in Persian poetry, Sanskrit drama, and Chinese fiction as well. As he famously asserted to his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, "poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing

itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men." He declared: "I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature [*Weltliteratur*] is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, 165–6). We can say that Goethe's *Faust* and his *West-Eastern Divan* were born as works of world literature.

At the same time, Goethe was eager to be read abroad. He took great satisfaction in reading translations of his works into French, English, and even Latin, and he felt that foreign reviewers often had insights into his works that more parochial local reviewers might lack. His worldly works reached their fullest audience, and their fullest meaning, when they circulated out into the world; and the same is true of many prominent works of world literature, whether or not their authors were deeply engaged with foreign literatures or anticipated reaching readers abroad. Neither Sophocles in ancient Athens nor Du Fu in Tang dynasty China would have known much (if any) foreign literature, and neither had any expectation of being read in any other region or language than his own. In time, though, they became major presences in world literature, and the following pages will have much to say about the processes of translation and circulation that have made it possible for people to read their works in a host of languages, in countries – and entire continents – that neither Sophocles nor Du Fu even knew existed.

Reading a work from a distant time or place involves a back-and-forth movement between the local and the general, the time-bound and the timeless, the familiar and the unfamiliar. A view of the world is always a view from wherever the observer is standing, and we inevitably filter what we read through our experience of what we've read in the past. But then, if we don't simply project our prior expectations onto the new work, its distinctive qualities will impress themselves on us, enlarging our field of vision and giving us a new purchase on the things we knew before.

World literature may seem daunting in its sheer scope, but this is already a feature – and a difficulty – we find in any major national tradition. More novels were written in nineteenth-century England than anyone can read in an entire lifetime. There is always more to read, but we can only read on if we have been successfully oriented, at least in a preliminary way, by the very first works we have read. Reading our way beyond our home tradition involves a more pronounced version of the part–whole dilemma or hermeneutic circle that we already encounter within a single tradition, and we have to start somewhere and work outward to achieve a broader view. We will better understand what Charles Dickens was doing if we know the novels of Henry Fielding, Jane Austen,

Walter Scott, and George Eliot. Further, our sense of classic narratives is also shaped by the books that are written today: we read Dickens in part through lenses provided by A. S. Byatt, Salman Rushdie, and Peter Carey. These three novelists all write in English, but they grew up reading Dickens on three different continents; Dickens has long been a world author just in the English-speaking world. Our understanding will be further enlarged if we can view Dickens in the context of the nineteenth-century European novel, in relation to writers such as Goethe, Victor Hugo, Nikolai Gogol, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. And why stop there? We will better understand the specific artistic choices and cultural assumptions behind the European novel if we can compare it to traditions of prose fiction elsewhere, from Apuleius' satirical narrative *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* in the second century CE to *The Story of the Stone* and other masterpieces written in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

A broad familiarity with novels from around the world is wonderfully helpful for appreciating Dickens or China's Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan; but we can never achieve such familiarity unless we make some real sense of the first novel we read, and then of the second one, and on though the tenth and the hundredth. This hermeneutical process begins in childhood, with the works that circulate in our home tradition, including books that have taken root as imports from abroad. A reader may have known *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *The Thousand and One Nights* from such an early age that their very foreignness seems comfortably familiar. If we now start to read beyond the boundaries of already familiar texts, we experience the shock of the new, but we can respond by bringing to bear the skills we developed when we first began to read.

This book is organized around a set of skills that we need to develop and refine in order to read world literature with understanding and enjoyment. We need to become aware of different literary assumptions made in different cultures, including assumptions as to what literature itself is – its modes of creation and reading, its social setting and effects. This is the subject of the first chapter, which draws its examples chiefly from lyric poetry. The second chapter treats the issue of reading across time and uses the western epic tradition as a case in point: How do we come to terms with an older work's distinctive methods and worldview, and how do we assess its afterlife in the later tradition it helped to shape? Building on the first two chapters, the third turns to the problem of reading across cultures, now through case studies drawn from drama and fiction.

The fourth chapter discusses the fascinating problems raised when we read in translation, as readers of world literature must often do. I will argue that it is important to read translations in critical awareness of the

translator's choices and biases, even if we have no direct knowledge of a text's original language. Such a critically attuned reading can help us make the most of the reading experience and, at times, even discover ways in which a work has gained in translation.

If the first four chapters focus on how we can reach into the world of the foreign text, the remaining three discuss ways in which literary works themselves reach out into the world. The fifth chapter looks at works that are set abroad, while the sixth chapter discusses works written within the context of the European empires and their postcolonial aftermath. The seventh chapter then discusses new modes of writing in today's globalizing world. Finally, the epilogue outlines ways to go farther in reading and studying world literature, from primary texts to critical readings to the new media in which more and more works are being created today.

This book can be read on its own or as part of a survey course. The focus on different genres in the opening chapters can dovetail with a genre-based course plan, though the issues raised in each chapter can equally be applied to works in any genre. There is also a movement over the course of the book from early periods to modern times. This movement reflects a progression typical of many courses, but early and later materials are counterpointed at several points; a chronological presentation is only one way to set up a course or a plan of reading. In the interest of keeping this book to a manageable length, I have discussed most works fairly briefly, and usually with only tacit reference to the large bodies of scholarship that have grown up around many of them. The discussions here are by no means intended as full-scale readings but are given as examples of general issues and as portals into extended reading of these and comparable works.

This book aims to illustrate something of the extraordinary variety of world literature, and so it includes discussion of a wide range of writers, including Homer and Sophocles in ancient Greece, Kalidasa in medieval India, Murasaki Shikibu in Heian Japan, and onward – up to the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. Yet I've tried to resist the temptation to pile example upon example; in each chapter, a few key works or pairings form the centerpiece of discussion, and there are briefer treatments of several more. The examples given here are intended to highlight the problems raised and to suggest major strategies that have been employed by writers and that can be adopted by readers today.

This book examines many texts that have become standard in world literature courses, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to Voltaire's *Candide* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. Yet we will look at less familiar works as well, both to find good examples for a given point and to showcase writers whom I find particularly fascinating and want more people to read. We

can get a good first grounding in world literature by attending to the general issues presented by a reasonable number of works, but a tremendous expanse of possibilities opens out before us from that point onward, offering a far richer and more varied diet than any single literary landscape could possibly provide. James Joyce has a line in *Finnegans Wake* – perhaps the most "global" text ever written – envisioning an ideal reader "suffering from an ideal insomnia" (120). Perhaps there is no better definition for world literature than the expansive universe of works that compel us to become that ideal reader, dreaming of that ideal insomnia.

# 1

# What Is "Literature"?

A first challenge in reading world literature is that the very idea of literature has meant many different things over the centuries and around the world. At its most general, "literature" simply means "written with letters" – really, any text at all. If you go to see your doctor about a persistent cough and she says "I'll pull up the latest literature on tuberculosis," she means medical reports, not Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Even in more artistic contexts, many cultures have made no firm distinctions between imaginative literature and other forms of elevated writing. "Belles-lettres" would be a good translation of the ancient Egyptian term *medet nefret*, "beautiful words," which could refer to any form of rhetorically heightened composition, whether poetry, stories, philosophical dialogues, or speeches. The classical Chinese term *wen* designated poetry and artistic prose but carried a much wider set of meanings, including pattern, order, and harmonious design. In Europe, reflecting older ideas of literature as "humane letters," the concept of literature remained quite broad throughout the eighteenth century but came to be increasingly restricted to imaginative works of poetry, drama, and prose fiction. This understanding has become the norm around the world, including in the meanings now given to such terms as *wenxue* in Chinese, *bungaku* in Japanese, and *adab* in Arabic.

Still, these terms can be applied either very broadly or quite restrictively. Often readers only admit some poems and novels into the category of "real" literature, considering Harlequin romances and Stephen King thrillers as little more than verbal junk food, unworthy of inclusion in the company of Dante and Virginia Woolf. Even farther from the realm of literature are advertising jingles. Though it certainly represents a minimal form of poetry, a jingle isn't meant to be savored for its beauty; its meter and rhyme are used purely instrumentally, to help the message lodge in your mind so that you'll remember to buy a particular brand of toothpaste.

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Even in the sense of belles-lettres, literature can be defined to varying degrees of breadth. Great scientific writers such as Charles Darwin and eloquent essayists such as Montaigne or Lin Yutang offer many rewards to a reader who pays close attention to their language and to the shaping of ideas and of the narrative in their works. Sigmund Freud actually won a leading German literary award, the Goethe Prize, given him in recognition of the artistry of his psychoanalytical case studies, and he is often taught in literature courses next to Proust, Kafka, and Woolf. Literature anthologies now regularly include religious and philosophical texts, essays, autobiographical writing, and examples of creative nonfiction along with the poems, plays, and prose fiction that still occupy the bulk of their pages. Literature has expanded even beyond its root sense of works "written with letters," to include oral compositions by illiterate poets and storytellers. Movies and television series give audiences many of the pleasures that novels gave nineteenth-century readers, and "literature" can appropriately be considered in its broad sense to include works of aural and visual narrative, from movies to manga and poetic podcasts.

In view of this variety, we need to prepare ourselves to read different works with different expectations. Primo Levi's haunting holocaust memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* would lose much of its force if it turned out that Auschwitz had never existed or that Levi hadn't been interned there, whereas for readers of Boccaccio's *Decameron* it hardly matters whether there was an actual plague in Florence that forced people to flee the city and start telling each other ribald stories in the countryside. And quite apart from its real-world reference, there is the question of what literature is *for*. In many parts of the world, early theorists and practitioners understood poetry not only in terms of metrics or metaphors but as a mode of particularly intimate address. According to the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock,

> before the modern period people in South Asia were very careful to distinguish the sacred Veda from what later would be called *kavya* [literally the "work of the *kavi*"], for which "literature" in our contemporary sense is a good translation. … The Veda was said to act like a master in giving us commands; ancient lore and legends (*purana*) like a friend in offering us advice; and literature like a lover in seducing us. (Pollock, "Early South Asia," 803–5)

By contrast, the Roman poet Horace expected that literature should have a public value, and famously remarked in his *Ars poetica* that good poetry should be *dulce* but also *utile* – both sweet and useful.

Writing in 1790, Immanuel Kant downplayed literature's use value in his influential *Critique of Judgment*, in which he defined art as