

1. General Introduction: The Cosmopolitan and the Vernacular in Interaction

Stefan Helgesson

The world seems to be up for grabs – conceptually speaking – in contemporary critical discourse. The anthropocene, globalisation, planetary thinking, world-system theory, worlding, worldedness: there is much evidence to support Eric Hayot’s claim that “world” (and its variants) has become a word with “rhetorically unmatched prestige”.¹ Literary scholarship, as will be discussed below, has its own version of world-speak, namely world literature, a concept and a field of study that has generated a significant amount of debate in recent years. The present volume, dear reader, that you either are holding in your hand or (which is more likely) reading on a screen, puts itself at an angle to that scholarly conversation, building on its insights but also presenting some alternative points of departure for thinking “world” and “literature” in conjunction.

If we agree with the fundamental phenomenological insight that the world is only possible to experience and think from within a given emplacement in time and language, it should be evident that the world is never just “out there” but always also “here”. Transposed to the concerns of world literature, this calls for a conceptual framework that takes both the here and the there into consideration. Hence our overarching terms “cosmopolitan” and “vernacular”,

¹ Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30.

How to cite this book chapter:

Helgesson, Stefan. “General Introduction: The Cosmopolitan and the Vernacular in Interaction”. In *World Literatures: Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange*, edited by Stefan Helgesson, Annika Mörte Alling, Yvonne Lindqvist, and Helena Wulff, 1–11. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bat.a>. License: CC-BY.

which should not be thought of as opposites but as two modes – or vectors – of literary worldliness that may interact, merge or contest each other. As thoroughly relational terms, they are also implicated in the social construction of literary value and can have analytical force at a number of different levels, including style, language choice, emplotment, translation, book history and large-scale syntheses of literary history. How has the vernacular been defined historically? What is its place in world literature scholarship? How is it inflected by gender? How are the poles of the vernacular and the cosmopolitan distributed spatially or stylistically in literary narratives? How are cosmopolitan domains of literature incorporated in local literary communities? What are the effects of translation and language change on the encoding of vernacular and cosmopolitan values? These are some of the questions broached in the chapters that follow, all of which emerge out of a Swedish research programme called, appropriately, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures”. (A more detailed presentation will follow.)

Before proceeding, however, it is probably wise to state what this volume does *not* claim to do. It is, first of all, not a world history of literature. The 26 chapters provide a considerable amount of historical knowledge and their temporal range stretches from the early modern period onwards. But the emphasis lies on contemporary literature and there is no attempt here to craft a coherent narrative of development and interaction. Nor is this anthology attempting “full coverage” in a geographical or cultural sense. There is nothing here on Arabic, Japanese or Persian literature, almost nothing relating to South America (excluding Brazil and the Caribbean), and only one piece on India. If we were to group contributions in terms of their geographical affiliations, one can note that that they gravitate around Scandinavia, western Europe, Turkey (Constantinople/Istanbul), Russia, China, Africa south of the Sahara, the Caribbean and North America.

This is geographically ambitious in its own right, but we are wary of reducing world literature to a matter of coverage. As Franco Moretti once famously stated, “[r]eading ‘more’ is always a good thing, but not the solution”.² Even though digital

² Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 55.

technologies make the “wild idea” of grasping the sum total of the world’s literatures slightly less unattainable in practice than Claudio Guillén claimed in the early 1990s, this is still not where the interest of this anthology lies.³ Rather, our premise is that the wide-ranging debates on world literature over the past two decades have important implications for how we frame the object of literary studies. Consider for a moment the criticism that has been levelled at world literature, mainly from postcolonial and comparative literature scholars. Peter Hitchcock has complained that the “world” in world literature is “studiously neutral”, whereas Gayatri Spivak has accused it of remaining beholden to “Europe as guide to disciplinary objectivity”, an observation that resonates with Aamir Mufti’s point that “the Latinate term literature, and the set of its cognates in the Western languages ... now provide the dominant, universalizing, but by no means absolute vocabulary for the comprehension of verbal-textual expression world-wide”.⁴ Choosing a different tack, yet in the same critical spirit, Emily Apter has attacked world literature for being “oblivious to the Untranslatable” and suggests instead that “translation and untranslatability are constitutive of world forms of literature”.⁵

These interventions all express dissatisfaction with aspects of the scholarly conversation on world literature, but are, for all that, no less intent on devising ways to study literature in planet-wide and transnational contexts than the main targets of their critique. Without rehearsing once again the arguments of those who are routinely identified as the leading thinkers on world literature – David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova – it would seem that they and their critics broadly agree that world literature is a matter of method and theory first, and only then, as a consequence of this, also about *what* we read and study. This is

³ Claudio Guillén, “Weltliteratur”, in *World Literature: A Reader*, edited by Theo D’haen et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 143.

⁴ Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6; Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 455; Aamir Mufti, “Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures”, *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 488.

⁵ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 9, 16.

at least the view adopted in the present volume. In doing so, we are clearly resisting both an older conception of world literature as a “world canon” (with European masterpieces occupying centre stage) and the newer equation between world literature and the global anglophone market for literary publishing.⁶ Such reductive conceptions of world literature are inadequate, at worst harmful, and fail above all to address what could be seen as the core challenge of world literature: to provide alternatives both to methodological nationalism and to methodological eurocentrism. That is to say, neither the nation-state, nor a notional (above all cultural) “Europe”, should be taken for granted as the frameworks within which the study of literature unfolds. But by the same token, nor should European literatures be *excluded* in such a way that their centrality is reinstated negatively in relation to “the rest” – hence the inclusion of very diverse European cases found in this book.

Methodological nationalism and eurocentrism pose two distinct challenges that can be associated with two different disciplinary formations. Comparative literature, in its various iterations, has at least had the potential to sidestep or complement the national framework, and postcolonial studies have by definition challenged the knowledge regime of eurocentrism. Combining these two disciplinary traditions (or sets of traditions) in world literature studies is however easier said than done, as exchanges among Spivak, Damrosch, Apter, Mufti, Graham Huggan, Pheng Cheah, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and others demonstrate.⁷ But beyond

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of different conceptions of “world literature”, see Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, eds., *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* (New York: Routledge, 2015). Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl also provide an excellent account of central issues in the current debate. Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl, “Anglophone World Literatures: Introduction”, *Anglia* 135, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.

⁷ Apter, *Against*; Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); David Damrosch and Gayatri Spivak, “Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 4 (2011): 455–85; Graham Huggan, “The Trouble with World Literature”, in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford:

the specific disagreements, which often have an ideological slant, a bigger methodological question looms: Is there anything that remains to hold literary studies together? Is there anything internal to the phenomenon we choose to call “literature” in, say, West African, eastern European and Chinese settings that keeps it from splintering into so many discrete traditions and cultural fragments?

Two fairly recent interventions in the world literary field have provided strikingly different answers to that question. The first is *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC). Here, a group of Marxist scholars present a restricted conception of “world-literature” (note the hyphen) as an effect of the capitalist world-system – to be precise, as “the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development”.⁸ This is a “strong” definition in the sense that it does posit a single, if complex, framework for reading, and leaves everything not connected to the modern and global capitalist era (such as classical Chinese poetry, or the Provençal troubadours) to one side. This approach provides a clear focus for a global and non-national mode of literary studies, while at the same time disallowing itself to engage with deep history.

In his book *An Ecology of World Literature*, Alexander Beecroft presents instead a typological model of what he calls “ecologies” that, hypothetically, could cover all modes of literary reception and circulation throughout human history. Working with *literatures* (and not just “literature” in general) as a unit of analysis, and with empirical cases from ancient China to the present day, Beecroft discusses six types of literary ecologies that arguably cover everything from minimal to maximal circulation: epichoric, panchoric, cosmopolitan, vernacular, national and global ecologies. If epichoric circulation is mainly oral and restricted to a

Blackwell, 2011), 490–506; Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 455–65; Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum, 2008)

⁸ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 17.

tightly knit community, panchoric circulation draws together distinct polities within a common cultural identity – a case in point being the ancient Greek world and its sharing of a particular literary legacy. Cosmopolitan circulation emerges through religion or imperialism (or both), and is tied to a particular high-prestige language (Sanskrit, Latin, Chinese, Arabic). It is against such cosmopolitan cultural authority, Beecroft argues, that self-aware vernacular literatures then tend to emerge, not so much “from below”, but through the formation of elites vying for cultural and political independence. It is only in the modern era, finally, that literature attaches to the newly invented nation-state, and even more recently that a global market and modes of reception start taking shape. Each of these modes produces a distinct community, as well as a distinct understanding of what counts as literature. The oral-based, ideal-typical epichoric ecology is a case of exceptionally reduced circulation, while the global ecology – which is obviously dependent on a number of technological, economic and linguistic preconditions – has the planet as its scope. These ecologies do not simply replace each other, however, in a teleological line of progression. Instead, different ecologies may co-exist, serving separate purposes at a given moment.

Both WReC’s and Beecroft’s categories will fray at the edges when looked at more closely. How does WReC’s notion of “literary registration” – once one has braved the thickets of their theoretical argument – actually escape the risk of reproducing a strongly determinist view of literature? And is it even meaningful to posit “ecological” types, as Beecroft does, on the basis of such vastly different historical cases? This is not the moment to engage in an extensive discussion of these matters, but it is instructive to place WReC and Beecroft side by side. Both their books are impressive in their scholarship and rank as significant contributions to world literature studies, and yet the trajectories of their arguments move in almost diametrically opposed directions: one is restricted, historicising, focused on the modern era, geared towards close reading and overtly political; the other is expansive, pan-historical, erudite rather than political, and engaged in distant rather than close reading. This contrast not only alerts us to the current diversity of world literature studies (and the attendant

lack of consensus in the field), but provides also a backdrop against which we can outline the contribution of this volume.

Rather than present a single, strong theoretical framework (such as world-system theory), and rather than adopting a typological approach (such as the ecologies model), the organising principle of this book is that of an open-ended dynamic, or what we call the cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange. Inspired by Erich Auerbach's famous coinage of the *Ansatzpunkt*, the concrete point of departure necessary for the study of literature on a world scale, our wager is that the cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange provides not only a uniquely adaptable comparative fulcrum for literary studies, but redresses what has repeatedly been identified as the inability of the world literature paradigm to accommodate literature which does *not* circulate, accumulate global prestige or make it on the Euro-American market.⁹ It is also for this reason that we collectively engage with more than a dozen different languages, so as to diminish the risk of reinforcing the limitations of the English language as – currently – the hyper-central mediator of world literature.

The notion of the cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange does not, perhaps, satisfy Auerbach's requirement of a distinctly *concrete* set of phenomena, but it does operate at various and interacting levels, as the sections of this anthology demonstrate. For Auerbach, an *Ansatzpunkt* involves “the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy”.¹⁰ What our four sections – on literary history, locations and orientations, world-making, and translation and circulation, respectively – demonstrate is precisely how the cosmopolitan-vernacular optic can be employed in macro-historical and sociological registers, as well as on the micro-level of close textual analysis.

⁹ See in particular Apter, *Against*; Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Neumann and Rippl, “Introduction”.

¹⁰ Eric Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”, trans. Edward and Maire Said, *The Centennial Review* 13, no.1 (1969): 14.

The question, of course, is what the terms “cosmopolitan” and “vernacular” mean – or at least what the contributors to this anthology *take* them to mean. They are used here primarily as heuristic and analytical concepts that help to organise our investigations, and not as organic or “emic” concepts that emerge from within the texts or cultural contexts themselves. Sheldon Pollock’s well-known discussion provides a model here: in his macro-historical comparison of South Asia and Europe, he treats cosmopolitanism and vernacularism “as action rather than idea, as something people do rather than something they declare, as practice rather than proposition”.¹¹ By analogy, the short studies presented here focus more on what texts, narratives, journals, translations or historical processes *do* than on what they profess. The cosmopolitan trajectory involves, in this instance, a larger world than the nation or local community and culture, whereas vernacular literary cultures (drawing once again on Pollock) “reshape the boundaries of [the] cultural universe by renouncing the larger world for the smaller place”.¹² A key boundary marker, of course, is language, which is how the term “vernacular” once originated. Etymologically, it signifies the language of the house-born slave in imperial Rome, a felicitous designation in so far as it connotes class and sociolect as much as multilingualism in a stricter sense. Speaking of the “cosmopolitan” and the “vernacular” always involves a social dimension of some sort, and resists thereby the reduction of literary language to a neutral, transparent fact.

Accordingly, this problematic should not be thought of exclusively in terms of distinct languages, but also in terms of place, power, poetics, ethics and gender. It is relational all the way down. The most salient point in both Pollock’s and Beecroft’s discussions is that the vernacular in literary contexts is never reducible to an organic authenticity, untouched by the artifice of a cosmopolitan model. The latter figure of thought, inherited from romanticism, obscures precisely the relational, historically situated nature of the terms “cosmopolitan” and “vernacular” (and this relationality

¹¹ Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History”, *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 593.

¹² Pollock, “Cosmopolitan”, 592.

is also what gives our conceptual pair greater traction than, for example, more abstract terms such as “universal” and “local”). When looking at the historical evidence, both Pollock and Beecroft claim that self-conscious articulations of vernacular literary value always emerge in relation to a literary culture and language with cosmopolitan authority – such as Sanskrit and Latin in earlier eras, or French and English in the modern period. But if we take this a step further, it becomes just as evident – and this is perhaps more characteristic of the modern and contemporary period – that the cosmopolitan and the vernacular are directly implicated in each other in myriad ways. Migrant writers may have access to several cosmopolitan and vernacular literary cultures at the same time, which all have a bearing on their poetics. Or, what is cosmopolitan in one setting – such as Farsi in West Asia – becomes vernacular in another – as an “immigrant language” in Sweden. Similarly, if English and its literary tradition on the one hand has been associated with the cosmopolitan legacy of imperial coercion in Africa, it has also provided a repertoire of forms as well as material networks which have fed into the cultivation of local literatures. If we look at the domain of literary translation, it is just as evidently involved in complex negotiations of cosmopolitan and vernacular trajectories: of the outward and inward movements, of foreignisation and domestication, of sociolects and dialects, of major and minor languages.

Short summaries of the individual chapters are provided in the introduction to each subsection. The design of the book as a whole needs however some explanation. What we present here should be seen as an interim report. As mentioned previously, the contributions all derive from a Swedish research programme with the heading “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures”.¹³ Funded by a generous grant from the Swedish Foundation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond), and based at Stockholm University, it involves all the contributing authors. Having begun in 2016, and with 2021 as its cut-off date, the sub-projects are still in their initial phase as

¹³ See our website for more information: <http://worldlit.se>.

this manuscript is being put together. For this reason, the chapters have an exploratory and introductory character. They are organised according to the current thematic division of the programme: 1) literary history, 2) locations and orientations, 3) world-making, and 2) translation and circulation. We see these as four dimensions of world literature studies, with quite distinct methodological inclinations. One could at the same time claim that the book has a circular composition: beginning with “distant” methods of historical investigation, it moves towards different modes of close reading in parts 2 and 3, and then again outwards, into the distant reading of the circuits of translation and circulation. Another way to phrase this is that there are shifts in scale, from the macro-historical, macro-social and paratextual, to investigations (both literary and anthropological) of individual texts and cases. In this way, the volume presents a broad introduction to diverse methods of doing world literature. Our explicit intention in each case, moreover, has been to produce short, updated, informative pieces, accessible also to advanced students. For the continued fruition of our efforts, watch this space.

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