World Literature and Its Discontents

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Any discussion of world literature today is apt to lead us into a garden of forking paths, a grand narrative that is also an elaborate labyrinth, where each step simultaneously reveals or forecloses apparently infinite possibilities. Or, perhaps, to cite another tale by Jorge Luis Borges from the same period, it is more like the library of Babel, a hauntingly vast bibliographic phantasmagoria in which every imaginable work of literature confronts the bewildered reader, from sheer nonsense to supreme masterpiece, although part of the unending angst of such an approach to the whole “world” of literature is the awareness that such distinctions cannot be easily made. The question of world literature, its functions and effects, as well as its value as a formal object of literary study, is deceptively complex. On the one hand, the widespread availability of and interest in literary works produced in various countries, languages, and cultures from around the world would seem to be wholly beneficial; these texts educate readers about foreign experiences and social forms, while making possible transnational and cross-cultural literary relations. On the other hand, such seemingly cosmopolitan practices have participated in processes of globalization which have frequently elided cultural specificity, either reducing or fetishizing the differences among societies, and at the same time creating a marketplace for a certain type of “world literature,” often at the expense of the variety and wealth of literature written, read, and studied throughout the world. In an era of multinational capitalism or the globalization of culture, these questions have gained greater urgency and complexity in these opening years of twenty-first century, and it is perhaps not surprising that world literature—as a concept, a field of study, or even a genre—has become a key element of contemporary criticism and theory.

I. Introduction

Exemplary of this sense of urgency, Emily Apter’s provocative new
book, Against World Literature, raises troubling questions about the study of world literature as a disciplinary or subdisciplinary field. To be clear, Apter is for the most part an advocate of expanding the study of literature beyond national borders and monolingual traditions, and she certainly does not argue that literary studies ought to return to a more narrowly circumscribed social or vernacular domain. However, she is justly concerned that that “World Literature” as a field of study and as a marketing genre has for several decades functioned as a cultural adjunct to those processes of globalization which have masked, undermined, or even destroyed cultural differences in the name of the of a single world market and a global consumerist or neoliberal economic system. “World Literature,” which Apter capitalizes in order to distinguish it from the literature or literatures of the world, has also established a star-system of transnational writers or texts whose ready-made translatable at once fetishizes cultural differences and makes them easily consumable commodities for a largely Western (if not strictly American) book-buying public. This, in turn, displaces and disavows those social customs, experiences, and even words that are fundamentally untranslatable. Apter argues that, by focusing precisely on untranslatability, we will be better able to understand and celebrate the importance of world literature for comparative literary studies in the twenty-first century, while we will also be better prepared to battle the influence of the crudely commodified “World Literature” foisted upon us by cultural globalization.

Apter’s fascinating book joins a panoply of studies whose general theme might be characterized, with apologies to Nietzsche, as “the use and disadvantages of world literature for life.” In the past 20 to 25 years especially, the subject of world literature has received increasing consideration both from scholars of comparative literature and those who have traditionally operated within fields such as English, along with those hybrid fields that may be circumscribed by a single, discernibly national language and literature or focused on a slightly broader domain, such as linguistic grouping (say, Romance languages) or area studies (e.g. Asian Studies). During this period, for example, major works by Franco Moretti, including Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez, Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History, his massive five-volume project on The Novel (in English, two volumes), and, most recently, Distant Reading, a compendium of ten of his more controversial articles over the past two decades, have invigorated and transformed the older discussions of world literature, while also