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Introduction

Literature and the making of the world

Stefan Helgesson

Texts have a paradoxical capacity to constitute their own publics. These can be purely notional, restricted to just a handful of readers, or can accumulate and grow across time. The public-forming force of a text is proper to its own instance of performativity (including the performance of reading), but this force is at the same time entirely reliant on the world that precedes it: its media, its languages, its rhetorical repertoires, its social groupings. Consider, for example, the scrapbooks of Alexander Gumby in Harlem. Emerging out of the social world of the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century, his compilation of texts about black achievements and the African cultural heritage ‘convened’ – to use Karin Barber’s (2007: 144) phrase – an audience both in and beyond Harlem and, even more importantly, in an undefined future. As an idiosyncratic, vernacular archive that repurposed already existing texts by placing them in new constellations, its key public would arguably be posterity – meaning, among other things, us today – for whom the scrapbooks would evoke both the specific world of Gumby’s Harlem and the wider world as it was conceived and intimated by Gumby.

Or consider the Chinese writer Lu Xun, who found that the very language of Chinese culture (this was also in the early twentieth century) could no longer address the ills of a society in decline. Having studied in Japan and read contemporary European literature, Lu Xun attempted to reform the literary language in China and, in doing so, to create an alternative public that was attuned to the social problems besetting the country. This new language rejected the classical Chinese heritage and claimed a vernacular authenticity, yet was profoundly cosmopolitan – and in that respect also alien – in its constitution. Lu Xun’s vernacularity, manifested in his double-coded ‘A Madman’s Diary’, was

in this respect not just local, but assumed *necessarily* a multiglossic world much wider and diverse than China.

Or, to take a third example, we can see how contemporary Indian literature constitutes a sometimes bewildering multiplicity of publics. If, as Francesca Orsini (2004) was early to demonstrate, there is a division of labour between internationally circulating, Booker Prize-winning Anglo-Indian literature and the numerous national or regional literatures in other Indian languages, the contemporary case of Vivek Shanbhag's novel *Ghachar Ghochar* (2016, discussed in Chapter 8), first published in the South Indian language Kannada, challenges that straightforward hierarchy of literary languages. A 'vernacular' with a long literary tradition of its own, Kannada has not been an obstacle to the international success of *Ghachar Ghochar*, which has appeared in numerous languages and convened new publics with every incarnation.

These three examples – Gumby's scrapbook, Lu Xun's cosmopolitan vernacularity and Shanbhag's circulating Kannada novel – are merely indicative of the range of investigations in this book, but they showcase some of our central concerns. Here, as when the present volume deals with the Western travel-writing genre, little magazines in southern Africa and literary constructions of Paris, Venice, Constantinople and Siberia, our interest lies in how literary practice in the modern era is both constitutively worldly and constitutes worlds of its own. Literary practice (linked to Warner's and Barber's notion of publics), does not, in other words, merely reflect the world but shapes it as well; it both assumes and makes a world. As Michael Warner (2002: 81) explains it, texts 'must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address', a formulation of direct relevance to our concerns. At the same time, it is the complications of achieving a world-making address that come to the fore in these chapters' combined focus on translingual, transcultural and transnational aspects of literature. This attempt at jointly engaging textual, cultural and social levels of literature is one thing that distinguishes our contributions from more rigorously external and quantitative approaches to literature in book history and sociology. Just as importantly, our approach differs from certain brands of world literature studies that privilege internationally canonized literature and tend to treat the 'world' as a self-explanatory backdrop. To unpack the implications of this alternative take on world literature, it is therefore necessary to begin with some basic theoretical considerations concerning language, literature, practice and the semantics of 'world'.

If we assume that language, or what we rather should think of as the endless proliferation of language games, is constitutively *of* the world, then we have a place from which to begin. Contra the structuralist doctrine of a fundamental split between word and world, whereby language – *langue* – is essentialized as a ghostly presence, oddly complete in itself yet ‘parallel to reality’ (Jameson 1972: 33), a Wittgensteinian insistence on language as untotizable practice *begins* rather with its worldliness. In Stanley Cavell’s (2002: 19) formulation, ‘we learn language and learn the world *together*’, which is a point of departure for Toril Moi’s (2017) important critique of post-Saussurean literary theory. To this we could add Jaakko Hintikka’s distinction between language as ‘universal medium’, a view which dominated Western philosophy in the twentieth century and turned the signifier into an epistemological cage, and language as ‘calculus’, which sees language rather as a practice of meaning-making possible to analyse at a distance (Hintikka 1989: 53–4). If language is considered as calculus, ‘you can discuss the semantics of your language and even vary systematically its interpretation’ (ibid.: 54). Admittedly, Hintikka’s views rehearse a rationalist conception of language which in itself is not unproblematic (see Bauman and Briggs 2003), but taken together these alternatives to the post-Saussurean model enable a flexible combination of non-prescriptive investigations into how language intervenes in the world.

Literature counts as one such linguistic intervention. As with the word ‘game’ itself, famously discussed by Wittgenstein ([1953] 2009 §66–71) in *Philosophical Investigations*, literature is not a unified concept but covers a cluster of phenomena across diverse contexts. A novel in French, a praise poem in Zulu, an ancient Greek tragedy, a Japanese *monogatari* may all conceivably fall under the heading ‘literature’, but are hardly instances of the same thing. What counts as literature will also differ in different periods, even as the concept’s meaning sediments and accumulates with the passing of time. It is one of those strange categories where the identification of the members of the set and the making of the set tend to coincide. These semantic peculiarities and instabilities notwithstanding, the crafted use of *language* is clearly a minimal requirement for anything to be called literature – which is not the case, for example, with sculpture, or toads. (Certain avant-garde poetry, such as dada or concretism, attempts of course to disrupt linguistic signification – but this is precisely a dismantling *of* language, or its negative image, not an escape from it.) In this way, literature’s worldliness, insofar as language is worldly, is a given.

Our concern in this book, however, is not really with theory but with practice – literary practice – as it might be understood historically from the vantage

point of our globalized (and possibly de-globalizing) present. Further, it places a premium not just on language but on how *languages*, in the plural, shape world-conceptions and world-belongingness. Linguistic plurality today has many names – translingualism, heterolingualism or multiglossia are just a few – but, under whatever label, the valencies of a shifting range of linguistic signification in contexts as diverse as China, Constantinople and southern Africa are thematized in our chapters. Described thus, it should be clear that our separate studies can have no encompassing *frame* that contains them all but, as discussed in the general introduction to this volume, they do have a methodological starting point: the cosmopolitan–vernacular (or vernacular–cosmopolitan) dynamic. This heuristic postulation of two complementary orientations in literary cultures generates our investigations and enables inquiries that move across the conventional period-, language-, theory- or nation-based boxes in literary studies.

This brings us back, then, to the valencies of world, language and literature in the studies presented here. Having already used the word ‘world’ several times, I must stress its polysemic character. It can refer to the phenomenological life-world or, more emphatically, to a precondition of being. It may indicate self-regulating systems (such as the capitalist world-system), secular temporality, the totality of the planet or the abstraction of the globe (Jordheim and Sandmo 2019). This semantic fluidity is, on the one hand, a problem with the term. One could even follow the philosopher Markus Gabriel’s (2015: 1) cue, and drastically conclude that ‘everything exists except one thing: the world’. More modestly, one may concede that a non-specified use of ‘world’ invites unnecessary misunderstandings. On the other hand, the strong appeal and semantic density of the word ‘world’ tells a story all of its own about multiple attempts to articulate existential, social and cosmological emplacement. As I explain below, it is to some extent this semantic density, specifically the tension between the assumed immediacy of the life-world and a more or less vaguely sensed globality, that we wish to activate through our cosmopolitan–vernacular approach. To explain this, we can first reflect on how our approach *differs* from the branch of literary theory dealing with ‘possible worlds’.

Before becoming a narratological mode of reading, possible-worlds theory first emerged out of specific concerns in analytic philosophy concerning the truth value of hypothetical statements. As a way to counteract the rigidity of a structuralist framework, this philosophical paradigm posits a ‘many-worlds ontology’ (Bell and Ryan 2019: 3) in which the actual world is not the only one we can access and interpret. There are important points to be derived from this

field – not least concerning the semantic openness of language discussed in relation to Wittgenstein and Hintikka above. But although Debjani Ganguly (2016: 80–5) has quite decisively brought possible-worlds theory to bear on world literature, it should be noted that its influential formulations are not in the least concerned with the historical, social or translational aspects of the word ‘world’ itself. It invokes ‘world’, rather, in a Leibnizian, conceptually frugal sense as a totality in which a particular state of affairs obtains, neither more nor less. This is significantly different from our approach in this book, which is concerned rather with historical, temporal and cultural dimensions of worldliness. ‘World’ as we use it in this book could therefore be considered ‘loose’ from the vantage point of possible-world theorists; we would rather describe it as ‘dense’. Even more importantly, the specific qualities of the world, as presented in these chapters, are always an outcome of a cosmopolitan–vernacular dynamic. Although cosmopolitanism conventionally is assumed to have a monopoly on ‘viewing oneself as part of a world, a circle of belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of humanity’ (Cheah 2008: 26), our understanding is that worldliness is equally produced through vernacular registers of language and social belonging. It becomes, in effect, an unhelpful abstraction to conceptualize the literary making of the world in the absence of vernacularity. This is why the double meaning of ‘world’ as both small and big, both part and whole, is not a drawback but the very point of its use in this book.

In *On Literary Worlds*, a bold attempt to combine an expansive understanding of ‘world’ with a rigorous focus on the particulars of literary works, Eric Hayot (2012: 39) keeps these two meanings of world as ‘a generic totality’ and ‘as the most total totality of all’ in play. This manoeuvre is necessary if we intend to remain in dialogue with world literature. (By contrast, a strict possible-worlds focus could bypass world literature completely.) When positing, furthermore, that ‘aesthetic worlds’ are always ‘social and conceptual constructs, as well as formal and affective ones’ (ibid.: 45), Hayot’s conception of worldedness resonates strongly with our approach in this book. What needs to be added is that our focus on *practice* invites a broader range of objects of study by covering textuality, materiality and paratextual practices, such as editing and marketing.

By insisting on the dual formal and thematic aspect of world, Hayot attempts to establish a methodological connection not just between internal and external approaches to literature, but also across diverse cultural contexts. Stating axiomatically (but also with some troubling circularity) that ‘no work of art

recognizable as such could avoid constituting itself in relation to a theory of wholeness that would, minimally, allow it to be recognized as a work of art at all, he opens the door to different 'comparative histories of this universal as it has been experienced and expressed, as it has been managed, ignored, or otherwise engaged' (ibid.: 87). The hermeneutic caveat, of course, is that such an act of comparison itself can only be undertaken from within a historically and culturally specific positioning. This is a point of crucial importance to the present volume, which engages with diverse instantiations of worldedness in what might be called the long era of the globe – a world-horizon or world-unconscious produced originally through the effects of Western imperialism from the fifteenth century onwards (for more on the early modern history, see Ramachandran 2015).

Our adoption of Nelson Goodman's (1978) view that the world is something *made* is largely motivated by this insight that worldedness and notions of 'wholeness' will shift depending on context. Arguing in a Kantian philosophical lineage that there can be no 'perception without conception,' Goodman (2012: 6) places a heavy emphasis on how language and symbolic systems enable perception and, in that sense, 'make' worlds. This does not mean that we collectively promote Goodman's strong constructivism, however. In his view, 'content vanishes without form,' which means that '[w]e can have words without a world, but no worlds without words or other symbols' (ibid.), in response to which Doležel (Bell and Ryan 2019: 51) asks where we possibly could find words without a world. Here, one might say, epistemology clashes with ontology in a way that retraces elements of object-oriented ontology (Harman 2012) as well as recent debates in anthropology around the 'ontological turn.' If previous anthropological disagreements in the late twentieth century questioned the epistemological validity of knowledge about the 'other,' the radical ontologists tend to see worlds 'not as relative to each other' but existing 'unto themselves, as immanent rather than contingent' (Vigh and Sausdal 2014: 54). The debate risks drawing us into deeper philosophical waters than the present book intends to navigate, but it can be safely claimed that our contributions tend towards a world-conception that stresses relationality – and hence translatability – rather than radical incommensurability. The very terms 'cosmopolitan' and 'vernacular' (as discussed in the general introduction) only make sense as relational markers, and in our investigations literature functions as a mediator (sometimes a problematic one) across differences rather than an instantiation of the incommensurable. The studies presented here also have a humanist

rather than a posthumanist slant, which otherwise is common among the new ontologists.

In keeping with our emphasis on *practice*, therefore, a helpful formulation on these matters is Hannah Arendt's, for whom it is through labour and work that the world becomes human and a human world is made. As Arendt (1998: 134) writes, '[i]f nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth'. In its extreme fragility and finitude, as the Covid-19 crisis has starkly illustrated, human life calls for endless vigilance and exertion to be sustained, and it is of course also in this respect that we can speak of the making of the world. Conversely, this explains how histories of slavery, genocide, wars, colonialism, exploitation and ecological devastation can be thought of as *world-destroying*, even as new worlds may or may not emerge in their wake. Jean-Luc Nancy (2007: 34) even insists that globalization, understood as an endpoint to the process whereby the West 'has come to encompass the world', amounts to an ongoing destruction of the world, a fact 'from which any thinking of the world follows' (ibid.: 35). This rather obscure statement can be illustrated by Anette Nyqvist's interviews in Chapter 9 of this volume with North American travel writers, who struggle, in the age of Google and YouTube influencers, to produce the sense of difference and distance upon which the marketability of their genre of writing depends. Here we witness if not the end of the world, then certainly the possible end of one practice whereby the world has been represented and made cognitively accessible.

Once we directly engage with the world literature debates as they took shape around 2000, we see that 'world' was severely undertheorized at the time. In their engagement with the lineage of *Weltliteratur* from Goethe onwards, they either conceived of 'world' as sheer extension, a geographical backdrop for intercultural exchange, or, in Moretti's (2000) and Casanova's (1999) cases, as a distinctly literary world-system. But after thorough interrogation of these positions in recent years, it is fair to speak of a conceptual turn in the field in the 2010s from an unexamined notion of world to a richly theorized one. It would lead too far to provide a full summary here, but two lines of critique can be discerned. One is that the 'world' in the work of, notably, Damrosch (2003), Casanova (1999) and Moretti (2000) is an ideological construct that serves to disguise and perpetuate power relations between the West and the Rest, and occludes literature that does not travel or 'gain in translation', to rehearse Damrosch's (2003) oft-cited

criterion of world literature. This primarily postcolonial mode of criticism has, with variations, been articulated by Hitchcock (2010), Huggan (2011), Young (2011), Spivak (2012), Apter (2013), Mufti (2016), Boehmer (2014, 2018) and others. By claiming that world literature ‘assumes a general interchangeability across cultural divides’, and promoting against this a reading practice that solicits ‘the reader’s attention in specific ways’ (Boehmer 2018: 14), the tendency here has been to disaggregate world-conceptions and emphasize fracture. The other line of argument often builds on a similar critique, but rather than dismissing world literature altogether (as has been common), it inscribes itself in the field by providing refined and alternative world-conceptions. A high-profile example is Pheng Cheah’s attempt to redefine world literature according to a temporal understanding of ‘world’ that does not privilege spatial distribution as its main feature. Instead of ‘world’ as ‘extension on a global scale, where world literature is conceived through an analogy with a world market’s global reach’, Cheah (2014: 306–7, 319) considers world as ‘a form of relating, belonging, or being-with’. In this sense he can then argue for the resistant, normative potential of literature in view of globalization’s world-destroying effects. Ganguly’s (2016: 83) even sharper account of world-theories is, in turn, yet more attuned to a non-reductive reading practice that ‘straddles the empirical and phenomenological in a relationship of excess to the global’, and Neumann and Rippl (2017: 14–15) make a similar point about the excessive or disruptive potential of literature vis-à-vis the global. Choosing a different tack (more in line with Moretti’s approach), the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC 2015) coinage of ‘world-literature’ (with a hyphen) offers instead an exclusively systemic and historically specific understanding of world as the state of global interconnectedness through capitalism’s boundary-defying logic of combined and uneven development. World-literature, on that understanding, designates the aesthetic ‘registration’ of systemic logic in literary works. Compared to Cheah and Ganguly, WReC remains committed to a stricter conception of world tied to the economic logic of globalization. But although these developments have different and sometimes incompatible methodological implications – if WReC reads literature as a world-effect, Cheah reads it as a world-cause – the enduring point is that the semantics of ‘world literature’ has acquired significant depth and diversity in recent years.

Given that this book is a collective endeavour, and in keeping with an openness towards the multiplicity of literary practice, we neither promote a single conceptualization of world nor offer an exclusive definition of world literature. It is instead, at the risk of sounding repetitive, precisely the *dynamic* of

cosmopolitan and vernacular orientations that we explore empirically through works, topoi, media and social networks. Throughout, however, these inquiries are undertaken in awareness of world literary debates of the last two decades and with a distinct methodological principle that is best expressed negatively: in contradistinction to most approaches to world literature in the wake of Moretti's and Damrosch's early interventions, circulation is not a *primary* criterion for our selection of cases in this book. Circulation, taken as a synonym for publication and distribution, always enters the picture at some level, but the methodological point of the cosmopolitan–vernacular optic is that it allows for very localized and text-focused investigations to be combined with transnational and non-national vistas of world literature.

To recapitulate: works of literature and literary practices have the capacity to constitute worlds on behalf of their publics, yet these worlds necessarily stand in some (often complicated) relation to the world beyond literature. 'To world is to enclose, but also to exclude,' Hayot (2012: 40) writes; therefore, '[w]hat falls in the ambit of those enclosures and exclusions will determine the political meaning of any given act of world-making'. The histories and archives of meaning that are sedimented in language(s) are a key indicator of such enclosure and exclusion. To take an instance that makes maximal claims on behalf of poetry: 'The Brain – is wider than the Sky.' This line from Emily Dickinson (1960: 312) asserts transcendence, yet is itself inescapably historical and material. It is encoded in a standardized language – currently the most powerful cosmopolitan language the world has ever seen – and the line itself is made accessible across time through complex, overlapping and contingent institutions of literary publication, editing and reception that instantiate, valorize and disseminate Dickinson's poetry. It is in all these entangled respects that literary practice will confront us with both a specific and a strong mode of world-making. If we consider language as a boundary marker, Dickinson's poem retraces an enclosure, worlding a world that is reliant on linguistic alterity, on being different from all that is not comprehensible as 'English'. Such a view resonates with the multilingual or translingual approach to world-making developed in several of our chapters. Contrary to the monolingual norm that emerged with the shaping of national literatures in the nineteenth century, particular types of texts (such as the literary magazines in Stefan Helgesson's Chapter 7), or the poetics elaborated by individual writers (such as Joseph Brodsky in Anna Ljunggren's Chapter 5) or in textual clusters published across different countries (as in the subgenre of Siberian narratives in Mattias Viktorin's Chapter 3) all engage multiple

languages or registers of language in their world-making endeavours. And as they transgress one set of boundaries, these translingual events, as Helgesson and Kullberg (2018) have termed them, will themselves inevitably institute other enclosures and exclusions.

These remarks also indicate that the concerns of this volume resonate with Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini's (2018: 294) view that 'the world' is not a given but 'is produced by different, embodied, and located actors', not least those which Orsini (2015) has designated as 'multilingual locals'. As an alternative to normative Western conceptions of 'world', Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini offer a methodology of 'significant geographies' which engages the geographical imaginaries, real-life trajectories and affective attachments to place that are traceable in literature. Such an approach, they suggest, allows one 'to avoid the binary of local vs global but also the Russian dolls view of local-regional-national-global, the traditional comparative literature view that takes the nation (and national language) as foundational, and any idea of area as culturally autonomous' (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018: 297). It enables thereby the tracing of 'trajectories, loops, and *imaginaries* within both cosmopolitan and vernacular languages without thinking that the world belongs primarily to the former' (ibid.), a view that has affinities with ours, yet without explicitly addressing the *co-constitutive* nature of the cosmopolitan and vernacular dimensions of literature.

To conclude, then, the division of this book into two parts – 'Worlds in Texts' and 'Texts in Worlds' – outlines a methodological trajectory based on the points discussed above and comprising text-focused, hermeneutic, sociological and anthropological approaches. Place is of importance throughout: the nine chapters take us to widely different locations in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. They also showcase the importance of urban centres (with Siberia as a contrasting exception) to the literary imagination as well as literary production. Indeed, it would seem that cities are, almost by default, the key playing field for cosmopolitan–vernacular dynamics, often in a transcultural mode – a point that would merit further investigation. But if the literary practice investigated in the first half engages the imaginaries of urban cosmopolitanism in Europe and China – or its evacuation and inversion in Siberia – the second half deals with entanglements of text and society in North America, southern Africa and India. This is where political and material conditions of literary practice are foregrounded, yet with a continued methodological attentiveness to language, genre and modes of writing. It is precisely through such a dual optic that the world-making capacity of literature becomes apparent.

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