

Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003 (pp xiii + 324). \$21.95 paper. ISBN 0691049866.

The question raised by the title of this innovative and ambitious monograph has been one of the perennial concerns of literary studies ever since the seventy-seven-year-old Goethe coined the phrase "world literature" in 1827. Taking his cue from Goethe as well as from Marx and Engels (not the only strange bed-fellows that the author brings together), David Damrosch not only probes the uses and abuses of the concept of world literature, but makes a timely and shrewd contribution to contemporary debates over this seemingly self-explanatory, yet curiously elusive phenomenon. So, what is world literature? Or, to put the question in opposite terms: "What *isn't* world literature? A category from which nothing can be excluded is essentially useless" (110). Precisely!

Redrawing the whole architecture of inquiry, Damrosch first of all delimits the object of investigation and outlines the integrative profile of his new approach as well as its aims and scope by setting it off against traditional approaches to world literature, which define the latter "in one or more of three ways: as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as *multiple windows on the world*" (15). In the introduction, he presents the parameters and focus of his treatment of the subject, providing a capacious, yet exact definition of the key term: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4). He prudently avoids possible misunderstandings by explaining that by "circulate" he doesn't just mean that a work "has ever reached beyond its home base": "a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (4), i.e. whenever, and wherever, actual readers actively engage with it. Though Damrosch concedes that world literature consists of a potentially immense and incalculable corpus of books, he manages to turn the notion into a viable, flexible and useful concept by focusing on modes of circulation and of reading rather than on canons of masterworks. One of the central claims of this book is "that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike" (5). The author observes that his book "is intended to explore this mode of circulation and to clarify the ways in which works of world literature can best be read" (5).

After the key concept has prudently been delimited in this way, the nine chapters that follow manage to develop and support the main argument sketched out in the concise introduction by presenting excellent case studies, ranging from the Sumerians to the Aztecs and from medieval mysticism to Kafka and postmodernist metafiction. Although a review cannot do justice to the complexity of *What is World Literature?*, it is possible to give a brief synopsis of the book's impressive scope and structure, which, despite the extraordinary range of Damrosch's theoretical considerations and, even more so, his highly illuminating close readings, is crystal clear in exposition. The three chapters of part one (entitled "Circulation") are devoted to "the travails of appropriation and misappropriation" (84) that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has undergone since the nineteenth century (ch. 1); Aztec poetry (ch. 2); and a novel in French by the contemporary Zairean writer Mbwil a M. Ngal entitled *Giambatista Viko; ou, Le Viol du discours africain* (1975), a little-known work dealing with the cultural politics of globalisation (ch. 3). Looking also at various North American anthologies of world literature and showing that they "now typically show a far wider geographical and literary range" (128), Damrosch convincingly interprets Ngal's novel "as a pathbreaking work both of and *about* world literature" (116) in that it provides "a sobering reminder that foreign works have difficulty entering a new arena if they don't conform to the receiving country's image of what the foreign culture should be" (17). In part two ("Translation"), Damrosch turns his attention, as well as his admirable erudition and philological sophistication, to the processes and problems involved in translation, using lyrics of ancient Egypt (ch. 4), the mystical writings of Mechthild von Magdeburg (ch. 5), and new editions and translations of Kafka as a testing ground to explore the perennial problems that translators face. In part three ("Production"), the author extends his wide range to the unduly underestimated comic novels of P.G. Wodehouse (ch. 7), whose "spectacular international success was closely connected with his cultural double vision" (213), the highly controversial case of Rigoberta Menchú (ch. 8), and Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (ch. 9), which demonstrates "the major difference between a work's life in a national context as opposed to a global context" (275).

Each chapter offers a wide range of perspicacious textual analyses, many of which would deserve to be singled out for more elaborate appraisal. The author never contents himself with just reviewing well-known issues, offering instead a welter of sophisticated observations and rereadings of the works he has chosen for analysis. The comparative and interdisciplinary perspective Damrosch brings to the field of world literature allows him to see world

literature not as an exclusively "literary object" but rather as a cultural, discursive and social phenomenon that cannot be properly gauged without taking into consideration the manifold problems of literary production, circulation, translation, and reception. An added virtue of Damrosch's eminently readable book is that he is equally at home with contemporary literary theory, literatures from many different cultures, periods, and languages, and textual analysis. Though the unassuming writer himself, who observes in passing that "What a consciousness of sin is to the saint, an awareness of ignorance is to the scholar" (112), obviously belongs to those "ambitious readers [who] have been acutely aware of how little they have managed to read" (112), he leaves the reader dumbfounded by his unsurpassed range and critical intelligence. He deals equally confidently with cuneiform-inscribed shards, Egyptian hieroglyphics, medieval mysticism, Aztec chronicles, and intricate issues of translation. The extremely lucid exposition of complex theoretical issues is complemented by a sustained concern for textual analysis, practical demonstration, and more general issues of cultural politics, showing, for instance, that the current popularity of "'minoritizing' or 'foreignizing' translations ... clearly accords with the rise of multiculturalism and our new attention to ethnic difference" (168). Some of Damrosch's interesting observations, e.g. on "the ways in which any text alters and renews its meaning as it circulates across time and across cultures" (97), on the characteristic oscillation "between extremes of assimilation and discontinuity" (133), and on the intricate issues involved in "culturally weighted struggles of memory and oblivion" (48), arguably deserve to be the subjects of full-scale books, and one might hope that this compelling monograph will lead to equally sophisticated studies of these and related issues.

It comes as a bit of surprise, however, that some of the hotly debated issues in literary and cultural theory, e.g. many of the problems posed by ethical criticism, postcolonial theory, and world-system theory (e.g. diaspora and exile, global vs. local, postcoloniality, transnational literary geographies), all of which would arguably have deserved somewhat lengthier treatment, receive only relatively short shrift. This may have something to do with the perspective from which the book is written. Laying his cards on the table early on in his book, the author freely admits that he is "concentrating particularly (though not exclusively) on world literature as it has been construed over the past century in a specific cultural space, that of the formerly provincial and now metropolitan United States" (27-8). One might wonder, and ask, what kinds of answers the question raised by the title of the book might have provoked had it been written from the point of view

of a scholar from, say, India, Africa, or South America. Though it would be facile and highly unfair to accuse the author, who pokes fun at the "Euro-universal world" (149), of Euro-centrism or provincialism, or of "U.S. metropolitanism," it is arguably no coincidence that critics from India, for instance, favour different models of world literature, distancing themselves from the cultural and political needs of the American academy. To say this is not meant to diminish Damrosch's remarkable achievements in the least but to serve as a reminder that any notion of world literature is always contingent on the cultural, historical, national, and regional point of view from which it is construed. Nobody is, of course, more fully aware of this than Damrosch himself, who prudently proposes an "elliptical approach" (133), constructing world literature "from two foci at once," and who observes, for instance, that the "work of world literature exists on two planes at once: present in our world, it also brings us into a world very different from ours, and its particular power comes from our doubled experience of both registers together" (164).

Meticulously researched and cogently argued, this landmark work in literary studies is arguably the most distinguished, original, and valuable recent contribution to the ongoing debates about world literature. Rich in insight and scholarship, rigorous in argumentation, and exemplary in terminological precision and close reading, *What is World Literature?* opens up productive methodologies and new paradigms for a fruitful engagement with both the problems raised by the recent debates on global literary studies and with the works subsumed under the umbrella of the term "world literature" itself. This highly recommendable book is not just a brilliant "essay in definition, a celebration of new opportunities, and a gallery of cautionary tales" (36) - it is also a goldmine of critical insights and a great pleasure to read. The fact that there are virtually no errors and typos testifies to the great care with which this groundbreaking book, which deserves to enjoy many reprintings and, one might hope, translations, has been conceived and written. *What is World Literature?* will be essential reading not only for all students of Comparative Literature courses, but for the growing number of scholars and common readers concerned with world literature. Last but not least, special praise is due to the publishers, who were wise enough to make this elegant and modestly priced book available in a paperback edition so that it can reach the wide readership it no doubt deserves.

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