

Prendergast, Christopher, ed. *Debating World Literature*. London & New York: Verso, 2004 (pp 288). £ 15.00 paper. ISBN 1-85984-458-8.

As debates around globalization take on increasing force in the academy and more voices are heard against the separatism resulting from a rigid adherence to identity politics, Goethe's ideal of a *Weltliteratur* has come back on the agenda of scholars working not merely in the field of comparative literature but also in areas such as postcolonial literature and the more traditional discipline of "English Studies." According to Edward Said, there is a growing realization nowadays that the literary work (like all "human work") is "worldly, that is situated in the world, and about that world" ("The Politics of Knowledge" 191). This is why for him it is imperative to approach literary works no longer as the rarefied products of "some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world," but as belonging to (and actively participating in) "the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole" (196).

In Christopher Prendergast's *Debating World Literature* the worldliness of a literary work is understood less as an inherent quality of what is distinctively human and more as a problem, indeed, a challenge that needs to be taken up in all the diverse fields of contemporary literary studies. As Prendergast informs us in his introduction, the point of departure for his edited collection of fifteen essays was Pascale Casanova's *La République Mondiale des Lettres* (1999), a book that sets out to reinscribe Goethe's ideal within the wider context of global border-crossing and increasing homogenization on the one hand, and the more specific cultural *agon* among nations, on the other. *Debating World Literature* points to Prendergast's wish to engage with Casanova's understanding of *Weltliteratur*, opening up a theoretical space where the "worldliness" of "world literature" might be conceptualized both beyond the "inter-national" (where the trafficking between literatures reflects the existing power dynamic among nations) as well as beyond the "global" (where the price for entering "the many-windowed house of human culture" is the erasure of all particularity and difference).

The aim of the volume, then, is to reclaim "World Literature" and define its object, area, stakes and scope anew. To this end, it sets out to raise a number of important questions about both the category of the "world" (Who is included in the world? How has the term functioned historically? What forms of relations does it open for those uniting in its name?) and that of "Literature" (What belongs to literature? What is the relation between the written and the unwritten? What is the status of folklore?). Individual contributors address these questions from diverse methodological and ideologi-

cal perspectives. Some privilege a distinctly theoretical approach; others prefer to focus on specific case studies. Irrespective of their differences, however, all contributors emphasize the need not to reduce the questions around "world literature" to current debates regarding the canon. As Franco Moretti puts it, "reading 'more' is always a good thing, but not the solution ... [W]orld literature is ... a problem that asks for a new critical method" and, hence, for new ways of thinking, reading and teaching (149).

The structure of the volume exemplifies a central concern traced in each individual essay, a concern with what Prendergast calls "the migratory (and thus the interconnected)" and "the comparative (and thus the divergent)" (x). Although they have not been organized into separate sections, the essays come together and divide, forming multiple thematic clusters and sites of tension. The first four essays converge in their attempt to understand (theoretically and historically) the meaning of "world literature." Prendergast opens this theoretical investigation with a rigorous critique of Casanova's agonistic *Republic of Letters*. Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig contextualizes Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, a term which, as he writes, has "by turns ... proved too indeterminate, uncomfortably restrictive and extravagantly ambitious to define workable objects" (29). Peter Madsen and Emily Apter, finally, trace the reinscription of Goethe's legacy in the work of some of his most distinguished disciples: namely, Erich Auerbach, Georg Brandes and Leo Spitzer.

The three essays that follow seek to bring together questions relating to the "what" (meaning, nature) and the "how" (methodology, practice) of "world literature." What is at issue here is the interrogation of familiar paradigms of literary contact and cultural exchange. Hence, Franco Moretti's and Stephen Heath's concern with genre, understood as the stabilization of "relations of communication" (169). Hence, also, Timothy J. Reiss's insistence on rethinking cultural difference beyond the simplified binarisms (i.e. colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed) that, in his view, continue to haunt contemporary work in postcolonial and ethnicity studies. The need to put forward a more complex account of the interaction between colonizers and colonized, the center and the periphery, "big" and "small" literatures is also at the heart of the last three essays of the volume. Stanley Corngold engages with Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's reading of Franz Kafka and their politicization of an idealized notion of "a minor literature." Bruce Clunies Ross, in his turn, takes to task postcolonial theories of literature for failing to account for "the haphazard, uncentered aspects of colonization" and the hybridization of "English" as it migrated in different parts of the world, a hybridization thrown into relief, according to him, in the richness and diver

sity of contemporary poetry (317). Similarly, Francesca Orsini warns against an over-reliance on a center-periphery model of literary influence and calls for more nuanced theorizations of the relationship between regional, vernacular literatures and "world literature."

The five remaining essays are somewhat narrow in scope and, as such (with the exception of Simon Goldhill's fascinating account of reading practices in the Ancient world), may inspire limited interest on the part of the nonspecialist reader. Though perhaps not sufficiently compelling on the level of theory, these close studies of specific practices (Goldhill) or the work of particular figures (the *folkloristas* Isabello de los Reyes and Ricardo Palma in the essays by Benedict Anderson and Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela; the orientalists Berthelemy d'Herbelot and Victor Segalen in the chapters by Nicholas Dew and John Sturrock) make a significant contribution to the volume. Firstly, because they exemplify what is best in comparatism's philological heritage, namely, the ability, as Apter describes it, to sustain both "global reach and textual closeness" (79). Secondly, because they help open the concept of "literature" to the scenes of reading and orality (Goldhill, Anderson, Tudela), a contribution appreciated all the more in light of Hoesel-Uhlig's suggestion that the potential of Goethe's "new and striking term" ended up being absorbed by a divided concept of literature that was at once all-inclusive and inarticulately selective (32). Finally, because they invite a more complex assessment of the nationalist and colonial politics of such practices as the study of folklore (Anderson, Tudela) or Orientalism (Dew, Sturrock), thus reiterating the concern traced throughout the volume with moving beyond simplified binarisms and becoming more attentive to the multiple (and often conflicting) gestures performed by texts and their authors as they venture abroad.

In fact, it is this "reach for complexity," this commitment to a critical engagement with "some of the polemically simplifying tendencies at work" in contemporary theory that, according to Prendergast, constitutes the common thread that binds the essays together (viii). This is, indeed, the major strength of the volume, what renders it a valuable aid in the mapping of a field which, like the process of globalization that frames and shapes it, is "still in the making" (viii).

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Works Cited

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