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### Introduction

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# The Work of World Literature

## Introduction

FRANCESCO GIUSTI AND BENJAMIN LEWIS ROBINSON

It's the most interesting thing  
in the world, maybe more  
interesting than the world.

Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange  
Institution Called Literature'

The conception of this volume goes back to a conversation about the state of literary studies that the two of us had in a park adjacent to the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in the summer of 2018. With the combination of elation and despair characteristic of such conversations, we were remarking on the sheer breadth of literary studies today and wondering what commonalities in the study of literature remained — between, for example, Francesco's work on the theory of the lyric and Ben's interest in post-colonial literature. Two literary scholars of disparate interests and areas of specialization — what of substance

did we ultimately have to say to one another? It was in this context that Francesco mentioned the name, Derek Attridge. For Francesco, Attridge was first and foremost a literary theorist, while for Ben he was above all the author of an extraordinary book on the South African writer J. M. Coetzee, which is at once a work of postcolonial literary criticism, a theory of literature, and an ethics.

What is intriguing about the case of Attridge is that these two dimensions of his work are intimately and explicitly related. In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), his influential intervention in literary theory, Attridge refers to *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, published in the same year, as its ‘companion book.’<sup>1</sup> It is as if the theory of literature, of literature in general, emerges out of a particular literary encounter, in this instance with a postcolonial writer preoccupied with geopolitical, historical, and ethical limits, not least the limits of literature itself. At a certain level of abstraction, one might say, the theorization of literature, of that which is specifically literary, emerges out of an encounter with ‘world literature.’ For, although Attridge studiously avoids the phrase — indeed, even the word ‘world’ is noticeably absent from the concepts he develops to explore the literary — by almost every metric Coetzee is taken as exemplary of the emergent disciplinary and discursive paradigm of ‘world literature.’ It was this constellation that drew into focus the concerns we had idly been seeking to express, namely, what is the place of the literary, of its theorization, of its appreciation, in the expanded field of literature studies that increasingly takes its bearings by the beacon of ‘world literature’?

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1 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3; Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Taking up the titular phrase of Attridge's more recent book *The Work of Literature* (2015), we proposed to insert 'world' into the title — *The Work of World Literature* — to see what this supplement might bring. We invited Attridge and a group of scholars to the ICI Berlin in June 2019 for a conversation from which the essays in this volume emerged. At first glance, the insertion of 'world' seemed to lend the well-worn phrase on which Attridge draws a distinctive kind of currency. Indeed, our gesture could be said to capitalize on the contemporary proliferation of the term as a normative aspiration or ideal, of which 'world literature' would be a particularly telling case. This topicality owing to the 'world' in world literature, or the topicality lent to literature on account of the modifier 'world', is profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, world literature presents itself as the most significant expression of the necessary, urgent, and long overdue efforts in literary studies to reckon with and transcend the parochialism and Eurocentrism of its tradition by adopting transnational, transhistorical, and transcultural perspectives. On the other, advocates of world literature have to contend with the suspicion that the currency of world literature is related, as seems all too evident, to an altogether problematic entanglement in processes of 'globalization'.<sup>2</sup> Much of the debate around world literature in fact turns on the question of the relation of literature to the imperious progress, or rather the 'combined and uneven development'<sup>3</sup> of global capital: Is literature

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- 2 See Eric Hayot, 'World Literature and Globalization', in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 223–31; he also provides a catalogue of the ways that 'world' operates normatively in contemporary discourse in Eric Hayot, 'On Literary Worlds', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 72.2 (2011), pp. 133–34.
  - 3 Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

world literature when it critically engages globalization in some capacity, or is world literature rather a function of the global propagation of a capitalist 'world-system' that it uncritically reflects, or even champions?

In any case, we did not mean by our title to capitalize cynically on the currency of world literature as the staging ground, in literary studies, of 'globalization and its discontents'. Rather the intention was to bring into focus the sometimes obscured dimension of the literary in world literature. For the study of world literature, in contrast with the approach Attridge advocates that foregrounds the literariness of literature, tends to be concerned rather with the worldly aspects of the literary enterprise. Its socio-political and cultural references, its contexts and conditions of production, its circulation, distribution, and translation, are taken to be decisive. Consequential for the study of world literature are for the most part criteria that are not in the first instance literary. But what then becomes of the 'work' of literature as distinct from the circuits of labour, production, and activity in which literature is taken up? Is the study of literature without attention to its literariness ultimately worth pursuing? Or does, as some fear, the rise of world literature register, or even solicit, the demise of the work of literature and along with it, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak succinctly puts it, 'the death of a discipline'?<sup>4</sup>

The abnegation of the literary in world literature studies is most conspicuous in the paradigmatic quantitative and sociological approaches of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova. But even in cases like David Damrosch, who insists on the intensiveness of particular literary experience, the decisive criteria for world literature relate not to

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4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

its literary characteristics but to the ostensible relation to the world that it affords. For Damrosch, world literature circulates globally and offers 'a window on the world'.<sup>5</sup> As a rule, the question of world literature revolves around the uncertain status of the 'world' in the phrase. Even advocates who have vigorously defended the literary in the context of world literature, have done so by problematizing the implied understanding of the 'world'. World literature, these critics argue, is for the most part informed by a pre-understanding of what is meant by the world — one that often and too easily conflates the world with the globe of globalization. Spivak's conception of the 'planetary' as an inappropriable alterity led the way in unsettling what Emily Apter calls the 'oneworldedness' on which the discipline of world literature tacitly relies.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Pheng Cheah has recently criticized 'spatial' or descriptive conceptions of world literature which treat literature as a worldly entity within a given world rather than appreciating the 'temporal' capacity of a properly world literature *to world*, that is to open up 'other possible worlds', in a manner that challenges and transforms the established world order.<sup>7</sup>

Cheah's engagement with the concept of world literature leads him to the question that is the title of his book: *What Is a World?* But it is not only the concept of world that threatens to remain uninterrogated in world literature, there is equally an implied assumption about literature.

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5 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 15.

6 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, chap. 3; Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), pt. 1.

7 Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 129.

For, like the world, literature too is often taken as given. World literature is a problematic category not only because of the tendentiousness or instability of the world but because of the troubled status of literature. Paradoxically, investigations in world literature, even those committed to socio-political critique, often take the transcultural validity or general applicability of the notion of 'literature' for granted, as if 'literature' as a cultural practice were fully transferable from one culture to another or translatable from one language to another. This scholarly practice is perhaps understandable, although not necessarily justified, when critics engage with contemporary literary production in a globalizing world. Yet it clearly reveals its flaws when deployed in or across different cultures and epochs. Even before the conundrums of *untranslatables* that Apter discusses in *Against World Literature*, the question of an implied translatability of the field called 'literature' poses itself.

In a seminar on 'The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation' held at Yale in 1979–80, which Apter quotes in her study, Jacques Derrida observes: 'In order to compare literatures or literary phenomena, I must first know, at least by way of precomprehension, what the literary is, lacking which I risk comparing anything with anything in the name of comparative literature.'<sup>8</sup> The question arises: Do we need to have an idea of what the literary is — or what it does — in order even to conceive of world literature? Or inversely: What is the implied pre-conception of literature that informs world

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8 Jacques Derrida, 'Who or What Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in 'Who?' or 'What?' — Jacques Derrida, ed. by Dragan Kujundžić (= *Discourse*, 30.1/2 (Winter/Spring 2008)), pp. 22–53 (pp. 29–30); quoted in Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 237.

literature — and is it ultimately even literary? It is the sense of ‘literature’ in world literature that we propose to explore in this volume. From this perspective, the advent of world literature can be regarded as sign and symptom of a profound uncertainty about the literary, one that is expressed notably in a disengagement of literature that extends even to literature departments, where approaches are now advocated that dispense with the concern for the specifically literary. Attridge’s attempt to reinvest or reinvigorate the meaning of the phrase ‘the work of literature’ in a manner that foregrounds the specificity of literary experience can be read as a counter-response to this contemporary anxiety.

As an intervention into the current state of literary studies, Attridge’s work reminds us why we read literature in the first place. His gesture is to reduce the critical, literary-historical, and philological apparatus of literary studies in order to expose a peculiarly literary experience that arguably motivates all literary study, including the particular pleasure of simply reading literature. The work of literature, Attridge argues, is an event that is characterized by singularity, inventiveness, and otherness. For Attridge then, a text is not literary — or non-literary — by essence. It becomes literary when readers let it work as literature, when they do justice to it in a singular act of reading. Attridge thus shifts the question of the object of literary study to what he calls the ‘act-event’ of the literary encounter.

That ‘world literature has to be made’ is the point of departure that Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler take in their *Cambridge Companion to World Literature*. This approach acknowledges the open, diverse, and contingent character of world literature while also bringing into focus the ‘material’ of both literary practice and literary criticism



in a manner that [Zimbler elaborates in this volume](#).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, to take ‘the work of world literature’ as the point of departure is to ask instead: How does world literature *work*? What does literature do, perform, enact when it is world literature — and what sort of responses does it solicit in turn? This approach has the advantage of leaving suspended the definition of world literature as an object or field or orientation — indeed it does not even have to be decided whether such a thing as world literature exists. Instead, we will know world literature when it works — and perhaps, like the singular work of literature according to Attridge, each time differently. Each of the essays in this volume presents a response to a particular working of world literature. We neither seek to conceal nor reconcile the differences between the contributions, nor do we consider this volume simply to present a compilation of disparate and possibly incompatible perspectives. Instead we are interested in the way that, taken together, they cast a particular light on tensions inherent to the problematic of world literature. In the remainder of this introduction, we will sketch some of these tensions.

#### TRANSLATION

A quick look at the numerous monographs and edited volumes in the field attests to the extent to which the practice and problem of translation is central to the concept of world literature. Indeed, in an often-quoted statement by Damrosch — ‘World literature is writing that gains in

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9 Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1–20 (p. 5).

translation'<sup>10</sup> — translation becomes definitive of world literature to the point of becoming almost coextensive with it. A curious paradoxical aspect, however, is inherent in every act of translation: the rendering of a text, literary or otherwise, in another language is meant to overcome those boundaries that it in fact helps to establish or at least reinforce. Translation seems often to rely on the assumption of the existence of discrete languages while, in turn, it contributes to their normalization and their respective positions of power. This could constitute quite a precarious ground for world literature, especially if, as Robert Young argues, the very idea of a language 'is altogether a Western construction.'<sup>11</sup>

The mutual implication of world literature and translation receives a different articulation in Rebecca L. Walkowitz's discussion of works that are 'born translated' in the context of the production and circulation of English-language novels in the current global world.<sup>12</sup> This peculiar condition undermines notions of authorship, uniqueness, and the original, by showing how such novels are inherently collective works crossing and mixing national and generic traditions, as well as readerships and languages. Yet, one could wonder to what extent such works of world literature are distinctively due to globalization, or whether their proliferation is simply accelerated and intensified by it. After all, literature is to some degree always born in translation. It has always crossed borders, languages, and traditions, as Wai Chee Dimock and Laurence Buell have shown with respect

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10 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 288.

11 Robert J. C. Young, 'That Which Is Casually Called a Language', *PMLA*, 131.5 (2016), pp. 1207–21 (p. 1208).

12 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

to 'American' literature and as Jahan Ramazani claims about poetry's transnationalism.<sup>13</sup> It could indeed be argued that the idea of national literatures — which world literature as a contemporary phenomenon and as an academic discipline is meant to overcome — does not rest on properly literary grounds. In any case, on account of the trans- or post-national literary currents that it brings into view, the acceleration and intensification of the globalization of literature is seen as a source of hope as well as anxiety.

In the space opened between the two axioms 'Nothing is translatable' and 'Everything is translatable', Apter points to the field of tensions that constitute what she calls the 'translation zone' and the challenging position that comparative literature occupies within it. Between the accusations levelled by Spivak in the name of autochthony and Djelal Kadir's denunciation of the dangers of incomparability,<sup>14</sup> Apter acknowledges a need for translation:

The challenge of Comp Lit is to balance the singularity of untranslatable alterity against the need to translate *quand même*. For if translation failure is acceded to too readily, it becomes an all-purpose expedient for staying narrowly within one's own monolingual universe. A parochialism results, sanctioned by false pieties about not wanting to 'mistranslate' the other. This parochialism is the flip side of a globalism that theorizes place

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13 *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. by Wai Chee Dimock and Laurence Buell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

14 Djelal Kadir, 'Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism', in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Haun Saussy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 68–77.

and translates everything without ever traveling anywhere.<sup>15</sup>

Negotiating this treacherous passage between the Scylla of translation and the Charybdis of incomparability in her subsequent book *Against World Literature*, Apter explores the potentiality of *untranslatables* in order to reinstate the moments of difference that translation tends to erase, and thereby accentuate the tensions that traverse that field. The approach based on the philology of *untranslatables* seems to raise the question of the translatability of 'literature' itself. For the investigation of *untranslatables* in or as literature either implies a global idea of 'literature' or treats 'literature' as itself affected by the same untranslatability. Apter's challenge to 'world literature' thus destabilizes not only the assumed oneness of the world but also that of literature.

In a characteristic gesture, *Attridge in his intervention in this volume* shifts the inflection from the work in translation to the work of translation, from product to process. It is a matter of finding strategies that convey the work of literature, indeed in a certain sense take part in the work of literature, while 'acknowledging the unavoidable force of untranslatability'.<sup>16</sup> Focusing on the use of Kaaps in a poem by South African poet Nathan Trantraal, he challenges the idea of translation as a linear movement from *one* source language to *one* target language, as if they were two distinct unitary systems, by considering porous speech communities and variations within a linguistic continuum. Accordingly, translation for Attridge does not aim at do-

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15 Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 91.

16 Derek Attridge, 'Untranslatability and the Challenge of World Literature: A South African Example', p. 48.

mesticating the otherness of the original, but rather at creating, 'by whatever means appropriate, an experience that corresponds in some measure to the experience of a reader who's able to enjoy the original directly.'<sup>17</sup> Rather than an equivalent text in another language, translation thus becomes a dynamic and responsive process of approaching the work that envelops a broad field of practices, 'including literal translation, explanation, and suggested equivalents, with the recognition that readers' differing idiolects will mean that different strategies have differing chances of success in different contexts.'<sup>18</sup>

By interrogating the political construction of languages as discrete entities, Attridge's approach resonates with Apter's project. In her *Afterword*, Apter picks up on Attridge's 'South African example' in order to sketch a genealogy of racialized structures that underpin standardized 'sovereign' languages and dominant forms of translation in a manner that, she argues, projects of 'World Literature' (capitalized) risk reproducing. In order to redress ingrained forms of linguistic violence, Apter explores the possibilities of a 'reparative translation' with radical theoretical and methodological implications for any approach to the work of world literature (without caps).

Translation emerges in Attridge's account as internal to the work of literature. After all, for Attridge, in the act-event of reading a literary work every reader brings their own *idioculture* — their own 'unique (indeed, singular) cluster of attributes, preferences, habits, and knowledges'<sup>19</sup> — to the encounter, regardless of the degree of

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17 Ibid., p. 52.

18 Ibid., p. 49.

19 Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 61.

familiarity with the language in which the text is written. The singularity of literature, for Attridge as for Derrida, has to do with its iterability which he presents as a play of translatability and untranslatability:

If singularity names the translatability of both languages and literary works, it also names their untranslatability. That is to say, the process of translation is not a process of exhaustive replication; even exact repetition does not produce an exact equivalence because repetition always takes place in a new context and singularity, as I have said, is always open to context and changes in context.<sup>20</sup>

One could venture that a degree of translation as a process of familiarization and adaptation is always involved in any act of reading and in any singular experience of literature, even when the text being read is in the reader's so-called 'mother tongue'.

In the both active and passive encounter with a text and its singularity, as Jarad Zimble makes clear in his essay in this volume, 'a dialectic of proximity and distance unfolds.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, the text must present itself to readers with a certain degree of familiarity — in terms of medium, language, form, genre, technique, subject matter — in order for them to be exposed to its otherness. To work as literature, a text must be first of all *legible*, and translation is what can make culturally distant texts relatively familiar and therefore *workable* in other contexts. Zimble traces how Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's English translations of the

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20 Derek Attridge, 'Contemporary Afrikaans Fiction and English Translation: Singularity and the Question of Minor Languages', in *Singularity and Transnational Poetics*, ed. by Birgit Mara Kaiser (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 61–78 (p. 70).

21 Jarad Zimble, 'Working Conditions: World Literary Criticism and the Material of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', in this volume, p. 172.

songs of the fifteenth-century *bhakti* poet Kabir exhibit this kind of domestication for contemporary American readers by offering an analogue to the Beat poetry of the Sixties. A reading that focuses on this transnational domestication, however, risks overlooking the relational literary dynamics that informed Mehrotra's translations and that only 'archaeological' criticism can bring to light. As Zimbler shows, translation across languages, traditions, and epochs plays a significant role in making received literary materials workable again. The 'work of world literary criticism' for which Zimbler argues should, therefore, reflect on 'our capacity for making texts work' and 'the resources that we activate in writing, and in reading, and in writing about reading'.<sup>22</sup>

Attending to transhistorical continuities in lyric poetry, Francesco Giusti in his essay proposes a shift away from the question of the linguistic translatability (or untranslatability) of contextual meaning in world literature in order to think about the transferability of gestures. Literature makes these gestures available for re-enactment in different contexts and it is in the context of each re-enactment that they acquire a specific meaning. Within the discursive mode of the lyric, the notion of gesture — which Giusti develops from Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Giorgio Agamben — could be helpful to account for the transferability of texts across diverse contexts and for an approach to world literature which takes into consideration both the literariness of that world and the fact that texts can perform different functions in different situations. While reading (or 'translating') a poem, even one 'originated' in a culture distant in time or space, or both, readers find themselves sharing those gestures — and thereby participating in a

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22 Ibid., p. 177.

peculiar form of transcultural community. It is at the level of gesture that the ethical ground of lyric poetry is to be found.

#### ETHICS, POLITICS

Although it markets itself as a 'good', world literature is often reproached for downplaying political or ethical considerations. Young, for example, argues that an ethical impetus decisively distinguishes postcolonial from world literature. While world literature presents itself as universal, postcolonial literature, which insists on its partiality and particularity, is engaged in a genuinely universal project that he calls an 'ethics of humanity'.<sup>23</sup> The ostensible neutrality of world literature arguably betrays a more invidious and profoundly political operation, in fact suppressing the cosmopolitan diversity it is supposed to celebrate. In a public discussion with Damrosch in 2011, Spivak expressed the concern that the unproblematic propagation of world literature risked becoming a process in which 'the politics of identity' overcomes 'the ethics of alterity'.<sup>24</sup>

A number of the essays in this volume approach the question of the ethics of alterity in relation to the particular alterity exhibited by literature. Taking up Young's distinction between postcolonial and world literature, **Lorna Burns** explores the possibility of a 'postcolonialism after world literature', to cite the title of her recent book, that retains 'the dissident spirit'

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23 Robert J. C. Young, 'World Literature and Postcolonialism', in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, pp. 213–22 (p. 218).

24 David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 48.4 (2011), pp. 455–85 (p. 467).



of postcolonial thought.<sup>25</sup> Burns criticizes approaches ranging from Pascale Casanova's field-theory to the world-system analysis propounded by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) for presupposing a priori structures that condition world literature. Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Rancière, she argues in contrast for the significance of modalities of 'absolute otherness' in literary works that produce instances of 'dissensus'. Rather than departing from a supposition of 'inequality' or 'difference', Burns deploys Rancière's thought in order to argue for a critical approach that sets out 'to assemble and verify moments of dissensus insofar as they enact an assumed fundamental equality between actors'.<sup>26</sup>

In her essay on extractivism and indigenous form Rashmi Varma is, in contrast, circumspect about the insistence on 'otherness'. If the 'other' is supposed to be outside of or to present an alternative to the capitalist system, then the task of literary criticism is rather to show the ways in which such ostensible alterity is in fact profoundly implicated in and even integral to the system. Rather than reading Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's collection of short stories *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* as performing an ethics of alterity, Varma reads it as contouring forms of extractivism that make visible otherwise obscured processes of capitalist extraction of adivasi peoples, lands, and cultures in neo-liberal India. Varma, a member of the WReC, shows how treating world literature as '*the literature of the world-*

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25 Lorna Burns, *Postcolonialism After World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

26 Lorna Burns, 'World Literature and the Problem of Postcolonialism: Aesthetics and Dissent', in this volume, p. 73.

system'<sup>27</sup> does not involve immediately reaching for the abstractions of the system as the explanatory instance, but requires rather the finely calibrated work of articulating the uneven development of modernity in the concrete.

In Attridge's theory the work of literature is defined by its 'otherness', an otherness that ultimately resists total assimilation by means of interpretation, translation, or analysis. Benjamin Lewis Robinson's essay approaches the question of the particular alterity of the work in a time of world literature by considering J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which two kinds of otherness are explicitly played off against each other. The first, which might be called 'other-world literature', belongs to a tradition of literary theology discussed by Derrida in his reading of Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham where the 'secret' of literature lies in the absolute otherness it harbours, as if literature were ultimately not of this world — or as if it presented the promise of another one. The second, exemplary of 'this-world literature', approaches otherness as absolute 'likeness' elaborating differences within the world. The ethical question of world literature in Coetzee's novel depends on the extent to which readers are ready and willing to leave the 'other-world literature' behind.

Attridge sees the work of literature to be inherently ethical precisely because it opens onto and negotiates with otherness. Drawing a provisional distinction between politics as being concerned with the universal and the programmatic, and ethics as addressing the concrete and the singular, Attridge opposes readings of literature that too quickly translate the literary into the political. Dirk Wiemann's essay interrogates this attachment to the eth-

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27 Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, p. 8.

ical in the name of a more robust account of the potential politics of world literature. While the ethical account certainly corresponds to a characteristic experience of literature as the encounter between an individual reader and a singular work, Wiemann argues that what is needed is a form of literary reception and critical analysis that brings the collective dimensions of literary experience into focus and ultimately solicits an ‘ethics of commitment’. Attridge’s concept of ‘idioculture’, understood as the particular worldly context that the reader brings to the work of literature, ought to be expanded or developed with an eye to the ways in which it intersects with a broader *sensus communis*.

Led by a similar interest in how literature can put us in common or solicit community, but moving away from the level of meaning, Giusti focuses on the movement of individuation and dis-individuation that characterizes the ‘act-event’ of the encounter of a reader (and potential future writer) with a lyric poem. In the process of re-enacting a poem, readers are brought together as a ‘we’ in a ‘gestural community’ that is not based on a pre-existing identity — on systems of knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours — but rather on the shareability of certain transcontextual gestures.

In *The Singularity of Literature* Attridge observes, ‘Literature — when it is responded to as literature — is not a political instrument, yet it is deeply implicated in the political.’<sup>28</sup> In different ways, the contributions in this volume have explored this *implication* of the literary and the political. But there is also the question of the relation of literature, especially when it is supposed to be ‘world literature’, to what is *external* to it. A number of the con-

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28 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 120.

tributions in this volume point in this direction by taking up the problematic translation *into* literature of histories and positions that perhaps have nothing or want nothing to do with literature, understood as a particular, historically Western institution. In *Robinson's reading*, Coetzee's novel radicalizes the question of such indifference to literature by presenting a world without literature; its inhabitants exhibit no interest in, no passion for literature, and the absence of the literary is not even felt as a loss. More concretely, *Wiemann's contribution* focuses on *Refugee Tales*, a project of translation of (unnamed) refugees' oral histories into literature by well-known British writers, while *Varma's essay* reflects on the ambivalences of writing about the expropriation of indigenous culture in literary form. Responding to a similar constellation of concerns with particular attention to questions of racial justice, *Apter advocates in the Afterword* for a 'reparative translation' that seeks to redress the wounds inflicted by violent forms of translation that perpetuate 'white sovereignty on historicized language worlds.'<sup>29</sup>

Within the Rancièrian framework which *Burns brings into the discussion*, the question can be phrased as the degree to which works of literature that seek to account for the 'unaccounted-for' reinforce or disrupt the 'distribution of the sensible.'<sup>30</sup> Perhaps then world literature is literature that acknowledges what lies outside of the world of literature and resists being inscribed into it. Decisive would be the ways in which the literary exhibits modalities of hos-

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29 Emily Apter, 'Afterword: Towards a Theory of Reparative Translation', in this volume, p. 225.

30 Jacques Rancièrè, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004); see also Jacques Rancièrè, 'Ten Theses on Politics', trans. by Rachel Bowlby and Davide Panagia, *Theory & Event*, 5.3 (2001).

pitality, however partial and precarious, to the 'preliterate' or 'preliterary' external body, which is thereby rendered visible or audible and, in any case, available for particular forms of care.

#### SCALE, PRESENTISM

Wiemann's title 'Being Taught Something World-Sized' brings into focus the question of scale. While the phrase 'world-scale' is often evoked in discussion of world literature, the essays in this volume tend rather to trace the ways in which world literature operates between scales. It is as if the work of literature consists precisely in scaling, in providing passage between otherwise incommensurable experiential and analytic dimensions of the world. Varma, for example, develops the notion of allegory, in Fredric Jameson's sense as 'profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities', as a means of registering the multiple levels on which extractivism operates.<sup>31</sup> Precisely on account of its fragmentary and disjunctive quality, allegory in this way presents a way of mapping ecological imperialism. In contrast, Attridge's essay, which presents a conception of language as differing by degree, indicates how one may approach the translation of literary works, especially of works in 'minor languages', by being attentive to the specific calibre of language used. Treating language as a continuum, rather than emphasizing the ostensible boundaries between (national) languages, presents an alternative way of thinking about how literature articulates the world.

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31 Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (1986), reprinted in *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 159–86 (p. 170).

So far in this introduction we have avoided the habitual references to the historical precedent for world literature, notably Goethe and Marx.<sup>32</sup> Without denying the value of historical and genealogical investigations of the concept — Aamir Mufti’s study of the co-relation between Orientalism and world literature presents one of the most provocative of such approaches<sup>33</sup> — we have sought to insist on world literature as a largely distinct contemporary phenomenon, one that is defined by its presentism. Indeed, the popularity and proliferation of world literature can arguably be considered a symptom of an epoch that is presentist.<sup>34</sup> Giusti shows how world literature risks not only conflating objects of study to include works that cannot straightforwardly be categorized under the contemporary term ‘literature’, but also the adoption of critical approaches which import contemporary questions — that of translation for instance — into contexts where they do not necessarily apply. At the same time, the presentist disposition tends to occlude the specific temporality of works of literature, such as the transhistorical lyric gestures Giusti traces. A different conception of ‘nonsynchronicity’ is at the centre also of Varma’s reflections on ‘combined and uneven development’ in adivasi literature. Wiemann’s recovery of the ‘anagogic’ moment of medieval hermeneutics may be read as part of a project to expand the present understanding of literature and reconfigure what literature can do. While in an archeological manner, Zimmler shows with the example of Mehrotra’s translations of the songs of Kabir

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32 For an expansive take on the historical dimension, see *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*.

33 Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

34 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. by Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

that the fascination with the actuality or the actualization of world literature, which in this case meant its ostensible Americanization, obscures transnational and transhistorical dynamics responding to local exigencies that are essential to a thoroughgoing understanding of the work as world literature.

In a 1989 interview that Attridge conducted with Derrida and published in *Acts of Literature* under the title ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, Derrida remarks: ‘It’s the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world.’<sup>35</sup> It’s a joke of course but one that is revealing of the present conundrums of literary studies. For if the peculiar fascination of literature that we, following Attridge, have called the work of literature, owes indeed to its being more interesting than the world, then it presents the risk of disparaging the world and discounting its concerns. And this would in turn explain the widespread distrust of literature in the face of more urgent if ultimately less interesting worldly concerns. Within literary studies, the turn to ‘world literature’ evinces such distrust by deliberately shifting away from what is most interesting about literature in order to attend to more mundane concerns. But ‘interest’ comes from *inter-esse*, to be among, to be in the midst of, even to participate, to take part in — and for that reason to matter. Perhaps there is then another possible inflection of the phrase: Literature is more ‘worldly’ than the world. If literature is ‘more interesting than the world’ it is not because it transports beyond the world but rather because it engages in the world — it is an intensification of the world.

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35 Derek Attridge, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 33–75 (p. 47).

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