

second edition



david damrosch

how to read
world
literature

WILEY Blackwell

The new edition of this highly popular guide, *How to Read World Literature*, addresses the unique challenges and joys faced when approaching the literature of other cultures and eras. Fully revised to address important developments in World Literature, and generously expanded with new material, this second edition covers a wide variety of genres – from lyric and epic poetry to drama and prose fiction – and discusses how each form has been used in different eras and cultures. An ideal introduction for those new to the study of World Literature, as well as beginners to ancient and foreign literature, this book offers a variety of "modes of entry" to reading these texts. The author, a leading authority in the field, draws on years of teaching experience to provide readers with ways of thinking creatively and systematically about key issues, such as reading across time and cultures, reading works in translation, emerging global perspectives, postcolonialism, orality and literacy, and more.

- Accessible and enlightening, offers readers the tools to navigate works as varied as Homer, Sophocles, Kalidasa, Du Fu, Dante, Murasaki, Moliere, Kafka, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott
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How to Read World Literature, Second Edition is an excellent text for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in World Literature. It is also a fascinating and informative read for all readers with an interest in foreign and ancient literature and the history of civilization.

David Damrosch, PhD is Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Literature at Harvard University and a past president of the American Comparative Literature Association. Dr. Damrosch has written widely on comparative and world literature, and his work has been translated into an eclectic variety of languages, including Chinese, Estonian, Hungarian, Turkish, and Vietnamese.

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How to Read World Literature

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To my students

Preface to the Second Edition

The study of world literature has developed at a rapid pace since the turn of the millennium. Just since this book first appeared in 2008, many new courses and several entire programs in world literature have been established, while a growing number of sophisticated studies have contributed to the expansion of world literature as a field of scholarship. These developments have also given rise to renewed debates concerning the politics of world literary study amid the ongoing stresses of globalization, including crises of migration, economic inequality, and tensions between local or national belonging and regional or religious identification. In such difficult times, it is more imperative than ever to find productive ways to read across cultures, gaining a better purchase for critical engagement both with the wider world beyond our shores and with our own home culture – or cultures. It has been a pleasure to be able to return to this book now, and I took this opportunity to expand a very succinct account into a more capacious but still accessible introduction to the key issues involved in the study of world literature today, as illustrated through a range of remarkable works from across the centuries and around the world.

In preparing this new edition, which is half again the size of the first, I've brought in a range of new writers and have expanded the treatment of others. In particular, I've opened out what had been a single chapter on travel and empire into two full-length chapters. The chapter "Brave New Worlds" now includes discussion of the Italian merchant Marco Polo, the Moroccan jurist Ibn Battuta, and the Chinese monk Master Xuanzang, together with the hilarious fictional *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, loosely based on Xuanzang's arduous journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures. "Writing Empire" features expanded discussions of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and Derek Walcott, along with several newly added writers: the great Renaissance poet Luís Vaz de Camões, the Shanghai modernist Eileen Chang, and the Israeli Arab satirist Emile Habibi. Issues of orality and literacy are highlighted in new or expanded

discussions of Homer, Virgil, Margaret Atwood, Alice Oswald, and Bob Marley, while questions of migration and of center–periphery relations are more fully addressed in cases ranging from Nikolai Gogol and Lu Xun to Jorge Luis Borges and Clarice Lispector and from Wole Soyinka to Salmon Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

For this new edition I’ve drawn on the illuminating experience of co-teaching survey courses with my colleagues Stephen Owen and Martin Puchner over the past seven years at Harvard and on the new perspectives brought from around the world by the faculty and by participants in the sessions of the Institute for World Literature in our month-long meetings in Beijing, Istanbul, Harvard, Hong Kong, and Lisbon. There is no better way to study world literature than to get out into the world. This second edition is dedicated, like the first, to my students, both past and current, who have introduced me to many of the works I discuss here and have given me new insight into all the issues I take up. Yet I offer this dedication with some hesitation: Can I really speak so simply of “my” students when I am also theirs?

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Introduction

Reaching back more than four millennia and extending today to almost every inhabited region of the globe, world literature offers its readers an unparalleled variety of literary pleasures and cultural experiences. Yet this very variety also poses exceptional challenges, as we can't expect to approach all these works with the fund of cultural knowledge that readers share with writers within a single tradition. A reader of Balzac will come to know a good deal about Paris even without visiting the city, and as a result will be better able visualize scenes in Baudelaire and Proust; similarly, a good knowledge of the Qur'an is a prerequisite for a full appreciation of Arabic poetry. It can take many years to develop a close familiarity with even one culture; how are we to deal with the multitude of the world's literary cultures?

Literary traditions are often highly culture-specific: the plays of Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard insistently recall Shakespeare, while the early Japanese *Tale of Genji* is filled with references to ancient Japanese and Chinese poetry – and modern Japanese novelists keep referring back to *Genji* in their turn. Along with differing literary references, cultures develop distinctive assumptions about the ways literature should be created and understood. If we read a foreign text in ignorance of its author's assumptions and values, we risk reducing it to a pallid version of some literary form we already know, as though Homer had really wanted to write novels but couldn't quite handle character development, or as though Japanese haiku are would-be sonnets that run out of steam after seventeen syllables. If we are reading a foreign work in translation, we are at a further remove from its original form and we need to be attentive to the ways in which it has taken on a new life in a new language – a process that can involve both losses and gains.

The context in which we read these works raises issues of its own. As the comparatist Franco Moretti has remarked, world literature “is not an object, it's a *problem*” (“Conjectures on World Literature,” 55). The

problem isn't just a matter of scope or scale, but equally of politics and economics. In today's global culture, it may be possible to think of national traditions as part of a single worldwide system, but this system is marked by deep inequalities; Moretti himself describes the world system as "one, but unequal." As Emily Apter argues in her 2013 book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, literature rarely flows freely across borders. And that's just modern literature; once we look at earlier periods, we have to think more in terms of largely separate regional systems, often little connected to one another: world literatures in the plural.

Neither classic nor contemporary works reach us all by themselves, dropped into our laps by Homer's rosy-fingered Dawn or winging their way effortlessly through cyberspace, ready to be downloaded free of any cultural baggage, their own or ours. Complex and often troubled histories of imperial conquest, along with the unequal flows of commerce and capital today, have profoundly affected the selection of works that reach our shores; and these processes influence how we read them as well. When they are well translated and read with care, great literary works can open up new vistas, challenge our unquestioned assumptions, and promote dialogue and understanding across cultures. Yet often works from distant times and places have been presented and read in stereotypical ways, reinforcing the reader's cultural self-satisfaction and a two-dimensional view of the world.

What's a non-specialist reader to do? If we don't want to confine our reading within the narrow compass of literature written in our own home country and by our immediate neighbors, we need to develop ways to make the most of works from a range of distant times and places. Writers have always been in dialogue with contemporaries and predecessors beyond their own borders; hence even to understand a national tradition means attending to its place in the wider world. This book is intended to meet this need by offering a set of modes of entry into the many worlds of world literature. Each chapter highlights a key issue that we face in confronting foreign material and showcases conjunctions of major works that can exemplify fruitful approaches to reading world literature, as individuals or in the classroom.

The challenges we face in dealing with the world's many literatures are very real, but I've written this book in the conviction that works of world literature have an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of the cultures that produced them. Even some very great works are so culture-bound that they can only be meaningful to a homegrown audience or to specialists in the area, and those texts remain within the realm of their original national or regional culture. Yet many works find readers in distant times and places; they speak to us with compelling immediacy, even

as we may be variously puzzled, tantalized, or attracted by their persisting foreignness. No literary culture is more distant from us today than the court of King Šulgi of Ur, the world's first known patron of literature, who reigned in southern Mesopotamia from 2097 to 2047 BCE. His very language, Sumerian, is unrelated to any other known language. It had already ceased to be spoken a thousand years before Homer, and its cuneiform script was unreadable for a full two thousand years, until the late nineteenth century. Yet now that modern scholars have painstakingly deciphered the ancient language, no specialized knowledge whatever is required for us to respond to the charm of a lullaby written for one of Šulgi's sons:

Sleep come, sleep come,
 sleep come to my son,
 sleep hasten to my son!
 Put to sleep his open eyes,
 settle your hand upon his sparkling eyes –
 as for his murmuring tongue,
 let the murmuring not spoil his sleep.
 (“Šulgi N,” lines 12–18)

This ancient lyric already offers us the possibility of reading more than the literal statement itself: Is it really the infant whose murmuring tongue will spoil its rest, or is it the sleep-deprived parent who wants the kid to finally quiet down?

A literary work can reach out far beyond its own time and place, but conversely it can also provide a privileged mode of access into some of the deepest qualities of its culture of origin. Works of art refract their cultures rather than simply reflecting them, and the most “realistic” painting or story is a stylized and selective representation. Even so, a great deal is conveyed through literature's kaleidoscopes and convex mirrors, and our appreciation of a work can be enormously increased if we learn more about the things it refers to and the artist's and audience's assumptions. This is already the case for music and the visual arts, and it is all the more true for verbal creations, which recode so much in differing languages: Japanese and English people don't see different colors but categorize them differently, assigning color names along different points on the spectrum. We can learn much about a culture from its art and its architecture, but we learn immeasurably more when we have written records as well.

If we read more of the poems that King Šulgi commissioned, for example, we soon find ourselves surrounded by an entire pantheon of Sumerian gods and goddesses and by a plethora of historical and literary allusions.

Šulgi's poems give us an important mode of access to his culture, and that cultural knowledge, in turn, helps us appreciate the poems. Four millennia ago, Šulgi himself understood poetry as giving a privileged mode of access to the past. "I am no fool," he declared,

as regards the knowledge acquired since the time that heaven above set mankind on its path: when I have discovered ... hymns from past days, old ones from ancient times, I have never declared them to be false, and have never contradicted their contents. I have conserved these antiquities, never abandoning them to oblivion.

He ordered the old poems added to his singers' repertoire, "and thereby I have set the heart of the Land on fire and aflame" ("Šulgi B," lines 270–80).

Šulgi's motives for expanding his literary holdings were political as much as aesthetic. He commissioned a series of poems about Gilgamesh, legendary king of nearby Uruk, whose prestige he used to bolster his own authority as he created an early regional empire. In one poem he announces that he has been adopted by Gilgamesh's divine mother Nunsun, thereby becoming his great predecessor's foster brother. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which would later be based on those poems, is the first great work of world literature; and it has often been read as a timeless tale of friendship, adventure, and a quest for immortality. Yet it was very much a work of its time and place, the product of imperial ambitions in its origins, and then a prize find for the British in their imperial rivalry with France, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, when it was dug up in Iraq in the mid-nineteenth century from the ruins of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh.

We can think of world literature either in terms of a work's production or in terms of its circulation. Whereas many authors have written primarily within a national or regional setting and have become world authors only years or centuries later, others create their works in a much wider context. Even if such writers aren't translated, or even read abroad, they are already actively participating in world literature, and our understanding of their works benefits from our knowledge of the writers with whom they are in dialogue. The person who first gave prominence to the term "world literature," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, was a cosmopolitan writer in this sense. He infused his work with ideas and strategies drawn from a host of classical and modern European authors; he took a close interest in Persian poetry, Sanskrit drama, and Chinese fiction as well. As he famously asserted to his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, "poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing