
Overcoming Thresholds and the Mysterious Travels of Literary Influence: Why National Canons Cannot Be Projected onto the Big Canvas

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Abstract: World literature studies has to navigate between idealism and realism: the idealism of creating a broader and more inclusive understanding of the world's literature, and the realism of how literature circulates and has to overcome many thresholds to change canonization. The increased recognition of how translation is a necessary part of world literature has done much to lay the grounds for an increased engagement with literature in non-European languages. I propose that an understanding of key patterns in the international circulation of literary works can provide a better critique of the imbalances of canonization, and the inspiration for the inclusion of neglected works in the future.

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The world of literature is vast, thankfully, and time is short, alas. This is a recurrent sentiment among literary scholars (and all avid readers), and it is also widespread in institutions that support literature, not least in education systems at all levels. The amount of time available for teaching literature is limited, making it difficult to disseminate more than a fraction of national literary canons to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the role of literary culture needs to be rethought in a globalized world in which most of the world's population is raised and born outside of the Global North. There is no doubt that the discipline of comparative literature has been and is oriented towards European languages to a degree that has left limited space for literature in non-European languages. While this may not have been done by design, it is certainly deeply related to hundreds of years of imperialism and asymmetry in relations across nations. Martin Puchner speculates in *Literature for a Changing Planet* on how literature may be complicit in a concentration of power that has numerous unfortunate and unfair consequences (27). But what would it take to create a more diverse discipline and more diverse literary cultures in general?

One issue that divides the tradition of comparative literature and a newfound interest in world literature in recent decades is whether literature can be read and studied in translation or not. In some respects, the dictum in comparative studies that literature should be read in the original language

is easy to defend—but it can also be criticized with regard to at least two issues. Firstly, literature influences other cultures mainly through translation. And secondly, the demand that texts should only be studied in their original language severely limits the range of scholars and any hope of comparison between literary cultures that are distant from one another. In particular, non-European languages and literatures have been ignored by comparative literature scholars and they are left to specialists in language departments. Consequently, the gradual acceptance in world literature studies that there has to be a balance between reading in the original and reading in translation, with a view to achieving more global engagement with literature, constitutes a significant and necessary shift—at least, if world literature is not to become the domain of a few blessed geniuses.

However, it is one thing to remove an obstacle, but quite another to change the complex process involved in intermingling literatures. There is reason to be quite pessimistic about the future imbalance between literature in European and non-European languages in the wider international circulation of attention and cultural capital. If we exclude religious texts, what is world literature in non-European languages? There are obviously various tiers in the international circulation and canons, but few examples of works in non-European languages that are actually widely known (if not read) across the world and studied in comparative studies programs. *Arabian Nights* and haiku poetry come to mind, but what about the next tier? Global recognition is, of course, a very high bar to set, and this glass-almost-empty approach should be countered by the fact that a wealth of translations are available, making non-European literature accessible in many languages. In between the exclusive tier of globally read works and the sparsely translated, there are many authors and works that are well-known, if not staples of world literature. *The Tale of Genji*. *The Art of War*. Haruki Murakami. Lu Xun. Rabindranath Tagore. These are just a few examples which also tacitly illustrate the mechanisms of selection to which I will return below. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has also emerged as a modern classic, which is a rarity because it is written in a language that is not supported by a national culture, although as Rebecca Gould dryly remarks:

To draw on two prominent examples, while the faculty for the core Literature Humanities course at Columbia University recently voted to include the *Gilgamesh* epic in their syllabus, Literature Humanities at Columbia nonetheless begins with the more recent *Iliad*, as it did when Literature Humanities first began to be taught in the 1920s. *Gilgamesh* enters by the back door, as a complement to the more canonical Homeric text. (270)

So it is an uphill battle. For instance, it is revealing that among the top twenty-five literature pages in the English Wikipedia with the most views in 2012 and 2013, there were only two non-native English writers: Anne Frank and Rabindranath Tagore (Fischer web). It is more uplifting to search for translations at worldcat.org. The number of entries may still be tiny, but there is at least some evidence of connections occurring across the world, such as translations of the South Korean novelist Gong Ji-young into Polish, Portuguese, and Persian (and other languages), or the relative wealth of translations of Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish into at least thirty languages, including Basque and Indonesian.

Getting an international foothold is very hard, especially for small nations. The wide circulation of Norway's Henrik Ibsen and Denmark's Hans Christian Andersen demonstrates that it is possible for

writers from small nations to have a sustained impact across many countries.¹ It is well-documented that Ibsen is still being performed across the world to this day, and the translations of Andersen's work into more than two hundred languages is an equally solid testament of impact. Other nations with strong literary traditions and an even more central location in relation to the traditional centers of international literary markets—such as Belgium and the Netherlands—do not have an international calling card for their literature that has had the same widespread influence. There is something uplifting in the thought that even though size and power play a role in terms of achieving a literary impact, they are not everything. Small nations can also produce outstanding figures in the long history of world literature.

In this article, I will start by arguing for the need for a continued reflection on how the dynamics of canonization create more inclusive and diverse literary cultures, without ignoring the benefits a particular concentration of interest brings to a shared conversation. In particular, the threshold between nation and world must always be considered in any discussion of nationally canonized works, as well as of works which are circulated internationally in different circumstances and between different cultures (and individuals). The concept of world literature itself may also be too demanding, and the rhetoric of worldwide recognition should be complemented with a greater understanding of bilateral and multilateral networks of literary connections that may not go through the traditional centers of literary influence. Secondly, I will consider four concrete examples of features that, for better or worse, have shaped the international circulation of literature: a close connection to Western literature, the use of enchantment in literature, the representation of violence, and the advantages of short formats. All these features show the good and the bad sides of the way in which literature attracts interest outside of its original culture, and may be helpful in thinking about the possibility of adopting an activist stance in relation to the promotion of particular works.

Confusing Canons

In many ways, canonization is a given of the literary world. It is an expression of preferences established mainly through a diverse network of actors such as lay readers, critics, and scholars. But this is only half the story, although it is the good half, because canons are also influenced by institutions that are not neutral but have a considerable interest in being gatekeepers of works that have a national interest or fit certain moral standards. There is also a certain degree of inertia in canons, with works that are taught and anthologized remaining on canonized lists. Anthologies tend to be reprinted, and teachers at all levels are reluctant to replace one work with another. The publishing system does not always generate greater diversity—indeed, the opposite is sometimes the case. In *Redlining Culture*, Richard Jean So has demonstrated that there is a racial bias in large publishing houses and media (70). The market is primarily interested in sales figures, which in some big markets (not least the American market) rely on books written in English rather than books that have been translated. Having said that, it should be remembered that the overall diversity of literary activity, and the many routes that works find in order to become translated, is no small feat of the literary culture.

The conundrum of canonization is that although canonization is a desirable mechanism to facilitate a shared conversation about literature and to sort out what is exciting and of high artistic standards, this is only true to a certain extent. It is also essential that the dynamic of canonization

should allow for change, and that literary cultures should not only value canonized works but also consider the need for change. A world without canons would be very fragmented, making good discussions of literature impossible; while a world relying solely on a narrow canon would stagnate.

Finding a balance between canonization and non-canonization is a recurrent theme in David Damrosch's writings on world literature. In the six-volume *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, it is stressed that the works included do not have to be canonical, certainly not in a Western context, but that they must be of good literary quality and "compelling to read" (xxi). In *What Is World Literature?*, one of the definitions of world literature stresses that world literature is not a canon of works but a mode of reading, thereby emphasizing that canonical and non-canonical works should be read together in a pedagogics of expanding the comparative space (297-300). And in "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," Damrosch addresses the paradox of the status of canonization and argues in favor of a more nuanced concept of canons that acknowledges the split of the traditional canon into a privileged hypercanon and a downward-trending shadow canon, as well as an emerging counter canon that challenges the works in the traditional canon (45). This differentiation is essential in both its grasp of the reality of the tiers of canons and its fundamental optimism that they will change.

In "Geographies in a Globalizing World," Andreas Huyssen underlines the importance of abandoning the idea of high and low in the cultural system, although without sacrificing the demand for quality, which is very similar to Damrosch's call for mixing the known and the unknown without giving up on the quality of writing. Importantly, Huyssen also makes a call for questioning the elements of what constitutes good quality:

We should reintroduce issues of aesthetic quality and form into our analysis of any and all cultural practices and products. Here the question of criteria is obviously key: rather than privilege the radically new in Western avantgardist fashion, we may want to focus on the complexity of repetition and rewriting, bricolage and translation, thus expanding our understanding of innovation. The focus might then be on intertextuality, creative mimicry, the power of a text to question ingrained habits through visual or narrative strategies, the ability to transform media usage, and so on. With this suggestion, I argue for an artistic practice in the Brechtian sense, but it is a version of modernism with a difference: politically more modest and aesthetically more open to past practices than the Utopian rhetoric of the historical avant-garde allowed for. (202-203).

Huyssen's call for rethinking modernism in world literature could be extended to Franco Moretti. He has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the non-canonical by pointing to genres as a significant factor in the circulation of literature, where the individual works may not be as significant as the genre's contribution to the literary system (Moretti 58). Genre and genius: They share the same etymological root but have come to stand for opposite levels of achievement. Literary studies tend to focus on the latter, but there may be genius in becoming a genre that captures sustained interest.

Finally, it is worth remembering that modern literature attracts far more attention than literature from the past. For many good reasons: readers care about new literature and how it describes the time they live in, so historical works can only continue to attract attention if they are presented in the educational system. Bruce Robbins has written on temporal cosmopolitanism as a challenge which is

on a par with geographical cosmopolitanism:

What would it mean to think or behave like a temporal cosmopolitan? By analogy with geographical cosmopolitanism, one possible answer might be: to develop a sense of responsibility to people, peoples, and events distant from us in time that would parallel our responsibility (recently recognized as more acute) to people, peoples and events distant from us in space. On closer inspection, however, this definition by parallelism suggests an intersection, even a collision between the two responsibilities: going back in time might well lessen the responsibility towards distant actors in the present, and vice versa. Overcoming one's loyalty to the present is not ethically comparable to overcoming one's loyalty to one's nation. (183)

There are no quick fixes to creating a more diverse literary culture. It is not a case of being for or against canons, but rather of having a more flexible relationship with them. This is particularly important when national literatures and their canons engage with world literature. The nation in which literature originates cannot expect the rest of the world to have the same kind of appreciation for works based on national canonization. There may be all kinds of obstacles preventing a work from achieving recognition abroad, and the most crucial point may be that it is impossible to predict what will be picked up. Meanwhile, engagement with the literature of other cultures should not be so concerned with the potential for canonicity or representation.

One recent example of the surprising popularity of an author from another culture is the Danish author Tove Ditlevsen, who primarily wrote in the 1950s and 1960s and was featured in *The New Yorker* in 2021. Often frowned upon in her native Denmark as a popular, but minor writer labelled as a social realist, she has found an audience that looks upon her writings with fresh eyes and do not care about her status in her homeland. The translations also encouraged Danish audiences to read her anew, without the prejudice against unsophisticated social realism.

One could also talk of unwanted successes from a sending country. This can, of course, be highly political, as the number of prolific emigrant writers has shown, as well as writers who are under the scrutiny of the authorities, e.g., Orhan Pamuk in Turkey. However, it can also be the success of writers that the sending culture does not think represent the best that it has to offer. In particular, there may be a conflict between the contemporary literature that presents itself with newness and a focus on the present day, versus historical works that have achieved a status as classics but do not benefit from being new to the world.

Turning national classics into world literature is not easy, and it is a good thing that cultural influence is not a simple commodity—not least because national classics often tend to be complex and bound to intricate understandings of history and culture. Erich Auerbach wrote that there is no need to teach contemporary literature, since readers and students are already well-versed in the culture of the present, but they do need help to make sense of and derive pleasure from historical works (10). However, the examples Auerbach used to illustrate his point were all Western writers—Rilke, Gide, and Yeats—and the same point would probably not work as well for African, Middle Eastern, or Asian literature in the context of Western literature and students that he addressed, just as the opposite would be true of Western writers outside of North America and Europe.

World literature will always be stuck between idealism and realism. There is the idealism of

opening up the world, of cultures sharing their literature, of engaging with something new, and of promoting a spirit of being citizens of the world and not just a nation (although this last point may be controversial for some). On the other hand, there is the realism of limited resources—for readers, publishers, educators—and preferences for genres or what is familiar, which limits what can be expected of global literary culture in terms of diversity and circulation.

A larger question is: what can we hope for in a literary culture? First of all, not to see it as a monolith but as a network of readers and influences that inspire and influence, a surplus of works that exceeds what an individual can read, and vibrant pedagogical approaches in schools. Most people will never study for a degree in a particular literature (or in any form of literature for that matter), so the primary and secondary education systems are no less important than they were in the past. This goes beyond the canon, although preferences and the assumption of a canonical ladder cannot be abandoned completely. Historical depth also has to be a must, for continuity and putting the contemporary flux (that will not have much of a lasting impact) into perspective. Most of all, the canon facilitates conversations between generations, including those who are no longer present.

Skepticism about world literature, which might be successful for the wrong reasons, is often expressed through the term “airport literature.” In some cases, it may be literature that has a proven appeal to the mass market but does not rank highly in its country of origin. One example of this is Paolo Coelho, whose sales and international reach are quite astonishing although this success has not resulted in critical recognition. In contrast, Georg Brandes wrote of Hans Christian Andersen that he first and foremost was famous, but this judgment has changed to a widespread recognition of Andersen’s merit (23-27).

In the cases of Coelho and Andersen, it is also easy to identify possible drivers of their success, namely an engagement with enchantment. There is nothing inherently wrong with this device or quality, but it can certainly be divisive and may detract from the success of some works, while enhancing the success of others. However, it is part of the reality of why some works circulate more than others; and instead of dismissing such drivers, it would be beneficial to develop a better critical understanding of their influence, an influence that is often backed up by numbers. Understanding such drivers is also crucial for the idealistic, activist element of world literature—which can be carried out at many levels from classroom teaching to cultural politics—that recognizes that even though the long-term success of works and authors in a foreign context does not have a fixed recipe, there are historical patterns to learn from and use for one’s own purpose.

I will now comment on four features that have been influential and which differentiate works from their national literature. They are in order: a connection to Western literature, enchantment and the exotic, the universality of violence, and short formats. These traits are obviously not in themselves a recipe for wide international recognition, but they are important to observe in the circulation of literature that achieves a lasting presence outside of its country of origin.

Lonely Canonicals and Western Connections

Many nations have few authors who have achieved global or almost global recognition, or even none at all. With almost two hundred nations in the world, there is no room for globally recognized authors from every country. Despite this fact, it is impressive that minor and emerging literatures

can have an impact that defies the soft power of larger nations. The impact of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez was not a given when we consider the way in which cultural capital operates. On the other hand, it is noticeable that being a large nation does not always translate into global recognition, as is evident with the literature of India and China, something that should also be seen in the light of the history of imperialism.

It is interesting to study the authors who actually have an impact—I have called them “lonely canonicals” (Thomsen 44)—to see what they have in common. They do not share a single common denominator, but they do have a recurring characteristic: a relation to the literatures of Europe and North America is quite normal. This is not surprising in postcolonial literature, but even so it is remarkable that Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* engage with European works and formats, which also facilitates recognition by a broader audience familiar with Western literature and genres. The works also present a multifaceted critique of imperialism, constantly challenging any attempt to make a one-sided narrative of history, while expanding the literary canon of the Global North.

The same could be said of the success of migrant writers, who are often among the most influential voices of their country of origin, even though they are writing in a new country and perhaps even in a new language. This is the case with Bosnian-born Aleksandar Hemon, who became a refugee to the United States when his hometown Sarajevo was under siege in the 1990s, and who has published in English since the late 1990s. There is a dilemma in this, or at least the potential for conflicting attitudes: without Hemon, would there be a strong Bosnian voice in the international circuits of literature at present? Without migrant writers, would, for example, African and Indian history and culture have the same international presence in literature? Probably not, but it is worth considering whether there is a price attached when adapting your work to Western markets, genres, and stereotypes, and whether works which are primarily developed in a national context are overlooked. The case for that argument was certainly made implicitly with Salman Rushdie’s selection of Indian literature, which was written almost exclusively in English.

The argument relating to Western affiliations could also be extended to Chinese and Japanese literature. Nobel laureates Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan are connected to Western literature in their own different ways: Gao Xingjian not only as a migrant, but also as a reader of (for example) French drama, which places him between two cultures. Similarly, Mo Yan has acknowledged that he was influenced by the writing of William Faulkner and other Western modernists, while staying true to continuing a tradition of Chinese storytelling (Mo and Goldblatt xix-xx). The Western connections also define the life and writing of Yukio Mishima, described as being torn between Japanese traditions, Western influence, and the modernist gaze towards the future. When it comes to the most widely read contemporary Japanese author, Haruki Murakami, the references to Western culture and literature permeate his work, all the way into the titles: *Norwegian Wood*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *1Q84*.

The optimistic take on this is that creative engagement with multiple traditions promotes literature and creates works that contain multiple inspirations while still being rooted in a specific culture, and that this kind of literature has a greater chance of becoming internationally recognized and circulated in a variety of contexts, academic as well as lay. The critical view would be that these writers do not represent their literature authentically or as representative of their traditions, something which could be regarded as a weak point of criticism, or that they show a discrepancy between what is recognized

at the national level and at the international level, where the hopes for world literature as a concerto of the best from each literature would be represented. However, this is of course speculation regarding what deserves to be recognized and what actually is recognized. Suppose multiple kinds of works have a good chance of being received favorably if they are translated. In such circumstances it would be necessary to take the verdicts of a variety of voices from around the world seriously, even though one might still lament that it is not locally recognized literature that becomes world literature.

Enchantment

Another double-edged driver of internationalization is enchantment. Enchantment certainly helps literature to gain an international reputation, but does this then happen for the wrong reasons? For instance, the authors of the South American literature that boomed in the 1960s and 1970s had high literary standards while thriving on what can be crudely summed up as magical realism. The breakthrough novel of Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, also owes a lot to enchantment, as does Haruki Murakami, among many others. In 2012, Gabriel García Márquez and Paolo Coelho were the only two contemporary writers in the top twenty-five authors on both Arabic and Persian Wikipedia, and there are many more indicators of how much enchantment has meant in world literature. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes sarcastically suggested a temporary ban on magical realism, since it was the sort of writing that had become mannerism rather than an integral part of a work:

A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, of surprising honour and random cruelty. Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the fredonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. Permit me to rap on the table and murmur "Pass!" Novels set in the Arctic and the Antarctic will receive a development grant. (99)

Joking aside, Barnes stresses the need for activism to create new centers of attention and, through his pastiche, emphatically shows that enchantment distorts, takes something away from the engagement with another culture. If Danish literature was only known through Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales (which is the case for many people), this is surely problematic in some way.

Enchantment has peculiar effects when read in world literature. To a secular reader, enchantment encourages adopting a dual perspective: one retains a skepticism with regard to the supernatural, yet empathizes with a text in which the supernatural could be real. The bifocal reading that Damrosch writes about in *What Is World Literature?* is no more visible than when it comes to enchantment. However, while this perspective is represented in the books, a world of magical reality is not simply a reality to other people. Instead, enchantment in literature makes the world exotic for everyone, making the world strange to all, just as the Russian formalists intended.

The long shadow that magical realism has cast over South American literature testifies to the impact of its particular form of enchantment, but also prevents later generations from becoming part

of world literature without catering for a particular brand of enchantment. As with other traits of literature, enchantment is a complicated affair. It moves works, but possibly not always the ones that critics would like to see promoted to a larger stage. Fredric Jameson has some choice words about the use of a particular formula for success:

The formal result, for the novel, is strange and paradoxical, yet momentous: all successes grow to be alike, they lose their specificity and indeed their interest. Success sinks to the level of emergent mass culture—which is to say, fantasy and wish-fulfillment. Only the failures remain interesting, only the failures offer genuine literary raw material, both in their variety and in the quality of their experience. (web)

The effects of enchantment, of course, are just one aspect of what a work of literature is, and one means of expression. The combination of societal engagement and enchantment has been shown to expand the limits of what literature can do while staying true to represent history and culture. Enchantment is a powerful device in literature that rarely exists in pure form, but is balanced against elements of realism and political engagement. That is a way of taking command of the representation of reality, which stands in contrast to another mode that has created fascination but on unequal terms, namely the exotic.

Universal Violence?

Violence plays a huge role in humankind's history and literature, and the fascination of the inherent evil of humans when they take to brute force upon other humans is a powerful topic across literatures. The gravitas of trauma related to violence, through war, political persecution, or in any other systematic form, gives the literature that deals with it a significance in documenting and understanding historical events and engaging with a part of reality that goes beyond language. While violence is always part of a cultural and historical context, the descriptions of assaults and bodies in pain transcend time and place, perhaps because pain itself is indescribable, as Eliane Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (4)

In the literature of traumatic events, not least the mass killings of the 20th century, the violence also creates states of exception in which the whole point of the narratives is that the normal is no longer a given and the world has been made strange for everybody. This may be why violence has been able to fascinate readers who are given a way to grasp the universe that confronts them with something very recognizable, enabling them to understand the intricacies of the social fabric.

The French-Afghan author and director Atiq Rahimi has explored this play between violence and ordinary life in two of his short novels, *Earth and Ashes* and *The Patience Stone*. Both novels deal with life during the Soviet occupation and the atrocities of war. Just as importantly, the novels

revolve around two simple stories of human caretaking: a grandfather taking his grandchild to see his father, and a woman taking care of her wounded and unconscious husband. The violence of war is unmistakably present, but its entanglement with gestures of caring as well as anger about the way in which women in particular are treated puts the conflict into another perspective in which universal and particular elements are mingled. The titles themselves also reveal a reliance on elementary, universal elements, and the violence is countered by scenes that still border on conflict and loss of autonomy, but on a non-human scale:

A fly sneaks into the heavy hush of the room. Lands on the man's forehead. Hesitant. Uncertain. Wanders over his wrinkles, licks his skin. No taste. Definitely no taste. / The fly makes its way down into the corner of his eye. Still hesitant. Still uncertain. It tastes the white of the eye, then moves off. It isn't chased away. It resumes its journey, getting lost in the beard, climbing the nose. Takes flight. Explores the body. Returns. Settles once more on the face. Clammers onto the tube stuffed into the half-open mouth. Licks it, moves right along it to the edge of the lips. No spit. No taste. The fly continues, enters the mouth. And is engulfed. (Rahimi 22)

It is not hard to see the impact of violence in numerous works of literature that have crossed over to make a mark in non-European languages. One prominent example is Sun Tzu's philosophical treatise, *The Art of War*. A more contemporary example is Yukio Mishima's novels and their fascination with sexuality and violence. It is also noteworthy that both Lu Xun and Mo Yan deal with violence and disrespect for bodily autonomy. The binary understanding of life and death (which is incidentally also part of the title of the Mo Yan novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*) does not stand alone, but contributes a particular vibe to the works. This is perhaps not ideal: one often neglected quality of literature is that it does not rely as much on conflict and war as history does but can explore life much more widely and with a greater focus on individual emotions in all of their range. The universal understanding of violence and empathy for bodily pain may thus work against the width of what literature represents, even if the works themselves are multifaceted.

Short Formats

Finally, it should not be overlooked that the accessibility of literature plays a role in forming literary cultures, not least in the education system, where a short novel may not have the richness and complex structure of a lengthy one but does at least fit into the syllabus. The importance of the short format becomes evident every August in Amazon's sales rankings, when relatively short novels climb to the top 100 of the bestseller list as students return to school and stock up on *The Great Gatsby*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *The Stranger*. The inclusion of these three titles is easy to justify—they are all historically important contributions to literature, with narrative and formal features that have captured the interest of readers for several generations.

Nor is it an overstatement to say that the haiku has been one of the greatest exports from Asia to the rest of the world in the 20th century, owing not only to the body of Japanese haiku but also to the genre itself and its inspiration for making new poetry. The 5-7-5 syllable format combines with a more loosely defined attempt to capture a spirit of disengaged observation of the world, in a perhaps not

genuine but mostly sincere attempt to use the form to break away from Western modes of thinking and writing. The Western counterpart of a hypercanonical short form, the sonnet, is likewise characterized by being both formalized and flexible, and carrying assumptions of particular modes of reasoning. It is worth mentioning that the canonicity of the haiku spills over into Western rewritings of the form, such as Ezra Pound's "In A Station of the Metro" and Jack Kerouac's American haikus.

The harsh realities of the educational system are that there are very limited resources, and that the works most people will encounter will often be excerpts or literature in short formats. Very little poetry is translated, and the interest in poetry has become more marginal, which is a problem in a world that has been increasingly turned towards the novel. There is nothing wrong with that per se, as the achievements of novelists are fantastic, but it is rare to find short masterpieces. The canvas of the genre is demanding, and it is even more revealing that short novels are taught more, especially if the tradeoff between quality and length is not too big. A case in point is that Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* registers on more than four times as many syllabuses as his masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow*. Similarly, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is on 2,500 syllabuses, whereas *Ulysses* is only on 1,650 and *Finnegans Wake* is only on 250. These figures are all superseded by short stories from Dubliners, which make more than 5,000 appearances. On the other hand, Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is neck-and-neck with the much more demanding *Moby-Dick*, and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* just barely beats *Crime and Punishment*, both with more than 1,500 appearances on syllabuses.²

Is it possible to be brief and lengthy at once? *Arabian Nights* is a privileged work because it has a frame that gives it unity, while the episodic nature of the many tales makes it possible to read excerpts in a way that would often be unsatisfactory in many other instances. The cynical conclusion to these observations on length is that one should look for short forms and appreciate them and promote them if one can vouch for their quality. The alternative is that no literature will be taught at all.

Conclusion

The four themes commented on here may also help explain why national canons are not easily transferred to an international circuit of literature. In each of these cases, one can discuss whether these qualities constitute the wrong reasons or the right reasons for the international attention that has been directed towards these works. Brevity is not a quality in itself, but acknowledging its importance is a recognition of other conditions than representation and quality. If it is a question of choosing between less diversity in the curriculum and the inclusion of shorter texts, then brevity becomes a quality. Of course, the cases presented here could be taken too far: a literature of short, multicultural works that deal with violence as well as enchantment would not work as a general measuring instrument of literary quality, but nor is this the issue under consideration here. Instead, we are trying to understand critically how such features shape the international circulation of literature and consider whether more windows could be opened towards literatures that have little international exposure. It is also a question of not having different standards for different literature, as Gould argues:

Contemporary scholars of world literature are all too familiar with the pattern whereby Asian, African, and Islamic literatures are read for the window they offer on the anthropology

of a given culture and presented as adjuncts to a European core which is seen as requiring no contextualization. If the decontextualized Great Works approach works for the teaching of Greek and Latin literature, why should it not work as well for Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic traditions? (271)

National literature is still part of the foundation of educational systems even though it is also under pressure from other aspects of language and letters. The integration of a more diverse body of works in the curriculum is a worthwhile ambition in a world of increased mobility and more cultural meetings, helping people to appreciate the diversity of world literature. But change can only be expected when idealism and realism meet.

Notes

1. More than 20,000 performances of Ibsen have been registered at ibsenstage.hf.uio.no/.
2. Source: galaxy.opensyllabus.org.

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