

REWORDING THE WORLD OR REWORLDING THE WORD?

SOME POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE “WORLD” OF WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract

There appears to be no consensus as yet on the meaning of the term “world” in “world literature”. Over the last few years, “world” has indeed been the object of a multitude of responses and readings, which markedly vary according to researchers’ academic backgrounds and theoretical vantage points. How then is the “world” of “world literature” to be apprehended? Combining linguistics-informed and close-reading methods, the present essay seeks to shed light on a notional issue that has especially divided world and postcolonial literary scholars in recent times. More precisely, it will be argued that “world” in the phrase “world literature” has begun to undergo a linguistic process of resemanticization, whereby this lexical item has come to encode, and be imbued with, values central to the postcolonial agenda – thus providing the postcolonial cause with fresh impetus in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Roughly two decades after Goethean *Weltliteratur* was revised by comparatists on the eve of the third millennium, the presence of the noun “world” in the now almost inseparable pair “world literature” has given rise to vehement reactions among some postcolonialists.¹ A premodifying element of “literature”, “world” has readily been perceived by critics of all stripes as a spatial notion equivalent to “globe” (Cheah 2014, 2016). It is this union of a synonym for “globe” with “literature” that has most notably been met with disapproval within the circle of postcolonial literary scholars. “World”, many of the latter group feared, was the cornerstone of an all-embracing paradigm that would erase the distinctive socio-historico-political horizons indicated by the adjective “postcolonial”. Nonetheless, reactions such as these have by no means been the only ones to date. As I will substantiate below, other postcolonial critics have set out to retheorize the “world” component of the phrase “world

¹ Literary scholars wrote on *Weltliteratur* – though more sporadically – in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including postcolonialists (e.g. Said 1984; Bhabha 2004, 16–18). I am not concerned here with the genealogy of the concept. Oft-quoted texts authored by thinkers such as Goethe himself, Georg Brandes, and Rabindranath Tagore, will accordingly not be covered. I prefer to look into the manner in which “world (literature)” as a term has been understood by the researchers who, in a sense, have institutionalized world literature as a far-reaching field of inquiry in the 2000s.

literature”, hence world literature altogether. The geographical meaning that was promptly assigned to “world” when the current domain of world literature was in its infancy, and the broad conceptual grounds on which the budding field rested, indeed appear to have created a space in contemporary world literary studies into which several postcolonial researchers have stepped. Under their pens, the five-letter word has been reinterpreted to encapsulate postcolonial thinking in a version made more germane to twenty-first-century globalization-related issues. In so doing, these scholars have managed to sit down at the table of world literature, as it were, to debate literary studies in the 2000s, at the same time supporting and promoting the postcolonial ethos in the new era. Before detailing the above argument, it might be worth reminding readers of the ways in which the signifier “world” was originally employed by a few of the theorists who showed renewed interest in *Weltliteratur* nearly two decades ago.² It has to be stated beforehand that, for the sake of methodological clarity, I will make a brief foray into the area of linguistics in what follows. It is hoped that the pertinence of my interdisciplinary framework will be established as I proceed.

“World” in the early stages of today’s world literature

“*Weltliteratur*”, which is nowadays commonly coupled with the figure of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, was initially translated into English as “world literature”. This unhyphenated phrase occurs, *inter alia*, in the titles of David Damrosch’s “World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World” (2000) and What Is World Literature? (2003), along with John Pizer’s “Goethe’s ‘World Literature’ Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization” (2000) and Franco Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000). To use more specialized linguistic terminology, the English-language denomination corresponds to a “noun + noun” sequence in which “literature” is the head noun or core constituent that is modified by “world” (Biber et al. 1999, 325–326, 589–591). Particularly worth observing from a semantic point of view is that what a “noun + noun” combination denotes cannot always be straightforwardly derived from the two nominal parts of the sequence. In the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, Douglas Biber et al. explain in this respect that such constructions

contain only content [i.e. lexical] words, with no function words [e.g. prepositions] to show the logical relations between the two parts. As a result, noun + noun sequences represent two opposite extremes of communicative priorities. On the one hand, they bring about an extremely dense packaging of referential information; on the other hand, they result in an extreme reliance on implicit meaning, requiring addressees to infer the intended logical relationship between the modifying noun and head noun. In fact, noun + noun sequences are used to express a bewildering array of logical relations. (Biber et al. 1999, 590)

In short, there are no grammatical clues inside these noun phrases that help to make intelligible the imperceptible dialogue between their halves. Interactions among content words remain practically inaudible. In the non-comprehensive list of likely semantic connections that Biber et al. go on to

² In this essay, emphasis is laid on the resurfacing of world literature within the presentday Euro-American academy. Furthermore, as I have chosen to carry out a stylistic analysis of “world” as a member of the locution “world literature”, I did not include in my corpus Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), inasmuch as the author opted for another phrase: the French “*République mondiale des Lettres*”. Due to space constraints, elaboration on the latter term has to be deferred for another occasion.

compile following this quotation, what the authors call “Source” and “Location Type” are but two categories that might at first glance apply to “world literature”: “literature” could either be assumed to emerge out of “world” (“Source”) or to be situated in “world” (“Location Type”: Biber et al. 1999, 590–591). Needless to say, the geographical reading of “world” is indispensable in the latter case to work out the “noun + noun” series in this manner. As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this essay, it is this reading of “world” in “world literature” that was investigated by Pheng Cheah in “World against Globe: Toward a Normative Conception of World Literature” (2014) and *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016). The scholar in point of fact extensively explored the nuances of the word in this phrasal context, not least with the intention of coming to grips with its variable uses in literary studies. “What struck me about those new theories of world literature”, Cheah shared in a conversation with David Damrosch about “The World of World Literature” recorded in 2018, “is that its key defining term [i.e. ‘world’] was underspecified and unexamined, not rigorously defined” (Cheah and Damrosch 2018; see also Cheah and Damrosch 2019, 306). Debjani Ganguly, too, grappled with the “semantic variability” of this term in *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*, a word that she deemed to have “scarcely had a settled meaning” despite its “spectacular reentry as a literary critical rubric in the twenty-first century” (2016, 71, 77).

Posing the thus not-so-naïve question “What exactly is ‘the world’ in recent attempts to rethink world literature in the North Atlantic academy?”, Cheah delved deeply into the writings of prominent figures in the attendant field – the already cited Damrosch, Pizer, and Moretti, in addition to Pascale Casanova (e.g. Cheah, 23–38). Not only did he examine in detail the central theses these authors had advanced and the staple arguments each of them had deployed to this end, but he also concentrated on the precise terms upon which they had relied to formulate their own versions of “world (literature)”.³ Ultimately, this critical analysis that attaches importance to lexis uncovered close affinities between the theorists’ interpretations of the word “world”. Cheah actually came to the conclusion that “the world”, or more accurately their “world”, is virtually axiomatic, blends with “the globe”, and equals “a spatial object produced by the material processes of globalization” (2014, 308–309; 2016, 28). At the root of most of these theorists’ modern variants of *Weltliteratur* lies what Cheah identified as a world literature/global market exchange analogy or metaphor. To his mind, it is as a result of this trope that “world” amounts to “extension on a global scale” (e.g. 2014, 305–306, 308–317; see also Ganguly 2016, 80), or, as he pointed out elsewhere, to “primarily a spatial category, [an] object of the greatest spatial extension that serves as a container for all objects and subjects” (Cheah and Damrosch 2018). Cheah, moreover, held that the word had lately been adopted as an adjective that differs from the “national” of “national literature” (e.g. 2014, 309). As it qualifies the noun, “world” then characterizes literature’s “locomotion or movement in Mercatorian space according to the mathematical coordinates of Euclidean geometry” (e.g. Cheah 2016, 26, 28). Ganguly, who was more intent on retheorizing the word “world” via the world novel (e.g. 2016, 24, 84–85), discerned an identical propensity in literary circles to take the “world” of “world literature” to be one of “the

³ Damrosch’s use of the preposition “into” in his (2003) account of world literature is judged to be revealing of the comparatist’s theoretical position (see Cheah 2014, 309; 2016, 29). Cheah based his claim on Damrosch’s assertion that “a work enters into world literature by a double process: first by being read as literature; second by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (Damrosch 2003, 6; quoted in Cheah 2016, 29, Cheah’s italics). “Into”, Cheah maintained, suggests here both “motion” and “transformation”, conveying subtly the two pivotal ideas that underpin the Damroschian approach to world literature (2016, 29).

flattened and the fungible”, thence world literature to be “coextensive with our ever-expanding sense of connection with the rest of the globe due to accelerated information flows” (2016, 79–80; see esp. 20–27, 69–86). For my part, I would be more inclined to posit that, whatever figurative likeness world literature might bear to market exchange, such neoliberal metaphor remains a somewhat indirect or second-hand means of understanding the key term “world” and what the whole string of words “world literature” labels. Be that as it may, what Cheah’s in-depth study and Ganguly’s reflection highlight above all is that the “world” of “world literature” was manifestly not glossed in an explicit and unequivocal fashion from the outset. Its meaning was therefore left to guesswork. What is more, the logical relation between “world” and “literature” in what I take to be a “noun + noun” sequence likewise seems not to have been clarified and securely established, thereby leading to various and sundry articulations of the signified behind the expression.⁴

To figure out what “world” is in those texts that laid the foundations for new world literature similarly proceeds from inference, I would postulate. Early scholarly publications (e.g. Damrosch 2000, 7–8; Moretti 2000, 54– 55) very often underlined that there had been a tendency for the word to be equated with “Western European” and “North American” when co-occurring with “literature”. How the same word came to be construed in these publications was however not distinctly verbalized. Since what semantically underlies “world” has not been put down in black and white, scholars appear to have first and foremost used the noun’s co-text – that is, the linguistic context in which it is found – to try and get a firm grasp of the term. This is a well-known interpretative mechanism: in a situation where the content of a linguistic unit is unspecified, the term’s neighbours serve to reduce its semantic perimeter to a considerable degree. As far as “world” is concerned, instances of items that make up its co-text in early contemporary world literature scholarship include: “the expansive multicultural landscape so evident today”, “the tremendous widening of our literary horizons” (Damrosch 2000, 7), “the literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system” (Moretti 2000, 54), and “the fact that literature is becoming immanently global, that is, that individual works are increasingly informed and constituted by social, political, and even linguistic trends that are not limited to a single nation or region” (Pizer 2000, 213, italics in the original), among many others. As these examples show, some of the words detected in the vicinity of “world (literature)” are borrowed from the lexicosemantic domains of location and position (e.g. “landscape”, “horizons”, “around”, “planetary”, “region”) and linked to ideas of extension (e.g. “expansive”, “widening”, “not limited to”), which inescapably favours the treatment of “world” as meaning “(en)large(d) area” or “extension on a global scale” (see Cheah 2014, 305–306, 308–317).

Still, “world” might not really be “space extension” alone. Other potential features that are not three-dimensional are alluded to in the four excerpts, be they “(multi)cultural”, “literary”, “social”, “political”, or “linguistic”. How these elements affect and interact with spatial spread can only be surmised. Is “world” in “world literature” a common ground that incorporates what Pizer described as “social, political, and even linguistic trends” (2000, 213) which cross boundaries and with which literary compositions are infused? Or does “world” fuse “increased geographical coverage” with

⁴ Admittedly, one may cite the noun phrase “‘the literature’ of ‘the world’” (Damrosch 2000, 7), in which the preposition “of” bridges the semantic gap between “(the) world” and “(the) literature”.

Nevertheless, what both nouns and their definite articles – cautiously framed by inverted commas – signify is not plainly stated.

“inclusiveness” literature-wise, as Damrosch (2000) put it? Predictably, the first available alternative elicited dissatisfaction from a number of postcolonialists insofar as it undercut the legacy of pluralism and diversity that was said to characterize the literary productions from former British colonies. What has to be stressed at once though – as David Damrosch himself rightly did in a written comment on a preliminary draft of this essay – is that affirming that today’s “world literature scholars assume a depoliticized borderless landscape of easy circulation” would be tantamount to a drastic shortcut. Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, both taking their cue from Marxist thinkers such as Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Pierre Bourdieu, conceived of “world literature” and “world literary space”, respectively, as moulded by inequality (e.g. Moretti 2000, 55–56; Casanova 2004, 12, 39, 42–43), fuelled by struggles (e.g. Moretti 2000, 64; Casanova 2004, 9–12), division and hierarchy (e.g. Moretti 2000, 56; Casanova 2004, 82–84). Fighting for linguistic, cultural and literary recognition in the wake of political independence and from the margins of her “World Republic of Letters”, postcolonial novelists have succeeded in carving out a niche for themselves in Casanova’s explanatory model (e.g. 2004, 37–39, 79–81, 119–125).⁵ In a similar vein, several postcolonial critics, whose work is probed in the next section, have precisely offered conjectures on the outcome of a rapprochement between “postcolonial” and “world”.

“World” and “postcolonial”

By the mid-2010s, world literature had established itself as a fully fledged academic field and had been the focus of numerous research papers and edited volumes. Some of the latest publications in the field have been penned by postcolonial literary critics intrigued by the resurgent two-word phrase “world literature”. Their titles, it is interesting to note, bear a strong resemblance to one another as they tend to reproduce the same lexicogrammatical pattern: indeed, they mostly consist of a nominal group comprising the terms “postcolonial”, “postcolonialism”, “postcolonial studies” at one end, “world”, “world literature” at the other, which are joined together by the coordinating conjunction “and”. This similarity in form notwithstanding, “and” stands out here as a highly polysemous function word that is indicative of individual postcolonialists’ stance on the relationship between their area of expertise and world literature, and consequently telling, I would hold, of their attitudes towards the “world” of “world literature”.

By way of example, Robert J. C. Young contributed to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2011) with a concise article on “World Literature and Postcolonialism”. Then regarded as “two separately demarcated domains of literary study” (Young 2011, 213), twenty-first-century Weltliteratur scholarship and postcolonial literature were chosen in this piece as the object of a brief and illuminating comparative analysis. In substance, Young, who premised his reasoning on the (2003) Damroschian delineation of world literature, contrasted its inherently universalist and mobile nature with the “resistance”-driven postcolonial literature that is typically “partial, locked into a particular problematic of power” and whose texts capture “the particular local and historical instance” (2011,

⁵ Moretti’s (2000) and Casanova’s (2004) musings on the topic subtend WReC’s hyphenated world-literature (2015, 6–10), which will be touched upon in the following section of the present essay.

214, 216). Whereas world literature hinges on a work's diffusion and potential to afford insights into diverse lingua-cultural settings (e.g. Damrosch 2003, 6, 15; Young 2011, 214), postcolonial literature is said to "expose and challenge imbalances of power, and the different forms of injustice that follow from such factors" (Young 2011, 217). Thus the latter sort of literature, the theorist summed up, aspires to "go beyond itself to impact upon the world which it represents" and is as such "engaged with realities beyond itself"; it "remains a literature concerned with the world", namely "a world which that literature seeks to change by telling the stories that it shares with its readers" (217). Barely noticeable amid the flow of words in Young's book chapter, these statements are of great relevance to our current discussion in that they mark a semantic shift involving the noun "world". The "world" introduced in those lines can be "impacted" and "changed" by postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literature, for its part, is believed to be "concerned with" the "world". Although Young did not enunciate his perception of the term either, its co-text is evidently discrepant with the linguistic context of "world" as used in the excerpts from academic writings on modern-day world literature selected in the second section above. In fact, what conceivably occupies the foreground of the "world" upon which postcolonial literature aims to act is power asymmetry. Inequality, in contradistinction to space expansion, appears to embody the essence of this "world". On that account, the "world" associated with "postcolonial literature" in Young's (2011) essay does not seem to tally with the "world" of "world literature" implied in those writings. The conjunction "and" which Young employed in the heading of his survey, while certainly reflecting his intention to set "world literature" against "postcolonialism", does not stand for an absolute convergence of the two branches of knowledge.

Yet, comparisons aside, the word "and" lodged in such a lexical configuration can bespeak cooperation between, and even coalescence of, the two domains. Stefan Helgesson's almost identically titled paper "Postcolonialism and World Literature: Rethinking the Boundaries" (2014) is a case in point. The specialist in Southern African literatures indeed advocated for "a mutually enriching exchange" between postcolonial and world literary studies in order to overcome their respective shortcomings and ideally "account for literature both as grounded in local, conflictual histories and as a circulatory phenomenon that moves across languages and literary fields" (484, my italics). Only to a certain extent, Helgesson contended, do postcolonial studies effectively address the transnational turn and global scale perspective in literary criticism (488). Besides, he put forth, creative writing originating from former European colonies at large is in a position to provide a major stimulus to the conceptualization of world literature (484). Significantly enough, the research areas' fruitful collaboration would not generate any invigorated postcolonial literature, so to speak, or refined world literature alone. What would actually come out of this synergy is a fresh look at the logical relation between "world" and "literature" in the corresponding "noun+noun" sequence. Neither would literature exclusively "impact upon the world", as Young had it; nor would it possibly be "of the world", as Damrosch (2000) intimated. As it turns out, literature – in the Bourdieusian sense – would rather be seen "as a world of its own" (e.g. Helgesson 2014, 484, 489, my italics). To put forward the idea of "literature as a world of its own" could, in Helgesson's opinion, "mak[e] the full range of the literary visible, from local generic conventions and the singular encounter between a reader and a text...all the way to the global flows of genres, books and translations across dozens of languages" (489). From this theoretical standpoint, literature is "also a world, regardless of any insistence on untranslatability or local irreducibility, whose texts are by definition made public, mediated, either prior to the critic's

intervention or as a result of it" (489, italics in the original). Helgesson subsequently backed up this claim with a careful examination of extracts from texts composed by Mozambican writer Mia Couto and Algerian-born woman of letters Assia Djebar (489– 498). Singling out newly coined terms in the authors' Portuguese- and French-language work as well as their counterparts in a series of translated editions, Helgesson put a premium on the difference to be made between the ones that register a cultural framework that is historically and politically defined, and those that are purely linguistically oriented (e.g. 494). For example, the conjugated verb "timbilava", invented by Couto in one of his stories, is judged to exemplify the first class of coinages (493). It derives from the noun "timbila", that is, "a musical instrument proper to southern Mozambique", and is designed to evoke (the sound coming from) this kind of xylophone (493). As for the second category of neologisms, Helgesson devoted attention to the term "blygförrad" found in the Swedish translation of the same novel by Mia Couto (489). This word, a mixture of "shy" and "confused" that is not attested in the Scandinavian language, parallels Couto's invention "perturbabado", which is distinguished by a double "ba" that arguably echoes and formally inscribes the narrator's "perturbed" ("perturbado") mood (489–490). For this reason, a given piece of writing issuing from a land that was once seized by European rulers is not solely a window onto ongoing power struggles, bias, and disparity; it is furthermore produced, edited, translated, distributed, and fundamentally "mediated" (e.g. 487–494). It is, let us insist, this confluence of postcolonial and literary-commercial factors that profoundly shapes Helgesson's literature qua world (e.g. 484).⁶

Among the postcolonialists who have conversely voiced severe reservations about merging their field of study with world literature are Elleke Boehmer. In the title of her article "The World and the Postcolonial" (2014), the Oxford-based literary critic appears to have been prone to insert the coordinating conjunction "and" as a symbolic gatekeeper between "postcolonial" and "world" with a view to preventing world literature's unforeseeable incursion into the former's territory. More specifically, Boehmer harboured suspicions of the very word "world" in the blanket term "world literature" (e.g. 2014, 300–301, 302, 303–305). "World", flagged up as being a "seemingly more neutral, more inclusive" item that might sound "mainstream" and "omni-referential" to a postcolonial researcher (301, 302), is a lexical emblem of "a qualified or conditional universalism, but a universalism nonetheless" (302). It is such a fear of engulfing universalism that Boehmer expressed through what she aptly named an "array of sceptical questions" that she wished to pose (305). A few of them, as the next quotation will attest, are reminiscent of – and further elaborate on – Pheng Cheah's general inquiry reported in "World" in the early stages of today's world literature above (see Cheah 2016, 24):

To ask an eminently postcolonial question, which world and whose world are we referring to when we say "world literary studies", remembering that when we say postcolonial we are rarely, if ever, referring to the centre in isolation from its margins?... Where the geopolitical scope of the postcolonial conventionally privileged the representation of nation, region and locale in narrative, does world move us away from specific locations, and from geopolitical territories with defined or even disputed borders, but borders nonetheless? And, if so, does this world not threaten to empty the politics out of the postcolonial... ? Is the entire planet somehow magisterially designated by the term "world literature", or does that "world" of world literature in fact have a more limited meaning ... ? (Boehmer 2014, 303–304, italics in the original)

⁶ For another perspective on the limitations of postcolonialism in twenty-first-century literary studies and on how it can be complemented by world literature as a paradigm, see Thomsen (2008, esp. 21–25). For a specific outlook on how postcolonial thinking, in turn, may inflect the world novel, Ganguly's work is worthy of note (2016, e.g. 110–131, 177–178).

While the subject had already been broached elsewhere (e.g. Young 2011, 214; Helgesson 2014, 485), the semantic indeterminacy of “world” in the locution “world literature” may have been tackled here with another end in mind. Boehmer’s motivation behind these challenging questions, I would speculate, is less to provoke antipathy towards world literature than to raise her peers’ awareness about the risks entailed by the avowedly ambitious though equivocal unit “world” and the opportunity offered to postcolonial literary scholars to clear up the terminological confusion surrounding this noun. In spite of her queries tinged with concern, Boehmer indeed did not shut the door on a combination of “world” and “postcolonial” criticism. On a more figurative note, the “and” interposed between these two terms in the title of her paper does not wall “the postcolonial” off. Part of the concluding paragraph reads:

A conjunction of world literary and postcolonial studies need not necessarily involve the co-optation of the one by the other; of the seemingly more peripheral by the increasingly more hegemonic field ... It may not be inevitable that a convergence of world and postcolonial betrays the core task of postcolonial studies, which is to make invisible exploitation visible, especially as it manifests in texts, and to allow knowledge from below to count. (Boehmer 2014, 307)

That alliance could eventually bring forth an alternative, “more radical and expansive [i.e. no longer Eurocentric]” notion of “the world” (307), which recalls in some measure Helgesson’s (2014) theoretical position. This being said, Boehmer departed from this hypothesis of productive partnership in another passage of her text (2014, 303). It is worth repeating at this stage that Helgesson considered postcolonial writing to be integral to and instrumental in world literature theorizing (484). Boehmer, for her part, went so far as to declare that postcolonial literary criticism could in certain respects “appear to lend itself to joining pedagogic and critical forces with world literary perspectives and studies” given that it is “an always already ‘worlded’ mode of critical reading and commentary” (303, italics in the original). Postcolonial criticism is here described as “worlded”, surprisingly enough, because it deals with the postcolonial. In particular when it comes to its comparative compass, postcolonial literature is believed to be a likely candidate for being qualified by the modifier “world”: not only does it embrace works that can be analyzed on various scales and well beyond the confines of the nation and the region, but it also “involves”, in Boehmer’s own words, “a relentless conceptual shuttling between the specific and the universal, the local and the planetary, and between networked space and cumulative time” (303). To be sure, attaching the label “world” of the Damroschian world literature to “postcolonial” is far from being consistent with Young’s (2011) stance. Neither is it consonant with Helgesson’s (2014). The latter researcher let postcolonialism permeate into the noun “world” to formulate his “literature as a world of its own”, whereas Boehmer allowed “world” principally understood as “globe” (see Cheah 2014, 308–309; 2016, 28) to become an essential attribute of the term “postcolonial”. “In the face of the powerful trend towards ‘world’ over ‘postcolonial’”, she concluded, the idea that the postcolonial ethos is not doomed to be eroded by its mingling with “world” is to her “an expectation or at least a hope that deserves vigilant critical attention and vigorous (re-)articulation at every available opportunity” (Boehmer 2014, 307). As it happens, this rearticulation had actually already been set off.

Two years earlier, a group of postcolonialists had spearheaded a research initiative designed to revisit the construct of world literature substantially and, by the same token, the phrase “world literature”. Under the now strangely familiar heading “Postcolonial Studies and World Literature” (2012), James

Graham, Michael Niblett, and Sharae Deckard made known their wish to “recalibrate the emergent field of world literature”; in a nutshell, to undertake “a reconstruction of ‘world literature’” (2012, 466). The three critics additionally announced that they, and the other contributors to that special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, would embark upon the “reconceptualiz[ation] [of] postcolonial studies in relation to world literature” (468). This time, the function word “and” fastening “postcolonial studies” to “world literature” in the essay title is presumably more suggestive of an interplay between the two domains. Strictly speaking, world literature reconsidered is very much informed by the materialist branch of postcolonialism, Franco Moretti’s Marxist “one and unequal” approach to world literature, and Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory (e.g. Graham, Niblett, and Deckard 2012, 465–466). As readers would in all probability have predicted at this point, that conceptual overhaul culminated in a book eloquently entitled *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), co-authored by members of the Warwick Research Collective (henceforth, WReC). This time, the signifier “world literature” was slightly but meaningfully altered by means of a hyphen, a short, inconspicuous horizontal stroke between the two nouns. The punctuation mark, which to all appearances is a trivial extra symbol, is in actual fact a nod to Wallerstein (Graham, Niblett, and Deckard 2012, 468). Hyphenated world-literature is indeed “an analytical category” that is construed as “the literature of the world-system – of the modern capitalist world-system, that is”, as “a creature of modernity” born around the late eighteenth century (WReC 2015, 49, 8, 51, italics in the original). World-literature is moreover thought to “register” and “encode” this world-system (e.g. WReC 2015, 15, 19, 20). On the subject of hyphenation, Wallerstein asserted that the symbol had been deliberately added to signal that the system referred to does not encompass the whole world – plausibly as a map – but forms a world, which as a rule does not match the entire – geographical – world (Wallerstein 2006, 33). A world-system is from his point of view a spatio-temporal zone that is culturally and politically outlined and contains institutions and activities systemically defined (34). As a consequence, to return to “world-literature”, the hyphen borrowed from the American social scientist’s theory not only amends the denomination “world literature”; it concomitantly ascribes different meaning to its “world” component and establishes a logical connection between “world” and “literature”. World-literature is really “the literature of the modern capitalist world-system” (WReC 2015, 8, my italics) and not “‘the literature’ of ‘the world’” (see Damrosch 2000, 7). To be completely accurate, one however has to concede that although a world-system is not “‘global’ or ‘globally dispersed’”, the modern capitalist one proves to be a striking “exception” inasmuch as “it is a world-system that is also, uniquely and for the first time, a world system” (WReC 2015, 8, italics in the original). Even so, the research collective took a stand against the image of “a ‘level playing field’” that is much too often conjured up by the noun “world” in “world literature”, an image that is intended as “a more or less free space in which texts from around the globe can circulate, intersect and converse with one another” (22). As regards postcolonial studies, Graham et al. did underscore their important theoretical input to the assessment of the modern capitalist world-system (2012, 468). What WReC later clarified is the extent to which the field is pertinent to this critique (e.g. 2015, 115–142). In respect of the “European literary periphery”, they felt that “a vocabulary and conceptualisation derived from world-systems theory are more appropriate to discussion of ‘expanded’ Europe than a vocabulary and conceptualisation derived from postcolonial studies”, insofar as “it is not really possible to address peripheralisation as an historic process with the toolkit bequeathed by postcolonial studies or colonial discourse theory” (WReC 2015, 125). It will be

briefly shown in the final section of this essay that the postcolonial ethos itself can be viewed as appropriate for world literature all the same. Beyond a mere coalition or symbiosis between the two, the former has been reported to perform a new role by virtue of the latter.

Postcolonial literature as world literature

As this essay draws to a close and little space is left for me to expound Pheng Cheah's book-length reasoning about our chief concern here, I would like to sketch in bold strokes his own take on the "world" of world literature. To do so, I plan to limit this section to the curious subtitle of his (2016) work, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*.

Cheah, let us restate once again, brought to the fore in the first chapter of his volume a "world"/"globe" analogy on which several accounts of incipient contemporary Weltliteratur were predicated (e.g. 2016, 28–38). In the researcher's estimation, these formulations of world literature appear unsatisfactory on the grounds that they take no heed of "literature's worldly causality" and "normative force" (e.g. 5, 191). What Cheah therefore propounded was precisely an ideal-laden image of world literature, which "seeks to understand the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the existing world" (5).⁷ Crucially, it is advanced that viewing world literature through this lens necessitates holding the "world" of "world literature" to be first of all a temporal unit (6).⁸ Firmly guided by Goethe, Cheah concurred that "literary exchange generates a spiritual world that transcends spatial networks", a "higher world" whose "members ... hope that in due time, through historical progress, the ideal humanity that literary intercourse reveals will be actualized in the existing world" (2016, 6). In relation to temporality, Cheah assured further in his book that "globalization involves the calculative management and appropriation of time" (17). "Peripheralization", or "the incorporation of external arenas into the world-system as peripheries", would thus lead to tight regulation and arrogation of time (193). It is worth remarking in passing that, in spite of their common Wallersteinian framework, Cheah departed from WReC, not least when he explicated his thesis about the interaction between world literature, world-system, and globalization: "recent theories of world literature", he wrote, "are reactive responses to the world-system and globalization" and "have reflected on the implications of world-systems theory for understanding literary production" rather than "stud[ied] world literature as a process in the capitalist worlding of the world and, conversely, the role that it can play in a counter-worlding" (Cheah 2016, 193). It is exactly in this latter case that postcolonial literature steps in as world literature in his own words.

⁷ "Normativity", Cheah spelt out, "refers to what ought to be. We conventionally understand norms and their related cognate, values, as ideals that practical reason prescriptively projects onto reality to transform it in the image of human ends or as principles immanent to collective human existence that will unfold and actualize themselves. The force of a norm comes from its universal validity. A norm with universal force can move human agents to worldly action. The normative force of world literature refers to its power or efficacy to change the world according to a normative ethicopolitical horizon" (2016, 6).

⁸ Cheah, in tune with philosophical phenomenology, opines that "literature does not merely map the spatialized world and give it value and meaning"; instead, "its formal structures enact the opening of a world by the giving and coming of time" (Cheah and Damrosch 2019, 308). To be fair, time – yet a notion with a non-phenomenological slant in this instance – is not at all overlooked in Damroschian world literature and even goes hand in hand with space (e.g. 2003, At heart confirming the semantic "flexibility" of individual terms (Newman 2016), this piece of research has notably validated the contention that "most words are ambiguous in isolation, but their potential meanings are 97, 135, 140, 148, 149, 164, 168, 218, 276–277, 281; see also Cheah and Damrosch 2019).

Literary publications emanating from postcolonial peripheries are paradigmatic of endeavours to oppose the juggernaut of globalization and its modern temporality. About the postcolonial narratives that he chose to examine, Cheah tells us:

As part of their ethico-political vocation, they provide cognitive mappings of the position of the societies they portray in the global capitalist system and attempt to stage the heterotemporality of alternative modernities. They locate the opening of heterotemporality in the persistent presence of precolonial, non-European traditions that exert a powerful hold on the consciousness of key characters. The novels thus critically revive non-Western concepts of the world for progressive use in the present and future. (Cheah 2016, 214)

By grounding world literature in normativity and “world” in temporality, Cheah managed to set postcolonial writings as an exemplar of a literature recounting “a world which [it] seeks to change by telling the stories that it shares with its readers”, to quote Young once more (2011, 217), and countering capitalist modernity. Not inconsequentially, postcolonial literature does not influence or join forces with world literature; it is regarded as world literature. Incidentally, the word that binds together “postcolonial literature” and “world literature” in the subtitle of Cheah’s (2016) volume is not the coordinating conjunction “and” but the preposition “as”, a preposition which seems to impart a new function to postcolonial literature in the 2000s.

Conclusion

At heart confirming the semantic “flexibility” of individual terms (Newman 2016), this piece of research has notably validated the contention that “most words are ambiguous in isolation, but their potential meanings are restricted – and often determined – by their phraseology” (Stubbs 2016, 109). As words’ linguistic surroundings vary, or are made to vary, so do their significations – and this according to diverse semantic processes. Literary critic and theorist Raymond Williams commented, in the narrower context of terms that mainly “involve ideas and values”, that:

We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. (Williams 2015, xxix)

The critical – albeit far from complete – overview that I have offered in this essay may prompt us to think that a comparable semantic shift is occurring with the all-pervasive term “world” in literary studies. Deliberations on the connection between postcolonial and world literature, epitomized by the function word “and” or “as” in the aforementioned book and essay titles, have simultaneously helped to bring the adjective “postcolonial” closer to the “world” of “world literature”, allowing “postcolonial” to enter the latter premodifier’s co-text and seep into its murky signified. At the instigation of some researchers aligning themselves with postcolonial schools of thought, then, the “world” of twenty-first-century “world literature” has lately gone through innovation (e.g. Cheah’s “world” as, at bottom, a temporal unit), specialization (e.g. WReC’s “modern capitalist world-system”), extension and overlap (e.g. Helgesson’s “literature qua world”), as well as transfer to the “postcolonial” (e.g. Boehmer’s description of “worlded” postcolonial criticism). Whether the most common reading of “world” as a

geographical category in new world literature scholarship will one day be obsolete remains to be seen. What appears more certain is that, as far as the “world” of contemporary world literature is concerned, postcolonial theorists have not said their final word yet.

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