

V41.0970.001

Topics: Critical Theory

‘What is World Literature?’

Schedule 1

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 10.00am—1.00pm, 19 University Place, Room 514, or by appointment

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In recent years, the idea of ‘world literature’ has been the subject of increasing attention and debate. Ever since the concept of ‘Weltliteratur’ was first proposed by the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827, and subsequently endorsed by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), the idea of world literature has been opposed to the idea of ‘national’ literatures. Since the end of the nineteenth century, with the increasing mobility of authors, it has become more difficult to assign authors to specific national locations and identities--is Conrad, for example, an English novelist or a Polish novelist who wrote in English? Does a national literature have to be written in a single national language? Does the idea of a national literature tell us more about nationalism than about literature? What does the idea of a national ‘literary tradition’ do with the fact that countries, or their national languages, may change over time, or that individual writers may read far more widely across many different literatures? How valid is it to study instead the literature that has had most impact upon us, including literatures that have travelled far from their original cultures? How does that impact occur? Can we claim that the study of world literature increases cross-cultural understanding? How do particular texts become part of ‘world literature’, and do anthologies of ‘world literature’ tend to ignore the value of non-European literatures? Does translation play a marginal or a central role in our literary culture?

In this course we will be examining the history of ideas of world literature, from Goethe in the nineteenth century to Pascal Casanova and Franco Moretti in the twenty-first; issues of writing and the choices that writers face when choosing or changing their languages of expression; the possibility of cross-cultural understanding (and misunderstanding) through literary texts; and questions of the theory, practice and role of translation. Although the course will be primarily conceptual and theoretical, we will also be using literary examples in order to discuss these questions, and students will be encouraged to develop their own ideas with reference to their own choice of specific literary texts.