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Epilogue

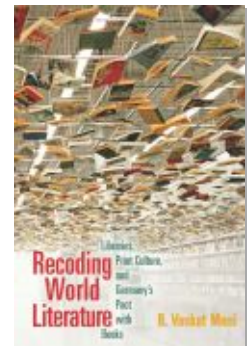
Published by

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Recoding World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books.

Fordham University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.48096>.



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[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:17 GMT)

Epilogue

From Goethe's *Faust*, beleaguered in his claustrophobic study by his past, to Grass's future-oriented thousand-fold librarian, we have come a long way. We have been through many *Bibliotheken* (libraries) and met many bibliophiles and bibliophobes. We have seen the bibliograph of world literature undergo dramatic transformation—as part of major cultural historical shifts spanning a few decades, or within a few years under political pressure—underscoring my inaugural proposition that world literature is historically conditioned, culturally determined, and politically charged. We have traversed various trajectories of bibliomigrancy.

At the end of this book, we need to ask ourselves again, what are the advantages of refracting the term *world literature* through libraries and books? Let me offer a few summarizing thoughts.

World literature is not bound by a singular definition. It can be multiply defined: it is a philosophical ideal, a process of exchange, a pedagogical strategy, a mode of reading. It is neither a select set of representative texts from particular national or linguistic traditions (*Weltliteratur*) nor the sum total of all the literatures ever produced in the world (*Allerweltsliteratur*).

World literature is the literature of inhabitation, not inheritance. It is marked by creation and re-creation, coding and recoding, and interpretation and reinterpretation of literatures beyond their linguistic origins.

World literature is a mode of challenging the pedantic arrogance and collective narcissism evoked by national literatures. Contrary to Goethe's pronouncement, world literature does not render national literature meaningless.¹ Unlike Marx and Engels's prediction, world literature does not "arise" through a frictionless comingling of various national and local literatures.² World literature punctuates national literary production, it enriches national literature, and at times—just like in the case of the Nazis—it also becomes subservient to nationalist politics. In other words, world literature *upsets* but does not *annihilate* the national arrangement of literature.

World literature is a unit for the global comparative evaluation of aesthetic affinities among literary traditions; it is a way of putting to test the compound noun *Gemeingut* (shared property), not just in terms of formal similarities of aesthetic expression but also in terms of what is usurped, purloined, suppressed, and rejected through forces of history. If Auerbach's unsure stance on the possibility of world literature after World War II reveals anything, it is that every new world order creates new definitions of the shared and the unshared, of inheritance and inhabitation.³

World literature is a strategy of cosmopolitan affiliation to literature. As Hesse expressed it so succinctly, world literature is a way of slow familiarization with the thoughts, experiences, legends, and symbols of the world.⁴ To this I would add that the engagement or the thoughts, experiences, or legends do not amount to a harmonious reconciliation with the world. Readers of world literature in the public sphere shape and inform this cosmopolitan affiliation by engaging with the inequities and inconsistencies of the world. The *Bücherfreude* (joy of books) and *Lesetrieb* (desire for reading) is a *step toward* creating and gaining access to a literary catalog of the world, not the end.

Finally, world literature is a system of classifying literature that decries its geolinguistic division. At the beginning of this book, I presented world literature as an ever-transforming literary catalog of the world, adding that the inventory, the bibliography of world literature is anything but an alphabetically arranged bibliography. Visualizing the library as a space, let me offer a slightly different variation on the transnational arrangement: world literature is a conscious disarrangement of national literatures. World literature is a set of dispersed texts, in the original or in translation, that find new homes on shelves of national (literary) libraries, sometimes inserting

themselves between works of “national” literature with whom they have aesthetic or formal affinities. World literature is a way of looking at the coexistence of books in many literary systems. Therefore, the “catalog of world literature,” as Hesse also attests, is anything but neutral.

A print-cultural approach to world literature serves many purposes. First and foremost, such an approach helps us understand that world literature is not a randomly or accidentally circulated and distributed body of texts. Literary works become part of networks through complex multiple processes of acquisition, collection, classification, and dissemination. Attention to these processes helps us to connect the materiality of a world literary text with the aesthetic and political issues that are read into the text, along with the space in which the text is read, which can be a public or private library or a politically organized state. The many libraries—physical, on paper (book series), and virtual (digital)—discussed in the period of two centuries that this book covers, serve as nodes in these networks. We have seen how the global network of libraries in the early nineteenth century created new possibilities to acquire manuscripts and printed books from Asia and Africa. Colonial/imperial libraries such as the Asiatick Society Library in Calcutta were connected—through the royal libraries of Awadh in Lucknow among others—to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. We have seen the efforts toward the establishment of the German National Library in the late nineteenth century—which led to the foundation of the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig (1912)—and the splitting of the national spirit with the ideological and political division of Germany into two nation-states after World War II. While the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig oriented itself more toward Eastern European nations, the Amerika Häuser in several West German cities became symbols of freedom of speech, albeit marred by internal ideological pressures themselves.

Second, production, translation, and circulation—key terms in current debates on world literature—have concrete and complex material and political histories. An examination of global translation enterprises such as the Oriental Translation Fund—in tandem with scholarly societies such as the German Oriental Society—shows not only the institutionalization of world literature, such an examination gives an actual roadmap connecting far-flung libraries around the world from Alexandria to Singapore with centers of book production and world literary publication in London, Paris, Berlin, and Leipzig. Book series such as Reclam’s Universal-Bibliothek, Diederichs’s Märchen series, GDR’s Volk und Welt, and others exemplify concrete histories of translations, facilitating public access to

world literature as well as the formation of small private libraries of world literature.

Third, the “medial” nature of the library, when subject to scrutiny, reveals the constantly moving boundaries between fact and fiction, history and memory, collection and dispersion, order and chaos. The silent order of the library unravels rather quickly to reveal the power structures and the uneven circulation and distribution of literature. From Nazi cultural officer Langenbucher to US Senator McCarthy, we have met many bibliophobes: suppressers of free speech, book-burners, and secretive censors who would purge libraries—public and private—of anything that did not fit their singular political vision of the world. In other words, an empirical study of world literature unmoors world literature from the constraints of a university classroom or specialized readers and places it in the larger public sphere.

Fourth, such an approach assists in challenging normative periodizations that turn world literature into a derivative discourse, into a unidirectional flow from Western centers to non-Western peripheries. We have met many bibliophiles: authors, translators, editors, publishers, librarians, government policy makers, intellectuals like Rolland and Tagore with dreams of a “world library,” all of them striving toward the “coming of age of world literature” as Goethe hoped; at the same time partaking in and benefiting from international financial dependence, thereby contributing to the cosmopolitan consumption of world literature.

Finally, a print-cultural approach to world literature does more than merely replace Western with Eastern or Southern conceptualizations of world literature; it does help to decenter hegemonic Western positions, which, as we have seen, are not insulated from the non-West but are in fact formed precisely because of contact with non-Western parts of the world. Shaping this decentered approach are forms of *bibliomigrancy*, the physical and virtual migration of books from one geocultural space to another. Tracing bibliomigrancy initiates a difficult but necessary conversation comparing the dominant and the subservient, the colonizer and the colonized, but also the mainstream nationalist and the marginalized cosmopolitan. A print-cultural approach reveals the multicentric, multidimensional, and multilingual nature of world literature.

I started this book with a discussion of two authors as a way of featuring libraries as transactional spaces of the “worlding of literature.” Let me end with an invitation to examine the non-neutrality of the catalog of world literature. There’s no better place to demonstrate this than within literature itself.

One of the most claustrophobic images of a library in European novels from the twentieth century is offered by Elias Canetti, the German-language author of Sephardic-Jewish heritage who was born in Bulgaria and died in Zurich. In his novel *Die Blendung* (1936), translated into English as *Auto-da-fé* (1947), he takes his readers on a tour of the protagonist's library. The library takes up all four rooms in Peter Kien's spacious *fin-de-siècle* Viennese apartment on the top floor of 24 Ehrlich Straße. Kien, the readers are told, is the greatest living Sinologist and expert of several linguistic and literary traditions of the Orient. Unwilling to compromise his intellectual autonomy for financial gains, he regularly declines offers of employment from prestigious universities across Europe. In the pursuit of his collection and accumulation, he seeks to emulate Eratosthenes, the head librarian at Alexandria. Unlike Eratosthenes, however, Kien is not only the curator, cataloger, and organizer but also the sole and principle patron, with exclusive access to his twenty-five thousand volumes. His personal isolation manifests itself through the library's architectural insulation. The windows in all the rooms have been sealed shut and skylights have been installed, not only to assure maximum possible surface area for bookshelves and natural lighting respectively but also to ward off the "time-wasting and immoral habit" of watching what goes on in the street.⁵ Organized by subject and language on the floor-to-ceiling shelves, the books are easily accessible with the movable ladder that glides on rails through all the rooms. The furniture in the apartment—before matrimony alters his existence—are Kien's large desk and chair and a divan in another room. In short, the entire library is designed to make sure that "no single superfluous article of furniture, no single superfluous person could lure him from his serious thoughts."⁶ By giving the novel's readers partial access to Kien's library through description of its contents, Canetti promotes them to the status of visitors, only to demote them at once when they realize that their lack of access to the specialized knowledge of Sinology makes them as superfluous as people on the streets or, for that matter, as burdensome as Therese, who is promoted to the status of his wife and shortly thereafter demoted to her original position of housekeeper. The privileges of the library's upkeep are taken away from her.

Let us juxtapose this image with another literary representation of a library that stands in the leading commercial center of the German-speaking world, this time from Orhan Pamuk's *Kar* (2002; translated into English as *Snow* [2004]). Scoped by the narrator's probing eyes—also named Orhan—who has come to investigate the murder of the exiled Turkish poet Ka, the Stadtbücherei Frankfurt (city library) stands in sharp contrast to Kien's

private library. The architectural description is sparse: the narrator characterizes it as “a modern and anonymous building.”⁷⁷ The number of volumes, systems of cataloging, and the arrangement of books and other materials are perhaps too vast to explain and therefore remain unmentioned in the novel. Instead, the narrator chooses to comment on the multiple and heterogeneous body of users: “Inside were the types you always find in such libraries: housewives, old people with time to kill, unemployed men, one or two Turks and Arabs, students giggling over their homework assignments, and all other manner of stalwarts ranging from the ranks of the obese, the lame, the insane, and the mentally handicapped.”⁷⁸ Everyone whom Kien considered superfluous and tempting is present in and an integral part of the Stadtbücherei. Unsurprisingly the library is Ka’s public refuge from the isolation he experiences in his decrepit, tiny apartment in Frankfurt. This public space is his last stop before he is murdered on the street, so the readers enter it with Orhan for a forensic investigation. While Kien’s library is a space where no time is wasted, Orhan, while opening copies of collections of poetry in the library’s English section, “shed[s] tears for him [Ka] and for the years he’d wasted away in this library.”⁷⁹ Unlike ancient Chinese scriptures, out-of-print editions, and scholarly commentaries by other distinguished scholars that Kien owns and has mastered, Ka’s readings comprise poetry by W. H. Auden, Robert Browning, and Samuel Coleridge. Instead of bookplates that demonstrate the permanence of the Viennese native’s propriety over Oriental knowledge, checkout slips with signatures of the exiled Turkish poet become identifiers of his temporary possession of volumes, indeed of his poetic borrowings. There is little to be owned in the exilic subject’s life, one that is characterized by borrowed time, space, and, as the novel emphasizes, the materiality of intellectual stimulation.

The linguistic, national, and cultural differences between Canetti’s *Die Blendung* and Pamuk’s *Kar* are significant. The dust jacket on Kien’s world is a map of early twentieth-century Vienna; folded in the jacket flaps is ancient Chinese and Japanese calligraphy that only Kien can decipher. Ka’s world is covered with snow and the dust of several geographies. The dog-eared map of Kars—a small-town on the Turkish-Armenian border—carries smudges and fingerprints of many patrons of the Stadtbücherei.

The libraries depicted in these novels, when considered in tandem, offer for consideration another dimension of difference through transformation, namely, the difference manifest in the spaces that hold and contain these novels, these “books.” Semiotically and symbolically, what offers itself in transformation is the house of books—the *Bibliothek*—as well as the virtual bibliographic space, a space that writes (*graph*) itself through books

(*violin*). The bibliographs of these bibliotheks signal the necessity to re-think the meanings of bibliomigrancy and its effect on the bibliophiles and the bibliophobes. Thinking through this bibliomigrancy, I am suggesting, might assist us in a new understanding of world literature as a literary catalog of the world, as a collection of books that creates new shelf-space for itself in the libraries of “Others” in the readers’ many “Elsewheres.”

As books and libraries change in form and function, our understanding of their mediality will change. What I have performed in this book might be just one way of looking at world literature and print culture. Future readers and scholars will surely follow other paths. Because as the larger political world changes around us, so will our definition of world literature. The catalog of world literature will undergo transformation, because a literary catalog of the world is anything but neutral. As the literary catalog of the world changes, so does the reader. A reader of world literature is a “reader-in-translation,” a reader who is recoded, re-identified time and again through engagement with someone else’s literary inheritance. Translation interrupts our habits of reading. Access to world literature in translation helps us to think beyond our own literary inheritance; it inspires us to inhabit other worlds in translation.

World literature is anything but a detached engagement with the world. As Hermann Hesse put it, our love for books and our desire for reading will determine our relationship to world literature.

There might never be a Borgesian catalog of catalogs to serve as a key to all books in the world. But to understand our own pact with books, all we need to do is unpack someone else’s library.

