The World in a Journal

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To establish a new journal entails thinking seriously about the challenges as well as the opportunities for scholarly work in the field, and this is especially true in a rapidly evolving field such as the study of World Literature. Amid the excitement of the expansion of comparative studies to a global scale, difficult choices have to be made in deciding what dimensions of the world’s vast literary production to showcase within the 125 pages available in each of our issues, and the choices extend to method and perspective as well as material. What kinds of work should our readers expect to find in our pages? What thematic or other forms should our quarterly issues take, and what kinds of work should people send us? What interventions will the Journal of World Literature seek to make in the field, and in literary studies more generally?

The challenges involved in planning our issues would be considerable enough even if it were merely a matter of deciding whether to accept an essay on translations of Tagore instead of one on Murakami’s reworking of Kafka. The difficulties are considerably increased by the deep antinomies that underlie comparative and world literary studies today. These divisions produce widely divergent kinds of work, sparking sometimes sharp debates between proponents of differing political views or theoretical or methodological perspectives. Many of these antinomies have been percolating for years in the fields of comparative literature, postcolonial studies, literary theory, and Translation Studies; they come to the fore with renewed force once “world literature” no longer signifies primarily a select canon of Western European masterpieces and their classical antecedents. The JWL is intended to provide a forum in which our contributors can find new ways to address the cultural, political, and philological challenges of literary study in a global age.

Even to identify the antinomies underlying the field today involves making debatable choices that may be skewed in favor of some perspectives over others. If, as the saying goes, the world is divided into two groups—those who divide the world into two groups and those who don’t—this formulation already locates itself (however ironically) in the first of these categories. Yet cer-
tain key antinomies can be identified that most people would acknowledge, however they choose to address them. Several rifts in the landscape of today’s world literary studies are particularly contentious and in need of fresh thought: between cosmopolitan universalism and national or local cultural specificity; between postcolonial and global studies; between work with (untranslatable?) original languages and work in translation; and between aesthetics and politics as the fundamental ground of study. All of these antinomies have become the subjects of widespread debate in the field, and to these four oppositions could be added a fifth, not as often discussed but also highly significant: between earlier eras and the modern or contemporary period. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen has argued that earlier and contemporary literatures comprise two distinct and almost separate systems; can we even speak of “world literature” in the singular at all, whether we are thinking temporally, regionally, aesthetically, or politically?

These are real divisions, and they can’t be ignored. Different people have deeply held commitments on one side or the other of each of these equations, or at one or another point along a spectrum between each pair of opposed terms. If the *jwl* is to be a forum for airing and advancing these debates, this will sometimes involve publishing integrative work that shows how seemingly opposed terms can be combined, and at other times presenting work that takes a stand and advocates a given approach or perspective. An analogy for the latter option can be made to the “language anxiety” that Robert Young has identified as pervasive among colonial and postcolonial writers: do they adopt the language of their present or recent imperial masters, or do they instead employ a local vernacular? Sometimes a compromise solution can be found, as with the exuberantly creolized English that Amos Tutuola developed for *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, but writers have more often found themselves confronted with the necessity of making a definite choice one way or the other. As Young has remarked, either choice has its advantages and its disadvantages; his conclusion is that the most important thing is for a writer to feel and face this anxiety, dealing with it creatively rather than merely wishing it away.

Sometimes our contributors will no doubt be combining postcolonial and global perspectives, or will be working both with original texts and translations, but often they are likely to have positioned their essay within one or another perspective or approach, whether for ethical or political reasons or simply in order to delimit a topic and pursue a particular line of inquiry. Under integrative or contrastive approaches alike, we will look for nuanced work that avoids the limitations of a vague, feel-good universalism on the one hand, or on the other a Manichaean presentation of stark either/or choices culminating in the ritual slaughter of some straw figure from the opposite camp.