

Instituting literature: writing between singularity and transnational system

A World Literature symposium at Stockholm University, 13-14 June 2013

ABSTRACT

Literature is never simply a given, but performatively and materially instituted by authors, translators, publishers, academies and academics, critics, and readers. On this view, literature must be understood as both a social and a textual/verbal phenomenon, shaped in a tug-of-war between interests – individual and national, aesthetic and political, cosmopolitan and vernacular – and indeed different conceptions of autonomy, relevance and value. By addressing these tensions, and by gravitating around the triangle Europe-Africa-Latin America, the symposium aims to move beyond the internal/external divide as well as the split between postcolonial and European literary studies. Of crucial importance to this undertaking is to keep both the singular and the transnational aspects of literature in view. The symposium aims thereby to intervene in the current development of world literature methodology. Literatures in the formerly colonial "European" languages English, French, Portuguese and Spanish will be the central focus, but this does not exclude discussions of translational exchanges with other languages.

Papers may speak to questions such as (but not restricted to) the following:

- When literature is consolidated in postcolonial nations, need this always be understood in terms of an "anxiety of influence" vis-à-vis the literatures of old imperial centres?
- Can one speak of "literature" in the singular in transnational contexts, or does the institutional perspective – as some scholars have suggested – call for a Wittgensteinian understanding of literature as a "cluster concept", a set of discrete but related phenomena which are made to seem coherent thanks to the translational labour of institutional agents?
- How do the globally spread "European" languages, with their diverse literatures, compare as languages of translation?
- How may an institutional perspective account for the singularity of literary writing, i. e. its irreducibility to an instrumental calculus?

Each invited speaker is at liberty to determine his or her focus. The methodology may range from textual analysis to book history, and the time period could be anything from the 19th century until our contemporary moment.

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