

World Literature and the Creation of Literary Worlds

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Neohelicon (2011) 38:341–348

After having worked for several years on a new edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd edition, I think of world literature first and foremost as remains of lost worlds. The very fact that these works have survived is often close to a miracle; many had been lost only to be rediscovered haphazardly. Contemplating what has been irretrievably lost would be a melancholy business were it not for the anticipation of what might still be unearthed in the future.

But what is at least as astonishing as the survival of so many works of world literature are the worlds imagined in these works. Open any page of the anthology, which will be published next year, and you enter a world. The pedagogical recognition that these worlds are strange, that they need all kinds of explanation, does nothing to diminish the fact that they unfold complete universes that we can discover and in which we can begin to orient ourselves. For example, reading Eileen Chang's short story *Sealed Off*, for all its modernity, means entering a world of Shanghai that no longer exists. Indeed, Chang's exquisite evocation of this world with her characteristic attention to fabrics, styles, atmosphere, and social interactions registers the knowledge that the Shanghai rendered in this and other works by this author is already lost, if it ever existed (Chang 2007).

Saying that literature, any literature, creates a world to which we can gain access through the act of reading is perhaps something of a banal statement. And yet it helps reorient our standard understanding of what literature, and in particular, world literature, is or can be. Our new edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, for example, begins with a group of texts called "Creation and the Cosmos," i.e. with world creation myths. The idea here is not so much that literature begins with world creation and then moves on to other topics, but that from the beginning,

UFLR 2011

literature has concerned itself with the cosmos, with the world, and has sought to render it in a variety of ways.

One might categorize these texts as mythical and thus as pre-scientific explanations of this, our world. For this line of argument one can draw on the work of Hans Blumenberg, who describes myth as a naming of an originally strange and threatening world, which becomes less threatening once it is thus named (Blumenberg 2006). I would like to extend this line of argument beyond the act of naming to a dimension that myth shares with literature, namely the imagining and literary creation of a world. This extension of Blumenberg means that we can no longer rely on his anthropological conjectures, which are highly speculative and cannot be taken seriously. For example he asks us to imagine a scene in which early humans first emerge from the jungle to take possession of the savannah. Instead of this speculative anthropology, I suggest that we relate myth and literature not to our world and its explanation. Rather, we should see them as creating *a* world, a world whose status remains to be determined. When seen from this perspective, creation myths document a literary imagination that engages and imagines a world on a level of totality. What understanding of literature emerges if we take our point of departure from such works of world creation?

Reference

First we should focus on the function of reference. This is a dimension of literature that has not received much notice recently. What is the status of reference in world creation myths, and other works of literature, for that matter? To the extent that we read these myths as explanations or orientations or acts of naming in the tradition of Blumenberg, they refer to our world. But to the extent that they are works of poetic imagination, they do not seem to refer to our world at all. The usual answer given at this point is to say that they don't refer at all. The alternative answer I will give here is that they refer to manufactured worlds as well as to the act of world making itself. World creation literature does not belong in the history of mimesis as presented by Erich Auerbach, a towering figure in the history of scholarship on world literature (Auerbach 1946). At the same time, this view differs from the understanding propagated by post-structuralism, which has tended to emphasize the purely "self-referential" nature of literature. Reference is there, but only in the defanged form of self-reference. But I want to argue that the worlds created by literary texts

belong in a history of making: not mimesis, nor self-referentiality, but *poesis*.

What are these worlds that are made, if not made-up, these worlds of literature? The first question a *poesis* of literature must ask is “What kind of world” does a work create. And indeed, this question is, among other things, one of reference. The branch of literary theory that has tried to deal with reference most successfully is what is called possible worlds theory. Borrowing from logic and analytic philosophy the concept of “possible worlds,” theorists such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Thomas Pavel, and Lubomir Dolezel argue that literature does indeed refer to a world, however not to our real world, but to possible worlds (Ryan et al. 1991; Pavel 1986; Dolezel 1998). This solution is elegant: it allows us to retain the concept of reference, which is after all a crucial dimension of language. However, there are powerful intellectual traditions militating against this view, favoring instead an understanding of literary language as special, or anomalous. This school of thought has its origins in Russian formalism and the Prague School, both of which emphasized the extraordinary and hence anomalous use of language at work in literature. “Estrangement” and “re-functioning” were some of the terms organizing this view of literature. To my mind, there was always a serious drawback associated with this approach because it presumed that in literature the ordinary workings of language, including reference, were somehow suspended. Having to make a special case for literature puts the burden of proof on those literary theories, though. It is a burden we need not take on. Why not accept that in literature language works quite well? This is where possible worlds theory can come in handy as a way of explaining that in fiction, language still refers to a world, albeit not to our world, but to a possible world.

To be sure, there are unresolved internal problems associated with possible worlds theory. The theory emerged after all in a very different field, modal logic and analytical philosophy. The transfer of concepts such as “possible worlds” from these intellectual traditions to literary theory has not always been smooth, and brought with it a thorough reformulation of its key concepts. The work of Ruth Ronan points to several such transformations and pressure points (Ronan 1994). But what counts in the end is not how consistent this transfer really was, but how effective the terms are within the new theory.

While possible worlds theory has solved the problem of reference in literature on a theoretical level, work remains to be done in thinking about how specific genres and types of literature refer, and what kinds of worlds

The full text of Dr. Martin Puchner's essay, "World Literature and the Creation of Literary Worlds" is available in the printed version of this issue, and in *Neohelicon*, vol. 38, where it was originally published.

abstract prose, perhaps the way to create worlds is by acknowledging limitations, that is, to create smaller versions of worlds: model worlds. The worlds presented in *Gulliver's Travels* can be considered such model worlds, nested worlds, that capture totality precisely by being smaller, perhaps simpler, in any case easier to handle in every way, including in terms of literary technique. The various island plays and novels, and of course the assorted utopias belong to these model worlds as well.

If Stapledon pushed the totality and world-creation type of literature to an extreme, there is an author who can be said to have done the same with model worlds: I am talking about Edwin Abbott Abbott and his novel *Flatland* (Abbott 1993). *Flatland*, of course, belongs to the pre-history of science fiction in the sense defined by Darko Suvin, the best critic of science fiction, who describes the genre as aiming at a cognitive dissonance (Suvin 1979). *Flatland* describes life in a two-dimensional world, giving us an account of how everyday life, including procreation and the rest, proceeds in two-dimensional houses. Flatland is a simple world, to be sure, but Abbott gives it enough texture so that it may count as a complete world, at least as a complete model world.

The complexity of an alternative world is among other things a matter of literary economy, but also of the purpose of the whole exercise. Models usually have a purpose, and in the case of *Flatland* the purpose is to drive home the point that our own three dimensional perception is not the only and natural one. The model world functions by analogy, and this technique is thematized when the flatlanders are incredulous at the thought of one-dimensional worlds and creatures. This is how we should now think of four dimensions, or Spaceland, Abbott suggests. Indeed, if we go back to *Gulliver's Travels* one more time, we can see a similar ambition in having the land of Liliput be followed by Brobdingnag.

Model world creation seems to be the more promising path for world-creation literature, and perhaps Stapledon knew this; in any case, he included an explicit reference to *Flatland* in his novel *First and Last Men*, which, in contrast to the totality aimed at in *Star Maker*, strikes one now as positively modest; after all, we cover only a few billion years, not the totality of the cosmos. Once again, one encounters here the question of feasibility, which in literature is one of technique. This technical side of world creation deserves to be examined in detail. Such an examination would include reconsidering the various genres, from creation myths to science fiction, but also questions of narrative perspective and finally, of style. They all play a vital role in how literature takes up the project of

creating worlds, be they complete or partial, complex or simple, set in the future or an alternative past.

World literature, or world creation literature, as I understand it, thrives on the relation between the two words of which this term is composed: world; and literature. It invites us to reconsider the dimension of reference, asking what world or worlds this literature refers to; the dimension of scale through which some type of totality is aimed at; and, by contrast, the decision to use the model as a way of making that totality manageable.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank a number of people who have been helpful in the formulation of these thoughts, especially the participants of the fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature, organized by Wang Ning and David Damrosch in Shanghai, August 2010, but also my co-editors and collaborators on the Norton, including Wiebke Denecke, Emily Wilson, Suzanne Akbari, Barbara Fuchs, Caroline Levine, Pericles Lewis, Vinay Dharwadker, and Gottfried Hagen.

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