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In the northern Danish town of Silkeborg, the local museum of art houses an extraordinary painting by Asger Jorn: 'Stalingrad' measures 296 by 492 cm and was a work in progress for the artist between 1957 and 1972. The painting was inspired by Jorn's friend, Umberto Gambetta, and his horrific experiences of the battle, which put an end to Hitler's advances in Russia and formed a turning point in World War II. The painting gained its name when it was exhibited at the World Exposition in Seattle in 1961. Subsequently the painting was exhibited in Paris and Cuba before it settled in its current domicile in 1968. It has not travelled since.

We, aspiring young scholars from across Europe, had nothing to do with Asger Jorn. Yet I am proposing a connection despite evidence to the contrary. The evidence was this: the research interests and presentations of the assembled PhD students at the Hermes Workshop 2007 (hosted this year by Aarhus Universitet) read like an eclectic catalogue of world-wide intellectual curiosities. It was a conference where papers on Michael Ondaatje vied for the audience's ears and sharp critique alongside an analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's literary quotation in film, while the poetics of Michel Houellebecq's novels were presented on the same panel as the travel writing of V.S. Naipaul and W.G. Sebald. If you suggest that there is little variety here among works of contemporary cultural production, there were papers that deepened the linguistic and temporal reach: the conference started with a reflection on literature as philosophy of history and closed with a medievalist's presentation on the Greek, Ottoman and Russian reports on the fall of Constantinople.

And so, armed with heavy words of literary analysis and burdened by the influence of past masters, we sought to unify our work under the theme of 'World Literature and Culture'.

The term 'world literature', while clearly right at home in our age of internet, global networks and access to unprecedented quantities of resources, was coined under circumstances that were not dominated by technology or digital and virtual relations. True as it might be that we are more exposed to ideas, objects and people outside our own cultural sphere, we must remember, as Kwame Anthony Appiah is right to heed, that 'calling this process "globalization," as we

often do, is all very well but tells us very little about how it is either novel or significant.¹ While the migration processes of the past fifty years have been unprecedented, exchange between societies has always taken place, allowing for some form of the macroscopic to be imagined by individuals who participate only in a singular local context. 'World literature' is a term coined by Goethe who, speaking to his young disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, introduced the phrase which has captured the imagination of many literary enthusiasts: 'National literature is no longer of importance; it is time for world literature, and all must aid in bringing it about.'²

As we see, beginnings are easy to master: a theme that the uninitiated few (myself included) considered to be embroiled in the terminology of postmodernism and the opening up of modern language literatures, is actually part of a very canonical literature and a cultural tradition itself. Rather than adopting a free-wheeling, anything-goes attitude, the conference participants staunchly defended the national question which, we decided, cannot be simply bypassed in any attempt to be less myopic or microscopic.

This is why I chose to start with Jorn's painting, which you will probably have to Google, as 'Stalingrad' does not belong within the corpus of world art. (If you do Google the painting think about what it means for this image to travel so freely digitally when it has only ever travelled once and before 1975 at that. Stalingrad will probably never be moved from the Silkeborg museum again as its proportions are simply too large for the doorway that leads in and out of the gallery space. Circulation and its practices are central to world literature.) But when I say 'world art' do I, in this instance, actually mean 'a masterpiece' or 'a classical piece of work'? We often forget that, historically, literature was the preserve of the upper classes or that it was considered a vehicle for historiography. It is also worth asking how we could compare different traditions that predominantly rely on oral forms or scripts outside the Latin alphabet? We felt compelled to decide (although no conclusion was forthcoming) whether: 1) world literature would include the classics (Ovid, Homer and so on) and the masterpieces (the predominantly Western canon) or whether 2) world literature would remain separate from those categories in order to bring challenging and resisting narratives to conventional world views through translation and

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 216.

² Goethe, *Essays on Art and Literature*, Vol. 3, ed. by John Gearey, trans. by Ellen von Nardoff and Ernest von Nardoff (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 224.

circulation? In either case, we needed to question what this implies about the valuation and judgment of literature. This subject was complemented well by one of the keynote lectures: Horace Engdahl, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, gave a condensed but illuminating history of the Nobel Prize in literature, spending some time analysing Alfred Nobel's will and his condition that the prize be awarded to a writer who had, in the previous year, 'conferred the greatest benefit on mankind' and had produced 'the most outstanding work in an ideal direction.'³ The Nobel Prize brought into focus the role canonization plays by inference and by naming, yet it is clear that scholars themselves are instrumental in this process. While as PhD students we cannot yet alter the canon of texts that should be read, some of us do and will set syllabuses for undergraduates that will reflect our own intellectual interests and preferences. But are these interests general or specialist? Do we teach by comparative literature and by including literature in translation or are we still stranded in separate modern languages departments, teaching by the languages we speak?

We still found, as the days went on, that we could not resolve the national question. We kept returning to binary pairs like provincialism and cosmopolitanism, minority and majority literatures; all the while discovering that what we assumed was repulsion between oppositional terms was actually complex interaction leading to a point of gravitational attraction. Again, I turn to Jorn, who is an interesting illustration of an artist who has become central within a country's national canon (Denmark) but whose education, influence and context were more widely European (specifically for him, French and Italian). Perhaps this is a puerile point on its own, but Jorn's movements between different national cultures recall additional words of Goethe:

For it is evident that all nations, thrown together at random by terrible wars then reverting to their status as individual nations, could not help realizing that they had been subject to foreign influences, had absorbed them and occasionally become aware of intellectual needs previously unknown. The result was a sense of goodwill. Instead of isolating themselves as before, their state of mind has gradually developed a desire to be included in the free exchange of ideas.⁴

We see strong refractions of these thoughts in Jorn's 'Stalingrad': the painting is not only a depiction of a historical event through the hues of abstract

expressionism but also a statement and exploration of Jorn's own existential and artistic struggle, in which internal and external war reach out to foreign influences. 'Stalingrad', in that case, is a piece of world culture which has as much to do with the materials of production as the forces determining its reception and audience. While the painting might not travel as a commodity, its anchoring motif allows for a far more rigorous and demanding intellectual travel: the destroyed Russian landscape, while acting as the anchoring motif of Gambetta's experiences during the battle, kept changing as Jorn added to it; painting the many shadows and sides of human existence, his own existence. In one way, the painting only came into being as the last touches were made to it in December 1972. This was approximately two decades after Jorn first heard of Gambetta's experiences at Stalingrad. For world literature, then, we must look both within and without a work. Arguing about minor and major languages, extending and withdrawing implied authority of a culture versus the hybridity of new, almost trans-national ideas and peoples is all very well, but meaningless unless we read what is therein.

Is there any universal paradigm, then, that distinguishes world literature from other methods of categorisation? (This is only valid as a question if we agree that world literature is not a set of texts – the canon – but rather an experimental method. I am not sure we reached such an accord.) However, making a claim for universalism is an ethical statement too, one that was brought into acute focus by the last panel of the conference on testimonial literature where the testimonies recorded spoke about war, slavery and trauma. Could we find, in the margins of such extreme experiences involving inflicted violence, a point of universal relevance and understanding? If so, what role would the discourse of literature (or any other artistic form) play here against other social discourses that come with more potent and explicit codes of power, such as law or medicine?

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At the museum, as the guide left us and we remained for a few more minutes to contemplate the painting (trying, in fact, to take it apart and see that which she had told us there was to be seen), an elderly couple shared their experiences of 'Stalingrad' with us. On a previous visit, they had happened to be in the room with some school children who were also being led around by a museum guide. The children saw something that was not immediately noticeable to the adults: the outline of Stalingrad, ash grey, and the punctured corpses of horses (even the fallen bodies of soldiers). While the canvas was not monochrome in colour, its abstraction made it difficult to identify

³ From Alfred Nobel's will, quoted on http://nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/will/short_testamente.html. Website accessed 10/10/2007.

⁴ Goethe, p. 228.

shapes – especially shapes that were not scaled to please the adult eye. Perhaps that was why children responded to the painting with such ease: their untrained eyes could transform one line into a human body, two or three lines into destroyed buildings. Maybe, as with all things, we should ask children about world literature because, as David Damrosch says ‘systematic approaches [to world literature] need to be counter-balanced with close attention to particular languages, specific texts: we need to see both the forest and the trees.’⁵ Occasionally, as scholars, we fail to do so.

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The next Hermes Seminar will be held in June 2008 at UCL. The subject of the seminar is ‘Comparative Literature: Models for Interdisciplinarity in the Humanities?’ More information will be provided at a later date.

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⁵ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 26.