

What in the World?: Students as World Literature Editors
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Recently, world literature has caused much debate in academe. We all know the problems inherent in a world literature course, beginning with the definition of the term itself. It used to be easier; world literature essentially meant western world literature, the masterpieces of ancient Greece and Rome and their descendents produced by white European males. But with contemporary critical awareness of Eurocentrism and its dangers as well as the inherent conflict between ‘globalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’, the canon of world literature has inevitably been affected, with the result that it is no longer easy to determine what we should be teaching and how. As David Damrosch, general editor of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, puts it: ‘What does it really mean to speak of a “world literature”? Which literature, whose world?’ (1).

Since world literature is a core class required of all students at my university to expand their ‘global awareness’, these questions have affected my colleagues and me. The debate, manifesting itself usually in the question of what anthology the department should require or whether we should in fact get rid of the anthology all together, focuses on what Vilashini Cooppan describes as the two-pronged task of teaching world literature:

[first,] representing the globe, and second, reading globally. The first is a trap, the latter our best solution to the problem of ‘conceptualizing “the world as a whole.”’ A focus on reading globally rescues us from the inevitable charges that x or y has been left off the world literature syllabus, thereby invalidating the very notion of the course per se. Reading globally thus trains our attention on

something other than the inevitable lists that litter the battlefields of world literature courses. (12)

But while we all know and face the problems, students in these core classes are, for the most part, blissfully unaware of or uninterested in the debate. They generally read what the teacher tells them to, some of it familiar, some of it ‘weird’ or alien. They take for granted that what’s included in their text must be ‘good’ literature, or it wouldn’t be assigned or included. But they rarely think about the intellectual debate that goes into the making of a text that purports to cover ‘world’ literature, nor that someone has had to decide for them what constitutes ‘world’ literature.

Having taught these courses for many years, I dutifully assigned works – some ‘classics,’ some less known but helpful for showing ‘diversity’ – from a variety of cultures, along with the contextualizing materials the anthologies include – the general essays on the culture and on the specific work, the maps, the chronologies, and so on.

Then one semester a couple of years ago, having been assigned to teach an Honors section of early world literature (up to 1700), I began to think about ways to get the students to engage with the works as well as with some of the larger philosophical questions about what world literature really means. So I decided to try a new research project for the entire class: they would undertake to create a new unit for inclusion in their text, consisting of a work of literature from a culture not currently covered along with all the background information and apparatus such units contain. Included with the hands-on work of editing and researching would be a discussion of how the work would fit with the rest of the anthology and whether and why they thought this culture ought to be represented. Such a project would, I hoped, help students understand the concept of

‘reading globally’, even with a rather obscure work. And I hoped that, as Damrosch notes,

the study of world literature may be most fruitful if it doesn’t directly go global, instead understanding world literature as a variable and contingent concept, taking distinct forms in different national contexts. This focus gives time for detailed treatment of exemplary works, allowing for the interplay of general issues and actual cases. (‘World Literature’ 521)

I selected for our ‘actual case’ a work of early Russian literature, known as *The Igor Tale* or *The Lay of Igor’s Campaign*. It seemed workable for a number of reasons: though technically of a culturally specific genre known as the *slovo*, it shared characteristics with western epic (oddly enough, its history as an artifact is strikingly similar to that of *Beowulf*, having been discovered in a single manuscript in the late eighteenth century by Alexander Pushkin and then destroyed in a fire, leaving only a single transcription for posterity), and thus would invite students to read ‘globally’ by connecting an unknown, clearly national work to contemporary works in other cultures. It was available in a couple of English translations, which would invite discussion about the blessings and evils of translation. And though little known outside of Russia or Russian Studies departments, the work was and is a significant part of a national culture: it still is taught to Russian school children as well as being the source for Alexander Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor*. I did some preliminary research on the web and in our library to make sure that students would be able to find much of the necessary information. I also ordered several texts on early Russian history, culture, and literature to have on hand to assist the students. Another factor in my choice was the fact that we would have in our department

that year a visiting scholar from Russia, who was very happy to serve as a resource on the place of *The Lay* in Russian culture.

I then set up my syllabus for the early part of the semester to focus on epics from a variety of cultures to make sure they had a solid basis for evaluating *The Lay* as part of the tradition. When class began, I explained the project to them so that they could begin reading and analyzing the text with that goal in mind. Study questions were supplied to direct their critical attention to what went into a cultural unit in the anthology. And I also began the class with a discussion of what ‘world’ literature might mean, who determines what gets included, and what needs to be included with the work of literature and why. The students soon became quite good at assessing why certain things were included, making those connections between the introductory essays, the glossaries, and the maps and comprehension of the work of literature.

About six weeks into the semester, we began the research assignments. I had devised a variety of tasks – some individual, some group – and types of assignments. While the students began searching the web outside of class for preliminary information on early Russia, as well as for maps and chronologies of early Russian history, for class they were given, along with a hand-out of questions to ponder, two different translations of *The Lay* to read: neither had much in the way of footnotes to explain what they were reading, which made them even more aware of the necessity of editors to make the text comprehensible for the novice reader. We were also able to discuss issues such as ease and pleasure of reading (they preferred the more prose-like translation for that) versus which might be considered more accurate or closer to the feel of the original. As they read, they kept reading journals to note words or terms that would need to be defined,

such as money and distance units, religious terms, geographical names, and so on. They also took notes on what would need fuller explanation in the introductory essays – social structure, political system, family structures, the role of women in society, religious beliefs, and so on.

The class as a group agreed that *The Lay* ‘fit’ the anthology, as it focused on a male warrior hero based on an historical figure, facing a threat to his culture, a major battle, and the gods – though it didn’t fit in other ways, being more of a lament than a celebration of the warrior culture and focusing on the hero’s failure. The students were able to find timelines for the history of Kievan Rus’ on the web, as well as a nicely detailed map listing most of the geographical features and peoples named in the work. They were also able to find a couple of websites that gave the basics about early Russian culture, but they quickly discovered that it wouldn’t be enough.

This brought them to their individual research projects. After compiling the list of information they’d need for the introductory essay, the students selected a topic from the list for their own research, based on their own interests: for example, one student, a political science major, opted to investigate the political structure; a music major decided to investigate the musical aspects of eastern European folk epic performance; another selected religion and the supernatural; and another chose to find out about family life. The class was too small to be able to cover everything they needed, but it was a start.

They quickly learned a valuable lesson – that research isn’t always easy. They ended up encountering many a brick wall. First of all, they had to find out about specialized data bases so as to locate scholarly sources – Wikipedia wasn’t much help here. They also discovered, once using the databases, that there wasn’t a treasure trove of

sources to choose from, and not everything was available in English. I also had them contact faculty in their area of research to learn how scholars in those fields did their research. We discussed their frustrations as well as their triumphs at the beginning of each class session, with me playing the role of cheerleader as well as seasoned researcher. But eventually, the students were able to write their essays, explaining what the limitations of the sources were as well as what they were able to ascertain.

By the time the research was completed and the papers written, we had come to the collective realization that there was much still to learn and that we wouldn't be able to complete our unit for the anthology, given our time frame. The students did, however, give a group presentation on the project and their findings at our undergraduate research lecture series, and they had learned a number of valuable lessons:

- they had gained a deep appreciation for the work of textual scholars and anthology editors; and they had learned to use and appreciate the textual apparatus included in their textbooks.
- they had deepened their awareness of cultural inclusion and exclusion, of the decisions that are often made for students of what cultures to study and what to exclude and why. And they had learned that there are still huge black holes in modern knowledge of some premodern cultures – that there's still much to learn and to explore in this world.
- they had developed their skills as researchers, had taken that next big step in scholarship into the world of academic specialists, and they had learned how to cope with dead ends and brick walls.

The students were on the whole pleased with and proud of what they'd accomplished. I was pleased with them, too – their hard work, their willingness to try something new, their intellectual curiosity. There were, as always, a few drawbacks: the project takes a good portion of the semester, so some students will become bored; and it helps if you're teaching at an institution with a first-rate research library, though with more and more scholarly materials becoming available online, that aspect of the project will get easier. I also made sure to bring in a more stimulating guest lecturer the next time I used it – one who was approachable and eager to talk to students about what they had learned.

But in spite of the drawbacks, the project is one that I found useful, for a variety of reasons:

- it allows for a variety of assignments (written and oral, short and long, group and individual) and multiple assessments that clearly connect with each other;
- it comes as close to a 'real world' project as I've been able to discover for a course in premodern world literature;
- it gets students involved with their learning, encouraging them to become active learners and even in a small way experts rather than passive receptacles.
- it is adaptable to multiple regions and time periods, and encourages the understanding that world literature, as Damrosch states, 'is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for the reading of established classics and new discoveries alike' (5).

Works Cited

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