In considering the topic of world literature and world history, a basic question is whether world literature has a history at all. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the first great proponent of world literature, didn’t think so. For him, *Weltliteratur* was a phenomenon of the future, not of the past. As he remarked to his disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827: “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Eckermann 132). Building on Goethe two decades later, Marx and Engels spoke of world literature as a nascent manifestation of the global marketplace of their times:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.

The Communist Manifesto 11

Though Marx and Engels hoped for writers of the world to unite, literature continued to be written and read primarily within national markets, or at most in broader but linguistically circumscribed markets such as those for Arabic, or Commonwealth, or Hispanophone literatures. A favoured few works could become international bestsellers in multiple languages, though usually only after achieving fame at home. It is only in recent decades that a truly global marketplace has begun to weaken the hold of national literary markets. Today a significant subset of literature is being created as “world literature” from its very inception. In Rebecca Walkowitz’s phrase, more and more books are “born translated”, in the authors’ minds as well as in the negotiations of their agents and the promotional plans of their publishers, and quickly translated into dozens of languages for readers around the world. World literature in this sense has a purely modern history, not one of any substantial historical depth.

Still more recent is World Literature as an academic field of study. (Here I follow Emily Apter in *Against World Literature* in designating the field with capital letters, to distinguish it from the actual archive of world literature itself.) Goethe was going against the tide of history in declaring the eclipse of national literature as a meaningful term, and scholars long focused on national traditions. Yet in Goethe’s day, the nascent interest in world literature went hand in hand with
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early attempts at writing world history. His friend Johann Gottfried Herder wrote many essays on aspects of world history, and he devoted a series of works to charting the dimensions of “Universalpoesie”. Closely related were the histories of August Ludwig Schlözer, a professor at Göttingen. In 1772–1773 he published a two-volume Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie, following this with a textbook for use in schools, Vorbereitung zur Weltgeschichte für Kinder (1779), and then a full-scale study in two volumes, Weltgeschichte nach ihren Haupttheilen im Auszug und Zusammenhang (1785, 1789). Schlözer sought to move beyond a European perspective and gave as much attention to material conditions as to the battles and treaties that so many histories favoured: global occurrences such as the introduction of potatoes from the New World into Europe were as significant for him as the names of emperors.

Literary scholars, however, didn’t join historians in building on such early “universal” studies. The close connection of language, literature and Volk that Herder himself championed became dominant in nationalistic literary histories such as Georg Gottfried Gervinus’s five-volume Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen (1835–1842). Even comparative literary histories focused on the relations among a few European powers, as with Georg Brandes’s six-volume Hovedstrømninger i det nittende Aarhundres Litteratur [Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century Literature] (1872–1890), which treated just four countries: England, France, Germany and Italy. These main currents didn’t include his own rivulet of Denmark, much less any non-European streams.

The emphasis on literary history as national history was enshrined in the departments of modern literature that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today we often still speak of “national literature departments”, though few if any departments of English, French or German teach only the literature of England, France or Germany. Through the 1970s, most literary scholars concentrated on individual national traditions, and even Comparative Literature dealt almost entirely with a few major European literatures. When comparatists ventured into the literatures of the Americas or into “East/West” studies, these again were usually discussed in relation to European traditions.

The rise of postcolonial studies, crystallised by Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), opened out an extensive field of inquiry beyond the boundaries of Europe and North America, though postcolonialists mostly analysed colonial and postcolonial writing within the dimensions of one or another European empire.

In the United States, a more fully global approach started to emerge in the mid-1990s, embodied in such anthologies as The HarperCollins World Reader (Caws and Prendergast, 1994) and an “Expanded Edition” of the Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces (Mack and Lawall, 1995), which added 2,000 pages of non-Western literature to its existing 4,000 pages of Western material. Wide-ranging collections for general readers also appeared, such as J. D. McClatchy’s Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry (1996) and Jeffrey Paine’s Poetry of Our World: An International Anthology of Contemporary Poetry (2000). Scholarship in turn began to reflect on these developments, notably in Pascale Casanova’s La République mondiale des lettres (1999) and Franco Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000). This nascent global interest took on new urgency in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, as Theo D’haen has emphasised in his Routledge Concise History of World Literature. Given the very recent emergence of World Literature as an active field of study, though D’haen might almost have titled his book World Literature’s Concise History.

In keeping with this contemporary focus, most studies in World Literature concentrate on modern literature. Though there are important exceptions such as Alexander Beecroft’s An Ecology of World Literature (2015) and Wiebke Denecke’s Classical World Literatures (2013), much more
common are studies of modern and especially contemporary literature, such as Pheng Cheah’s *What Is a World?* (2016), Debjani Ganguly’s *This Thing Called a World* (2016), Eric Hayot’s *On Literary Worlds* (2012) and Walkowitz’s *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature* (2015). The Warwick Research Group’s *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015) argues directly that the world literature worth studying is work that critiques the neoliberal world-system. They designate their preferred “world-literature” with a hyphen, to distinguish it from world literature in general, since “to think of ‘world literature’ as the corpus of all the literature in the world would be strictly nugatory or useless” (8).

Granting that the modern world presents a fundamentally new context for literary production and circulation – as Bruce Robbins argues in the present volume – it remains the case that older works continue to have a significant place in World Literature, not only as a prehistory but because classic works themselves circulate widely today. The six-volume survey anthologies published by Bedford, Longman and Norton each give half their space to premodern literature, then two volumes extending from the early modern period through the nineteenth century, only reaching the twentieth century in volume six. Writers too have rarely confined themselves to the literature of their own times. Even if Goethe saw himself at the threshold of a new era of world literature, his own reading of *Weltliteratur* ranged widely across time as well as space: he was deeply influenced by the classical Greek and Roman poets, the ancient Sanskrit dramatist Kalidasa, and the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez.

Ever since his time, at least some work on world literature has always taken earlier periods on board. Thus the Anglo-Irish scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett devoted a chapter to world-literature in his path-breaking study *Comparative Literature* (1886), which introduced the term “comparative literature” in English. He employed an evolutionary scheme, in which literary traditions evolve in tandem with social formations, from the clan to the polis and on to the nation. As the Warwick group would later do, Posnett hyphenated “world-literature” in order to discuss it as a distinct kind of literature characterising a particular stage of social evolution. Yet he didn’t see world-literature as a purely modern phenomenon, but instead considered it to originate in early empires in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, East Asia and the Arab world. From his nineteenth-century perspective, it was the modern national literatures that provided the culmination of his tale, whereas world-literature enjoyed a history of at least two millennia.

If we are to do justice to the full sweep of world literature as Goethe and Posnett understood it, literary scholars need to take premodern as well as modern literature fully into account. In attempting this dual focus, we can learn from the field of World History, which has long grappled with a similar bifurcation between largely local or regional premodern traditions and the increasingly interconnected histories of recent centuries. We can also learn from the history of World History itself, in terms of the limitations as well as the successes of prior efforts, which by now can be seen in historical perspective. In the following pages, I will try to suggest some of the challenges and opportunities that World History offers to literary studies today.

In light of the pivotal role of the 9/11 attacks in stimulating renewed work in World Literature, it is intriguing to look back at the ambitious world histories that were written in the wake of the two World Wars. Those global conflicts also produced major literary reassessments, but literary scholars largely confined themselves to studies of national literatures (in studies of British modernism and the Great War, for instance), or at most of European literature. Thus Ernst Robert Curtius wrote in the preface to the American edition of his masterwork *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* that his work had been profoundly shaped by the experience of the First World War. In the aftermath of the conflict, he devoted himself to studies of modern French literature, hoping to promote peace by helping his countrymen better understand their
neighbours across the Rhine. With this hope dashed by the rise of the Nazis, he decided that he needed to go farther back in time:

When the German catastrophe came, I decided to serve the idea of a medievalistic Humanism by studying the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. These studies occupied me for fifteen years. The result of them is the present book. It appeared in 1948.

What I have said will have made it clear that my book is not the product of purely scholarly interests, that it grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture.

Curtius’s friend Erich Auerbach wrote his magisterial *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* in exile in Istanbul, publishing it in Switzerland in 1946. In his epilogue, Auerbach wrote that:

I hope that my study will reach its readers – both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered.

The two World Wars had an enormous impact on their lives and their scholarship, but these events didn’t inspire either Curtius or Auerbach to write anything approaching a world literary history. They delved deeply into Western European literature rather than looking farther afield, even though they were certainly aware of the more global responses of some prominent historians among their contemporaries. In the opening pages of his *European Literature*, Curtius wrote of Arnold Toynbee as a crucial figure: “How do cultures, and the historical entities which are their media, arise, grow and decay? Only a comparative morphology of cultures with exact procedures can hope to answer these questions. It was Arnold J. Toynbee who undertook the task” (4). In 1948 Curtius wrote a glowing essay on “Toynbee’s Theory of History”, which he praised as “the greatest achievement in historical thought of our time” (16). Yet he never attempted anything resembling Toynbee’s ten-volume *Study of History* (1934–1961).

I am not aware of any study of world literature, in fact, that can be compared in scope and impact to Toynbee’s massive work, or to Will and Ariel Durant’s even more massive eleven-volume *Story of Civilization* (1935–1975), weighing in at nearly 10,000 pages, or even to H. G. Wells’s *Outline of History* (1920), which runs to a comparatively svelte 1,196 pages. These works were extraordinarily popular. My copy of Wells’s *Outline* is from the twenty-eighth reprinting (January 1930), and Toynbee appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1947, when an abridgment of his first six volumes sold 300,000 copies in the United States alone. These and the Durants’ histories undoubtedly helped many people to make sense of the world and its competing and clashing civilisations. Yet few contemporary historians still turn to these works, whose authors were inevitably skating on thin ice much of the time. By contrast, Curtius’s far more circumscribed *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* went far deeper into its subject and is still a touchstone for medievalists today. Auerbach too remains a major figure in the history of the discipline, though it has to be said that few scholars after him attempted so ambitious a survey of “the representation of reality in Western literature” from Homer and the Bible to Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. Studies within a single country, or at most a comparison of works from two or three countries, continued to be the norm. So it isn’t necessarily a bad thing...
that mid-century literary scholars didn’t attempt even more global works, but the historians’ ambitious studies have much to teach us if we now attempt to meet the challenge of writing global literary history.

To take the example of Wells, his *Outline of History* is of interest both methodologically and politically, and it has further value for literary scholars since Wells was a prolific novelist, a writer whose fiction is marked both by social engagement and by a pronounced historical sense. A vast historical sweep subtends his most famous fiction, *The Time Machine* (1897), which ranges from prehistory to the final days of the solar system, and his great satirical novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909) offers a penetrating analysis of the unsettling of Victorian class relations and the onset of a commercialised and militarised modernity: following the collapse of the Ponzi scheme that his uncle has built up around the quack medicine Tono-Bungay, Wells’s hero ends up designing destroyers for the British navy. *The Outline of History* is in some ways an expansive non-fiction sequel to these works and to Wells’s bestselling wartime novel, *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916), which is centrally concerned with the devastating impact of militarism and the need to find a lasting basis for peace.

Wells opens *The Outline of History* by confronting the objection that British history alone is so vast that it already strains the limits of what a reader can absorb or a college course can cover. He readily allows that world history can’t simply be an endless agglomeration of national histories:

> If an Englishman, for example, has found the history of England quite enough for his powers of assimilation, then it seems hopeless to expect his sons and daughters to master universal history, if that is to consist of the history of England, plus the history of France, plus the history of Germany, plus the history of Russia, and so on.

Wells’s formulation of this dilemma, and his response to it, directly foreshadow Franco Moretti 80 years later. In his “Conjectures on World Literature”, Moretti observes that far too many novels were published just in nineteenth-century England for anyone to read them all, “forty, fifty, sixty thousand – no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will. And then there are French novels, Chinese, Argentinian, American . . . ” (45). He argues that “world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The categories have to be different” (46).

So too Wells: “the only possible answer” to the problem of scale, he says, “is that universal history is at once something more and something less than the aggregate of the national histories to which we are accustomed, that it must be approached in a different spirit and dealt with in a different manner” (v). Wells asserts that he has written his book

> primarily to show that history as one whole is amenable to a more broad and comprehensive handling than is the history of special nations and periods, a broader handling that will bring it within the normal limitations of time and energy set to the reading and education of an ordinary citizen.

Instead of piling up a mass of names and dates, his history will offer “general laws” of human history throughout the ages, treating such topics as the appearance and growth of science; the spread of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam; and the development of money and commerce.
Having staked his claim for his approach, Wells emphasises the importance of his project for the postwar world:

The need for a common knowledge of the general facts of human history throughout the world has become very evident during the tragic happenings of the last few years. Swifter means of communication have brought all men closer to one another for good or for evil. War becomes a universal disaster, blind and monstrously destructive; it bombs the baby in its cradle and sinks the food-ships that cater for the non-combatants and the neutral. There can be no peace now, we realize, but a common peace in all the world; no prosperity but a general prosperity. But there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas... A sense of history as the common adventure of all mankind is as necessary for peace within as it is for peace between the nations.

The urgent italics are his.

In keeping with this emphasis, the Outline ends with an eighty-page chapter on the Great War, pointedly entitled “The International Catastrophe of 1914”, and then a brief concluding chapter, “The Next Stage of History”, in which he argues passionately for a “Federal World Government”. This is, then, a thesis-driven, even utopian, world history, grounded in Wells's longstanding socialist internationalism and infused with his disgust at the massive slaughter during the recently ended war. He blames the conflict squarely on nationalism and imperialism, and he senses that the disaster of the war has not diminished their persistent influence. He sees the newly formed League of Nations as only a renewed attempt at global control by major-power elites. He describes the League as “exemplary only in its inefficiencies and dangers” and remarks that “the League does not even seem to know how to talk to common man” (1091–2).

The Outline of History is Wells's attempt to address “common man” and to reveal fundamental historical processes that could counter what T. S. Eliot would soon describe as “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177–8). Throughout the thousand pages leading up to his concluding chapters, Wells teases out countervailing forces amid the endless progression of tribal, imperial and national conflicts across the ages. While he gives disproportionate space to the Mediterranean world in antiquity and the European world thereafter, he devotes far more space to non-Western cultures than literary historians of his day would do, always seeking examples of efforts towards a common understanding of humanity. He places great emphasis on world religions, science and education as providing the building blocks of a workable world order, and he looks to commonalities of everyday life in ways that anticipate the Annales school, even offering an archaeologically based portrayal of “the daily life of the first man” in the Neolithic age (59–64). Drawing on a multitude of specialised studies, The Outline of History is a remarkable work of synthesis and advocacy.

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Literary historians can regard Wells's sweeping history with a mixture of regret and relief. Our archive is at once more limited and more manageable than that of world history in all its range and depth. For most of the world's literary history, writing was heavily skewed toward elite circles, primarily of men, almost always urban in location and perspective. The daily life of “common man”, and of women and children, is hardly to be found in literature before the rise of bourgeois realism in the eighteenth century. There are some notable exceptions in the popular traditions that produced such works as The Thousand and One Nights, the Icelandic family sagas and the vernacular fiction of the Ming Dynasty, but even those works were recorded and
reshaped for a comparatively select audience. In its severely limited historical depth, literature lags behind other arts: art historians have vivid cave paintings dating back tens of thousands of years, and stone-age tools and arrowheads give clear evidence of early artistry. Musicologists can reconstruct the pentatonic scale likely used for bone flutes made 40,000 years ago, even if the actual melodies played on them have vanished forever. Oral traditions of poetry and storytelling no doubt go as far back, but at best the surviving Sumerian hymns and the Homeric epics tell us about the traditions that were circulating orally at the time that they were reduced to writing. Outside the Near East, we have very few extant texts dating back more than 2,500 years, and for large parts of the world, there are no literary works more than a century or two old.

The early texts we do have must represent only a fraction of their cultures’ literary composition. Sophocles wrote 120 plays; 7 survive. We are somewhat more fortunate with Euripides, as we have 18 of his 95 plays, mostly with titles beginning with the letters epsilon through kappa: one shelf of some ancient library survived when the rest were destroyed. If even such great writers are so fragmentarily present, we can only imagine how many other writers have been entirely lost to us. In the modern era, conversely, the flood of publications has created what Moretti has resonantly called “the slaughterhouse of literature”: the canon of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts we read today is radically selective, and it has been selected on principles not always consonant with those we would use today. Literary historians often have to be salvage experts, sometimes with significant success in recovering long-forgotten writers of great value, but there is no telling how many excellent works languish among “the great unread” in the handful of libraries that haven’t deaccessioned them altogether.

With all these limitations, we have a tremendously rich and varied archive to deal with, and we can learn a great deal from the principles of selection and the modes of connection that Wells and other world historians have devised. “Selection” (Auszug) and “connection” (Zusammenhang) are already key terms in Schlözer’s 1785 Weltgeschichte nach ihren Hauptheilten im Auszug und Zusammenhang, and Wells is adept at selecting key figures, movements and historical moments to illustrate the general principles of social history that he wishes to develop. Particularly noteworthy is his emphasis on world religions, in contrast to the secularism prominent in twentieth-century literary scholarship as early as Georg Lukács’s Theory of the Novel – also a product of the period of the Great War – which defines the novel as “the epic of a world abandoned by God” (20). Lukács’s secularist perspective foreshortened his presentation of some of the modern novelists central to his book, such as Cervantes and Dostoevsky, and for earlier eras, it is all the more important to recognise religion as a powerful vector in the creation and wide circulation of literary texts, as Ronit Ricci shows in her book Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia (2011).

Even when it is the product of an urban elite, literature gives us exceptional access to the cultural life of its times, often including aspects of everyday life that the writers may leave to one side or view only from a distance. Homer’s agricultural similes tell us much about the material conditions of archaic Greece, and, read against the grain, Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops gives insights into Greek relations with the “barbarians” around them. The scenes set in Ithaca are directly and indirectly revealing about conditions for women and servants in early Greece, providing a rich source for contestatory reworkings such as Margaret Atwood’s Penelopiad. We can even trace a history of representation of Schlözer’s beloved potatoes, working our way back from their recurring presence in Salmon Rushdie to the talismanic potato that Leopold Bloom carries in his pocket in Ulysses, and farther back to no less a figure than Goethe. As Goethe regretfully remarked to Eckermann, “Shakespeare gives us golden apples in silver dishes. We get, indeed, the silver dishes by studying his works; but, unfortunately, we have only potatoes to put into them” (99).
Much as Wells (like Schlözer before him) widened his focus beyond a sequence of Great Men, world literary history can move beyond a select canon of Great Books. Until recently, World Literature meant the study of major canonical works from a very few countries, but this emphasis has been changing, a shift marked in Norton’s substitution in 2000 of “World Literature” in the title of what had previously been the Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces. Dozens of small as well as large countries are now represented in the Norton and the other survey anthologies, including many writers not well known outside their homeland. Yet World Literature lags behind national literary studies in attending to popular literature, and such global genres as the detective story are only beginning to receive serious attention. We still have much to do to bring such works fully into the discussion.

If we have much to learn from Wells’s successes, we can learn from his limitations as well. His book is a distinctly univocal history, an aspect signalled as early as his title (“the” outline of history, not “an” outline). The problem with Wells’s Outline is not that he had a thesis. The best historians have never been mere antiquarians but have always had a definite perspective, and they have usually sought to derive a social or political moral from their studies. Particularly amid the rise of virulent ethno-nationalisms today – in the United States and United Kingdom as elsewhere – Wells’s anti-nationalistic and anti-imperialist emphasis offers us a heartening model. Yet the utopian telos of his history exerts a strong force on the selection and presentation of his materials, and not to the advantage of his conclusions. Wells wanted his readers to remake the postwar world in light of the “general laws” his history revealed, but his predictions even for the near future proved to be sadly mistaken.

Wells closes his penultimate chapter with “A Forecast of the Next War”, which leads into his concluding peroration in favour of a unified world government founded on principles of pacifism and social justice, upheld by science and a non-sectarian world religion. The “forecast” he discusses is a chilling speech delivered in December 1919 by Major-General Sir Louis Jackson. In his address to the Royal United Service Institution in London, the major-general anticipates that the tanks and artillery so ineffective in the recent war will soon be superseded by fleets of airplanes with vastly increased destructive power. Their mission will be to break the enemy by massive bombing of production centres far beyond the front lines; victory will be assured, even though most of London is likely to be destroyed in turn. As Wells sardonically comments, in terms that uncannily foreshadow Stanley Kubrick’s Doctor Strangelove, this would be “a world in which scarcely anything but very carefully sandbagged and camouflaged G.H.Q would be reasonably safe” (1084). Wells, however, is sure that Major-General Jackson’s vision will never be realised, because “no people whatever will stand such warfare as he contemplates, not even the people on the winning side” (1084). The world had just fought “the war to end war” (1085) – the phrase could still be used without irony in 1920 – and would now be ready to absorb the lessons of history and move beyond the toxic blend of jingoism, militarism and imperialism that had nearly destroyed it. We can only regret that Major-General Jackson’s speech proved to be a better guide to the ensuing decades than Wells’s Outline.

It is easy enough to critique Wells’s utopian history in hindsight; it is less easy to avoid similar distortions of our materials by the very concerns that lead us to study them. Even as we open out our literary histories to countries, social groups and kinds of writing long excluded from them, we have to take care that we don’t select only those authors and works that neatly fit our own aesthetic predilections or political desires. As one example, consider the absence of Kukrit Pramoj from any scholarly discussions in English – or, so far as I know, any European language. Author of some forty books, this major Thai writer (1911–1995) would be a perfect example of Benedict Anderson’s thesis on the importance of newspapers and novels in helping to create the imagined communities of new nations. Kukrit was a newspaper publisher and a novelist and historian, as well as an actor and playwright, and was a founder of a centrist political party. Anti-imperialist and
antiauthoritarian, he was deeply engaged in the process of modernisation, probing its losses and compromises as well as the gains for Thai society. As an actor, he starred in a stage adaptation he made of Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, and he appeared alongside Marlon Brando in the 1963 film *The Ugly American*, playing the prime minister of a fictional Southeast Asian country struggling to deal with Western incursions. Then, in a remarkable transformation, in 1975, he actually became Prime Minister of Thailand. Coming into conflict with the country’s military (the prime power in the country), he left politics 2 years later and returned to his career as a writer.

Kukrit Pramoj is thus of interest from many points of view, and yet, he has never received the attention given to his Indonesian counterpart Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Both wrote ambitious generation-spanning novels that encapsulate the development of their modern nation: in Pramoedya’s case the four-volume *Buru Quartet* (1980–1988), and in Kukrit’s case, his long novel *Four Reigns*, first serialised in 1953 in his newspaper *Siam Rat*. In his novel, Kukrit traces the fortunes of a young woman and her family from the reign of the reformist king Rama V (Chulalongkorn) at the turn of the century through the death of Rama VIII in 1946. Benedict Anderson worked on Thai as well as Indonesian culture, and this would have been a perfect novel for him to take up; equally, Fredric Jameson could well have used *Four Reigns* as an exemplary third-world national allegory. So why has it never been discussed, by those scholars or virtually anyone else outside Thailand? The problem isn’t linguistic inaccessibility: *Four Reigns* was beautifully translated in 1981. Deeply (and sceptically) engaged in Thailand’s modernisation, an opponent of military rule and of imperialism, even a feminist, Kukrit Pramoj seems to have only two strikes against him: he was a royalist rather than a Marxist, and he was a Buddhist rather than a secularist. (Understated in *Four Reigns*, his Buddhism comes to the fore in another important work, *Many Lives*, a linked set of short stories that trace the karmic paths which lead each character to be present on a ferryboat that sinks amid a violent storm on the Chao Praya River.) It is important to include a figure such as him in our literary histories precisely because he doesn’t fit neatly into the narratives that Western critics typically want to create for third-world literature. Of course, a history that would include Kukrit Pramoj at the cost of suppressing Pramoedya Ananta Toer would be no improvement; what we need are histories that are open enough to allow the variety of our materials to challenge and modify the aesthetic, political and historiographic frameworks we bring to them.

Contemporary world literature is far more varied than any singular world-system analysis can comprehend, and premodern literatures, conversely, are often more connected than they appear in the retrospective canons of “national” literatures. Though there was no worldwide circulation in premodern times, most of the features of a global world literature can be found, fractally, on a regional scale, whether in the trade routes of the ancient Mediterranean, the Sinographic sphere of East Asia, the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” of South Asia, the Islamic *ummah*, the intertwined civilisations of Mesoamerica or the Petrarchan tradition in early modern Europe. In different but relatable ways, “world literature” has always been a congeries of world literatures, and to a large extent it still is today. If we attend to the work of world historians from Schlözer to Wells and beyond, we can carry on their work of challenging xenophobic ethno-nationalism by writing (multiple) outlines of world literatures (in the plural), seen in connection both to one another and to our most pressing concerns today.

**Works cited**


