(Un)making Worlds in Literary Theory

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What makes a world has long been a question for literary theory. This question has been asked on scales both small and large: How do narratives constitute fictional worlds in works of literature? What defines and makes possible literature as world literature? The notion of world enters these debates from different directions and in different guises, serving different purposes. From philosophical apparatuses (possible worlds, being-in-the-world) to material structures (world market, world-system) and practices (translation, circulation, fictional world-building), it connects literature to wider ontological and socio-political questions and to the theoretical frameworks developed to address them.

As questions involving the notion of world increasingly converge around the "worlding" of experience in and through writing and reading, it is time to ask what "world" does across these different contexts. Rather than keeping these questions apart by treating their conceptions of world as incommensurable, we will ask what we, as literary critics, writers, and readers, do with the world. This workshop invites several lines of enquiry: whether any conceptual consistencies can be traced across different uses, traditions, and genealogies of "world", while also considering how these histories bear on literature in the present, when questions of the unmaking of worlds seem increasingly pressing; how we make or unmake the world, especially through literary and artistic practices; how the world is valued, and by whom, for what purposes; and how conflicting worlds, or conflicting understandings of different worlds may be acknowledged and negotiated.

Theory's valuation of "world" as a form of meaningful experience has consistently been paired with the threat of its undoing. The opposition between world-making and capitalist globalisation has traversed philosophy and theories of world literature. This opposition has itself been complicated by the emergence of the planetary, a category reducible to neither, and by climate change and the renewed prospect of the end of the world. Crises and wars, risk and precarity increasingly shape our experience of the world and, with it, literary world-making and unmaking. Rather than certainty and convergence, the question of "world" leads us today to divergence, multiple worlds, and prospects of worldlessness.

The question of "world," a notion as vague as it is necessary, offers an opportunity to rethink the relation between literature and philosophy, as well as between different modes of conceptualisation in literary theory. It allows us to re-examine the critical frameworks behind the various concepts of world, beyond the well-trodden ground of modal logic and phenomenology, to the point of subjecting the notion of world itself to critique. It also allows us to emphasise the literary creation and destruction that (un)makes worlds and the values that sustain them. What values shape world literature and allow

it to transform? Finally, it enables us to rethink the relation between literature and politics. What remains of the cosmopolitan promise of world literature? What kinds of conflicts and struggles does making and unmaking worlds bring forward, and what kinds does it obscure? What is the reach of the micropolitics of worlding?

These are some of the questions that this workshop will address in an attempt to approach the acts of (un)making worlds from comparative perspectives that cut across different literary traditions, media and disciplinary boundaries of literary theory, critical theory, and philosophy. Rather than treating literary world-making as a series of case studies, the workshop will focus on the theoretical stakes of the concept of world itself.