

Writing “World Literature”: Approaches from the Maghreb

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The notion of ‘world literature’ is notoriously indeterminate. Since its origins in Goethe’s 1827 references to a universal *Weltliteratur*, it has passed through many mutations, and, with the resurgence in interest in the term since David Damrosch resuscitated it with his provocative *What is world literature?* in 2003, it has provoked a good deal of controversy. One of the ambiguities of the notion is that, although it appears to describe a type of literature or group of texts, it is rather more often used to designate a critical perspective that varies in form. World literature is not so much a canon of works that are somehow conceived to be of global or universal significance, than an approach to literary criticism or a way of reading. What this critical approach entails, however, is often unclear, and frequently freighted with cultural and socio-political assumptions that leave the supposed openness of world literature questionable. Most theorists of the term agree that it invites exploration of the ways in which texts exceed national borders, but the relative status of national and international socio-cultural frameworks remains highly contentious, as do critics’ understandings of a text’s ‘worldliness’ and mode of circulation. As Franco Moretti famously asserts, world literature is precisely ‘not an object, it’s a *problem*’; it evidently requires ongoing debate.¹

In order to respond to some of this ambiguity, the present article will explore how the notion of world literature is theorised not by critics but by the writers who could be conceived to be the ones to produce it, and will take a close look at how something like Edward Said’s ‘worldliness’ is actively and self-consciously foregrounded in literary texts.² Moreover, the works under scrutiny will all be by Maghrebian writers who write in French, so as to reveal how the form of intercultural thinking contained in the notion of world literature developed in these former French colonies, where there has been in recent years a strong sense of disillusionment towards the culture and ideology of the new nation. Robert Young has argued that ‘world literature’ and ‘postcolonial literature’ are necessarily opposed, since world literature implies universality, together with a focus on aesthetics, while postcolonial literature must be historicised and indeed inexorably riven by its context.³ Young has more than once emphasised the transnationalism of postcolonial studies, and yet he evidently

¹ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on world literature’, *New Left Review* 1 (Jan-Feb, 2000).

² Edward Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

³ Robert Young, ‘World Literature and Postcolonial Literature’, in Theo D’Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) CHECK.

associates 'world literature' not so much with intellectual and creative border-crossing as with a universalism incompatible with postcolonial political critique.⁴ A number of works by francophone postcolonial Algerian and Moroccan writers nevertheless demonstrate how dissatisfaction and unrest in generations following those of the anti-colonial movement has triggered to a form of multilingual, intercultural creativity that might give new energy to the theory of world literature.

World literature, then, has been problematic since the term's inception, and, as Damrosch argues, it is often not clear both which (if not all) forms of literature it refers to, and what concept of 'world' it implies.⁵ Goethe famously affirmed, according to Eckermann, that 'poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men', and therefore, 'national literature is now rather an unmeaning term'.⁶ As the numerous analyses of Goethe's concept attest, however, what he then means by *Weltliteratur* is rather vague. The comments cited above spring from his enthusiasm towards a Chinese novel he read, and his discovery that despite the enormous differences between Chinese and European cultures, there is a level on which the work is able to transcend its context, to communicate more broadly with humanity and address our universally shared concerns. Nevertheless, as Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir suggest in their preface to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, Goethe's focus is at times global, but at times more narrowly European.⁷ Moreover, as John Pizer suggests in his more detailed study of Goethe's concept in the same volume, world literature names not a stable canon of works but a process whereby writers of many kinds from diverse origins are able to communicate and learn from one another through the far-reaching network of literary exchange.⁸ And yet, that literary dialogue is by turns understood as the preserve of an intellectual elite, and conversely, as the far larger and more diffuse network created by the commercialisation of literary culture. *Weltliteratur* is from the beginning a challenging, visionary idea, an aspiration towards an at once inventive and inclusive literary humanism,

⁴ See for example Robert Young, 'What is the postcolonial?', *Ariel* 40.1 (2009) 13-25.

⁵ David Damrosch, *What is world literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann and Soret* (London: Smith, Elder, 1850) p. 350.

⁷ Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 'Preface: *Weltliteratur*, *littérature universelle*, *vishwa sahitya*...', in Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, xviii-xxi.

⁸ John Pizer, 'Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe: Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*', in Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, 3-11.

but it is also, as Christopher Prendergast suggests, ‘a thought-experiment, a groping reach for a barely glimpsed future’.⁹

Goethe’s reflection on circulation and exchange was taken up again more recently by both Pascale Casanova and David Damrosch, who set out to explore in more detail the processes by which texts enter into international space. Casanova’s highly ambitious *World Republic of Letters*, published originally in French in 1999, examines the dual pull of the international and national forces working on literature as it is shaped by processes of exchange and formed by the market by which it is influenced and then diffused.¹⁰ Casanova’s ‘world republic’ still places Paris at its centre, however, and her vision of international literary space rests at the same time on a conception of the movement of a literary work between its initial national context and the broader network of exchange. Ultimately, then, the nation still retains a privileged position in the world republic of letters, and Casanova’s theory of competition and rivalry hardly contests borders and categories in the way that Goethe perhaps originally envisioned. David Damrosch’s *What is world literature?* goes further in its vision of transcultural circulation, in that he explores precisely the ways in which works travel, often through translation, away from the contexts in which they were written, and in so doing, generate new meaning. As I suggested, Damrosch also insists that world literature is above all a mode of reading, ‘a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time’, and rather than focusing on the national rivalries that shape world literature, as Casanova does, he perhaps more optimistically emphasises the new creative life produced through literary circulation and translation.¹¹ Yet if Damrosch helpfully recommends this emancipatory form of literary travel, his model relies on translation: texts move in the wider world because they are translated from one language into another. This model, I would suggest, pays insufficient attention to the ways in which texts might already contest borders through their own multilingual, intercultural form. The worldliness of world literature may already be there in the form of the work, rather than being created afterwards by translators, critics, and readers.

Casanova and Damrosch in their different ways leave out the question of what the worldliness of the text itself consists in, and for a better understanding of the text’s own worldly engagement, as opposed to its perception by the critic, we might turn back to Edward

⁹ Christopher Prendergast, ‘Introduction’, in Christopher Prendergast (ed.), *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004) vii-xiii (p. viii).

¹⁰ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹¹ David Damrosch, *What is world literature?* p. 281.

Said. This reappraisal of ‘worldliness’ might also function as an alternative to the false universalism of ‘world literature’, since it suggests a way of thinking, an alertness to different cultures but also a ‘worldly’ wisdom about the text’s limits that serves to attenuate the utopianism of some existing theories of world literature. Most famously, Said argues in *The World, the Text, the Critic* that even texts that appear to be autonomous, those that retain the ‘most rarefied form’, are still ‘always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly’.¹² Said’s point here seems to be a simple one, that literary works do not consist in pure textuality but are immersed in both history and lived experience, but his emphasis on the world as opposed to nation or locality is highly significant. Said is consistently resistant in all his writing to ideological and critical orthodoxies, and indeed, he argues that ‘secular criticism’ – a form of worldliness – is ‘constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems’ and therefore open to the world.¹³ Importantly, however, if this ‘secular’ perspective was established during the nineteenth century as a challenge to religious orthodoxy, it immediately becomes implicated in the structures of Orientalism, so must continually turn against and critique itself. As Jonathan Arac notes, Said’s modern secular criticism (and therefore worldliness) must be defined by an awareness of its limitations and an ability to question itself.¹⁴ One might consider in addition, moreover, that if a text is ‘enmeshed’ in the world, this is not because it circulates after completion, but because it comes to life through the dialogues it maintains not only with the place of its creation it but also with the broader, multiple cultural histories that its language draws on or taps into, at the same time as with itself.

Said’s understanding of ‘worldliness’ might be a starting-point for a closer reflection on the ways in which a text, through its very language, and the contacts and references with which it enters into dialogue, not only speaks to other cultures or circulates beyond its origin, but ‘enmeshes’ itself in the world. Yet the role of language within texts we might conceive as examples of world literature has tended to escape the purview of critics. Emily Apter has made the important point that existing theories of world literature tend to underplay the effects of translation in their desire to cross borders and embrace the world system. Apter’s argument is a cautionary one, as she criticises ‘the tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground’, and she invokes, ‘untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary

¹² Edward Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic*, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ Jonathan Arac, ‘Edward W. Said: The Wordliness of World Literature’, in Theo D’Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, 117-125.

endeavours'.¹⁵ The point is well made, but despite Apter's linguistic sensitivity, her focus remains on the difficulties of translating from one language into another and on the risk of misunderstanding that subtends the ostensibly liberating cross-fertilisation that occurs as texts migrate between cultures. The ways in which literatures might be construed to be 'worldly' precisely because they themselves do not adhere to a national language, because despite their apparent monolingualism they already dramatise their own multiple points of contact with the wider world, remains to be developed.

Françoise Lionnet's contribution to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* embraces the palimpsestic form and multilingualism of world literature, and serves as a compelling springboard for the present reflection on intercultural writing in the postcolonial Maghreb. Lionnet's essay opens with a critique of the French *littérature-monde* movement, inaugurated by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud with their manifesto 'Pour une littérature-monde en français' first published in *Le Monde* in 2007 and developed in the volume of essays with the same title.¹⁶ Le Bris and Rouaud may have wanted to liberate literature from 'son pacte avec la nation', but Lionnet argues that, on the contrary, the movement actually participates in, 'an old assimilationist agenda that promotes the integration of the larger Francophone world of letters into a very Parisian understanding of writing as a monolingual activity that seeks to embrace "les voies du monde" [the ways of the world] (*Le Monde* 2007), but in order to make them fit into the world Republic of Letters as defined and understood by a universalizing French perspective'.¹⁷ She goes on to explore rather the palimpsestic structure, the 'creolization' or multilingual strategies, of a range of literatures in French, including not only the famous example of the Martinican Edouard Glissant but also half-forgotten eighteenth-century poets Evariste Parny, Antoine Bertin, and Nicolas Germain Léonard. Lionnet deliberately cites metropolitan alongside postcolonial figures, all of for whom the French language is continually interspersed with words, idioms, and traces of other languages so as to construct a more richly intercultural and linguistically dynamic literary form. A creolized world literature is in this way a broad signifier for writing whose form and style would not be constrained by a national culture and language, but would in its very fabric display its engagement with global cultural and linguistic diversity.

¹⁵ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013) p. 3.

¹⁶ Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

¹⁷ Jean Rouaud, 'Mort d'une certaine idée', in Le Bris and Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde*, 7-22 (p. 21). See also Françoise Lionnet, 'World Literature, Francophonie, and Creole Cosmopolitics', in Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, 325-335 (p. 325).

Lionnet's conception of world literature as a creolized space of production is precisely not limited to the Caribbean context; rather, creolization is a broader figure for hybridization and linguistic plurality in literary form as it occurs in any context. This 'worldly' process might once again succeed in evoking not a universalism dominated by European culture, but an ongoing encounter between languages from different parts of the world in all their unevenness. The two North African writers who contributed to Le Bris and Rouaud's volume might, then, unlike the editors themselves, also be conceived to embrace a comparable form of creolized world literary creation in that they demonstrate how texts can actively juxtapose multiple languages and cultures. The first of these is the Moroccan poet and novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun, who, though drawing extensively on local tradition in his novels, throughout his œuvre focuses less on postcolonial Morocco than on migration, travel, cultural transfer and exile. In his contribution to *Pour une littérature-monde*, Ben Jelloun reflects on his own bilingualism, but goes on to use this not to theorise a literature written in two languages, but a much more open 'errance dans l'écriture' ['errantry in writing'].¹⁸ A literature that dramatises its immersion in the world will contain traces of contacts with multiple cultures and stretch the boundaries of standardised French, rather than positing languages as enclosed national entities (creating in the case of Morocco a straightforward clash between French and standard Arabic). In one of his poems (check), moreover, Ben Jelloun suggests that the poet is always a traveller, he is 'l'hôte imprévisible de toutes les langues' ['the unpredictable host of all languages'].¹⁹ Literatures that are created through the writer's dynamic contact with the world and with multiple communities juxtapose rhythms, sounds, idioms and images to create visions that, once again, transcend nation and ethnicity. In his novel most explicitly concerned with the writing process, *L'Ecrivain public* published in 1983, Ben Jelloun tracks a writer's travels around a disaffected postcolonial Morocco, as well as to other parts of the Arab world and Europe, in order to explore the ability of the writer (here figured as a public writer) to embrace the lives of other people. In this instance, however, the travelling writer represents a form of enmeshment in the world but also an inexorable sense of exile, and here Ben Jelloun also brings out the doubt and self-questioning that for Said were also a crucial part of worldliness. The writing also alters or betrays its referents, and leaves its creator with a profound sense of alienation. Writing that embraces the world, then, does not claim to capture and possess it, but accepts its own provisionality.

¹⁸ Tahar Ben Jelloun, 'La Cave de ma mémoire, le toit de ma maison sont des mots français', in Le Bris and Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde*, 113-124 (p. 113).

¹⁹ Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Le Discours du chameau, suivi de Jénine et autres poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 342.

The Algerian writer Boualem Sansal also contributes an article to Le Bris and Rouaud's volume, in which he condemns the restrictive effects not only of the literal borders between nations, but also the conceptual thinking that separates, antagonises and divides. This separatist and isolationist way of thinking fuels, argues Sansal, the creation of Arabic as the national language in Algeria at the expense of dialectal forms, Berber and French. Against this oppressive monolingualism, Sansal like Ben Jelloun celebrates the opening out and diversification of language, the creative remodelling of French, for example, through its dialogue with other cultures, and he rejects the belief that languages are to be owned. Languages, as they are used and spoken in the world, continually stretch and mutate, and we must accept that, 'les langues sont ainsi, on les veut nôtres à part entière, parce qu'on est jaloux, et elles, se veulent ouvertes à tous et finissent par nous imposer leur bruyante progéniture' ['this is how languages are, we want them to belong to us entirely, because we are jealous, and they want to be open to everyone and end up by imposing on us their noisy offspring'].²⁰ More critical than Ben Jelloun, Sansal's point is also a political one, as he offers in *Poste restante: Alger*, published in 2006, an incendiary critique of the stultification of contemporary Algeria, with the result that the work was banned there. At the root of Sansal's argument is once again his embrace of and immersion in cultural and linguistic diversity as it lives and evolves in contemporary Algeria despite the push towards Arabic monolingualism and the imposition of a politicised Islam. Algerian culture is precisely not national culture, then, but a hybridised mix emerging from a history both of invasions and of movements outwards: 'nous sommes des Algériens, c'est tout, des êtres multicolores et polyglottes, et nos racines plongent partout dans le monde. Toute la Méditerranée coule dans nos veines et, partout, sur ses rivages ensoleillés, nous avons semé nos graines' ['we are Algerians, that's all, multicoloured and polyglot beings, and are roots are found deep down across the world. The whole of the Mediterranean flows in our veins, and, everywhere on our sunny shores, we have scattered our grain'].²¹

Sansal's arguments in these essays do not overtly foreground the role of literature in promoting interculturality and multilingualism, yet it is significant that he responds to the *littérature-monde* manifesto with this condemnation of monolithic and separatist thinking more broadly. The implication is that this critique is the foundation of *littérature-monde*, a creative culture that would actively resist monolingualism, and in particular, a radicalized

²⁰ Boualem Sansal, 'Où est passée ma frontière?', in Le Bris and Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde*, 161-174 (p. 173).

²¹ Boualem Sansal, *Poste restante: Alger. Lettre de colère et d'espoir à mes compatriotes* (Paris : Gallimard, 2006) p. 48.

monoculture in Algeria, in its engagement with its plural and dialogic past and future. Sansal's literary texts, moreover, are known more specifically for their deliberate interweaving of Arab and Jewish histories, and his bold demonstration of how these mutually inform one another may be one example of a world literature that refuses to partition stories into self-enclosed cultural compartments. Commenting on his writing, Sansal boldly affirms in an interview in *World Literature Today*: 'I make literature, not war. . . . Literature is not Jewish, Arab, or American. It tells stories to everyone'.²² *Le Village de l'Allemand ou le journal des Frères Schiller*, a novel published in 2008, tells the story of two Algerian brothers who discover that their father had been a Nazi officer, and explores the links between the Holocaust, the Algerian War of Independence, the civil war in Algeria during the 1990s, and contemporary disaffection in the Parisian banlieues.²³ More recently, *Rue Darwin* published in 2011 explores the writer's own complex family history, and stresses the proximity between Arab and Jewish communities in Belcourt during his childhood.²⁴ The character Daoud, moreover, a childhood friend whom the narrator later learns is his brother, reinvents himself as a Jew working in the Hotel Lutétia in Paris (where the Nazis gathered Jews to be deported, and also where Jews were initially returned after the war), and with both texts Sansal is at pains to stress the proximity and shared history between Islam and Judaism despite the brutal conflicts between them that have dominated their twentieth and twenty-first century history. In Sansal's writing, then, both broader histories and subjective memories are international and cross-cultural, and, as a result, identities are themselves open to recreation. And if history and memory are 'multidirectional' in this way, to use Michael Rothberg's term, then the creative works that embrace this dialogic structure might be rather closer to a worldly literature than to national literature, even if in the case of Sansal the texts are also deeply rooted in Algeria.²⁵

As a final example of this kind of richly dialogic, intercultural and multilingual world literary text from the Maghreb, I would like briefly to draw attention to the Algerian Salim Bachi's *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin*, published in 2010. Many of Bachi's works

²² Boualem Sansal, 'A Rustle in History: Conversations with Dinah Assouline Stillman', *World Literature Today* (September 2012) <http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2012/september/rustle-history-conversations-boualem-sansal-dinah-assouline-stillman-0#.USnf7d0yUk>.

²³ Boualem Sansal, *Le Village de l'Allemand, ou le journal des frères Schiller* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008).

²⁴ Boualem Sansal, *Rue Darwin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

²⁵ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Rothberg suggests that multidirectional memory, is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing: as productive not privative' (p. 3). His focus is above all on the ways in which Holocaust memory triggers and overlaps with the memory of other moments of trauma, in particular, those of the conflicts around decolonisation. His point is that the way we remember an event is through its dialogue and association with other memories, as well as with the memories of other people.

draw extensively on myth as well as on a range of literatures, but *Amours et aventures* is a most extraordinarily energetic web of engagements with and citations from a proliferation of sources, and constitutes a *tour de force* that must be nothing if not worldly. The novel has a densely multidirectional and palimpsestic structure in its tracking of its protagonist's, a modern Sindbad's, errancy through the association of his experiences with an array of literatures and myths from across history, and can be conceived as multilingual or 'creolized' in its deployment of images, idioms, and ideas from texts from around the world. At the same time, it is 'worldly' in the way that Said and Ben Jelloun also suggested, in that it promotes self-questioning and allows space for doubt about the veracity and stability of literary representation, including its own.

Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin is replete with references to both European and Arabic mythology and literature, and there will be space to sketch briefly only a few of these. Most paradigmatic is the parallel with *The Odyssey*: Bachi's novel reverses the order, however, and opens with a homecoming, only to follow the return of the first character, the 'Sleeper', with the narrative of the journeying of the modern Sindbad, a kind of Arabic Odysseus. The city where the story is told, moreover, is the legendary Carthago, Algiers transformed into a 'new city', yet one of oppression and bloodshed (connoting the Algerian 'black decade' of the 1990s). In addition, for his frame Bachi draws extensively on the myth of the seven sleepers, according to which a group of Christians took refuge in a cave in Ephesus, sometime around 250AD, to escape persecution, but they fell asleep and only awoke 180 years later (more in some versions) and then died. The myth itself has multiple origins, and is also referred to in the Koran, but Bachi redeploys it here in the form of an anonymous figure (the Sleeper) who returns after a long absence to Carthago to find it ravaged and barely recognisable. The frame of the novel, then, is the encounter between the Sleeper and Sindbad, and the myth serves to take the narrative beyond the immediate reference to the recent Algerian past. The Sleeper evidently remembers something of the War of Independence, but he has seen many wars across the world, and, having no idea of his age or identity, he represents the association between Algerian history and universal human history. Outside time for a part of his life, he is also anonymous. Citing Odysseus before the Cyclops, he claims 'mon nom est Personne' ['My name is No One'], and is able to recollect multiple moments in Algerian and international history in a 'multidirectional' way:

Il pouvait être juif, romain ou berbère; marcher avec les Arabes le long des caravanes; traverser l'Atlantique à bord d'un bateau négrier; périr dans des mines d'argent au

Mexique; se prosterner devant la Kaaba ou baiser le mur du Temple à Jerusalem puisque voilà une éternité qu'il s'était endormi près de ses compagnons, veillé par ce chien sans âge pendant que les siècles s'additionnaient.

[‘He might be Jewish, Roman, or Berber ; he might have walked with the Arabs alongside their caravans ; crossed the Atlantic on a slave ship ; perished in the silver mines in Mexico; prostrated himself before the Kaaba or kissed the wall of the Temple in Jerusalem. Because it had been an eternity since he’d fallen asleep beside his companions, guarded by that ageless dog as the centuries accumulated’].²⁶

The Sleeper’s timelessness allows the narrative to cast a fresh light on the senselessness of recent history in Algeria, but also to enhance understanding of contemporary experience with the imagery of multiple other histories, places, and epochs.

The Sleeper meets Sindbad in the opening pages, and in this meeting Bachi brings together the former’s timeless universality with the dazzling heterogeneity and dynamism of the *Arabian Nights*. The *Arabian Nights* itself is a compelling example of world literature in its vast, intercultural and multilayered structure, as Sandra Naddaff explores in her contribution to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*: the *Nights* ‘speaks directly to the potential of a foundational literary text fearlessly to cross borders and boundaries of all sorts: generic, formal, linguistic, and national. Perhaps no other work of world literature holds up as clear a mirror to the way a text can simultaneously be identified wholly with a literary culture and yet circulate well beyond that culture, than does this foundational text of Arabic narrative’.²⁷ It is precisely a worldly work with no single origin, drawing on a multitude of sources from Persia, the Arab world, India, Europe and back again, and having been repeatedly reworked and retold. It is also palimpsestic, as stories are told within stories, narrators are grafted upon narrators, to create a work at once full of the most diverse happenings and creatures, and provocatively reflective of all the complexity of literary representation.

²⁶ Salim Bachi, *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010) p. 25, pp. 32-33; *The New Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor*, trans. Sue Rose (London: Pushkin Press, 2012) p. 16, p. 22.

²⁷ Sandra Naddaff, ‘*The Thousand and One Nights* as World Literature’ in Theo D’Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, 487-496 (p. 487).

Marina Warner also implies that the *Nights* are an eminent example of world literature, arguing that it ‘inspires a way of thinking about writing and the making of literature as forms of exchange across time – dream journeys in which the maker fuses with what is being made, until the artefact exercises in return its own fashioning force’. See *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011) p. 27.

It is the seven voyages of Sindbad the Sailor that Bachi evidently explores here, both in order to theorise the association between story-telling and the journey, and in order to reflect on the very process of producing narrative. *Amours et aventures* is worldly, then, in its polyphonic mélange of myths, in its depiction of its protagonist's own literal and intellectual travelling, and, through the intertext of the *Nights*, in its demonstration of the narrative's limits in a bid once again to resist orthodoxy. In the *Arabian Nights*, Sindbad is, at first glance, a hero, a sailor who goes through many adventures, and each time returns having made his fortune. He is endlessly restless, he gets lost, shipwrecked, and narrowly escapes death many times, but cannot resist setting out anew in an unquenchable thirst for discovery. The text repeatedly stresses that on returning from his voyages, Sindbad has plenty of riches and is ready to settle down, and yet each time the next story begins with the return of this urge to travel. As an insatiable voyager, then, he is an apt hero for a work of world literature that too contests hermeticism and isolationism. Nevertheless, Sindbad's travels expose him to extraordinary brutality, perhaps most strikingly, for example, in the fourth voyage, when according to a local custom he is buried in a tomb with his dead wife, and survives by killing the husbands and wives who succumb to the same fate in order to eat their rations. And Sindbad himself is also here violent, as this dark tale casts doubt on the form of his adventuring. In several instances, he is treated with brutality because, arriving somewhere new, he misunderstands local inhabitants, disturbs the natural equilibrium, meddles in the environment and arouses wrath in the creatures and people on whom he intrudes. Indeed, as Wen-chin Ouyang explains, the Sindbad of the *Nights* learns, just like Schahriar in the frame story, about the dangers and limits of power, and, far from the swashbuckling games of the Hollywood film version, the original text is rather more cautionary.²⁸ Travelling, perhaps, may be an enriching and compelling process of discovery, but it is dangerous if the traveller becomes egocentric and arrogant.

The Sindbad in Bachi's tale too figures travel and worldliness in a complex and reflective way. On the one hand, Sindbad delights in the refreshing discovery of new places, and in particular in his series of lovers, the most prominent of which is Vitalia, whose name evidently connotes the sailor's embrace of life through his encounters. Sindbad's story of his adventures also celebrates the creative potential of his heterogeneous intellectual discoveries, and a form of multilingualism shapes the text as he litters his anecdotes with imagery drawn

²⁸ Wen-chin Ouyang, 'Whose story is it? Sindbad the Sailor in Literature and Film', in Wen-chin Ouyang and Geert Jan Von Gelder (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Arabian Nights: Ideological Variations and Narrative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2005) 1-15.

from other texts. In Rome, for example, he reads Sciascia's *Spanish Moments* to vindicate his own solitude, and looks anew at the back streets such as the Via Veneto by remembering Tennessee Williams exploring there for young boys. Strolling in Cadiz, he imagines he enters the world of Salammbô, 'Je devins un Carthaginois, un marchand grec, une putain sacrée qui embrassait un serpent et l'aimait comme un homme ou une femme, ou quelque chose de plus étrange encore' ['I became a Carthaginian, a Greek merchant, a sacred whore who kissed a serpent and loved it like a man or woman, or something even stranger'].²⁹ Even the traveller's disgust towards the inanity of Italian television is compared to Dante waiting at the gates of his Inferno, and the Milanese industrialist who dominates the media is a Golem, or the Emperor Tiberius. The story is richly interwoven with such images and citations, as if the experience of a place is always enhanced, developed, and altered through a simultaneous imagined journey into comparable literary worlds. On the other hand, however, the Sindbad of Bachi's work is not the seafaring hero of the *Nights*, who returns each time from his travels having made his fortune, but a much more disillusioned, nomadic soul, continually dissatisfied like his predecessor yet rather less heroic and certainly less wealthy. His journey is triggered after he squanders his fortune, and in his departure he is accompanied by many others desperate to escape the dystopia of Carthago. The sailor's errantry in the world here is less an epic adventure than a bid to leave the stultified Algerian nation, 'l'enfer de nos indépendences ratées' ['the hell created by our unsuccessful efforts at independence'], and, lacking the purpose of the Sindbad of the *Nights*, Bachi's reincarnation merely drifts.³⁰ His travelling will not make him his fortune, then, and yet Bachi's text sketches a worldliness that perhaps more quickly eschews the desire for mastery and that is from the outset more alive to a process of discovery without possession. It is, once again, clearly a response to the dangers and restrictions of nationalism in the postcolonial era, and yet the disillusionment Bachi expresses might also be associated with a non-proprietary attitude that is, once again, worldly in Said's terms.

If *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin* is a work of world literature, however, this is not only because it performs an idea of worldliness, but also because it hints at a compelling vision of the literary and of the manner in which texts engage writers, storytellers, and readers in the world. The Sindbad narratives in the *Arabian Nights* do this in part through the presence of the narrator's double: Sindbad the Sailor tells his story to another

²⁹ Salim Bachi, *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin*, p. 89 ; *The New Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor*, p. 58.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 128; p. 84.

Sindbad, a poor porter, a reflection of what he might have been without his riches. He recounts his adventures, then, before an alter ego who reminds him of his potential failure, and the story is created against the backdrop of that sign of its provisionality. In Bachi's version, this trope of doubling recurs several times. Like the poor porter, the Sleeper is in a sense Sindbad's double or his darker side: 'ces êtres étaient à l'opposé l'un de l'autre. L'un était la vie, la jeunesse, l'amour, l'autre en était la négation' ['he was the complete opposite of the Sleeper and his dog. One side represented life, youth and love, and the other was the complete negation of these qualities'].³¹ Later, a painter named Ingres tells him the story of the original Sindbad, and Bachi's protagonist identifies here with the poor porter; so in this case, he is the fragile one, the shadow that casts doubt on the story-teller's depiction of his the Sailor's success. Bachi's Sindbad has more than one double, reflecting multiple different potentialities and the ability to play many contrasting roles, each of which is on some level a fiction. Furthermore, stories are shown to be unable to contain the richness of reality, as Bachi's protagonist comments that Sindbad the Sailor escapes Ingres's narrative. This insufficiency, however, is linked at the same time to the observation that Sindbad's good fortune lies in 'sa capacité à se réinventer à travers les femmes et les voyages' ['his being able to reinvent himself through his women and his voyages'].³² Narrative might be flawed because it is finite and partial, then, but its limitations might also be its strength: provisionality allows for renewal.

At the end of the novel, Bachi's Sindbad recounts in a fever the episode in the original *Arabian Nights* tale when Sindbad carries the Old Man of the Sea on his shoulders, at first in order to help him in his frailty, only then to find he is unable to escape this terrible burden until he succeeds in getting him drunk. A last example of the double, the Old Man of the Sea evidently represents the burden of age, the frailty to which we are all destined threatening to cloud the vitality of the present. If Sindbad shakes him off and continues his adventures, however, it again reminds the reader of the provisionality of the Sindbad of the narration, and in turn, of Bachi's protagonist. In each case, it is as if the voyager tells stories in order to create versions of himself, while all the time those versions are underpinned by the reminder that the created self could be other. This possibility is in part liberating, it allows the subject of the narrative to escape from deterministic forms of representation, but it also reveals that every incarnation of the subject will be transient, vulnerable, and mortal.

³¹ Ibid., p. 47; p. 32.

³² Ibid., p. 149; p.99.

The richly textured, multilayered web of Bachi's work is, then, a vision of a narrative form that challenges national frontiers in ways reminiscent of the theories of Said or Lionnet. Bachi could indeed be seen to capture something of the universality of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* in associating contemporary experience in Algeria with the histories of other epochs and places, and in opening the text with the anonymous Sleeper, he lifts the narrative outside its context and time. Even more, in both recording a journey, and figuring its constituent moments by reference to other texts and histories, he creates a work immersed in the world and in world literature, whose palimpsestic form is itself a dynamic and open form of worldliness. At the same time, however, through the presence of the various doubles that structure and inform the story, Bachi continues the intensely self-reflexive work of the *Arabian Nights* and conceptualises literature itself as a space for worldly self-doubt and self-questioning. Not only does *Amours et aventures* offer a vision of the plural, multifaceted form of world literature, but it also demonstrates the crucial acceptance in world literature of its own fragility and impermanence.