

**World Literature as World Crisis:
Discussing World Literature to Change the World**

**Svetovna književnost kot svetovna kriza:
zamišljanje svetovne književnosti v imenu boljšega
sveta**

International conference of the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association
and the ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies

Mednarodna konferenca Slovenskega društva za primerjalno književnost in
Inštituta za slovensko literaturo in literarne vede ZRC SAZU

September 11–12, 2025
11.–12. september 2025

Gosposka Hall of the ZRC SAZU Geographical Museum, 16 Gosposka ulica, Ljubljana
Gosposka dvorana ZM GIAM ZRC SAZU, Gosposka ulica 16, Ljubljana

“World Literature as World Crisis” aims to unearth a surprising discourse of catastrophe in what has been canonized and globalized as the debate on world literature. Europe-wide since the Revolutions of 1848, the discussion on world literature has become a global concern of literary authors and scholars alike. Starting with the events of 9/11 and the ensuing Global War on Terror, those involved in the debate have acknowledged the impact of global crises on their interest in world literature. But world literature has always been contemplated as a possible cure to a potentially global catastrophe, from the crisis of post-Napoleonic Europe in the age of Goethe to the most recent global health crisis of the Anthropocene.

The debate itself ought to therefore be approached as a debate on world history as much as world literature. The question of what world literature is should no longer be treated separately from the question of when, where, and by whom this question is posed. Indeed, the most widely discussed definitions of world literature can be reread as so many attempts to respond to a looming or ongoing worldwide catastrophe. The rich and enduring archive of notions of world literature can be tapped into as an archive of notions of world history and its relation to catastrophe.

As a result, looking at how people have imagined world literature can help us see how they have perceived world crises; furthermore, following future discussions of world literature can alert us to potential world crises they might foreshadow; and, finally, retooling world literature in this way can enable us to bring an entire humanities discipline into the age of public humanities.

Konferenca »Svetovna književnost kot svetovna kriza« bo osvetlila presenetljiv diskurz krize v tem, kar je bilo kanonizirano in globalizirano kot razprava o svetovni literaturi. Ta razprava, ki je vseevropski pojav vse od meščanskih revolucij iz leta 1848, danes zaposluje literarne kroge vsepovsod po svetu. Začenši z globalno vojno proti terorizmu, ki so jo ZDA sprožile po 11. septembru 2001, se udeleženske in udeleženci v razpravi zavedajo vpliva potencialno globalnih kriz na njihove konceptualizacije svetovne književnosti. Toda svetovna književnost je bila že od nekdaj obravnavana kot možen odgovor na proto-globalno krizo, pa naj je šlo za krizo postnapoleonske Evrope v Goethejevem obdobju ali za nedavno globalno zdravstveno krizo.

Razprava o svetovni književnosti je torej obenem razprava o svetovni zgodovini. Vprašanja o tem, kaj je svetovna književnost, ne bi smeli več obravnavati ločeno od vprašanja, kdaj, kje in kdo to vprašanje postavlja. V najbolj razširjenih opredelitvah svetovne literature lahko razberemo poskuse odzivanja na grozečo ali potekajočo svetovno krizo, bogat arhiv pojmovanj svetovne književnosti pa lahko uporabimo kot arhiv pojmovanj svetovne zgodovine in njenega odnosa do krize.

Če si torej ogledamo, kako so si ljudje predstavljali svetovno literaturo, lahko ugotovimo, kako so dojemali svetovne krize. Še več, če spremljamo nadaljnji potek razprave o svetovni književnosti, imamo možnost opozoriti na morebitne svetovne krize, katerih zametki bi utegnili uravnavati ta potek. In če navsezadnje na ta način preoblikujemo pojem svetovne literature, lahko celotno humanistično vejo pripeljemo v dobo javne humanistike.

PROGRAM

September 11, 2025

10:00–10:30 Introduction

- **Blaž Zabel**, Slovenian Comparative Literature Association
- **Jernej Habjan**, ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies

10:30–12:00 Session I

- **Blaž Zabel**: Homer's *Weltliteratur*: Goethe and the Local in World Literature
- **Sándor Hites**: World Literature from Perpetual War to Perpetual Peace (and Back)
- **Francesca Lazzarin**: An Arc Stretched between East and West: World (or Universal?) Literature in an Early Soviet Publishing Utopia

12:00–12:30 Discussion

12:30–14:30 Lunch ("Šestica," Slovenska cesta 40, Ljubljana)

14:30–16:00 Session II

- **Marko Juvan**: Small Nations, Big Debates: Empowering Slovenes as a Subject of World History in the Critical 1930s
- **Anna Björk Einarsdóttir**: Literature and Class Consciousness: The Proletarian Moment in World Literature
- **Simon During**: Auerbach: The World-literature Philologist as Ordo Liberal?

16:00–16:30 Discussion

16:30–17:00 Coffee break

19:00 Dinner ("Breg," Breg 20, Ljubljana)

September 12, 2025

10:00–11:00 Session III

- **Lucija Mandić**: Milan Kundera as a Representative and a Theorist of World Literature
- **Laura Gerday**: New World Literature, or the "World" in a Semantic Crisis

11:00–11:30 Discussion

11:30–12:00 Coffee break

12:00–13:00 Session IV

- **Nesrin Değirmencioğlu**: World Literature and Uneven and Combined Development: Neoliberalism and Metamodernism in the Novels of Hasan Ali Toptaş and China Miéville
- **Jernej Habjan**: World Literature According to Its Poster Children

13:00–13:30 Discussion and concluding remarks

13:30 Lunch ("Šestica," Slovenska cesta 40, Ljubljana)

PROGRAM

11. september 2025

10.00–10.30 Uvod

- **Blaž Zabel**, Slovensko društvo za primerjalno književnost
- **Jernej Habjan**, Inštitut za slovensko literaturo in literarne vede ZRC SAZU

10.30–12.00 Sekcija I

- **Blaž Zabel**: Homerjeva *Weltliteratur*: Goethe in vprašanje lokalnega v svetovni literaturi
- **Sándor Hites**: Svetovna literatura od večne vojne do večnega miru (in nazaj)
- **Francesca Lazzarin**: Obok, razpet med Vzhodom in Zahodom: svetovna (ali univerzalna?) literatura v zgodnjesovjetski založniški utopiji

12.00–12.30 Diskusija

12.30–14.30 Kosilo (Šestica, Slovenska cesta 40, Ljubljana)

14.30–16.00 Sekcija II

- **Marko Juvan**: Mali narodi, velike debate: opolnomočenje Slovencev kot subjekta svetovne zgodovine v kritičnih tridesetih letih 20. stoletja
- **Anna Björk Einarsdóttir**: Literatura in razredna zavest: proletarski moment v svetovni literaturi
- **Simon During**: Auerbach: filolog svetovne literature kot ordo-liberalec?

16.00–16.30 Diskusija

16.30–17.00 Odmor za kavo

19.00 Večerja (Breg, Breg 20, Ljubljana)

12. september 2025

10.00–11.00 Sekcija III

- **Lucija Mandić**: Milan Kundera kot predstavnik in teoretik svetovne literature
- **Laura Gerday**: Nova svetovna literatura ali »svet« v semantični krizi

11.00–11.30 Diskusija

11.30–12.00 Odmor za kavo

12.00–13.00 Sekcija IV

- **Nesrin Değirmencioğlu**: Svetovna literatura ter neenak in kombiniran razvoj: neoliberalizem in metamodernizem v romanih Hasana Alija Toptaša in Chine Miéville
- **Jernej Habjan**: Svetovna literatura v očeh njenih maskot

13.00–13.30 Diskusija in sklepne besede

13.30 Kosilo (Šestica, Slovenska cesta 40, Ljubljana)

ABSTRACTS

Blaž Zabel

Homer's Weltliteratur: Goethe and the Local in World Literature

One of Goethe's best-known reflections on world literature was recorded by Eckermann on January 31, 1827, when Goethe was reading a Chinese novel. Musing on the idea that poetry is a universal possession of humankind, he told Eckermann that national literature was outdated because "the epoch of world literature is at hand." Poets were thus free to follow no particular model; except, of course, "the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented." This remark has often been dismissed as Eurocentric, but few have asked what Goethe actually meant by it.

In this paper, I explain why for Goethe the Greeks, and Homer in particular, served as a model (*Muster*) for world literature (*Weltliteratur*). His admiration for Homer, I argue, sheds further light on two overlooked aspects of *Weltliteratur*: first, that no modern work of literature can be truly universal, since it always belongs to a locality, which means poets must remain attentive to how they make their works local; and second, that it may nonetheless be meaningful to regard certain literatures as classical (and therefore non-local) as a way of making world literature more meaningful for local literary spaces.

Sándor Hites

World Literature from Perpetual War to Perpetual Peace (and Back)

Reconsiderations of world literature are usually bound up with moments of crisis, that is, global political upheavals and their ramifications in economic and cultural environments. As Sanja Bahun has noted, the concept of world literature gains prominence when a need for consolidation of a global system is pronounced. Hence Goethe's initial framing of the idea of *Weltliteratur* according to the geopolitics of the post-Napoleonic age, and its resurgence after World War II and in the post-Cold War era—or indeed today, amidst the spectacular collapse of the post-Cold War world order. Critical points in these trajectories, however, have not only followed trends in economic and political history, but also intervened in these trends conceptually or pointed to their further escalations. In other words, world literature theories not merely register, respond to, describe, or teach about past or present crises, but also anticipate, perform, predict, and fantasize about possible futures.

A key aspect in this dynamic pertains to prospects of war and peace. Early work on cross-cultural exchange grew out of discussions on the troubled relationship of commerce and peace—a central theme in Enlightenment thought, presuming either that the intensification of trade would automatically enhance tolerance and harmony among nations, or that their self-destructive drive for commercial and military expansion could at least be harnessed within a harmonized system of international relations. Reflecting these conflictual visions of globalization, considerations of the reality of warfare (military or commercial) and the utopia of world peace were intrinsic to early world literature theories. If Goethe hoped

that transnational cultural interactions would make inevitable conflicts more tolerable, Fichte advocated a world-system of inter-state intellectual trade in which, contra Kant's perpetual peace, political and economic insularization would safeguard the harmonious co-existence of mankind. This paper will reconstruct Goethe's and Fichte's respective positions and track their resonances in two later developments, mid-nineteenth free-tradism and twentieth-century socialist internationalism. The first of these developments will be showcased by the activities of John Bowring, a prolific translator of East-Central European poetry and a pioneer of colonial gunboat diplomacy in Southeast Asia, and the second, by the ambivalent tendencies of emancipation and hegemony in the Soviet Republic of Letters.

Francesca Lazzarin

An Arc Stretched between East and West: World (or Universal?) Literature in an Early Soviet Publishing Utopia

The legendary Vsemirnaya Literatura publishing house was founded in Petrograd by Maxim Gorky in September 1918, shortly after the October Revolution. Aligned with the cultural and educational objectives of the new regime, its mission was to translate and publish a substantial body of European and Asian poetry and prose, thereby contributing to the broad cultural education of the emerging Soviet generations. These ambitions clearly reflect a key element of Gorky's conception of culture as well: Gorky believed that culture in its broadest sense (encompassing literature, art, music, and science) had the potential to unite humanity under the ideals of peace and harmony. Within this new humanist vision, intellectuals were called upon to join forces in creating networks of associations devoted to the preservation and advancement of culture beyond national boundaries.

The aim of this paper is to outline the central features of the conception at the origin of Vsemirnaya literatura, with particular emphasis on the efforts to establish a cultural bridge between Asia (then commonly referred to as the "East") and Europe (the "West") through Russia. A comparative analysis will be undertaken between Gorky's utopian vision, the Enlightenment-era cultural ambitions of the French Encyclopedists, and Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, as both Enlightenment and Goethean ideals significantly influenced the policies of Vsemirnaya Literatura, together with contemporary socialist and pacifist ideas. In this regard, special attention will be given to the terminological shift from the Russian adjective *vsemirnyj*—intentionally chosen by Gorky for its connotations of universality—to *mirovoj*, which later became the standard term for "world literature" in the Soviet academic discourse.

Marko Juvan

Small Nations, Big Debates: Empowering Slovenes as a Subject of World History in the Critical 1930s

The paper analyzes how Slovene intellectuals and writers of the 1930s attempted to redefine the role of a small nation within the world-system in the face of the global economic crisis, authoritarianism, and the threat of fascist expansion. Three central interventions are examined in detail: 1) Josip Vidmar's culturalist defense of Slovenia as a nation defined by its

intellectual and artistic achievements, which the paper contrasts with Edvard Kardelj's Marxist reinterpretation of the Slovene national question as part of a broader anti-imperialist struggle; 2) Anton Ocvirk's peripheral model of comparative literary history, which emphasizes the creative contribution of small literatures to world literature; 3) Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut* as a "national allegory" of resistance, later reframed in global contexts ranging from totalitarianism to Islamic fundamentalism to post-9/11 terrorism.

Together, these case studies illuminate how Slovene thinkers and writers mobilized cultural production, literary theory, and historical allegory to empower a small, "unhistorical" nation to assert historical agency and claim a place in world history in the decade that led to World War II. By revealing the transnational significance of peripheral cultural production in times of global crisis and showing how intellectual and artistic strategies can counteract geopolitical vulnerability and change perceptions of national identity, the paper contributes to debates about the role of small nations in world history and world literature.

Anna Björk Einarsdóttir

Literature and Class Consciousness: The Proletarian Moment in World Literature

The interwar period (1918–1939) saw the rise of an international movement struggling for the creation, promotion, and defense of proletarian literature and art. This movement was international, and writers situated on the peripheries of both the capitalist core and the emerging socialist world looked toward revolutionary Russia. This paper focuses on three such authors, namely Richard Wright (USA), Roberto Arlt (Argentina), and Halldór Laxness (Iceland). During the interwar period, all three were involved in local communist and socialist politics as members of the literary scene surrounding such politics. However, the post-1945 reception history of these authors is characterized by narratives that see them distanced and even divorced from interwar literary radicalism. It is as such that each author has played a crucial role in the formation of national or regional literary traditions.

By focusing on writers who wrote their major novels in positions that were peripheral vis-à-vis both the cultural center of the Second World in Moscow and the core locations of Western hegemony, this paper charts the movement that these three writers made from writing politically committed literature during the interwar period toward possessing a privileged place within their respective national or regional literary tradition during the postwar period. The paper looks at how socially committed writers on the peripheries of both the capitalist and the socialist world responded to a worldwide economic and political crisis by aligning their writing with the world revolution and writing in its name.

Simon During

Auerbach: The World-literature Philologist as Ordo Liberal?

This paper places Auerbach in new contexts which allow us to understand his famous essay on world literature in a new light. In particular: Auerbach's closest colleague during the time he spent teaching in Istanbul was Alexander Rüstow, a philologist who became a prominent

ordo liberal (and after 1945 helped establish West Germany's economic system). He was, indeed, the first person to use the term "neo liberalism" at a meeting of the Colloque Walter Lippman before the war. During the time when he was most closely associated with Auerbach he was writing his universal history, *Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart. Eine universalgeschichtliche Kulturkritik*, the first volume of which was published in 1950. During this period Auerbach and he read each other's manuscripts (Auerbach was working on *Mimesis*) and commented on each other's works. This paper will attempt to show how and why placing Rüstow and others alongside Auerbach helps us change our view of Auerbach's concept of philology and world literature as well as his place in intellectual history.

Lucija Mandić

Milan Kundera as a Representative and a Theorist of World Literature

The paper traces the evolution of Milan Kundera's notion of world literature across several decades, contextualizing his writing within major historical events, including the liberalization of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, the post-1989 transition of the former Soviet bloc, and the turn of the millennium. Throughout the years, but particularly after his own immigration to France in 1975, Kundera's writing consistently tied the notion of world literature to that of Central Europe, a conceptual framework that enabled him to position (semi-)peripheral European literatures within the Western canon. In his influential 2005 essay "Die Weltliteratur," Kundera ultimately reframes the marginalization of small literatures in terms reminiscent of other late-twentieth-century theories of world literature, notably that of Pascale Casanova. However, the paper argues that, unlike Casanova, who critically analyzed small literatures in relation to Paris, Kundera, while acknowledging their marginalization, promotes them within a framework that reproduces Eurocentric literary hierarchies, and, finally, as a novelist, embodies the very structure examined by Casanova.

Laura Gerday

New World Literature, or the "World" in a Semantic Crisis

The present paper grows out of a large section of a doctoral research project that I carried out between 2017 and 2024 at the University of Liège: my PhD thesis was in part designed to investigate whether the "world" of world literature as used by contemporary Euro-American theorists shared ideological underpinnings with the "world"—not least in world literature—of commentators aligned with (classic) postcolonial literary criticism. Via micro-analyses of the lexical perimeters and occurrences of the term "world (literature)" in influential subfield-related academic writings, the study revealed—as does this paper—that researchers had divergent interpretations of the term depending on their schools of thought in Anglophone literary scholarship. In fact, while the new world literature thinkers under examination seemed strongly inclined to dissociate a text's circumstantiality from a reader's or critic's environment, thereby contending that the "world" of modern world literature had its own inner workings, the postcolonial authors included in my corpus assigned a more subject-centered meaning to the same word.

Nesrin Değirmencioğlu

World Literature and Uneven and Combined Development: Neoliberalism and Metamodernism in the Novels of Hasan Ali Toptaş and China Miéville

This paper attempts to bridge the gap between the revival of Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development in the discipline of international relations, on the one hand, and in world literature studies, on the other, by exploring these main questions: what can the theory of uneven and combined development tell us about the ways in which literary aesthetic movements travel across the globe from the advanced literary spaces toward the developing ones in the neoliberal era? and in what unique formations are they recreated in the developing regions of literary aesthetics, and how are new genres or techniques of literature being invented?

The paper argues that if Trotsky's "whip of external necessity" and "privilege of historic backwardness" are implemented to understand how world literature traverses the globe from the advanced literary spaces of the literary world-system toward the developing ones, Hasan Ali Toptaş's novel *Gölgesizler* (1995) can be read as an emblematic text that makes leaps and contributes to the creation of new aesthetic forms while having the potential to redefine the parameters of metamodernism. Similarly, China Miéville's novel *The City & The City* (2009), although its deployment of allegory differs from Toptaş's metamodernist techniques, shares with *Gölgesizler* critical irrationalism as a literary device aimed at overcoming the cognitive impositions of the theory of uneven and combined development.

Jernej Habjan

World Literature According to Its Poster Children

Ever since its first mentions, world literature has been theorized by some of the same figures that are supposed to be theorized as key representatives of world literature, including such obvious candidates as Goethe, Tagore, Gorky, Hesse, Kundera, and Pamuk (but also Barbery, Glissant, Le Clézio, and Maalouf). Moreover, theorists of world literature have never ceased to draw on the theoretical meditations offered by these writers, confirming the impossibility of metalanguage rather than the conceptual availability of world literature. It therefore seems apt to read theoretical pronouncements on world literature as potential examples of world literature.

This paper considers not only what theorists of world literature say, but also where and when they say it; not only the truth value of their statements, but also the genre of their utterances. Whether these come from writers or scholars, the paper addresses the object of their studies while being attentive to their studies as an object. Thus, the history of their mappings of the world bleeds into the history of the world itself. In turn, world literature appears as that which literary scholars and writers debate when they wish to debate world history. World literature appears as world-historical literature.

SPEAKERS

Nesrin Değirmencioğlu is an assistant professor of Anglophone literatures at the Middle East Technical University. A former Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick, she is the co-editor, with James Christie, of *Cultures of Uneven and Combined Development: From International Relations to World Literature* (Brill, 2019). Her work on the contemporary global novel has been published in *Comparative Literature Studies*, the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, and elsewhere.

Simon During is an honorary professor at the School of Communications and Culture, University of Melbourne. He has also held professorships at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Queensland. His books include *Foucault and Literature* (Routledge, 1991), *Modern Enchantments* (Harvard UP, 2002), *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory, and Post-Secular Modernity* (Routledge, 2010), and *Against Democracy: Literary Experience in the Era of Emancipations* (Fordham UP, 2012).

Anna Björk Einarsdóttir is an associate professor of comparative literature at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Before joining NTNU, she was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Iceland and a research fellow at UC Santa Cruz. Her current book project, a comparative study of interwar proletarian literature, has been showcased in essay-form in such venues as *Science & Society* and *A Contracorriente*. She is also working on two edited volumes on what she terms “Red World Literature.”

Laura Gerday is a member of the Centre for Teaching and Research in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Liège, where she recently received a PhD in English Linguistics and Literature. Examining the legacy of postcolonialism in global English linguistics and Anglophone literary studies, Gerday’s work has been published in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *English Text Construction*, and other venues.

Jernej Habjan is a researcher at the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. He has been a Fung Global Fellow at Princeton University (2020–21) and a postdoctoral fellow in the research group “Globalization and Literature” at the University of Munich (2012–14). His essays on world literature theory have appeared in the *Journal of Global History*, the *Journal of World Literature*, and *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

Sándor Hites is a researcher at the Institute for Literary Studies, Research Center for the Humanities in Budapest. At the Institute, he has led the Lendület Research Group “The Political Economy of Hungarian Literature in the Nineteenth Century” (2019–24). Hites has held a visiting fellowship at the University of Edinburgh (2012) and was a visiting professor at

the Babeş-Bolyai University (2012–13) and at the University of Toronto (2015–17). His book *Five Economies of World Literature* is forthcoming with Cambridge UP in 2025.

Marko Juvan is a researcher at the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and a professor of Slovenian literature at the University of Ljubljana. A member of Academia Europea and of the Executive Committee of the AILC/ICLA, he is the author of *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), *Literary Studies in Reconstruction* (Peter Lang, 2011), and *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (Purdue UP, 2008).

Francesca Lazzarin is a research fellow and adjunct professor at the University of Udine, where she currently studies contemporary women's theater in Ukraine, Czechia, and Russia, as well as the role of hip-hop music in Ukrainian and Russian culture and society today. She translates from Russian, Ukrainian, and Czech. Her book *Tra le luci e le ombre di Pietrogrado. La casa editrice Vsemirnaja literatura come istituzione culturale dei primi anni sovietici* was published with Edizioni dell'Orso in 2024.

Lucija Mandić is a researcher at the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and at the Institute of World Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences. At the AILC/ICLA, she sits on the Research Committee on Digital Comparative Literature and the Research Committee on Language Contact in Literature: Europe. She is the guest-editor, with Ivana Zajc, of a special issue of *Primerjalna književnost* titled "Big Data, Small Literatures."

Blaž Zabel is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Ljubljana and the president of the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association. A recipient of a Pre-doctoral Visiting Research Award from the Fulbright Foundation (2019–20), he received his PhD in Classics from Durham University (2020). His articles in comparative literature and intellectual history have been published in the *Journal of World Literature*, *History of Humanities*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Between*, *Clotho*, and elsewhere.

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