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# World Literature, National Contexts

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For the past half-century, world literature in its North American guises has usually been opposed to national literature. Genial disregard, if not outright hostility, often obtained between the devotees of the two. With most literature faculty based in departments organized along national lines, “world literature” was treated in many schools as an introductory course, suitable for beginning students but fundamentally vague in conception and unrigorous in application, a preliminary stage prior to serious work in a literature major based on close study of a culture and its language. Even the most elaborate comparative scholarship often raised serious reservations among committed specialists. No less a book than Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), one of the most ambitious and impressive synoptic studies of its generation, was roundly criticized by reviewers based in one or another of the specific areas his book traversed. The classicist Ludwig Edelstein, for example, noted that Auerbach had dramatically foreshortened Greco-Roman literary history, ignoring the findings of classical scholarship to produce his stark contrast of Hebrew and Greek cultures, whereas “in the historical view, even the fifth century is not a unity.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the medievalist Helmut Hatzfeld criticized Auerbach for reading the *Chanson de Roland* “with the eyes of an enlightened pacifist” rather than with an understanding of what the medieval author would have believed.<sup>2</sup> Even René Wellek, in a review filled with faint praise, felt that Auerbach’s results were “peculiarly shifting and disconcertingly

1. Ludwig Edelstein, review of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, in *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950): 426–31, quotation on 431.

2. Helmut Hatzfeld, review of *Mimesis*, in *Romance Philology* 2 (1948–49): 333–38, quotation on 335.

vague.”<sup>3</sup> *Mimesis* won this battle, but it lost the war. Widely admired and discussed to this day, it has had few if any successors: Auerbach’s own students became specialists in a much more limited range of languages and eras.

Comparatists in the postwar era often returned the specialists’ disregard, holding out messianic hopes for world literature as the cure for the ills of nationalistic separatism, jingoism, and internecine violence—and, by implication, advancing the comparatist in person as the transcendent heir to the narrowness of monolingual specialization. Comparative Literature was to be the great corrective for “the nationalistic heresy,” as Albert Guérard put it in a lead article in the 1958 *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*. Looking ahead to European unification, Guérard anticipated that “Comparative Literature will disappear in its very victory; just as ‘foreign trade’ between France and Germany will disappear in the Common Market; just as the ‘foreign relations’ between these two countries will be absorbed by a common parliament.” For Guérard, the overriding question in 1958 was “How and When Shall We Commit Suicide?” His answer: “Not just yet: we are needed so long as the nationalistic heresy has not been extirpated.”<sup>4</sup>

We can no longer proceed as though this heresy is about to disappear. The European Parliament in Brussels is unlikely to supplant Europe’s national governments during our lifetimes, and in an academic context the very great majority of teachers and scholars of literature continue to be located in nationally based departments. What does the ongoing vitality of national literary traditions mean for the study of world literature? With the possible exception of a few irreducibly multinational works like *The Thousand and One Nights*, virtually all literary works are born within what we would now call a national literature. The modern nation is, of course, a relatively recent development, but even older works were produced in local or ethnic configurations that have been subsumed into the national traditions within which they are now preserved and transmitted. A “nation” itself, in early modern English, could designate an ethnic group or culture: in the King James Bible, “the nations” is the translation of the Hebrew *ha-goyim*, the Septuagint’s *hoi ethnoi*. Understanding the term “national” broadly, we can say that works continue to bear the marks of their national origin even after they circulate into world literature,

3. René Wellek, review of *Mimesis*, in *Kenyon Review* 16 (1954): 299–307, quotation on 305.

4. Albert Guérard, “Comparative Literature?” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 7 (1958): 1–6, quotations on 4, 5.

and yet these traces are increasingly diffused and become ever more sharply refracted as a work travels farther from home.

This refraction, moreover, is double in nature: works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers. Even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures. The receiving culture can use the foreign material in all sorts of ways: as a positive model for the future development of its own tradition; as a negative case of a primitive or decadent strand that must be avoided or rooted out at home; or, more neutrally, as an image of radical otherness against which the home tradition can more clearly be defined. World literature is thus always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture; hence, it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone.

The complex process of elliptical refraction means that the circulation of world literature is much more than what Welles famously disparaged as merely "the foreign trade of literature,"<sup>5</sup> and it doesn't lead to a transcendent universalism in which cultural difference is a mere "heresy" that should wither away, as Marx and Engels expected the state would do. At the same time, recognizing the ongoing, vital presence of the national within the life of world literature poses enormous problems for the study of world literature. It is far from clear how to proceed if we want to broaden our focus beyond one or two periods or national traditions: who can really know enough to do it well? Bad enough that there are many more works of literature than anyone can read; must we really learn all about their home cultures too? The ellipse of world literature may seem comprehensible enough when we are thinking of only a single text or group of texts, but as we begin to look more widely, we soon find ourselves amid a multitude of partially overlapping ellipses, all sharing one focus in the host culture but with their second foci distributed ever more widely across space and time.

Lacking a deep knowledge of more than a very few cultures, are comparatists doomed either to stay within a limited range of material

5. René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," in *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nicholls (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 282–95, quotation on p. 283.

or else to succumb to a kind of scholarly ecotourism? Students of world literature increasingly experience what Djelal Kadir has described as “the simultaneously productive and melancholy precariousness of the comparatist’s existence.”<sup>6</sup> The situation was very different when Auerbach and Wellek came to the United States after World War II: then it was supposed to be the national traditions that were in a precarious state, but this no longer seems to be the case. Much recent literary study has taken a dim view of nationalist ideologies and their imperial projections, and yet in an odd way the critique of nationalism has turned out to coexist quite comfortably with a continuing nationalism in academic practice. The more one needs to know, say, about the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James I in order to understand Shakespeare, the less time one has available to learn much about the cultural underpinnings of French drama or Greek tragedy, and one tends to downplay the importance of what one doesn’t know.

Moving beyond a regionally linked set of traditions becomes harder still. The more committed today’s Shakespeareans become to understanding literature within a cultural context, the less likely they are to feel comfortable in comparing Shakespeare and Kalidasa. Indeed, even within a single region, a range of disparate literatures can seem too daunting to tackle. Several years ago I was on a search committee looking to hire a junior medievalist; one of the hottest topics we found among our applications was the dissection of the origins of nationalism in the medieval kingdoms that were struggling for mastery in the British Isles. The several writing samples on aspects of this theme all took a critical attitude toward the efforts of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman rulers to promote themselves culturally and extend their sway politically, and yet none of the scholars who provided these samples was doing any work in Irish or Welsh literature. Not on principle, no doubt, as the richness of both traditions in the medieval period is widely recognized: the medievalists simply hadn’t had time to learn those languages along with everything else they were studying. Rather than include material they could read only in translation and without a close cultural knowledge, they left it out of account altogether. Yet works like the Irish *Táin* and the Welsh *Mabinogi* would be full of interest for explorations of cultural identity, while poets like Dafydd ap Gwilym have fascinating satirical things to say about Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Normans alike. Deconstructing nationalism in theory, these medievalists had succumbed to it in practice.

6. Djelal Kadir, “Comparative Literature Hinternational,” *World Literature Today* 69 (1995): 245–47, quotation on 245.

How to do better? A logical but too rarely chosen way to study an extensive range of material is to work collaboratively, as Henry H. H. Remak already argued forty years ago in a pointed article on “Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prognosis.”<sup>7</sup> Even so great a scholar as Auerbach lacked world enough and time for his European-based study of the representation of reality, but two or three people working together can collectively encompass more of the world than any one person can do. Collaborative work can help bridge the divide between amateurism and specialization, mitigating both the global generalist’s besetting hubris and the national specialist’s deeply ingrained caution.

There are encouraging signs of a growth of such work. For thirty years now the International Comparative Literature Association has been sponsoring an ambitious multivolume comparative literary history project, long headed by Mario Valdés of Toronto, each of whose volumes has been produced by national and regional specialists working in collaboration. World literature anthologies today are often the product of extended collegial interaction among a dozen or so broad-minded specialists, and all of us who have been working on such projects can testify to the intellectual excitement they entail. Team teaching is also becoming more and more common both in world literature survey courses and in more focused cross-cultural topics. Yet it also has to be said that our graduate programs really have yet to begin to adapt to this shift. We essentially do nothing to encourage doctoral students to work together, still less to train them to work together well. While individual scholarship and teaching will always remain important, those who work on world literature are increasingly going to find that a significant share of their work is best done in collaboration with other people. Our graduate programs have some serious rethinking to do.

Equally, whether it is pursued individually or collaboratively, work on world literature should be acknowledged as different in kind from work within a national tradition, just as the works themselves manifest differently abroad than at home. This does not mean that we should simply ignore the local knowledge that specialists possess, as literary theorists of the past generation often did when developing their comprehensive theories: neither Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) nor Roland Barthes in books like *S/Z* (1970) and *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971) made any serious use at all of scholarship on the authors they used to illustrate their elegant conceptual schemes.

7. Henry H. H. Remak, “Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prognosis,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 9 (1960): 1–28.

A student of world literature has much to gain from an active engagement with specialized knowledge.

At the same time, though, this knowledge is best deployed selectively, with a kind of scholarly tact. When our purpose is not to delve into a culture in detail, the reader and even the work itself may benefit from being spared the full force of our local knowledge. Intimately aware of a work's life at home, the specialist is not always in the best position to assess the dramatically different terms on which a work may engage with a distant culture. Looking at such new contexts, the generalist will find that much of the specialist's information about the work's origins is no longer relevant and not only can but should be set aside. At the same time, any work that has not been wholly assimilated to its new context will still carry with it many elements that can best be understood by exploring why they came to be in the first place. The specialist's knowledge is the major safeguard against the generalist's own will to power over texts that otherwise all too easily become grist for the mill of a preformed historical argument or theoretical system.

When I distinguish specialists from generalists, I mean to characterize approaches as much as individuals. Just as a work can function either at home or abroad, so too any given person can be both a specialist for some topics and a generalist for others. When we are employing a generalist approach, we should not simply cast off our specialist selves—or our specialist colleagues. Generalists have much to learn from specialists and should always try to build honestly, though selectively, on specialists' understandings, ideally even inspiring the specialists to revise their understandings in turn. Too often, a generalist who alludes dismissively to the narrow-minded concerns of specialists merely ends up retailing a warmed-over version of what specialists had been saying a generation earlier. Instead, the generalist should feel the same ethical responsibility toward specialized scholarship that a translator has toward a text's original language: to understand the work effectively in its new cultural or theoretical context while at the same time getting it right in a fundamental way with reference to the source culture.

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A clear virtue in theory, doing justice to the source cultures was already problematic in practice when “world literature” was confined largely to the literatures of the major Western European powers. As comparative literature increasingly attempts a genuinely global vision, this project may seem entirely unfeasible. Considering the dizzying

multiplicity of texts and cultures now in view, comparatists may seek to ground their work in broad patterns and movements that would reduce or even eliminate the need for close study of individual cultures—even, at times, of individual works of literature. Modern literature can be studied in global terms within the “polysystems” framework developed by translation theorists like Itamar Even-Zohar<sup>8</sup> or the sociopolitical “world systems” approach based in the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein. A notable example of such work is Franco Moretti’s ambitious mapping of the spread of the novel, beginning with his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. As he has carried his work beyond Europe, Moretti has found that the global system of literary production and reception is highly variable locally, and he has described the difficulty of dealing directly with the masses of disparate material that a global approach should encompass. Moretti has gone so far as to recommend that we abjure close reading altogether, analyzing broad patterns rather than individual works. “Literary history,” he says, “will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*.”<sup>9</sup> Though his emphasis is political rather than archetypal, Moretti’s method recalls Frye’s in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, which gave rapid surveys of patterns and motifs in a wide range of works. In his article, Moretti draws a sharp distinction between two metaphoric approaches to change: trees and waves. Individual works can be studied by specialists as offshoots of a family tree, an exfoliating national system; global comparatism, by contrast, should concentrate on wave patterns of transformations sweeping around the world.

Are students of world literature really going to have to leave the analysis of actual works to specialists in national literatures, as Moretti proposes? Those of us unable to tear ourselves so resolutely away from the pleasures of the text are likely to disagree. A world systems approach to literature has many of the virtues earlier found in structuralist approaches, but it also shares some of the problems experienced by those who attempted to apply the insights of structural linguistics directly to complex literary works. Deep structures could be elucidated, but literary effects are often achieved by highly individual means, and generative grammars of narrative had difficulty providing much insight into works more elaborate than folktales or

8. Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 287–310.

9. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 57–67, quotation on 57.



detective stories. As with texts, so with cultures at large: individual cultures only partly lend themselves to analysis of common global patterns. As Wallerstein himself has said, “the history of the world has been the very opposite of a trend towards cultural homogenization; it has rather been a trend towards cultural differentiation, or cultural elaboration, or cultural complexity.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, systemic approaches need to be counterbalanced with close attention to particular languages and specific texts: we need to see both the forest and the trees.

This is a problem that Moretti acknowledges. Going beyond a simple form-and-content account of the spread of the novel (the Western form imitatively adapted to convey local content), Moretti argues for the importance of a third term, narrative voice—a primary feature of indigenous tradition that critically affects the interplay of content and form. As he says, however, we can’t study narrative voice at a linguistic remove, in the way that we can trace patterns of book sales or broad movements of motifs.<sup>11</sup> But how to mediate between broad, but often reductive, overviews and intensive, but often atomistic, close readings?

One solution is to recognize that we have better options than an unappetizing choice between global systematicity and infinite textual multiplicity, for world literature itself is constituted very differently in different cultures. Much can be learned from close attention to the workings of a given cultural system, on a scale of analysis that also allows for extended discussion of specific works. A culture’s norms and needs profoundly shape the selection of works that enter into it as world literature, influencing the ways they are translated, marketed, and read. In India, for example, world literature takes on a very particular valence in the dual contexts of the multiplicity of India’s disparate languages and the ongoing presence of English in post-Raj India. English itself can be seen in comparative terms as three distinct entities in India: as the language of the British literature that featured so prominently in colonial Indian education; as the worldwide phenomenon of contemporary global English; and as Indo-English, with its ambiguous status somewhere between a foreign and a native language.

Amiya Dev has pointed out that India’s twenty-two principal literary languages themselves form a plenum comparable with that of

10. Immanuel Wallerstein, “The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 97–105, quotation on p. 96.

11. Moretti, p. 66.

European literature, and the different Indian literatures are always strongly colored by the other languages in use around them. As a result, Dev says, no Indian literature is ever itself alone: “Bengali will be Bengali +, Panjabi Panjabi +, and Tamil Tamil +. In a multilingual situation there cannot be a true appreciation of a single literature in absolute isolation.”<sup>12</sup> “The very structure of Indian literature is comparative,” as Sisir Kumar Das has said; “its framework is comparative and its texts and contexts Indian.”<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, world literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a very different set of forces: by complex relations between people of indigenous, European, or mixed descent; by inter-American relations within Latin America and vis-à-vis North America; and by lasting cultural ties to Portugal, Spain, and France. In works like Oswald de Andrade’s *Anthropophagist Manifesto* (1928), “international modernism” helped form a specifically Brazilian cultural identity, as Beatriz Resende has recently emphasized.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, whereas European scholars have often seen world literature as radiating outward from metropolitan centers toward relatively passive provincial recipients, a number of contemporary Brazilian scholars are moving beyond the paradigm of “Paris, cultural capital of Latin America” to emphasize a two-way process, one that is grounded as much in Brazil’s dynamic heterogeneity as in French cultural authority.<sup>15</sup>

With such differences in mind, the study of world literature may be most fruitful if it doesn’t directly go global, instead understanding world literature as a variable and contingent concept, taking distinct forms in different national contexts. This focus gives time for detailed treatment of exemplary works, allowing for an interplay of general issues and actual cases.<sup>16</sup> For any given observer, even a genuinely

12. Amiya Dev, *The Idea of Comparative Literature in India* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1984), p. 14.

13. Quoted in Chandra Mohan, “Comparative Indian Literature,” in *Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*, ed. Chandra Mohan (New Delhi: India, 1989), pp. 95–105, quotation on p. 97.

14. See Beatriz Resende, “A Formação de Identidades Plurais no Brasil Moderno,” in *Fronteiras Imaginadas: Cultura Nacional, Teoria Internacional*, ed. Eduardo Coutinho (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2001), pp. 83–96.

15. This is the subject of an illuminating recent article by Tania Carvalhal, “Culturas e Contextos,” in Coutinho, ed., pp. 147–54. In her balanced presentation of a two-way exchange, Carvalhal avoids the implicit triumphalism seen in a work like Pascale Casanova’s *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), which might better be titled *La République parisienne des lettres*. An unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, Casanova’s book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context.

16. I give a range of detailed case studies in *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton University Press, 2003), from which this article is adapted.

global perspective remains a perspective from somewhere, and global patterns of the circulation of world literature take shape in their local manifestations.

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Its circulation into a new national context does not require the work of world literature to be subjected to anything like an absolute disconnect from its culture of origin. Anyone involved in translating or teaching works from other cultures must always weigh how much cultural information is needed and how it should be presented. One healthy consequence of the increasing acknowledgment that a work of world literature does come to us from a particular time and place has been a greater openness in providing readers with contextual information. Often in the past, translators gave no such information at all or folded it silently into the translation itself so as to preserve the seeming purity of the text, though in reality they had to distort the text in order to avoid disrupting a supposedly direct encounter of reader and work. Especially when the text in question was both old and foreign, translations were forced either to become very loose paraphrases (Sir Richard Burton's 1885–86 *Arabian Nights*) or to assimilate closely to host-country norms (Edward Fitzgerald's 1859 *Rubáiyat of Omar Kháyyâm*).<sup>17</sup> Scholarly readers, by contrast, would be given heavily annotated bilingual editions, full of cultural information but with the translation often only marginally readable.

This either-or choice is increasingly breaking down. Arthur Waley's classic 1925 translation of *The Tale of Genji* bathed the story in the warm glow of Edwardian prose; in the process, he also suppressed what he apparently regarded as the disruptive effect of the hundreds of poems scattered through the text, deleting most and translating the remainder as prose. Waley freely paraphrased and expanded passages in order to insert clarifying information for the Western reader. Even his assimilative translation, however, employed footnotes to explain literary and cultural references that couldn't readily be folded into the text itself. Fifty years later, Edward Seidensticker's 1976 translation gave a far more literal (and far less Edwardian) translation, openly setting the text's poems as poetry. Seidensticker also went

17. Fitzgerald was quite open about his assimilative program. As he wrote to a friend in 1857, "it is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who, (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions and who really do want a little Art to shape them" (quoted in Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], p. 18).

further than Waley in framing his translation, with an extensive introduction (more than twice the length of Waley's) and with fuller literary references in his footnotes. In his introduction, Seidensticker mentions that he had written many more notes than appear in the published translation; his editor at Knopf pressed him to prune them back substantially, evidently fearing that full annotations would put off the general readers for whom the translation was intended, and so the net result is only a small increase over Waley's level of annotation.

The *Genji* has recently been translated once again, by Royall Tyler (2001). Though this translation, too, is clearly intended for a general audience, Viking has allowed Tyler about three times as many footnotes as Seidensticker was permitted twenty-five years before; many pages have six or even ten footnotes, offering a stream of cultural information that at once emphasizes the text's foreignness and supplies information to bridge the distances between Japanese and English, medieval and modern worlds. Tyler's translation also concludes with more than fifty pages of explanatory back matter, including maps, house diagrams, and extensive glossaries, not only of names but also of colors, clothing, titles, and offices, all elements that have intricate vocabularies in Japanese that can only be partially suggested in English. The new translation has been widely reviewed in the general press, and the reviewers have specifically praised the wealth of annotation along with the eloquence of the prose.

As André Lefevere has written, a direct presentation of cultural context is often essential if we are to avoid an assimilation to our own norms, and this requires us as readers to accept the translation's mediating role:

When we no longer translate Chinese T'ang poetry "as if" it were Imagist blank verse, which it manifestly is not, we shall be able to begin to understand T'ang poetry on its own terms. This means, however, that we shall have to tell the readers of our translations what T'ang poetry is really like, by means of introductions, the detailed analysis of selected texts, and such. We shall, therefore, have to learn to skip the leap we often call "of the imagination" but which could be much more aptly called "of imperialism." The question is whether Western cultures are ready for this.<sup>18</sup>

The sequence of *Genji* translations indicates that more and more readers are indeed becoming ready for just this sort of contextual framing.

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18. André Lefevere, "Composing the Other," in *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 75-94, quotation on p. 78.

It may make sense to regard older works of world literature as negotiations between two regional or national contexts, but what of today's globalizing, "post-national" world? In recent decades a growing number of works have been produced primarily for foreign consumption. This is a fundamentally new literary development: for the first time in history, authors of highly successful works can hope to have them translated into twenty or thirty languages within a few years of publication, and foreign countries may even provide the primary readership for writers who have small audiences at home or who are censored by their governments. In earlier centuries, writers like Dante rarely thought of themselves as writing anything resembling this kind of "world literature"; though they might hope to be read abroad, their patrons and most immediate audience were at home. Dante, indeed, wrote his *Commedia* in the vernacular precisely in order to be read by the widest possible audience in Italy, instead of using Latin to reach a large European public.

Writing for publication abroad can be a heroic act of resistance against local censorship and an affirmation of global values against local parochialism, yet it can also be only a further stage in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism. According to Tim Brennan, "Several younger writers have entered a genre of third-world metropolitan fiction whose conventions have given their novels the unfortunate feel of ready-mades. Less about an inauthenticity of vision than the context of reception, such novels—typically grouped together in the display cases of library foyers—unjustly come off as a kind of writing by numbers. . . . Placed in the company of other hybrid subjects, they take their part in a collective lesson for American readers of a global pluralism."<sup>19</sup> This is almost the opposite of the long recognized problems of cultural distance and difficulty: these new globally produced works may be all too easy to understand. Brennan places the blame chiefly on distributors and readers, but others have criticized the writers themselves. According to Tariq Ali, "From New York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television, and, increasingly, read the same junk novels. . . . Instead of 'socialist realism' we have 'market realism.'"<sup>20</sup> Older non-Western works have often been excluded from world literature courses on the grounds that they are too difficult to understand and absorb in the time available; now the converse fear is

19. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 203.

20. Tariq Ali, "Literature and Market Realism," *New Left Review* 199 (1993): 140–45, quotations on 140, 144.

often expressed—that contemporary world literature isn't worth the effort it doesn't require.

Brennan and Ali tactfully avoid mentioning any new-global-economy writers by name, but others have been less discreet. The prominent Sinologist Stephen Owen provoked a severe reaction when he advanced a comparable critique of contemporary Chinese poetry, in a 1990 review essay significantly titled "What Is World Poetry?" Owen's occasion was the 1988 publication of *The August Sleepwalker*, the collected translated poetry of the prominent dissident poet Bei Dao. Writing for nonspecialist readers in the *New Republic*, Owen argued that third-world poets increasingly are running afoul of the literary hegemony of the major Western powers, with the result that they begin to write a "world poetry" that is little more than a watered-down Western modernism:

Poets who write in the "wrong language" (even exceedingly populous languages like Chinese) not only must imagine themselves being translated in order to reach an audience of a satisfying magnitude, they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it. And, although it is supposedly free of all local history, this "world poetry" turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism, depending on which wave of colonial culture first washed over the intellectuals of the country in question. This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal.<sup>21</sup>

In Owen's view, this surrender to Euro-American modernism—often imported into China in the form of mediocre translations several decades ago—entails the erasure of local literary and cultural history, leaving the writer with no vital tradition from which to work. This new world poetry floats free of context, merely decorated with a little local ethnic color. Though such poems lack real literary power, Owen says, "it may be that the international readers of poetry do not come in search of poetry at all, but rather in search of windows upon other cultural phenomena. They may be looking for some exotic religious tradition or political struggle. These Western fashions in exotica and causes are ephemeral things. Who now reads Tagore? He is a bargain that fills the shelves of poetry sections in used book stores."<sup>22</sup> Having established this broad, depressing framework, Owen proceeds to discuss Bei Dao's poetry as a secondhand U.S. modernism, given mo-

21. Stephen Owen, "What Is World Poetry?" *New Republic* (November 19, 1990), pp. 28–32, quotation on p. 28.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

mentary currency thanks to its author's close involvement in dissident activities leading up to the Tiananmen Square massacre. Owen sees Bei Dao's lyrics as sporadically vivid but ultimately empty: "most of these poems translate themselves. They could just as easily be translated from a Slovak or an Estonian or a Philippine poet. . . . The poetry of *The August Sleepwalker* is a poetry written to travel well."<sup>23</sup>

Owen's position has been widely criticized, most notably by Rey Chow, who opened her 1993 book *Writing Diaspora* with a wholesale attack on his essay. Calling Owen's views Orientalist and even racist, Chow argued that the problem is not with the poetry but with the Western critic's loss of authority: "Basic to Owen's disdain for the new 'world poetry' is a sense of loss and, consequently, an anxiety over his own intellectual position. . . . This is the anxiety that the Chinese past which he has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the Sinologist himself is the abandoned subject. . . . Concluding his essay sourly with the statement, 'Welcome to the late twentieth century,' Owen's real complaint is that *he* is the victim of a monstrous world order in front of which a sulking impotence like his is the only claim to truth."<sup>24</sup> The problem for a nonspecialist reader—apart from the danger of the critical prose bursting into flames in your hands—is that Chow is so deeply committed to her position that she doesn't see any need to combat Owen's views by discussing a single line of Bei Dao's poetry. Owen's article does give some brief quotations, but he spends little time on them. Further, having taken the position that Bei Dao's poems "translate themselves," he says little about the work of the poems' actual translator, Bonnie McDougall. Readers unable to consult Bei Dao in the original may wonder how we can possibly assess these radically differing views.

We can make some headway by looking directly at *The August Sleepwalker*, which includes verses that show Bei Dao's own acute awareness of the difficulties his poetry faces abroad. Thus his poem "Language" begins by saying that

many languages  
fly around the world  
producing sparks when they collide  
sometimes of hate  
sometimes of love.<sup>25</sup>

23. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

24. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 3–4.

25. Bei Dao, *The August Sleepwalker: Poetry*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 121.



Appropriately enough, I first encountered this poem in Jayana Clerk and Ruth Siegel's anthology *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*, whose back cover copy (no doubt written by the marketing department rather than by the editors) positions the collection as just the sort of literary jet-setting that Owen condemns: "Travel to 61 countries and experience a vast selection of poetry, fiction, drama, and memoirs," the cover urges us; "make stops in Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. . . . Your passport? *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*."<sup>26</sup> Bei Dao's own poem, however, ends by deconstructing this very process of circulation:

many languages  
fly around the world  
the production of languages  
can neither increase nor decrease  
mankind's silent suffering.<sup>27</sup>

Bei Dao seems less confident of his work's value abroad than Chow herself is; at the same time, he may have a more thoughtful, ironic stance toward home tradition and foreign audiences alike than Owen allows. To pursue this question in detail, it would be necessary to look at a range of issues: the ways in which Chinese poets in the generation before Bei Dao translated U.S. and French poets as a form of self-expression when the regime was forbidding them to publish experimental poetry of their own; the ways in which midcentury U.S. and Chinese poets alike were influenced by translations of earlier Spanish-language poets like Rubén Darío and Federico García Lorca; and the ways in which the surface simplicity of Bei Dao's prosody may be subverting Maoist calls to abandon the complexities of aristocratic poetry and return to the purity of the old *Shih Ching* (*Book of Songs*), that ancient folk classic marked, as Eugene Eoyang has said, by simple diction and "intensely commonplace sentiments, with a universality which the song does not try to hide."<sup>28</sup>

Such investigations could take us deep into specialist territory, but it is important to realize that we don't face a strict either-or choice between total immersion and an airy vapidness. A full appreciation of world literature requires us to see it as at once "locally inflected and

26. Jayana Clerk and Ruth Siegel, eds., *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), back cover.

27. Bei Dao, p. 121.

28. Eugene Eoyang, "The Many 'Worlds' of World Literature: Pound and Waley as Translators of Chinese," in *Reading World Literature: Theory, History, Practice*, ed. Sarah Lawall (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 241–66, quotation on p. 249.



translocally mobile,” as Vilashini Cooppan has said.<sup>29</sup> Our reading of Bei Dao, or of Dante, will benefit from a leavening of local knowledge, an amount that may vary from work to work and from reader to reader but that will remain less than is needed for a full contextual understanding of a work within its home tradition. As such, world literature can be aligned with the nuanced, localized cosmopolitanism championed by Bruce Robbins: “No one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere. . . . The interest of the term *cosmopolitanism* is located, then, not in its full theoretical extension, where it becomes a paranoid fantasy of ubiquity and omniscience, but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications.”<sup>30</sup> Rather than being a rootless cosmopolitan, Bei Dao is doubly or multiply linked to events and audiences at home and abroad; indeed, as an exile since the early 1990s, he has occupied an increasingly various relation to the very terms “home” and “abroad.”

To read Bei Dao’s poems in English we should be alive to relevant aspects of the context of their production, but we don’t finally need the Chinese context in all its particularity. When all is said and done, Bei Dao in English is no longer Bei Dao in Chinese, and Owen is really describing the life of any work of world literature when he asks, “Is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the Chinese language?”<sup>31</sup> Owen means to express the poet’s limitations by this formulation, but the criticism only partly holds, even if Bei Dao’s poetry is in fact superficial in the original. Not only is this something that those of us who don’t read Chinese cannot judge, it is actually irrelevant to the poem’s existence abroad. All works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only “began” in their original language.

The crucial issue for the foreign reader is how well the poems work in the new language; such cultural information as may be practical to acquire and relevant to apply must still make sense in the translation if it is to be useful at all. Here we can gain in understanding by looking at different translations of Bei Dao’s work. Thanks to his global popularity, he has already been translated by a number of people, and even individual poems can be found variously translated. Here, for example, are two versions of the opening stanza of his most famous

29. Vilashini Cooppan, “World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium,” *Symplokē* 9 (2001): 15–43, quotation on 33.

30. Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms,” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 246–64, quotation on p. 260.

31. Owen (n. 20 above), p. 31.

poem, “The Answer,” which became a rallying cry for the Tiananmen protestors:

Debasement is the password of the base.  
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.  
See how the gilded sky is covered  
With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.  
(McDougall translation)

The scoundrel carries his baseness around like an ID card.  
The honest man bears his honor like an epitaph.  
Look—the gilded sky is swimming  
with undulant reflections of the dead.<sup>32</sup>  
(Finkel translation)

McDougall’s translation clearly tries to convey an underlying word play in the original, but the result is stilted and unpoetic English. Donald Finkel’s translation is freer but also more readable, and without the constraint of making the ends of the opening lines echo the beginnings, he is able to set up a more effective contrast of identity card to epitaph. Further, his version plays with modernist shifts of verbal register: the stanza opens with prosaic, even clunky language to describe the bureaucratic “scoundrel” and then moves to the poetic eloquence of the “undulant reflections of the dead.”

As the poem continues, Finkel also brings out uses of modernist motifs that aren’t visible in McDougall’s version. Where McDougall has “I don’t believe in thunder’s echoes,” Finkel has “I don’t believe what the thunder says,” ironically recalling the heading in T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* when the speaker turns to the East for timeless wisdom to refresh his dried-up Western roots.<sup>33</sup> In Bei Dao’s concluding stanza, a group of stars that McDougall renders as “pictographs” become in Finkel “that ancient ideogram,” using Ezra Pound’s term of choice for Chinese characters. These echoes assort well with the debt to U.S. modernism that Owen and others have identified in Bei Dao’s work. Rather than connecting the poem to modernism in this way, McDougall continues to do her best to suggest Chinese theories of correspondence and history, as in her version of the concluding stanza:

A new conjunction and glimmering stars  
Adorn the unobstructed sky now:  
They are the pictographs from five thousand years.  
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

32. McDougall’s version is from her translation of *The August Sleepwalker* (Bei Dao, p. 33); Donald Finkel’s is from his collection *A Splintered Mirror: Chinese Poetry from the Democracy Movement* (San Francisco: North Point, 1991), pp. 9–10.

33. Bei Dao, p. 33; Finkel, ed., p. 9.

## Compare Finkel:

The earth revolves. A glittering constellation  
pricks the vast defenseless sky.  
Can you see it there? that ancient ideogram—  
the eye of the future, gazing back.<sup>34</sup>

Compared with McDougall's cautious and literalistic renderings, Finkel's version is at once more eloquent and more creative in holding Chinese and modernist contexts together in view. The prosaic prosody and lurking sentimentality that Owen dislikes in Bei Dao's poetry are much more evident features of McDougall's translations than of Finkel's, which actually gain in poetic effect by emphasizing the modernist connections that Owen regrets and that McDougall plays down.

Far from simply floating free of any national context, Bei Dao's work actually involves a newly complex negotiation between U.S. and Chinese cultures, a movement back and forth across the Pacific and across the twentieth century. To read his poetry in the context of world literature, as to read *The Tale of Genji* in translation, does not entail full immersion in their respective cultures, of the sort that is our goal when reading a work within its national context. Intended for readers of world literature, Tyler's new *Genji* translation still presents far less contextual information than specialists possess. Scholarly studies such as Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince* or Haruo Shirane's *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of "The Tale of Genji"* provide a wealth of historical and intertextual information that far surpasses anything dreamed of even in Lefevere's philosophy of translation.<sup>35</sup> Yet to read Morris and Shirane, or to go further and read the older romances and poetry collections that Murasaki Shikibu was raised on, is to take a significant step in following the *Genji* back into its home culture. An endlessly rewarding and fascinating pursuit: but it is an approach that shifts one's understanding into the realm of Japanese literature. By contrast, when we read the *Genji* as world literature, we are fundamentally translating it out of its home culture and into a new and broader context.

Reading and studying world literature inherently involve a mode of detached engagement, by which we enter into a different kind of dialogue with the work, not one involving identification or mastery but the discipline of distance and of difference. As Robbins says of a locally inflected cosmopolitanism, it involves not an ideal detachment

34. Bei Dao, p. 33; Finkel, ed., p. 10.

35. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Haruo Shirane, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of "The Tale of Genji"* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

but “a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance.”<sup>36</sup> We encounter the work not at the heart of its source culture but in the elliptical field of force generated among works that may come from very different cultures and eras. This elliptical relation already characterizes our experience of a foreign national tradition, but there is likely to be a significant difference of degree, both because the ellipses multiply and because the angle of refraction increases. Works of world literature interact in a charged field defined by a fluid and multiple set of possibilities of juxtaposition and combination. As we triangulate between our own present situation and the enormous variety of other cultures around and before us, we won’t see works of world literature so fully enshrined within their cultural context as we do when reading those works within their own traditions, but a degree of distance from the home tradition can help us to appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away from its point of origin. If we then observe ourselves seeing the work’s abstraction from its origins, we gain a new vantage point on our own moment. The result may be almost the opposite of the “fusion of horizons” that Friedrich Schleiermacher envisioned when we encounter a distant text;<sup>37</sup> we may actually experience our customary horizon being set askew, under the influence of works whose foreignness remains fully in view.

World literature can be described, to borrow a phrase from Vinay Dharwadker, as “a montage of overlapping maps in motion,”<sup>38</sup> and this movement involves shifting relations both of literary history and of cultural power. Works rarely cross borders on a basis of full equality; if the classic masterworks long dominant in world literature have typically enjoyed high prestige and authoritative weight in their new homes, the power relations are often reversed when noncanonical works come into North America today. Brennan and others have criticized the manipulations by which the political edge has often been taken from works imported into the U.S. context, but it is not enough to have our politics in the right place. All works are subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception, but established classics usually gain a degree of protection by their cultural prestige: editors and publishers will be less likely, for example, silently

36. Bruce Robbins, “Introduction,” in Cheah and Robbins, eds., p. 3.

37. Schleiermacher’s concept, developed in his 1810 lectures on hermeneutics, has been most fully expounded by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

38. Vinay Dharwadker, *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 3.

to truncate a classic text or reorganize it outright, a fate commonly experienced by noncanonical works even at the hands of highly sympathetic translators.

A full understanding of world literature must attend to relations of cultural power and influence, as well as to the local knowledge of the source culture that specialists possess. Yet we use this information selectively and for different purposes when reading a work of world literature than we do when reading a work of national literature—even in the case of the same text. The specialist in a national literature attempts to enter as fully as possible into the source culture, a process aptly symbolized by the effort to attain “near-native fluency” in its language. By contrast, the student of world literature stands outside, very much as Walter Benjamin describes translation itself standing outside a work’s original language: “Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.”<sup>39</sup>

39. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 69–82, quotation on p. 26.