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Periphery—Lost and Found

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Panel: Writing from Where I Stand

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Reading literature is very often like tasting wine: to evaluate which wine is good and which is not, you must blind yourself to the wine’s origin, age, brand, and price. If you still need to know these outside factors, you are a bad taster.

But in the global literary market today you need only to pretend to be a good taster. We all read Borges, for instance, because the world has cast him as the literary model in this postmodern condition. If the language in which the Argentine wrote is the “right language,” it seems absurd that a good taster could find any modern master in “wronged” languages like Mongolian or Indonesian.

Does true literature still need what is called “local genius” or “autochthonous aesthetics”? When you are deeply immersed in reading, what really interests you is the texture or, more deeply, the intricacy, the interconnection of the work’s elements. “There is nothing outside the text”: we recall a deconstructionist maxim. How do we recognize Argentinian things in Borges’ stories, like “Death and the Compass” or “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which are full of foreign names? Where is Serbo-Croatian form to be found in Milorad Pavic’s Dictionary of the Khazars, especially when we know that this “novel” is modelled after The Universal History of Infamy and Book of Imaginary Beings by Borges? How do you recognize the first-hand rhyme and prosody in some of the best Indonesian modern poems if, when they are translated into English, they are rendered in the form of Chinese poems from the T’ang era or of Anglo-American Imagist poetry? Could you imagine that something more than a Kafkaesque atmosphere is well-construed in 1970s Indonesian fiction?

If you are a true close reader, local paraphernalia is not something you expect first from a literary work. What can be considered “local” is not something beyond language: it is nothing other than the language itself.

To reach to what is called “world literature,” then, is to sway between bad taste and good taste, between cultural studies and literary criticism, between ethnographic inquiry and formalism, between “political passion” and literary enterprise, between distant reading and close reading. What is the use of world literature for those who writes in a “wrong” language like my own?

When, in early 19th century, Goethe coined a phrase “world literature” (Weltliteratur), he transcended the provincialism of German literature. Sharply aware of the inferiority of his own national literature when compared with, for instance, French literature, or with Shakespeare, he saw the world as an extension of his homeland. From this extended homeland Goethe absorbed foreign forms, and he found his universal, humanist self in other nations. Goethean world literature is a path to literary creation: it is self-criticism as well as self-extension—or narcissism as well as imperial passion, if you like.
Two centuries after Goethe, world literature is more the calling card of literary scholars, comparatists more specifically, than of writers. Writers, national or otherwise, still retain literatures of the world as their source—notice, for example, how “fantastic literature” or detective stories lend the form across national borders—but they perceive the world as fragments, or a melange of works in which, to quote Emily Apter, “macro and micro literary units are awash, . . . with no obvious sorting device.” But perhaps there is such a device, namely English translation. We live in an Angloglobalized era. The restraints of literary aspiration once placed upon the great books of Western literature have been lifted, yet those writing outside the English language still must rely upon translation into English.

To literary scholars nowadays, world literature is a systematic rendering, if not a system. According to Franco Moretti, interconnections between all (national) literatures make up the world literary system, in which literary forms, especially the novel, circulate from the center (i.e. Western Europe) to the periphery (i.e. colonial or postcolonial countries). As the superstructure is to the material base, the world literary system is to the world historical and economic systems. To put it simply: non-Western countries have imported the novel from the West and added to it local forms and local narrative voices. But there is always inequality, literary and economic as well, since, to quote Itamar Even-Zohar, “a target literature is, more often than not, interfered with by a source literature which completely ignores it.”

The problem is how to depict the world literary system—or world literature—if any comparatist is only competent in two or three national literatures. The answer, according to Moretti, is distant reading: to read other people’s research. The trouble with close reading is that it depends on an extremely small canon; world literature must be a patchwork of other’s people research, without a single direct textual reading. Elsewhere, David Damrosch says, a comparatist has to practice a kind of amateurism when constructing world literature, as he relies on other comparatists’ readings of literatures he can’t read in the original. World literature is a collaborative work between comparatists and national literature specialists.

Distant reading and amateurism. These two marvelous words alone signify the change in the nature of comparative literature. After poststructuralism shook the foundations of humanism and humanities, now the study of literature has to deconstruct itself too. According to the Bernheimer Report of 1993, subtitled “Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century,” “literary texts are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production.” The report suggests that “comparative literature departments play an active role in furthering the multicultural recontextualization of Anglo-American and European perspectives.”

So, if our age is the age of multiculturalism, and if literary studies are more interested in culture than in literature itself, can the minority literatures—or any literatures written in “wrong languages”—ever be legitimized, even, perhaps, as the other world literature?
By “right languages,” I mean those of the long-established tradition of comparative literature – German, English, French, Spanish, and perhaps Italian and Portuguese; these imperial, core languages are the real languages of the global literary market today. Through all of these languages (though primarily through English) scholars and writers envision the literature of the world. If you write in one of these languages, even in a “pidginized” branch, even if you are from the tiniest, most remote postcolonial country, you could potentially write back to the center, leading world literature will “take your side.”

Literatures from other parts of Europe, too, are still in the orbit of Weltliterature, for the languages and cultures have been firmly attached to the Enlightenment and humanist tradition.

Meanwhile, the “remote” cultures of China and Japan are never farflung: their literature has long appealed to Western scholarship, which have provided us with self-criticism, close reading, and proper translation. Even through work confined to national literature departments, scholars-cum-translators like Ivan Morris and Donald Keene have been able to elevate Japanese literary works to the ranks of world literature. Only by having this kind of close readers is a supercomparatist like Moretti able to rely on his distant reading.

Then on the cryptic periphery are those that write in “wrong” languages, literatures, modern or otherwise, that have never been paired with Western literary scholarship. These literatures, appraised, at the moment, only as elements of a “social canon,” only draw interest from area studies departments. Will a firm comparatist weave this “ethnographic” reading into his “patchwork of other people’s research”?

Moretti says, “The pressure from the Anglo-French core (center) tried to make the system uniform, but it could never fully erase the reality of difference. . . . The system was one, not uniform.” Once again, in my opinion, only literature written in the “right languages” will be welcomed in this system of variation—yes, variation, since the pressurized form from the core, is always to be indigenized, creating a compromise between “foreign form, local material, and local form,” or between “foreign plot, local characters, and local narrative voice.”

The results are the formal features of the literary work itself, and only close reading can reveal whether or not the compromises resist the center’s hegemony. Theoretically speaking, a reader can’t easily extract local form or local narrative voice from this “triangle” without mastering the language, without immersion in its obscure literary tradition.

The celebration of marginal(ized) literatures nowadays is motivated by political heroism disguised as theory. Some pretend to diffuse the boundaries of genre but, ironically, more often only encounter local materials and local characters (elements of great value to ethnographers) in distant reading. In today’s revised comparative literature, close reading is overshadowed by the dictates of the world
literary system; and the local form—or the foreign form localized—can hardly be unfolded. Local form, perhaps, will soon be considered only a variant of or a resentful reinterpretation of the so-called modernism.

By way of theory, what we can have is *worlded* literature—or world literature being opened up with a kind of affirmative action.

I would like to draw an analogy. In the early nineties there were some traveling exhibitions of modern Indonesian art (or Indonesian modern art?) in the United States and Western Europe. This “cultural diplomacy” attempts to say, “We too have modern art, which is art of the present, not revitalized indigenous art from the past.” While Indonesian critics promoted the exhibit as art with postmodern assumptions, the exhibition itself only visited small, unimportant museums, oftenly ethnographic museums. While many reviews claimed this art was no more than a belated, inferior carrying-out of high modernism, our critics argued that the reviewers had been persistently haunted by modernist principles.

Thinking that affirmative action may only be for those who are begging for recognition and those who are deprived, I conclude that world literature is more ellipsis than all-inclusive. Though we have the picture of world literature, what is worth taking into account is something beneath it.

World literature is, to borrow a phrase from Moretti again, a sort of slaughterhouse of literature, where the majority of works are to be “killed,” forgotten, and to disappear forever – only a very limited number of works can survive. I am not referring to the universalist principle that has obnoxiously obliterated what it calls “period pieces” and “mediocrity.” But I do believe that any kind of criticism can change the course of literature, so long as it boldly makes value judgements. Without this boldness, the criticism will only fall victim to cultural relativism, a humanity-threatening malady of this democratic era. Without a certain degree of formalism, there can be no such judgement. Even true believers in cultural studies must choose a few particular works as the subject of their study; their political straining allows the the greater part be disregarded.

Even if a literary canon is expanded to include the minority works of *other* literatures, it can never embrace all literatures. The acts of deconstruction, opening up, and reconstruction of literary history always begin with the question “What makes works literary?” We are never able to escape the notion of literature.

The history of literature is always a dynamic of selection and restitution. Some obscure works from the recent past are worth elevating to canonical status, for example, those of Fernando Pessoa in Portugal; and some important authors might pass into oblivion, as will be the case, undoubtedly, of some Nobel Prize- and Goncourt Prize-winners.
From a writer’s point of view, world literature is antithetical to what has been formulated by literary scholars and critics. We prefer to follow the tenets of Goethe’s world literature: reading is an unsystematic, open-minded effort, rather than a method of constituting a system.

The world’s literary sphere, then, is quite independent from its political-economic sphere. In this newly-formulated space, a literary revolution in a language, a region, or the world can be launched from a remote, almost unknown country, by an obscure writer. Such a revolution can even be accidental, if we endorse, for instance, the case of Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario and his *modernismo*: he asserted (perhaps only duplicated) French symbolism, the dominating poetic form, onto the Spanish language, yet he is considered a great innovator in Latin America and Spain.

Yes, we know of great examples: the shifting of global literary gravity to Latin America in 1970s; the Indian writers, writing in English, writing themselves back to the center since the 1980s; or a minority’s works becoming a model in a dominant language, as was the case of Beckett and Kafka in recent past. Apart from the fact that these examples affirm, once again, the rightness of the core, imperial languages, I am sorry to say that such revolutions cannot simply be adopted by, or repeated by, any other literature, national or otherwise.

Now, I believe that to develop a world perspective is not to grasp the whole globe. The insightful writer knows that world literature is a way to violate his own national literature; no longer tempted to be recognized in the Angloglobalized literary world, he loves to imagine a small circle of ideal, close readers.

For him, literary comparatists are basically the great advertiser of so many national literatures; from this melange he can find what is unimportant in the world literary market. But that will transform him into “merely” a verbal artificer, no longer an heir to any definite culture. What he has stolen from, for instance, Paraguayan or Serbian literature might be brought to light by comparatists as a local genius replanted in his postmodern tropics.

For this writer, world literature is a misreading of national literatures, a reading that makes him a global citizen, ethnographized.