

## “Show me the Zulu Proust”: some thoughts on world literature<sup>1</sup>

Aijaz Ahmad\*

**ABSTRACT:** In this article “world literature” is seen as an age-old field of enquiry where readers can immerse themselves in geographically remote imaginative realities, as well as a recent pedagogical object of the academic literary field. Its origins are related to the fact that literature, traditionally, disregarded geographical boundaries, until the European concept of “nation” as a delimited community was disseminated beyond Europe. In the pedagogical field, what followed was a movement towards the teaching of “national literatures” and, later, of comparative literature. Such shift, however, did not decrease the privileges of European languages, especially English, and established once and for all the United States as the imperial home of comparatism, as well as multiculturalism as its prescribed social form. With globalization World Literature has presented itself as an alternative way of doing comparative literature. Never before has the access to books been so widespread, the canon so internationalized, or the practice of translation so extensive, although it is important to take into consideration that the original language in which a work has been written and its generic properties still have the power to relegate it to the “national/local” circles. A major question is, thus, the influence of the world cultural market, with its treatment of works of literature as commodities, its aggressive marketing campaigns, increasingly profitable book fairs and tendency for corporate publishing. The truth of World Literature lies in between these market-related issues and the creation of conditions for it to become a practical relation, without the mediation of the commodity, among emancipated and radically equal individuals. The re-invention of World Literature from a South-South perspective rather than from

---

\* Diretor do Center of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Nova Déli, Índia.

---

<sup>1</sup> This text has undergone several earlier versions. The first was drafted in 1998 and published as “The Communist Manifesto and ‘World Literature’ in *Social Scientist*, n. 326-327. Other versions were delivered as lectures at Columbia University and New York University. The very latest, and yet quite different one, was delivered as the seventh Pablo Neruda Lecture at Developing Countries Research Centre, Delhi University, under the title “On the Dangerous Edge of Things: Thoughts on World Literature”.

a periphery-center one is posed as a possible alternative for a country like Brazil.

**KEYWORDS:** World Literature, comparative literature, cultural market

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo o termo “Literatura Mundial” refere-se tanto à antiquíssima prática investigativa que possibilita a leitores mergulharem em realidades imaginárias geograficamente remotas, quanto a um recente objeto pedagógico dos estudos literários. Suas origens remontam ao fato de a literatura, tradicionalmente, ter ignorado as delimitações geográficas, fenômeno que começou a mudar somente quando o conceito europeu de nação como uma comunidade delimitada alastrou-se para além da Europa. Na área pedagógica, o que se seguiu foi um movimento pelo ensino das “literaturas nacionais” sucedido mais tarde pelo da literatura comparada. Tal mudança de enfoque, no entanto, não restringiu os privilégios das línguas europeias, especialmente do inglês, e estabeleceu, de uma vez por todas, os E.U.A. como o centro imperial do comparatismo, assim como o multiculturalismo como sua forma social de prestígio. Com a globalização, a Literatura Mundial tem-se apresentado como uma maneira alternativa de se fazer literatura comparada. Nunca antes o acesso aos livros foi tão generalizado, o cânone tão internacionalizado ou a prática da tradução tão extensiva, apesar do fato de que a língua de origem de determinada obra e suas propriedades genéricas ainda têm o poder de relegá-la ao âmbito nacional ou local. Uma das principais questões a serem levadas em conta é a influência do mercado cultural mundial, com seu tratamento de obras literárias como commodities, agressivas campanhas de marketing, feiras literárias altamente lucrativas e casas editoriais apelando para a abordagem corporativa. A verdade da Literatura Mundial encontra-se num meio-termo entre essas questões de mercado e a criação de condições para que ela se torne uma relação prática, sem a mediação de uma commodity, entre indivíduos emancipados e radicalmente iguais. A reinvenção da Literatura Mundial de uma perspectiva sul-sul – ao invés de uma perspectiva periferia-centro – é sugerida como uma possível alternativa para um país como o Brasil.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Literatura, mundialização, literatura comparada, mercado cultural

One has to begin somewhere. So, let me begin with the obvious point that when Goethe said, in 1827, that the age of national literatures was really over and one should rather start thinking in terms of a "world literature," that was really a cosmopolitan vision and a somewhat outlandish wish. What were the enabling conditions for such a wish to arise? We know that at the time when he said so, Goethe was reading a Chinese novel – rather, German translation of a Chinese novel. A powerful tradition of German Orientalist scholarship had by then begun to assemble an archive of translations from a handful of Asian languages, alongside the archive of literatures in the European ones, so that a certain kind of European writer with cosmopolitan inclination could now begin to imagine a trans-continental category of "*world literature*". Goethe certainly had in mind the great classics, from Chinese and Sanskrit and Farsi and so on, alongside European literatures, the classical as well as modern. In terms of today's debates, one could see Goethe's idea of a "world literature" as a wish to enlarge the canon. That this "world literature" would come to him in translation into one of Europe's main languages was something he took for granted, much as most teachers and critics of "world literature" would in our own time. However, he also imagined at times a *world* – in which writers from diverse countries and continents would encounter not only each other's books but also, literally, each other. In other words, not only a world literature but also a cosmopolitan, trans-continental *culture* of personal encounters! This matter of *travel* is of some interest. In Goethe's own time and for Europeans specifically, trans-border travels were typically of two kinds: inside and across Europe, or *from Europe into* what in more recent years came to be known as the third world. It was in his time extremely rare for an African or Asian writer to travel to Europe. That kind of travel has become far more frequent in our own time, and yet much less frequent than critics located in the Euro-US zones might imagine.

Goethe's utopian wish was also a *leap*, from the national into European and from European into a "world" literature. The prior histories of Latin had of course given to much of European culture a certain physiognomy. Consolidation of modern languages, nation-states and national literatures was also, by the time of Goethe, either an accomplished fact or an ongoing process in much of Europe. Such linguistic/literary consolidations were proceeding very briskly even for the smaller nationalities within the Habsburg empire, next door to Goethe's Germany. At the time when Goethe made that remark, he was reading not only the translation of a Chinese novel but also of a Serbian poem. And there was a lot of traffic in books and people alike. So, the idea of a "European literature" was a natural outcome, and increasing contact among writers of various European nationalities was also quite to be expected. But a "world literature"? That could only be thought in one of two ways.

One was the way, so familiar from so much European writing of that period that divided humanity between the civilized world and the barbarians, associated that "civilized world" essentially with Europe and its offshoots in North America, identified that "civilized world" as the world itself, thought of European literature itself as "world literature" and thus constituted a certain kind of European cosmopolitanism that thought of itself as a globalizing universalism: the kind of universalism that could gladly coexist with racism – Civilization, as "White Man's Burden," expanding inexorably among the barbarians. But then there was also another way of imagining a universalist culture – and "world literature" as its corollary—that was more humanist, more inclusivist, not quite so keen on the teleology of Europe's planetary mission, and which therefore did not offer a civilizational module that radiated out of Europe, to be implemented and validated everywhere else in the world.

Even in Goethe we can find some remarks where he tends to speak of European literature and his beloved

*Weltliteratur* as if the two were synonymous (“European, in other words, World Literature” and variants thereof), but, even then, largely without the civilized/barbaric binary so common in his time. He was simply incapable of the kind of contempt for non-European literatures that one finds in, say, the piqued challenge attributed to Saul Bellow: “Show me a Zulu Proust!” That was not Goethe’s way, nor was it, for the most part, the way of the great Orientalists he was reading. William Jones, a contemporary of Goethe, had held, in his address of 1786 to the Bengal Asiatic Society, that “the Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of wonderful structure, more perfect than Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either”. Goethe did not know Sanskrit and would probably not have gone quite so far but he was, after all, a protégé of Herder. And, Herder’s own work of the 1770s – when William Jones was understandably so preoccupied with “Oriental” literature – included essays not only on Shakespeare or Hebrew poetry but also his ethnographic collection of 1778-79, *Voices of Peoples in Songs* (*Stimmen der Völker Liedern*), in which he juxtaposes songs and oral voices from across Europe, Greece to Greenland (i.e. “minor” literatures, non-canonical voices, from the fringes – the peripheries – of Europe) to reflect not only upon the national and political particularity of specific utterances but also what was in his view the universality of literary expression and poetic voices – properties, so to speak, of human language itself. I have severe reservations about those aspects of Herder’s thought that incline rather too much toward cultural relativism. It does need to be said, though, that his proposition that politics and political suffering serve as a spur for poetic utterance among the subject peoples has a special resonance for literatures that have risen out of experiences of colonization and struggles for liberation. And, Herder’s equally strong, perhaps stronger, emphasis on certain elements of mutual intelligibility in the very structures of human languages identifies him with that tendency in Enlightenment thought that Vico

expresses so powerfully when he says that “there must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it in as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects.” In other words, a conception of the universal not as a higher negation of the particular but as the very ground of being for the particular – and as a relation of intelligibility among particulars!

Goethe’s statement, as Eckerman reports it (“I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds of men... National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach”) must be taken in that strong sense. This universalist aspiration yields rather interesting results for Goethe, three of which I might mention. First, it can cut against ethnocentric prejudices that tend always to favour one’s own traditions. If in relation to various classicisms, William Jones can think the thought that Sanskrit is superior to Greek and Latin, Goethe himself would be haunted by the thought that, for all his own achievement as well as the achievements of people like his friend Schiller, German literature of his own epoch still was, in comparison with French or even English, really provincial. He would recommend, moreover, that one can learn equally from ‘minor’ literature (e.g. Serbian, Latvian) and from the major ones (e.g. French).

Second, this kind of universalism can potentially insulate one from the will to exoticize other cultures and other times. If anything, the presupposition of a common humanity underlying the various human languages and social arrangements across cultures and civilizations, tends, in those strands of Goethe’s thought that we are trying to grasp here, to look for commonalities and to make foreign things look more familiar and contemporaneous. Regarding the Chinese novel he is reading, he says “the Chinamen

think act and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, except that all they do is more clear, pure and decorous." Even though it is rather implausible that the Chinese would be "perfectly like" the Germans (just more "pure" and "decorous"), Goethe does display here an openness to the world far beyond his native land, paying no attention to the common European idea of the inscrutable oriental.

The third consequence that arises for Goethe out of this conviction that all human languages are in their own way equally productive pertains, however, to the activity of translation itself, in surprising ways. For, unlike most of us most of the time, Goethe seems not to think of translations as pale facsimiles of the true beauty and greatness of the original. Rather, he thinks of translation as a powerful and productive medium in its own right. Translation, in his view, may not just diminish but actually enrich, enhance, renew. This principle he illustrates with reference to his own work. "I do not like to read my *Faust* in German any more," he remarks and goes on to say that a prose translation he has been reading makes his own German text "again fresh, new, and spirited." The same applies to literary analysis and commentaries; he reads French and English commentaries on German literature, he says, because the foreign perspective, untainted by native prejudice, tends to be more original, livelier. This kind of openness to other cultural perspectives thus grants to all cultures the right, within bounds of reason and mutual respect, to also criticize other cultures. An inclusivist civilization presumes a rationalist discourse in the service of mutual and universal improvement – critical reading of each other, shall we say. "Left to itself," Goethe says, "every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one." There is, I believe, something deeply satisfying and exhilarating about this particular strand in universalist thought, and this strand needs to be strongly defended as much against the civilization/barbarism binary as against those claims

of cultural authenticity that recognize the validity of no representation that is not self-representation.

But, then, this *philosophical* idea of a certain fundamental universality in the very structure of the human mind, human languages, human social arrangements, human thoughts and feelings, needs also to be seen, historically, in relation to the kind of *capitalist* universality that actually ensued from the colonial and imperialist enterprises, as a negation of the kind of universality that the more visionary side of the Enlightenment had proposed. In other words, what Goethe is reported to have said to the young Eckerman in 1827 needs then to be related to what young Marx was to say, some twenty years later, about the relation between world literature and the world market.

## II

The argument contained in this paper started taking shape more than a decade ago, in 1998-99 to be precise, the hundred and fiftieth birthday of the *Communist Manifesto*, when I began thinking of that famous passage on “world literature” in it. I wrote up a piece then, as one of the four essays I published on the *Manifesto* over those two years. Among the subsequent versions, one was in fact prepared for presentation in the University of São Paulo some six years ago, but the plan had to be aborted. I claim no professional expertise on the subject but it is worth recalling that Franco Moretti’s seminal essay on world literature and what he calls “literary inequality,” his further writings on the subject, and the debate that ensued thereafter had not been published when I drafted my initial thoughts on the ambiguities of “world literature”;<sup>2</sup> nor was Pascale Casanova’s influential book that was translated into English more recently.<sup>3</sup> Those initial thoughts were generated almost entirely by my own sense of great admiration, mixed with equally great sense of unease, about Marx’s famous passage on ‘World literature’ in the *Manifesto*:

---

<sup>2</sup> Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, Jan-Feb 2000.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, Harvard University Press, 2004; French original, *La republique mondiale des lettres*, copyright 1999.



The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries... that no longer work up indigenous raw materials, but raw materials drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

That is a powerful statement, but also problematic. When Marx speaks here of “old-established national industries... daily being destroyed” he was probably thinking of some other sorts of industries, such as handloom textile or the more general transition in Europe from pre-industrial to industrial production, even though anti-colonial resistance in Asia and Africa always included the charge of “destruction” not only of textiles etc. – what many of us in India would justifiably call “colonial de-industrialisation” – but also “destruction” (or at least disorientation and imposed stagnation) of indigenous cultures, languages and literatures. Nor do intellectual creations of individual nations become “*common property*,” as Marx sanguinely puts it. One only has to visit libraries and museums in the Western countries – the US itself, Britain, France or Germany – and then museums and libraries in the imperialized zones – in Egypt, say, or Turkey or India – to see the inequality in the distribution and accumulation of such “properties”; and one has to recall only the recent plundering of the great Baghdad museum under the very eyes of US troops to grasp how massive and constant the pillage has been and how very one-sided is the process whereby the cultures of the

invaded and the colonized get to be accumulated by – and in – the imperial centre.

Similarly, what Marx is saying here about “raw materials drawn from the remotest zones” surely applies to mineral and agricultural products taken from the colonies, not to speak of gold and silver from Latin America more specifically, but, if we stretch the meaning quite beyond what Marx had in mind, it could equally well apply to the global workings of what Adorno was to designate, in a different sense, as “the Culture Industry”: the use of Africa in Conrad’s fiction or in Hollywood movies, of African masks in European Cubism, of India in Kipling and Forster, and, by now, of countless cultures from around the globe as raw materials for novels published in London and New York, often by native informants. Globalisation, in other words, not only of literary form such as the novel, which is what Franco Moretti emphasizes, but also of the very raw materials out of which some of the most successful English-language novels are made. Between the onset of global colonization and the generalization of household TV viewing in the historical moment of decolonization, European fiction itself has been one of the cultural practices through which geographies of various parts of the empire were to be represented for readers of the colonizing centres who could thus travel to their colonial possessions, in their imagination, even while staying at home.

That of course is not what Marx meant in the passage at hand. When he speaks here of “every country”, he is so clearly – with the self-assurance of a historical reflex – speaking of a small number of European countries and, at best, Northern United States, considering that the bourgeoisie “exploiting the world market”, as he puts it, with such relentless energy and dynamism was, as of 1848, comprised of strictly a set of capitalist fractions drawn from only certain corners of Europe, and “production” had undoubtedly not taken a “cosmopolitan character” anywhere else. Similarly, “old-established national industries” – in the broadest sense of “national” and “industries” – had

undoubtedly been “destroyed” in the colonies but the “new industries” that had “dislodged” them were at that time located in the colonizing centres but not in the colonized world, so that it was quite fanciful to speak of a “universal dependence of nations”, in the sense of mutuality and reciprocity across the globe. Most peoples of the world, whether or not they could be called “nations” at that point in history, were in fact coming to be highly dependent on a few core European countries, and even those core countries were connected with each other not only in relations of free-floating mutual “intercourse” but also in highly unstable and violent conflicts over colonial possessions, which led to numerous local and regional wars throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup>. A world market arose and something resembling a global culture also eventually arose – but only at a certain level of generality. For the rest, the “world market” was comprised of many markets which were sites of competition among enterprises, countries, and empires – and indeed between cultures and literatures. Just a few years before Marx penned those lines, Macaulay had declared that all the classical literatures of India, and the East more generally, weren’t worth a shelf of Western literature. What got globalized was the domination of European and American cultures. Underneath the sovereignty of this expanding and intensifying “global culture” many cultures and literatures were simply erased, especially in the successful settler colonies. Elsewhere, there continued to be national and local cultures, not just co-existing but also conflicting with the dominant ones, as voluminous literature on cultural imperialism would testify and as one witnesses daily in the cultural struggles of the indigenous peoples across the world even today.

We do find passages in the *Manifesto* where Marx speaks eloquently of the brutality of colonial pillage in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but such passages sit very uncomfortably with the one I have quoted here, and the tribute to the worldly mission of capital takes a curiously teleological form. Capitalism seems to spread across the

world in unbroken motion, producing the same effects everywhere, so that everything appears to be really quite predictable and there emerges a perfect correspondence between a world market and a “world literature”, over and above what is dismissed contemptuously as “national narrow-mindedness”. The world market itself appears to be the absolute good, the great equalizer, without any sense that the “world literature” which is assembled in the world market can hardly be free of the sharp inequalities which that very market structures into the economic sphere, between classes and countries, leading *necessarily* to very unequal access to cultural goods among countries and classes of the world.

This is all surpassingly strange, considering that only a little earlier Marx himself had said the opposite, in *German Ideology* for instance:

In history up to the present [...] separate individuals have [...] become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them, a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the world market. [...] By the overthrow of the existing state of society by the communist revolution, this power which so baffles the German theoreticians, will be dissolved, and [...] *then* the liberation of each single individual will be accomplished in the measure in which history becomes transformed into world history [...] *only then* will the separate individuals be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in a position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth. [...] All-round dependence, this natural form of the world-historical cooperation of individuals, will be transformed by this communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of these powers [...] In any case, with a communist organization of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to the local and national narrowness, which arise entirely from the division of labour.

Here, the world market itself is seen as that power, alien to humanity's species being, which enslaves individuals and keeps them separate; while the dissolution – not the infinite expansion – of this great power of the world market, combined with the coming of the communist revolution as the definite negation of that market, is seen as the *precondition* for the liberation of individuals and their emergence, for the first time, into world history which itself begins only *after* what the *Manifesto* had called "the exploitation of the world market" has been transcended. "National narrowness" is itself identified here not as some unfortunate hangover from the pre-capitalist past but as a consequence of the world market itself, and of its "division of labour." There is no empty talk here of "interdependence of nations" which capitalism itself achieves, but of "all-round dependence, this natural form of the world-historical cooperation of *individuals*" which can only be achieved in a world beyond capitalism. Nor is there any abstract, celebratory talk of "world literature" as a happy twin of the world market and a cure for "national narrow-mindedness"; what is urged, rather, is "*practical* connection" among emancipated individuals "with the material and intellectual production of the whole world" where abolition of the market itself has put an end to "the subordination of the artist to the local and national narrowness." There is a magisterial vision, in other words, of a truly utopic future moment – for which the operative word for Marx and numerous others is "communism" – when shackles of class and colony, market and nationality, would be dissolved, and humanity would emerge out of its prehistory into a world of radical equalities, so that a "world history" in the proper sense may then begin – and of course a "world literature" as well, properly speaking.

The truth about "world literature" in our own time lies, I believe, somewhere between those two passages. To this point I shall return at some length. Let me first refer these matters of "national narrow-mindedness" and/or "*practical* connections" to a sort of historical connections that once

were rather more fluid and tend therefore to escape the national/global binary.

### III

Let me offer two propositions.

First, I find quite implausible a chronological narrative that presupposes that “national literatures” were the old established form and any imagination of a “world literature” arises later – traceable to Goethe or Marx, to Enlightenment universalism or global capitalism, or whatever. That conception corresponds to phenomena that became fairly general across Europe as the national state arose out of histories of absolutism; the nation itself got re-fashioned, not always successfully, in terms of monolingual cultural homogeneity; and elaborate national educational apparatuses were assembled, on an increasingly larger scale, which dispensed this national language/literature model among school-going populations at large. Essentials of this model were in place within the more advanced zones of Europe by the end of the Napoleonic wars and were getting exported to the colonies through world conquest, very successfully in the settler colonies of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand etc., less successfully in those countries of Asia and Africa that had rich literary traditions of their own and managed to save them from colonial eradication. Those histories shall concern us below.

My second proposition is that the “world literature” that concerns critics, theorists and departments of literature these days is not the “world literature” that was the object of speculation for Goethe or Marx in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The primary difference is institutional. For Goethe the problem was not the making of a college syllabus but the very formation of the modern mind. In the contemporary debates, training students’ minds for professional expertise is of course an issue but that is entirely interlocked into pedagogical issues specific to the thinking and organisation of the contemporary university,

as it functions under quite precise pressures and incentives formulated at the Anglo-American core. We are dealing, in other words, with two different archives which do overlap here and there: a vast archive of literary production, including translation, which circulates among tens of millions of readers across the world in countless languages; and a much more restricted, authorised archive composed for the academic institution of literature. To this issue, too, we shall return.

Let us return, then, to the kind of linear mapping wherein literature was at first national and the literary field occupied by national literatures, which then gave rise to a restricted field of Comparative Literature that started reading literatures across at least the European languages, and which, in turn, led to a phase that we are in the process of leaving behind, groping our way to a new kind of globality, whether you call it world literature, literary transnationalism, postcolonial comparatism, or whatever. I tend to think, rather, that literature, in the widest sense of the word, always had the tendency to spread outward beyond geographical boundaries, that the attempt to contain literatures within national modules came very much later, at a historical moment within Europe when a certain category of writing was detached from other kinds of writing and got constituted as "literature", which was then pressed toward philosophical aesthetics on the one hand and the so-called "national spirit" on the other, so that there arose a chain in which literature came to be seen as the finest expression of a language, the language itself the spiritual essence of a nation, the nation as a bounded community of humans which needed a territorial/administrative state of its own for its own self-realization, and a distinct educational apparatus for the cultivation of that language and propagation of that national literature. Any number of literatures attached themselves to those conceptions and apparatuses, but the idea itself was rather new, having gained momentum not very much before the Reformation and the rise of the absolutist state; and it was

a European idea that admittedly got diffused much beyond Europe, as did nationalism itself.

When I say that the idea of a national literature was rather new I have in mind, for example, all those centuries when Latin remained the paramount continental language in Europe long after literary cultures had started emerging in what were then regional languages and became “national” only later, a process that spans a couple of centuries from the founding of the Academie Française in Paris to at least the “Spring of the Peoples” in 1848, if not the national consolidations of Germany and Italy even later. Only after globalised colonisation could those European specificities be presented as something of a universal history of humankind, and memories of some other kinds of indigenous cosmopolitanism erased. Only two examples should suffice to clarify this point.

In premodern Asian zones, Persian literary texts circulated among literate classes over a vast territory extending from what is now eastern Turkey to other regions of Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and parts of Southeast Asia. One of the two most eminent Farsi poets, Rumi, is actually buried in Anatolia; the other, Hafiz, also commanded a vast readership in places near and far, and he wrote, among other things, a poignant letter to a Rajah in Bengal who had invited him to his court, citing infirmities of old age for his inability to undertake so long a journey to meet his admirers. Some of the greatest writers of the language were born and lived not only in what we now know as modern-day Iran but in cities like Ashkhabad and Kashgar and Delhi; not only the court records of the Mughals but also of the Maratha Confederacy in Western India were kept in Farsi; when Raja Ram Mohan Roy, sometimes called “the Father of Modern India”, thought of editing a newspaper he did so in Farsi; and the Naval Kishore Press, located in Delhi and run by a gentleman of the Hindu Kayastha caste, as the name of the Press itself signifies, was until the 1920s the largest publisher of Farsi



books, often to fill the orders from Iran, Afghanistan or some place else in south central Asia.

My example from India is even more complex. There once was a time when Sanskrit and/or Pali, two classical Indian languages, were intelligible to substantial sections of the literate intelligentsia from what is now Afghanistan to regions of Southeast Asia and from Tibet to Sri Lanka, for religious purposes as well as profane, and performance of episodes from the *Ramayna* and the *Mahabhartha*, the great “Hindu” classics, may be witnessed in corners of “Muslim” Indonesia even today. Similarly, particular kinds of texts went across vast geographical spaces through the agency of Buddhism. Tales of the Jataka, for instance, are said to have been composed in Pali from about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century but are found in a variety of languages and media, including dance and sculpture, and versions of them have existed in a variety of vernaculars as well as Sanskrit and Tibetan, and were to then emerge in Farsi in modified forms. Conversely, new tales were being added to the main compendiums as Buddhism arrived in new places and pulled tales from the local folklore into the *Jatakas* to make the latter more attractive for the local population. Some of the stories are said to have been translated into Old Persian and then re-translated into Greek, Latin and Hebrew; some versions of them then found their way into Aesop’s Tales and the *Arabian Nights*, getting wholly secularised, while in the Thervad countries such as Thailand and Cambodia the *Jatakas* live on in dance, dramatic performance and formal, semi-ritualistic recitation. Something similar could be said about such individual Sanskrit texts as the *Panchtantra* as well.

Thus, European languages, which often travelled colonially, are not the only ones which have had a life beyond what got stabilized as national frontiers in modern times. Those other ones travelled without the colonial baggage. The idea of “national literature” came very many centuries later and the related recasting of some languages as *national* involved a great deal of violence and methodical

suppression of many other languages that were either just debarred from history or reduced to mere local function, in the name of progress. This has been true wherever the European model of nationhood was adopted, as in Turkey for instance, not to speak of the treatment of the indigenous languages in much of Latin America.

In this sense, the first and most fundamental act of capitalism was not to facilitate the rise of a “world literature” but to greatly consolidate “national” literatures, which were the literature of the language designated as “national”. So, no matter how much Goethe or Marx or anyone else talked of “world literature” as an entity whose time had come, what actually took hold of the academic apparatuses of the West was the teaching of national literatures, and, very much later, of *comparative* literature which arose in the western universities as a comparatism mainly among the literatures of western nations. The Americas, North and South, have had no difficulty adopting that particular model of comparatism because their “national” languages were European before they also became American. That comparatism was always deeply Eurocentric, even though some of its origins can be traced to Turkey and to the 1930s, when that barely European country was gripped by a particularly intense bout of Europhilia. Among all the languages of the world, Mandarin Chinese can perhaps claim the largest number of native speakers. Among the twenty most widely spoken languages, six are native to India. One Indian language, Tamil, has the longest continuous history of literary production, spanning over two millennia. None of these ever figured much in Euro-American Comparative Departments. Whose comparatism, then?

#### IV

Whatever role the great German comparatists may have played in the past, it is the United States that have been the imperial home of Comparative Literature, as of much else, since the Second World War. As a rule, it is from

there that stability and/or crisis of academic disciplines radiates out into the world more generally. In at least one of its accents, this new valorization of "world literature" arises precisely out of the crisis of that kind of comparatism in a United States where demographics are slowly shifting in favour of non-European minorities – especially the Asian and Latin American minorities with financial clout – even in such mundane matters as university attendance, and where corporate-driven globalization is part of the official ideology, so that the discipline has had to ask itself, collectively: where does Comparative Literature now go in the face of these demographics and in this age of globalization. In other words, the nation-state that is still at the helm of a global empire is feeling, in its internal ethnic composition, great pressures toward multiculturalism. "World Literature" as a pedagogical practice speaks to the requirements of a globalised intelligentsia, in the language of a domestic multiculturalism that has emerged as a specific social form within American nationalism.

There is nothing like major shifts in the material base for ideological superstructures to start shifting their posture. For one thing, East Asia has now emerged as one of the three centres of global capital, alongside the US and EU; indeed, the US government pays good number of its bills with East Asian money. Second, while the US declines as the globe's unique economic powerhouse, other, lesser centres are emerging: China, Russia, India, Brazil – and others are still in the making. Third, US universities (and the British even more so) rely for a considerable portion of their tuition revenue on fee-paying students from such countries and from the prosperous upper classes of the Tricontinent more generally. Given these material realities, it does become more difficult for an academic discipline to hold on to its Eurocentricity while claiming fidelity to Universals.

It is a matter of some significance that the pedagogical category of "world literature" would start taking hold of the professional literary imagination in the United States

and its affiliates in Europe, and then its dependencies elsewhere, precisely at the time when the term “globalization” takes hold of government agencies and the social sciences; the “nation” has fallen in terrible disrepute in these postmodern times, and, implausibly enough, nation-state itself is now said to be in the period of its terminal decline. In some circles, the teaching of “world literature” is now treated as an absolute good, as great antidote against “national narrow-mindedness”, pretty much as the right-wing radicals who often pass as neoliberals pushed globalization as an antidote against what they regard as arcane protectionism of the national-developmental state in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

I don't wish to be misunderstood. Far from debunking this turn away from Eurocentric comparatism to some decent desire for “world literature”, I think the present moment is full of possibilities, not the least because this crisis of conventional comparatism had coincided with the emergence of an impressive number of people problematizing this crisis further and looking for alternatives to it, notably two of the most admirable comparatists of yesteryears, Franco Moretti and Fredric Jameson. To some of these authors I shall return later. Suffice it to say that with work of this kind emerging all around us, it would be at least very churlish to cultivate some nostalgia for the solidities of a “national” literature *versus* “world literature”. I hold no brief for nation-states and their national literatures *per se*, and “world literature” is at any rate being proposed not as an alternative to national literature but as a way of radically transforming the extant ways of doing Comparative Literature. Nor am I opposed to globalization – and indeed not to “world literature”. But the question always is: what kind? Whose nation-state, and in whose interest? The world has indeed become a far more interesting place because of increasing communications among people across nations and continents. So, I do want world literature, but not the kind which is a natural product of the world market, as Marx conceived of it in

the *Manifesto*. As for the category of national literature, the lengthiest chapter in my infamous book, *In Theory*, is devoted to arguing that India is even constitutionally a union of linguistic nationalities and, as such, our study of Indian literature(s) should be organised not on the model of a national literature but on the basis of a multi-lingual comparatism; and that, in our own history, what we call our literature has been so fundamentally connected with the performing arts, with religious belief, with social and religious dissent, with multi-linguality even within the body of an individual text – in Gura Nanak’s *Granth Saheb*, the sacred text of the Sikhs, for example – that, if we ever dare to have something resembling a policy and a commitment to proper education, we may find that we need not confine the study of literature to the teaching of literature as such. We thus have a nation-state whose own literature is multi-lingual, comparative literature, violating all the European norms of the nation-state form.

However, the transition from a *national* comparative literature – a comparatism that rests on languages such as Hindi, Kannada and Oriya etc. – to a “world literature” is not easy. Only those books can reasonably belong to “world literature” – i.e., have a potential readership in diverse countries – that are either originally composed in or are at least translated into a world language, such as English or French – preferably English, which has emerged as the most eminent even among the languages that circulate substantially beyond national boundaries. Needless to add, only those languages had a chance to become “world languages” that were able to travel colonially, in the formation of colonial empires. Only books available in such languages can circulate across global markets; all else remains “local” and “national”. The circuit of distribution and readership for a Greek poet remains “national” until s/he is translated into a “world language” and may obtain a place in this other, transnational archive. In context, then, it is far from accidental that “world literature” as a definite pedagogical object is getting constituted primarily in the US university

system precisely because this is the unique institution, at the heart of the empire, which has the requisite level of textual accumulation, the degree of concentrated erudition, the breadth of personnel, and the financial resources to accomplish such a task. This imperialistically produced capacity is just an objective reality, and the reality remains regardless of the fact that the best work in the field is being done within US institutions by many critics and teachers who have profound anti-imperialist commitments, some of whom are immigrants from former colonies.

So, one person's location in "world literature" is no less a consequence of the world market than someone else's "national narrowness", and what was posed in the *Manifesto* as opposites – "world literature" *versus* "national narrowness"; cosmopolitanism *versus* provincialism – are actually components of a dialectical unity which cannot be transcended within the workings of the "world market"; it is the "global" that produces the "local" *as* "local". We thus have two intersecting circuits within the world market: the local/national circuit *versus* the global circuit. The vast majority of books published in the world are composed in non-Western languages and, with the exception of some, they remain a part strictly of the "national and local literatures". These are different spheres, hierarchically interrelated, and these linguistic spheres tend to coincide also with distinct cultural markets; only "world literature" has a world market, whereas the great majority of books in the world circulate only in local and national markets. The world market penetrates and dominates national and local markets; it does not abolish them. Similarly, "world literature" does not abolish local/national literatures but dominates them, and selects from them a very small number of books that are worth translation and admission into the global circuits.

In Asia and Africa, though not in Latin America, these distinct circuits do as a rule display somewhat different generic properties. The fiction that is confined to non-European indigenous languages and local/national markets

in Asia or Africa tends typically to stay within protocols of Realism, as it has developed from the classical bourgeois novel to socialist realism. Nor is this generic Realism a minor matter, considering that it has been practised by some of the greatest novelists, Asian and Arab, over the past century, from Premchand (India) and Pramodya (Indonesian) to Mahfouz (Egyptian) and Mounief (Saudi, stripped of his nationality, a misfit in every Arab state). Translation and academic consecration may bring such writers into European languages as well but for markets of restricted circulation and relatively modest profitability. However, fiction that is crafted by writers coming from those same geographical zones but in a European language would tend to command modernist or postmodern technical apparatus and sensibility even though it may not entirely forego the Realist narrative strain, considering that a mass market is not easily obtained for fiction that does not have a strong and continuous plot line or is written in some specialised language of the Joycean kind. This other kind of fiction, composed primarily for the world market even though by Asian or African writers, is the arena where the demand for a "Zulu Proust" may well be met; and this surely is the world of potential competition for international prizes, for brisk book reviewing and restless promotional tours in the metropolitan countries, a reaching out toward the Best-seller list, and at times even a blurring of lines that have historically separated the world of literary "Distinction" (in Bourdieu's sense of the word) and the mass market.

This case of differential generic properties for different circuits of circulation is worth keeping in mind, I believe, as is the distinction between two different kinds of readings, as Roberto Schwarz, for example, conceptualises them. "The first," he says, "is located in the national-historical experience of the periphery; the second, based in the dominant metropolitan centres [...] seeks to identify new entrants to the canon of world literature; masterpieces fit to sit beside the great works of the established tradition".<sup>4</sup> As I understand it, the distinction here is between two types

---

<sup>4</sup> Roberto Schwarz, "Competing Readings in world literature," *New Left Review*, Nov-Dec 2007.

of readings and the institutional pressures to produce one kind of reading rather than the other, not between national or racial origins of critics doing the reading; in principle, anyone with the necessary competence, experience and inclination may produce either kind of reading. The best example of the first type of reading – the one that “is located in the national-historical experience of the periphery” – is of course Schwarz’ own reading of Machado which goes into the minutia of Machado’s prose and plottings in relation to the specific kind of capitalist periphery Brazil was at the time of his compositions. It is just very unlikely that an Indian who has not read Machado in the original and who is not steeped in Brazilian history and literature could ever produce that kind of reading; and of course not every Brazilian reads Machado that way; Schwarz has a very specific kind of competence and standpoint in such matters. By contrast, one could refer to the magisterial gaze of someone like Pascale Casanova, whose mapping of what she calls the “world literary space” over the past several centuries would of course be concerned primarily with the question of just what place to assign to Machado in that “space” and through what procedures of consecration. One might even suggest that Moretti’s own dazzling and ambitious work on producing encyclopaedic knowledge for the world production of the Novel through secondary monographs, translations and what he delightfully calls “distant reading” would almost programmatically take its distance from things like “national-historical experience of the periphery”, leaving such matters to the secondary monograph, but would be immensely useful in selecting just what books from the periphery to teach in the metropolitan classroom.

## V

The pedagogical field that we in the university call “world literature” is not what the world market gives us spontaneously. It is rather *an extraction*, through academic



labour, from an immense mass of texts-in-circulation that are the real condition for the thriving of the world market, which is devoted not to this canonical fraction but to the production of a literary culture of consumerism and a genre of fiction which Tariq Ali calls “Market Realism,” remarking that

the publishing giants of North America and Britain buy authors and exhibit them like cattle. Potential bestsellers are auctioned by a new breed of literary agent. Such books need to be sold and it is at this stage that the hyper-merchants enter the fray and the promotion begins.

The latest in this marketing frenzy of exhibition and auction is the phenomenon of the literary festival in cities across the world, from Edinburgh and Frankfurt to Jaipur in India, where millions are spent and millions earned, very much on the lines of events that corporate capital organises for exhibit and promotion of latest automobile models, information technology goods or consumer durables. I might add that this phenomenon envelopes not just things like the pot boiler and the crime thriller but also some of the most consecrated names in contemporary fiction. Even as I draft this paper, I have lying next to my laptop a fine novel by a recent winner of the Nobel Prize which has on its covers not only blurbs by John Updike and Margaret Atwood, itself a sign of consecration, but also fragments of reviews from 20 dailies and monthlies, ranging from *Minneapolis Star Tribune* to *The Times* (London), which signifies a highly successful marketing campaign for literary commodities. Gone, in these postmodern times, is the modernist writer’s dread of the mass market, and what we seem to have now is a seamless generality in which masterpieces of metropolitan fiction are frequently linked to corporate publishing while the literary publishing house may itself be a subsidiary of a much larger corporation which produces great many other commodities as well. This is what I meant when I proposed that the truth of

world literature as we have it today lies between the two passages I quoted from Marx, the one from the *Manifesto* which sees world literature as a necessary consequence of the world market and occludes the questions of imperialism and unequal exchange, and that other passage from *German Ideology* which requires of us the labour of creating a world far beyond the world market so that artistic production itself can become a *practical relation*, without the mediation of the commodity, among emancipated and radically equal individuals. Within these conditions, then, what the university makes possible is undoubtedly superior to what the world market generally prefers, but limits for the protocols of the university are also set by the very conditions in which it operates and the metropolitan university of course has its own kind of blindnesses alongside its possibilities; so, in arguing for “world literature”, as in much else, one has to constantly push against those very limits, keeping always in view that “world literature” is not an object already given, waiting to be revealed by academic labour alone. Nor is Moretti’s famous “literary inequality” just an impediment that can be overcome with well-intentioned literary theory. Rather, that “inequality” is the very condition of this kind of academic production in the metropolitan university.

Now, regardless of the globalisation of a culture of literary consumerism, it is surely the case that serious readers of literature across the world do have an unprecedented access to works of literature from diverse countries while the canon of consecrated contemporary masterpieces is now quite thoroughly internationalised; one version of “world literature” as it is conceived in the academe can satisfy itself with this new canon, in which Márquez and Pamuk, Rushdie and Isabelle Allende can easily overshadow the Saul Bellows of this world. Translation has become over the past several decades as important and widespread a literary activity as original composition, which has transformed reading habits across the globe. Some of the best American poets have translated some of the great poets

of other languages, such as Neruda and Césaire, and, in doing so, they have transformed the poetic idiom and the repertoire of poetic devices in English itself, so that much poetry that is now getting written in English bears the mark of the idiom and devices introduced by those translations. Libraries and bookshops all over the world stock works of dozens of writers from diverse parts of the world, in the world-hegemonic language which has the widest readership in the country or region where the library or bookshop is located, regardless of the language of original composition. It is very likely that more people have read García Márquez in a language other than Spanish than in Spanish itself, so that readers in most countries tend to either forget his Colombian national origin or attach no particular significance to it: he becomes simply a Latin American writer or a truly "universal" one, even though reading García Márquez without reading the complexities of Colombian historical and social experience leads to a rather thin reading, indeed.

Within India, there is no literary language whose modern literature has not been fundamentally transformed through a variety of foreign influences and not just British influence; Urdu fiction was surely influenced rather more by Russian and French literatures than by British literature *per se*. Meanwhile, Moretti is undoubtedly very astute in opting to study the global diffusion of the genre of the novel as his principal exhibit in favour of his project for "world literature", even though I don't think that poetic forms travel quite as easily as he claims. Why did the form of the modern short story become so universal across Indian languages but not the English sonnet? Or, for that matter, the Shakespearean play or the Homeric epic, which were taught in the colonial classroom with much zeal? Not that these other forms were not tried. Just that the results were not very satisfying and the forms were abandoned. Capitalism's great global offensive to universalize individual private property and nuclearised family life might have had rather more to do with the global spread of the novel

and the short story as the corresponding and appropriate narrative forms. The other form that also spread through considerable Asian and Arab zones was the unrhymed, and even unscannable versification, which probably had a great deal to do with the coming of print, the gradual decline of a punctual and historic relation between poetry and song, as well as the introduction of capitalist clock-time, all of which tended to make verse primarily a visual experience through reading during allotted bouts of leisure time. Why certain literary forms travel more easily than other forms is a matter of great interest for sociologies of literature.

Even through all the histories of colony and empire we *have arrived* at a sort of capitalist universality which has generated the resources, especially in the core countries of advanced capitalism, to make possible the kind of things I have just enumerated. The flip side of this resourcefulness is that many more people in this world speak Mandarin than English as first language, and speakers of Hindi and French are said to be roughly equal in number, but it is inconceivable that either Mandarin or Hindi could command the archival resources, the research and teaching institutions, the funds, and whatever else it takes to institute “world literature” as an academic discipline the way it can be instituted in the US; and it is indicative of one common way of thinking about “world literature” that Pascale Casanova’s sparkling book on the subject simply bypasses China altogether although the book is structured to tell the story of an almost teleological expansion of what she calls “the world literary space”, from its beginning in France – as she proposes – to the farthest corners of the globe. That kind of resource, that kind of material base for thinking concretely about world literature, is available primarily in the colonial centres of yesteryears, and in English even more than French because English has been the language of the two great empires, the British and the American – especially the American, which is the first global empire in human history and therefore the appro-

priate site for the making – and marketing – of a “world literature” as a fully-fledged academic discipline.

My first point here is that colonial history itself arranged the European languages into something of a hierarchy, in accordance with the actual strength, geographical expanse and longevity of each empire. English became pre-eminent, as I just said. French was relegated to a second position, despite its enormous literary capital, and all the more so in the period of America’s post-war imperial ascendancy; Paris could still dominate in what came to be called simply “Theory” but even its theoreticians needed the American academic market for their global validation and circulation (where would be Derrida and Deconstruction without the US literature departments?), and Paris could not be the primary home of “world literature” in quite the same way as a cluster of US universities could be. Spanish was third but not with the kind of power outside Latin America that Anglo-American literary institutions could command in the rest of the English-speaking world – and around the world more generally. Portugal, once major colonial power, became a periphery of advanced industrial Europe and Brazil was then able to cut loose from Portuguese dominance and itself became something of a literary centre for the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. One of the great strengths of Casanova’s book is that it traces the centre-periphery relations inside Europe with great care and precision. For the rest, however, when it comes to the non-European “world” in what she very imprecisely calls the “World Republic of Letters” she tells a not very surprising story built around texts that appear in these four colonially globalized – and very unevenly globalized – languages.

On the other side of the colonial divide, languages of the colonizing country became virtually universal in the *settler colonies*, such as the United States and Canada, but such languages became dominant but far from universal in the *administered colonies*, such as India or Vietnam; and in those other countries that used to be called “semi-

colonies”, such as China or Iran, even this dominance of any particular European language was rather thin. Thus, in Latin America, the indigenous languages were either eliminated, or forbidden in public discourse or at least very greatly subordinated, even in countries like Bolivia, where the indigenous were a majority of the population, while Portuguese and Spanish were more or less universalized in their respective zones for productions which came to be called “literary.” Re-assertion on the part of some of the surviving languages is a powerful contemporary phenomenon in Latin America, but these struggles for cultural rights at the dispossessed ends of society are unlikely to have any immediate effect on the teaching of “world literature”. In India, by contrast, English was dominant but far from universal, and the colonial period is in fact the period of immense consolidation of modern literatures in many of the indigenous languages; since the dissolution of British rule, English has undoubtedly become one of our languages, for speech as well as literary production, but the number of people for whom it is the mother tongue – or the *only* language – is relatively small and largely concentrated in sections of the ruling class, with the more privileged strata of the middle classes still aspiring for that kind of cultural intimacy with this tongue of the imperial metropolis. All this is well represented in Casanova’s book in the fact that Faulkner is one of its heroes, she discusses Brazil at some length, represents India through the two predictable figures of Tagore and Rushdie, Iran with the lone example of Sadeh Hedayat, who got translated into the key European languages quite early, and simply ignores China.

## VI

Let me return, then, to the proposition I offered earlier, to the effect that when we speak of “world literature” we are speaking of two structurally different fields that are adjacent and whose raw materials may often overlap but which remain distinct. There is an *academic* literary field

where "world literature" exists as a pedagogical object. This field likes systematicity, sorting devices, course modules, teaching methods, close readings and "distant readings"; it teaches the canon, feels increasingly uneasy about the Eurocentricity of the canon, feels ennobled by the desire to expand the canon, wonders how to expand it and to what extent; may even speak brashly of counter-canon; it is beset by the worry that the teaching of world literature would greatly expand the materials that have to be taught but the teaching hours – the student contact hours – shall remain the same; it is suspicious of literature in translation because translations leave out the original linguistic form, flatten the reading process, shift the focus from linguistic analysis to analysis of the narrative element; quotes Derrida to the effect that even philosophical concepts do not carry well across languages to make the point that the literary text must be read in the original. This is a pedagogical field, with literature as its object. I don't mean to underestimate the value of this particular literary field. I participate in it myself, with much pleasure and sense of purpose. However, this pedagogical field of systematicities is only one way of thinking about "world literature". Literature's other form of existence is wider, much older than the recent academic debates. It is much more unsystematic, chaotic, contentious and productive. This is the age-old field of inquiry where writers and lovers of literature immerse themselves in all sorts of literary utterances, for pleasure, for discovering again and again what Marx would have called their "species being", for participating in the moral economy of the age, for gaining sustenance from other writers for their own work, for surprises in other people's writings which may change one's own imaginative life and perhaps even more than only the imaginative, for affiliations which are sometimes political affiliations, a field of activity much closer to what Marx meant, in the passage I quoted earlier, by the phrase "separate individuals [...] brought into practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world".

This is the world in which Shelley can speak of “the capacity to imagine what we know” and what I hear in that wonderful and wonderfully ambiguous phrase is that there is the faculty of facts, which you may know for example from the social sciences, but there is also a way, almost a spiritual relation to the material, where you subject your factual knowledge to the whole of your imaginative faculty, which then is the realm of literature, in the best sense of that word. Trying to imagine what you do not know is of course also an important exercise of one’s faculties but more prone to sentimentality because trying to imagine what you do not know lacks a material point of reference within your own experience; imagining that which one *knows* requires a different kind of rigour, makes a more exacting demand upon ourselves; and if one were to apprehend the coordinates of one’s own knowledge with the rigours of a fine poetic imagination, one may gain a more empathetic opening to the world outside the self.

I read that in Shelley, the great, intensely political, British Romantic poet and what comes to mind, curiously, is a little comment by Pramoedya Toer, the great Realist novelist of Indonesia, the survivor of the massacres of 1965, the man who went in and out of Suharto’s prisons but never succumbed to the temptations of safe exile when given the opportunity. What I am recalling here is his statement that he expressed in his fiction a “reorientation and evaluation of civilization and culture which is precisely NOT contained in historical reality.” A remarkable statement from a man who wrote not only doggedly realist novels but ones in which you can find perhaps all the properties that Lukács ascribes to the European historical novel, even though I am quite sure he never read Lukács. “I am not a man of much education,” he used to say modestly, by which he meant that he had little scholarly knowledge of things outside Indonesia. I might add that Pramoedya spent a good part of his time writing histories of various periods and problems in the Indonesian past. A writer of histories, a writer of historical novels, a great anti-colonial



nationalist who could never reconcile himself to the kind of state that arose in Indonesia after Independence and especially after the bloodbaths of 1965, a leftist perfectly comfortable with the idea of socialist realism: what could he possibly have meant by this conception of literature as an "evaluation" of culture "which is, precisely, *not* given in historical reality"? I imagine that he meant what Shelley meant when he invoked the capacity to imagine what we already know, even though I can never be sure of what either Shelley or Pramoedya actually meant. Elsewhere, Pramoedya observes, borrowing from a well-known Buddhist metaphor, that "human beings too often clap with just one hand". Literature is for him, then, an effort of the imagination, an act of evaluation, to break through the resounding silence and pregnancy of that one-handed clap.

And, while we are still on the subject of Pramoedya, I might add that he suffered for some thirty years under the Suharto dictatorship, which burned his library, banned his books, banned him from public speaking, kept him in prison for varying lengths of time and then forced him to report weekly to the police station whenever he was out of prison. But he never wrote either a novel or a memoir or anything else about that regime that was more extensive than an odd op-ed page. He described the regime as a pure negativity, a "minus", and there was, he said, nothing he could write about it which, in his words, "will carry its readers further forward than the established order." Elsewhere he speaks of "a literature that could provide courage, new values, a new world-view, human dignity, and agency for the individual in society". Not a writer suited to the postcolonial, post-modern temper of these times, because if "the death of the grand narratives of emancipation" were to actually occur, it would have caused him no joy whatsoever. However, what Pramoedya says here *can* be connected, in a roomier house of "world literature" with yet another moment in the history of English Romanticism, in 1799, when Coleridge was to write to Wordsworth:

I wish you would write a poem [...] addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurian selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophes.

I speak of Pramoedya here partly to mourn his death a couple of years ago, but I also speak of him deliberately in relation to Shelley and Coleridge because so many of the modish ways of revising the canon are beset by a kind of presentism, by such cavalier attitudes toward issues of historical depth, that one must insist on reading literatures of the past because they not only tell us about that past, about ourselves as beings constituted by that past, but, if I may put it this way, it is in the literatures of past generations that we hear the echoes of our own present; and *expansion* ought not mean simple diminution of that which has been central in other places and other times.

## VII

This paper has been largely, and inevitably, about the emergence of “world literature” as an academic discipline in the North American metropolis. But what do we do with all that, in our own situation: an Indian addressing a Brazilian readership? We could of course stay within the existing paradigm: each of the formerly colonized country establishes its own unique relationship with the imperial centres, so that “world literature” comes to mean a combination of one’s own “national literature” plus the conceptions and methods now established in the metropolis. Or, one could risk exploring alternative perspectives.

In my view, it should be possible to do “world literature” primarily as a South-South relation: as a revamped, re-invented version of what once used to be called “third world literature”. And we need to do this not as an act of political piety but as critical historiography and as jour-

neys into the worlds of facts and imaginations we never explored, quite in this way, because Europe was the only continent for us, other than our own. We need to teach Garcia Márquez and Munief face to face, and we might find that *Cities of Salt* and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* are twins. Other fictions: written in homage to peoples whose destinies were intertwined with corn, sugarcane, wheat, the yellow gold of Brazil, the black gold of the Arabian sands; city fictions, of Cairo, Delhi, Buenos Aires. Just a great books course in 20<sup>th</sup>-century fiction: Asturias and Garcia Márquez, Pramodya and Premchand, Mahfouz and Munief. Names could be added or dropped. That is unimportant. Conception is the point.

Our languages do not have the resources that imperial languages have. We don't have the libraries, the research institutes, the personnel with competence in dozens, indeed hundreds of languages from across the world, as the imperial centre indeed does. Most work will have to be done through translations in a borrowed "world language", which is a limiting factor in great many ways, but as in so many other matters, making a South-South world is a race against handicaps, and handicaps in this instance are no greater than in doing just good old comparative literature the established way.

If old-style Comparative Literature has become untenable in the metropolitan centres because of its Eurocentricity, and "world literature" is getting proposed as an antidote to that Eurocentricity, then comparatists in the Tricontinent do have to go a step or two ahead of their metropolitan counterparts.

