theories and methodologies

World Literature, by Any Other Name?

RAJAGOPALAN RADHAKRISHNAN

THERE IS A "WORLD" OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BENIGN DESCRIPTIVE TAUTOLOGY OF THE PHRASE *WORLD LITERATURE* WHEN IT IS USED to indicate, with its phenomenological innocence, literature from a variety of sites and in various languages and the same phrase when it is used to indicate a unitary mode. I distinguish between these concepts by placing quotation marks around the phrase when the second sense is meant. "World literature" indeed results from an act of ideological and hegemonic production: it is a tendentious, normative category with all the magisterial and juridical authority of a taxonomic rubric. In a classic Althusserian sense, the phrase, in quotation marks, actively interpellates the world and the world responds to the ideological hail. In so doing the world constitutes itself epistemologically as certain and determinate. The hail privileges and exemplifies a particular configuration of the world, inevitably alienating and "othering" the possibility of infinite alternative configurations and constellations as various and protean as the world itself. The crucial difference is that until the moment of the hail, world literature just "was," doing its thing expressively, speaking profusely and in polyglot chaos and richness without necessarily speaking for itself in a unitary, prescriptive, representational, and representative mode. To put it simply, every literature in the world was in the world, and this fact needed no reiteration, no self-conscious validation. Where else would anything or any literature be except in the world? Why not just let world literature be in its various sites, languages, and configurations?

World literature is thus manufactured as "world literature," and I use the term *manufactured* to emphasize the industrial and industrializing mentality that makes world literature function as raw material and "world literature" pose as the value-added finished product. At work also is the phenomenon of what Michel Foucault would call "reformed representation," which acknowledges the normative violence that underlies all epistemological production. In other words, the literatures in the world need to be prepped for a certain gaze that would see them, recognize them, and rename them

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in the singular as "world literature." In whose or what gaze is world literature to be known and possessed as "world literature"? With the advent of the category "world literature," a certain anxiety arises, a certain unrest among the many that constitute the one of the world. Now that it is not enough just to be in the world, which one of the many will be factored into the "world" and through what processes of qualitative adjudication, methodological gatekeeping, measurement, and comparative evaluation? More significantly, which of us, which constituencies, will have to be left out, weeded out, to be "included by exclusion," as Agamben would have it, so that the world may anoint itself exclusively and exceptionally as "the world," the world at its self-exemplifying best: rid of the dross, the baser metals, all the raw material now converted, sublated in hegemonic and representative excellence? Which literatures in the world will now suddenly be declared not of the world? It is as though in the self-reflexive gaze of world literature, recognition will be punitive and some constituencies will be fated to occupy the production model's blind spot.

Recognition is indeed the crucial concept here. An example may help me make my point about recognition in a world that is a world only because it is structured in unevenness: take the unevenness away and the world crumbles, deliquesces for lack of structural integrity. This example is particularly salient now, as I write this piece, in October, the month when the Nobel prizes are announced. "Literature" is the most controversial and polemically fraught category: will the chosen author be simultaneously of that person's part of the world in some irreducibly autochthonous way and yet available for the metonymic or synecdochic prestidigitation that renders that author "of the world"? I am thinking of an incident that occurred about forty years ago in Chennai, as I was speaking with the great Tamil writer and public intellectual Jayakanthan, who, alas, passed away recently. We were discussing the existential nature of all literature, and in that context I asked him if he had studied the works of one of my all-time heroes, Jean-Paul Sartre, and *bang* came the indignant response: "You ask me if I have read Sartre, and I ask you if Jean-Paul Sartre has read Jayakanthan?" His response points up the problem of recognition as a structural issue. Recognition performs an anomalous double duty: it acknowledges the antecedence of the world to be recognized but at the same time insists that the world is reborn with value added in being recognized. In phenomenological parlance, recognition is immanent and of the world even as it is constrained to perform its epistemic function transcendentally. If recognition and the world are mutually constitutive, it is a problem that despite the givenness of our one world, Sartre and Jayakanthan live and perform in two worlds that are not coeval. What drove Jayakanthan mad was the lack of reciprocity in the figure of recognition, as though the apparatus of recognition had been suborned and hijacked by the fait accompli of a world structured in dominance.

The question, deeply phenomenological, is: how many worlds are there in the one world? And this question, with a grateful nod toward Jacques Derrida's work, does not just reiterate the Tower of Babel problem (i.e., the issue of translatability) or the matter of translation as foundational to the viability of world literature. These are important linguistic, epistemological, and methodological concerns, whereas the phenomenon I am talking about is the reality of a world structured in dominance. I am invoking imperialism, colonialism, racism, Eurocentrism, and other "worldviews" whose *longue durée* is still the tacit authority in whose name the world speaks for itself. Of course Sartre has been translated into Tamil and of course Jayakanthan's work is translatable into French. And, if I may add, I have had the privilege and honor of translating Jayakanthan's work into English. But translatability is not the

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primary issue. The problem is that of virulent centrisms that have axiomatized themselves as imperatives and preconditions for the worlding of the world. The unfortunate fait accompli is that the world in which Sartre is recognized—the Occident—has legitimated itself unilaterally as the hegemonic trading center for the valorization of the world. The relation between the Occident and the rest of the world is one without reciprocity—as reflected in, for example, the category of "sanctioned ignorance" formulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and in Chinua Achebe's trenchant insight that underlying Joseph Conrad's seemingly generous acknowledgment of the African brother in *Heart of Darkness* lies a profound denial of the African brother's coevalness: the African brother is fundamentally "juniorized," as development and progress are handed down to Africa by the developed West.

My intention in problematizing centrism is to initiate the argument that it matters crucially who in the world is raising the issue of world literature and from what location. Inevitably, the urgency of "world literature" is inflected and, in a way, spoken for by the locational perspective of whoever is initiating the discussion; that is, "world literature" becomes an agenda from that perspective and that perspective alone. My contention, not meant as an ideological critique or an accusation, is that the recent preoccupation with "world literature" has been primarily metropolitan and academic. It is in the First World's urban centers and corridors of academia that the phenomenon of world literature has been "worlding." This fact, neither good nor bad, needs genealogical analysis and symptomatic reading.

The persuasive emergence of "world literature" is the direct result of the remedial desires of urbanites and academics to become less parochial. Such desires require viewing world literature simultaneously as other and as a vital and corrective dietary and pedagogical supplement to the regnant metropolitan regimen of good health and normalcy. I am not opposed in a doctrinaire way to such a project, but we must recognize the problems it poses. For starters, an epistemological distinction has to be made between world literature, which has existed as long as the world itself, and the current configuration of "world literature" as a symptomatic response to a specific anxiety. There is a difference between reading world literature because it exists and is profoundly worthy of study, research, and analysis and reading the same literature on the assumption that it will fix our ills. Sartre should not read Jayakanthan to cure or deprovincialize himself (God knows Jayakanthan's language is chronically provincial in its own way); he should do it, rather, in the name of a proactive and coeval relationality. Perhaps I am going out on a limb, but it would be wiser in the long run to "be provincialized" by others than to "provincialize oneself" as a performance of mastery in self-reflexivity (Chakrabarty). Even as the First World launches the world-literature project as an autocritical exercise in unlearning its privilege as loss, it must be remembered that during the period of colonialism all the colonized countries were learning Western literature as world literature while denigrating their own productions as vernacular, indigenous, and subworldly. Well might Kamel Daoud write his magnificent postcolonial retelling of Albert Camus's *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*), and yet in the retelling Camus retains an essential significance despite having been subjected to a deconstructive reading, against the grain. Camus's novel became world literature in a monoconscious Eurocentric mode, despite or on the basis of having left its Arab character nameless, whereas Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* (*Meursault, contre-enquête*) is forced into a painful and agonizing double consciousness before it passes as world literature. Camus without Daoud is thinkable and viable, but Daoud without Camus is dubious and questionable.

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It all comes down to this: in whose name is world literature to be cultivated and studied? Given the multeity of the world, the answer cannot be any one "egotistical sublime." The point I am making, in a Kantian vein, is that studying is not synonymous with programmatic instrumentalization. How literature is studied is a means-and-end problem. World literature is not the means to an end: in this case, the metropolitan pedagogical end. We face a double bind: anxiety about world literature or the need to study it cannot be disavowed, and yet the objectivity of the world cannot be held prisoner to a particular ideological interest, professional desire, or therapeutic need. Try as nobly, generously, and self-reflexively as it might, the world-literature phenomenon cannot solve, transcend, or even ameliorate the self-other problematic. On the contrary, it surfaces as yet another symptom of the same old binary crisis: advocacy and any kind of solicitude on behalf of the world are constrained to take the form of an advertent or inadvertent exoticism in which the figure of the other fills in for the world and the self is rendered exceptionalist or invisible. The challenge is to imagine into existence and coordinate a simultaneous split screen and double frame partaking of a mirror structure and a window structure capable of focusing on self and other in a double gaze. Recent discussions about distance learning, the world being too much with us or too little with us, the world's distance from or proximity to us, the reliability of translations for entry into other linguistic worlds, and whether by definition the world is where we are not make me think of the lyrics to that good old Beatles quasi-mystical song: "Without going out of my door, I can know all things on earth / . . . / The farther one travels, the less one knows." These discussions also remind me of the figure of the risible autodidact in Sartre's early novel *La nausée* (*Nausea*), the autodidact as a naive humanist who seeks to cover the knowledge of the entire world by undertaking a literal study of works from a library in alphabetical order. When all the books are covered, studied, and exhausted in that patiently additive mode, the entire world will have been known and understood, and the erudition of the humanist will have been consummated in the name of the world. Needless to say, Sartre mercilessly lampoons this figure. This is not the way to go. In this model, the humanist disavows his ideology, pretending to be a passive and innocent accountant or adder-up of knowledge and, furthermore, fails to understand the circumambience of the world that is not reducible to the rationale of an obsessive inventory taker seeking numerical closure.

What is an acceptable way to cultivate "world literature" as a domain and an object of study? I dismiss right away two options as unproductive: the principle of coverage and the ideology of either-or. The principle of coverage—that is, including as many works as possible when determining what counts as "world literature"—much like the humanist project satirized by Sartre, seeks a literal coextensiveness of the word with the world and in so doing overlooks the ideological and the figural dimensions of the enterprise. Any plenitude that could be claimed on behalf of the world can never be descriptive; it can only be interpretive, ideological, and effective as metonymy or synecdoche. Apposite to my argument is the eloquently double-voiced cover design of Edward Said's posthumously published *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*: a ticket stub reading "Admit All" sticking out partially from the pages of a massive, closed book. The book, and I discuss this in *History, the Human, and the World Between*, represents completeness and incompleteness, while the ticket stub speaks for immurement as well as emancipation. The book is a textual construct and an allegorical escape from textuality in the name of the world. The ticket stub's "All" are both inside and outside: while no one is left out, excluded, or alienated, no one is always already in. There is the All before,

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as undifferentiated multitude, and then, with a temporal lag, there is the All inside, in the form of the demos. The admittance has to take the form of a disembodied imperative or hail that announces, "Admit All operationally, bureaucratically, governmentally." The admission is not automatic. The ticket stub becomes a necessity, and the Admit All has to be an official decree embodied in and as the ticket stub. Who said, "Admit All"? Is this the All interpellating itself, the one calling the many, or the other way around? Is there a constitutive outside to the desirable semantic interiority of the book, its plenary meaningfulness? In the context of my discussion, who or which gaze wants, on the one hand, to admit the world in all its phenomenological multeity and, on the other, to control and administer such a world under the unitary taxonomy of the one world literature?

The book cover's image is both literal and ironic: it asserts the importance of the Admit All call and, at the same time, the impossibility of the call's actualization. Given the multeity of the world as one, there can be as many Admit All calls or exhortations as there are perspectives in the world. One could also ask if the book as world is just any book, a generic book, or a specific book? Is it the Koran, the Bible, the constitution of a particular nation-state, *The Communist Manifesto*, the Bhagavad Gita, or something else? Is the All denominational, nondenominational, religious, secular, lay, or professional? The space of the book is not open: it has to be a closed space imagined as open, thanks to the stub, in the name of the All with the proviso that each and every one that composes the All is in possession of the ticket. No valid ticket, no entrance. The political message here is the inclusion of the All, but the allegorical burden is that every Admit All call by definition is not only ideologically flawed but also occlusive of other perspectival exhortations, each of which is based on its own worldview. Enough said about the book cover: the message is that no point of entry is ideologically innocent. Every point of entry imposes its shadow, its historical baggage, on the enterprise at hand.

Said's legacy, with its rich contrapuntal ambivalence, prompts us to ask, Does the point of entry, which is after all contingent and in a way fortuitous, harden into a centrist intervention? Centrism in Said's understanding does not always have to be virulent, invasive, or colonizing. In *Freud and the Non-European*, Said is quite harsh in associating aspects of Michel Foucault's writing with an ideological Eurocentrism that Foucault could have avoided. Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, is forgiven: in his case, centrism comes across as an unavoidable limitation of historical consciousness. He could not know what he could not have known, in his time and place. Conrad, in Said's pantheon, retains a questionable pride of place for being self-reflexively and autocritically centrist, thus enabling Said to read him contrapuntally. In the context of Conrad's self-staging narrative, centrism almost becomes de rigueur for the production of discourses that oppose the center's hegemony: one and the same text is animated by a contrapuntal double consciousness in which Eurocentrism is asserted, only to be made instantly vulnerable to narrative deconstruction and demystification. From Said's perspective, a debatable one, the critical appreciation of the staging of narrative in Conrad's fiction is not inimical to the emergence of postcoloniality, and Conrad's fiction is valorized as an acceptable point of entry into the postcolonial problematic. This discussion brings me to the either-or option.

What then is a valid point of entry into world literature and on what basis? I detect a polarization in the current literary-critical and theoretical scene: the radical proponents of "world literature" consider it their duty to negate, disavow, or countervalorize national literary practices and national critical practices. According to them, the world is somewhere out there, and it is obligatory to forsake

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or neglect one's domestic perspective to get on the world bandwagon. They understand the relation between the nation as home and the world to be incommensurable, or mutually exclusive. In contrast, the practitioners of the national seem insensitive to the call of the world. I think it is time now to invoke Adrienne Rich and her productive formulation of the politics of location, as well as Foucault's equally compelling theorization of the subject position. Whereas location, in Rich's essay "Notes Towards a Politics of Location" pertains to the realm of the macropolitical, subject position nods in the direction of the disciplinary and the micropolitical, and we need both valences in the context of world literature, which is general and experiential, as well as disciplinary and discursive. What Rich does in her celebrated essay is to denaturalize and deuniversalize her location as a Western feminist and mark it instead as historically limited and contingent. However appropriately provincialized feminisms of color may be, she does not impose on herself an either-or choice.

Becoming self-conscious does not lead her to paralysis or ascesis. Endeavoring to find a way beyond the Scylla of the unitary grand narrative and the Charybdis of relativism, she galvanizes the practice of the politics of location in search of a politics of acentric relationality. In marking herself critically as middle-class, white, Jewish, from Brooklyn, and so on, she finds the world as not ours and not theirs. In the radical shaking up of the us-them binary in the spirit of Frantz Fanon's cry "The Negro is not. Any more than a White Man," a different cartography of the world to come is to be imagined (*Black Skin* 231). There is no attempt to mark the world in the name of the self's unmarking. The aim is not to become un-American so that one can become a better or a truer being of the world: there is no romanticization of the world and consequent demonization of the self. The project, rather, is learning how as an American to be a wiser, better-informed, and conscientious being of the world and in the process radically to transform the meaning of what it is to be, to feel, to think, and to act American. There is no attempt to transcend or negate one's perspective and embrace instead the ontology of the world in one fell, unmediated act of authentic recognition. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the world itself is perspective, its objectivity a form of givenness to the teeming irreducible historical perspectives that make up the ongoing totality of the world. The ethic of the practice of a politics of location is to highlight critically the *as* in "as an American," "as a woman," "as a subaltern" and on that basis to project visibly the tension between the individual perspective and the manner in which it is caught up, along with other perspectives, in imagining the world. The intention is not to run away from home to world in impassioned ontological innocence, especially when the home is legitimated as the virulent, exclusionary, racist, xenophobic, hate-mongering nation-state. The point I am making is that often, in current debates, the avoidance of critical and oppositional engagement with one's national and domestic literature gets coded and nobly euphemized as one's love of world literature. Such a move is not only an unconscionable abdication of responsibility but also a recklessly unilateral and arrogant allegorization of the world in the name of one's unearned innocence. My suggestion: work out your particular karma as whatever you are, not in the protection of your home but in the active presence of the entire world as infinite perspectives so that the world as other, the world as others, will have a constitutive say in how you choose to work out your karma. You do not own your agenda. In other words, have the ethicopolitical courage to let your history happen overseas.

The best example of such critical practice I can think of is the brilliant work of New Americanists such as William Spanos, Donald Pease (author of *The New American*

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Exceptionalism and editor, with Robyn Wiegman, of *The Futures of American Studies*), Anthony Bogues, and Amy Kaplan (editor, with Pease, of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*), to name just a few, who in the act of demystifying the claims of American exceptionalism are also uncovering hidden or suppressed connections between the United States and the world. My choice would be to render every constituency, every domain of study, every national or regional literature, double conscious, itself and not itself, in perennial tension. For too long, double consciousness has been the painful onus of the African American, the subaltern, members of minority groups generally. It is time now, in the name of the world, to generalize this legacy. What would be effective is a multilateral staging, a mise-en-scène of the worlding of the world from every perspective in the worldly continuum. Through a perennial process of undoing the opposition between privileged content and contingent perspective and between contingent content and privileged perspective, an effective register of worldliness can be cultivated. What is also necessary is the practice of reciprocal defamiliarization, whereby the nation is rendered exilic and chronically porous in the name of the world and the world rendered amenable to contingent and provisional acts of domestication and homemaking. As the "refugee problem" unfolds on a global scale, we are being made painfully aware that refugees, immigrants, and exiles are built in to the structure of the nation-state. The horrible choice that nation-states must make—that is, to honor only the sovereign citizen or only the nonsovereign human—is a dilemma of our own making. If being is a territory, we all are aliens, but with the strict understanding that all alienation begins at home, at one's national home.

To bring this discussion "home" to the institutional context of the university as academic home, I ask, Who would or should teach world literature? I would rather that, in the name of the world, there be programs in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, and so on and that these function self-consciously in their own names than that they be subsumed under a category such as global studies or world literature. There are glaring lacunae in the curriculum that need to be filled with specific forms of knowledge and expertise. I make this suggestion not to underscore identitarian lines but to drive home the point that any undertaking on behalf of the world should be an acknowledgment and a remediation of existing historical wrongs, inequities, and imbalances and not a rhapsodic celebration of the ideal elsewhereness of the world. To keep actualizing and honoring the phenomenological objectivity of the world, we need a double-conscious epistemology that neither traps the world as our home nor renders the world radically other. I am calling for a way of knowing and doing that would be inspired by Derrida's profound formulation: "we only ever speak one language" but "we never speak only one language" (27). Thus, to be a true citizen of the world, do not inaugurate the megalomaniac program of an endless polyglot education that will eventually catch up with and outstrip the world (and don't speak "like a native," to echo the title of one of Rey Chow's many books, for in cultivating the native ideal in that way, you are perpetuating racist anthropology); instead, practice a lingualism that deconstructs all normative distinctions between the intralinguistic and the interlinguistic, the intraidentitarian and the interidentitarian—that is, liberate the accents in each language and at the same time learn other languages in the world. The purpose of this double session would be neither to get coextensive with the world by way of a program of relentless coverage nor to seek the blessing of the plenary one at the end of the pilgrimage but to enable the momentum of relationality without recourse—in other words, to retire forever the dystopia of the *unum*.

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Here are a few suggestions in the spirit of the many worlds that render the one superfluous. Commensurate with the rigorous practice of the politics of location, we should practice subject-positional humility in reading other literatures without surrendering the validity of our own subject positions. The fact that our professional and methodological subject positions are assigned does not automatically mean that these positions are straitjackets that prevent us from accessing other literatures. I think comparisons, judgments, and evaluations do need to be made, and made audaciously, but with two caveats. First, the strong exercise of our subject-positional expertise should not result in what Chandra Talpade Mohanty termed "methodological universalism" (346–49). Second, even as we judge and evaluate, we readily submit ourselves, our locations, and our subject positions to external evaluation and critique. The biblical principle, and I discuss this in "Flights of the Human as Flights from the Human," of not judging for fear of being judged needs to be in intimate active dialogue with its corollary of judging for fear of not being judged. My point is that comparatist politics is inevitable and indispensable in the context of relations among the many literatures of the world. To compare while desisting from evaluation is either an act of cowardice or a gesture in the direction of divine forbearance and omniscient paternalism. When it comes to the politics of comparison, a difference has to be made between Saul Bellow's by now overdiscussed comment on the Zulu's lack of a Tolstoy in their culture and the genuine anguish felt by many great Tamil writers of the early twentieth century that their great and ancient language did not have a writer like Virginia Woolf. Equally important, as we compare and contrast, is not to divide up literatures into major and minor, center and periphery, and canonical and vernacular and in the process produce a hierarchical taxonomy of genres, structures of feeling, and modes of analysis, interpretation, and exegesis. Finally, by way of summing up my thesis, I turn to a trenchant formulation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Globalectics* (the title is a portmanteau coinage that synthesizes *globality* and *dialectic*, *dialect*, and *idiolect*): "to read a text with the eyes of the world and to see the world with the eyes of the text." Another way of saying this is: neither the selfie of the world, nor the world as selfie.

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