

Thinking Literature across Continents

Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller

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Ranjan Ghosh is a teacher in the English department at the University of North Bengal, while J. Hillis Miller is now an Emeritus Professor at the University of California, Irvine. The idea behind *Thinking Literature across Continents* is to let the Indian and American scholar share their views on five topics: the matter and mattering of literature; poem and poetry; literature and the world; teaching literature; and ethics and literature. Ghosh and Miller write a chapter each on each of these subjects, also commenting briefly on what the other has to say. There is a short preface by Miller and a short epilogue by Ghosh.

Miller and Ghosh differ very much in their basic attitudes toward literature. Miller emphasizes the unique character of every text and every reading of a text, and he favours close reading with a focus on the rhetorical strategies applied in the text. He is unwilling to read a text except from the perspective of its own cultural and literary tradition, and he is sceptical of the idea of world literature. Miller's interest in non-Western literary cultures appears limited; he has much lecturing experience from mainland China but emphasizes that he does not really understand the country.

As is often the case, the Asian scholar has a much more impressive cross-cultural competence. Ghosh is universal in his approach, and he makes free use of Indian and Anglo-American, and to some extent also Chinese, literary references. The focus for Ghosh is literature itself (which he prefers to call "sahitya," using the originally Sanskrit word now often employed in Indian contexts for designating literature). His focus is not on literature in its empirical diversity, though, but literature as a kind of objectified power supposed to possess remarkable capacities. Ghosh has a tendency to think and write as if a different realm of being would open up, should we be capable of overcoming borders and distinctions. His writing is a flow of metaphors and quotations, while Miller's is traditional, somewhat essayistic, humanistic academic prose.

Of the five main topics in the book, "Literature and the World" may be the one that is most likely to interest readers of *Postcolonial Text*. In his chapter on this subject, entitled "More than Global," Ghosh is characteristically expansive and optimistic. He wants to transcend the local and the global to arrive at the "more than global." "On the surface," Ghosh writes, "the local and the global have their usual separateness and rupture; but in what I argue is more than global, such ruptures often become a kind of provocation to question the promise and latency of a dialogue between the two" (113). Ghosh criticizes existing globalizing literary scholarship for trying to avoid "the shock,

the adventure, and risk of bringing unfamiliar patterns and paradigms of reading into serious play.” Ghosh wants to see space created for a “dystopian unease” which “invites the anxiety of conflictive exchanges, the ‘gradient’ of comparison and difference, dismantling, most often, the enclaves of literary systems that preserve canonicity or *horizontes* of world literature” (119), and he recommends an “intra-active transculturality” with the capacity to “dilate the radius of literature’s meaning-making ability, rendering an aesthetic whose generous tenancy shall include non-European writing with cognition and recognition” (118). Personally, I find both Ghosh’s principal criticism of existing research and his own positive suggestions too vague.

In each of the chapters, some specific literary text is used more or less prominently as a point of reference. In his chapter on the more than global, Ghosh offers a reading of Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” approached via concepts taken from traditional Indian aesthetics. This is of course an interesting idea, but, as Miller points out in his companion chapter, the complex Sanskrit concepts introduced—*lila*, *ananda*, *prasada*, *rasavada*, *ānandaikaghana*, and many others—are explained so briefly that an outsider to the culture will inevitably find it difficult to grasp the substance and distinctiveness of the reading presented by Ghosh.

In Miller’s contribution on literature and the world, “Globalization and World Literature,” scepticism about the new sub-discipline of world literature is the dominant theme. Miller emphasizes the difficulty of mastering many different languages and of working with translations. He points to the further difficulty of getting an overview of the vast mass of literature involved and, where courses in world literature are concerned, the difficulty of making principled and meaningful selections. Miller also lists “the challenge of defining what is meant by *literature*” (140) as a problem for the study of world literature: “Literature, in its modern Western form, is not even three centuries old. Is it legitimate to globalize that parochial notion of what is meant by *literature*, to make it valid for all times and places, for all cultures?” (141). These objections, although not original, are certainly worth considering. However, for Miller they serve as an excuse for devaluing the possible contributions of transcultural literary study. He believes that taking these doubts seriously will “unglobalize” world literature, forcing scholars back to the activity which Miller sees as the core of literary studies, “the one-by-one reading of individual works that we have decided are examples of literature” (141).

The later part of Miller’s chapter has a different focus. There, Miller offers an interesting reading of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he (not wholly without sympathy) elucidates Nietzsche’s reasons for disagreeing with Goethe about the desirability of a *Weltliteratur*: “As far as Nietzsche is concerned, it would be better not to know, better to forget all those alien literatures that swarm around the globe. It would be better to live as Nietzsche implies Athenian Greeks did, that is, in joyful possession of a narrow local

culture that ignored all other cultures and literatures and saw them as barbarous” (150).

For me, the juxtaposition of the texts by Miller and Ghosh does not produce much synergy or much meaningful conflict—neither in these two chapters nor in the book as a whole. Miller and Ghosh tend to speak past one another. In his references to Miller’s chapters, Ghosh is polite and prone to consider himself and Miller to be in basic agreement despite differences in style and approach. Miller, for his part, makes it clear that Ghosh’s mode of thinking and writing is not at all congenial to him, while at the same time describing their common intellectual project as very fruitful for himself. But there is no real exchange of ideas, and in my view Ghosh and Miller do not say anything about literature that is at once substantial and of considerable scope.

What I benefited from most in Ghosh’s contributions were his well-informed references to specialist literature and his often fine quotes from writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Wallace Stevens. What I found most interesting in Miller’s chapters were his analyses of Stevens’s “The Motive for Metaphor” and Trollope’s *Framley Parsonage*. Miller’s complaints about the current disrespect for the humanities contained little that will surprise the book’s readers, but they were very lively and made for good reading.