

<CT>THINKING *THINKING LITERATURE ACROSS CONTINENTS* ACROSS
GENERATIONS

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Thinking Literature across Continents. By Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016; ISBN: 9780822362449.

When we were first invited to write on Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller’s coauthored *Thinking Literature across Continents*, we thought a book that “juxtaposes views of literature by two scholars”¹ might merit its own juxtaposed views in turn. This forum, of course, offers just such a juxtaposition, but in what follows, we attempt something additional. We take up Ghosh’s aspiration that the “book’s being [be] its becoming”² by writing ourselves into it, by becoming implicated “in the across.”³ For us, the most adequate response to Ghosh–Miller’s book “about enacting a communication”⁴ has been to (re)enact a communication, to dialogue in response to a dialogue, to take up what Ghosh and Miller perform as “thinking across continents” by thinking across in turn, here across generations. *Thinking Literature across Continents* unfolds in five sections on “The Matter and Mattering of Literature,” “Poem and Poetry,” “Literature and the World,” “Teaching Literature,” and “Ethics and Literature.” In each section, each author has his say (first Ghosh, then Miller, always in that order). Our sections do not correspond exactly to those in *Thinking Literature Across Continents (TLAC)*, but they attempt to take up their primary themes. They are respectively marked with our initials (RTS: Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan; RR: R. Radhakrishnan), but it is fair to say that we are both here, throughout: “Our positions and transpositions belong to us and to the other.”⁵

I. RTS: Intentions

In his final chapter in *Thinking Literature across Continents*, Ranjan Ghosh proposes that an ethical relation to literature, what he terms “the ethics of reading sahitya,” demands a critical awareness of how sahitya (which is and is other than literature), manifests and registers the entanglements of thoughts and “things in their independence,” “the mind and the body,” the “extraordinary” and the ordinary, material conditions of its production.⁶ Ghosh uses the language of “copresence,” “entanglement,” and “coconstitutive enactments” to describe what I take to be for him the nature of literature’s belonging (as opposed to being) in the world.⁷ He gives the example of the speeding up of writing and intensification of concentration brought on by a computer losing charge. If I have only five minutes to type out what I think, I will think it in five minutes, and it will be a different thought than it would have been in ten.

Here, I write in anticipation of Radha (as he is known to friends and colleagues), in anticipation of a voice that has been critical to my own thinking, a voice of and from another generation. If a generation is “all of the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively,” and, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definitions continue, “generally considered to be about thirty years,” then Radha and I, though we share genealogical and geographical origins and destinations in South India and the United States, respond to this text (and others) across a generational gap productive of different relations to theory (for instance, the “deconstruction” which Miller playfully disavows in his introductory chapter), to language (when I read Ghosh’s Sanskrit, I hear the derivative Malayalam, and I hear it in my grandmother’s voice), and undoubtedly to literature as well. Having recently earned my PhD from a department of Rhetoric, I recognize Miller’s charge that “old-fashioned literary studies” has been substituted with “cultural studies.”⁸ I, unlike Radha, resemble the remark.

“Generation” is not a term offered by Ghosh–Miller but, as I have already begun to suggest, its concerns are immanent in the text. Miller contrasts his formative years as a scholar at Johns Hopkins University (1953–1972) with a “now” that he reads as “a time of desktop computers, the Internet, iPhones, iPads, DVDs, MP3s, Facebook, Twitter, Google, video games by the thousand, television, and a global film industry.”⁹ His chapters bear the traces of that evident generational disjuncture, which conditions his view of literature’s digital itineraries as a “magic transformation.”¹⁰ I am reminded of David Scott’s elaboration of the “generational” as a “temporality [of] unease . . . marked by my sense that within the span of my own lifetime crucial aspects of the historical cognitive–political present in relation to which we conceive the *background* as well as the *horizon* of criticism have altered with bewildering speed and apparent finality.”¹¹ We might add to “background” and “horizon” the material infrastructure of criticism, including Miller’s desktop and Ghosh’s draining battery.

What might it mean to write generationally? For one, it means to write as one’s own contemporary. To some extent, we all do this—the “now” I apprehend is first the “now” I myself inhabit—but my wager here is that it is possible to read and write differently than as one’s own peer. This is to say that in reading across generations, we might (in)fuse our text (to borrow Ghosh’s term) with concepts and paradigms reflective of our different generational purchase on the past and the future, as well as the irreducible fact of our being, for a time, contemporaneous in this historical cognitive–political present.

By that same token, thinking across generations need not simply be about the location of divergent responses to the text. With Ghosh and Miller, whose first two chapters consider “the mattering of literature,” Radha and I surely agree that literature does in fact matter? It matters especially as literature continues to transform, physically into e-texts and semantically as a

referent that exceeds the literary. But I suspect that Radha and I, like Ghosh and Miller, will have different ideas about *why* literature matters (in Miller's words, because it makes a positive "contribution to empirical knowledge about the social world" and is involved "in the formation of ethical norms"¹²) and *how* (in Ghosh's words, through "a kind of withdrawal from its readers, a febrile anxiety to see itself exhausted at the hands of its readers"¹³)—as well as about the ways in which Ghosh–Miller pose and address these questions. And so we dialogue, seeking to be "*exploratory and participatory*," to engage "in an exchange that, while directed, is nevertheless relatively open-ended, unpredictable, vulnerable to contingency"¹⁴—at least until it is time to edit.

II. RR: Axioms

Since text and method surface often in the Ranjan–Hillis dialogues as point of intersection as well as divergence, let me start with the following question. What are the axioms behind each literary performance here? Do Ranjan and Hillis subscribe to the same axioms? When I ask this question, I have already double coded "literature" both as a general category as well as a specialized taxonomical rubric. To be moved by literature is to be moved both as a general amateur worldly reader in abeyance of the codes of specialization, and as a specialist practitioner of a certain ilk, persuasion, methodological school, or way of reading. Talking of axioms, a priori and founding principles, let us take the two terms "literature" and "sahitya." I think they are cognate but I do not think they are synonymous or fungible, but they work well together under the aegis of contingent translatability. Whereas "literature" is etymologically aligned with literate and literacy, (raising the question if literacy is a prerequisite for literary experience), sahitya, as Ghosh points out, is about community and togetherness. And I do not think we should ask for more. Ok, literature is linguistic, it is made of language; so it should

matter what “language” means or how it is defined and understood in each tradition. By and large, the linguistic turn holds sway in the “Western tradition,” and of course all interlocutors in this conversation have been happily interpellated by that tradition, and Saussure and his formulations are “within the true,” “dans le vrai,” to borrow from Foucault. But in Sanskrit (and here I am afraid that unlike Ranjan I am a dilettante and not a scholar, and when I say Sanskrit I am referring to a canonical verse in Kalidasa) “vag” and “artha” are conceptualized as a heteronormative indivisible union in the name of Parvathi and Parameswara. There is nothing epistemologically, figurally, or ontologically in common between this metalinguistic thesis on language and Saussurean linguistics. Does this or should this difference matter?

One of the interesting questions that Ragini raises here is that of generations: intergenerations, intragenerations, and issues of continuity and discontinuity. To posit generation as an analytic category as well as a heuristic device is to always already conceive of temporality as amenable to hermeneutic negotiations. Both diachrony and synchrony can be posited discretely and at the same time be sublated within an overarching Tradition of difference and identity, of rupture as well as continuity. So, in the context of something as specific and constructed as sahitya, what does the term “generation” signify? Is it simply chronological, which is to say, that Ranjan and I are perhaps cogenerational with Hillis coming in a rung earlier, and Ragini one temporal rung later? Or, does sahitya reconstitute the very given notion of generation based on chronology, primogeniture, what comes after and before, into a different order altogether of simultaneity based on convergence of taste, sensibility, worldview? To go back to T. S. Eliot and “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Donne and Eliot, become, in a real sense, qualitative contemporaries by way of an act of trans-temporal evaluation. And we know how magisterially Eliot constructed a genealogy and a tradition, and the mind of Europe, and in

the process valorized certain periods and movements and disdainfully “othered” certain other traditions and modes of writing and feeling.¹⁵

The question I am raising is this: how to double mark or double-historicize sahitya as both of its time, factually and chronologically speaking, and at the same time as a force or as a phenomenon fully capable of formulating an inner or perhaps formal sense of temporality that has very little to do with historicism, developmental or chronological time? This is also a question about periodization and periodizability. Was the postmodern already present in Sterne, Melville, before it became a full-blown movement and an -ism at a certain moment in time? Compared to the inner logic or rationale of Science and its relationship to time and temporality, what is the nature of literary duration? What is the relationship of disciplinary temporality to chronological temporality?

I have a question for Ghosh, especially in the context of his discussion of the passage from Rabindranath Tagore’s “Sadhana.”¹⁶ When we are in sahitya, with its notion of being together, who are we “with?” My answer, and Ghosh may want to correct me here with some asperity, is: we are with ourselves, in a heightened mode, in literature. It is a highly stylized, aesthetic, near mystical togetherness with the idea of togetherness. This not a demotic, populist, vernacular togetherness with the people, whoever they may be. If anything, as the Tagore passage, given Tagore’s Bhadrakok spiritualist aesthetics, amply demonstrates, what is valorized is a highly subjective, individualized, romantically transcendent one-ness with Nature: “[The fish] came up from the depth of its mysterious dwelling with a beautiful dancing motion . . . I felt as if I had a friendly greeting from an alien world in its own language, and it touched my heart with a flash of gladness.”¹⁷ It is a moment of epiphanic authenticity between the jivatma and the Paramatma, with nature as a physical stand-in; and there is no room here for a clamorous

populist togetherness with the Dasman. If anything, the “boatman’s world” is instantly downgraded (it is a mundane, sordid vision corrupted and contaminated by the boatman’s mercenary desire) so that “what the poet sees” may be mystified as superior and primordial. Of course, this passage could be read as a radical critique of anthropocentrism and humanist desire, but such a reading would be in bad faith for the simple reason that “what the poet sees” is innocently exculpated of its own anthropocentrism. Of anything, this passage could be interpreted as a strongly polemical advocacy of one kind of togetherness, the literary-spiritual kind with the spiritual touch of the union of the Jivatma with the Paramatma, and the debunking of a sordid, monetary, appetitive, all too mundane and worldly togetherness. What underwrites Tagore’s aesthetic is vedantic spirituality reconfigured, almost secularized as poetic ananda. Nothing right or wrong with this: all I am saying is that there is something allegorical going on here with literature as the vehicle.

We also need to keep in mind that generations are understood and calibrated within specific silos such as European tradition, or the Sanskrit classical tradition, the Islamic, the Tamil sangam tradition, and so on. In a Foucauldian specialized sense of subject-positionality, Ranjan, Hillis, Ragini, and I belong together in the same affiliated family known as “English literary critics,” even as locationally speaking, and of course I am thinking here of Adrienne Rich, we come from different locations and are therefore differently filial and umbilical. To put this somewhat hastily and reductively, when Ranjan and Hillis come together to think about literature cross-continentially, what happens to the economies as well as the scales of the “intra-” and the “inter-?” Whether the focus be on text or method, when Hillis dives hermeneutically into the European Tradition, and Ranjan into Sanskrit, are two clocks ticking coevally; or is a new clock chronologized into existence? More crucially, what are the mutual implications? Are the two

frames adjacent, always already syncretic, merely juxtaposed, a collage, a unitary composition, a split screen, contrapuntal dialogue in agreement, disagreement, or both?

Coming back to the notion of generations, what does “the time of desktops, and so on” really signify? It has been customary in the humanist tradition to think of literature as an antidote to, or as an ongoing critique of instrumentality, of instrumental reason. When we digitize humanities, “prestdigitalization” in Miller’s sense of the term, or speak of digital humanities, are we talking form or content or both; mode of production, worldview, or both? Is literature the object here of specialist or generalist attention? To ask this question in a Saidian vein, how does literature, of whichever tradition or provenance, partake of and demonstrate worldliness and at the same time perform as self-reflexive style without fuss or jargon-laden ostentation? The other question that looms large here is this: What is the tacit connection between literature and ethics, and what does the other, with or without the capital O, denote and connote in the context of literature? Why is the register of the ethical instantly available to the literary without this availability having to go through the threshold of the political? I have a problem with any endeavor at instantiating or exemplifying the ethical without adequate mediation. I have problems not only with the exaltation of ethics as First Philosophy and the exceptionalism that underwrites such an exaltation, but also with a trans-ideological humanism that freely and gratuitously recognizes in literature an innocent mode of both being and belonging.

Ragini astutely points out that to Ghosh what matters is belonging and not being. But belonging is no less fraught, no less controversial than being. Belongings are not neither natural nor inclusive. Given that literature is simultaneously a gate kept enclave based on credentials of literacy and at the same time a call toward the Open, thus rendering the very possibility of the Open a function of a specific kind of preexisting belonging, it is not at all clear that the literary

call is free of internal contradictions and incoherence. Similarly, the experiencing of literature as affect or as ethical persuasion does not neutralize or obliterate the reality that literature is a category. This belonging is not free of entailments or requirements. Literary belonging is denominational like any other belonging. Not everyone is automatically admitted. And here is the succulent paradox: any world we imagine in the spirit of utopian open-endedness is the result of a generic intervention. Even imagination is generic: scientific imagination, philosophical imagination, literary imagination. A pure unmediated imagination is literally inconceivable. We are then left with the contradiction of the term “generalist,” which, the moment it is coined turns into a generic or specialist label or genre. In becoming literary gnostics, a la Ghosh, we inevitably bring it into existence, through sheer faith and belief, a wavelength called literature which we believe will be a wavelength that in broadcasting on its own frequency will also function as the medium for the Open, the Other, the Beyond that is beyond all wavelengths and frequency and bandwidth broadcasting. So, is Literature (I am thinking of Coleridge and the Aeolian Harp and the magnificent Dejection Ode) a wavelength that like the holding Void in Heidegger de-structs itself in the name of the Open (I am thinking here of one of the Hindu temples in India where the sanctum sanctorum is a no place, just a hole in the ceiling that makes the infinity of the sky visible, thus both framing and un-framing the Infinite)? Or is it the Mother of the Father of the wavelength of all wavelengths that has the best of both ways: both a finite vehicle and an innocuous and self-consuming point of entry into Alterity, the Infinite, the primordial Open?

The underlying questions here have to do with dualism and nondualism. There is also this other question: To be a gnostic, does the “devotee” have to abandon dualism altogether? In the Hindu tradition, we have the examples of three kinds of believers—I am using the term

“believer” to make the point, and Ragini may disagree with this formulation—that Ghosh is a “believer” in and of sahitya, whereas Miller is a methodological, professional practitioner of literary criticism. The question is: is belief a leap of faith, and as a leap of faith a nonsequitur that is out of sequence with the rationale of the methodological Cogito? Or, is it conceivable to construct “belief” as the logical and rational entailment of finite practice and performance? It would have been useful to have heard Miller and Ghosh say more to each other about their respective philosophical/epistemological/theological “givens,” and how these givens dictate their disposition and performance as critics. I am thinking here of Magliola’s excellent work on phenomenology, Derrida, and Nagarjuna’s madhyamika epistemology. There is an insufficient staging of subject positionality as well as a critical rehearsal of where each is coming from.

Hillis’s humorous disavowal of deconstruction (rigorous analysis of rhetoric and rhetoricity, rather than deconstruction) that Ragini points out is not without polemical interest. In this entire conversation between the two scholars, there is a pattern of avowals and disavowals. And here I do not think of avowals or manifestos of integrity and disavowals as disingenuous. I am working on a different axis. Avowals acknowledge marking whereas disavowals elide marking. The important question, in the context of cross-continental sharing and thinking, is this: which strategy is more conducive and friendly to the project of finding common ground. In not ostentatiously foregrounding my strategy as deconstruction, or in not making a big deal of the recognition that this is a Victorian text, am I enabling a freer, more porous cross-cultural dialogue; or does it work the other way around? This is also a question about the relevance of professionalism. “Between Culture and System” would have been Edward Said’s preferred wavelength.

In the context of the cross-continental, or any cross-dialogue, would text-centric or method-centric analyses be more appropriate; and of course, the question should be raised, why centric at all? I assume that the objective of any cross conversation is not to synthesize, unify, or flatten out difference, but on the other hand, achieve a robust coeval relationality based on what I would call the nondifference of differences. Common grounds, I would argue, have to be produced through hard work; they are not just freely available. So, what does it mean to posit literature as common ground? Is this an empirical, or idealistic claim? To achieve something like a cross-continental conversation, we need variables as well as something fixed for the variables to dance and work around. Here is one scenario: fix a text, Homer, the Bible, the Mahabharata, Gilgamesh, whatever and we all read the same text from different backgrounds, locations. The other scenario is to fix a method: close reading, deconstruction, and so on, but the texts are in a constant swirl. In my understanding, privileging of the text would amount to prioritizing substance or content, whereas the latter would valorize perspective. Either we are all reading the same text with a difference; or we are all reading similarly, but with a difference. In this entire discussion, the elephant in the room is the theme of Universalism. Even as Miller and Ghosh are residents of the one and same world, culturally and methodologically speaking, are they citizens of two entirely different worlds? If yes, is this the world of relativism, or relational universality, relationality without final recourse, or what? Is the Bible, or Shakespeare, or Carnatic Music or Tales of Genji, or Icelandic sagas more amenable to universalist or relational understanding by virtue of being nondenominational, that is, despite cultural differences, than say a methodology known as deconstruction or Marxist materialist critique? This is not a question about sharing: that is one step further away. It is a question about what might constitute a persuasive and rational basis for the creation of possibilities for any kind of meaningful sharing that is based on

an ongoing dialogic relationship between the Many and the One, between perspectivism and Objective Totality.

III. RTS: Worries

I find myself wanting to begin (again) in Miller's voice, with a profession of how much I have "learned from [Radha's] part of this [dialogue]"¹⁸ and an admission that Radha's response "is challenging in a number of ways. I have read it repeatedly in order to get the hang of it as best I can."¹⁹ Reading Ghosh–Miller (and I have to note here that, for Radha, they are often Ranjan and Hillis, the first-name basis being also a generational prerogative), I was struck by the moments in which the one would directly address the other, attempt to translate the other, situate the self in terms of the other. I noticed right away that Miller assumes an interpretive role vis-à-vis Ghosh far more often than Ghosh does vis-à-vis Miller. Miller summarizes Ghosh, often, by his own admission, by "oversimplify[ing] quite a bit."²⁰ He includes within his own text explanatory e-mails sent to him by Ghosh, suggesting that the dialogue in question exceeds the text, happens around it, and perhaps even better resembles dialogue qua dialogue in such off-stage exchanges. (Indeed, Radha and I have had the same experience in writing, editing, and revising this text.) Miller even suggests some ways in which we readers might read Ghosh ("Ghosh tends to assume that a poem may be reasonable but gives the reader access to something beyond reason"²¹), and he does this, he says, in the name of "an attempt to fulfill our contract to be 'dialogical.'"²² This initially worried me a fair bit: the theorist in and of the West, Miller, explaining the inscrutable, "challenging" theorist of the East, Ghosh. My worry deepened with Miller's profession that he and Ghosh "speak for [themselves], though each is a representative, on the one hand, of one Indian way to define literature, or, on the other hand, of one U.S. way."²³ The grounds of such representation are oddly taken for granted, and the critical specificity (and

possibility) of “continent” gets lost with the avowal of cultural and national difference. If I am reading Radha correctly, this is a concern he shares, and it one that hits at the very premise of the cross-continental conversation.

But it strikes me now, after reading Radha’s response, that we might yet make something of this translational asymmetry between East and West, India and the United States. Miller attributes to Ghosh the desire for “a unified, universal, and transnational theory of literature,” while he himself purports to want only “to account inductively . . . for some what some text says and how it says it.”²⁴ Miller writes, “My conclusions aim to be based on a careful and more or less comprehensive close reading of whatever work I am discussing . . . Ghosh, on the contrary, abstracts details from the literary works he cites to support the transcultural poetics of meaning and understanding that . . . he calls the (in)fusion approach.”²⁵ Miller reads in Ghosh’s transcultural poetics an attempt to establish a program for literary (e)valuation that is in some ways consonant with Eliot’s: a program, or methodology, for the consolidation of a literary tradition that “cannot be inherited” a tradition “of the timeless as well as of the temporal,”²⁶ a program, or methodology, whereby not only Donne and Eliot but also Ghosh’s Laozi and Tagore might become, and these are Radha’s words, “qualitative contemporaries by way of an act of trans-temporal evaluation.”

Let me try to make my point more simply. Radha rightly points out the othering at the heart of Eliot’s project, and I am interested in the way that Ghosh becomes for Miller (and not the other way around) an Eliot-like figure, one with universal, if not universalist, aspirations. “Close” versus “distant” reading then appears in Miller’s prose as a methodological stand-in for the relationship between West and East, where “distant” reading of literature (i.e., that which is not “a careful and more or less comprehensive close reading of whatever work”) is associated

with abstraction, assemblage, and the across. Ironically, Ghosh describes his own project as one of deep and close involvement; his sahitya “affirms its own existence and upholds an intimacy in which the writer, the text, and the reader grow in a relationship of possession, communication, and contradiction.”²⁷ I am drawing attention to this in order to begin to address Radha’s questions about periodizing sahitya, as well as about “the axioms behind each literary performance.” For Miller, literature and sahitya are synonyms. For Radha, they are cognate and “work well together under the aegis of contingent translatability.” For Ghosh, I wonder if they are not something else altogether: terms that perform, as opposed to reconcile, the disjuncture between disciplinary and chronological temporality; terms that, not only by definition but in their contested relation, problematize literary being, belonging, and becoming.

Radha is wary (and maybe even weary) of tacit connections between literature and ethics, and of assumptions of literature’s innocence and openness to alterity. I wonder in whom and in which chapters and readings such assumptions are operative. I find myself looking to Ghosh for a response here. What kind of a “category” (Radha’s word) does literature become for Ghosh through its not-being sahitya (and vice versa)? Sahitya is of words and “yet speaks and teaches beyond words.”²⁸ It is other-wor(l)dly, sacred, and generative of secrets that close reading cannot access (here, Ghosh allows himself to read Miller as he is read: there are “levels that the poem did not allow Miller to touch and experience”²⁹). Whereas literature “exists without us,”³⁰ sahitya affirms relations of “possession, communication, and contradiction.” It is through its not-being sahitya that literature might “transmit telepathically.”³¹ It is through its not-being literature that sahitya is “thingized.”³²

All of which is to say that I wonder if literature is in fact ever posited in this text as “common ground.” It is, in that it occasions the dialogues, but it is not, in that it constantly slips

away, into sahitya, into reading strategies, into transcultural poetics, into not-deconstruction, into ethics. I take Radha to be pointing out that while “literature” is the offered center of this text, it does not hold. Despite Ghosh–Miller’s profession of “coexistence,”³³ what their dialogues lack is precisely the fixity of a constant, whether a text like the Bible or method like deconstruction, around which each variable-chapter might pivot. That being said, have we not all already “read the same texts with a difference”? Reading across: Is it even possible to read in any other way?

IV. RR: Bound and Liberated

Thank you, Ragini, for that brilliant salvo of questions, yes, worries, and insights. I have many things to say in response to your rich and provocative prompts, especially your worries that I most certainly share. But before I get into that, a little bit of a prologomenon about the nature of this conversation between you and me, a conversation that is both about itself and is at the same time addressed to the Ghosh–Miller dialogue. As I formulate my thoughts as sentences, I am keenly and pleasurably aware that I am both bound and liberated, Ragini, by your thoughts and contributions. I am responding to you, riffing off of you, and at the same time saying my own things, whatever that may mean. I am ethically concerned that what I say I ought to, as a categorical imperative, be in response to your thoughts. In other words, I should do more than merely juxtapose my thoughts with yours. I have the obligation to achieve substantive intertextuality with your text; and at the same time, I should experience my freedom to indulge in my own thinking, but as a function of my differential and perhaps dialectical interaction with your insights. Is this counterpoint, or perhaps a jugalbandhi—a duet in which we alternately take the lead, playfully, competitively, entwined in our improvisations? Again, the two terms are kind of cognate, certainly not synonymous. In this conversation with you (Mitsein and not just Dasein), I have to be more and less than me to be truly with you. There are things I want to say

that are not really invoked or provoked by your text, and there are other things that I am saying that I could not have said without your stimulation and “call.” I am pure response here. How then should I both let myself free *and* valorize this freedom as no more and no less than my response to your call? All this fuss and ado only to focus on your significant anxiety that Miller and Ghosh, each in being a representative of his tradition or practice, may have begged the very question of, dare we say, “the fusion of horizons?” And, is it possible to exorcise Heidegger and Gadamer from the phrase “fusion of horizons” even as we retain with passion the import and conceptual gravitas of the locution?

Even before we get to the possibility of the fusion of horizons, there is a prior question. Is it really the case that Ghosh and Miller are exemplary representatives of their respective traditions? Clearly, not all contemporary American or Western literary critics are deconstructionists; and not all Indian (is that who Ghosh is? I do not think so) literary critics share Ghosh’s assumptions. Each tradition is made up of heterogeneous voices and dispositions that contradict one another; and to posit disciplinary or canonical unity on behalf of either tradition amounts to stereotyping or essentializing. In the context of language and theories of language, what about the differences between Orphic and Hermetic traditions, mirrors and lamps within the West? Or for that matter, what about the differences in sensibility between theorists like De Man, Hartman, and others who tend to privilege poetry and others like Jameson and Said who prefer narrative and fiction? We need to think about acute generic differences within literature and the very different truth claims made on behalf not just of language, but of very specific generic configurations and dispositions of language. What about differences between Romantics and the Modernists when it comes to language? Moreover, given the reciprocal histories of East and West, to claim that East and West exist as discrete silos is just plain absurd.

The chances are that Ghosh as a postcolonial critic would have been much more influenced by the West and Eurocentric theory than Miller would have been touched by Rasa Theory, or Kalidasa, or Tamil Sangam poetry.

Also to be thought through critically in the Miller–Ghosh context is the relationship of the critic to the “original” writer in both traditions. To the best of my limited knowledge, the role of the critic in Indian traditions does not echo the persona of the Western critic. The critic is in no way obligated to produce her later and latter text as that “dangerous supplement” that seeks to destabilize or call into question the ideological and putative completeness of the original text. Quite to the contrary, the critic is expected to demonstrate affective and perspectival solidarity (sahridayatva to be loosely translated as “fellow-heartedness”) with the writer. Typically, criticism in Indian traditions takes the form of commentary, exegesis, appreciation, even critical adulation, and supplementation that is additive, conservative, symbiotic, and incremental, and not dangerous or subversive at all.

Yes Ragini, I share with you the concern that perhaps each of the two minds, Ghosh and Miller, in its representative exemplarity, is really not meeting with the other. If Miller were to have his arm-twisted, and Ghosh, too, how would each of them cogitate beyond their respective regions? What does Miller really think of (he clearly will not think about this within his own region) Ghosh’s belief in literature or its capacity to transcend language despite its linguistic materiality? Is there “nothing” outside the text, and what about the ontological/epistemological status of the “nothing?” Conversely, what would Ghosh have to say about Miller’s resolute practice of rigorous immanent reading? The question here is: What does your belief do to my belief or nonbelief? To put it somewhat provocatively, if you believe in, that is, think it is reasonable to do so, the return to the Caliphate, and I believe in modernist secular nationalism,

how then do we coexist meaningfully and coevally and in a state of communication with each other: that is, without negating or neutralizing each other? Why do you reject my template of secular nationalism; and why do I find your theocentric Caliphate imagining objectionable, even reprehensible? To find responses, if not binding answers to these questions, do I stay within my worldview, or do I have the obligation to enter your worldview, albeit, imaginatively, empathically? Clearly, historically speaking, the desire to return to the Caliphate is routed through colonialism, the Crusades, and much else that points to the imbrication of Christian history in Islam and vice versa. When Miller in all honesty states where the differences lie between his critical disposition and Ghosh's, is he also claiming that there exists a relationship of untraversable incommensurability between the two regimes? Would Miller, when he has his arm twisted, cry out, "Ouch, yes I have to confess that I find Ghosh's claims on behalf of literature and literary revelation to be erroneous and indefensible, perhaps exotic," or would he just say that Ghosh's beliefs are "unthinkable" within Miller's worldview? Two very different positions to take.

I too, like Ragini, as reader of the Ghosh–Miller text, have been torn between two impulses: to read each chapter and look for instances of symptomatic, conscious or unconscious self-disclosure by each critic, or to read the text holistically. Furthermore, I am also trying to see if there is any connection or continuity between the discrete chapters and the sections where each author is overtly addressing the practice of the other. I am afraid, and correct me if I am wrong Ragini, there is a disconnect. My concern, for lack of a stichomythic dialogic chapter or two full of raucous, infelicitous mutual interruptions, is that each chapter functions as a display and performance of the self in the absence of the other, but with the utmost aplomb and confidence that the next chapter will belong fully and exclusively to the other. How wonderfully useful it

would have been to have devoted a long dialogic chapter where each author chooses to dwell ecstatically and in exotopic fashion in the domain of the other with rousing discussions and disagreements about phenomenology, ontology, the reality of the text, language and meaning, language and silence, words and beyond, nothing and the something, Advaita, Buddha, Derrida, Heidegger, Tagore, Goethe, and much more, all in rampant and no holds barred intertextual relationality. I would love to have a clearer sense both of the intersections and the divergences: where they are ontological and where epistemological, where they are nominal and where real, where they are discursive and where primordial or originary, where they are axiomatic and where merely modal, and so on.

A final word in deep and grateful appreciation of Ghosh's verbal and processual advocacy of "the differencing of difference," rather than a smug endorsement of Difference as an a priori. I also value the spirit of infusion that in my reading successfully avoids the pitfalls of the One-Many binary. Any thinking across informed by the spirit of infusion does not seek the unicity of the One. Whether the One is conceived of as the One to Come, or the One to be restored by way of ontological nostalgia, the Benjaminian prelapsarian "shattered vessel" to be pieced back as a whole, Ghosh's infusional vision resolutely avoids the seduction as well as the fallacy of the One, and invokes instead the spatiality of the across to enable multilateral, multidirectional, communication emanating from heterogeneous locations and subject positions in active repudiation of the myths of incompatibility and incommensurability.

V. RTS: Beyond Juxtaposition

Are the Ghosh–Miller dialogues really dialogues? For that matter, is this review-exchange really a dialogue? The risk of the chapter by chapter format or, in our case, the section by section format is, as Radha notes, that each part then functions "as a display and performance

of the self in the absence of the other,” as opposed to in the *presence* of, as opposed to *with*, as opposed to in a relation of contamination, mutual imbrication, involvement, and vulnerability. Reading Radha, I am reminded that openness to the other is not a sufficient precondition for interlocution. It is possible to be open and yet not receptive, to hear but not to listen, to acknowledge but not, finally, to admit within. “I have to be more and less than me to be truly with you,” Radha writes. This, it seems to me, beautifully captures the aspiration of the dialogic: not only to encounter the other of and within the self (Ghosh quotes Jean-Luc Nancy on the “[infinite exposure] to the ‘otherness’ of our own being”³⁴), or the self in and of the other, but rather to move beyond relations of inclusion/exclusion and inside/outside toward practices of self-reinvention, reformation, and revision.

Put differently, my hunch is that what a dialogue requires is the willingness to suspend the impulse for self-preservation. To take up Radha’s question about the coexistence of seemingly incompatible beliefs (belief in the return to the Caliphate, on the one hand, and belief in modernist secular nationalism, on the other), maybe communication, to say nothing of communion, requires that we not only *not* negate or neutralize each other, but that we actually give up our-selves. This giving up might firstly involve the acknowledgment that, in Donna Haraway’s words, “we are not immediately present to ourselves.”³⁵ Then, an admission that my “belief” is never mine alone. Then, the realization that “I” have not the power to negate “you.” Also, that if we are to be contemporaries (which is to say, contemporaneous with one another), I not only have to be more than and less than a self to be with you, but I also have to be before, with, and after you, with you at once in the past, present, and future of this exchange. And if I successfully do each of these things, perhaps then I might be able, to return to one of the initial goals I proposed for this dialogue, to read and write differently than as my own peer.

Are the Ghosh–Miller dialogues dialogues? I do believe it is a fair question (certainly, it is one that this review-dialogue seeks to both interrogate and dramatize), but I do not think we need to adjudicate the matter. It is enough that Ghosh and Miller *desire* dialogue; they desire the *across*; they seem to want to take up Haraway’s caution that “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.”³⁶ I am not convinced that *TLAC* has absorbed the lessons of “limited location” and “situated knowledges,” but the desires for interlocution through and from *location* are plain. In this light, Ghosh’s closing words in the Epilogue are striking. There, he qualifies his initial aims for the book and seems to settle for “stirring the pot,” for the book’s having allowed “things to grow in silence.”³⁷ Ghosh writes: “Perhaps this silence is what the book urges on its readers, triggering their own explorative ways; the meditation that the book is intended to generate effectuates the stirring of continents and the silences that such stirrings have left behind rather unavoidably for readerly ascension and tenancy.”³⁸

Radha raises at various points the question of the agency of language—a question that undergirds all discussions of literature and ethics and of literature’s worlding capacities—and I am curious now to think that question in relation to this final offering from Ghosh. If language worlds and yet cannot, by some accounts anyway, access the Real, then what does silence do, or world? Might we read “the silences [left behind by] the stirring of continents” as something akin to nonknowledge, maybe even to V. S. Naipaul’s “areas of darkness”? In Ghosh’s chapter on pedagogy, “Reinventing the Teaching Machine,” he asks of Miller a striking question about the requisite knowledge for encountering a work of literature: “But is our knowing the kind of bird the rook is or the kind of flower daffodils are always insurmountably essential to the understanding of a poem?”³⁹ Readers of postcolonial literature in particular know that the daffodil is not just any kind of flower, and that, even if knowing the daffodil is not essential to

the understanding of a poem, not-knowing the daffodil has been essential to the writing and reading of the postcolonial experience. For example, Jamaica Kincaid's narrator in *Lucy*, who in her late teens leaves the West Indies to become an American au pair, is menaced by daffodils: "I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was . . . a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School . . . then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full . . . everybody stood up and applauded . . . they told me how nicely I had pronounced every word . . . The night after . . . I dreamt . . . that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget."⁴⁰

This is the history that Ghosh is writing about when he says that "the sociocultural displacement of a text in a classroom is a reality that the reading and experience of literature have to encounter."⁴⁰ It is a history of displacement and absence, but also one of enforced silences, muted tongues, imposed languages, foreign imaginaries, gate-kept canons, and fetishized pronunciations. I am now wondering as I write this if what I have been responding to all along is Radha's casual description of Ghosh as a "postcolonial critic." Would Ghosh chafe against this description? (Radha himself, via email, suggests to me that it is a description he may want to retract.) Where is the postcolonial in this text, whether as theoretical rubric, apparatus, methodology, or politics? What would Ghosh say back to Miller, for whom the postcolonial seems primarily to figure as part of a broader "social studies" movement taking over literature departments?⁴¹ I am now, belatedly (but then, is that not the temporality of postcolonial intervention?), perplexed that the postcolonial does not figure robustly in *TLAC*, and that thinking literature across continents did not require grappling more explicitly with how certain literatures were moved across continents in the first place. Is this a generational anxiety, one attributable to the fact that I, a junior scholar, am still aspiring to the postcolonial, while my

elders and betters are staking claim to the world? Or is the forgetting of the postcolonial here a form of necessary violence, a withdrawal that enables enlargement, “a retrojection whose void is in fullness”⁴² and which in fact enables Ghosh–Miller’s provisional and particular across?

Ghosh may not be a postcolonial critic, but he might be an Indian one, at least according to the identitarian terms established by the text. What, finally, does this mean? Radha has pointed out that the role of the critic differs in Indian and Western traditions; the role of the Indian critic is to “demonstrate fellow-heartedness” with the writer, as opposed to “destabilizing” the original text. That these disparate critical dispositions can be (and have long been) articulated as “Eastern” and “Western”—as opposed to, for instance, sympathetic versus symptomatic—is what warrants Ghosh–Miller’s project in *Thinking Literature Across Continents*. A supposition of difference necessarily undergirds the attempt to write across it. Which brings us back to the problem of communication. Over and above the question of from *where* we speak is the fact of our having to enact—critically, provisionally, faithfully, and together—some *how*.

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Notes

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- ¹ Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), vii.
- ² *Ibid.*, 261.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 220–21.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ¹¹ David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 157–81; 158.
- ¹² Ghosh and Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, 50.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ¹⁴ Scott, “The Temporality of Generations,” 159.
- ¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36–42.
- ¹⁶ Ghosh and Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, 27.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 233.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ²⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 37.
- ²⁷ Ghosh and Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, 43.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 222.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 260.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³⁵ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99; 585.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 590.
- ³⁷ Ghosh and Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, 260.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 260–61.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ⁴⁰ Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990): 17–18.
- ⁴⁰ Ghosh and Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, 173.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 229.