

WORLD POETRY, WITHOUT BAEDEKER: THE VERY IDEA

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Poetry is perhaps a more neglected genre of world literature than others, probably because poetry does not translate well. Poetry seems to be stubbornly rooted in its native language and embedded in its original cultural context. Thus, it is paradoxical to speak of world poetry as being uprooted or rootlessly “generic,” as some sceptics have claimed. But there is a sense in which poetry is one, even though languages are many, as the Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky asserts. World poetry has been described and evoked as international, transnational, postcolonial, global, or planetary. All these labels capture some aspects of what world poetry might be, yet they are not quite the same as what is meant by “world poetry.”

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Ezra Pound was one of the first Anglo-American poets in the twentieth century to envisage a “world poetry.” Pound began his career as a poet with the determination, as he recalled in 1913, that he would try to know what counted as poetry anywhere by finding out what part of poetry “could *not be lost* by translation” (“How I Began” 707; emphasis in original) and also whatever was unique to each language. In 1915, he again affirmed his Goethean conception of literature as involving a criticism of excellence “based on world-poetry” (*Literary Essays* 225). This “world” perspective of poetry is not only Goethean, but also Arnoldian in some respects. Matthew Arnold had defended the idea of culture as “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (5). Arnold saw the purpose of his 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy* as “to recommend culture as [...] a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically” (5). Pound’s conception of the “world” was wider and more specific than Arnold’s, however. In 1914, he recognized that “our opportunity is greater than Leonardo’s:

we have more aliment, we have not one classic tradition to revivify, we have China and Egypt, and the unknown lands lying upon the roof of the world—Khotan, Karashar and Kan-su” (*Literary Essays* 224). In this, Pound was also heir to a perception of Henry James. Two years before Arnold published *Culture and Anarchy*, James, in a September 1867 letter to T.S. Perry, highlighted the advantages of being born American:

it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose & assimilate and in short (aesthetically &c) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a regret & a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. (James 23)

Indeed, for Arnold, James, and Pound, the need to become more “worldly” comes out of a deeper concern about one’s intellectual disposition. Arnold’s idea is that provincialism can be avoided by cultivating an expansiveness of mind and outlook. James’s idea is that the American writer is uniquely positioned to fuse and recreate the cultures of the world. Similarly, Pound’s idea of “world-poetry” is based on his sense of the great variety and the transcultural universality of the world’s best poetic traditions. Pound was a poet in English, but as an American, he was not solely bound by “English” tradition. For Pound, the emerging American poet, establishing his own foothold in the metropolitan literary centre of London, “world-poetry,” as the best poetry that has been made and validated in the world, also implicitly claimed to go beyond the metropolitan and imperial (English) centredness. This English centredness that Pound was implicitly challenging was, in essence, the insularity Arnold was criticizing in *Culture and Anarchy*. Like Pound, W.B. Yeats also recognized the need to champion, incorporate, and appropriate what is good poetry from the margins of Empire and beyond it. Both Yeats and Pound championed the poetry of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and were enthusiastic about Japanese Noh drama and Chinese Tang poetry. If Pound was brilliant in identifying two major issues in the conception of world poetry—whatever “could *not be lost* by translation” and whatever was unique to each language—what matters also is the dynamic tension between these two issues, what evokes universal resonance and prompts universal recognition but may remain as something singular and unique, regardless of how accessible it may be.

First, we need to look at the question of English-language poetry as world poetry. In 1961, American critic and literary historian Roy Harvey Pearce predicted that “there will be no American poetry in the next half-century”; instead, “it will be a new international poetry” (433). Pearce may have overlooked the complexity inherent in an “international poetry”; yet, he has highlighted the limits of considering poetry only in national terms. Pearce might be hinting at the hybrid, cosmopolitan, or transcultural nature of American poetry of the future. Throughout the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, English became a global language, an imperial language, a dominant language, and indeed a world language, for better or worse. Yet it cannot be denied that English-language poetry has in some ways come to serve as *de facto* world poetry, as the most hybrid and inclusive body of world poetry. In fact, English-language poetry (English, Scottish, Irish, American, Canadian, Australian, Indian, Caribbean, South African, etc.) is already in large part a world poetry, or approaching its condition. But even within this broad framework of English-language poetry, there is still the felt or perceived “minor” status of regional poetics such as Irish or Caribbean within the “major” canon of the English-language mainstream. What Omaar Hena has called “global Anglophone poetry” has already been saturated or infused with elements from its multifarious interactions with the poetics and poetics of the world. English-speaking poetry is thus already polycentric and cannot be subsumed under the dichotomous model of the imperial centre versus the colonial periphery. The hybrid nature of English has been recognized as a depository for many national or regional literatures with distinctive inflections. Yet what seems to have happened is a dual move, escalating the dominance of what linguistically remains, in large part, one language precisely through a continuous absorption and adaptation of multiple cultural elements. However, to highlight the *de facto* centrality of global Anglophone poetry is not to justify its complacency or superiority or to perpetuate its dominance. There are of course other influential language-based spheres of poetry with a global reach such as the Francophone and the Sinophone, to name just two. This is to acknowledge such existing spheres of poetry as among the global resources in the development of a true world poetry to come.

In this process, we end up with a constant drive, amplifying the horizons by redefining poetry beyond local terms. From cross-cultural to transcultural, from transnational to cosmopolitan, from global to planetary, the list of labels proliferates. Yet, with this seeming escalation of scale, conceptual boundaries merge and are transgressed, notions are scrambled, but the “world” still remains an unsurpassable horizon. The world is a horizon that has depth, or that which “withdraws” as you approach it; it becomes less of a substantive notion, and is always a matter of worlding or re-worlding. The world is not a place one can reach, nor is it a simple moving target. Going *toward* the world is always entangled in the essential condition of being always already *in* the world. This is why to complicate the idea of “world poetry” is at the same time to make it more problematic than it is. Local and singular elements have become defining elements of the “world.” These elements have often been explored in a predominantly spatial or geographical conception of poetry and poetics. But to what extent can a more temporal conception of poetry and poetics be realized without cancelling out these signs of rootedness? At what point is this geographical and spatial conception not a “vertical” worlding?

Currently, there are at least three main operative connotations of world poetry: (1) the sum total of all national or regional poetics; (2) international poetry in circulation and translation, historical and contemporary; (3) a more restrictive canonical

status bestowed upon poets and poetry of international reputation. The term *world poetry* does not innocently mean a coherent body of literature; yet, recognizing its numerous sources or components does not necessarily imply recognizing its problematics. *Poetics*, which is central to the idea of world poetry, has often been tied to Western theories; as far as the politics of canon formation is concerned, *world poetry* is usually used to mean poetry of the “rest of the world” apart from Anglo-American or Euro-American poetry. However, what needs to be recognized is that world poetry does not merely supply raw untheorized material for a western-dominated poetics. Rather, world poetry needs to be seen as an active mode or means of rethinking and expanding poetics that has been defined by any single or dominant literary tradition.

This understanding helps us to see in Pound an example of taking world poetry as poetry that thinks the world by projecting or inscribing or thematizing it in poetry. World poetry becomes a categorial form to access, identify, and reconfigure a reality. In this sense, *world* can embrace the processes and experiential spaces that terms such as *globe* fail to imply. Jean-Luc Nancy makes an apt distinction: “the stance of the world is the experience it makes of itself” (43). Hence, its perspective can only be from within itself and cannot “occupy a place overlooking itself” (Nancy 43). In this perspective, to participate in the discourse of world poetry is to register the loss of the plenitude entailed by our inability to participate in all the other viewpoints embodied in world poetry. To say the least, “world poetry” will not just enable us to recognize the presence of the world in national works, but our existential projection into the world as well. It is both the arena of the world and the world as arena.

What emerges from the problematics of world poetry is a paradox of plenitude and singularity, one constantly driving towards and, in a way, resuscitating the other. But this paradox also challenges us to see things in qualitative rather than simply in quantitative terms. Canonization and the demand for ethnographic authenticity are cases in point. A necessary condition for such authenticity to be knowable to the rest of the world is for it to remain so identified. Another problem in the translation, reception, and evaluation of non-Western poetry is the dominant preference for political context and topicality over aesthetic and poetic values. Such canonization of/in world poetry is a political reading, or a reading tied to a political point of view. This is not to invalidate political readings of world poetry, but to affirm the unboundness of the potential force and power of world poetry to break out of particular national and political identities. Demand for recognition indicates a disguised presupposition of Eurocentrism. There is an incongruity between world poetry defined as inclusive and world poetry as a token of recognition. But this paradox of plenitude and singularity offers terms for us to rethink these two aspects fundamentally, or to reflect on our inherent modes of conceiving these aspects so as to articulate a new paradox of world poetics. If this paradox of plenitude and singularity is identified largely in descriptive terms, the formulation of a new paradox of world poetics would be primarily in analytical and evaluative terms.

For example, a recognition of Chinese poetry as Chinese in its uniqueness and

difference is at the same time a recognition as universal and shareable (precisely transcending mere “Chineseness”), but to make this dual recognition possible, one has to regard it simultaneously as *both* different and common. Recognition is not necessarily a consequence of being translated into a powerful language such as English. The fact of a work being translated is not the same as its being accepted or valourized or consecrated as a work of world literature. Translation or accessibility do not necessarily translate into recognition as world literature. This is to say that, even without circulation or before circulation, Chinese poetry is necessarily already (part of) world poetry, by definition, albeit still waiting to be discovered, translated, and read *as* world poetry. Is there another criterion or definition that is more evaluative? World poetics is thus both hermeneutic (mutually elucidating and illuminating) and constructive-productive (creating new worlds), enlarging and expanding our horizons and ways of seeing, doing, and being.

It is impossible, however, to speak of world poetry without addressing the nature and role of national traditions. In the idea of world poetry, plenitude is not a loss to be lamented, but a sign of modernity that calls for the idea of world poetry. What Nietzsche calls the “age of comparison” is an age in which tradition has less power over people, an age characterized by “outward restlessness, their mingling together with one another, the polyphony of their endeavours” (24). This relativization of all artistic styles, as well as “all the stages and genres of morality, custom, culture” (Nietzsche 24) deterritorializes them from place and time and renders them to “be compared and experienced side by side” (Nietzsche 24). Indeed, the worlding of world poetry is precisely the emptying out of one’s cultural embeddedness; it could offer an emergent episteme rather than a new paradigm that merely takes the “world” as a spatial or geopolitical category. This position should allow Anglophone and European literary traditions to be taken as (merely) one element among many in world literature, but the paramount need is to break with identity thinking. World literature is, in this sense, a cultivation of non-identity or non-identity thinking that recognizes how world and nation are already imbricated within each other. The normative force of world literature resides in the fact that the world is not (just) spatial, but needs to be construed and constructed philosophically: it is a world-making or worlding activity. This is why experimental poetry can function in an exemplary way as world poetry in the sense defined here, constantly producing new epistemes of worlding, invigorating the moment but without solidifying itself into a new paradigm, nor reifying itself into a fixed reality of the world. Experimental poetry is capable of generating images of the world in constant mutation and permutation. It is the pivotal moment or bridge between literary traditions and the world’s future. The contemporary Chinese poet Xi Chuan offers an example to illustrate this point in his essay “The Tradition This Instant.” In his conception, tradition inspires new literature beyond the existing modes, thereby creating new (world) literature. World literature is the constantly renewed and reemerging literature of all such tradition-inspired and other-stimulated works. Xi Chuan would not be possible without foreign and

international influence and orientation, without the renewing of Chinese tradition. The contemporary Chinese poet needs ancient Chinese poetry in order to recreate the tradition, that is, to create new literature. In this endeavour, “Cross-pollination is more important than maintaining a strict linear accession” (Xi 253). Tradition is redefined as the reimagining of the present vis-à-vis the world: “Only by re-imagining the world and our lives through tradition will we be able to confront the worlds and lives imagined by other cultures, particularly when those other traditions have borrowed elements of Chinese culture, and in this way engage in real dialogue with the rest of the world—a dialogue with the world that is ultimately a dialogue with ourselves” (Xi 253). Xi Chuan’s formulation prompts us to consider in more interactive terms both the aesthetics and ethics of this new world poetry or common poetics.

World poetry, therefore, is not an aggregation or collection of existing poetics, but it contrives, develops, and coexists by way of drawing sustenance from, interacting with, and contributing to other poetics. This is beyond simple denigration or dismissal of the literature of dominant nations or languages or idioms as part of the heritage of world poetry. Here, the *world* in world poetry comes in the sense of both spatial and temporal focalization—a new conjunction of the whole world—by deterritorializing national poetics. Through the (re)worlding activity of world poetry, the putative unity of the world as conceived and constructed by dominant cultures and traditions is deconstructed, fragmented, and reconstructed on other levels of becoming. World poetry should reconstitute the very frames of perception. In this conception, the otherness of other cultures and of the world is already a reconfiguration of the world. The otherness of the world is reconfigured when a poem is read differently in a different language. In this othering of the world, the poem becomes a “world poem.” World poetry uncovers much that is not really embedded, but is inaccessible or unknowable. World poetry presupposes an elsewhere not yet contained by one’s cognitive grasp or mental mapping, an elsewhere that is intrinsically unapproachable and inaccessible. World poetry is the current and future horizon of poetry, unsubsumable under the unity of oneness. At any rate, the world is always much larger, deeper, and more complex than what or how we think or grasp of it, much more than we can access it. This is no less true of what we call “world poetry.”

On the other hand, world poetry will always imply that one’s own potential is not—and has not been—fully realized, and needs new and different perspectives of oneself as well as others. World poetry itself is not fully accessible, since it always exceeds relations. Moreover, “world literature” has only limited access to the world that eludes us. Fundamentally, we need to think of the potential unity of the world as a problem. This is why, while translated poetry can enable and stimulate domestic poetry, we need to ask more searching questions about its real meaning or function in its new literary and cultural contexts in relation to its original context. Translation is never transparent, but always mediating and transformative. World poetry is both what is lost and what is gained in translation from particular languages and traditions; both impossible translation and a yearning for a world poetry to come. What

I am arguing for, therefore, is an interactive model of world poetry, neither a static concept nor a unifying one. Correspondingly, one essential condition of becoming or being a “world poet” is to be simultaneously rooted in one’s own native language and standing outside or looking beyond the language of one’s own nation and tradition.

This is not only about the fact that world poetry requires the condition and practice of deterritorialization. This also means a reterritorialization, insofar as deterritorialization enables or forces us to go beyond our more or less fixed cultural locations and perspectives, and endows us with a more acute awareness of the world’s diversity, as well as an increasing openness not just to cultural difference but also, more importantly, to what is truly common and universal beyond localities and periods. The mobility and flexibility of deterritorialization allow an expansive field of world poetry. Deterritorialization is a necessary psychocultural disorientation, as a fundamental mode of experiencing contingency and freedom as a continuous oscillation between embeddedness and disorientation.

Conceptualizing world poetry also raises the questions of how the past, present, and future are co-configured as aesthetic terms, and of whether they are related as a continuum or a dynamic genealogy, which, *à la* Thomas Carlyle, are “the lineal [Carlyle’s spelling] children of one another” (*Past and Present* 51). The idea of world poetry is given through each poem in a specific language, but no single work or poem is adequate for this idea. The ongoing totalization of world poetry is necessarily open and incomplete. This is not only a retrospective conditioning, but a retroactive event as well. An observation by Walter Benjamin may help articulate this point: works of art “integrate their fore-history as well as their after-history; and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous process of change” (261). For Benjamin, the afterlife of a work (re)constitutes it to realize its potential more fully in a retrospective and retroactive way. A poem in this Benjaminian sense is the translation of a prior, never fully realized and realizable pure poem. By the same token, this is also a forward-looking movement, because behind a poem in a particular language, there is a pure poem that exists in a language beyond languages. Thus, a poem is both retrospective and future-oriented.

A possible model of world poetry would thus be a poetry that is in process and continuously emerging, both in historical and political terms. In a fundamental sense, national poetics do not straightforwardly contribute to an already existing world poetry, since national or particular language-based poetics are already involved in interactive relationships and practices of exchange, influence, reciprocal learning, and cross-fertilization that usher in the very process of the becoming of world poetry. The all-encompassing process of becoming-world-poetry is in fact both prior and posterior to particular poetics, in that world poetry is both *projective* in its becoming and *retrospective* in its incorporation and reconfiguration of particular poetics. Thus, the projective and retrospective functions of becoming-world-poetry are closely interwoven, and world poetry is a plurality of the articulations of the poetic. The idea of world poetry is perhaps always unified too *prematurely*. As much as world

poetry is a horizon of possibility and responsiveness, the essence of world poetry lies in its essential constitutive excess beyond its current relations. World poetry is the constitutive element of a poem to exceed what it currently is, so that it may be more fully realized in circulation, reception, interpretation, and translation.

This is also to argue that the *world* in world poetry becomes a non-place from which, paradoxically, the real world discloses and opens up itself for us differently, again and again. This non-place functions as a countervailing force against exclusive claims of identity and identity-thinking. Poetry unmakes the world as it is (given) and remakes it in the light of newly discovered possibilities. World poetry offers a model of poetic practice as a virtual space or mode of writing in which the real may present itself and be made available to any reader in any language. This does not contradict the proposition that world poetry is concerned with forms of common understanding and feeling on the basis of the mutual engagement of diverse poetic ideas and traditions. World poetics should be driven by problems and problematics, and not only for the sake of inclusiveness and comparability. In other words, the putative certainty of the world's reference or referentiality becomes uncertain and has to be rethought and reconstituted. It is essential not to reduce the plurality of worlds to a/the unity of the actual current world. Plural worlds, as actually existing worlds, constitute the very world in which these plural worlds exist and in which we conceive of them. Different worlds of poetry may be taken as one, and the one world as many. As Nelson Goodman has reminded us, we need both the unity of one world and the plurality of actual worlds; "whether one or many depends on the way of taking" (2). Thus, reflecting on "world poetics" has a larger implication for rethinking the "poetics of the world(ing)." The distinction between these two concepts points to a double connotation of world poetics: poetics as existing in different traditions of the world versus a unifying poetics comprised of and comprehending all the poetic traditions of the world. World poetics is about how different versions of what poetry is, or has been, lead to new visions of what poetry can be. World poetry draws upon particular poetics without idealizing any particular poetic language or tradition. To be a world poet, or to become one, is to participate directly in the universal function of poetry and to perform directly and singularly in front of the world audience, to "leap" out of one's particular linguistic and national identity in order to participate directly in the transcultural and transnational universality of poetic making and unmaking. This may be the only way to break out of Eurocentrism or any other ethnocentrism.

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