

Poetry – Universal? Progressively So? On World Poetry

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Abstract:

The difficulty of translating poetry from one language into another is well known. But current discussions of “world literature” have their roots in a German Romantic ideal of “progressive universal poetry” that acknowledged, not sidestepped, those difficulties. Through a series of examples of interlinguistic contact and appropriation of poetic models across languages—a process sometimes akin to historical reproduction, sometimes akin to sampling—a model for the circulation of poetry in international space is proposed.

Keywords: world poetry, translation, Goethe, global English, prosody

The conversation about “world literature,” as framed by Franco Moretti’s 2000 essay, David Damrosch’s 2003 book, and the increasingly convenient consultation of vast text databases, has been centered on the novel, not poetry—and perhaps this is understandable, given the much larger readership today for fiction (even highbrow fiction) than for poetry.¹ But no such gap was implicit in the initial formulation of the “world literature” idea.

Goethe’s observations on world literature are well known.

I am more and more convinced, Goethe continued, that poetry is a common possession of mankind [*daß die Poesie ein Gemeingut der Menschheit ist*], revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. ... [W]e Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term;

¹ See also Jockers, Matthew. *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach (Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi 22-23).

Forty years before Goethe's reported remarks on *Weltliteratur* launched a scholarly industry sometimes treated as identical with comparative literature, Friedrich Schlegel defined the scope of a "progressive universal poetry" in the *Athenaeum*, a little journal full of manifesto-like fragments that he published together with his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel. Goethe's "Gemeingut der Menschheit" (common property of humankind) must have alluded to Schlegel's ideal:

Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry [*Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie*]. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. ... It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole world around it, an image of the age. ... The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a genre, the only one that is, as it were, poetry itself [*Die romantische Dichtart ist die einzige, die mehr als Art, und gleichsam die Dichtkunst selbst ist*]: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.²

From the two kinds of universality in play here, one can derive two ways of talking about "world poetry." Goethe is saying "world" in the sense of admitting the literary traditions of all countries and languages to a vast library or conversation. Geography is a precondition for that conversation (indeed the trigger for his talk with Eckermann on January 31, 1827 was a translated Chinese novel). Schlegel is describing a potential future state of romantic poetry, in which it has achieved, or is progressively on the way to achieving, "universality" in the sense of combining or connecting all possible expressive forms, from prose to verse, rhetoric to philosophy, sighs to epics, into one aesthetic commodious and flexible enough to give them all sense. Helpfully, Schlegel also comments that "a definition of poetry can only specify what it should be, not what it actually was or is."³ Perhaps then Goethe's cosmopolitan ideal of multinational reading only tends toward the recognition of the "common possession of humanity" that is poetry on the worldwide scale, yet will eventually result in something like Schlegel's "progressive universal poetry." On condition, that is, that we learn to "look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us."

Such was the state of the art in 1798 and 1827. To speak of the ambitions of the present time, let me start from a book I like and appreciate unfeignedly, though not without limit: Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics*. If you have read this book, you will know that its actual scope is examples of "transnational poetry" in English: poems by American, Canadian, Irish, Nigerian, Kashmiri, Jamaican, Australian, etc., poets, some of whom have immigrated to an English-speaking country from elsewhere, some of whom are familiar with languages other than English, but all of whom write their poems in English. Ramazani notes this fact but waves it away for the purposes of his discussion: "in an English department in a predominantly English-speaking country, the teacher devising a poetry syllabus cannot usually presume student competence in multiple languages." The next best thing for

2 (Schlegel 114-15). My understanding of the passage is framed and influenced by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), where it appears on p. 112.

3 *Athenäums-Fragmente* 114; *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente*, p. 114.

Ramazani (19-20) is to show how “the English language... is a world language for poets”. The meaning of “transnational” here thus depends on the narrow meaning of a “nation” as an entity that has borders and issues passports to individuals. I submit that the demonstration reveals rather how little that kind of “nation” matters in the perspective of a literary history longer and broader than the two centuries of the British Empire. We need to think about getting over the English-language watershed, and mapping it in reference to other transnational watersheds, as the first step to doing anything that merits the title “global.”

First, we need a better theory, and better examples, of what transits between poetic “nations.” This means mapping not geographical or passport nations but linguistic ones. We can consider most of the British Isles, North America, the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, a large part of Africa, some bits of Asia, etc., to be one nation because poets read one another across this vast zone without major obstacles; similarly there’s the zone of Spanish-language poetry, almost as vast; French, too; and so on. This is so obvious it’s almost painful to say it in public. Once we redefine the poetic “nation” as existing within the boundary of a *language*, then Ramazani’s case studies, valuable though they be for indicating the variety of dialect and experience within the English verbal nation, do not show much attention to inputs from other verbal nations, not even those so close to ours as the French and Spanish ones. (Quotations from Asian languages are the exception; but these figure in Ramazani’s account as sources of thematic material alone.)

There’s a reason for this, the vaunted and wonted “provinciality” of poetry, its language-specificity. We could go a step further here by considering an observation by Roman Jakobson, that the rules of verse production in any language are rooted in the phonemics and prosody of that language, without being identical to them. They may, indeed, suspend certain rules and categories, but not all or just any of them:

Any analysis of poetic sound texture must consistently take into account the phonological structure of the given language and, beside the overall code, the hierarchy of phonological distinctions in the given poetic convention as well. Thus the approximate rhymes used by Slavic peoples in oral and in some stages of written tradition admit unlike consonants in the rhyming members... but, as Nitch noticed, no mutual correspondence between voiced and voiceless consonants is allowed... In the songs of some American Indian peoples... the phonemic distinction between voiced and voiceless plosives and between them and nasals is replaced by a free variation, whereas the distinction between labials, dentals, velars, and palatals is rigorously maintained (Jakobson 88-89).

Thus, the features that most distinguish one language from the other languages around it tend to become the basis of codified poetic convention in the poetry of that language, a convention that works as a language of its own and, through this selection and emphasis of particular features, distinguishes the poetic variant of a certain language perhaps even more acutely from other languages than its prose variant.

Is this providence of some kind, or the song of a national soul, that poetry in English exaggerates the Englishness of English in the same way that poetry in Russian exaggerates the Russianness of Russian? No, it’s because the features exploited for poetic purposes have become salient and available for artistic use through contact and contrast with other languages. Chinese classical prosody was transformed by contact with the languages of India from the fifth century onwards. Basic rules and effects of Chinese verse, features of the poems widely thought to be quintessentially and irreplaceably Chinese, could not have been formulated before Chinese-speakers had heard Sanskrit, an unrelated and strongly different language (Mair and Mei 375-470).

Similarly, English prosody was transformed by contact with Latin and French, and so on. How

did this happen? It's not at all the case that English prosody became identical to French prosody after the Norman Conquest. Rather, certain features of English that distinguish it from French, such as stress accent and the role of unstressed syllables, having been secondary in the conventions of alliterative verse, now took on a new set of functions in their new-found relationship to the syllabic French verse system.

To understand this sort of thing, one needs to understand, at a minimum, how French prosody works; how English prosody at the time of contact or importation worked; then how French prosody seemed to work to English-speakers (which may not be the same thing as how French prosody works for French-speakers); then how the effects of one registered on the other. Contact between languages in verse form is a contact not between objects seen in the positivist style, but between forms of reflexivity.

There has been laudable attention paid in recent years to prosody, rhythm, meter, whatever you want to call it, in English. But the discussion has too often been provincial. This is exceptionally unfortunate. Ezra Pound ("The Approach to Paris," 1:154) with his customary abruptness stated in 1913 that "The history of English poetic glory is a history of successful steals from the French." And this is a general truth—substitute what national labels you like. "The history of X poetic glory is a history of successful steals from the Y."

What makes a successful steal? What makes an unsuccessful one? Now it gets more interesting as we have to compare multiple international poetic relationships over a long period of time—a task for another occasion. But let me indicate a couple of directions to follow.

Although poetry is so language-specific, so wedded to the materiality of the phonemes, syllables, syntax and vocabulary in which it is molded, the *shapes* of poetry do transfer from language to language. We find eighth-century Chinese, for example, trying to emulate the melodies of songs sung by horse-riding nomads on the plains of Mongolia or Central Asia, melodies originally crafted, it seems, to vehicle words in a Turkic language and now given a function, within Chinese, of representing an alternative, off-balance, non-native sensibility, thematically tilting towards absence, regret, desire, non-transparent disclosure. This is the glorious heritage of the *ci*, a major part of the Chinese poetic tradition for twelve hundred years, and it was achieved by a steal from the Xiongnu, accomplished by people who probably did not know any Xiongnu but were drawn to its rhythm and prosody.

I've just enumerated two transformations in Chinese poetic tradition that originated outside China. This is actually, I would hold, the normal case, and the "native" meters and poetic forms in any language are probably just forms the origins of which have been lost to history. Thus one narration about "world poetry" can be disqualified. This is the account that says, "We had some kind of local essence and it's been taken away by imitation of world poetry." This is simply not the way either local tradition or outside contact works.

How do poets learn from poets in other languages?

All poets learn from their predecessors in the craft. You read Emily Dickinson; Emily Dickinson inhabits you; something happens to your own writing, just as something had already happened to Emily Dickinson from reading Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, the Bay State Hymnal, and so on. I can recognize from your rhythm or word-choice the effects that Dickinson has had on you and on me, and that's what makes poetry an argument across the ages, with all the anxiety and elation of influence. But what exactly happens when the Dickinson in my example has been reading poets in Hebrew or Sanskrit? What of their language can get into hers?

Here the models of imitation and of the transmission of thematic material are necessarily going to be more complicated than we see it in the work of the "world literature" theorists, who for good reasons have concentrated on the novel, an inherently easier form to imitate across languages. Poetic form is really form: it can potentially dictate what is going to be done with every word of the text that

has not yet been written. And this form is irreducible to theme; it's not inherently semantic, except insofar as form shapes and organizes semantic material. (This is the "form of the content," to talk like Hjelmslev (78).) Ezra Pound ("A Retrospect," 255) is forthright in his advice to young poets: "Let the candidate fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language, so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement." So when metrical or stanzaic forms, or models of argument, are adopted from outside one's own language, there's a lot of artifactuality to deal with. Before someone can write sonnets in Azeri, for example, there has to be an understanding of what constitutes a poetic line, what makes a rhyme, at the very least. (I do not know anything about Azeri poetry, which is why I take that as a random example; I do not know, for example, whether it uses a syllabic or stress meter, whether lines are of definite length, whether it recognizes rhyme and regular rhyme-pattern; in other words, I cannot be sure that it is possible under current conditions to write a sonnet in Azeri.)

Thematics is easier. The example of other poets serves as a license. If Omar Khayyam or Whitman wrote about wine or skinny-dipping, then so can I! But for a translinguistic poetic appropriation to succeed, it is not enough to imitate thematically. You have to be able and motivated to imitate something formal in order to make the thematic innovation stick *as something new*. I was once invited to evaluate a Chinese translation of Yeats. The thoughts that came to me in that process I will convey through a more familiar example, the case of Baudelaire in English. Swinburne and Symons, among others in the world of Victorian Decadence, were of course aware of Baudelaire. But take a look at the translations produced by that movement—they are unrecognizable.

Baudelaire became translatable into English with the arrival of Eliot's poetics, a combination of classicizing stiffness in the expression and low or random observation in the content. To take it step by step, it is after Eliot had written Laforgue into English with the help of eighteenth-century ironists like Pope that Baudelaire could find a voice. Only then did poets such as Tate, Crane, Lowell, Wilbur—formed on Eliot's example—have the power to make Baudelaire translations that were no longer Victorian and soppy. Without the intellectuality of the famous "irony and paradox" poetics, the tension between theme and expression so lamentably absent from Swinburne and Symons, you do not have the means to make Baudelaire in English.

With a nod to pharmacology, I want to call this phenomenon "selective uptake."⁴

Translation is citational, retrospective. It does not connect two presents, but two accumulations of precedent. Had Eliot not happened, Baudelaire would still be waiting for an English expression. Many poets in other languages are still waiting for the person in English who will show the way for them to be translated. This leads to a sobering thought for the proponents of "global poetry": Not all foreign poetry is available to English, or to whatever language, at any time. A preparation in the idiom of arrival has to have occurred. To ask about this preparation, about *what we're ready for* in English or French or Chinese, opens up a broad and comparative historical interrogation.

I am talking about Eliot and Pound just because they are so familiar and canonical to speakers of English, and because their steals from abroad are so well-known, yet have not been integrated into accounts of how poetry is and always was transnational. I have mentioned some of the reasons for the difficulty of a cross-linguistic account of poetic circulation. Poetry is a specific medium and the thematics of poetry in language Y are not in themselves going to transform the poetry of language X. The form of poetry in language Y may do so; a nexus of the form and the thematics of a particular poet in Y, as for example Baudelaire, can do so. But it is all about a very technical and non-obvious kind of emulation.

Technical and non-obvious connections are, however, more than thematic resemblances, the threads

4 The earliest instance of this phrase I could find in the National Institutes of Health's PubMed database dates from 1955: Gunn SA, Gould TC, Ginori SS and Morse JG, "Selective uptake of Zn65 by dorsolateral prostate of rat," *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine* 88 (1955): 556-8.

that bind together the corpus of world poetry. It is a corpus made of interchanges, imitations and “steals”—steals still fresh from the stalls, with the thieves forever red-handed. Readers who notice these connections—readers for whom these connections have value—are urgently needed, lest thematic universality (a low common denominator) and world English come to define the body of work read across the globe as “world poetry.”

Note:

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