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## Before and Beyond Genette: Cuba's Nicolás Guillén and the Empowered Paratext

Keith Ellis

(University of Toronto)

### **Abstract:**

Gérard Genette led the way in exploring, identifying and characterizing those accessories of the literary text—prologues, titles, introductions, epigraphs, etc—that he came to call paratexts. His original cataloging of them in the late twentieth century was recognized in world literature as significant. However, despite the many hundreds of usages from which he derives his conclusions concerning types, positions and functions of paratexts, there is a decided and yet influential insufficiency in his contribution. This is particularly noticeable to a scholar who deals with the third world, from which Genette takes a very small and superficially analyzed minority of his examples. Samir Amin's idea of Eurocentricism and its penalties are relevant here; for, particularly when we know a poet who is as richly inventive as Cuba's Nicolás Guillén, we find examples of the usage of paratexts, much of it preceding Genette's discoveries and provided to us in creations that are more mature and dynamic, more appealingly literary than those of the poets usually cited by the lauded Frenchman.

**Key words:** paratext, epigraph, Genette, Guillén, Eurocentrism, metropolis, inclusiveness, periphery, combativeness

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On dealing with the subject of the paratext it is almost obligatory to bear in mind the writings of the late literary theorist, Gérard Genette (1930-2018). He has gained widespread fame for his work in relation to narratology, including his study of paratexts, or accessories of literary creations such as titles, dedications, prologues, introductions and epigraphs. His contributions have been so fundamental and influential that it has become customary for subsequent researchers of these subjects to employ terminology that he has invented for aspects of his work. The acclaim he has been accorded makes it essential in the interest of scholarship that attention be paid to a highly consequential omission which may keep from view some fruitful uses of paratexts as devices that play an important role in literary creations. The scope of Genette's contribution can be revised by bringing into the picture uses of the paratext that make it dynamic, as is illustratable by reference to the typically dramatic poetry of the Cuban writer, Nicolás Guillén.<sup>1</sup> When this is done, a restriction is revealed in Genette's inventory, notwithstanding his apparent extensive activity.

In his book *Seuils* (1987) [Thresholds or Paratexts], Genette refers to more than eight hundred authors who have used, alluded to, or commented on paratexts. The great majority of these authors, more than ninety percent, are European or North American. The total number of writers from other parts of the world mentioned by him and including Spanish American and Caribbean writers is fewer than two dozen. When a theorist such as Genette writes about a literary genre or category such as the paratext and makes it his territory, having rechristened key parts of the terminology, the impression is given that the work is substantially completed. Very few would suspect that Genette had left a gap to be filled or that this gap had already been filled unbeknownst to the theorist even before he had begun his task of analyzing the paratext. Nicolás Guillén, a poet from Cuba, had achieved this feat as a complement to his poetic creation, renowned for its superb inventiveness and pronounced musicality and enriched by its author's sharp wit, high intelligence, broad knowledge, humane inclusiveness, good humor, and absorbing communicativeness.

1 As this study develops and to measure the originality of Nicolás Guillén's achievement, let us bear in mind the following words from Genette, remembering that Guillén's creations preceded Genette's conceptualizations by several decades: "[...] the paratext is neither on the interior nor on the exterior: it is both; it is on the threshold; and it is on this very site that we must study it, because essentially, perhaps, *its being depends upon its site*" ("Paratextes," *Poétique*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1987, 69), as quoted by Richard Macksey in his "Foreword" to Jane E. Lewin's translation of Genette's *Seuils* (1987): *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), xvii.

I will look first at the use Guillén makes of the epigraph, one of the several paratexts for which Genette has attempted an inventory of the forms and functions. This background may serve also as a frame from which to view other uses of the device, such as those introduced by Guillén. It will also allow us in the course of the essay to observe evolution in the poet's use of the paratext.

Genette recognizes three main conventions of presentation employed in the use of epigraphs: the allographic (by a different author), the autographic (by the author himself) or the anonymous (from an unknown source) (153-156). He observes four varieties of the instructive function of the epigraph (159-163). The first is to justify the title of the literary work; the second, to introduce an initial commentary concerning the text and ensure that the reading of the work is properly oriented, promoting the author's point of view; the third, to cite a prestigious author or work as a source of the epigraph and thus give greater credibility to the work; the fourth, to conform to the tradition or the custom of offering an epigraph. The dynamic conflictive epigraph, which we will discover to be potent in Guillén's poetic usage, is excluded from these functions.

The limitation in Genette's list of the possible functions of the epigraph is similar to that of other well-known and influential writers. For example, Jorge Luis Borges, the Spanish American most cited in Genette's book, with echoes of his statement "[...] cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores" (2: 228) [every writer *creates* his precursors], views epigraphs as illuminators of his texts. John Barth, in advocating for the abolition of the epigraph in his *The Friday Book* implies that his view of them coincides in large part with Genette's fourth function (the use of the epigraph to fulfill the mere custom of using an epigraph) and that at best they serve as metonyms for the works that are being offered (xix). He demonstrates the fact that, despite his post-modernist restlessness revealed throughout this book, he still lacks the combative spirit that would allow him to see how to use the unendorseable or defective epigraph. Borges and Barth are names that evoke literary daring and originality, but not so much so when they use the epigraph. For, whereas Barth will speak audaciously for abolition of the device, in his practice of it he does nothing that would have disturbed Genette's classification of the instructive function of the epigraph. Borges, for his story "Las ruinas circulares" (Borges, 1: 435-440) about a son who is dreamed into existence, chooses, as a typical conventional epigraph, the predictable

*An[d] if he left off dreaming about you... (sic)*

Through the Looking Glass, VI (sic)

And the general trend seems to emphasize the Genettian posture of concordance, which, as Alec Nevala-Lee put it, “is a whispered aside from the author just before the curtain rises.”

Guillén’s employment of the epigraph is infrequent, suggesting an uneasy recognition of the fact that the device as he knew it to be practiced in general carried a risk of superfluity before which he showed restraint. The economy that we may observe in his use of this device is a characteristic of his writing in general. He seems to reserve the epigraph for certain special moments in his poetry, when he gives the device exceptional treatment, providing it with attributes not commonly found in the traditional epigraphs described by Genette. And, given the principal characteristics of Guillén’s poetry, its dramatic liveliness, its confrontational vigor, it is predictable that his preferences would be for epigraphs that are vibrant and dynamic in their function. Indeed, if in his initial use of the device Guillén may be seen to enhance the instructive power of epigraphs and endow them with greater autonomy than those that Genette observed, in time he came to introduce forms and functions of the device with which the famous theorist was apparently not familiar when he wrote his influential book: epigraphs which become the target or the foil of the poet’s focus.

Guillén’s first use of the epigraph comes upon us as a sudden flurry of seven epigraphs within his grand “Elegía a Jesús Menéndez” (1951) [Elegy to Jesús Menéndez], the murdered leader of Cuba’s largest trade union, the union of sugar workers. Guillén deploys them adroitly, fitting them to each of the seven sections of the poem. They contribute, in relationship to each other, a narrative and dramatic function that enables them to speak for themselves, since they assist in developing the tragic-heroic sentiment, moving the poem along, and giving themselves a dynamic presence in this balanced literary work, one that combines epic, lyric and dramatic qualities.

For the first section of the “Elegía...” he makes an epigraph of the following words from the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561-1627):

... *armado*  
*más de valor que de acero.*  
(1580/1625 *Poesía*: 584, Poema 49, 17-18)  
[... armed  
more with valor than with steel.]

This quote prepares the reader for the circumstance that is going to be presented in



the text, about a valiant but physically defenseless hero. In addition, the presence of Góngora at the beginning of the poem, and exhibiting the stylish syntax that he bequeathed to the Spanish language as of his time, indicates to us that the content of the text is capable of having various epochs of relevance. On making this selection, Guillén would likely have been very well aware of the success that such contemporaries of his as his close friend Rafael Alberti (1902-1999), as well as Dámaso Alonso (1898-1990) and Gerardo Diego (1896-1987), all members of the Spanish Generation of 1927, were having in resuscitating and making lasting Góngora's stature, on the basis of sound analysis and fine emulation.

The epigraphs taken from Lope de Vega (1562-1636), Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) (1809-1844) and Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga (1533-1594), for sections three, four and five respectively, intensify the experience by giving close-ups of different moments of the same drama. Lope helps to express the antipathy universally felt toward the criminal killer:

*...si no hay entre nosotros  
hombre a quien este bárbaro no afrente?*  
(*Fuenteovejuna*, III, i)

[...is there no one among us  
whom this barbarian does not offend?]

Plácido emphasizes the hero's purity of character:

*Un corazón en el pecho  
de crímenes no manchado.*  
(Valdés, 326)

[A heart in his chest  
unstained by crimes.]

And Ercilla prepares us for the search for and the finding of the notorious coward and criminal:

*Vuelve a buscar a aquel que lo ha herido,  
y al punto que miró, le conocía.*  
(*La Araucana I*, "Canto III," 35, 5-6)

[He searches again for the one who wounded him,  
and the moment he saw him, he knew him.]

The quote from a U.S. newspaper that is the epigraph to the second section of the poem brings North American journalism to the scene, with a list of rising stock market prices that are signs of investor happiness in reaction to the murder of the organizer of Cuban sugar workers:

*...hubo muchos valores que se destacaron.*

*New York Herald Tribune*

*(Sección Financiera)*

[...there were many stocks that stood out.]

*New York Herald Tribune*

*(Financial Section)*

This opens the way to the sixth epigraph where the celebrated Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916) paints a picture of the United States, with the Statue of Liberty, adorned in all its imperialist cynicism:

*Y alumbrando el camino de la fácil conquista,*

*la libertad levanta su antorcha en Nueva York.*

*(“A Roosevelt,” 639-642)*

[And lighting the path to easy conquest,

liberty raises her torch in New York.]

Then comes the concluding one of these epigraphs:

*Apriessa cantan los gallos  
e quieren crebar arbores.<sup>2</sup>*

*Poema del Cid*

[The cocks are singing merrily  
at the dawn’s first lights.]

It is chronologically the first, taken from a poem too old, written in the period 1140-1207, for its author to be known by name as an individual with definitive dates of lifespan. But these deficiencies, far from impinging on the reliability of this source, tend rather to give it oracular power, as it predicts through the voices of singing cocks, symbols of revolutionary change and sustained hope, the imminent new time

2 Joseph Gulsoy, a specialist in the language of this period, assisted in this translation. Except where otherwise specified, I have undertaken all translations. The date of the *Poema del Cid* as discussed by scholars with this interest has been established to this point as being no more precise than between 1140 and 1207. See Ángel Valbuena Prat (35-38).

of a triumphant revolution.

Each one of these epigraphs, even outside of the world of Guillén's poetry, is potent. But combined, in their interrelationship and their firm connection to the text, they possess greater strength. In his study Genette cites no case of the use of multiple epigraphs within a single poem. He lists a few novels, mainly Gothic ones, that carry an epigraph with each chapter (149-150), but makes no comment about their relationship to each other, to any dramatic function. As a reader of poetry he very likely would have found Guillén's use of multiple epigraphs to be remarkable had he observed that the Cuban poet gives to these epigraphs a sense of identity, character and autonomy, sufficient for them to assume roles, to participate with ultimate empathetic effect among themselves in the tragic but finally hopeful drama of the poem. These epigraphs could seem heterogeneous, but Guillén unites them, causing them to share, as Borges might have usefully put it, a precursor identifiable with Jesús Menéndez.

This manner of empowering epigraphs by linking them is made all the more effective and coherent in the composition since, from the beginning of the text itself, Guillén employs the technique of deeply engaged personification. He presents the canes, Menéndez's erstwhile wards in a sense, and now suddenly his would-be protectors, in urgent, dramatic and ultimately pathetic interaction with him:

Las cañas iban y venían  
desesperadas, agitando  
las manos.  
Te avisaban la muerte,  
la espalda rota y el disparo.

[The desperate canes were bending  
to and fro, waving  
their hands.  
They were warning you of your death,  
your pierced back and the gunshot.]

By adding combatants, through this use of personification, to the heroes and villains implied in the epigraphs, Guillén strengthens the dramatic and dynamic intensity of his poem.

Even more dynamic are a class of epigraphs that are to be found functioning in more of Guillén's poems than any other. They may be called, from the viewpoint of the author, negative (in the sense of adversarial) or defective epigraphs. I consider a

defective epigraph to be one that provokes a disapproving reaction in the author and in the reader because it possesses a perceptible insufficiency or disagreeableness of content that keeps it from being persuasive or instructive in its role as an epigraph, in the readily compatible Genettian sense, and renders it susceptible to adversarial treatment. In what we will come to recognize as Guillén's special contribution, the defective epigraph, a category neither identified nor included by Genette, will come into prominence. In the hands of the right poet the defective epigraph, so treated and made dynamic, is capable of yielding exceptionally valuable contributions to the art of literature.

Such epigraphs are not taken into account by Genette, or they escaped his notice in the course of his massive research. As we have seen, the French theorist, like so many others, is centrally concerned with epigraphs that bear a direct, closely allied relationship to the text and are endorsed by the author. Guillén treats defective epigraphs with various degrees of opposition, producing various levels of dramatic effect, thus making a rich contribution to his poetry. The courageous, corrective, combative spirit that they manifest is a hallmark of his writings in general.

In "Elegía cubana," the first of six elegies collected in 1958,<sup>3</sup> Guillén uses an epigraph excerpted from the presumably authoritative and encyclopedic *Larousse Illustrado*:

CUBA, isla de América Central, la mayor de  
las Antillas, situada a la entrada del golfo de  
México... *Larousse ilustrado*

[CUBA, Central American island, the largest  
of the Antilles, situated at the entrance of  
the Gulf of Mexico...]

On the face of it, this epigraph is neither negative, defective nor objectionable. It is a distanced, neutral, brief description of Cuba's geographical location. But the poem that follows it begins:

Cuba, palmar vendido,  
sueño descuartizado,  
duro mapa de azúcar y de olvido...

3 A collection that has come to be known as *Las grandes elegías* [The Great Elegies]. See these six elegies in Nicolás Guillén's *Obra poética 1922-1958 I*, 255-293.

[Cuba, sold off palm grove,  
dream torn apart,  
cruel map of sugar and of neglect...]

initiating the metaphorical enumeration of the ills besetting the Cuba of 1952, the litany of which will constitute the rest of the poem. The text of the elegy thus implicitly contradicts the geographically-focused epigraph, one that misleads in any connotation it might have of pleasantness. Guillén demonstrates his awareness of its fallibility and ensures that such a connotation is invalidated, by modifying “map” negatively in “duro mapa” [cruel map] in the immediate vicinity of the epigraph.

The poet abandons the field of physical geography to which this epigraph is entirely devoted in order to attend intensely and broadly to the social experience lived in that space. But he does not see the geographical and the social as complements of each other, or the geographical as the determinant of the social in the manner of Montesquieu.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Guillén is showing in this case the disconnect between the physical environment and the social sphere, as he does even more pointedly and contrastively in his poems, such as “Canción carioca” [Song from Rio de Janeiro] dealing with the deprivations that underlie the superficial allure of that city, a poem written in 1953, one year after the “Elegía cubana,” and in his essays, such as “Haití: La isla encadenada” (1941) (*Pp 1929-1972 I*, 155-160) [Haiti: The Chained Island]. In all this we discover the procedure of a writer who compulsively corrects the illusions implicit in a superficial, insufficient description of Cuba. Instead of treating the epigraph merely as a “paratext,” as a threshold to the work, Guillén integrates it into a central purpose of the work, attempting to rescue Cuba from a dictionary’s misleading and well-circulated definition.

The achievement of having the epigraph play such a vital role in lending vigor, passion, pace, scope and unity to the elegy leads one to wonder whence the urge for Guillén to extend his mastery to his productively adversarial treatment of what he recognizes as the disagreeable, defective or insufficient epigraph that will be displayed in poems we will be examining. The roots of this urge may be seen to lie in an experienced distrust of colonial or neocolonial sources of information or education, education that does not respect or take sufficiently into account his reality. This tendency in Guillén may be noticed both in his poetry and in his prose,

4 We find it prudent to make the clarification and distinction here because of the carefully researched interest Guillén showed in the general topic of the influence of French literature in Cuba in his essay of 1981, “Notas y apuntes sobre la influencia francesa en Cuba,” *Prosa de prisa (1929-1985) IV*, 61-78.

in the time of the Revolution and preceding January 1, 1959. Thus in his elegy “El apellido” (1951) [The Last Name], lamenting his ignorance of his lost (African) name, he begins the poem:

Desde la escuela  
y aún antes... Desde el alba, cuando apenas  
era una brizna yo de sueño y llanto,  
desde entonces,  
me dijeron mi nombre. Un santo y seña  
para poder hablar con las estrellas.  
Tú te llamas, te llamarás...  
Y luego me entregaron  
esto que veis escrito en mi tarjeta,  
esto que pongo al pie de mis poemas:  
las trece letras  
que llevo a cuestas por la calle,  
que siempre van conmigo a todas partes.

[From school days  
and even before... From my first light, when  
I was merely a wisp of sleep and tears,  
from those times,  
they told me my name. My password  
for talking with the stars.  
Your name is, your name will be...  
And then they gave me  
this one that you see written on my card,  
this one that I put at the foot of my poems:  
the thirteen letters<sup>5</sup>  
whose burden I carry with me,  
whose burden I feel wherever I go.]

In his essay “Cuba-Paraguay” (1965), Guillén defies his orthodox schooling and becomes a pioneer, ahead of Eduardo Galeano,<sup>6</sup> in vindicating the creator of an

5 The phoneme “ll” in Spanish is treated as one letter.

6 Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (308-313); translated by Cedric Belfrage as *Open Veins of Latin America* (206-212).

independent Paraguay, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. As one of the beginners of the process of rescuing Dr. Francia from the steady stream of calumny to which such leading poets as Pablo Neruda<sup>7</sup> had carelessly come to contribute, Guillén wrote:

[...] desde mi lejano bachillerato sabía yo, porque así me lo enseñaron quienes tenían interés en que yo lo aprendiera de ese modo, que el doctor Francia era “un tirano brutal.” Las anécdotas más terribles le hacían una fama diabólica, mientras se ocultaba cuidadosamente su gran papel en el rescate de la independencia paraguaya, la independencia absoluta, al frente de la revolución de 1811. El tiempo me dijo la verdad [...].<sup>8</sup>

*Prosa de prisa III*, p. 297.

[...] from my distant high school days I knew, because that’s what those who had an interest in my learning it in that way taught me, that Dr. Francia was “a brutal tyrant.” The most terrible anecdotes created for him a diabolical fame, while they carefully hid his great role in rescuing Paraguayan independence, its absolute independence, as he led the

7 In Neruda’s “Canto general” (1950) (316-721), a work of poems in which Neruda presents himself as the voice of the Americas, he places Dr. Francia in a section of the book reserved for “Verdugos” [Tyrants]. He devotes to him a poem in which some of the calumny referred to here by Guillén and which had originated in attacks on Francia, most notably by paid literary agents of the then dominant British imperialism when the leader of Paraguay—in those times the most prosperous and peaceful of Latin American countries, as we see from Galeano (*Open Veins*, 207-212)—refused to be coerced by the British into opening up to them any part of the economy of his country (see also my article: “Power Without Responsibility: The Function of Words in Augusto Roa Bastos’s *Yo el Supremo*,” 195-216).

8 The unbalanced education about which Guillén writes here will be found to be a weakness affecting the formation of theorists and critics in North America and Europe. A footnote in Aijaz Ahmad’s very useful book, *In Theory* [...] (329), speaks eloquently to the issue:

It is symptomatic of the whole drift of American Left criticism that Frank Lentriccia’s *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), surely the central and in some ways a genuinely brilliant summation of the vast changes that have occurred in US literary criticism and theory in the two key decades between 1957 and 1977, makes scant effort to locate the disciplinary developments in any history other than the literary-theoretical. It is only by holding on to one’s own memory and by fixing this memory on stray remarks here and there that one recalls, while reading the book, that these same twenty years were known in other kinds of narratives for quite other sorts of developments, such as the revolutions in Algeria, Cuba, Indonesia and Southern Africa. (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso, 1994, 329)

In the two bilingual English-Spanish anthologies of poetry of the English-speaking Caribbean which I produced a few years ago: *Poetas del Caribe inglés: Antología* (2009) and *Poetas del Caribe anglófono* (2012), I included a thematic index which contained a surprisingly large number of poets in the region who contributed pungent criticism of colonial education to the volumes.

revolution of 1811. Time told me the truth [...].

Genette's mindset is one that is comfortable with conformity, is that of a grammarian, disposed to repeat or add to what is established. He protects and makes things tidy, distinguishing what belongs to the center from what is marginal or peripheral. We notice that, in the course of making his observations concerning the historical and normal positioning of epigraphs, he intimates in one instance the religious inspiration of his conformity. He cites the example of Julien Green (1902-1998), the French novelist, placing an epigraph on the spine of his book, *Léviathan* (1929) (150). Having done that, Genette does not continue with his narrative about the positioning of epigraphs. He turns to focus instead on the content of this epigraph: "If I were God, I would have pity on men's hearts," the text of which Green had taken from Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) without showing any qualms about using it. But Genette seems disturbed since he interrupts his description to comment that François Mauriac (1885-1970), Green's senior and Roman Catholic "distinguished colleague," has "denounced" the content of the device as "sacrilegious epigraph," demonstrating the conservative religious tutelage of the period. Interestingly, even when Genette comes upon a case such as this one that places him in the environment of what he might well have considered to be the negative or defective epigraph, the French theorist is not nudged to inquire whether in some part of the world such epigraphs are put to constructive poetic use, in the manner of Nicolás Guillén.

The functions which Genette attributes to the epigraph, of interpreting or giving prestige to the work of which it is the threshold—whether it points to the interpretation of the title or of the work, or to the prestige of the epigraph or its author, or simply to the prestige that the use of an epigraph implies—make it difficult for him to capture the importance or even the presence of a category that can be designated as the defective epigraph. The risk of simply disregarding this type of epigraph is increased if one conceptualizes the paratext as exclusively a threshold to the work, with no space for it to function as an integral part of the text. Given Guillén's combative spirit in the quest for justice, it is perfectly understandable that he is going to demonstrate his antipathy; and the inevitable consequence is that such an epigraph, which is necessarily allographic or anonymous, will go beyond being a mere paratext, not integral to the text. Rather, it is going to figure directly in the text, to receive there its author's due censure for being a faulty epigraph.

This is the process of engagement by which the words of Yevgeny Yevtushenko



cross the threshold, in the form of an epigraph, and enter into Guillén's poem "¿Qué color?" [What Color?], dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. (*Op 1958-1977 II*, 241-242):

*Su piel era negra, pero con el alma  
purísima como la nieve blanca...*  
EVTUSHENKO (según el cable), ante  
el asesinato de [Martin] Lutero King

[His skin was black, but with a soul  
as perfectly pure as white snow...  
YEVTUSHENKO (according to the cable), on -  
the assassination of [Martin] Luther King]

Guillén attacks Yevtushenko's words with ferocious sarcasm, reiterating the word "negro," to insist on its meaning of pure goodness, reflecting the courageous and constructive actions for which the great parson is famous. In the dramatic confrontation that takes place within the text of the poem, he rescues King from the condition of inferiority that the then Soviet poet would have given to him with those words. There are several ironies in this gesture of Yevtushenko. Clearly, it wasn't his intention to insult Martin Luther King Jr.; it seems that he intended to send to his readers a rapid obituary in reaction to the shock caused by the murder of the great fighter for the dignity of black people and for peace. Yevtushenko's quote is followed by the words "según el cable" [according to the cable], referring to the most rapid means of transmission of news in those times, when the Soviet citizen Yevtushenko was serving as the head of his country's news bureau in Havana, covering such developments as the "October Crisis" or "Cuban Missile Crisis" of 1962.<sup>9</sup> Now this man, who ought to be an ideological comrade, is revealing to Guillén, in a moment of spontaneity and urgency, a lapse that places him in the

9 Nicolás Guillén, as President of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba, was usually attentive to Cuban visits by important Soviet writers, among others. Yevtushenko (1932-2017) was in Cuba during the 1960s when he played a role in significant events. He served as bureau chief for the Pravda news agency during what was known as the October Crisis or the Cuban Missile Crisis. He co-wrote the screenplay for the film *Soy Cuba*, the first version of which was not generally regarded in Cuba as a success (see the temperate, balanced, and informative recently revised article "I Am Cuba" in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Am\\_Cuba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Am_Cuba)). Nevertheless, I have searched all of Guillén's published and yet to be published work, and have found the epigraph to "¿Qué color?" to be the only reference made by Guillén to his Russian colleague.

camp of the others.

In “¿Qué color?” the emphatic, compensatory, and resounding heralding of blackness, the word stressed musically and occurring with alliterative frequency, unites at a level of great moral and ethical elevation the hero’s soul with the color of his skin, his thoughts, and his love, giving tight coherence to the poem. If we were to seek here an element that would be fuel for deconstructive fire in the poem it would not be hidden, as Jacques Derrida<sup>10</sup> might have expected it to be. Rather, it would be, as is customary with Guillén, at the heart of the poem, among its climactic lines, and tied to love, the crowning emotion, where we would find lines in which black love came to be universalized and made a part of love for humanity: “Qué negro amor, / tan repartido / sin color” [What a black love, / so widely shared / without color]. This widened role, far from contradicting, strengthens the moral premise of the poem, before the poet again resorts to blackness, treating, at the end of the poem with direct finality, the offensive and objectionable epigraph. This conclusion, with its appeal to consensus broadened by the rhetorical question that, assured in its moral stance, demands an assenting answer, affirms the natural acceptance and goodness of King’s blackness. The answer also normalizes the change of tone from sarcasm in the poem’s opening lines to the candor of the closing ones that is supported by the inclusiveness of widely shared love. With procedures not envisaged by the leading theorists dealing with the subject, Guillén makes, with his treatment of the epigraph, a potent poem. His way of making the epigraph essential—central and not marginal—is consonant with his integrative worldview, one that never acquiesces in notions such as periphery being inferior to metropolitan and that acknowledges no marginalized space as befitting his part of the world.<sup>11</sup>

After the rectifying torrential usage of the word “negro,” Guillén ends this demonstration of his use of the defective epigraph with the lines:

Qué pensamientos puros negros	[What pure black thoughts
su grávido cerebro alimentó.	were nourished by his weighty brain.
Qué negro amor,	What black love,
tan repartido	so widely shared,

10 See Joseph Adamson’s concise “Jacques Derrida,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 296-297.

11 Samir Amin in his book *Eurocentrism* (1998) (89-92) has criticized the tendency of scholars and others to give in to a belief in the rationality of European culture and ideas despite its largely unexamined mythical foundations.

sin color.<sup>12</sup>

regardless of color.

¿Por qué no,  
por qué no iba a tener el alma negra  
aquel heroico pastor?

Why not,  
why would that heroic parson  
not have a black soul?

Negra como el carbón.

Black as coal.]

Note how, in the first line, Guillén's masterly employment of syntax makes it possible for him to take the idea of purity from the epigraph, where it was misused, and juxtapose it rectifyingly alongside "negros" in "puros negros." He underlines the rectification by devoting the rest of the poem to the idea of Dr. King's purity: the purity from which springs the civilized gesture of sharing indiscriminately, regardless of color, and the purity of having a black soul from which emanate the purest essential thoughts:

...negro amor,  
tan repartido  
sin color  
or  
...el alma negra  
...  
[n]egra como el carbón.

By recognizing the negative or defective epigraph as a special category that provokes an adversarial attitude, Guillén appreciates the structural benefit that is derived from the usage of this device. He again exploits that insight, that potential for dynamism, and intensifies the emotion of his poems when in two compositions of his book of love poetry, *En algún sitio de la primavera: Elegía* (1966) [In Some Springtime Place, Elegy], he contends with two epigraphs in a way that gives

12 Guillén's moral and ideological consistency in this regard is observable not only here within the poem. It is there too to be observed in his prose and other poetry. The idea shown here of shared love without regard to color was clearly expressed and combined with other maxims in Guillén's prose, in a speech he gave thirty-one years earlier in Madrid on July 6, 1937, at the International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture. Looking forward hopefully to a time better than that of the hatred and violence of the Spanish Civil War, he ended the first of his speeches invoking "...¡hombres ya sin colores, sin guerras, sin prejuicios y sin razas!" [...men finally without colors, without wars, without prejudices and without races!] (*Páginas escogidas*, 166).

extended purview to his preoccupation. The first of them, in Poem XIII, taken from François de Malherbe (1555-1628), is:

*Le temps est médecin d'heureuse expérience;  
son remède est tardif, mais il est bien certain.*

*Malherbe*<sup>13</sup>

[Time is a doctor who gives good results;  
his remedy is slow, but very sure.]

He tries to apply the remedy to himself, reciting Malherbe's words in soliloquy and evaluating their effect on his moment of crisis. He gives them a real trial because he truly needs and is searching for relief from this devastating feeling of loss, occasioned by the breakdown in relations with his beloved. His failure to recognize and acknowledge what is offered by this epigraph—consolation—is not as abrupt, definitive, or sarcastic as is what is offered by the epigraph that attempts to characterize Martin Luther King Jr. in “¿Qué color?”. Removed also from the treatment of the deficient epigraph in this poem (XIII) is the indignant and vituperative tone that extends throughout “¿Qué color?”. Instead, employing affectionate language, he approaches his co-practitioner and specialist in consolations, to thank him for his friendly intent, even though it fails in this case. The failure, as our poet understands it, is not entirely the fault of Malherbe who, nevertheless, does not have the right to feel satisfied with his calm and intellectualized prescription for putting to an end the pain of separation, because, on doing that, he doesn't fathom the full dimension of the emotion that it is left to time to resolve; nor does he appreciate the difference between the experience of the victim and that of the observer. Malherbe's words have caused the abandoned Guillén to feel even more abandoned. And nevertheless, as a measure of his desperation, and, without having any other possibility of a remedy, Guillén inserts terms of endearment as he ends the poem and avoids the total rejection of the possible efficacy that time can provide. He resorts to a question that accepts the possibility of consolation in a future indefinite time, but with the doubt that he can survive the actual experienced interval of time:

Muy bien, Malherbe,  
muy bien, mi viejo amigo,

[Very well, Malherbe,  
very well, my old friend,

13 This epigraph by François de Malherbe is from the first stanza of his poem “Stances,” *Poésies, Livre II*.

This relative gentleness heightens by contrast Guillén's impassioned rejection of the words and the sentiment of the epigraph to "¿Qué color?" and suggests the poem's rooting in a deep sense of identity he feels with Martin Luther King Jr.. This is expressed not in soliloquy, reflecting the intimacy of the love poem, but in words that are said out loud, with the desired effect of influencing large gatherings. The coincidence between King and Guillén may first be noticed with regard to theme. Guillén began his systematic publishing at the national level in 1929, the year of King's birth, with a series of essays in defense of the black sector of the Cuban population, taking up as the central issue, widespread discrimination on the basis of skin color. King, at approximately the same age (27 in 1956), took up the same issue, ultimately giving his life for it in the United States (1968).

Perhaps this sense of identity is deeper than is felt at the conscious level, for traces of it may be found in Guillén's poetry, including in some of his other uses of the epigraph, as we will see in the following paragraphs. As early as in 1956 in a prepared statement that King read concerning the conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott that he led in connection with Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat to a white man, he included the poetic assertion: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The statement, which subsequently became a key focus of King's rhetoric,<sup>14</sup> was adapted by him from a longer, less elegant one made a century earlier by the Unitarian clergyman, social activist and firm abolitionist Theodore Parker (1810-1860).<sup>15</sup> The full statement, condensed and endorsed by King, indicates, in the context of the pain of social injustice, that an end to it is long

14 King would use this quote on at least five more occasions: 1) in 1958 in an article entitled "Out of the Long Night," published in *The Gospel Messenger*, Feb. 8, 1958, 13-14); 2) in 1964 in a graduation speech at Wesleyan University (<http://www.carlruby.com/the-arc-of-the-moral-universe-is-bending-toward-justice/>); 3) in a 1965 speech "Our God is Marching On" or "How Long, Not Long" after the Selma march on the steps of the Alabama capital, Montgomery (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>); 4) in a 1967 speech "Where Do We Go From Here" to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeVITdHsY6I>) and 5) in his 1968 sermon "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore\\_Parker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker)).

15 The Parker statement that King so elegantly paraphrases is: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe: the age is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice," *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker: Sermons and Prayers*, ed. Frances Power Cobbe (London: Trübner & Company, 1879, 2:48), as quoted by Rufus Burrows, Jr., in his *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance*, p. 261 ("Chapter 1" footnote 63).

in coming but that it will come.

Coinciding with the time of King's use of the statement, between 1956 and 1968, but in a different context: that of attempting to overcome the pain of lost love, Guillén resorts to the epigraph from Malherbe that I have been examining. Parker's statement, as adapted by King, and Guillén's epigraph from Malherbe are close in their content, both of them contemplating the theme of the possibility of relief from long-term suffering. The two are structured similarly, with the positive ending allowing in each case the preceding acknowledged handicaps to be surmounted, the parallel effect being perceivable in the cadence as well:

Malherbe: "Time is a doctor who gives good results;/his remedy is slow,  
but very sure."

King: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward  
justice."

A difference between Guillén and King is the unquestioning acceptance given by the latter to the authoritative consoling assurance. Guillén does not allow Malherbe to leave contented with his epigraph. He troubles him by asking further what is to be done while the pain lingers indefinitely, thus exposing the inadequacy of the French poet's solution. Guillén thereby produces another instance of the contested epigraph, through the latent highly significant coincidence of sensitivity between three distinguished minds: his own, Martin Luther King Jr.'s and Theodore Parker's.

The other epigraph employed in *En algún sitio...*, in "Poema XV," is also not just a bystander, positioning itself statically to the lower right of the title, a place that it has learned to occupy by force of generic habit. Nor is it just a look-alike to a central motif of the poem. It is a highly charged module that is made centrally functional in the construction of the poem. Taken from Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), it reads:

Como yo te he querido, desengáñate,  
así no te querrán.  
(*Rimas y leyendas*, "LIII", 143-144)  
[Like I have loved you, don't delude yourself,  
they will never love you so.]

The words of the epigraph, like their author, reappear as part of the text of this last poem of Guillén's book of fifteen poems, with only the slightest modification sufficing to allow the words to become Guillén's words also, as sadness twins

the two poets. The words fit smoothly into this latter poet's desperate but failing attempt, infused with pathos, to have his still distanced loved one heed his plea for her to return and end the rupture. Guillén leads up to his paraphrase of the words of the epigraph within the poem by providing the following profile of Bécquer, thereby duplicating the experience of the loss of love:

Bécquer, cuya tristeza me acompaña,  
en cuya voz la vida pasa  
con sus morados velos fúnebres [...].  
(*Op 1958-1985 II*, 412)

[Bécquer, whose sadness accompanies me,  
in whose voice life passes by  
with its purple funeral veils [...].]

The latter of the two epigraphs of *En algún sitio...* comes in the context of the poet's awareness that this is the end of the communication, of the distanced dialogue: an end beginning in sadness as the poet identifies himself with Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the Spanish Romantic poet, and the author of the epigraph. He is highly admired by Guillén who described him in prose within a year of writing this poem as "inmenso y delicado" [immense and delicate].<sup>16</sup> Among its troubling implications, this epigraph introduces the possibility of jealousy, of other suitors competing with him. This makes the epigraph intolerable and useless to him as further company. In any case, we have noticed in Guillén the strong tendency to embrace the positive view at the close of his dramatic narratives, as we witnessed at the end of the "Elegía a Jesús Menéndez" with its optimistic final epigraph. And here in this love poem our poet will refuse to abandon the hope that what he treats as the crowning emotion, love, will triumph. As the final stanza continues, there is a steady shift in the mood of his language, from the hard resignation conveyed by the indicative in which the epigraph or references to it are expressed, to the subjunctive, employed in a resurgent and extravagant wave of optimism, which then, with our poet's memory of his recent history, including the restive role played in it by the intrusive epigraph, has to be tempered, with plain realistic language:

16 See his paper "Rubén Darío," given at the conference "Encuentro con Rubén Darío en Varadero de Cuba" (1967), written less than a year after *En algún sitio de la primavera: Elegía* (1966).

Ay, ojalá sea  
en algún sitio de la primavera  
húmedo al beso de la luna nueva,  
donde tiemblen campánulas sonando  
en saludo a tu fúlgido regreso,  
y vengas tú  
con lentas flores de naranjo  
por entre aplausos y corales.

Pero vuelvo a decirlo,  
No sé si esto será inocencia y fiel candor,  
Si no será tal vez pedir más de la cuenta.

De veras que no sé.

[Oh, oh that it could be  
in some springtime place  
humid with the new moon's kiss,  
where bellflowers tremble ringing  
their greeting to your resplendent return,  
and you will come  
with slow orange blossoms  
amid applause and corales.

But I say it again,  
I don't know if this is all innocence and faithful simplicity,  
if it's perhaps not asking too much.

I really don't know.]

Nevertheless, the heights of lyricism that the poet reaches in his final expression of hopeful mood counters decisively all previous negative notions including the epigraph, leaving to be overcome only the hard plain fact that at the end of this poetic work the lost loved one is still absent, but not hopelessly.

Because of the active role it grows to achieve within these poems, the epigraph



is not merely a paratext but a vital part of the text.<sup>17</sup> In both cases the epigraph is made dynamic and is kept by dialogue, albeit between distantly separated interlocutors, at a high level of dramatic intensity. The drama also reveals an ironic magnanimity extended by our poet to Malherbe, who fails in his consoling mission in “Poem XIII;” while in “Poem XV” the drama demonstrates the partial coincidence of vision between Guillén and Bécquer. The latent capacity of the epigraph to function overtly within the text, that Guillén brings to light, leads us to wonder whether Genette, had he discovered this usage, would have assigned to it a new nomenclature that acknowledged this dual function. It is a matter of profound sadness that he cannot do that now.

In this regard it is helpful to mention Guillén’s use of other paratexts that would be highlighted in Genette’s book fifty-six years later. With Guillén, with his contentious brilliance on behalf of social justice, devices such as titles, prologues, and epistles are, like epigraphs, made to dramatize productive issues; and with his penchant for economy, he can even treat all of these paratexts together in one cluster.

As early as 1931, as if in strange anticipation of his innovation with other paratexts (prologues, epistles, forewords, titles), Guillén, in presenting his book of poetry, *Sóngoro cosongo*, wrote challengingly against prologues as they were then employed (*Obra poética 1922-1958 I*, 101-102). He wanted the pages they occupy to be “frescas y verdes, como ramas jóvenes” (101) [fresh and green, like young branches]. As for the place prologues would occupy, he stated that he preferred them coming at the end of the work, perhaps as epilogues, a placing that would obviate some of the false promises and other fakery, similar to some of those treated mockingly in part of Genette’s fourth function of the epigraph, the function of mere fashion. Guillén also demonstrates his eventual enervation with the formal repetitiveness of the prologue by substituting the epistle for it in his book *El diario que a diario* (1972) [The Daily That Every Day],<sup>18</sup> whose title signals an intense degree of meaningful innovation. The “que” is a key to the title’s ingeniousness. Because of its presence, we have an ellipsis, a form of chaos apt for announcing

17 At the very beginning of his discussion of epigraphs (*Seuils*, 147), Genette weighs the merits of the term “exergue” as a possible substitute for “epigraph.” He favors the latter, pointing out that naming a literary device on the basis of where it is placed (outside of the work, from the Greek *ex ergon*) is not felicitous. Guillén’s capacity to make text, rather than merely paratext, of the epigraph, having it function inside the poem, would almost certainly lead him to prefer of the two the received substantive term “epigraph.”

18 In her translation of *El diario que a diario*, Vera Kutzinski translates the title as *The Daily Daily*, ignoring completely, with her inappropriate tidiness, Guillén’s disruptive conjunction “que.”

the debased, inhumane world of the fateful clamor of the slave trade and auction that is about to be exposed. The title coheres too with other fittingly ravaged components of the book: with the belittled and undermined prologue (“Prologoillo no estrictamente necesario” [Not Strictly Necessary Little Prologue]),<sup>19</sup> with the embarrassment about the unmanaged chaos admitted in the epistle (“Epístola”) and with the repulsive turbidity of such literary compositions as “Sonnet.” The “que” of the title points to all this mess. For being overwhelmed by it, by the predominance of social distress that it augurs, our poet apologizes at the outset in his “Epístola,” addressed by name to his fellow poet and friend, Eliseo Diego, known for his limpid, elegant verses.<sup>20</sup>

In the antithetical way hinted at when Diego is mentioned, Guillén later produces a new kind of approved prologue. He places after the title of his book, *La rueda dentada*, also of 1972, a “Prólogo” which is an exquisite musical parable about revolutionary cooperativeness. This is a prologue with pages “fresh and green, like young branches,” as he had demanded of the genre in general in 1931. We had learned too from the autographic prologue to his book *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931), that its title, with its pronounced Sub-Saharan African phonic features, was born in part as his reaction to what he had perceived to be bias by sections of the Cuban bourgeoisie against the use in poetry of Cuban popular speech in his book of one year earlier, *Motivos de son* (1930) [Son Motifs]. He was, with the combative, musical, Guillenian title, which he invented in 1931, reinforcing the African cultural heritage; because the phrase “*sóngoro cosongo*,” without denoting any fixed referent but rich with emotion derived from the music and the combativeness, has become entrenched and ubiquitous in Cuban popular speech.<sup>21</sup>

There is yet another epigraph whose contribution needs to be assessed. It is taken from the poetry of Emilio Ballagas, Guillén’s compatriot and contemporary, and has been with the reader from the beginning to the end of the book, *En algún sitio...*, functioning as a third and pervasively influential guide to its reading. This

19 He employs the title of the first poem to undermine twice, by using the diminutive and the adverbial qualification, the prestige of the prologue genre.

20 In a lecture he gave at the University of Toronto not long after Guillén died in 1989, Eliseo Diego amid unstoppable tears lamented the passing of his dear friend, the Francisco Quevedo (1580-1645) of our time, consummate master of poetic forms and styles, who would always suit them to well and humanely considered subjects.

21 It has shown up too in other parts of Latin America; for example, a well-regarded restaurant in Lima, Peru, which serves traditional Lima food in an ambience providing “*música criolla*,” enjoys the name “*Sóngoro Cosongo*.” Those who know in Havana the restaurant “*La Vita Nuova*” that features pasta and pizza would not be surprised at the parallel Peruvian development.

is again not simply an epigraph or one that functions like any of his previously examined epigraphs. This one compels us to notice once more, manifested in a different way, Guillén's emphasis on economy in his practice. There occurs here

*Yo te doy a la vida entera del poema.*

[I give you to the whole life of the poem.]

the merger of two paratexts: an epigraph and a dedication; because Ballagas's words are endorsed by our daring and superbly innovative poet. They are converted into an unusual dedication in which the poetic creation that has taken hold of the poet through the loved one and that has turned out to be occasioning such hope and despair is bequeathed to the loved one, so that she may experience and understand the tumult that he has been living. The sharing of poetry itself, with its antitheses, thus becomes his last hope.<sup>22</sup>

The true masters are the creators. We, as critics or readers, can observe, if we are open and sensitive enough, precisely how creators use the resources that are at their disposal. For literary creators have a common storehouse of linguistic devices which, if they do not already exist in the form in which they wish to use them, can be modified so that they conform to the design of their creation. With the great masters, the process of adaptation is fluid and spontaneous; they sense that compositions ought to be elaborated in a certain way and they execute them in that way, perfectly, just as Guillén is wont to do. Critics are slower: only after absorbing the work in its totality can they dare to speak of the dynamism of its parts and organize their reportage in such a way that they do not comment on any device, part or element without bearing in mind its relationship with the rest of the composition.

The work of the theorist is the most distanced. Theories are put to the test when they are judged in relation to the range of their applicability. In the field of literature, theorists tend to lead a tense existence, because they are constantly challenged by the boundlessly creative talents of writers who are dispersed throughout the world and whose works may be distant culturally and psychologically from the practice with which a given theorist is familiar. The theorist seeks relations—correspondences, contrasts—among works of various authors of the same or of different epochs and of the same or of different social

22 In fact Guillén presented the manuscript to his loved one on completing it.

circumstances. On the basis of that information, the literary theorist proposes a theory, which at best is applicable globally. Literary theorists, then, should have ample knowledge of a great range of subjects and above all of literature if they want their theories to be applicable to the greatest extent possible. Their knowledge of literature may also validate the selection of the works most suitable to illustrate their theories. Of course, the theorists cannot know all literature and not even all the great writers that could be instructive for them.<sup>23</sup> There are potential handicaps that can skew their vision: for example, the natural attraction of their nation's literature may occupy a disproportionate part of the theorists' attention and awaken pride in them. It isn't surprising that Mikhail Bakhtin, a theorist of great international fame, takes, with indubitable validity, as his admired illustrator of his theory of the novel, his compatriot Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and of his theory of poetry, although not as extensively employed because the novel is his favorite genre, his also great compatriot, Alexander Pushkin.<sup>24</sup>

A likely consequence of the respect or even awe that Genette has earned by the indefatigable effort he put into his partial study of the paratext is that subsequent researchers have been reluctant to go beyond the bounds he established for his examination of the genre. His survey of its use, with its predominance of so-called "First World"<sup>25</sup> producers, led him and his followers to findings that they consider to be fully representative of the genre, wherever it is practiced. In his book, *Eurocentrism*, the Egyptian economist Samir Amin highlights the center/periphery axis that defines and tensely sustains the capitalist system and its social organization (141-142). Amin recognizes the center as the locus of greater comfort and advantage and therefore as being less or much less likely than the periphery

23 Nicolás Guillén should by no means have been considered to be an obscure writer by any French literary theorist. He became Cuba's National Poet by acclamation with the victory of the Revolution in 1959 and retained that status until his death in 1989. He spent some four and a half years from 1953 to 1958 in political exile during which time he resided frequently in Paris. His impeccable biographer and editor of collections of his work, Ángel Augier, also tells us that his poetry was on the curriculum in French schools and that in 1978 he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Bordeaux where an international conference on his poetry was held. Before that, in 1954, he received the well-publicized Lenin International Peace Prize and carried out, in the spring of 1965, invited speaker visits to ten of France's leading universities, all this, mitigating somewhat the indignity he had suffered when he was briefly detained in Ellis Island in 1949. Why then did he escape Genette's searching eye?

24 In my article "Si Bajtín hubiera conocido a Nicolás Guillén," [If Bakhtin Had Known Nicolás Guillén], I suggest a very strong challenger for Pushkin's place, given the arguments used by the famous theorist in this case.

25 See Aijaz Ahmad, "Three Worlds Theory: End of a Debate," *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (287-319).

to be the site of agitation for change or for effecting change (144). His focus is socio-economic, but his observations are strikingly analogous to literary ones. In fact, within Nicolás Guillén's poetry itself, models of combative writing from a peripheral stance abound. The poem "Problemas del subdesarrollo" [Problems of Underdevelopment]<sup>26</sup> is an example of the many poems in Guillén's work that with deft irony, rich music and riveting wit, face head-on the condescension and other discourtesies ascribable to the center/periphery paradigm. So that, when this poet encounters this Eurocentric paradigm in a context in which an epigraph is applicable, he is well prepared for the experience, as also should be his critics.

One doesn't get sensitized to the presence and functions of paratexts, especially beyond those provided by Genette in the worlds of his Euro-centered focus, without enquiring about the life of these devices in civilizations and countries where a European literary language is conspicuously used and divulged, such as in India, or where translation into a European language leads to the possibility of paratranslation, as in China.<sup>27</sup> In these cases we find, as readers of English, issues and attitudes arising from imperial and colonial habits that were acquired over long periods of time. They are now being addressed largely in the field of paratranslation, a field in which we may readily see, as applied to tensions in such diverse areas as social status and marketing, the far-reaching relevance of Nicolás Guillén's 1931 Caribbeanized innovations. See, for example, with regard to China, Sara Rovira-Esteva's 2016 study of the translation into English, Catalan and Spanish respectively of the "chick lit" novel, Chun Sue's *Beijing Doll*. This study reveals the impact of economic development and rivalry on the target audiences' reception of the work. In the case of the British-Indian audience, the 2018 study by Pallavi Rao, entitled "The Five-point Indian: Caste, Masculinity, and English-language in the Paratexts of Chetan Bhagat," shows the enduring concern for social status revealed in Genettian paratext usage even when the author attempts to hide this concern. Thus we see that Guillén's rejection of colonial class barriers in his title

26 See comments on this poem in my book *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén: Poetry and Ideology* (177) and my translation of it into English for my book *Nicolás Guillén: A Bilingual Anthology* (387).

27 It is also used by the Nobel Prize (1992) winning poet Derek Walcott, from the small island country of St. Lucia, in the English-speaking Caribbean, with a population of only 160,000, when he titles one of his poetry collections *Omeros* (1990) to allude to linkages with Homer's epic *Odyssey*.

Note the extended fields of paratext required by theatre (speech patterns, costumes and set) in my translation into Spanish of Derek Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* (1974), which he based on Tirso de Molina's (1579-1648) seventeenth century Spanish play *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1616).

and prologue to his book, *Sóngoro consongo*, of 1931, uses paratext more creatively to confront the unacceptability of social inequality. The Chinese and British-Indian writers find ways of broadening the use and definition of paratext, but they fall short of the dynamism of Guillén's usage. Their chattiness relaxes the reader as they shun the trenchant power of Aristotelian and Guillénian dramatic intensity.

One consequence of the greater comfort enjoyed by the center, and that is quite conspicuous in the literary sphere, is the possibility of the emergence of a firm emotional identification of prominent figures from the periphery with the culture and way of life of the center. Peruvian-born novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (1936-) is a prime and acknowledged example among Latin Americans of his craft, leaning to a Spanish identity in his later years. His Paraguayan colleague Augusto Roa Bastos (1917-2005), having been pushed from his own country by the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner and from his refuge in Argentina by the looming one of Rafael Videla, and pulled by French literary currents, including Eurocentered literary theory,<sup>28</sup> finally saved himself and his Paraguayan national identity, when some important traits of democracy briefly returned to his country. Roa Bastos thus, near the end of his life, placed himself in the spacious realms of the periphery in which he could create anew or reconnect with the salient characteristics of his early literary work as well as with his democratic social commitments. At this late time Roa Bastos declared that of his two most famous novels, *Hijo de hombre* (1960) and *Yo el Supremo* (1974), the former was "el que más quiero" [the one I love more] (as quoted in *El País*, August 19, 2003). A main character in that one shows the stellar traits of a Jesús Menéndez and, as such, is more appealing than both his counterpart in the same novel and Dr. Francia in *Yo el Supremo*, as he had been presented, perhaps faultily, by Roa Bastos himself, under the influence of the French theorists. That is to say, Roa Bastos finally regained the peripheral position that Guillén had steadily maintained.<sup>29</sup> This lifelong position of Guillén and the ultimate one of Roa Bastos gave them both the freedom to create without the strictures that might be imposed by inappropriate, inadequately formed theorists. In fact, it gave them the capacity to be of help to theorists.

28 In his article, "Eurocentrism and Academic Imperialism," Seyed Mohammad Marandi makes a persuasive argument that Eurocentric thought exists in almost all aspects of academia in many parts of the world, especially in the humanities (<https://www.google.ca/search?q=%27Eurocentrism+and+Academic+Imperialism%27&oq=%27Eurocentrism+and+Academic+Imperialism%27&aqs=chrome..69i57j0.25598j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>).

29 Guillén, with his more combative and insistently political nature, found scarce solace in his French exile (1953-1958) and was never drawn to identify with the perspective of the center. For an example of how this discomfiture is reflected in Guillén's poetry, see my article, "National Ties and Metonymic Imagery: The Epistle as Used by Nicolás Guillén."

No one could have put and illustrated the case more strongly and eloquently for the inclusion of a Third World perspective in a humane literary vision than does the Cuban poet, critic and literary theorist Roberto Fernández Retamar in his splendid book of 540 engaging pages, *Para el perfil definitivo del hombre* (1981) [Toward The Definitive Profile of Humanity]. Fernández Retamar clinches his argument by taking and adapting his inclusive title from the poem “Llegada” [Arrival], the initial poem of Guillén’s book *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931).

If Genette had taken the time to know Nicolás Guillén’s writings and their context, it is possible that he would have been able to produce a theory of the epigraph that was more globally applicable. Guillén, the great creator, was always opening paths for grateful critics; and there are theorists who are not aware of how much has escaped their vision because they did not know his work well or at all. At the same time, it is fitting to reserve substantial gratitude for Gérard Genette, the theorist; for without his leading intervention in the area of the epigraph and of the paratext in general, among his beneficial labors, we might not have come to appreciate as fully this revealing example of Nicolás Guillén’s groundbreaking achievement: this Cuban creator’s ability to preempt and modify the literary device canon and to anticipate and illustrate with his unique and humane artistry aspects of the literary art that are such a joy for readers to discover.

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# The Eye Listens: Looking and Worlding in Song Lin's Poetry in Exile

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## Abstract:

As a main proponent of “City Poetry” in the 1980s, Song Lin’s poetic works, after he went abroad in the early 1990s, have become largely unknown. Through dialogues with himself and focus on writing itself, Song Lin has turned exile into a kind of wandering in his poetry. As Song Lin wandered further, a new poetics of “looking” came into being that helped him explore possibilities of writing in a foreign land. He proposed “the house of rhymes is the old garden of memory,” in which the multitudes of memory can find their shapes in the building blocks of meter and rhyme, thus integrating elements of “listening” into the poetics of “looking.” To realize his own poetic ambitions, Song Lin advocates for “digging at the roots of words,” thus setting his sight on the origin of Chinese civilization.

**Key words:** Song Lin’s poetry, memory, looking, listening, classic

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The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a large group of Chinese poets move to Europe and North America for various reasons. They continued to write, more prolifically in some cases. The body of poems they produced in the ensuing two decades have not only enriched the scene of contemporary Chinese poetry but also have animated the conversation about the place of Chinese literature in the formation of World Literature such as is the case with Bei Dao’s poems and their English translations.<sup>1</sup> Song Lin belongs to this group of Chinese poets. He left China in the early 1990s. For the next ten years or so before his eventual return to China, Song Lin lived in Paris, Singapore and several South American cities with his French-diplomat wife and became a more prolific writer than he was in China.

1 van Crevel, Maghiel. *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Leiden & Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008, pp. 137-188.

It was during these times Song Lin emerged as a major Chinese poet of our times. How the context of exile with its promises and limitations has shaped Song Lin's writing and his poetics will be the subject of this paper. Of particular interest to us is the process of one's conception of worlding while away from one's home country.

In 1994, Song Lin wrote a birthday poem based on a photograph of himself. In the poem, he closely and reflectively scrutinizes himself as if seen in a mirror:

tenderness of a daydreamer revealed between eyebrows  
that refract light of a delicate heart  
his sight calmly falls upon a place.  
slightly high cheekbones yet an upright nose,  
in the shadows of his cheeks burns the passion of a southerner.

obsession in the eyes and also doubts,  
forgiving as he has seen suffering,  
before beauty, he narrows his eyes into a smile.  
forehead held high before the powerful,  
the curve of his mouth makes up with anybody anytime.

the lush tree of life, autumn is coming,  
wind blows homesickness into falling leaves.  
this face on the palm can feel itself,  
yet becomes unfamiliar in the mirror.  
and this mouth will sing lines of verse before turning to dust.

—Song Lin “A Self-inscribed Portrait at the Age of Thirty-five”

This is the only time that a “self-portrait” has ever appeared in Song Lin's poetry career. Without a doubt, the act of self-examination in the mirror is an important one; it is a way of knowing oneself and the world, as well as showing the course of poetic thinking that encompasses Song's life experience and poetic craft.

By the time of this poem, Song Lin had already gone abroad for many years. The age of thirty-five corresponds to what Dante said about “midway upon the journey of our life.” As the main author of “City Poetry” in the 1980s and a great component of the “legend” on the banks of the Liwa River in Shanghai, when he found himself in a foreign land and reflected upon life's vicissitudes and his own struggles, (“forgiving as he has seen suffering”), mixed feelings spilled forth: despite “the lush tree of life,” “autumn is coming, / wind blows homesickness into

falling leaves,” and with “obsession” and “doubts,” the poet will continue to “sing” the lines of verse that spring forth continuously. Since the start of his writing career, he has been a firm believer in the Mallarmesque alchemist of words.

## 1. Wandering and the Poetics of “Looking”

It is unknown whether the aforementioned “self-portrait” in the poem, “a self-inscribed portrait at the age of thirty-five,” was printed on the front page of the collection *Foyer*.<sup>2</sup> However, from the facial features of eyebrow, nose, cheeks, eyes, lips and so forth, we cannot help but think of a Western poet—Rainer Maria Rilke. How the two of them resemble each other in their elegance and spirit! Although Song Lin himself once said, “The graceful verse of Keats has been a goal in my writing, in particular, his passion, which has an inescapable affecting appeal,”<sup>3</sup> in terms of style and personal disposition, he shares more with the respectable German language poet Rilke: calm, gentle, bookish, with a dream-like elegance, the enduring enthusiasm for mysterious things and acts (such as the practice of divination) in poetry and in life, wandering experiences in many a foreign country, the beautiful and delicate wording and the sensuous and gentle touch in poetry, as well as the exploration of themes of love, beauty, loneliness, existence, etc.

Song Lin never hides his affection for and allegiance with Rilke. In an interview, he particularly mentioned the spiritual influence of Rilke:

“We are, above all, eternal spectators / looking upon, never from, the place itself”—this line from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* tells of a wandering soul. This most spiritual poet in history paints a self-portrait of his back turned toward the distance for a premonition of his destiny and for readers who share similar disposition. [...] In Paris, Rilke was my guide, who knew around which street corner I would get lost and ghostly waited for me behind hand.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed this connects the two poets and touches upon the unpredictable nature of destiny and the uncertainties of a poetic life. This was perhaps in early 1990s, shortly after Song Lin arrived in Paris and tried to find his way around through

2 Song Lin. *Foyer*. Taiyuan: Beiyue Literature & Art Publishing House, 2000.

3 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

4 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

reading Rilke's poetry. Before his departure, he had written a swansong series called "death and praise," an elegy for the bygone era: although he keeps the impassioned tone of the 1980s, he discards, in the "Free Sonnets" dedicated to his lover, the overly exaggerated declarative style unique to that era, and instead, takes on a meditative narrative, which would become an important feature in his overseas poems.

For Song Lin, Paris means the true beginning of exile, though before that he had already been exposed to the "potential threat"<sup>5</sup> of exile. However, "exile" is not just a label for Song Lin; rather, it attains the characteristics of travel due to his "constant migration" between lands and countries: "from a city to another city, traveling has provided for me more empirical materials that refresh the writing, often, it is until you leave the city can you describe it, the geological displacement marks the coordinates of a personal poetic map that displays a complex and retrograde tendency."<sup>6</sup> Song Lin attempts through his writing to reinvent the connotation of "exile," and to reconstruct how the theme of exile enters poetry. In reference to the Rilke lines "we are, above all, eternal spectators / looking upon, never from, the place itself." Song Lin adds his own reflections: "Leaving means not here, in other words, from leaving to leaving, but never from here to there."<sup>7</sup> For Song Lin, exile brings out the insights of "from leaving to leaving" and the relationship between here and there. Like Rilke, Song Lin made his "home across four seas" for a long while and coincidentally, the image of the juggler<sup>8</sup> in the fifth poem in Rilke's "Duino Elegies" also appears quite frequently in Song Lin's poems: in his poem "Portrait I: Street Performer," he paints a picture of a female street performer as a "post-modernist goddess just born" and "displaying the tranquil beauty of the god-given

5 Song Lin once wrote: "In terms of the relationship between exile and the destiny of poets: when the identity of the first poet in Chinese history was established, at the same time, the theme of exile had been a constant, or in other words, the theme of exile has chosen poets. From the first lyric poet Qu Yuan until our century, not in a statistical sense, but as some sort of continuation of a spiritual life, no generation of Chinese poets could avoid the potential threat of exile." (Song Lin. "Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui's Eleven Questions". *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.)

6 Cf. "Being Carefree is Salvation, not the Other Way Around-Interviews with Song Lin". *Poetry Monthly*. <http://www.poetrylife.com>, Issue 5, 2008.

7 Song Lin. "Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui's Eleven Questions". *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

8 It is said that Rilke's image of the juggler was inspired by Picasso's painting "Family of Jugglers" as well as by his acute observation of street jugglers during his time in Paris. This image also appears in Rilke's "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge" and his essay "The Juggler." (Cf. Liu Haoming. "Foreword" in *Duino Elegie*. Shenyang: Liaoning Education Press, 2005. P. 49-50.)

body.” He gives her an “enthusiastic” look. Whereas in fragments and farewell songs, we see a scene like this—“puppeteers dressed in flashy clown clothes”: “happiness his red nose, innocence his poverty”; or in the series poem “Prism, Paris,” he notices “the street painter of May”; or in “walking down Montmartre,” he pays attention to “an old man fumbling in the garbage,” whose empty glance “could destroy the world.”

To a large extent, the street performer, the garbage collector, the flaneur on-the-go, the melancholic “foreigner” or “noctambulist” (in “Insomnia”) could be seen as varying portraits of Song Lin himself living in a foreign country. We can trace his “on the road” state of life in his poems: “a man walks in the immense city in the dead of night” (“Notes from Letters”), “a night of wandering, in this strange city” (“En Route”); or the lonesome silhouette of “floating”:

on the twelve identical bridges,  
not a single one without endless streams of traffic.

evening bell tolls, birds retrieve their shadows,  
steeple fade into a grey sky.

eyes in a daze, last leaves in wind  
keep trembling, not knowing where to fall

a spurt of feelings of the divided self,  
as if you stood on every one of the twelve bridges.

—“Metaphor of the Floating Life”

For a long time after leaving China, writing had become for Song Lin a way of overcoming the speechlessness that came with loneliness: “facing the threat larger than unemployment—speechlessness [...] the stifling spatial displacement is beyond imagination. The loneliness of a floating life, the habit of talking to spirits in solitude, could these things help construct the foundation of a pyramid in the vast interior, perhaps an insistent belief?”<sup>9</sup> Or a kind of self-help and therapy: “if you cannot bear the loneliness that comes with living overseas, then perhaps writing would fall into a greater emptiness. Strangely enough, loneliness also nourishes writing that sets out to overcome the sheer speechlessness. In this way,

9 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

writing becomes self-help or therapy.”<sup>10</sup> The writing of resistance brings out a major theme in Song Lin’s poetry, namely, from loneliness of the self to the greater “homesickness” of humanity. Needless to say, with monologues and attention to writing, Song Lin turns exile into wandering: “the enthused thoughts follow writing by the water / alas, where is the home of words?” (“The Wanderer in Prague”). Perhaps wandering lessens the anxiety that is part and parcel of exile. Song Lin’s poetry thus opens up to greater emphasis on the meaning of the world and being.

In this connection, street performers and garbage collectors are metaphorical representations of the condition of poets in modern life. This idea finds its origin in Baudelaire. According to Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire invented a new literary genre, in which “Baudelaire associated himself with the image of garbage collectors carefully fumbling through the garbage pile” and became an exaggerated metaphor for the poets’ writing process. “Poets are similar to garbage collectors in the sense that both do what they do in a lonesome manner when the city inhabitants are deep in their sleep, even their postures are similar.”<sup>11</sup> Touted as “the capital of the nineteenth century” by Benjamin, the city of Paris and its brilliant cityscape have inspired many a great poet, such as Baudelaire, Rilke and Apollinaire. Paris not only established the image of the poet but also cultivated a new style of writing, and Benjamin goes on: “Poets snatch their trophies from the specter-like mass, which consist of words, fragments, sentences on the bleak streets.”<sup>12</sup> Song Lin’s series “Prism, Paris” seems to find itself intertwined in the mist of the Parisian cityscape. This series weaves in “homesick” whispers (“homesickness by the water blows wrinkles of the moon,” “in the vast foreign land,” “everything has fallen homesick”) as well as his thoughts on writing: “when we say, poetry is the excess of the world / which means in the increase, there is decrease / like an orange in the orchard of reality / plump, spurting fragrance, the ultimate measure / takes place of process” (Number 5); “night chill as water, under a lamp cover / a poem leans onto eternal incompleteness: / like a blue u.f.o. / emitting strange and extremely strong light / resisting the name we gave it” (Number 13); “I write some poems, quite inappropriately, / unavoidably to fall heavily / what i need is to slow down in my sprint / to salvage songs in the deep recovery” (Number 14). These dialectical statements all point to the condition of poetry in a foreign land. In another poem

10 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

11 Benjamin, Walter. *A Lyric Poet in an Era of High Capitalism*. Tr. Zhang Xudong. Wei Wensheng. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1989. P. 98-99.

12 Benjamin, Walter. *A Lyric Poet in an Era of High Capitalism*. Tr. Zhang Xudong. Wei Wensheng. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1989. P. 98-99.



“circus,” Song Lin borrows from Baudelaire and compares poetry writing to a circus performance: “this is craft, wings of poetry, / not more than the body / or the clumsy movement of the body. / but in the ultimate effort, they look alike.”

It is worth mentioning that Song Lin posits a concept of looking as worlding and writing in “Prism, Paris” (Number 10) as he talks about the image of the poet and the nature of writing:

after all you are a witness—looking  
is the best way to enter the world  
because the world that has lost its connectedness  
needs you, now faster, now braver,  
to make up a new landscape on your own  
looking is change. the invisible  
becomes the body that foresees the unsettling invasion  
and the unchangeable law of metabolism of the talented  
the heart moved by eternity

Here, the “looking” that comes with “wandering” marks the limit of poetry writing. Like Baudelaire’s “watching” (an effective method of how “poets snatch their trophies from the specter-like mass, which consists of words, fragments, sentences on the bleak streets.”), which also reminds us of Starobinski’s “aesthetics of gazing.”<sup>13</sup> In Song Lin’s poetry, “looking” is not only a habit and posture in the process of “wandering,” but also a way of making phrases and sentences. This “afternoon wanderer” (“Afternoon Encounter”) is also a quiet and gentle observer, whose “writing goes across many ‘unknown terrains’ of the interior and is understated, self-referential and homeless.”<sup>14</sup> He wanders and is “in deep thoughts” (“Autumn Promenade”), but more often he “views” (“Three Poems on View”) and “perceives” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”): “eventful autumn tall trees use the blind eyes of scars to perceive” (“Songs of Finding Water”); “no one sees how

13 Jean Starobinski is a famous Swiss literary critic, a representative of the Geneva School, whose “aesthetics of gazing” was first published in the collection *The Living Eye*; for him, gazing “is a act of retrieving and storing,” “it is not satisfied by what is given, it waits for the quiet stasis within movements and rushes toward the littlest trembling of a face in repose, it wants to get close to the face behind the mask, or tries to experience the seductive vertigo that comes with that kind of depth, in order to re-capture the elusive changes of light and shadows on the water.” (*Poppaea’s Veil*. Tr. Guo Hong’an, Social Science Documents Press, 1995; Guo Hong’an. “The Metaphor of Gaze”. *Foreign Literature Review*, Issue 4, 2005).

14 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

a cliff rises up, / headlands, its lonesome border” (“Watching the Obsidian Cliffs From the Salt Shores”); “the sea gazing people, / gazing for gazing’s sake, / the shape of trestle in his memory / similar to bird wings and starlight” (“The Trestle That Reaches Into the Sea”); “if you are an angel, / do you always gaze from the top of the dome, / and say that sorrow is a craft (“Circus”). “Perception” or “gazing” is the “structure” of Song Lin’s way of viewing things during his journeys, which also serves as a starting point for his poetry. It is in this way that he can absorb “the landscape seen from an eagle’s eye” (“The Landscape Seen From an Eagle’s Eye”). All these demonstrate Song Lin’s sensitivity to “light” in his writing, through which he establishes a genealogy of “light”: “water’s light pressing the retinal” (“Bodensee”), “light shifts to the transformation of clouds and shadows” (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*), “vertigo in the nerves of light” (“Little Tunes in Jiangyin”), “light runs after light, the science of refraction / the cornea reflects the ghost in the water” (“Short Day”), “without knowing, the trumpet in the park / like a beam of light that squeezes into curtains” (“Hand-drawn Christmas Card”), “light saunters in the clouds and on treetops, some light filtered by glass windows (Foyer), “impressions of light. yes, light of the key / the pendulum light on the inside of a water tank / eyes closed and the feeling of being pushed forward slowly” (“The Kiss of The Bund”). “Light” solidifies the rich surface of the world and the multi-layered atlas of the heart and dissolves into writerly intuitions, which is a prominent feature of Song Lin’s poetics of “looking.”

Based on this poetics of “looking,” Song Lin explores the possibility of writing overseas: “living abroad and using the mother tongue is not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the experience of exile strengthens the longing for home. Between cultures, poets gain a double-vision [...]. To keep some aesthetic distance from the home environment does not hurt individual composition and instead, brings out more possibilities for Chinese language writing.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, when he writes about “homesickness” during exile, he tries to “reconsider the sullen homesickness” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”) and depict “the heart-shaped homesick matter” (“Guest Writing”). In such poems as “Roof of the Early Years,” “Mingjiang Visit” and in particular, the collection *Fragments and Farewell Songs*<sup>16</sup>, “homesickness” is

15 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

16 So far, this collection that was published Chinese-French en face by the French publisher MEET in 2006 has not been widely reviewed and recognized but is in fact a cogent long poem or a long series of poems, which weave reality and legend, old and new, foreign and home, the present and memory into a powerful whole. This collection exposes the mystery and strangeness of what “home” is all about.

not simplistically treated as a disease but is transformed into an inspiration to search for the origin and to explore the root of culture and memory. Moreover, Song Lin also touches upon the deeper meaning of “homesickness,” which points to a faraway place, representing the unavoidable absence and the inevitable disappearance: “every bench has a forever absentee” (“Benches in the Park”), “brilliant” clouds like a “brief kaleidoscope of a magic life” (“Tell the Clouds”). In the end, “homesickness” connects with the theme of death in his poems, “foreign land, utopia and deceased home are intertwined into a grey area, where writing has never exhibited such ambiguity.”<sup>17</sup> Once overseas, many of his poems are contemplations on death (for instance, “this recent departure is already death” in “Mingjiang Visit,” “in the shadow of utopia and death / the windmill slants” in “Prism, Paris,” “for a moment I think of the terseness of death” in “Perception by the Autumn Forest” etc.), which correlates to his experience overseas and continues in the series “Death and Praise” that was completed before he left China, echoing the sighs of death in Rilke’s poetry: “Death, its back to us, it is the sideline of life that light can never reach. We exist in the two infinite worlds of living and death and must do our best to absorb the nutrients from both worlds.”<sup>18</sup> From his reflective “looking” and his contemplation on death in the solitude overseas, Song Lin puts in new elements in his poetry writing: “elegiac reminiscence, the looking forward in melancholia, the hesitation between leaving and staying, the intertwining love and death—when these elements find their right words, a new and more complex lyric will emerge.”<sup>19</sup>

## 2. “The house of rhymes is the old garden of memory”

When the Polish poet Milosz talked about poet as a “career,” he said: “If we take flying above earth as a metaphor for the career of poets, then it is not hard to notice that there is a paradox even in times when it is not difficult for poets to avoid falling into historical traps. How could we stay above earth, meanwhile looking at it closely? But on the off-balance scale, when distance is introduced by the flow of time, some kind of balance can still be achieved. ‘Looking’ means not only placing it before the eyes, but also storing it in memory. ‘To see and describe’ could also

17 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

18 Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Thus Spoke Rilke*. Ed. Lin Yu. Beijing: China Friendship Publishing House, 1993, p.103.

19 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

mean to reconstruct in the imagination.”<sup>20</sup> Utilizing this theory to examine Song Lin’s poetry and his ideas on poetry, perhaps we could understand better his poetics of “looking” and the characteristics of his poetry.

To some extent, Song Lin’s overseas writing could be considered a kind of writing that turns toward memory. In fact, he’s rather clear on this: “The exiled do not have a present country. In the state of spiritual suspension, what they have is the fragmented reminiscence of the home country in the past. ‘Now’ is picked clean and we see the typical behavior of the exiled in a foreign land, namely, ‘a wandering ghost’.”<sup>21</sup> The same idea is expressed poetically in a short poem “untitled”:

a stranger walks past the river bank  
reminiscence turns him into a ghost

In a foreign country, Song Lin is like someone “crushed by memory,” yet cannot resist the temptation of “the urn of memory” (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*). Memory has become the main, if not the only, source of writing. Writing cannot but rely on memory and its reconstruction of memory to reflect the present reality. When “the needle of memory crosses rheumatism” (“Benches in the Park”), he “longs to see the invisible” “out of sight” (Foyer). Unconsciously, memory becomes existence and solves his trouble of “homelessness.” According to Song Lin, “looking” is “the best way of entering the world,” which means through “looking,” he connects with the world. In the process of “looking,” events make their way into short-term memory and once he opens up or “depicts,” everything that has to do with home and family will be retrieved from short-term memory and go into his writing. In the end, this kind of writing provides its own epistemology, which is about the origination of poetry: “Poetry is the will and the holding of it.” “What poetry holds is the memory of words that is passed onto collective memory by way of personal memory.”<sup>22</sup> In Song Lin’s poetry, memory is a necessity, the foundation of writing.

“Memory is a kind of roaring.” (*Fragment s and Farewell songs*) For Song Lin, “looking” is the medium that connects the present with memory. He writes with a flourishing eloquence: “the need for medium creates poetry / sounds back and forth between the visible and the invisible / like the migration of sparrows. what

20 Miłosz, Czesław. *Double Vision: A Metaphor for a Poet’s Vocation*. Ed. Wang Jiaxin. *Thus Spoke Important 20th Century Foreign Poets*. Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 1992.

21 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

22 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

is the faraway place? / shores of an early age—dream perceives it / a dirt house—grandma walks out from it” (“Prism, Paris”). The “faraway place” that “holds” the “homesickness” recalls a lot of memory and is soaked in the smell of articles and things from home. Even after leaving home for many years, the home in Song Lin’s memory still keeps its indescribable mystery: “at the end of the village a few cedars, which make us believe, the world protected by trees is large enough (*Fragments and Farewell Songs*). The overflowing of “the urn of memory” deepens the sense of overseas loneliness, which makes some of his poems seem as if pulled out of despair: “the wild imagination of the sea, from the abyss / melts and purifies a line of verse, / like ritual fire flying in the air,” “the cliffs under the dazzling sun make us think of / the origin of the heart of poetry generation after generation (“Watching the Obsidian Cliffs From the Salt Shores”). For the moment, the shocking landscape in his eyes is transformed into a scene in his life and constitutes a kind of metaphor for poetry writing (“origin” not just inspiration). Often as he “sees and describes” these landscapes, he does not limit himself to depictions of the landscapes and narratives; rather, his pen points out to poetry itself: “the river flows and flows not, like words, / flickering shadows, finally / envelope the named cliffs, and rush into / a waterfall of passion, breaking in the momentous sky” (“how to write this poem”). Through the mess of landscapes, he “searches, bends to pick up his lost keys, / picks up the kaleidoscope, early years, craft of the moment” (“Snow on the Postcard”).

Perhaps this is what is called “meta-poetry”—in poetry, the state of things correlates to the expansion of poetic thoughts and the process of words coalescing into poetry: “writing is a door, open to the fields” (“Q & A”). Through fabled landscapes, the characteristics or the magical parts of poetry are exposed: “a fish stuck in the net,” “which wriggles its waist, / and breaks free from the net, / like a rainbow, it flips drops of water toward the horizon,” “you, the survivor, whether it is you or the fisherman, / never has seen its lost scales” (“Poetry”); “perhaps this is poetry: fleeting shadow / the movement against fleeting” (“Advice to Young Poets”). The interest in meta-poetry shows Song Lin’s poetic awareness, for him “meta-poetry is the original poetry, the poetry of the heart, the poetry that knocks on the door of loneliness [...] Meta-poetry writing, in terms of epistemology, is a search for its own origin, whereas its methodology lies in establishing the correlatives. Meta-poetry is a difficult kind of poetry and through selection of obstacles and the attendant dismantlement, it comes closer, step by step, to the inevitable form culled from the random hand that throws the dice.”<sup>23</sup> He seems to believe that a poem shows the

23 Cf. “The Name of the Spirit—On Zhang Zao”. *Jintian*. Issue 2, 2010.

process of maturity and correlates to the growth of nature. The writer bears the responsibility of showing the correlation between words and things. Though poetry writing is indeed the natural blossoming of wild flowers, it still demands hard work and chiseling, which is the argument of the following lines:

with the meticulousness of the photographer in the dark room  
working until dawn. distracted face  
like a negative of quotidian experience

from the ambiguous medicinal drinks of memory, expose  
the whiteness of the day, and the blackness of the night  
from the old washes out the faraway childhood

—“Writingholic”

It is fair to say that meta-poetry is indicated in Song Lin’s poetic awareness: the selection of words, the chiseling of phrases, the attention to form, all of which have become a writing habit, as suggested in these lines: “A slender poet, then the poetry must be plump / understated, then the resonance rings far into the present and past” (“Three Commentaries on Poetry”). This comes as a self-reminder to pursue “crystal lines” (“Slowness”) and to capture “the slight trembling of water’s eyelids” (“An Imitation on Double Rhyme”), in the hope that the poetry achieves an understated and classically elegant style. However, for Song Lin, there is another more difficult layer to his craft, in consideration of his overseas existence: how to go beyond what Milosz said about “seeing and describing,” and, with the ethics of the witness and self-restraint, maintain an effective balance and improve the aesthetic purity of poetry, which could be summarized in one sentence: “The house of rhymes is the old garden of memory” (“Three Commentaries on Poetry”). “The house of rhymes” is the core. Obviously, he finds out about the common ground of “the house of rhymes” and “memory”: both are containers of sounds, emotions and experiences; the metaphor of “old garden” underscores the importance of “the house of rhyme” to “memory.” In a sense, perhaps Song Lin appreciates the variety and spaciousness of “garden,” and the historical weight of its being “old.” Thus, the statement “the house of rhymes is the old garden of memory” means that the various forms of memory find their shapes in the construction of rhymes by words, or more concretely:

[...] poetry, overflows from feeling,  
written upon events, not beyond reason

turns complaints into a fitting mockery  
uses words to describe the indescribable  
completes ideas to the measure of form

—“Three Commentaries on Poetry”

This “measure of form” demonstrates the uncompromising nature of Song Lin’s poetic craftsmanship.

In this case, why does Song Lin put so much emphasis on “the house of rhymes”? As is known to all, rhyming has an irreplaceable place in classical Chinese poetry. With the advent of New Poetry, the vernacular into poetic compositions and the liberation of poetic forms, “the house of rhymes” has been exiled in poetry. However, through the avocations and promotion by such poets and scholars as Zhao Yuanren, Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo and numerous others, New Poetry has seen some reconstitution of rhyme schemes. These poets and scholars try to overcome some innate disadvantage of modern Chinese and to give New Poetry a poetic form, whose beauty competes with that of Classical Poetry. They hope that New Poetry would be imbued with rhythmic benefits through reconstruction of certain poetic meters. There have been constructive proposals such as the theory of “three beauties” by Wen Yiduo, “lines separated by rhymes” by Lin Geng as well as “the design of intonation” by Zheng Min. Thus, it seems that Song Lin’s emphasis on “the house of rhymes,” besides its historical resonance, has its own meaning in recognizing the importance of rhyme and meter. Rather than saying “the house of rhymes” is a kind of rigid meter, it posits rhymes through a careful organization of words. It is important to point out that Song Lin’s concept of the house of rhymes, on the one hand, is a continuation of the classical tradition. On the other hand, it incorporates the poetics from Western Symbolists such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Rilke, Valéry, etc. To some extent, the latter influence is more important. Song Lin, who lived in France where Symbolism originated, of course knows its history and is influenced by it. His view of poetry as the “extreme sports” (as in “Circus”) of words can find its origin in the ideas (such as “pure poetry”) of Symbolist poets. Song Lin admires their effort to construct the house of rhymes<sup>24</sup> and their maintenance of rigorous “measure of form.” He uses the Symbolist rhymes to remake the “house of rhymes” in classical Chinese poetry and measures

24 Rhyme is a crucial element in Symbolist poetry. Poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Rilke, Valéry all agree on this. Valéry thinks, “Poetry uses the organs directly and sets the limit for songs. It is a precise and continuous exercise between visual and sonic forms and clear expressions,” p. 231, Hundred Flowers Arts Press, 2002.

his own poetry according to the finesse and subtlety of word choices.

Rhyme belongs to the sonic part of poetry, which includes breath, sounds, meter and so forth. The plan of “the house of rhymes as the old garden of memory” helps incorporate elements of “listening” into Song Lin’s poetics. In this way, the organ of “looking,” namely, the eye, not only “looks” at things, but also listens (as what Paul Claudel means by “the eye listens”<sup>25</sup>): “silent listening dissolves into rivers and mountains” (“Perception by the Autumn Forest”). “Listening” is so important that it should be a skill that writers should hone all their lives: “the past figures live on in another way / and talk to us in silent words, as if / in a mirror. the unheard sorrow! / and listening is at the root of what we can count on / mirror, the whole of paradoxes / to take in the opposites, to dissolve in itself” (“Prism, Paris”). Through “listening,” the relationship between people and things has become more magical:

now only the kettle sings alone,  
like a cricket in the kitchen calling another  
wild cricket. it is also calling my lips,  
to touch lightly, the warm fragrance of the snow-water tea.

—“The Kettle”

For Song Lin, “listening” first calls up the order of sounds (“Meter”), then constant self-warning of the measure and is finally transformed into “the measure of form” in poetic composition—stanzas, the balance and order<sup>26</sup> of lines, the restrained and calm tone, the relaxed and smooth rhythm, the gentle and elegant flair of classic aesthetics, the effect of which echoes through this stanza:

here and now, green leaves lush and bright,  
this moment stays on.  
feeling the breath and movement of the sea,  
all the boats quietly sail to eternity.

—“An Imitation of Double Rhyme”

25 “The Eye Listens” is the title of Paul Claudel’s collection of art criticism (Chinese title 《艺术之路》, translated by Luo Xinzhang, Beijing Yanshan Press, 2006). Claudel finds his ideas in Baudelaire’s “correspondences” and Rimbaud’s “dissoluteness of all senses,” which have inspired Deleuze. Here the author borrows Claudel’s term, but his definition of “synesthesia” differs slightly from Claudel’s. Refer to the Chinese introduction to *The Third Road of Deleuze—Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, translated by Dong Qiang, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007.

26 Song Lin’s lines are measured; usually two to three syllable words per line and three to five lines per stanza.



Song Lin has realized that rhyme and meter in New Poetry is not the same as in classical poetry. Contemporary writing cannot and should not reproduce the treasured pattern of parallelism in pre-modern rhymed verse. His attempt in rhyme and meter lays “in the overall tendency to use a common language in poetry, to revitalize the original meaning of words through variation of meter and quick condensation, and to expand, in the new rapport, from monotonous meanings to a complex orchestration of the meanings of words.”<sup>27</sup> There is plenty of evidence to show that such an attempt is insistent and singular, as we turn to his unique attention to “the root of words” in the next section.

### 3. “The Insistent Digging at the Root of Words”

In contemporary Chinese poetry, Song Lin’s writing is somewhat an odd presence. Though in the 1980s he came onto the stage of the poetry scene as a member of “City Poetry,” he remained a marginalized figure throughout the 1990s. Writing in exile has not helped the situation either. As a result, his work has been known only to those in the inner circles of readers and critics until recently. For the past thirty years, Chinese poetry has seen rounds of experimentation under the headings of “avant-garde” or “modernism,” and a public antagonism between people who take different positions on those experimentations and debates. There is hardly a consensus as to where contemporary Chinese poetry is going. It is for these very reasons that we may reevaluate and appreciate Song Lin’s poetry and his poetics, which have been participating in the poetic debate from the margin.

As mentioned before, we can find traces of classical poetics in Song Lin’s take on poetry, yet the attention that he pays to it really comes from his contemplation as an outside observer and critic. The poet Zhu Zhu acutely points out that Song Lin’s overseas poetry “has the trace of traditional incantation that builds a few windows in the poetic form, from which he could glimpse the ancient country from abroad.”<sup>28</sup> This reflection keeps Song Lin from over-indulging in or blindly promoting the classics (there are many poets who do this), and instead, helps him cultivate a particular acumen, that is, a “double vision” that “anchors upon the whole culture” and “a bigger picture of the present and past,” or in other words, “through translation and to utilize Ji Cang’s words, name the outside world and at the same

27 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

28 Zhu Zhu. “Walks under Statues—for Song Lin”. *Vertigo*. Liberation Army Arts Press, 2000, p. 105.

time turn the outside world into a mirror, thus obtaining a world view that would help deepen the understanding of our own world.”<sup>29</sup> Following this train of thought, Song Lin goes around the superficial discussion on modernism and localism and digs into the “origin” of ancient Chinese culture and from theory to practice (often in the form of meta-poetry) explores those elements that might feed into his poetry writing.

For Song Lin, “contemporary poetry exhibits the avant-garde stance and over-emphasizes evanescent ‘innovation,’” yet it lacks gratitude to these perennial stuff of life and shows inappropriate enthusiasm toward the earth, nature, and ancient ways of life, not to speak of the intimate conversation with the inner gods and tributes to others.”<sup>30</sup> It is blind to separate “innovation” from “origin” or “tradition.” On the contrary, Song Lin pays his tribute to ancient traditions and finds sources of the imagination in mysterious fengshui, phenomena and rituals: “divination of the same mysterious compass, holding / gold, wood, water, fire, dirt of the origin / now, on my wide table appears / poetry, every line (like the house of rhymes) is true / but the music in divination has slept for a thousand years” (“On Discovery of Ancient Songs in the Book of Changes”). Here the “music” that “has slept for a thousand years” references something particular. In his view, “contemporary poets should learn from the ancient in order to make up for the lack in culture. They should also find inspiration in ancient art and realize how rich our heritage is and try to face the tradition in their writing.” “The past has never disappeared but condensed in historical memory. Rather than saying literature is a developmental movement, it is a circular one. Through the excavation of culture and archeology of words, we can repair historical memory, which could become the mission of contemporary literature.”<sup>31</sup> Song Lin firmly believes that “the dead live on in another way / and speak to us in silent words” (“Prism, Paris”). Sometimes he declares, “the classics have been distorted. in a distorted age / I just want to be a water-finding man” and asks further, “what kind of exploration / could lead to the lost undercurrent?” yet the response is a witch-like “prophecy”: “ ‘dear traveler, you should search beyond your sight / and in listening cull the power of the spell / you should know that the origin of a river is small / go upstream to meet neighboring running waters / the vicissitude of dream is the vicissitude of life / when the rainbow outshines the sky

29 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes, *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

30 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes, *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

31 Song Lin. “In response to French Journal Poésie”. *Poetry Monthly*. [http://: www.poemlife.com](http://www.poemlife.com), Issue 5, 2008.

above the big river” (“Songs of Finding Water”); what consoles him is this:

origin obscured, saying “no” to us  
yet there remains recognizable signs  
that scatter among secret lanes covered in wild flowers  
like dots of fireflies, like lu shu square  
to reproduce for the world the beauty of words  
—“Three Commentaries on Poetry”

In the poem “Borges’s imagination of china,” Song Lin uses the third person narrative and dialogue to show the imagination kindled by the Chinese Classics.

These “origins” perhaps embody the deeper connotations of Song Lin’s “memory.” In poetics, they preserve a precious heritage: “Ancient poetics, in terms of Tao and Art, content and form, rhythm and syntax and numerous other aspects has set a theoretical foundation, which turns the Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, Confucius and Meng-tzu, Zen Buddhism ideas and ideals into a mold that serves as a mirror reflecting the world.”<sup>32</sup> The foundation of this “mold” is language—a poet’s native language, more specifically the “Chineseness”: “In the development of Chinese New Poetry, ‘modernism’ is perhaps the most important concept. We must think hard on this and come up with another important concept: ‘Chineseness.’”<sup>33</sup> If we dig into the “Chineseness,” there is the “Poeticness,” acumen of the native language: “to truly display the poeticness and Chineseness of poetry, with emphasis on historical and regional awareness and a renewed sense of rediscovery of the native language.”<sup>34</sup> “The Chineseness has long been incorporated into the shapes of the Chinese characters when our ancestors created the language.”<sup>35</sup> “The exploration of the relationship between the present reality, modernism and the identity of Chinese poets would inevitably lead to a metaphysical one about the origin of the civilization—if possible, all the way to the early history of characters.”<sup>36</sup>

If we put this awareness into the context of Song Lin’s overseas writing,

32 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

33 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

34 Cf. “Being carefree is salvation, not the other way around—interviews with Song Lin”. *Poetry Monthly*. [http://: www.poemlife.com](http://www.poemlife.com), Issue 5, 2008.

35 Song Lin. “Psychoanalysis of Overseas Writing—Answers to Mr. Zhang Hui’s Eleven Questions”. *New Poetry Review*. Issue 1, 2009.

36 “The Leading Circulation”, Introduction to Blank Etudes. *Poetry, Ten Years of Today Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

perhaps we could understand better his seeming obsession with “the root of words” in the Chinese language. Just as the poet Brodsky once said, “exile is an event of language: he has been pushed away from the native language and he gives in to this native language. In the beginning, the native language could be said to be his sword, then it became his shield, his airtight cabin. The private and intimate relationship with language in exile has become destiny—even before all this, it has become an obsession or a responsibility.”<sup>37</sup> Song Lin has a lot to say on this: “Between poets and their native language, it is blood relation, a relation of pre-selection. Before the native language, every poet is a latecomer. To write in the native language means to convey the personal effort of holding cultural and historical memory. Only the great poets could bring new energy to the ancient native language or to complete the mission of transitioning from an old end to a new beginning. To witness in the native language, to go beyond personal suffering, to put in new effort to save her ruined reputation.”<sup>38</sup> In *Fragments and Farewell Songs*, he said:

and on the baked and crisp tongues  
words, like rivers through  
many a reunion, and finally reach the open  
quietude, under larva-clumps of forgetting.  
wherever you are, the pale fire of the native language  
will shine as you fall asleep, and accompany you,  
to approach an iceberg on the frozen soil.

Language is the vehicle of memory. Wherever he is, he takes with him “the pale fire of the native language.” He metaphorizes the work of the poet: “our work sometimes resembles that of a groundhog. We dig and dig into the root of words until the sweet spring of meaning spurts out.”<sup>39</sup> “The root of words” is in fact the “root” of memory, the “root” of culture, or in other words, “the origin” of a civilization.

In recent years, Song Lin’s poetry and poetics have attracted many more readers. His “return” dazzles the poetry scene. Song Lin has made known his concerns with the apparent disregard of the classical in contemporary Chinese poetry. In the poem “In the Tribes of the Haudenosaunee People,” he conveys his reservations through

37 Brodsky. “The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh”. *Children of Civilization*. Tr. Liu Wenfei et al. Central Translation and Editorial Press, 1999. P. 59.

38 Cf. “The Surviving Eye and the Mutable Key—On Reading the Poetry of Paul Celan”. *Foreign Literature*, Issue 6, 2008.

39 Potato Brothers. “Blue Bird of Poetry on the Path of Return—Interview with Song Lin”. *Chinese Poets*. Issue 4, 2004.

the mouth of a patriarch of a tribe: “your words are broken, unclear, / which have never coalesced into a whole, / the exacting sea, unlike a fleet of ships, / sail firmly, move in balance... / said words go with the waves, / like a coin thrown in air, rootless.” The fact that he hopes to resolve the problem of “rootlessness” is the path in search of “root”—“constant digging at the root of words.” Of course, Song Lin’s “return” to “root” does not lead to the rigidity of an ancient language; rather, upon return, he hopes for innovation, “to take in foreign stuff into the interior world of poetry, for more pressure and tension in the language.”<sup>40</sup>

From a certain historical perspective, Chinese New Poetry is different from Classical Poetry in many fundamental ways and for good reasons. Chinese New Poetry seems to have taken shape in an “anxious” style (to borrow from the poet Jiang Tao), with frequent conflicts between the inner and outer worlds. In terms of form, the lineation and structure of New Poetry are constrained by sound-sense construction of words and the fixed units of sentences, the latter of which contributes to the proliferation of complex monosyllabic words and long sentences which often result in an attendant clutter. Such a linguistic limitation imposes obstacles to the beauty of form as well as prevents a more balanced organization of lines. It is not difficult to imagine the ambitious pursuit of “the house of rhymes” concept and “the measure of form” in Song Lin’s poetics. Their birth at the moments of writing between cultures notwithstanding, their impact will continue to be felt in the writing of Song Lin and other poets in contemporary Chinese poetry.

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# The Intercivilizational Turn of Translation Studies: An Interview with Professor Douglas Robinson

Douglas Robinson (Hong Kong Baptist University)

Jane Qian Liu (The University of Warwick)

## Abstract:

In this interview, Professor Douglas Robinson discusses his new book *Exorcising Translation*, particularly its key term “the cofigurative regime of translation”. He borrowed this term from Sakai Naoki but gave it new significance, using it as a new framework to understand the mutual historical constitution of Asian and European civilizations. Professor Robinson wants to bridge the disconnect between Critical Translation Studies and more traditional Translation Studies, and help us see the value of CTS in enriching TS and comparative literature. He also discusses various issues including pseudotranslation and comparative literature.

**Key words:** Translation Studies, Critical Translation Studies, the intercivilizational turn, cofigurative regime of translation, *Exorcising Translation*

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Liu: Professor Robinson, thank you so much for agreeing to accept our interview. I would like to begin our interview by discussing your latest book *Exorcising Translation*, and then move on to other aspects of your contribution to Translation Studies, if that is fine. *Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation (OCCT)* asked me to write a review of *Exorcising Translation*, and I read it with great enthusiasm. I found it an extremely thought-provoking book on translation theory, and is very revolutionary in many ways. Could you tell us what inspired you to write this book?

Robinson: Actually I didn't originally write it as a book. It was part of a larger project that ended up being too long to publish. It took me a full year to figure

out how to split that project into two parts: the longer part as *Critical Translation Studies*, the shorter (with some new material added) as *Exorcising Translation*.

Liu: A key term in your book is “the cofigurative regime of translation”. As you noted, you borrowed it from the Japanese theorist Sakai Naoki. Yet in your book, you gave this term brand-new significance. Could you tell us about this term?

Robinson: Certainly. Sakai uses it in reference to the “creation” of Japan as a single coherent nation, and Japanese as a national language, in the late eighteenth century: “cofigurative” in the sense that there is a dialogue among a variety of partners, in this case Japanese, Chinese, and Western intellectuals, who collaboratively create a Japanese national culture and a national language through translation. Since that kind of national unity tends to be imposed on the multiplicity of a living community in order to restrict and contain variability, Sakai associates it with what he calls the regime of homolingual address: the belief that the native members of a given national culture “naturally” understand each other and find it impossible to understand foreigners. Since this is all an undesirable illusion for Sakai, he tends to treat the cofigurative regime of translation negatively. I am less inclined to condemn it. I see it as a generative impulse, and explore its functioning between “East” and “West”—in the circulation of ancient Chinese religion/philosophy through the dissident peripheries of Western thought, beginning in the early eighteenth century, and ultimately influencing and informing the move from Romanticism and Idealism through pragmatism and phenomenology to the rise of Heideggerian Occidentalism in China and elsewhere. I resist the notion that Asian and European civilizations are oil and water. I am interested in their *mutual historical constitution* through cofigurative regimes of translation.

Liu: To be honest, I was almost at the final part of the book when the meaning of this term dawned on me, when you wrote, “this is the critical shift engineered by Sakai’s keyword ‘cofiguration’: Orientalism is *cocreated*, in relationship”. Did you perhaps purposely put this clarification to the latter part of the book, so that the reader would have gathered its meaning from earlier examples?

Robinson: I wasn’t sure where to broach that definition, to be frank. I had it early in the book, at first, and tried it various other places, looking for the place where it would seem most intuitively correct. I hope it worked at the end!



Liu: Yes, it worked really well at the end! I felt reassured when that statement proved my earlier speculation of its meaning. On another matter, I found the structure of the book extremely intricate and ingenious. The first chapter lays out the theoretical foundation of the book. The second chapter offers a lengthy illustration of the way civilizational spells work by examining the influence of Nietzsche on Harold Bloom. Then the third chapter provides an analysis of an American scholar's attack on an American translation of the Chinese classics *Laozi*, and it brings us back to the issue of panicked Eurocentrism raised in the preface, and melts the whole book into an organic unity. Is this how you planned to structure the book?

Robinson: This was the structure that gradually emerged as I struggled with the problem of dividing 140,000 words into two separate monographs. I worried that the long chapter on Nietzsche and Bloom wouldn't really fit. It's about "civilizational spells," to be sure—Sakai's term for Orientalist prejudices against "Asian theorists" and other cross-over phenomena between Asia and Europe that seem counterintuitive due to dualistic Orientalist thinking—but there isn't much Asia *or* translation in it.

Liu: I am relieved to hear you say so, for I was worried that maybe I was missing your point somehow when reading that chapter. Although there isn't much Asia or translation in that chapter, the following chapter highlights the theme of the book, and the Nietzsche/ Bloom chapter suddenly made sense.

In this book, you proposed a new turn in Translation Studies, the Intercivilizational Turn. Do you think this new turn signifies the end of the Cultural Turn and thereby takes its place? Could you elaborate on this new turn?

Robinson: I'm not sure about "ends" and "replacements." The Cultural Turn still exists, in many scholars' work. The Social Turn is still going strong. The Cognitive Turn is just beginning to gather steam. I'm really arguing for an *addition* to the list of crucial turns in TS, not trying to reduce or restrict all TS to intercivilizational studies. I do think, though, that the debate over Eurocentrism, which has occasionally become quite heated on both sides, may be directing our attention to the intercivilizational *traffic* in TS—the circulation of Eastern ideas through Western thought and the circulation of Western ideas through Eastern thought. The idea that the West originates everything and China simply borrows and imitates it is extremely depressing to me. I love exploring ways in which Chinese thought has

powerfully influenced my own Western approaches to human social interactions—especially the fact that my somatic theory of culture, language, and translation, which seems so counterintuitive to Western thinkers who are not steeped (as I am) in German Romanticism, American pragmatism, and European phenomenology, is spelled out quite clearly in Laozi and Mengzi, and tends to be taken for granted by average Chinese people who don't know the intellectual history behind their assumptions.

Liu: Indeed. I was deeply impressed when you said you found your intellectual kin in Mengzi. This kind of border crossing is so essential for TS scholars and scholars of comparative literature.

On a methodological level, you mentioned in your book that the reason why people are haunted by civilizational spells, by an impulse to draw lines, between East and West, between self and others, is that boundaries have explanatory power. This is very incisive. Reflecting on my own academic writing, and many academic works I have read, I totally agree with your opinion. However, one still wonders what happens if we really let go of boundaries. How can we begin to discuss questions related to the East, if there is no “East” to begin with?

Robinson: I don't think I advocate letting go of boundaries! I'm interested in border-crossings, transgressions of boundaries, which render the boundaries and categories porous or blurry but do not destroy them.

Liu: I see! Thank you so much. I would like to move on to your writings on Translation Studies in general, if you like. You proposed the term “Critical Translation Studies” (CTS), to include works by Lydia Liu and Sakai Naoki, and of course, yourself, I guess. Could you talk a bit about the essential difference between CTS and more traditional Translation Studies?

Robinson: The whole idea there was that Lydia Liu and Sakai Naoki and others were launching attacks on traditional TS as narrowly and naively obsessed with linguistic studies of equivalence between a source text and a target text in two national languages—which is not universally true, of course, given the massive TS assault on equivalence theories over the last three or four decades, but there is a sense in which it's still mainly true—and TS scholars were simply unaware of this whole other approach to the study of translation. Two groups studying translation,

with a massive disconnect in between. I wanted to bridge the gaps between the two approaches. CTS isn't a term those scholars use to describe their own approach: I borrowed the rubric Critical Translation Studies from Lydia Liu's Columbia website, where she says one of her research interests is "critical translation theory." (I've also, more recently, seen the rubric Critical Translation Studies used to describe a fusion of TS with Fairclough's CDA, Critical Discourse Analysis.) Anyway, as Liu and Sakai theorize translation, it is the pragmatic engagement with other people across felt borderlines that historically has *generated* what TS scholars regard as the "primal scene" of translation: two national languages, the translator mediating between them. At the simplest level, that is the difference between CTS and TS: CTS studies the prehistory to the interlingual encounter that TS studies as reality.

Liu: This is such a concise and incisive differentiation. Indeed CTS is crucial for the deepening and advancement of TS studies. As we know, your own works are very much theory-focused. I read your 2014 interview with Dr. Li Bo of CUHK, where you mentioned that you found traditional text-based Translation Studies to be quite boring. In your latest book, however, you seem to think a bit more highly of this kind of scholarly work, and even combined it with more theory-based studies yourself. Would you agree?

Robinson: I'm not sure what you mean. Which latest book? *Translationality* (2017)? I didn't remember calling traditional text-based TS boring to Li Bo, so I went back and reread it, and didn't find anything like your depiction there. In fact over and over in that interview I discussed the importance of applying theories to intertextual translation criticism, and defended the large number of such textual readings in the book that was just out then, *Translation and the Problem of Sway* (2011). What I did say, though, was that the traditional paradigm of *comparative literature* is based on static comparisons between texts, and that comparatists have been trying to render that paradigm more dynamic by appropriating the dynamic model of TS.

Liu: Oh, I was referring to *Exorcising Translation*, which also came out in 2017. So I probably missed your point. You said, "when you look at the history of translation theory over the last two thousand years, the questions raised have been very narrow. You translate word for word or sense for sense. That's basically it. If that is the tradition of Translation Studies, if that's what you want to get back to, leave me out. That's boring." (247) So you were not speaking against text-based TS, but were speaking against TS that only concerns itself with prescriptive discussions of how to

translate. You were in favour of issues within larger contexts, using interdisciplinary approaches, if I understand you correctly.

Indeed, Critical Translation Studies, and Translation Studies that takes into account the larger picture of the time, are sort of becoming the trend in European and American academia nowadays. However, back in China, discussions of foreignization and domestication continue to fill up the majority of Translation Studies works. Do you think this is the case?

Robinson: I had heard that about MA and PhD theses in the Mainland, a few years ago—that postgraduate students in China were all writing their theses using the distinction that Venuti borrowed from Schleiermacher, because (a) it's a simple-minded binary, which makes it easy to understand, and (b) neither Schleiermacher nor Venuti has any idea what makes a domestication a domestication or a foreignization a foreignization, which makes it arguably “original” to apply the vague distinction to two translations. More recently, however, I heard that Venuti is falling out of favor in Mainland China. This is all at the level of rumor for me, however. When I go to TS conferences in the Mainland, I find hardly anyone talking about Venuti (or Schleiermacher).

Liu: To move on to another aspect of your work, pseudotranslation, in which I take great interest, I read your definition of pseudotranslation in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, and realized that it differs from Gideon Toury's definition remarkably. You defined pseudotranslation as “not only a text pretending, or purporting, or frequently taken to be a translation, but also ... a translation that is frequently taken to be an original work”. Do you think it is necessary to separate a text which has no real origin and is fabricated to look like a translation from a text which is taken to be translations but did not mean to? That is, did authorial intention matter here?

Robinson: I hadn't done a lot of thinking about pseudotranslation when I wrote that encyclopedia entry; I've done more thinking about it since then, especially in the second essay of *Translationality*, where I'm interested in what we might call “metapseudotranslation,” where an author playfully pretends that his or her original text is actually translated from some other language, not in order to hoax anyone, as in Toury's definition, but to play with realistic expectations in metafictional ways. Rabelais uses that device in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; Cervantes uses it in *Don*

*Quixote*, and so on. The idea is that the first-person narrator of the novel is a real person who wrote his or her memoir—in the actual author’s language, like Lemuel Gulliver in Swift’s novel, or in an imaginary foreign language, like the narrator of *Gargantua*.

Liu: That sounds so interesting! I can’t wait to read *Translationality*. Then again about the definition of pseudotranslation, do you think it is necessary to distinguish a text which is taken to be a translation from a translation which is taken to be an original work?

Robinson: I agree with Toury when he says that a translation is anything that people widely regard as a translation. As long as a pseudotranslation is actually taken to be a translation, it *is* a translation—at least pragmatically, for the purposes of definition. Ontological definitions of translation, based on “objective” features that can be univocally distinguished from the features of non-translations (imitations, adaptations, etc.), never work.

Liu: That is true. Just like all sorts of writing, translation is derivative in ways that original works are derivative, let alone imitation, adaptations, etc.

I will now turn to the field of Comparative Literature. In Susan Bassnett’s “Introduction: What is Comparative Literature Today” (Introduction to *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, 1993) she states that “comparative literature has always claimed translation as a sub-category, but as translation studies establishes itself firmly as a subject based in inter-cultural study and offering a methodology of some rigour, both in terms of theoretical and descriptive work, so comparative literature appears less like a discipline and more like a branch of something else.” I am aware that this is a 25-year old quotation, but I am still curious to know if you would agree with this opinion. Do you see Translation Studies as a discipline that can contain Comparative Literature?

Robinson: Sure. Why not. I’m not sure why anyone would want to contain one field inside the other, but if you wanted to make that case, you could, I suppose. The point that I was making to Li Bo was specifically that comp lit was for over a century based on a paradigm of static comparison, and comparatists have more recently turned to TS for a more dynamic account of how texts *get* from one language to another—and the model of translation that comparatists have been mobilizing is a

fairly superficial and boring one. But none of that changes the fact that comp lit has been a high-prestige discipline for over a century, and TS is just now beginning to amass prestige. Translation scholars are still very much the new kids on the block, often working very hard to impress those older kids, the comparatists. Structural comparisons like Susan Bassnett's seem a bit bland in the sociological purview of disciplinarity.

Liu: I like that metaphor a lot. Let's hope that the new kids can succeed in impressing the older kids before too long. This has been really inspiring communicating with you. Thank you so much.

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### Author Profiles

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Douglas Robinson has been one of the world's leading translation scholars since *The Translator's Turn* (1991). His 1997 textbook, *Becoming a Translator*, has been the leading textbook for translation students world-wide for two decades, and has just been published in its fourth revised edition. His 1997 anthology, *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, has established itself as the standard reference work in English for pre-twentieth-century translation discourse. In his more recent work, since moving to Hong Kong in 2010—especially in *The Dao of Translation: An East-West Dialogue* (Routledge, 2015), *The Deep Ecology of Rhetoric in Mencius and Aristotle* (SUNY Press, 2016), and *Exorcising Translation: Towards an Intercivilizational Turn* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)—he has been mobilizing ancient Daoist and Confucian thought for “cofigurative” engagements. He is currently Chair Professor of English at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Jane Qian Liu is assistant professor in Chinese Studies and Translation at the University of Warwick. She has published in English and Chinese about various issues in contemporary British literature, modern Chinese literature, and translation studies, including *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899–1925* (Brill, 2017), “Pseudotranslation, Intertextuality and Metafictionality: Three Case Studies of Pseudotranslation from Early Twentieth-Century China”, *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 27(3), 2019.

# Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, and Issues of World Literature: An Interview with Professor Rebecca L. Walkowitz

Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Rutgers University)

Jane Qian Liu (The University of Warwick)

## Abstract:

In this interview, Professor Walkowitz shares her experience reading and teaching the contemporary British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. Talking about Ishiguro's latest novel *The Buried Giant*, Professor Walkowitz points out that the ending of this novel, rather than being bleaker than all the previous ones, in fact links with all of them by involving a kind of willed optimism that seems untrustworthy and dubious. When discussing the status of Ishiguro's works as English literature and world literature, Professor Walkowitz posits that he has been exceptionally important to the project of historicizing the concepts that have defined English Literature, and that his parody of Englishness is often misread as an expression of Englishness, as in the case of *The Remains of the Day*.

**Key words:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, *The Remains of the Day*, English literature, world literature

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Liu: Professor Walkowitz, thank you so much for agreeing to accept our interview. I would like to begin our interview by discussing with you a few questions about Kazuo Ishiguro, Nobel Prize winner of 2017, before moving on to larger issues of translation, and world literature, if that is fine.

I was thrilled to know that you have deep interests in Kazuo Ishiguro, and that you have taught him for years. I got to know him when I was pursuing my DPhil degree in the UK, and then I taught him for three years when I started my teaching position

at Beijing Normal University. To me he is definitely one of the most brilliant contemporary novelists of Britain. Would you like to talk a little bit about your first experience reading his works?

Walkowitz: I think the first time I read one of his novels was in the mid-1990s, when I was a PhD student at Harvard. By that point, the well-known film adaptation of *The Remains of the Day* had been released, and I had seen it, but I hadn't yet read the novel or any of the other novels. One of my advisors at the time, Professor Philip Fisher, mentioned that there were two earlier novels, about Japan, that he thought I might find interesting, so that's where I started. I'm pretty sure I read *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) before I read the Booker-Prize-winning *Remains*, though that was certainly the most famous of his novels to date. I had been reading Marcel Proust and Henry James, and I remember thinking right away that Ishiguro had managed to adapt their formal subtleties and representational strategies to a postcolonial critique of American triumphalism with dazzling originality.

Liu: That is a very insightful finding. Would you like to share with us your favourite novel of his?

Walkowitz: My favourite novel is *An Artist of the Floating World*. I have taught it many, many times – eight times in a lecture course of up to 350 students I taught at the University of Wisconsin in the early 2000s – and it works remarkably well to bridge the early modernist concerns about the aesthetics of patriotism with mid- and late- twentieth-century concerns about whether artists have a role in politics, and what strategies of aesthetic representation create the most ethical template for remembering the past. There's also a great connection between the analysis of masculinity and war in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ishiguro's treatment of that topic in *Artist*. He comes back to it again in *Remains*, but *Artist* is really the closer fit.

Liu: Many of Ishiguro's novels, such as *The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, describe the protagonist's rather tragic realization of the limitedness of one's horizon, and of one's judgment, which ultimately lead to the futility of one's lifelong endeavours. However, despite this heavy realization, there is always a sense of redemption by the end of the novels, when the protagonists take heart and face the tragedy of life squarely, preserving their dignity.



In his latest novel, *The Buried Giant*, however, the sense of redemption seems to have evaporated, when the loving couple Beatrice and Axl were separated by Death forever, without any chance of seeing each other again. I felt completely devastated reading the last sentence of the novel: “but he does not hear and he wades on.” Do you think there was a change of tone, and how would you interpret it?

Walkowitz: For me, the endings of the novels have always involved a kind of willed optimism that seems untrustworthy and dubious. Stevens in *Remains* and Ono in *Artist* insist that they feel good about their lives and will now simply look forward to a positive future. But we know from the novels that the rhetoric of forward-facing optimism is linked to the rhetoric of British and Japanese imperialism and the forgetting of various causalities: the tiger, the housekeeper, the Jewish maids, the betrayed student in *Artist*, and the victims of the China campaign. So in that sense I find the ending of *The Buried Giant* more similar than different, insofar as the future may or may not be happy – the couple may be reunited but probably not – and here the husband seems to relinquish the willed optimism he’s had up until this point. The person he does not hear is Death, perhaps because he is not able to forgive or be forgiven. It’s certainly a starker scene, but I think Ishiguro has been pretty stark about forgiveness – or the kind of forgiveness that involves forgetting – from the beginning.

Liu: I think that is an incisive argument about the linkage between *The Buried Giant* and Ishiguro’s previous novels. Indeed the optimism in previous novels is in a way willed and dubious. I hadn’t fully realized that, but now it all makes sense.

On a different matter, I think Kazuo Ishiguro uses parody very frequently. Take *The Buried Giant* for example, he makes frequent allusions to the 14-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The sharp contrast between the young Sir Gawain and the aged one, respectively depicted in these two works, foregrounds one of the themes of *The Buried Giant*, the passing of time and the unstoppable advancement of old age. Would you agree with this?

Walkowitz: Yes, I agree. He’s interested in what heroism looks like when it ages – or when its priorities age and are reframed from another perspective. In this sense, the aging of Gawain is similar to the aging of Stevens and Ono, except in *Gawain* we have a fictional character, a kind of symbol of Heroism. By parodying the story, he’s taking on that symbol and rewriting it.

Liu: Indeed. Also, in *The Buried Giant*, the aged she-dragon which was so easily killed by Wistan the young knight reminds us of the aged Beowulf and his heroic deeds of dragon-killing, which ultimately cost him his life. How should we make of this intertextual reference?

Walkowitz: I think there's a sense that the age of heroism is over, and we're now looking back at its costs and its prevarications. At the center of the story is not the physical struggle over the dragon itself but the ethical struggle over what the dragon's enchantment has enabled.

Liu: And that is exactly why the killing of the she-dragon was, instead of the climax of the novel, an anti-climax, which contrasts with the Beowulf epic so forcefully. Other than these, it also occurred to me that the name of the female protagonist Beatrice reminds us of Dante. Do you think there are some hidden messages here?

Walkowitz: I hadn't thought about that, but I now see that there is a whole bookshelf of epic texts that Ishiguro is activating here. It seems to me that Ishiguro is parodying the genre of epic as a way to reflect on the fantasy of English liberalism and tolerance. This has been one of his central topics from the beginning, and it is right at the center of *Remains*, where we see that fascism and anti-Semitism were nourished in the English countryside. In *Giant*, Ishiguro is focusing on the way that the veneer of English consensus is not only a product of British political culture but also a product of British literary history. It is that history that's he's taking up in the novel.

Liu: I like this idea of *Giant* engaging with the British literary history, which is why we find such an abundance of literary references in this novel! Thank you very much for obliging my obsession with intertextual references in *The Buried Giant*. Let me now move onto a larger issue concerning Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. It has been generally agreed that although he does not have English ancestry, his works often betray a real sense of "Englishness", with *The Remains of the Day*, of course, being the most salient example. Do you think his works thus challenge the way we define "English literature"?

Walkowitz: Well, I think Ishiguro has been exceptionally important to the project of historicizing the concepts that have defined English Literature, by which I mean

that he helps us see how those concepts have become attached to England's idea about itself and what has had to be forgotten, repressed, or excluded in order to make those concepts function exclusively and coherently. Sometimes, Ishiguro's parody of Englishness is misread as an expression of Englishness, and I think that's what's happened in the reading of *The Remains of the Day*. But if you read *Remains* alongside *Artist*, then it becomes clear that what is passing for Englishness (not discussing, not acknowledging, robust literalism) is really a kind of willful forgetting that is anti-democratic and nativist.

Liu: Indeed *The Remains of the Day* has so often been read as an expression of Englishness. Thank you for your incisive reminder that it is in fact a parody of it! That will alter in significant ways the way we understand the novel, as well as the novelist. On another yet related matter, people often argue about to what degree does Kazuo Ishiguro borrow from Japanese literature. I am wondering what your opinion is on this question.

Walkowitz: This is a hard question to answer in good part because early twentieth-century Japanese literature borrowed from French literature, and French literature borrowed from Japanese literature and art. So when we notice that there are some similarities between, say, Tanizaki and Ishiguro, is it because both authors were influenced by French modernists such as Proust, or because Proust was influenced by the French fascination with Japan, or because both Tanizaki and Ishiguro are interested in the conjunction between European and Japanese culture? I think one of the projects of Ishiguro's fiction, especially in the first three novels, is to highlight those intersections, both as a matter of literary history and as a matter of geopolitical influence and rivalry.

Liu: I should really go back to read his Japan-themed novels. These literary intersections are so complex yet fascinating, leaving so much for scholars of world literature to ponder.

In your work, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, you examine writers whose works are born translated, which cross the boundaries of national literature and become world literature through the conduit of translation. Could you talk about how Kazuo Ishiguro falls into this category?

Walkowitz: Ishiguro's works have been widely translated, but he was one of the

first major contemporary novelists to talk about how the fact of translation has influenced the way he writes his novels – the words he chooses, his emphasis on narrative structure, and his avoidance of regional idiom and historical reference. But in addition, I've argued, his work has always expressed suspicion about claims to originality, native belonging, and national coherence. For that reason, it tends to be very open to translation as a model of intellectual and political hospitality. *Never Let Me Go* is a novel about valuing the uniqueness of clones and indeed of understanding the copy, not the original, as the condition of literary creativity.

Liu: That makes it a perfect metaphor for the practice of translation, doesn't it?

Kazuo Ishiguro calls his own writing "international writing", which I suppose is in opposition to "local writing" or "regional writing". In your opinion, what features constitute "international writing"? Are works that deal with universal human feelings and conditions, such as memory, loss, love, and death, qualify as international writing, hence world literature?

Walkowitz: I think international writing can be about any topic, though it is difficult for a literary work to be read by international audiences if it requires local or regional knowledge, by which I mean knowledge presumed by the book but not provided by it. In my view, what makes Ishiguro's writing international is its ongoing interest in the relationship between large-scale and small-scale practices of hospitality. In so many of his novels, he tells us about who had to die or be excluded or what had to be sacrificed or forgotten in order to build a coherent and optimistic vision of national collectivity. So many of his novels are about failures of cosmopolitan hospitality: betrayals that lead to genocide, torture, death, and exploitation. Yet, the novels also represent moments of compassion and friendship that operate in tension with those failures. I think that's why the ends of *Remains*, *Artist*, and even *Never Let Me Go* feel redemptive, or more redemptive, as compared to the end of *Giant*. But I think the tension between monumental failure and momentary success are there in all four.

Liu: And that perfectly wraps up some of the most important questions we have discussed today! It has been really inspiring doing this interview with you. I have had an opportunity to reflect on many established ideas about Ishiguro's works. I look forward to reading many of your future works about his works and about world literature. Thank you again for accepting our interview!

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## Author Profiles

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Rebecca Walkowitz is distinguished professor and chair in English and affiliate faculty in comparative literature at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (Columbia, 2015), *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (Columbia, 2006), and she has edited or coedited several books, including *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (Columbia, 2016, with Eric Hayot). She is past president of the Modernist Studies Association.

Jane Qian Liu is assistant professor in Chinese Studies and Translation at the University of Warwick. She has published in English and Chinese about various issues in contemporary British literature, modern Chinese literature, and translation studies, including *Transcultural Lyricism: Translation, Intertextuality, and the Rise of Emotion in Modern Chinese Love Fiction, 1899–1925* (Brill, 2017), “Parody and Irony: Cavalier Literature in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (Dangdai waiguo wenxue) no. 3, 2016.

# Perspectives from the East in Comparative Literature: An Interview with Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta (Jadavpur University)

Zhang Cha (Sichuan Normal University)

## Abstract:

This is an interview on Comparative Literature with Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, conducted by Professor Zhang Cha in the College of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University. In this interview, Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta overviews Comparative Literature in India, outlines the Chinese studies in the context of Indian Comparative Literature, explores the Sino-Indian cooperation in comparative literature studies, expounds the relationship between World Literature and Comparative Literature, analyses the challenges of Comparative Literature, introduces the coping strategies of Indian Comparative Literature, discusses the Chinese School of Comparative Literature, and explores the ways in which Comparative Literature can build a harmonious world.

**Key words:** India, comparative literature, perspectives from the East, Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta

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**Zhang Cha:** Professor Dasgupta, you're a distinguished Indian scholar of Comparative Literature and I'm very happy to have this chance to interview you.

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Professor Zhang, I am also very happy to get this opportunity to exchange views with an eminent Chinese comparatist.

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## I. Comparative Literature in India

**Zhang Cha:** Your work *Literary Studies in India: Genology* was published by Jadavpur University Press in 2004. Would you please share with us your main discoveries in genology?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** *Genology* is an edited volume. It was a preliminary effort to work out the many nuances in the idea of genre in India as different from those of the West, along with large similarities. In the case of Aristotle, for instance, the three types of differentiating factors among arts of imitation were mode, object and means of imitation. For Indian aestheticians, *kavya* or texts constituted by the unity of word and meaning as different from Aristotle's arts of imitation, could be classified with reference to the visual or aural, to the language used, that is Sanskrit, Prakrit or Apabhramsa, to attitude towards life and the world whether idealistic or realistic, and to general stylistic devices. In the context of oral texts, it was evident that systemic dimensions that constituted communicative events, kinds of audience, context, relation between audience and performer, function etc., shaped the genre. Individual genres like the testimonio were also analyzed and in the case of the testimonio it was found that in the context of struggle testimonial writing exceeds the individual self and infuses in it a collective consciousness. Since the volume was an edited one, there were several articles with varied findings.

**Zhang Cha:** We know that long before the establishment of Comparative Literature as a discipline, there were texts focusing on comparative aspects of literature in India. Would you please expound it to us?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** In my earlier article where I raised this issue I was referring mainly to the Bengali texts of the nineteenth century that often took up comparisons between Sanskrit or Bengali literature and European literature. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's "Sakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona" is a pertinent example. There were then numerous essays in many Indian languages comparing Shakespeare and Kalidasa. There were also comparisons between the Sanskrit epics and their renderings into regional languages. The theme of World Literature appearing in many late nineteenth and early twentieth century texts, particularly in the context of translation, is also important in the conceptualization of Comparative Literature in India.

**Zhang Cha:** Rabindranath Tagore's idea of "visvasahitya" was complex, marked by a sense of a community of artists as workers building together an edifice, that of world literature; whereas, Buddhadeva Bose did not fully subscribe to the idealist visions of Rabindranath Tagore, for he believed it was necessary to break

away from Rabindranath Tagore to be a part of the times, of modernity. Between the two, with whom would you like to side?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Rabindranath Tagore tried to put his utopic ideas into practice all his life as is evident from the establishment of Visva Bharati and Santiniketan. Many of his ideas have gained new relevance today in the context of pedagogy, of ecological balance; of creative endeavors etc., hence it is impossible not to respond affirmatively to his literature that was strongly linked with his ideas on different aspects of life. At the same time, Buddhadeva Bose and others after him were trying to engage with the reality of the modern in a more mundane, down-to-earth fashion. Here again, a modern sensibility could not but respond to his formulations. So, I would say that from different perspectives both are relevant and both have a great deal to offer. I must clarify though that Bose and later modernist writers critiqued Tagore in general for his faith in a world-vision when everything around them was in chaos, they did not particularly critique his idea of “visvasahitya.” In fact there were several writers who continued to engage with the term in their own fashion.

**Zhang Cha:** Comparative Literature in India began at the department at Jadavpur University in the 1950s. How did it begin?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Jadavpur University was established in 1956 and Buddhadeva Bose was invited to Chair the Department of Comparative Literature. Before that Rabindranath Tagore had delivered his lecture on World Literature at the National Council of Education, the parent body of Jadavpur University, in 1907. The National Council of Education was formed to give shape to an education policy that would be compatible with the needs of the country.

**Zhang Cha:** The establishment of the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University in 1956, marked the beginnings of Comparative Literature in India. The same year, the department offered its first syllabus. This syllabus in your term “was quite challenging.” In what sense was it quite challenging?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The syllabus was vast. There was classical Sanskrit literature, ancient Greek and Roman Literature, the medieval period in Indian and European literature, Bengali literature from the early to the modern period and then European literature of the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Romantic and the modern period. A student taking his Master’s degree had to cover all that in two years.

**Zhang Cha:** Though he died at the age of only 40, Satyendranath Dutta (also spelt as Satyendranath Datta or Satyendra Nath Dutta, 1882 - 1922) won high reputation. Rabindranath Tagore has immortalized him in a poem written after his



death, and a street in South Kolkata has been named after him. He is considered the wizard of rhymes, and he was an eminent poet-translator and an expert in many disciplines of intellectual enquiry including medieval Indian history, culture, and mythology. As for translations, he stated in 1904 that establishing relations with literatures of the world was “relationships of joy.” What’s your comment on his statement?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** It is very typical of the period, when people were freely translating poetry from different literatures, calling them shadow translations sometimes, in a spirit of joy. Satyendranath Dutta himself was a great translator and took pleasure in creating different kinds of rhythmic patterns, which were to him once more a source of joy. The act of translation was for him an act of establishing relations with poems from other lands purely for pleasure. In a way, it was his perspective on World Literature. Getting to know other literatures deeply was an entry point into relations and relations led to joy. There was a desire it seems at that point of time to be a part of the world community of writers.

**Zhang Cha:** Many Indian scholars think that India has only regional literatures, such as Tamil literature, Malayalam literature, Bengali literature and so on. No wonder that some Indian scholars questioned whether people can really talk about the term Indian literature (Amiya Dev and S. K. Das 53). What do you think of this?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** As a comparatist, I believe that no literature exists on its own, there is a constant series of interconnections, and this is more so sometimes when there is a shared heritage and history. Hence while each language in India has its own literature, it is also shaped by other Indian literatures, and a large common historical background. However, Tamil, Malayalam and Bengali are all independent literatures and at the same time also a part of the large and varied corpus of Indian literature. Sometimes scholars also speak of Indian Literatures.

**Zhang Cha:** Comparative Literature in India in the 21st century engaged with two other related fields of study, one was Translation Studies and the other Cultural Studies. Would you please tell us more about this?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Several new Departments of Comparative Literature have come up that are called Comparative Literature and Translation Studies. The one at Ambedkar University, Delhi, is a recent example. Even in older Departments of Comparative Literature there are one or two courses on Translation Studies. This is inevitable as one needs to work out the nature of interliterary and intercultural engagements through Translation Studies. Some applied courses could also help in learning to approach other systems of aesthetics and cultures.

Similarly, Cultural Studies has also found its place in Comparative Literature syllabi across the country. A few primary texts from the Birmingham School are generally introduced and then each department in India has its own area of focus. The Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur, for instance, has a course where perspectives on nationalism, imperialism, gender, identity, multiculturalism etc. in different cultural traditions are studied. Otherwise, there is also a separate component or course on literature and intermediality, where again one engages with Cultural Studies

**Zhang Cha:** Some Chinese scholars hold that ancient China, India and Greece enjoyed unique poetics of their own, and these poetics are the three major sources of the world's poetics. Closepet Dasappa Narasimhaiah (1921–2005), the founder of Dhanyaloka Centre for Indian Studies and a famous expert in poetics, held that Sanskrit poetics should be a part of the world cultural heritage (Narasimhaiah 36). What roles should the Sanskrit poetics play in comparative literature studies?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** It is very essential to have a course in Comparative Aesthetics, but somehow that is not taught in many universities doing Comparative Literature, partly because of the lack of scholars having a deep and thorough knowledge of at least two systems. But in any case, Sanskrit poetics does play an important role in courses related to Ancient Literature in India, in working out concepts related to *kavya*. Approaches to literature through the *rasa* theory are also not uncommon. Then a study of both Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyasastra* becomes necessary to approach early drama, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Kalidas's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, for instance. But I do feel that one needs to look at Sanskrit poetics in greater detail and move out to other ancient aesthetic systems and related poetics in the Asian context.

**Zhang Cha:** Rabindranath Tagore gave a talk entitled "Visvasahitya" at the National Council of Education in his hometown Calcutta in 1907. His term "Visvasahitya" is roughly identical to "comparative literature" and thus the talk is generally regarded as the mark of the start of Indian Comparative Literature. To survey Comparative Literature in India, we cannot bypass Rabindranath Tagore. What is your comment on his position in Indian Comparative Literature as well as in World Comparative Literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Rabindranath Tagore was working with an ideal in his essay on Visvasahitya or World Literature and was not proposing a pedagogic structure for the study of World Literature. It would be good if both Comparative Literature in India and elsewhere looked more closely at his notions on literature that were also necessarily connected with human relationships and

the whole question of joy in such relations of reciprocity. One could read his essay, and along with it a few others, to engage with literature in a holistic fashion that would also serve humanitarian and environmental needs from a very large and open perspective. The relationship with the local and the global is also worked out in his writings. Rabindranath Tagore does have an important place in Comparative Literature courses in India, and more translations are needed of his works to study him in context in Departments of Comparative Literature outside India.

**Zhang Cha:** As for whether Comparative Indian Literature is Comparative Literature, different Indian scholars have different ideas. D.S. Mishra, the Dean of the Graduate Department of English, Sardar Patel University, believes that comparative Indian literature cannot be considered pure Comparative Literature, while Amiya Dev, a former professor at Comparative Literature Department, Jadavpur University, argues that Comparative Indian literature is true Comparative Literature. What is your opinion?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I prefer the nomenclature Comparative Literature though after having worked at Delhi University, I realize that the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies cannot but do Comparative Literature within the framework of Comparative Indian Literature. While looking at Indian Literature one necessarily has to look beyond the geopolitical region again and again because of the different cultures with which it came into contact and which always had an important role to play in the syncretic nature of the cultural formation. Hence in such a context even while doing Indian Literature, one is doing Comparative Literature. I think Amiya Dev meant that in India one has to do a kind of Indian Comparative Literature as histories of reception, as assimilation and analogy differ from country to country, and India like any other country, has its unique contexts. Comparative Literature, as it is practiced in different places, is necessarily defined by the histories of these places, both cultural and political.

**Zhang Cha:** The fundamental purpose of Comparative Indian Literature is to find out the “Indianness,” so as to find cultural ties for a multilingual, multi-religious and multi-racial India, and to promote the national unity and integrity. What is the main connotation of “Indianness”?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** For some scholars, the purpose of Comparative Indian Literature is to bring to the foreground the pluralistic dimensions that are constantly at work in the country with relation to diverse communities and the dynamics of pluralist epistemologies at work in literary and cultural expressions. This too is “Indianness,” the presence of many cultures and traditions. However,

this is true of other cultures too, and I would say that to look for the different origins and nuances of literary motifs, images, myths etc. operating in a particular culture is one of the goals of comparatists in the world in general. What I mean is that literary cultures continue to be inflected by many cultures and the comparatist necessarily tries to study the many in the one. However, even as we speak of particular cultures we are speaking of certain elements that entered a particular culture because of historical events and certain elements in its life-world, certain aesthetic norms and values and modes of approach to phenomenon. But these again have been modified in history, to a large extent, also because of interactions with other cultures. The study of transformations is important.

**Zhang Cha:** *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* went on to become an important journal in literary studies in India. Would you please make a brief introduction to this journal?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The annual journal came out in 1961 edited by Naresh Guha who was then head of the department. Articles were mostly in English, but Bengali was also often used. In the first few years there were mostly articles on East-West studies and sometimes on specific Indian or Western literatures. One of the early issues had Baudelaire as theme, dealing with studies on Baudelaire in different places and from different perspectives. Eminent comparatists from different places outside India contributed to the journal and there were book reviews from time to time. Gradually Indian literature began to receive prominence along with literatures from Africa and Latin America. There were special issues on Translation Studies, Testimonial Literature, and also one on Literature as Knowledge System. *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* continues to have an important presence in the academic world.

**Zhang Cha:** After Comparative Literature in India was established, two national associations of Comparative Literature came into being, one at Jadavpur University called Indian Comparative Literature Association and the other in Delhi University named Comparative Indian Literature Association. In 1992 the two merged and the Comparative Literature Association of India was formed. What role does the association play in Comparative Literature studies in India?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The Association holds annual conferences and has a Newsletter and an online journal. It is also associated with ICLA and disseminates news related to ICLA conferences. The papers submitted at the conferences give an insight into what the general literature scholars in the country hold as important and their perspectives on it.

**Zhang Cha:** In the last few years Comparative Literature in India has taken

on new perspectives, engaging with different areas of culture and knowledge, particularly those related to marginalized spaces, along with the focus on recovering new areas of non-hierarchical literary relations. What's the detailed story?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The Department of Comparative Literature started working on oral narratives present in rural India today, on those forms that were on the verge of extinction and tried to document them from different areas. The focus was also on methodology, on how one could document and work with indigenous traditions without appropriating their knowledge systems and if possible, allow the people to build their own archives. The presence of elements from expressive traditions in rural communities in metropolitan genres was also taken up for detailed study by several Indian comparatists. The Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies in Delhi University too has a strong focus on performative traditions of tribal communities.

**Zhang Cha:** What are the key features of the Indian School of Comparative Literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Comparative Literature is taught in different places in the country from different perspectives. In many places, the focus is on Indian Literature as Comparative Literature. The key feature in the Department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur is a more or less structured syllabus with the focus on analogy studies in the early phase, the Western and the Indian epic or Greek and Sanskrit drama for instance, and then a few core courses on a comparative study of themes and genres and literary historiography. Reception and cross-cultural literary relations are also important components particularly in the context of the Modern, and here one looks at both Western and Asian texts. Area Studies dealing with countries in the global south is another important feature, with Canadian Studies as the only exception. Where Indian Literature is in focus as in Delhi University, one studies *The Ramayana* in a pan-Indian context, also moving outside geo-political boundaries, the Bhakti movement, perspectives on women's writings in India, performance studies and oral texts and certain themes such as Partition Literature etc. So, there are perhaps two "Schools" of Comparative Literature in India today and both focus to some extent on Asian literatures with India as the center. Performance Studies, particularly with relation to indigenous forms are also gradually becoming important in Comparative Literature Studies.

## II. Chinese Studies in the Context of Indian Comparative Literature

**Zhang Cha:** Though it was not possible to offer the courses in the absence of specialized faculty members at Jadavpur University during the 1990s, area studies

components in Chinese and Japanese literatures were framed. This is an important reconfiguration of areas of comparison, as the focus in the past was on European literature as well as Latin American literatures and literatures from African countries, paying no attention to literatures from Asian countries. Would you please explain this in detail?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** From the turn of the century at least, the focus of research has to some extent shifted to Asian countries. Language still poses a problem, and the infrastructure is not yet available to teach area studies courses, but research in the area has been highlighted in research programs sanctioned by the Government's funding authority (Special Assistance Program under the University Grants Commission). In 2005 under the Special Assistance Program the Department of Comparative Literature introduced a special focus on Asian Literatures. We had several projects such as Travelogues to Asian Countries, studies on concepts related to "love," "death," "honor" etc. in literary texts of Asia, tracing performative traditions from one region of Asia to another and several others. Not all were completed, but one or two were and lectures were organized in some of the areas, which later helped research students to take up comparative work in the area. Professor Tansen Sen gave several lectures on Buddhism across Asia, for instance, and a student later took up the study of a comparison of Jataka stories in India and China for her dissertation. She also worked as a Research Fellow in the program and learned Chinese and spent some time in China. The focus continues. There are also now at least two students from China doing research in the department.

**Zhang Cha:** Could you please give us a brief introduction to the Hari Prasanna Biswas India-China Cultural Studies Centre of Jadavpur University?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The Hari Prasanna Biswas Centre started functioning in 2010 with an endowment from Hari Prasanna Biswas, a leading scholar of Chinese studies. The Centre was housed in the Department of International Relations and for a long period of time its Coordinator was Professor Tridib Chakraborty from the department. The Centre hosted a number of national and international seminars. One of the important contributions of the Centre was the establishment of Chinese Language Studies under the School of Linguistics and Languages, Jadavpur University.

**Zhang Cha:** The works in *The Book of Songs* range from the early Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century B.C) to the middle Spring and Autumn Period (6th century B.C). If based on this, Chinese literature would enjoy a history of more than three thousand years, and together with Indian literature, it is an important part of the world literature. Did the Indian scholars establish relations with it?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Yes, there are specialized programs of Chinese Studies in India, with some emphasis on literature and more on Language, Politics and International Relations. However, scholars have engaged with literature related to Buddhism over a long period of time. Several Chinese authors and texts have been very popular. Lu Xun, for instance, has been translated into Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Urdu. His centenary was celebrated in many places with seminars and symposiums. There are a number of dissertations on his works. Some classical Chinese poems have also been translated. Then there is substantial interest in the New Literature Movement in China and there again we have some translations. The poems of Ai Ch'ing, Mao Zedong and several others are available in translation. Chinese women writers are now also being studied.

**Zhang Cha:** In his comparative literature studies, Rabindranath Tagore cast his eyes on not only the West but also the East. The East here includes such East Asian countries as Japan, Korea and China. He once made some comments on Li Po in Chinese literature history, which is quite impressive. Could you please outline the general situation of Indian comparative literature studies since Rabindranath Tagore's study of Chinese literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** At Jadavpur we had *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West* for many years as part of a course offered to students. A former student of the Department, Rimli Bhattacharya who now teaches in Delhi University, and who had learned Chinese came as visiting faculty to give several lectures on the texts. Then in the two courses on lyric and narrative traditions early Chinese poetry and narratives were taken up as also the Japanese *haiku* and *The Tale of Genji*. Comparative Literature in China forms a part of the course on the History of Comparative Literature in both Jadavpur and Delhi University (Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies Department). The Department of Comparative Literature also interacts with Cheena Bhavana in Visva Bharati for infrastructural assistance. Courses related to Asian Studies where East Asia figures in an important manner have also been started.

**Zhang Cha:** How are the intercultural studies between India and China going at the department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** There was a seminar on framing intercultural studies between India and China organised with the Hari Prasanna Biswas India-China Cultural Studies Centre and the Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University. The Department of Comparative Literature held a one-day symposium entitled "Unexplored Links: A One-day Colloquium on Kolkata's Chinese Connection" in 2007.

**Zhang Cha:** Are there texts focusing on comparative aspects of literature in India from the point of view of its relation with literature from China?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, the eminent Sinologist had written a book entitled *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations* (1951). In 2014 *An Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts* was published under the auspices of the Ministry of External Affairs with editorial teams from China and India and written in Chinese and English. Both are important books for comparatists in India. Noted comparatists like Professor Amiya Dev and Professor Sisir Kumar Das interacted with Professor Tan Chung, the eminent scholar on Sino-Indian relations. Amiya Dev, along with Wang Bangwei and Wei Liming, co-edited a book with him entitled *Tagore and China*. Professor Sisir Kumar Das worked with Professor Tan Chung on many occasions and contributed to his volume *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China*.

**Zhang Cha:** *A Journey to the West*, one of the great four classic novels, was inspired by the life of Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang, 600-664). The studies by Fu Shi and Chen Yinke, two famous scholars in China, show that the prototype of the Monkey King in *A Journey to the West* is Hanuman in *Rāmāyana*. Of course, there are other scholars who do not agree. Did India have the influence study on Hanuman and the Monkey King?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I have not come across any study of influence related to Hanuman and the Monkey King. My knowledge here is limited.

**Zhang Cha:** Xuanzang left by foot for India in 629 to study religion at its source and reached there in 633. After studying at the famous Nalanda monastery, he returned home in 645, bringing back hundreds of Buddhist texts, including some of the most important Mahayana scriptures, and spent the rest of his life translating. He established the Weishi school of Buddhism (*Birtannica Concise Encyclopedia* 1814). He left the world a very important historiography, *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, a narrative of his nineteen-year journey to India. Rabindranath Tagore paid a visit to China in 1924, giving speeches and interviews at Tsinghua University. His visit exerted far-reaching influences in China. In 1961, to mark his centennial birthday, People's Literature Publishing House in China published his 10-volume *The Collected Works of Tagore*. In the past decades Chinese versions of his *Gitanjali* and other works were published. Quite a few Chinese writers and scholars including such great literary figures as Guo Moruo, Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin and Xie Wanying were greatly inspired by him. What's your comment on this phenomenon?



**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Yes, scholars often refer to Xuanzang, and also Fa Xian and Yi Jing and their detailed records that are so important for the reconstruction of the history of the period. They also provide a history of intercultural attitudes on the part of Chinese and also Indians. They are also important as they provide details of regions close to China and India as they travel.

Rabindranath's interactions are also important from various perspectives, as fostering long-lasting dialogue and relationship, as stimulating creativity in both contexts, and as giving rise to discourse on Asia and Eastern civilization in general in the region. The deep friendship between Tagore and Xu Zhimo has been described as symbolic of the cultural affinity between India and China. And then Cheena Bhavan itself stands as a testimony to the efforts made to promote Sino-Indian friendship and understanding under the guidance of Tagore and Tan Yunshan.

These interactions remind us of affinities, cultural intercourse and relationships that have existed for a very long time between the two civilizations and the need to sustain them.

### **III. Sino-Indian Cooperation in Comparative Literature Studies**

**Zhang Cha:** In comparative literature studies, what advantages and disadvantages do the scholars in China and India have?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The advantages are that the field is wide open and there are many possibilities of studying inter-literary activities as both countries have interacted with many other cultures. The other important point is that there are several points of difference with the Euro-American world in approaches to aesthetic systems in China and India. The study in differences, despite similarities, may lead to new creative perspectives in literature along with a layered understanding of literary phenomenon. The disadvantages may be the lack of archival material, the fact that one has to find and establish the pathways of connections between different cultures and literary traditions through painstaking research as much of the material may not be easily accessible or on the verge of dying out.

**Zhang Cha:** On April 27-28, 2018, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi successfully held an official talk with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan, the biggest city in Middle China. This talk has opened a new chapter for the cooperation between the two countries. On June 9-10 of the same year, the leaders of the two countries met again in the coastal city of Qingdao in eastern China to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit together, and India became

a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In fact, India and China are two of the four ancient civilizations, and they are two neighboring countries. India and China enjoy a recorded communication history as long as over 2000 years. In what ways could the two countries cooperate in academic, especially comparative literature studies, in the future?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Collaborative ventures on various issues need to be taken up. For instance, the study of Sanskrit, Tamil and Chinese poetics and early narrative traditions in both countries can be taken up. Folklore and traditions of knowledge in both cultures constitute another area that calls for collaborative work. There is then the whole sphere of Buddhist studies, the narrative traditions, images that enter literature etc. and although a considerable amount of work has been done in this area, there is scope for more. The silk route and literature around it can also be taken up involving neighboring countries. One can also take up the comparative study of reception of European literatures in both countries. Exchange programs between departments of Comparative Literature could begin with exchange of both faculty and students.

#### **IV. World Literature in the Context of Comparative Literature**

**Zhang Cha:** In a famous statement in 1827, Johann Wolfgang Goethe put forward his concept of *weltliteratur*, that is, world literature. Twenty-one years later Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels asserted in their *Communist Manifesto*: “And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (Marx & Engels 255). What’s your comment on their assertion?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** It is an important statement at a certain point in history and it is also significant that it comes quite soon after Goethe’s statement on *weltliteratur*. However, the exact nature of this world literature and its relationship with local literatures have to be worked out in detail. Certain questions such as those of reception and transformation will also remain in the context of literature.

**Zhang Cha:** At the end of the 19th century, as a new concept world literature aroused interest from the world. In the second half of the 20th century, as it tried to get out of Eurocentrism, again world literature aroused interest from the world. In the past several decades, as the multicultural turn and globalization emerged, world literature became a heated topic. In China alone, up to October 18, 2016, in

ReadShow Database there were 3959 Chinese books with “world literature” as the key word in their title, in China National Knowledge Infrastructure there were 73341 essays with “world literature” as their key word. Since the 1980s, the number of such essays has been on the increase year by year, and in the 21st century there are thousands of essays on world literature published yearly (Cao Shunqing 147). Also, world literature is confronted with challenges. First, the definition of “world literature” itself is ambiguous, and there are three common definitions of it (Ibid., 147-154). Second, John Pizer (1850—1897) held that Goethe’s world literature is German-nationally-centered (Cao Shunqing, *Cross-Civilization* 136). In his *Comparative Literature*, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (c. 1855 – 1927) discussed world literature from the British perspective (Etiemble 136). For more than 100 years since it came into being, world literature has been linked with Eurocentrism. This arouses worries from scholars around the world, and René Etiemble (1909 – 2002) from France and Cao Shunqing from China are among them. René Etiemble expressed worries for world literature in 1974, and so did Cao Shunqing in 2017. Why is world literature so attractive, and what’s your understanding of the challenges?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** To answer both your questions together, in different places and in different times world literature may be significant for different reasons. To some extent, trends of globalization and the growing space of the Internet are responsible for the attraction of the concept. It has also received an impetus from efforts made by David Damrosch and other scholars who engage with the concept, as a pedagogic practice, by holding summer schools in different places in the world. As practice, it is trying to move away from Eurocentric paradigms. But as you state, while a large number of scholars are investing in the term, there are also a few who are questioning the concept. Whose world, they ask, and why such urgency now? One has to think very carefully and more dialogue is definitely needed with scholars who are in “distant” places, to borrow a term from Franco Moretti, before it is placed in a definitive manner in our pedagogic structures.

**Zhang Cha:** As for world literature, Rabindranath Tagore used the word “visvasahitya,” and “stated that the word was generally termed ‘comparative literature’. His idea of ‘visvasahitya’ was complex, marked by a sense of a community of artists as workers building together an edifice, that of world literature” (Dasgupta 11). Did he mean that world literature includes comparative literature, in other words, comparative literature is the embodiment of world literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Yes, since he thought of the terms as

synonymous, he did think of Comparative Literature as a kind of embodiment of world literature. But this idea of world literature was also uniquely his, based upon the work of all *littérateurs* whose endeavor to write was an attempt to share a joy, to enter into relationships with other human beings. So, at the heart of world literature was also a sense of relation among diverse people. Moreover, it was also very deeply linked with the local and with an open, ever growing process.

**Zhang Cha:** In India the idea of world literature gained ground towards the end of the nineteenth century. What do you think of the relationship between comparative literature and world literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Comparative literature includes an approach to the study of world literature. This approach also has at its base one's own literature or the literature that one knows best, and from which one moves towards texts from other cultures, looking at interrelations, affinities and differences that add layers to one's understanding of literature. One can also begin with relations in the Tagorean sense and move over to histories of inter-literary relations, gradually looking at larger and larger areas of cross-cultural interaction, or work with several clusters of cross-cultural relations to explore the dynamics of literary and cultural processes through history. One can also take up the idea of the world or the planet as a place that has been given to one to nurture, as in the thoughts of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, and focus on texts that may lead one closer to the task.

**Zhang Cha:** Cao Shunqing, a "Changjiang Distinguished Professor" at Sichuan University and the fourth chairman of Chinese Comparative Literature Association, holds that world literature is now trapped in a difficult situation of Eurocentrism. As for Eurocentrism of world literature, he suggests that cross-civilization variation study is a possible way out. Cross-civilization variation theory is based on the sameness among the literatures of heterogeneous civilizations, starting from the sameness (or homogeneity, the same kind) while ending with variability (the heterogeneity and complementarity of civilization). What's your comment on this?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** In engaging with cross-civilizational variation theory Professor Cao Shunqing gives an account of what may be achieved by focusing on the issue. Variation is not difference, although it is related to it, and opposes the constant inclination towards arriving at or uncovering similarities while it also assumes that there is a global minimum. This creates space for dialogue because difference is not erased, while extreme situations of difference where conversation seems impossible are also avoided. There are also deep and complex layers in variation pedagogy as it grapples with new horizons, extensions, contacts and collisions among various heterogeneous civilizations. A primary purpose of the

pedagogy related to cross-civilizational variation theory is to reconstruct systems of literary discourse and to arrive at laws and mechanisms of variation. Eventually it wishes to draw upon rich and diversified resources for understandings, as also newer visions and advancements related to civilizational goals. There remains now the task of working out in full a pedagogy of variation theory in comparative literature in a dialogic manner from different spaces.

**Zhang Cha:** As for general literature, the scholars of the world have different ideas. The French scholar Paul van Tieghem (1871-1948) held that general literature, national literature and comparative literature are in a parallel relationship, and that they are related and supplementary to each other. The American scholars René Wellek (1903-1995) and Austin Warren (1899–1986) thought that separating comparative literature from general literature was groundless and hard to succeed. Another American scholar Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) advocated that we should try not to use the term “general literature,” but to use instead such terms as “comparative literature,” “world literature,” “translated literature” and “literary theory” depending on different occasions. The Chinese scholar Cao Shunqing believes that “national literature is the basis of comparative literature while general literature is the ultimate goal of comparative literature” (Cao Shunqing 434). How would you understand general literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I think Cao Shunqing is right when he says that national literature is the basis of comparative literature. General literature is a term that exists in its own right and comparative literature studies from a wider perspective also falls within general literature studies.

**Zhang Cha:** What do you think is the prospect of world literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I think the prospect of world literature is to bring to the forefront many texts from different cultures, open up the frontiers of literary studies, bring a diversified understanding of aesthetic norms, look for connections among literatures and enter into new perspectives on both history and literary history, and yet all this will need careful deliberation. The question about whose world are we talking about needs to be constantly articulated and even then what about language – will world literature always be mediated through English?

## V. Challenges of Comparative Literature

**Zhang Cha:** Susan Bassnett, a world-famous scholar of comparative literature at the University of Warwick denies comparative literature as a discipline: “However, I do not believe that comparative literature or translation studies are disciplines in their own right; they are methods of approaching literature. There is no point in

wasting time trying to argue that these huge, baggy fields of research are distinct disciplines, since they are very diverse and derive from a combination of other disciplines such as linguistics, literary study, history, politics, film, theatre, etc.” (Susan Bassnett 48). What do you think are the basic requirements for a discipline?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Each area has its own criteria of what a discipline is. The humanities will have a set of criteria that would be different from the social sciences or science, for instance. However, a history of the subject-matter and time-tested work, its tradition, a body of distinguished scholars in the field, a set of objectives, theoretical and conceptual formulations, and the subject matter’s relevance for the future of humanities are some of the basic requirements that I can think of at the moment. An interdisciplinary subject can also be recognized as a discipline.

**Zhang Cha:** In 2003, Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a compatriot of yours living in the United States, published an influential book *Death of a Discipline* from Columbia University Press. In this book she declared the death of comparative literature as a discipline. What is your comment on it?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I think Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was speaking of the death of a certain kind of Comparative Literature in the United States and was arguing for the necessity of a different set of approaches to Comparative Literature in her book *Death of a Discipline*.

**Zhang Cha:** Since its birth as a discipline nearly two hundred years ago, Comparative Literature has been encountering doubts from scholars around the world. What is your understanding of this?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** It is probably the openness of the subject that leads scholars to question its premise. The openness is, in fact, its strength. Single literature scholars also have questions regarding the translation-based study of literature.

**Zhang Cha:** What are the most outstanding achievements made in comparative literature studies of the world?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** They are many and Comparative Literature, I think, stands at that point in the study of humanities that is constantly moving into spaces not included within the framework of the academia, continuously expanding horizons with critical perspectives, helping in sensitive understanding of other cultures, sometimes leading to dialogues, discovering relations and enhancing creativity by exposing students to a large diverse body of literature. It has probably been able to move towards the creation of small open spaces in different parts of the world.

**Zhang Cha:** What is the biggest problem in comparative literature studies now?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Apart from material problems like institutional support for the humanities, the ground of operation is uneven as far as the situation of Comparative Literature in the world is concerned. There has to be more space for unrepresented voices to be heard in the context of Comparative Literature studies.

## VI. Coping Strategies of Indian Comparative Literature

**Zhang Cha:** In his essay “Globalization and Culture,” the Indian scholar Koyamparambath Sachidanandan (1948—) holds that the theory of globalization is based on a single country and a single culture and attempts to monopolize the right of culture, that the greatest threat India faces in the process of globalization is the death of the national language, and that as the English language is prevalent on the Internet, English is replacing the languages of India, Indian literature is gradually losing its nationality in this context of globalization, and Indian literature is also being represented by the English literature of India, and Indian Literature will certainly not exist in the process (Cao Shunqing, *Theoretical Research* 229). Do you agree with him?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I don’t think English language is replacing the languages of India, though it is true that English is gaining in importance as elsewhere in the world and that writers want their work to be translated into English more and more. However, writers in India continue to write excellent works in their own languages and are read and appreciated by a large number of readers as well. A considerable corpus of Indian language texts is today available on the Internet.

**Zhang Cha:** In the world now, the wave of globalization is higher and higher, and thus “generalization” and “homogeneity” constitutes a tight squeeze against “specialization” and “heterogeneity.” This is worthy of our vigilance (Zhang Cha 36). To my knowledge, India more or less faces such a problem. Would you please tell us briefly how India protects its national languages, literatures and cultures?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** India has two national bodies that function primarily to promote literature in Indian languages, disseminate translation in Indian languages, hold literary seminars and conferences with writers and scholars and give annual prizes recognizing merit in each Indian language. Besides, there are also folklore academies that help to preserve indigenous literary traditions. There are also local bodies of writers and scholars independently bringing out literary journals in Indian languages. Then there are separate centers for music, painting and performing arts. There is also the Indian Council for Cultural Relations that

fosters arts activities and cultural exchange.

**Zhang Cha:** Also, in his essay “Globalization and Culture,” Sachidanandan put forward a concept of “Internationalization.” To him, internationalization is a means of dialogue among multi-cultures, which tolerates differences among different cultures and does not attempt to standardize any culture (Cao Shunqing, *Theoretical Research* 228-229). From your point of view, is this proposal idealistic?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** One has to have ideals, goals – also for Comparative Literature. And Comparative Literature has always believed in dialogue. One has to go on trying.

## VII. Chinese School of Comparative Literature

**Zhang Cha:** In the essay “Strengthening ‘Interpretation of Western Literature with Chinese Literary Theory’ to Construct the Discourse System of Chinese Comparative Literature — An Interview with Professor Wong Waileung” published in 2018, Professor Wong Waileung points out that “China’s literary theories today still follow closely nothing but the West” (Zhang Cha 63). And in the essays “Strategies for the Cultural Development of China in the 21st century and Reconstruction of China’s Literary Discourse” (Cao Shunqing, *Discourse* 223-237) published in 1995 and “Aphasia of Literary Theories and Morbidity of Culture” (Cao Shunqing, *Aphasia* 50-58) published in 1996, Professor Cao Shunqing discusses aphasia of literary theories and its causes. To him, the most serious problem in the field of present-day China’s literary theories is aphasia. The field of modern and contemporary literary theories has been monopolized by western literary theories, and thus China has no theories of its own. This aphasia related to literary theory stems from the cultural morbidity since the end of the 19th century. What do you think of such criticism?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Yes, I do think we need to focus on our theories, not just the ancient ones, but also on more recent “discourses” on literature and culture from our part of the world. We too are largely preoccupied with literary theories from the Western world. *After Amnesia* by Ganesh Devy made a similar point in 1992. We also need to bring critical perspectives from our ground realities, our literary texts, histories, material conditions, literary systems etc., as we engage with Western theories.

**Zhang Cha:** A couple of years ago Professor Cao Shunqing finished in English an academic monograph entitled *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* and in 2013 it was published by Springer, Heidelberg, Germany. Professor Douwe Fokkema, former chairman of World Comparative Literature Association and



Director of Institute of History and Culture at Utrecht University, writes the Foreword, thinking highly of the monograph: “It would be a gross mistake not to take up the challenge of Cao’s erudite exposition” (Fokkema, v). What’s your comment on Professor Cao Shunqing’s Variation Theory of Comparative Literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** The idea of variation projected in Professor Cao Shunqing’s book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* is important to all practicing comparatists today. The practice of our discipline is premised upon the existence of an equal ground of cultural communication and the book alerts us to the fact that because of historical circumstances today, the ground reality is that the ecological balance of world culture has been destroyed in the context of grids of thought and theoretical formulations. All concerned need to work together to address the issue both for the sake of the discipline and for larger civilizational goals.

**Zhang Cha:** In “Keeping Upright and Innovative, and Opening Up a New World for the Chinese Comparative Literature Studies — An Interview with Professor Wong Waileung” published in 2017; Professor Wong Waileung says that “nowadays the Chinese Comparative Literature studies are vigorous and fruitful” (Zhang Cha 73). For years the scholars in China have been talking about the formation of the Chinese School of Comparative Literature. As to whether or not there exists such a school, different scholars have different views. Among them are two noticeable scholars: Professor Cao Shunqing at Sichuan University and Professor Svend Erik Larsen at Aarhus University. To Professor Cao Shunqing, Comparative Literature has experienced three stages, and “one of the theoretical systems of the third stage is the established Chinese School” (Cao Shunqing, *China School* 128), while to Professor Svend Erik Larsen, “it is completely irrelevant and against the basic idea of comparative literature, and comparative studies in general, to try to launch a national school” (Larsen 144). Do you think that there exists in a real sense the Chinese School of Comparative Literature Studies that stands alongside the French School of Comparative Literature and the American School of Comparative Literature?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I think, from my limited experience, that China also has its own ways of doing Comparative Literature and can therefore start talking about the Chinese School of Comparative Literature. Actually though, I think the word “School” today is a misnomer as American Comparative Literature has many varieties and the French Comparatists have moved away from many of their earlier assumptions. It may be more appropriate to talk about Comparative Literature in China, Comparative Literature in France etc.

## VIII. Comparative Literature to Build a Harmonious World

**Zhang Cha:** In his *The Future Poetry*, the Indian philosopher, poet, literary critic and national independence movement fighter Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) introduced his ideal of “the future poetry.” He held that this kind of poetry would be the integration of essences of both the Eastern and Western cultures, and it was possible for the poetry to be realized first in the Eastern countries. He believed that he himself would be the first “future poet” (Aurobindo 256-265). In your opinion, is this concept of “the future poetry” realistic, and if yes, has it been realized, and was he the first “future poet” in a real sense?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I am sorry, I will have to read Sri Aurobindo carefully to answer your question. I think he was talking about the expansion of an inner vision to include and to correspond with outer reality. The expansive spiritual mind turned upon the self and outer realities along with the free inquiry of thought and life energy could eventually lead to his ideal of “the future poetry”. It is an idealistic vision.

**Zhang Cha:** Yue Daiyun, a professor at Peking University, answered the question of what characteristics Chinese comparative literature should have to become a research group with great influence in the world, “I think,” she said, “our characteristics should be built on the historical roots of our profound Chinese culture. For example, ‘conciliatory but not accommodating’ is always advocated in China, which no one in foreign countries talks about. ‘Conciliatory but not accommodating’ is of the most essential and fundamental in China” (Zhang Cha 172). What do you think of her view?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** I respect Professor Yue Daiyun’s views. If the statement implies making place for the voice of the other and at the same time retaining one’s independent ways of approach, I agree.

**Zhang Cha:** What parts can Comparative Literature play in building a harmonious world?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Comparative Literature can play an important role in building a harmonious world by establishing relationships among people and cultures, opening up spaces for dialogue, promoting greater understanding of cultures and also in enabling creative processes that would lead to new visions for the future.

**Zhang Cha:** What are the basic requirements for a qualified scholar of Comparative Literature studies?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** A wide and diverse foundation in literary studies, a knowledge of more than one language, a thorough knowledge of

contextual details in his or her chosen area of work and an openness and sensitivity in approaching other cultures.

**Zhang Cha:** You are a scholar enjoying high reputation and have a rich experience. Would you please say a few words for the Comparative Literature scholars in China especially the young scholars based on your own experience?

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** To go to the roots of one's own culture as deeply as possible and then to set out to approach other literatures by giving importance to both language and history of the other literature/s with which one engages. Above all, it is important to cultivate a fine sensitivity while approaching other cultures.

**Zhang Cha:** Professor Dasgupta, I'm very grateful for your great patience and your insight in answering my questions related to Comparative Literature. Thank you very much.

**Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta:** Professor Zhang, I am grateful to you too for this extended interview that made me rethink some of the issues. Thank you very much.

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# The Variation Theory: A Brief Review of Its First Decade

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## Abstract:

Variation theory, which aims at solving some problems in the discipline of comparative literature, is a theory possessing unquestionable originality and academic value. After a decade of development since its original creation in 2005, in which it has gone through a number of adjustments and theoretical elaborations, this theory provides satisfactory guidance for many research practices of comparative literature. This theory sharply updates the theoretical system of comparative literature, reactivates certain traditional research areas, and offers inspiration to other related disciplines. We, however, are also able to observe a few problems and limitations of the variation theory, namely, its lack of elucidation of the concept of “variation,” neglect of synchronic studies of comparative literary theory, and the relative shortage of direct and effective interaction with domestic and international academia. These problems need to be solved soundly to ensure a brighter prospect for variation theory.

**Key words:** variation theory, comparative literature, comparability

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The variation theory, a comparative literature theory with unquestionable originality, has gone through a decade of development and adjustment since it was first proposed by Shunqing Cao, the former chairman of Chinese Comparative Literature Association (CCLA), at the 8th annual conference of Chinese Comparative Literature in 2005, and later polished in his book *The Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xue). A few adjustments of this theory's system have been made during these ten years. The latest definition of this theory appears in *The Introduction to Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue gailun):

The variation theory of comparative literature, researches the variation status not only of the influential communication between different

countries/civilizations' literatures, but also the mutual elucidations between different countries/civilizations. This theory inquires into the regularity of literary variation, focuses mainly on the comparability of heterogeneity. Its research scope includes five aspects: variation of literary phenomena across different nations, variation of literary phenomena across different languages, variation at the level of literary texts, variation at the level of culture, and variation at the level of civilizations and literary domestic appropriation. (161)

Due to the increasing influence of the variation theory in the field of comparative literature, it is very much necessary to delineate its first decade, which can give us a better understanding of this theory's current situation and future development.

### **A Decade of Theoretical Elaboration**

The variation theory of comparative literature emerged from a specific time and space and had its own academic background. In a journal article, Cao pointed out that, "It is a basic trend of western current critical theory to turn from the pursuit of truth/ultimacy/homogeneity to that of variances/normalcy/heterogeneity... in terms of current international discords, more attention should be paid to the conflicts between civilizations" (Cao and Zhang, 144-45), and according to these facts above, deconstructionism and cross-civilization study came naturally to be this revolutionary theory's basic theoretical support. Shengpeng Liu also expressed a similar viewpoint on this issue. He believed that the variation theory "overturns traditional research methodologies and completes the conversion both from essentialism to non-essentialism and from structuralism to deconstructionism within literary research area" (134).

Any theory is put forth because of its theorist's primary motivation, and unexceptionally, Cao attached great importance to this since the very start and mentioned, in different articles or monographs, his initial incentives for proposing the variation theory. According to the relevant research materials, it is reasonable to summarize his motivations as follows:

The first explicit motivation is Cao's discontent with Chinese academia's diachronic description on the development of comparative literary theory. For a long time it has been a prevalent mode of textbook creation among Chinese comparatists to simply mix together the typical views taken from the French school, American school and Chinese school. In this mode, these textbooks become closer to the

history of comparative literature, rather than theoretical frameworks which can properly guide our academic research. In addition, there is a considerable overlap among these three schools' theories, which brings great difficulties to classroom teaching of comparative literary theory. Through proposing the variation theory, Cao intends to "integrate existing theoretical sources synchronically" (*The Study* 20) and then reconstruct the research paradigm of comparative literature.

Another explicit motivation is Cao's introspection on the holistic deficiency of current comparative literary theoretical systems: Homogeneity, same-origin identities, and analogy, the similarities among literatures of different countries, or between literatures and other subjects, are the comparability criteria of influence studies and analogy studies (or parallel studies). In other words, in their research practices, whether it should be influence studies or analogy studies, their goal is to seek "similarities," all the while neglecting, intentionally or unintentionally, "dissimilarity." This theoretical deficiency has been producing a range of negative consequences: the "betrayal" of imagology from inside of the French school, and the controversy as to "whether there is a boundary or not in the scope of comparative literature" within the American school. On the basis of reflection on the aforementioned defect, the variation theory compensates the flaws within the views on comparability of the French and American schools with an emphasis instead on variation and heterogeneity.

The implicit motivation of proposing the variation theory can be found by looking back on Cao's academic career: from the revelation of academic aphasia to the attempt to rebuild the discourse of Chinese literary theory, from the summarization of cross-civilization study to the proposal of a Chinese school of comparative literature and the variation theory, the attitude behind all these efforts by Cao is consistent: namely, respect for heterogeneity between different civilizations. It is safe to say that the variation theory is the crystallization of Cao's years of contemplation on heterogeneity and definitely the milestone in his research career.

It is worth pointing out that the variation theory has been elaborated or restructured several times over the past decade. In *The Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xue), the first book that systematically described the variation theory, the existing theoretical resources of comparative literature were synchronically organized into four parts, literary cross-study, literary relation study, general literary study, and literary variation study. In Cao's opinion, the literary variation includes four different levels, the variation of language, the variation of image, the variation of literary texts and the cultural variation. The



literary variation study involves six specific research areas: Medio-translatology, Imagology, Reception Theory, Thematology, Genology and Cultural Filtration & Literary Misreading (The Study 184-293). Although this theoretical frame is carefully arranged, the following problems must be seriously considered: (1) Is it appropriate to take Literary Cross Study as one independent research areas? (2) Is it appropriate to cancel the Parallel Study proposed by American School? (3) Is it appropriate to put all the six specific research areas mentioned above under the term Literary Variation Study?

In *The Course of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue jiaocheng), the problems above were solved in a proper way: the basic theoretical frame of comparative literature was generalized as “one essential characteristic” (crossing) and “four research areas” (Positivistic Influence Study, Literary Variation Study, Parallel Study, General Literary Study). Within this frame, the Parallel Study was reconfirmed and reemphasized as one research area of undeniable practical and theoretical value, Thematology and Genology were reclassified as specific research areas of Parallel Study. All the adjustments that appeared in this book made Literary Variation Study become more concentrated than before. In the year of 2013, Cao published his first English monograph, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, in which he first delineated his variation theory to Western academia. With the latest definition that appeared in *The Introduction of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue gailun) published in 2015, a more clear and tenable theoretical system was presented in front of us after more than ten years’ elaboration.

Due to heterogeneity becoming a hot topic of both Western and Eastern academia, there are many scholars also reflecting on heterogeneity and trying to propose their own theories to interpret this trendy phenomenon from different perspectives, all of whose ideas share something in common with the variation theory. For example, Traveling Theory, proposed by Edward W. Said, intends to inquire about the fact that literary theories vary according to different time and place, and its similarities to the variation theory have been elucidated in Xingming Wu’s “Traveling Theory and the Variation Theory, an Inspection on the Standpoint or Perspective of One Research Area”. For another example, based on his years of research experience on Northeast Asian literature and culture, Shaodang Yan of Peking University puts forward the concept of the “Literary Variant,” which greatly inspired the emergence of Cao’s variation theory. Compared with these aforementioned theories, the advantages of variation theory mainly lies in its wide academic vision and synthesizing ability. Just as Xiangyuan Wang’s evaluation in

his monograph *The Genealogical Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xipuxue):

Except from emphasis on the “variation” as a research perspective, Mr. Cao’s variation theory is also an all-inclusive concept, through which he intends to surpass the analytic mode such as “Influence/Parallel Study,” and to tackle subfields in comparative literary highly related to variation phenomena together. (237-38)

After a decade of theoretical elaboration, the variation theory has become one reasonably comprehensive theory that can provide perfect guidance for the research practice of comparative literature.

### **A Decade of Theoretical Application**

Since its first proposal, Chinese academic circles have given high acclaim to the variation theory of comparative literature. In “A Crosswise Investigation on Discipline Theory of Comparative Literature, and the Variation Theory Studies of Chinese School,” Jinrui Shi points out that the variation theory, based on a deep understanding of the fundamental difference between the East and the West, breaks the theoretical basis—commonness—of the prior discipline theory of comparative literature and is conducive to remove the negative influence of cultural centralism in comparative literary researches (86). Not only has this theory deeply reshaped the disciplinary theoretical system, but it also has greatly inspired the birth of multiple creative academic research results, which can be roughly categorized into the following three parts.

(1) With the application of the variation theory, the discipline of comparative literature theory is sharply updated.

For example, the most important dimensions in comparative literature’s theoretical system, such as “Comparability,” “Influence Study,” “Parallel Study,” and “World Literature,” has been reexamined or reinterpreted discreetly. With respect to “Comparability,” Yu Zhang points out that the variation theory’s emphasis on heterogeneity originates from the profound understanding upon the differences between heterogeneous cultures, and has enriched the connotation of comparability, the core concept of comparative literature (143-50). When Speaking of “Influence Studies,” Yan Li, by looking back over the development history of Influence Studies, pointed out that traditional Influence Studies “unilaterally overstress the central position of the influencer,” while the Influence Studies shaped by reception

aesthetics “improperly exaggerate the function of the receiver’s subjectivity.” Thus both these tendencies above “inevitably lead to an unbalanced situation in cultural ecology.” However, with the advent of the variation theory, “not only could we rediscover facts of literary variation, but also, we found a communicational platform where different civilizations can dialogue as equals” (1-10). In regards to “Parallel Studies,” Mingfeng Qiu holds that due to “the suspension of existing differences,” even though Parallel Studies “partly correct the defect of Influence Studies,” it still is enmeshed in Western-centralism, cultural monism, and superficial comparisons like “X+Y” (192-94). All those problems in Parallel Studies can be solved with the introduction of the variation theory, and furthermore, this theory can help us “to redefine or reexamine the differences, changes and variations presented in diverse civilizations, and to promote more efficient conversations among varied literatures” (59-63).

Finally, it reconsiders “World Literature,” a concept first proposed by Goethe in 1827 and considered both the very beginning and the ultimate purpose of comparative literature for its broad vision and lofty aspiration. In recent years, American comparatists, represented by David Damrosch from Harvard University, put forward a new exposition mode of “World Literature” characterized by its attaching of importance to the “variability” within literary works. On the basis of discreet comparison between the viewpoint of American comparatists and the variation theory, Zhao Liang believes that these two theories share common features with each other — “although they are originated from different academic backgrounds and are proposed for different academic purposes, they all focus on how comparative literary can properly conduct research when confronted with problems caused by heterogeneous cultures and civilizations” (“The Variation” 74) — and should thus be regarded as the new direction of comparative poetics.

In light of the research approaches above, we can coincide with what is concluded in “The Introspection and Development of Comparative Literature in the Horizon of Variation Theory”: “the variation theory not only changes the usual understanding of comparative literature but also endows it with traditional influence studies and parallel studies in comprehensive manner, and it definitely qualifies as a general theory of comparative literature” (23-24).

(2) Under the instruction of the variation theory, some traditional research fields of comparative literature, especially empirical influence studies, were activated with a few stimulating factors. “Literary works from foreign areas, so long as translators and readers represent or reproduce the original text by using the target language,” Cao points out, “are inevitably regulated and influenced by the grammatical

structure of the target language and local readers' reading habits, under whose influence then variations occur" (The Writing Group, *The Introduction* 170). In other words, the cross-language/culture variations are not only inevitable but also universal. Based on this fact, researchers put a lot of energy into this field and gained abundant academic results.

These variations first abounded in the intra-civilization circles to which researchers particularly paid attention. For example, in "Changing and Writing: on the Selective Acceptance of the Story of Zhu Maichen in Japanese Literature," the author probes into the inherent rules and constants of the process of literary diffusion by tracing that story's reception, adaptation, and creation after its introduction to Japan (190-200). More variations, in fact, exist in the collisions and fusions between different civilizations. Within the scope of this research field, the most conspicuous academic project in China has been carried out in Cao's research project "Translations and Studies of Chinese Literature in English-speaking World" sponsored by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. In the last decade, Cao and his other project members "have published more than 30 research pieces (including monographs and dissertations)," and their research topics range from Pre-Qin dynasties' texts (for example, Weirong Li's dissertation "Studies on I-Ching in the English-speaking World"), Tang poetry and Song lyrics (for example, Li Huang's dissertation "Studies on Lyrics of the Tang and the Song in the English-speaking World") to Ming-Qing and modern Chinese literatures (for example, Guang Shi's "A Study on Translations of Wang Shi-zhen's Poems in the English-speaking World" and Jing Xu's "Studies on Lao She in the English-speaking World"). These studies not only "offer detailed catalogues, from which Chinese scholars can enjoy one convenient and easy source and point of access from which to acquaint themselves with the status of current overseas research. These studies include, for example, than names of foreign Sinologists, their works, and other literary terms, but they also "offer a lot of vivid examples and evidence of the variation theory, broaden the research scope of comparative literature, and contribute to a better understanding of translation activities of Chinese literary works." More importantly, these research pieces "make a breakthrough in Chinese classics studies with the aid of 'the eye of the Other' " ( 286-98).

(3) Along with the presentation of variation theory, lots of innovative research results emerge in other related disciplines. For example, Dr. Song Shi successfully introduced the variation theory into the field of film studies in his monograph "The Imaginative Acceptance and Variation Research of Chinese Movies in the West" and many other journal articles attempting to "analyze the underlying reasons of

the differences present in Chinese and Western scholars' studies on Chinese movies in a more reasonable and comprehensive way" (140). For another example, there are scholars introducing variation theory into the field of music studies, such as a study on the variants of the Chinese folk music song Jasmine Flower during the process of its dissemination overseas, or a study of the variation phenomena of American Jazz in China suggesting a new concept, Sinicized Jazz, for its Chinese counterpart (254-68). In addition, some scholars focusing on communications hold that "cross-cultural communication studies lacks specialized theories to analyze the variation phenomenon...the variation theory of comparative literature matches perfectly with communication studies and serves properly as a remedy to the theoretical lack in this research area." (147-52). Based on all the facts mentioned above, it is safe to draw the conclusion that the variation theory has already shown and, predictably will continue to show, a great potential to have an effect on other disciplines, not merely on literary studies.

### **Next Decade: Retrospect and Prospects**

We, however, have to acknowledge that a few problems still exist in the system of variation theory which need to be solved soundly in the next decade. It is necessary to point out these problems in a careful retrospective look at it as a system and to attempt to give some appropriate advice so that this theory has even brighter prospects.

(1) A clear and detailed elucidation of "Variation," the core concept of this theory, has still not been given by its advocates, which is mainly reflected in two aspects.

a. Lack of necessary prescription for the term "variation."

"Variation" is one abstract and neutral word, which makes it perfect to generalize shifts, distortions, and clashes during the process of literary/cultural communication, and, on the other hand, it is a term that is also somewhat all-embracing for specific textual variation cases and cultural research practices. Specific variation phenomena have different values and characteristics, the term "variation," however, does not provide us a clear distinction of what "variation" is. Expansive implications of this term produce a hidden peril that confounds positive variation, for example, Ezra Pound's translated works from the Chinese and his imagist poems (161-68), with negative variation, for example, certain faulty translation projects by irresponsible translators. If we allow for the absence of any value judgement to prevail in our research and accept every "variation" simply as a neutral "variation," variation theory, just like the sprawling comparative literature,

will face a crisis, and even maybe its death in the end. The proposal of the term “destructive treason,” which is created by Xiangyuan Wang in response to the abuse of “creative treason,” can provide a useful example to variation theory (“Creative Treason” 141-48).

b. Lack of precise description for the extent of the term “variation.”

The variation theory has an extensive theoretical framework. However, it lacks details to support its answers to the questions below: Where and why “variation” arises? Are there differences on level, scale, and extent among different “variations”? If there are, how can we describe these differences precisely? Is there a basic law regulating the occurrence, process, and accomplishment of a “variation”? In response to these questions, the variation theory team should resolve the imminent problem below: how can they “invent” or “produce” more concepts, which have yet to be completed in this theoretical system, in order to enhance their ability in describing variation phenomena? Perhaps the variation theory team can draw inspiration from “Literary Genealogy”, which is founded by Shaodang Yan and contains a series of special terms to describe the process of its research subjects, for example, literary variants, original discourse, middle medium, catalyst and literary texts, etc. (76-95). All these terms, mentioned in *Literary Genealogy*, make it a positive point of reference for the variation theory team.

(2) Most research results related to the validity of variation theory are diachronic studies, surveys on the current status of the French and American school are inappropriately neglected, which makes these works synchronically untenable.

Some Chinese scholars have already noticed this problem in advance of this article. “The French and American school,” the authors of “Analysis of the Variation of Comparative Literature” point out, “were confined to specific historical periods,” and deemed that “taking the French and American school within their historical contexts as a reference for recent studies, in fact, is to overlook the disciplinary focus shift and the overstatement of the crisis of comparative literature” (64-66). Peina Zhuang also realized this problem in her “On Research and Application of Variation Theory of Comparative Literature in China,” in which she mentioned that “most researches currently conducted adopt a diachronic perspective while rarely using the synchronic one. Most papers tend to elaborate on variation theory against the backdrop of the diachronic development of the discipline of comparative literature (...) which could reduce the dynamic and multi-dimensional discipline paradigms to a static and flat one.” From this statement she pondered: “What are the changes made by Influence Studies and Parallel Studies?” She then suggested “the future research focus should be properly shifted to the synchronic dimension,”

which “may better interpret the uniqueness and universality of variation theory as a discipline paradigm of comparative literature.” (Cao and Zhuang, “On the Research” 60).

It must be admitted that the variation theory reaches a constructive assessment on the gains and losses of the French and American schools, just like Douwe W. Fokkema’s evaluation found in the preface of Cao’s monograph *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. There, Fokkema states that, “Shunqing Cao’s characterizations of the ‘French school’ and of American comparative literature studies may strike us as quick abstractions from a complex reality” (“Forward” vi). However, the variation theory team must take the synchronic contexts into consideration and follow suggestions like Ma’s and Zhuang’s if they want to make this theory into a more persuasive theory for academic circles.

(3) According to my observation, there is not enough feedback on the variation theory offered by Chinese and Western comparatists, the relationship between the voice and its echo is, disappointingly, out of balance.

“Reflection on Some Theoretical Problems of Comparative Literature,” the doctoral dissertation of Peiyong Cheng, is one of the few works that focuses on the issues of variation theory, but there is still no proper response made by the variation theory team. This fact goes against this theory’s original intention and undermines its development potential. Some critical opinions in Cheng’s work are really reasonable for the variation theory. For example, Cheng wrote that “the variation theory never touches upon studies of ‘variation,’ the Comparability of ‘difference’ and practical research method, which leads to an ambiguous attitude on methodology.” This point of view would correspond to my critique already mentioned above. For another example, Cheng holds that the general path of any type of comparative literary research should follow a “sameness-heterogeneity-sameness” pattern and believes that “heterogeneity is fact, while sameness is construction.” On this point, Cheng expects a more penetrating elucidation on “sameness” from the variation theory system (Reflection 255-86). Fokkema shows the same concern for the issue of “sameness” by stating that “the variation theory recognizes sameness as well as differences, but how to identify sameness?” (“Forward” vi). Queries falling into such category require further exploration in the next decade.

“After grinding the sword for a decade,” Tang dynasty poet Jia Dao wrote, “I present it to you today.” From this brief retrospection on the history of the development of the variation theory during its first decade, we can realize clearly that this theory has already shown its great theoretical and practical potential and

confirm with great confidence that this theory will have one promising future. In the next decades we eagerly look forward to having more scholars involved in the discursive space opened up by this innovative theory of comparative literature study.

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