



Forever on the Way to Byzantium

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Abstract

In this paper, the author proposes that English literature studies, running across India, can produce a certain kind of borderlessness in order to nurture a Comparative Literature studies focusing on the many rich traditions of the various Indian languages and, indeed, historically, even of semiotic systems called “dialects”. The author believes that the more intensively “regional” the study of a specific language becomes, the more it can contribute to the study of Indian literatures. This is in keeping with the principles of Comparative Literature as it was founded in the twentieth century, revising the colonial outlines of *Weltliteratur*. The author offers a broad discussion of borders, including her early life in immediately post-independence West Bengal. As an example of a literary reading, the essay offers Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” which takes the theme of Byzantium as the middle passage between East and West and broadens it poetically and politically.

Keywords: Borderlessness, English, Indian languages, Comparative Literature, W. B. Yeats, Byzantium, East and West.

“Spivak doesn’t talk about India enough.” And in New York: “Well, you know, she doesn’t seem to belong to New York.”¹ As a Bengali, I often move, however unwillingly, under the influence of Tagore. This is the 150th birth year of Rabindranath Tagore, and this middle-class Bengali says, “*Deshe deshe mor ghor achhe.*” I have a place from country to country, a place, a room. *Ghor* in Bengali and *ghar* in Hindi are not quite the same. There is a language border here, and as we travel South, the borders are less permeable. For a very long time I have worried that there is no serious Comparative Literature across the North-South divide in India. There is no market for it.

We are a borderless country in English. For some of us, it is a borderless country. My earliest childhood as an Indian and a Bengali was scarred by bordering, of another kind. I was

¹These are extracts from seminars taught at the University of Pune from the 23 to 26 May 2012 at the invitation of Professor Aniket Jaware. Our thanks to him for his help with this project. The book, titled *Readings*, is forthcoming from Seagull Books.

born in British India. Partition in 1947. I saw that border, as I walked across the Toba Tek Singh between Bangladesh and India (Manto 2002). On uneven ground, in yellow paint on a block of wood, in Bengali script, was painted, “*Bharat*.” I looked back and there was a sun-bleached blue wooden signboard proclaiming, “*Gonoprajatantrik Bangladesh Sarkar*.” And in between was a Toba Tek Singh. I crossed the Indian border to the Indian border post, and half-educated Indian officials demanded a visa from me into my own country. I carry an Indian passport. Here was a class border. Only the Bangladeshi underclass crossed the Darshana-Gede border to board the all third-class train into Sealdah station, Kolkata.

This is a relatively benign example of class borders. I mention class apartheid that I witness in my own state of West Bengal in my writing. Class apartheid is not just in rural schools. It is between the rural underclass as a whole and everything above. This class apartheid in education that I have witnessed in my state now for nearly 30 years is not, I hope, replicated in all the states in India, but I fear it may be. It is a displacement of the millennial caste borders that are one of the disgraces of India. All of this is of course complicated by the gender borders we share with the rest of humanity. But the caste border crosses race, class and gender. We live, then, with many internal borders in India, as elsewhere in the world. Such borders are specific to every civilization, every history. They work in our everyday, as they work in the macrologies across the narratives of history, and I look at one of them now, when I read a couple of poems. What is a border? It is, of course, geographic limits outlining nation-states, often conflictually. We add to these internal borders of class and gender, of caste, and the right to health, education, welfare and intellectual, rather than only manual labour. When I was undergoing the tribulations of Partition, I was not old enough to think Africa. Now I know that the arbitrarily drawn borders that violated African principles of space and made borderlessness impossible would take the Indian discussion into different directions. For we as children, confined to thinking our corner of the world as “the world”, experienced friendship across borders when Nehru and China held hands, until the McMahon Line—the border set by the British—created conflict.

In 1961, I left India. The India-China conflict was in 1962. Hearing about the war in India, I thought borders were fictions. I thought, for the first time, that the earth came unmarked, except by natural boundaries. I look at Palestine, at Kashmir festering, and mark how history complicates this bit of common sense. And therefore—all facts to the contrary—we who learn from fiction must think a borderless world of unconditional hospitality.

Why do we have to do this? I used to think that this is because human beings are born ethical. Or at least, they develop an ethical sign system as they learn their first language as infants, before reason. I am still somewhat sure of this, but I think the possible impulse towards the ethical has to be activated away from the un-derived selfishness which also operates in all creaturely life. I say “creaturely life”, because I try not to be a human racist. In this activation, a literary education can be a great help, because the teacher engages directly with the imagination. A teacher of literature has nothing else to teach. If we teach literary history, it is on the model of history as a discipline. If we teach literature as evidence—and even Fanon uses it as evidence—it is on the legal model and so on, but by ourselves we have nothing else to engage with than training the imagination.

It is only with the help of the training of the imagination that we can change our epistemological performance. In other words, we change how we construct objects for knowing. And to engage with the imagination in the simplest way makes us suspend our own interests into the language that is happening in the text, the text of another traced voice, the voice of the

presumed producer of the text. I use these words “trace”, “text”, “voice” because the utility of the imagination is not confined to what we recognize as “literature” today. The element that we might call the “literary”, that trains the imagination to step out of self-interest, exists in many shapes and forms in the pasts of all civilizations. In the thinking of a borderless world today, we have to use the imagination through literary training in the broadest sense, including the filmic, the videographic, the hypertextual, learning to read in the broadest sense.

It is the task of the imagination to place a question mark upon the declarative. Imaginative training for epistemological performance focuses upon the detail that often escapes the attention of people who work to solve what seem to be more immediate problems. I draw your attention to the poet and the lawyer in the exchange of letters between Tagore and Gandhi. Tagore is resolute, saying that the only way in which imaginations can come together is through “*Bajeykharoch*”—wasteful spending—spending not on one’s own behalf; whereas Gandhi says, “My experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one’s moral height and that character-building is independent of literary training” (Bhattacharya 1997: 6).

This exchange is important: it is the task of the imagination to place a question mark on the declarative. Imaginative training for epistemological performance focuses upon the detail that often escapes the attention of people who work to solve what seem to be more immediate problems. And, no revolution lasts or prospers if there is no attention to detail. This is particularly important, because everything that is medicine can turn to poison if the person or the collectivity who is/are using it is/are not trained to know how much to use, when and how. This is the training of the imagination that makes revolutions last. It refers not to broad political descriptives, but to the micrology of practice.

This comes clear with so-called “corporate social responsibility”. There may be certain showcased features within a private enterprise where social responsibility is evident, but private enterprise today is held within the performative contradiction of borderless capital, and thus it is not possible for it to use its financial and economic policy maximally for the welfare of the state and its people, and for the welfare of the world. Social responsibility, therefore, is often a calculation of how much capitalism can get away with.

I am just coming from Croatia. A few years after the disappearance of Socialism, the Balkan Forum is trying to instruct the world against privatization. Although labour is no longer the prime mover of resistance in the globalized world, it seems to me important that the majority of the working class in a post-Socialist space, as in the Balkans, are attempting to instruct people in the inequities of privatization. I add this to bring news outside of the India-US circuit that we otherwise would travel in. The Balkan Forum were constantly regretting that no one listens to the Balkans as a European voice. I remarked there that my closest association with the work against privatization in a labour movement was in Bangladesh. “Do you think anybody,” I asked the Balkan Forum, “listens to Bangladesh as a global advisor?”—suggesting, then, that they not look above, at Europe, but find collectivity among the subalterns, below.

There are many intellectuals who condone violence, and even endorse violence, without much thought. Those who work for peace know that if violence is used to bring about a change in the polity and to secure borders, it will become a poisonous habit that will destroy a new nation. Once again, the training of the imagination into a will for peaceful social justice, rather than winning all conflicts by violence, may only be brought about by sustained attention to

detail, and sustained training into suspending oneself in the interest of the other person or persons.

That is what training in literary reading offers beyond the conventional definition of literature—painstakingly to learn the language of the other. This training can also come through cultural rearing, often compromised by gender and class. In other words, only women and servants must think of others, the *babus* and their children think of themselves, and the queer generally remain in hiding. This is a general description as I move through India. It is amazing to see in my own class how different the treatment of women and servants is, to observe how the children and the *babus* behave.

Literary reading can, if given the chance, undo this, and not just in India. I go to conferences all over the world, and no one ever looks at who cleans the rooms. I was in Italy before I went to Croatia. I was lecturing at an old Italian Socialist outfit. After the lecture, I was invited to go to La Scala, and share the box of the Pradas. It was a galling evening, although the music was splendid. I returned to my hostess's house, and the only other South Asians there were the two servants, both from Sri Lanka. A literary education can direct one to noticing these otherwise ignored details. That is the question mark in the question of a borderless world. Does education in the broadest sense nurture nationalism—I don't talk enough about India, I'm not enough in New York—or a regionalism that curbs the performative contradiction of a borderless capital?

Whatever we plan, the future will deal with it in its own way. We must make room for this undecidability as we plan. This is the future anterior. That too is marked by the question mark. Something will have happened; we cannot now know. It is in view of the elusive future anterior, then, that we must remind ourselves that, without the general nurturing of the will to justice among the people, there can be no borderless world, no end to the power play of small and large, rich and poor, debtor and creditor nations. Any thinking of welfare world borderlessness must attend, therefore, to education—primary through post-tertiary—at the same time as it attends to the uncoupling of the connection between specifically capitalist globalization and the nation-state. This is an almost impossible task to remember, especially when there are such complex and urgent immediate tasks lined up, but it must be repeated. Without this attention, there is no chance of the will to justice to survive political victory.

We are here in the Department of English Literature. The tradition of the teaching of English Literature is strong in our country for reasons that I do not need to repeat. Unfortunately, material reasons as well as a not-unconnected devotion to English have produced a lowering of interest in the production and consumption, indeed in the quality, of work in the regional languages of India. On the other hand, I think we cannot undermine our current excellence in the study of English—throw away something that we have developed over the last few centuries—because of this situation. The real solution would be to find ways of supporting a Comparative Literature of Indian languages, rather than jettison the exquisite literature of global English today.

When the country was first independent, we, who were among the first generation of post-colonial students and intellectuals, swore that we would see English as yet another language, rather than the language of the master. Because of the global situation, this was of course not possible. On the other hand, all over the world we hear of the Asian century, so that stuff that you read about American superpower wealth is not quite true today anymore, as little as a few years ago. Asia is here, metonymically, India and China. Yet, if India is indeed one of

the rising powers of the Asian century, let it not make the mistake of supporting an education that is nationalist in its ideology and capitalist in its goals. We must put on the country's agenda the slow and careful building up of a will to social justice, generation after generation, within the speed required by the ceaseless strategizing for maintaining a leading role and a vanguardist control of capitalist globalization, which has been the main concern of the top levels of the ruling class in our country since the 1990s.

The radical emphasis cannot be simply on explaining the political information, or claiming the right to information. Information is not enough. You have to train minds that can deal with information. Information control leads to human-interest stories in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The radical emphasis, on the other hand, must be on attempts to change habits of mind, for which the best weapon remains a literary education, best developed worldwide in the study of English Literature, not even French or German. It is in the context of this that I have talked about the concept of affirmative sabotage.

We must learn to demand more financial support for a Comparative Literature of the Indian languages. Elsewhere, I have called this kind of demand a concern for the ethical healthcare of a nation at war with general injustice. This would promote a kind of borderlessness while preserving linguistic borders as crossing-places, rather than indications of impenetrability. I do not know if I will see this in my lifetime, but I continue to repeat this, especially to students. From the place of a victim of globalization, I propose moving to a borderless Indian of a certain kind, invoking a performative contradiction which must attend carefully to borders, the very ground of an enlightened Comparative Literature where English remains a medium.

When we undertake to find this utopia—which can of course never be found—we realize that a borderless world already exists where capital roams free. The present financial crisis in the United States and Europe was occasioned by unregulated capital attempting to turn finance capital over and across borders, in and out, borrowing and lending repeatedly, to increase its volume exponentially until international capital could not keep up with the risks incurred by unrestricted selling of securitized loans. Such crossing of borders needs to keep borders intact. It seeks to preserve the difference between nation-state-based currencies, further divided by the global North, the G20 and the global South. Without this, the currency speculation, which is the base of finance capital, such as practiced by renowned philanthropists like George Soros, for example, would not flourish. These virtual and electronic divisions are added to more conventional borders so that capital can travel across borders in a digitally borderless fashion. We, the organic intellectuals of globalization, can use this as a model of Comparative Literature, undoing the crisis by imaginative training. This, too, is a species of affirmative sabotage.

Borderlessness, in an extra-moral sense, needs borders of a certain sort in order to be borderless. It is within this performative contradiction that the entire problematic of immigration—which you cannot ignore if you live in the United States—is lodged. I remind you of the lines going around blocks at the American Embassy in New Delhi, or the lines going around blocks at the Federal Building in New York for green cards. Capital cannot let go of massively underpaid labour with no work place safety or benefits requirement. Undocumented immigrant labour is the new subaltern social group. And yet, racialization (“They’re not Euro-US”) and sexualization: “They are coming into the United States to drop a baby so that they can have an American citizen baby,” must deport migrant labour. This is also a contradiction. Capital needs to keep soft currency soft. Labour must therefore cross frontiers, not borders, undercover, where hard currency beckons.

I will explain the difference between borders and frontiers, so cruel for many underclass paperless immigrants, through a joke between a mother and a daughter. As you know, the first European passage to the Americas happened because Columbus mistook it for the East-West passage. The general subject, the neutral subject, the Chakravorty-s, the name which was given to kings because they had the free wheel, the chakra that could go everywhere, that did not need a visa, as it were, has been reterritorialized into the US Columbus's mistake, has been reversed. My mother, who was my brother's dependent, had a US passport. I don't. I would say to her, "You Americans are the Chakravortys now. You can go everywhere." She crossed borders travelling with me, I, frontiers. She would slip through and I would say, "Stay close, stay close," as they would look at my passport and my face, my passport and my face, and even sometimes ask, "Do you have any relatives in this country?" I would say, "Yes, right there, across the border. Let me go," because Mother would be sitting there with her American passport. That's the difference between a frontier and a border, simply put.

I am carrying this analogy forward into the study of literature. I am suggesting that if we are obliged to become what Antonio Gramsci would call "the organic intellectuals of capitalist globalisation", let us do so in this supplementing spirit. In the best of all possible worlds, the performative contradictions of a literary borderlessness supplement the cruelties as well as the social productivity of seemingly borderless capital. We know what the outlines of supplementation are: the supplement knows the exact shape of the gap that must be filled, not any blank, but a textual blank, a blank framed by a text that must be known with critical intimacy rather than from a critical distance.

Since the supplement comes from the outside, it also introduces the dangerous element of the incalculable, because the supplement is not calculated by the rules of that which it supplements. So let us think it through: global capital and literature. Literature is the element of the incalculable here. This is something we must think about. The will to social justice for all, rather than justified self-interest, introduces the element of the incalculable even in the resistance to our digitally calculable globalized world. I cannot imagine what it would be like if there were no relief map of foreign exchanges between hard and soft currencies, if capital's false promise of a level playing field were true, if utopia could be calculated. I only know that Europe's plans for creating a borderlessness within its own outlines are coming undone, as Greece is on the brink of leaving the Eurozone and Turkey enters. If we attend to the narrative history of the millennial play of borders upon the European continent, we Brit-Lit types can plot it in terms of a literary Byzantium.

This would be a literary supplementation from a European rather than an Indian narrative, fanciful and incomprehensible to some, but I hope provocative and suggestive to others. Here is Byzantium, in the dance between Greece, Turkey and the European Union today read by a literary critic. Istanbul is the modern name of Byzantium, a corruption of Constantinople—Constantinopolis—as most people think, but its more interesting derivation is the appellation, Istinpólin,² a name they heard Byzantine Greeks use, which in reality was a Greek phrase which meant "in the city". Through a series of speech permutations over a span of centuries, this name became "Istanbul", just a civic interiority, a Medina (also a city called "city"), Medina forever Arabic, Istanbul—as indeed India—forever Greek.

² StinPóli—modern Greek phrase for "in the city" *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Even as Greece is fracturing the Eurozone, Byzantium, the city called city, historically standing in for an empire, and then a nation-state, is sidling in. Yeats saw the mosaic that he celebrates in “Sailing to Byzantium” in Italy, in *Ravenna*. Later he went to Sicily to see more examples of Byzantine work.

This gesture of finding a domesticated Byzantium, the city which had stood for the Eastern Roman Empire, now tamed as the latest entrant (perhaps) into the European Union, is an example of the phenomenon, Byzantium as place-holding proper name for the chiasmus East-West—even if it is to access eternity. It thus holds a transcendental promise, though the scene of a subduing. Yeats writes of Josef Strzygowski’s *Origin of Christian Church Art*:

To him the East, as certainly to my instructors, is not India or China, but the East that has affected European civilisation: Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt. From the Semitic East he derives all art which associates Christ with the attributes of royalty. It substitutes Christ Pantokrator for the bearded mild Hellenic Christ, makes the Church hierarchical and powerful (Yeats 1962 [1937]: 257).

In “Sailing to Byzantium”, let us assume that Yeats is imagining a boat ride down the Mediterranean, in and around the Greek islands, reversing Odysseus’s route. There is no Byzantium for Odysseus to stop at, but coming from Asia into Europe, he swings by the outpost of the Cicones tribe in Thrace, which is supposed also to be the birthplace of Orpheus, the limit of the known world for the ancient Greeks. Odysseus did not know East-West, but let me just mention in passing that for Derrida, who was Ulysses the Mediterranean in one of his many polytropic self-imaginings, there was a South-North across the famous sea, redoing Augustine. A topos—about topology, moving to “the place” like a city called city: for Augustine Rome, for Derrida Paris, for Yeats Byzantium. Utopias.

Yeats writes of the “to come”. The last line of the poem: “Of what is past, or passing or to come” (Yeats 2010: 267–68) spells a non-accessibility to the stability of the present, a gesture, protecting from claims to influence. The present is a vanishing relationship, constituted by its vanishing. Let us look at Benjamin’s powerful articulation, which I will cite again at the end: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant of its recognisability, never to be seen again. [...] History is the object of a construction, whose site forms not with homogeneous empty time, but time filled with the now time” (Walter 1999). Yeats’s time, the time for literary action, for literary activism, now time, not a present of the sort that you can catch as something that actually exists.

Many people think that “homogeneous empty time” was a phrase coined by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, a book which does not grant us the ability to understand what we are about, or to understand the great economic and political narratives of liberation that come from Europe (Anderson 2006).³ Many people think that Benedict Anderson wrote “homogeneous empty time” and that Partha Chatterjee opposed it, but in fact, it comes from this extraordinary passage in Benjamin where he talks about the time of action.

We know only a passing and, studying in the present, we construct a past thing. This is epistemology at work, forever trying to alter or affect, alter affect, the abreactive episteme. T. Sturge Moore noticed that although the subject of the poem claims, “Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing,”—since the poet wants to be an artificial bird, the form he chooses is nature, “Your *Sailing to Byzantium*,” he writes, “as magnificent as

³ (Anderson 2006). For Partha Chatterjee’s critique of *Imagined Communities*, see Chatterjee (1986).

the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies" (Bridge 1953: 162).

In response, Yeats writes the turgid poem "Byzantium," where he makes clear that the form is "ghostly:" "I hail the superhuman." It is as if he is insisting: "Look here, don't make a mistake now." When poetry is written in this admonitory style, it is not at its best:

I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud

In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood (Yeats 2010: 335–36).

"So don't mistake it for a 'natural thing,' T. Sturge Moore," Yeats writes in effect (Bridge 1953: 164). But the mistake remained: like the mistake meant to be made by the subject of "The Wild Swans at Coole," who thinks 59 swans, the objects of his vision, described as empirical, can fly "lover by lover" (Yeats 2010: 187). Obviously false. Fifty-nine is an odd number. To constitute a subject in error with characteristic simplicity is another rhetorical protection against possibilizing a past as a preferred or desired influence. In a more extended discussion, this can be carried through in relation to the Osmanli nostalgia/ambitions of Turkey in the Balkans today, and Greece talking about its ownership of democracy as it bites the dust. Against this golden ageism in extremis, the literary constitution of a subject in error with characteristic simplicity is a needed political protection.

Speaking, then, autocritically in a spirit of alliance I say that the idea of East-West as Byzantium, cleansed of empirical details, and attributing that cleansing to Byzantine aesthetics by projection (by the US critic Clement Greenberg, or as the Balkans and Eastern Europe in their relationship with Western Europe after the Cold War), is not adequate to what is happening in the world in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. For "Byzantium," like all named places that have had a share in utopia, cannot be subdued. My sense of "utopia" comes from the root meaning of the word, that it is no-place, a good place by ruse, substituting "eu" for "u" in the Greek word, to make it mean a good place—and today even a European Union place! E-U, ha ha.

The city called the city has always run on the aim to achieve utopia, more or less disingenuously. It allows the ignoring of the double bind of history as the site of struggle, of the warp and woof of the tracing of history—by all but the smartest masters. As a reader of literature, I learn the lesson without mastery, and complicit with, folded into, that textile, I dream of Thrace, the home of the mythic Orpheus, uxorious to a fault, quite unlike Adam. I think of the shepherds of Thrace, where Odysseus visited, the stage for the city, which never achieved a polis. These shepherds, I muse, only half-fancifully, would then have been un-derived subalterns, as Marx thought about the originary communists. For the ancient Greeks, Thrace was borderless. It was one of the four corners of Oceanus, the limit of the known.

Byzantium is not for us, then, a place of taking sides; it is a site of struggle. Septimus Severus Romanizes it, Diocleian divides it, Constantine Christianizes it, Justinian restores it, the Fourth Crusade devastates it; from 800 a tug of war with the Holy Roman Empire to the west, Orthodoxy refused to join with Catholicism, East would not join West, and Byzantium became Ottoman. The tradition of tremendous regional strife, within which Yeats is symptomatic, as you read his poetry, continued and wrote a famous history: Genocide's pogroms as empire turns to state. In 1916, Messrs. Sykes and Picot, by secret understanding, wrote the "Middle East" upon the body of Byzantium, so that the Holy Land could become a violent and violating utopia. This is also a suppression of cosmopolitanism-as-comparativism—as recorded in Wadad Makdisi Cortas's *A World I Loved* and Khaled Ziadeh's *Neighbourhood and Boulevard* (Cortas 2009, Ziahdeh 2011).

Today, as Byzantium shuffles into Europe, in the process reclaiming a new avant-garde, the Osmanli East-West spirit acknowledges conflict by resolution, reclaiming. In the Fall of 2009, relations between Serbia and Bosnia, never easy since the savage civil war of the 1990s, were slipping toward outright hostility. Western mediation efforts had failed. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Foreign Minister of Turkey, offered to step in. It was a complicated role for Turkey, not least because Bosnia is, like Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country, and Serbia is an Orthodox Christian nation with which Turkey had long been at odds. East-West. But Davutoğlu had shaped Turkey's ambitious foreign policy according to a principle he called "zero problems with neighbours".⁴ Neither Serbia nor Bosnia actually shares a border with Turkey. Davutoğlu, however, defined his neighbourhood expansively as the vast space of former Ottoman dominion, so that this story within which Yeats occupies a place is, as I was saying, a political narrative that has economico-political sense for us today. This Osmanli impulse, with resistance from within, continues under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Again, "the literary", even as practised by the conservative neo-fascist W. B. Yeats (national liberation is not a revolution). The supplementation that comes, introducing the element of the incalculable, takes us beyond nostalgic interventionist politics.

Byzantium will not be subdued by the repeated localization of the East-West chiasmus. For Orpheus the Byzant before the letter, Rilke taught us, only in the double kingdom did the voices become eternal and could be, imperfectly, mimed on Earth. In German, the more abstract word "determine" is, literally, "attuning": *die Bestimmung*, with *Stimme* in it, as in *die Stimmen* — "voices", in Rilke's lines, in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*:

*Erst in dem Doppelbereich
werden die Stimmen
ewig und mild.*

Only where those two worlds join
are there pure voices,
calm, without age (Rilke 1989: 9).

Thrace predetermines Byzantium into a *mise-en-abyme*, double standing in for indefinite, mirroring as in a hall of mirrors, poetry's response to a linear sense of strife in history. Double also as in double bind. Byzantium shows up the double bind of history as the site of struggle, the warp and woof of the text of time, as the shuttle rises and falls. It is the double bind of

⁴ Interview with Ahmet Davutoğlu, AUC Cairo Review (Egypt), 12 March 2012.

democracy that confronts the modern Byzantium, the double-bind of ipseity (myself) and alterity (the other), of the unconscious pulling away at the voting ego. It is the problem of supplementing vanguardism, supplementing the shortfall of the unquestioned need for vanguardism.

When a great change is made in politics and economics (national liberation is not a revolution), as time presses with increasing opposition from all sides, it is not possible to become completely non-vanguardist. Gramsci sitting in jail understood that. Unless vanguardism is supplemented by the instrumentalization of the intellectual to produce the subaltern proletarian intellectual, nothing will survive because people as a whole do not change epistemically as a result of the vanguardist “revolution”. Where Gramsci was thinking of the underclass, I am thinking of ourselves, generally middle-class teachers of English Literature at elite universities in India, the “world’s largest democracy”, to quote CNN.

How does a robust borderlessness, preserving borders with care for people rather than capital, supplement? With a sensibility aggressively trained into suspending self-interest in the other’s text, verbal, visual, oral, social. This is a training for the will to social justice, though not necessarily so. It is not a literary training alone that can do this, but when short-term solutions of regulating borderless capital—an example here is the Tobin tax proposed by the World Social Forum—calls for the will to impose such a tax on oneself, we need to depend on the slow-speed, long-term build up of what I call a literary sensibility: imaginative training for epistemological performance so that an economically just world can be sustained by each generation being trained in the will specifically to social justice.

This is undoubtedly a utopian vision. I wrote it as a teacher, with full civil rights in India and nowhere else, given that the world is still not post-national, addressing the students of English, again with full civil rights in India alone, urging them to understand that utopia does not happen, and yet to understand, also, their importance to the nation and the world. Indeed, I know how hard it is to sustain such a spirit in the midst of a hostile polity, but I urge the students to consider the challenge. It is in view of that impossible utopia that I understand the task of the student and teacher of literature here and everywhere, in a world where literature is trivialized, and I quote again that passage in Benjamin: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant of its recognisability, never to be seen again [...] History is the object of a construction, whose site forms not with homogeneous empty time, but time filled with the now time” (Benjamin 1999).

I began with borders in my childhood, youth, and the present as Indian. Partition, the McMahon Line. I moved into the performative contradictions of an Indian Comparative Literature, relating it to the performative contradictions of global capital: a borderlessness that must preserve borders—the tradition of English-in-India being put to work for regional languages. I proposed a supplementary relationship between the two, “the literary” introducing the dangerous element of the incalculable. I offered a reading of Yeats within the narrative of Byzantium, relating it again to the current Turkey-Greece minuet. Throughout, I insisted that a training of the imagination for literary reading produces a flexible epistemology, that can, perhaps keep saving our world.

Questions

Since this was a lecture series, we have edited the questions and answers as they contributed to the enhancement of the general argument.

1. The meaning of “organic intellectuals of capitalism” (Gramsci).

Most people seem to think that “organic intellectuals” is a word or phrase of praise, meaning something like a public intellectual, or an activist intellectual. In Gramsci, the only example you have of an “organic intellectual” is the “organic intellectual” of capitalism. There, “organ” does not mean, as in Coleridge, trees and plants and organs and so on. It means more an adjective emerging from organization. What he means by organic intellectual is an intellectual who is produced according to the social relations of force that operate a certain mode of production. I was actually trying to kind of create a fable of this: that finance capitalism, which is the major thing of capitalist globalization, is borderlessness that must keep borders intact. A bad thing.

Comparative Literature of Indian languages, which will be a borderlessness (English Studies) keeping borders intact—a good thing. So, I was in effect saying that the organic intellectual I am describing, who is produced by the organization of finance capital, without deliberate intervention, can affirmatively sabotage the structure which s/he can imperfectly deduce by studying the polity as text. My conclusion: in a country as linguistically rich as ours, this other sort of borderlessness in English Studies that we have can work at carefully preserving linguistic borders even as we make them permeable.

2. Rearing.

I use this word to get to a place that is less restricted than what is covered by the word “education”. This also allows me to bring in the broader scope of cultural instruction. Primo Levi, the Italian who was in Auschwitz, escaped when the Soviets came in and liberated Germany after the Second World War. He was asked, “What were those monsters like who tortured you?”⁵ And what Levi said was, “Apart from a few who really were monstrous, most of these people were really like you and me, but badly reared.”⁶ In the face of the kind of dehumanizing torture in the concentration camps recorded in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, for Levi to be able to answer this brings me back to the fact that Dante allowed Levi to survive. I meant that through cultural and, one hopes, institutional literary training, we may be given habits that deeply relate to others first, the very principle of social justice. Unfortunately, cultural

⁵ Levi (1986: 394): “Monsters exist, but they are too few in numbers to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are [...] the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions.”

⁶ “Coltivati male:” Levi writes, “*Infatti, l'uomo incolto (e itedeschi di Hitler, e le SS in specie, eranopaurosamente incolti: non eranostati “coltivati”, o eranostaticoltivati male) non sadistinguere nettamente fra chi non capisce la sua lingua e chi non capiscetout court,*” in “Comunicare,” *I Sommersi E I Salvati*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2007 [1986]), 71.

⁶ Raymond Rosenthal’s translation in “Communicating,” *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988: 71): “In fact, an uncultivated man (and Hitler’s Germans, and the SS in particular, were frightfully uncultivated; they had not been ‘cultivated’, or had been badly cultivated) does not know how to distinguish clearly between those who do not understand his language and those who do not understand *tout court*.”

instruction is deeply gender- and class-compromised. “Culture” is so quickly becoming a divisive word these days that I would rather say “social permission”.

When I actually teach at Columbia and teach for training at the rural schools I try to develop intuitions of democracy in the method of teaching, rather than talk to them about what they already know, that the ruling class is very cruel, absurd and so on. My subaltern teachers and students have mostly never seen white people where my schools are, and they do not connect to the America part of my existence. It is the fact that I am arriving from Calcutta which makes me their class enemy. What I try is to devise a philosophy of education that will at the same time keep alive the competitive intuition which is necessary in class struggle, or in the citizen demanding that the abstract structures of the state work for her or him, and yet keep alive other—directedness—the shuttle between ipseity and alterity. These are elementary schools and this kind of attempt becomes a part of rearing.

3. The female body.

It is a borderline, isn't it? All bodies, in fact, are borderlines. I was not just saying “respecting” borders, I was saying “attending to” borders. But in the simplest possible sense, the female body is seen as permeable. It is seen as permeable in perhaps the most basic gesture of violence. To respect the border of the seemingly permeable female body, which seems to be in the benign service of humanity itself, to understand that one must attend to this border and respect it—surely this is where you and I would agree. But this is long-term preparation for thinking, not short-term implementation of solutions by those who can think.

In terms of this, the short-term work is law: changing and implementing. The long-term work is the work that I was talking about. I am glad that you picked up on that, because this borderlessness attends to borders; not just respects them, but attends to them. After all, to be borderless is also a pleasure for the female and the male—to be borderless, to be permeable, can be a pleasure. So it is attending to borders rather than simply respecting them, in that particular situation.

Also, there comes a moment when one begins to talk about gendering. One is very careful about violence, because violence can be connected to desire. So where are you going to turn the ethical into merely the moral? This is a place where, because of the incalculable, I think the idea of attending to (hypercathexis in Freud is “attending”—not just occupying with desire, but “hyper”; *attendre* in French is “to wait”, so “to wait upon”) borders is very important. That is where I would go: law, training, attending to borders.

I bring you back to my opening remarks: on borderlessness. Today, empirically, capital can move in a borderless way all around the globe. This borderlessness, which by a performative contradiction has to keep borders intact, can be taken as the extra-moral condition of the mode of production which runs us, which we can use to propose a Comparative Literature borderless in English, which attempts to keep linguistic borders intact by devoted attention to its palaeonymy. Rather than say, “Global English cuts me down!”, take it and begin to move it so that you can enter other Indian languages—not just your mother tongue—keeping those borders intact for you to breach, because, if you just think of borderlessness, you will move around in inadequate English translations.

Another reminder in my closing remarks is: not to treat Hegel's *Phenomenology* simply as a sequential narrative, but also as a spatial epistemograph. That kind of graphic intuition is also in Kant: in his epistemograph, Kant uses grace itself, or rather its effect, a space in the

picture of the thinking mind. And in *Summertime*, in the idea of prayer: Margot is made to say, trying to fulfill the textual desire, that the movement of prayer is not a bad thing. Because, for Kant, mere reason (rational choice?) is “morally lazy” and just tries to put a plus in the place of a minus, we must make a little room for the effect of grace. Not the cause of grace—because practical reason is merely programmed to speak cause—but just the effect. I find that this exhortation has quietly entered my picture of reading: not only to understand by reasonable conduct, but the prayer to be haunted. This is more than just critical intimacy. Once we get to this difficult effort, ill-paid as you will be, and mocked as you will be, and in a hostile polity as you are, the task of a teacher of literature in the broadest sense is to restore this insane and competitive, genocidal, nationalistic place into something like a country among global countries. We are not in the national liberation phase where we have to be “best”. We know that neither national liberation nor competition is a “revolution”. Therefore, the prayer to be haunted by the country as text brings us to equality rather than victory as a model. Indeed, if we affirmatively sabotage Kant’s idea of the effect of grace into a broader structural model of non-religious prayer, it will help us to keep the fragile structures of secularism alive, without disavowing the transcendental.

A reminder about the double bind, noticing contradictory instructions, and also noticing how the text pushes you toward a decision, coaxes you to break the double bind. I hope you will enjoy this in future, even as you realize the seriousness of this training in reading the other(s) carefully enough to undertake the re-arrangement of desires, your own, and theirs. And be literal, do not turn everybody into yourself, do not turn literature into evidence of social reality or theory.

Learning from mistakes is another important point. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was the beginning of such a process of learning, which has today brought me to a very different place: from the burning of the widows in the past, to the changing of children’s mind in the present, for the future—please keep that in mind when you want to praise the essay. In its author’s intellectual life, it has served the purpose of opening a door rather than remaining a monument. Avoid the fault of the benevolent feudals—anthropologizing the aboriginal by preservation, and thus joining hands with UNESCO and the Nara Document of 1994, to “authenticate” cultural heritage. Literature authenticates nothing—it runs along, away from evidentiary authentication. A hard lesson—to be learned over and over again. Be aware that a desire represented in a text is not its fulfillment. Be aware of the general desire to capture the writerly, the undecidable. The last thing I will say is, do not tell me, “This is India!” because it can be done here. If you want to learn languages, you can learn languages. Stay with it. And thank you for making me welcome.

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