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# CONSERVATIVE IN FORM, REVOLUTIONARY IN CONTENT: RETHINKING WORLD LITERARY CANONS IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION\*

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“The merit of a literary history based on an aesthetics of reception will depend upon the degree to which it can take an active part in the continual integration of past art by aesthetic experience. This demands...a critical revision if not destruction of the traditional literary canon.” —Hans Robert Jauss (127)

By way of substantiating his argument that “courses of fully global scope are becoming common” in literature curricula, David Damrosch declares in his edited volume on approaches to teaching world literature that “Western literature courses that would formerly have begun with Homer now often start with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*” (“All the World” 2). And yet teachers and scholars of world literature have a long way to go, for, while Damrosch’s optimistic diagnosis may accurately describe the range of courses available to students majoring in literature, it is far from evident that introductory courses to literature have globalized to an extent commensurate with other disciplines.

To draw on two prominent examples, while the faculty for the core Literature Humanities course at Columbia University recently voted to include the *Gilgamesh* epic in their syllabus, Literature Humanities at Columbia nonetheless *begins* with the more recent *Iliad*, as it did when Literature Humanities first began to be taught in the 1920s. *Gilgamesh* enters by the back door, as a complement to the more canonical Homeric text. Meanwhile, Yale University’s Directed Studies program—a non-man-

datory version of the Columbia Core—does not include any non-western text in its curriculum. While the advent of world literature as a field of study has begun to transform Comparative Literature departments across the world, it has been far less effective in translating its goals into terms relevant to the pedagogy of traditional core curricula. In these institutional contexts, there is a lingering perception that, if Homer cedes space to *Gilgamesh*, Valmiki, or Vyasa (the authors of the two major Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), the integrity of literature as a discipline will be diluted. Beyond the problem of non-inclusion, the application of different standards to different literary traditions intensifies the geographic divide.

Damrosch identifies three basic modalities that have evolved “from Goethe’s time onward” for conceiving world literature: classics, masterpieces, and windows on the world (“All the World” 3). Far from being mutually exclusive, these three modalities often supplement each other. As Damrosch notes, Goethe embraced all three modes, “cherishing the Greek and Latin classics he read in the original, promoting the modern masterpieces he and his friend Friedrich Schiller were composing, and enjoying Chinese novels and Serbian folk poetry as windows on very different worlds of culture and aesthetic expression” (“All the World” 6). Building on the example of Goethe, Damrosch forthrightly states that the windows on the world approach is pedagogically useful “as a way of opening out world literature courses beyond the boundaries of Western Europe” (“All the World” 7). And yet the very fact that, when they are taught at all, non-European literatures tend to be taught as windows onto their worlds—and that texts within these traditions are read contextually before they are read aesthetically—whereas European literary texts do not require a comparable preparatory framework should occasion concern.

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Contemporary scholars of world literature are all too familiar with the pattern whereby Asian, African, and Islamic literatures are read for the window they offer on the anthropology of a given culture, and presented as adjuncts to a European core which is seen as requiring no contextualization. If the decontextualized Great Works approach works for the teaching of Greek and Latin literature, why should it not work as well for Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic traditions? Reversing the European angle of vision, shouldn’t it be possible to anthropologize the Greeks by reading Homer, Herodotus, and Aeschylus as windows on Greek civilization? Isn’t there an equally pressing need for a framework that considers what the Indian literary theorists such as Bharata, Abinavagupta, and Anandavardhana can teach us concerning the distinction between natural and aestheticized emotions in Sanskrit aesthetic theory?

In this essay, I outline how these uneven distributions of aesthetic merit and cultural goods were tackled by the inaugural literature faculty of Yale-NUS, a liberal-arts college collaboratively created by Yale University and the National University of Singapore, which began offering its first courses in Fall 2013. As literature faculty, we were tasked to create a syllabus for an introductory year-long course to be taken by all first-year students.<sup>1</sup> Answering to the rigorous standards of traditional core curricula while seeking to infuse this curriculum with a global content, we found ourselves

situated at the conjuncture of two somewhat contradictory pedagogical and aesthetic mandates. Finding an equilibrium between the conflicting demands of world literature and traditional literary canons was an exhilarating if ultimately impossible task, which I chronicle in part in this essay.

Much has been written about the ways in which “the dynamics of educational institutions” are increasingly “bound up with the dynamics of the world system” (Dirlik 51; Wildavsky). Even more has been written, in connection with this globalization, about the challenges of importing the liberal arts to societies where civil society, often deemed a precondition for liberal education, did not organically emerge through local political contestations. Much less has been written about a third challenge entailed in the creation of Yale-NUS and other international campuses of U.S. universities (NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai, Georgetown and Northwestern University in Qatar, among many others): the reconstitution of familiar canons. This issue has received less attention, in part because its immediate impact is less visible, although its long-term effect is arguably more substantial. The restructuring of the curriculum inevitably takes place—or should take place—whenever an educational model fashioned over the course of centuries for a specific constituency is reconstituted in a new cultural environment.

What happens to the liberal arts canon—to its concept as well as to its content—when it goes global, not merely in terms of the texts that are taught but in terms of the students to whom this teaching is addressed? How will a globalized canon inflect an institution that, from antiquity onwards, has been tasked to propagate, in the words of John Guillory, “the knowledge of how to read and write as well as what to read and write” (240)? How will this change affect the social worlds where the institutions that offer this education are situated? This essay pursues these questions by recounting my experience as an inaugural faculty member for Yale-NUS, who was tasked, along with five other faculty members, to create a curriculum that aspired to be the first systematically global world literary core, required of every entering student.

While there are countless precedents for our endeavour, the task we had embarked on in many respects represented a first in the pedagogy of literature. Core curricula have been formally incorporated into North American universities for nearly a century. Looking back further in time, the concept of a core is coeval with the development of the classical literary cultures of China, Greece, and the Arab world, among others.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, there would be no concept of a classic without the infrastructure offered by a canon. But while the Yale-NUS faculty aimed to generate a canon that would sustain students throughout their lives as readers and as citizens, there was at least one substantial sense in which our goals diverged from past precedents. In contrast to the vast majority of comparable curricula, our core was not intended to represent any single civilization, whether western or eastern. We aimed instead to identify a set of texts that resonated with each other, and which refracted the wide diversity of world literary forms.

Our form was traditional, in the sense that we were modeling ourselves on Great

Books programs that had long been offered at Columbia, Yale, St. Johns, and elsewhere. In contrast to these institutions, however, we aimed for a revolutionary content that was to be inflected by a diversity of world literary cultures. Our Asian location compelled us to “supplement the classic linkages provided by literary influence and reference” with “new modes of connection,” more richly easily accommodated within the discourse of world literature than within the pedagogy of canonical cores (Damrosch, “Major Cultures” 203). The goal was to combine in a single course two paradigms for conceptualizing literature that are all too often siphoned off from each other: world literature and canonical learning. In this course design, world literature and the traditional canon were to be mutually constitutive of, rather than antagonistic to, each other. In the process of realigning these relations, both disciplinary practices would have to be reconceptualized.

Whether in European, Islamic, or Asian traditions, literature canons have by and large been constituted independently of globalization, even when other disciplines aimed more forcefully to engage the world. Canons have instead traditionally instructed students into the foundations of their own cultures, while treating neighbouring and distant civilizations as ancillary or non-existent, respectively. Originally derived from the ancient Greek word *kanon*, meaning “a ‘reed’ or ‘rod’ used as an instrument of measurement,” already in antiquity *kanon* came to signify a body of legal precepts (Guillory 233). The various meanings of this term spread throughout the ancient and medieval world, and entered, among other languages, Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish, in which language it came to signify a musical instrument. *Kanun* took on a legal life of its own in the Ottoman Empire, as Sultans from Mehmed II, to Selim I, and Süleyman I, formulated *kanun* as a legal system which these rulers positioned as a supplement to *sharīʿa*. Süleyman I was even given the title *Kanuni* (“Law Giver”), by way of honoring his achievements in secular jurisprudence. Within the medieval European context, canon law instructed students in “ecclesiastical law, as laid down in decrees of the pope and statutes of councils” (“Canon n.1”).

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As these legal applications suggest, the purpose of a canon has traditionally been normative, concerned with consecration rather than creation. Canons have aimed to train students in the skills of writing and speaking as well as reading and interpretation, and to equip them to maneuver within pre-existing traditions. Narrow canons are often foundational to broad liberal arts educations. They cannot expand beyond a certain point without becoming eviscerated of content and thereby diluted in their educational prerogatives. Given these constraints, is it possible to create a canon adequate to an age of globalization, a canon capable of challenging its own canonicity?

While canons are conservative in form, given the structural limits to their expansion, no formal stricture prevents canons from being revolutionary. As literary theorist Gary Saul Morson has stated, “freedom does not require that there be no social constraints, only that those constraints should not reduce alternatives to singularity” (685). Constraints are not of themselves inimical to literary pedagogy. They only become a problem if they result in the stagnation of knowledge. Given that a

liberal arts education is premised on broad learning and canons are intrinsically narrow, this productive tension of itself justifies bringing canons and world literature into conversation with each other and exploring how the canon's conservative form can be enriched by a revolutionary global content. In the tradition of liberal arts education, this internal transformation entails drawing on the best traditions, while mobilizing these traditions for political critique in the present. Without reducing the importance of canonicity, rethinking the canon can help educators create students who are motivated to think independently "toward a vision of the good society" and to realize their visions by "speaking truth to power" (Deresiewicz 30).

In pursuit of the twinned goals of canon transformation and the globalized study of literary form, I propose three ways for forging a canon responsive to the political present. The first and most obvious proposal is empirical: increasing the canon's global scope will enable the canon's formal conservatism to encompass Sinic, Indic, and Islamic traditions alongside the many other knowledge systems that have been  
**274** obscured within mainstream literary history. Second: reconceptualize the notion of canonicity. Third: develop a method for reading texts through cross-cultural juxtapositions that the texts' creators could not have envisioned. Having considered the empirical task of reconstituting the canon's content globally, I will move on to the remaining two strategies: reconceiving canonicity and learning to read differently, against the grain of received historical traditions.

Guardians of canonicity in various traditions have too frequently failed to recognize canons' constitutions through multiple historical contingencies. Rather than assuming that the texts they encounter have been chosen as the best possible outcome in a world of multiple possibilities as per Leibniz, students ought to be trained to discern the ideological work that has gone into the construction of canons past and present. Inculcating this awareness of historical contingency will instill skepticism towards narratives that ground canonicity in a commonly shared human condition, and promote a more reflexive approach to canon construction. Far from displacing its canonical status, the study of a text from the vantage point of its canonization in time and space will bring into greater relief the high stakes of the literary imagination, for as Guillory contends, a poem is "more interesting (more ironic, more aesthetically complex) when fully contextualized in a social as well as a purely literary history" (248). This use of contextualization whereby knowledge of historical processes such as reception history enrich our encounter with a text, is quite unlike the "window on the world" approach proposed by Damrosch, whereby the ultimate justification for a text consists in its ability to contextualize a non-literary world.

The third strategy, of learning to read differently in light of new cross-cultural juxtapositions, follows both from the first mandate, of globalizing the canon, and the second mandate, of historicizing its reception. As students attend to their ways of reading texts rooted in cultures distant from their own, their responses will shed light on their own readerly positions, and help them arrive at independent assessments of works in ways which would have been difficult with more familiar texts.

In what follows, I organize each of these three nodes of transformation—globalizing the canon, rethinking canonicity, and reading with and within difference—in light of the experiences I gained through planning the literature curriculum for YALE-NUS College. These curriculum planning experiences demonstrate that difference is a more effective basis for global comparison than putative sameness derived from discarded universalisms.

## RECONCEIVING CANONICITY THROUGH METADISCURSIVITY

Beyond rethinking the meaning and purpose of canons in humanities pedagogy, the most pressing change that needs to take place to the canon is empirical. Globalizing the canon entails first and foremost forging new relations among texts that have yet to be incorporated into a single literary corpus. For literature, this means reading the *Ramayana* through the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* through the *Mahabharata*, and Chinese Tang lyric poetry in light of Persian *ghazals*. While such pairings are not unheard of in advanced courses on world literature, they are quite distant from the canons that tend to shape first-year core curricula. As the occasion where students first encounter the study of literary form, the global outlook of core literature courses ought to be comparable to their counterparts in other disciplines. Global approaches to literature should be instilled at the very beginning of every student's educational journey, rather than reserved for electives, advanced coursework, and graduate study, a sequence that prevails at present.

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At the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to distinguish between two approaches to canonicity. The first approach promulgates primary canonicity, drawing on the texts that have already been canonized within their respective cultures. For China, this canon includes the *Analects* and the *Book of Songs*, both texts traditionally ascribed to Confucius. Inasmuch as both of these constituted a part of the Chinese civil service exams before modernity, these works were situated at the juncture between literary pedagogy and state formation. The second approach promulgates secondary canonicity, a formation that includes texts only weakly canonized within their respective cultures but which nonetheless have claims to be included in a global core. Secondary canons also include texts that were canonized outside the contexts in which they originated, and often by radically different cultural formations. Secondary canons include *inter alia* works by minorities, by women, and classes of low social and economic status. Often because these works challenged local norms, or were simply regarded as irrelevant, they were not prized to the same extent within their respective traditions as were works pertaining to the primary canon.

For the Islamic world, the second category includes prose narratives produced outside the court, such as the epic of 'Antarah Ibn Shaddad, and the *rubaiyyat* (quatrains) of female poets such as Mahsati of Ganja, as well as many texts in newly



emergent vernaculars, including Turkic dialects. Often, secondary canons do not represent as radical a departure as might be supposed. Non-canonical texts often had tremendous resonance in both elite and non-elite culture, even when this influence was not actively integrated into any formal education system. To cite just one example, the canonical Chinese vernacular novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is classified as one of the four major Ming period prose narratives, and as a text with tremendous popular resonance, although it did not form part of the Chinese civil service exam, which focused on the mastery of the Confucian canon (Knoerle 128).

276 The distinction between primary and secondary canonicity is as fundamental as that between the pedagogy of core curricula and of world literature. Primary canonicity privileges texts that constitute the foundations of civilization. Secondary canonicity acknowledges texts and traditions that traverse divides of class, race, gender, and religion, while inviting readers to participate in the process of canon construction. Secondary canonicity is often more interested in receptions, translations, and new tellings than in originals. Inasmuch as they build on prior already canonized narratives, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) are both modern examples of secondary canonicity. Whereas texts in the secondary canon may be more significant for literary than for historical purposes, texts secure their place in the primary canon due precisely to their historical significance. Their significance of texts belonging to the primary canon for literature is therefore less easy to separate from their significance for history. Because texts enter the secondary canon by virtue of their ability to engage the imagination rather than their significance for history or the study of civilizations, they more easily lend themselves to cross-comparison. In an age of globalization, the secondary canon, which emphasizes and enables a shared literary discourse across multiple traditions, can enrich and supplement the primary canon, which is best structured to trace conversations across time within a single tradition, but is less amendable to literary comparison across traditions.

It is easier to construct a pedagogy for world literature on the basis of secondary canons than on the basis of primary canons. This may go some distance towards explaining why world literature courses have been able to globalize themselves pedagogically in ways that core curricula have not. Secondary canons enable the reader to choose among and even to define a given literary discourse, whereas primary canons call only for participation in predefined civilizational taxonomies. And yet notwithstanding their generality, primary canons are indispensable to a global curriculum. In their absence, a core literature course will lack scholarly rigour and coherence.

Constructing a canon in terms of primary canonicity entails defining the discourse that all canonical texts are said to share in common, but "literature" is a notoriously slippery category, within and outside the Latinate tradition where the term originated. Because it can draw on this longer and more formalized tradition, primary canonicity can come to the aid of secondary canonicity in attempting to define this object of inquiry. In seeking to define literature's elusive substratum (the quality that

makes a text literary), the curriculum group developed a principle that helped us navigate our progress towards secondary canonicity: a work of literature is, *inter alia*, a text that problematizes its own existence. From the *Ramayana* to *Don Quixote* to *Hamlet* to Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* to Kafka's *Metamorphoses*, all of the texts that ended up on our final syllabus were metadiscursive to varying degrees: they thematized questions of authorship, problematized representation, foregrounded language as a medium of expression, and probed the interfaces among author, hero, and reader.

## READING HISTORY CONTINGENTLY

Central to the process of globalizing the canon is a reconsideration of world literary history, and particularly its beginnings. Most Great Books curricula at present, including the Columbia Core and Yale's Directed Studies, begin with Homer: the *Iliad*, followed by the *Odyssey*. Although the Homeric epics can lay claim to great antiquity, mere chronology is hardly the most important rubric in narrating literary history, at least for pedagogical purposes. What of the Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which are notoriously difficult to date with accuracy and which, like the Homeric epics, evolved into standardized texts over centuries? While the extant versions of the Indian epics do not compare to the Homeric epics in terms of chronology, both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* narrate stories that circulated as early as the Homeric age, and which still circulate in the present. The more we dispense with civilizational taxonomies, and cease treating civilizations as discrete entities, the less useful is a linear chronology of world literary history.

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One ancillary effect of beginning with Homer is that it generates an illusion of unbroken continuity between Hellenic antiquity and the Euro-American present, notwithstanding the near total absence of engagements with the Homeric epics in European literature from late antiquity to the early modern period. The premise of unbroken continuity underwrites the most visible defenses of the western canon by Harold Bloom and other prominent advocates of traditional curricula (Bloom 1994). Within a comparative analytical framework, such narratives are unsustainable, as such sequencing tends to obfuscate more than it clarifies. While the Indian epics evolved from traditions that are continuously alive and persistently contested, Homer appeared on the horizon of early modern Europe from a lost archive. Homer was recanonized through the recovery of a Greek tradition that was almost a blank spot within medieval European literary history. The consequences of Homer's canonization from the point of view of literary history are therefore substantial indeed.

Not wishing to naturalize the European conceptual hegemony, the Yale-NUS literature faculty decided to begin the literature course that forms the cornerstone of our humanities curriculum with the Valmiki *Ramayana*, a Sanskrit text composed shortly before the Common Era, and which begins to be cited in earnest in the first

century of the Common Era (Pollock, “Sanskrit Literary Culture Inside Out” 80).<sup>3</sup> Alongside teaching the canonical Sanskrit text, we also introduced non-canonical interpretations of the story of Rama’s exile and his quest for his wife Sita. The vernacular Ramayana tradition was a great help here, inasmuch as it enabled us to draw on Bengali and Tamil rewritings of the Rama story, as well as on later Sanskrit reworkings, such as Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamśa* and Bhavabhūti’s play *Rama’s Last Act*, which challenge the quasi-hagiographical portrayal of Rama in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. We also looked at contemporary engagements with the Rama legend from Dalit perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

278 From the vantage point of the metadiscursivity discussed in the preceding section, the *Ramayana* was also an ideal text with which to begin the course, due to the account of the invention of poetry that occurs towards the beginning of the first book, *Boyhood (Balakanda)* (Valmiki, *Ramayana Book One* 43-62). This section from *Boyhood* resonates with the proem to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which narrates the creation of the world through the Muses’ aid. Both Hesiod and Valmiki are keen to stress poetry’s truth-telling function. The Greek poet, for example, declares that poets “know how to tell numerous lies which seem to be truthful, but whenever we wish we know how to utter the full truth” (*The Poems of Hesiod* 24). Valmiki’s and Hesiod’s sources of inspiration are clearly divine. Brahma prophesies a posterity for Valmiki’s poem comparable to that which Hesiod envisions for his *Theogony*. “No utterance of yours in this poem shall be false,” the god tells Valmiki. “As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure...so long will the story of the Ramayana be told among men. And as long as the story of Rama you compose is told, so long will you live on in my worlds above and below” (Valmiki, *Ramayana, Book One* 49).

Whereas Hesiod figures himself as a vehicle inspired by the Muses, who tell him “from the beginning, what divine power first came into being,” Valmiki figures his language as a medium for expressing absolute truth (*The Poems of Hesiod* 28). Both texts figure truth (Sk. *satya*/Gr. *aletheia*) metaphysically. They contrast it to falsehood as well as more ontologically to an absence of being, a connection strengthened in Valmiki’s case by *satya*’s etymological signification as that which “has affinity with being” (Kapstein 75). For both Valmiki and Hesiod, being is truth and truth is being. As Rama says to his brother Lakshmana, linking two concepts basic to Indian-Buddhist philosophy, *dharma* (righteousness) and *satya* (truth): “*dharma* is paramount in the world and on *dharma* is *satya* founded” (Valmiki, *Ramayana, Book Two* 137). Rama’s statement crystalizes the epic’s moral order, wherein community based values link the social world and serve as the ground on which metaphysical beliefs are articulated.

Valmiki receives the instructions of a god, but his words are his own, fashioned from multiple forms of grief (*shoka*), the very word for which underscores the connection between compassion and poetry (*shloka*). Like Hesiod’s *Theogony*, if with even greater attenuation, Valmiki’s narration of the beginnings of poetry (*kavya*) does double duty as a genealogy for the existence of his text. Beginning our literature

course with a text that tells a story concerning its own origins enabled us to present literature to the students as a discourse that reflects on itself. Furthermore, bringing a Greek and a Sanskrit text into a conversation at the beginning of students' encounter with literature prepared them to recognize the globality of literary forms over the course of their lifelong journey through variegated verbal expressions.

Only after we had substantially decentered the normative primary canon by immersing students in the world of the *Ramayana* were we ready to move onto texts that are more firmly embedded in the North American Great Books tradition, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Medea*. When they are exposed to the Greek material only after the Indic texts have been encountered in depth, students are better able to approach texts that are normally presented as their cultural, civilizational, and even national inheritance with fresh eyes, unjailed by the illusion of coherence that the concept of western civilization confers on a canon. Dispensing with received civilizational categories has the advantage of overhauling the pernicious yet prevalent view that readers and students should only take a serious interest in texts they can regard as part of their cultural inheritance. Given the dangers posed by the primary canon's persistent sway, I want to consider how teachers and scholars can advance the project of world literature while resisting the unreflective nationalist agendas that often accompany arguments for a return to primary canons.

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## CLASSICS AS MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE

In his recently published essay, "Crisis in the Classics," Sheldon Pollock, an Indologist who is also among the most prominent advocates for the philological turn in the contemporary humanities, offers two reasons for studying the classics, each of which stands in tension with the other. Distancing himself from prior reflections on canonicity by critics ranging from C.A. Sainte-Beuve and T.S. Eliot to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Frank Kermode, Pollock abandons the normative significance of the term "classical" and the "subjectivism and illegitimate generalization of the present that such normativity always smuggles in" in favor of a more contingent understanding of canon formation ("Crisis" 36).<sup>5</sup>

Instead of trying to assimilate ancient texts to contemporary values on the basis of the assumed universality of the human condition—a conceit on which each of his four predecessors rely in different ways—Pollock conceives of a work as classical when it attains two qualities. In an inspired paraphrase of Nietzsche's concept of untimeliness, Pollock argues that classical works are constituted in part through their "resistance to contemporaneity" and through their rejection of the "supposed universality" that is often said to bind a reader to a classic. Secondly, a work is classical when it indicates "human particularity and difference in that particular epoch." Pollock bluntly rejects the view that the classic text "tells me about my shared humanity." Rather than demonstrating the universality of the human condition, the classic

functions for Pollock as a marker of difference, between writer and reader, text and audience. “The classic,” Pollock reasons, “gives access to radically different forms of human consciousness for any given generation of readers, and thereby expands for them the range of possibilities of what it means to be a human being” (“Crisis” 36).

Later in the same essay, Pollock offers a different justification for studying the classics, one that runs against the grain of his preliminary definition. When he contests the prevalent view that classical works can be “reduced to some sort of false consciousness that must be overcome,” Pollock does not revert to his thesis of radical difference as a basis for engaging the classics. Instead, he moves backwards, and argues that the study of “the assembled records of 3,000 years of Indian thinking...is not merely pleasure or a duty we owe the dead...but a unique, and uniquely fulfilling, way of tracing the genealogy of our contemporary selves, whether you are Indian or not” (“Crisis” 40).

280 One of the most paradoxical aspects of Pollock’s insistence on the universal relevance of Indian knowledge is its reliance—perhaps unintentionally—on the same universalizing paradigm that animates engagements with the western canon from Sainte-Beuve to Eliot to Gadamer to Kermode. Unlike Pollock, his eminent predecessors were writing exclusively about the European canon. They never envisioned a world where the Indian epics and Chinese lyric poetry would be taught alongside Sappho and Homer. Beyond imagining such a world, Pollock actually inhabits it, and much of his life’s work has been dedicated to implementing this vision in reality. And yet the same universalist conceit that Pollock detected in prior European reflections on canonicity seeps into his own attempt to defend the Indian literary canon from the onslaughts of an anti-philological modernity on the basis of the light this literature sheds on the human condition. While the refusal to incorporate prior emphases on the classic as a means of accessing a shared humanity marks an important break with past precedent and a new inflection to critical philology, Pollock does not elaborate on how his alternative, whereby the classic text signals “what it means to be human,” differs substantively from the shared humanity concept that he fully rejects.

That a scholar like Pollock, who is profoundly reflexive concerning the impact of European norms on contemporary literary theory, should succumb to the same tendency that claimed his predecessors and against whom he argued eloquently demonstrates the difficulty of articulating a basis for the appreciation of canonical texts that avoids recourse to universality. Clearly there are reasons for globalizing the canon that make no claim to universalism—Pollock has outlined some of these—but in order to arrive at them we need to overturn many of the rationales for canonicity articulated even by scholars committed to rethinking the canon in politically progressive terms.

When the canon is deployed to signify a set of texts believed to be central to what William Bennett, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1981-1985) and Secretary of Education under the Reagan administration (1985-1988), has called “the great task of transmitting a culture to its rightful heirs,” this

concept inevitably founders on the question of authority (*To Reclaim a Legacy* 1). As Joseph Sitterson notes, the paradox of canonical authority in a secular age such as the present is that it “supposes that secular texts can be authoritative in a manner analogous to sacred texts” (166). The canonizers of religious traditions did not make aesthetic merit a primary criterion in their selection. Instead of judging according to beauty and literary achievement, their mandate was to distinguish “the orthodox from the heretical” (Guillory 233). By contrast, teachers and literary scholars who today are tasked with promulgating canons have a new opportunity to foreground aesthetics in their analytical judgments, because no shared religious tradition applies equally to all readers in an era of globalization. Due to the divergence of motives between sacred and literary conceptions of canons, the religious concept of canonicity becomes problematic when applied dogmatically to literary canon formation. Bennett’s complaint concerning the supposed threat posed by multiculturalism to the western canon is one such instance.

Bennett’s report, “To Reclaim a Legacy,” issued in 1984 while he was serving as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, illustrates the dangers of conflating the canon in its religious meaning with the canon when applied to the study of literature. In part this conflation entails a confusion between primary and secondary canonicity, but the results are articulated along even more fundamental lines of disagreement. Paraphrasing Matthew Arnold and speaking for many conservative administrators past and present, Bennett defines the humanities as “the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about human experience” (3). Yet, in spite of the seeming inclusiveness of this definition, the former Secretary of Education is keen to insist, rather idiosyncratically, that “the humanities, and particularly the study of Western civilization, have lost their central place in the undergraduate curriculum” (1).

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Bennett’s complaint echoes that of a Yale faculty member who insisted in the same year that saw the publication of Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* (1994) on the need to teach the canonical works of western literature rather than “some novel that some Chicano wrote yesterday” (Nelson 102). As Cary Nelson notes, such complaints circulate “despite the fact that enrollments in traditional courses at Yale and elsewhere remain high” (102). In fact, at universities like Yale and Columbia with robust core curricula, the study of western civilization has flourished at the undergraduate level, while Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit have yet to be substantively incorporated into the general education curriculum. No opening of the canon in the past few decades has altered, or even seriously addressed itself to, these omissions, the consequences of which are more substantial over the long term than any recent challenge to the western canon.

Like many of his counterparts, Bennett pays lip service to liberal arts’ educational values. He laments that the liberal humanities “have been syphoned off, diluted, or so adulterated that the students graduate knowing little of their heritage” (*To Reclaim a Legacy* 1). Given his stated contempt for the “liberal elite” (*De-Valuing of America*

179), Bennett's deployment of the "liberal arts" catchword attests to the chameleon-like capacity of this rubric to refashion itself according to varying political and pedagogic contexts. Bennett is a case in point that even conservative educators who dismiss liberalism in governance frequently embrace the liberal arts in their pedagogical visions.

This embrace of the liberal arts as an educational goal suggests yet another ground of convergence between Bennett's conservative advocacy of canon preservation and certain calls that have emerged from the academic left for expanding the canon beyond its contemporary dimensions. One of the most prominent voices on the left to argue in favor of a liberal-arts education while also insisting on the need for opening the canon is Cary Nelson, current President of the American Association of University Professors. Paradoxically for someone who presents himself as a "tenured" radicalizer of canons, Nelson defends the opening of the canon on the grounds that "we are partly what our national history has made us" (107). A more open canon, Nelson argues, will assist in the recovery "of the full textual evidence of that [national] history" (106). Elsewhere, Nelson concurs with Bennett when he acknowledges that the "traditional canon" must be taught because "it is part of *our* history" (104).

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Pace such conservative and liberal engagements with canonicity, a world literary pedagogy engages with the canon concept for reasons more related to analytical and literary rigour than to ideology. Scholarly rigour is only relevant ideology for the canon in world literary pedagogical contexts. In contrast to the vision of literature as a grounds of encounter with cultural difference promoted by Damrosch, Pollock, and other scholars seeking to refine the discourse of world literature, Bennett's and Nelson's rhetoric uncritically regards national formations as primary units of analysis, and assumes that the texts we chose to read must reflect in some way or another on "our" national culture. Pollock insists that a classical text's "resistance to contemporaneity" is precisely why it belongs in the canon, however this canon is construed. Nelson and Bennett by contrast automatically assume that the texts most highly prized in their ideal curricula are those most significant to "our" heritage. Although neither Nelson nor Bennett define what they mean by "we," it seems fair to presume that their imagined constituency holds US passports and speaks English as their first and probably only language.

The silences exhibited by Nelson and other leftist academics with respect to the exclusion of Asian literatures from introductory core curricula demonstrate that even if world literature has altered the way literature is studied by graduate students and professors, its impact on public discourse about higher education has been more muted. Damrosch advocates for a pedagogy that brings together major and minor literatures. He is ready to cede Whitman to the Urdu poet Ghalib because "students already get a good deal of Whitman from high school onward and may not need to have as many pages of him in a world literature course" ("Major Cultures" 199). While Damrosch's criteria of inclusion bespeak a new moment in the pedagogy of literature, his approach remains by far the exception rather than the rule.



Damrosch's conception of world literature has rightly been charged with not doing justice to the study of literary form, with failing to attend to the way in which literature contradicts the worlds within which it is generated, and with not perceiving the way in which literariness stands in tension with worldliness (see Saussy 2011). While these critiques are well conceived and much needed, the world literature agenda affords an important beginning for literary studies, particularly at the pedagogical level. Moving beyond the limitations of the world literature paradigm—as we must ultimately do—requires that we first meet the minimum threshold requirement of a global canon. Only then we will be able to substantively improve upon Damrosch's anthropological conception of literary texts as windows on worlds.<sup>6</sup>

The conspicuous silences on the left and right function as proxies for an undertheorized and undercritiqued nationalism. Given the globalization of higher education, it is no longer possible to assume a readership or a student body united by their identification with a single nation. National history—literary or otherwise—has no place in a core curriculum, although there are ample reasons (more historical than literary) to offer classes on specific national literatures for those wishing to specialize in these traditions. Canons are most useable and most teachable when based on shared discourses, disciplines, and ideologies. They are most likely to perpetuate delusions of false particularism masquerading as universalism when based on civilizations, or the histories of specific nations. Here again the distinction between primary and secondary canonicity helps to make sense of which approaches work for which specific contexts.

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The Yale-NUS literature faculty aimed less to train students to become scholars of literature, than to teach them to read texts in ways that could enrich the totality of their lives. For the purpose of forging connections between the texts we read and the contemporary world, we had to become “naive readers,” in the sense defined by Umberto Eco: someone who “looks at the textual environment or at the circumstance of utterance in order to support the best [meaning]” (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* 55).

National literatures fall outside the scope of the Yale-NUS Literature Humanities core, just as they should for North American cores. Before students can know their history, as Cary Nelson asks them to do, they must be able to define the meaning of history and literature for themselves. But they will not be in a position to define these categories—and to work within and against preexisting definitions—until they have been exposed to the many shapes these ideas have taken throughout the world. Significantly, both the academic left and the conservative right have failed to conceptualize a concept of canonicity that resists the nation-state form. One of the benefits of world literature is that it offers a solidly empirical framework for such reconceptualization.

Neither Bennett nor Nelson is unique in grounding the value of a liberal arts education in their conception of a shared humanity. Already in 1778, at the dawn of the British colonization of India, the British Orientalist Nathaniel Brassey Halhed



sought to defend the liberal arts as part of the broader colonizing endeavour. “The nation,” Halhed wrote in the first English-language Bengali grammar, “is interested in marking the progress of her conquest by a liberal communication of Arts and Sciences, rather than by the effusion of blood: and policy requires that her new subjects should as well feel the benefits, as the necessity of submission” to imperial rule (xxv). Promoting the liberal arts, Halhed discerned, was necessary to maintaining an empire’s stability.

Halhed was even prepared to link the colonial state’s promotion of the liberal arts for pedagogical ends to its methods of governance. “The many impositions to which the poorer class of people are exposed,” Halhed wrote of colonial India, “in a country still fluctuating between the relics of former despotic dominion, and the liberal spirit of its present legislature, have long cried out for a remedy” (xvi). The Anglophone liberal arts canon that filtered through to North America from European universities in the first decades of the twentieth century is indelibly marked by the sovereign  
**284** power that facilitated its institutionalization, from within a nation-based framework. Nation-based histories linking ancient Greece to western civilization have been etched so deeply onto our consciousness because they are seen to reflect gloriously on “our” civilization. But now that the nation in the first person plural has become incoherent—now that there is no “our” from which “we” can coherently speak—the time has come to forge a liberal arts curriculum that breaks with colonial precedents.

The argument for the canon that Pollock proposes, based on difference rather than sameness, is a challenge even for its originator to assimilate into his reading of Indian classics. Unlike Sainte-Beuve, Eliot, Gadamer, Kermode, and the many others who have turned to the classics in the search to uncover old genealogies, the creators of the inaugural Yale-NUS literature curriculum did not choose texts according to principles of proximity. The texts we chose spoke to us—and to our students—because of their radical divergence from contemporary norms. Such temporality traversing texts teach us to be, and to imagine being, other than ourselves. Lacking the nation-state, a common ethnicity, and even a shared humanity with which to bring the disparate works that have delighted and enlightened us into conversation with each other, we were forced to confront world literary history as a continual negotiation with contingency, and to shape from this contingency new narratives concerning the global emergence of literary forms.

## NOTES

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1. For a more comprehensive account of this process, see Petrus Liu and Colleen Lye, "Liberal Arts for Asians?" *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (forthcoming).
2. For an overview of Great Books programs in North American universities, see Gould, "Philology, Education, Democracy".
3. Ashvaghosha's reference to Valmiki as the creator of the first verse poem (*padya*) in his *Buddhacarita* 1.43 supplies the *terminus ante quem* for this work. See Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture" 80.
4. For these, see Busch; and Pawar Bhagat and Patwardhan.
5. Pollock is arguing with Gadamer 285.
6. For an attempt to move beyond world literature as a disciplinary rubric and towards a global concept of comparison specific to literary form, see my essay "Epistemic Comparison: The Social Production of Literary Form" (in progress).

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