

**Ranjan Gosh, J. Hillis Miller, *Thinking Literature Across Continents***

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*Thinking Literature Across Continents*. By Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller. Durham/London: Duke UP, 2016. 316 p. ISBN (pb): 978-0-8223-6244-9. US\$26.95.

Reviewed by Christine LORRE-JOHNSTON

*Thinking Literature Across Continents*, Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's co-authored book, is based on a method implying a critical dialogue, with double chapters conceived both as a reflection and a response to the other author's viewpoint on the same topic. The format leads to a lively conversational style (though often veering toward the abstract with Ghosh), for a discussion solidly framed by theory, and, notably with Miller, amply rooted in the close reading of a range of literary texts. Another characteristic is that the reflection has been conducted over a number of years; some of Miller's chapters have been reworked from earlier published versions, as in an ongoing reflection subject to contemporary societal and political changes, one that is bound to further evolve. Ranjan Ghosh teaches at the University of North Bengal, while J. Hillis Miller is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Irvine; clearly the purpose is to confront through juxtaposition and dialogue two viewpoints that are anchored in singularly different cultures and traditions, making up an "international dialogue" (Miller xi). Yet a more complex process of circulation is also at play, as the authors' locations are not strictly impermeable: to quote Ghosh, the book "speaks of no finite Asia or Europe or America – self-contained, harmonically hermetic" (3). "Across" is the key word here, alluding to various forms of circulation and exchange. Ghosh positions himself through what he has called the "(in)fusion approach," which refers to the "cross-epistemic and transcultural entanglement" that is at work in literature (Ghosh 4), "the amalgamation of the elements that go into it" (Miller 8). As for Miller, he starts by distancing himself from the school of thought of deconstruction, which he has been influenced by, because of its erroneous understanding, and prefers to characterise his method as one that starts from specific literary works to evolve towards tentative generalisations.

The five parts of the book successively examine essential topics that define what literature is about. In Part I, "The Matter and Mattering of Literature," Ghosh thus explains the notion of *sabitya*, originally a Sanskrit term but now a word generally referring in Indian culture to the various genres of literature. *Sabitya* is understood as having a dialectical dimension of sacredness, conjoining a hermeneutical strength and an ability to generate a secret. Ghosh sheds light on the concept through an analysis of Robert Frost's poem "Birches," underlying the poetical (rather than political) dimension of *sabitya*. Miller, in contrast, emphasizes the function of literature as social critique, the way the text can be a source of pleasure, and how it generates images that give us access to the imaginary. Miller also observes how the shift from print culture to digital culture – which he calls "prestidigitalization" – marks a receding of literature in the traditional sense.

In Part II, "Poem and Poetry," Ghosh develops a theory of poetry based on the Sanskrit concept of *rasa*, which is about truth, goodness, and a dominant emotion linked to the poem. He also draws on Chinese and Arabic theories of poetry, as well as Western sources, to demonstrate that a poem is the common ground of the ordinary and extraordinary, an expression of life. Miller, in his chapter, proposes a reading of

Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" to demonstrate that no theory can anticipate what reading will produce; reading a poem, between hermeneutic and stylistic analysis, is a process unique to each text.

Part III, "Literature and the World," focuses on the "new efflorescence" (Miller 151) of world literature and what it implies. To Ghosh, the fact that literature nowadays is said to be "at once global and local" (112) leads to a "more than global": a form of transculturality that is more important than local or global affiliations, an "unexpected web of meaning" that grows from "multiple points of articulation" (113, 114). To Miller, world literature is undoubtedly a response to economic, financial and technological globalisation, and might be seen as "a last-ditch effort to rescue the study of literature" (139). In this process, he notices three main challenges: translation, representation, and the very definition of literature. From this he concludes that world literature, and theoretical statements about it, need contextualising.

In Part IV, "Teaching Literature," Ghosh reflects on teaching Beckett's *Endgame* to a class of Indian postgraduates. He argues that the play being about the human condition, it has a natural dialogical relation to other worldviews; in India, it can be connected with Hindu ethics and philosophy and the dharma of existence – the right action. Ghosh thus proposes a transcultural theory of literature – unlike Miller, who is convinced that poetry should be read in the context of its own tradition. Miller also argues that, even though literature is on the decline on American campuses, it remains a form of training, through the teaching of rhetoric, in spotting lies and distortions, at a time when many lies are told.

Ghosh, in "Ethics and Literature" (Part V), envisions ethics in literature as a form of hunger, or desire for a relation to the other. He also considers a kind of post-aesthetic hunger, which leads one to realise that the aesthetic experience may lead to nothing but salvaging experience and strangeness. To Miller, ethics means "the issue of how to act or choose rightly" (233); he thus proposes a reading of Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* to illustrate the Victorian belief that realistic fiction could "teach ethical principles and conduct to its readers" (241).

*Thinking Literature Across Continents* is a timely conversation about literature and some of the methodologies to read it, teach it, and write about it; the decentring effect of its dual approach opens up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation. The book examines the relevance of literature in our times, and raises important questions about academic practice in its relation to readers, in the context of the digital revolution. Even though it is not optimistic about the future of literature in view of the profound transformations it is currently undergoing, it nonetheless demonstrates the rich potential of literature and its enduring necessity as an art.