REVIEW

Prescribing World Literature

Aruni Mahapatra

***Recoding World Literature: Print Culture, Libraries, and Germany's Pact with Books*, by Venkat Mani. New York: Fordham UP, 2017, pp. 360.**

The story of 'world literature' is a German story. Since the early decades of the nineteenth century, German men have found a range of reasons to argue whether reading literature from outside Germany was good or bad for Germany. Such reading could allow Germans to appreciate "*poesie*", the shared wealth of all nations (Goethe), or it could undermine the growth of a strong, united German Reich (Goebbels). But these reasons were always expressed in terms of *weltliteratur* (world literature). Venkat Mani's *Recoding World Literature* is a history of these utterances, all of which may be answers to this one question— "Why Read World Literature?" Mani's narrative is structured around three moments. In 1827, after reading a Chinese novel, Goethe said to his assistant, Johan Peter Eckermann, that the time of national literatures was about to end, and world literature to begin. In their 1848 book *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels claimed that since the bourgeoisie had made industrialization a global phenomenon, economic growth had transcended national borders and the production and consumption of books was no longer a national but rather a global phenomenon. Finally, Eric Auerbach had claimed, in his 1952 essay "Philologie der Weltliteratur", that world literature in the sense that Goethe had spoken of was not possible in the twentieth century.

Mani approaches each of these instances by describing what he calls "bibliomigrancy—the physical or virtual movement of books" (38). Doing so shifts the focus from the individuals who read the books (and made statements that have since become famous) to a "large body of actors who determine a reader's access to literary

works", and the spaces where these actors operated: the library (39). Focusing on the library allows Mani to invoke the public life that all pronouncements on world literature implicitly invoke, but which current scholarship on world literature has, to a large extent, failed to theorize. In a long and exhaustive survey, Mani argues that the concerns of contemporary scholarship on 'world literature' are somewhat presentist and pedagogical, confined to issues of teaching in academia today. Mani instead asks what attitudes to national literature made it possible for University libraries in 1850s Germany to start a bidding war for a collection of two thousand Oriental manuscripts acquired from a Princely estate in the Northern Indian province of Awadh (120-123)? At different times, different attitudes to languages and literatures other than the national language determined what books were acquired in libraries. A focus on these societal paradigms, what Mani calls different "publics' pacts with books" (40) sheds light on one intellectual consequence of books actually arriving in the national libraries: the process by which a discourse about the value (or lack) of reading translated books serves as an alibi in a range of cultural debates: nativism, relativism or pluralism. Because 'world literature' could be 'coded' and pressed into service to justify a wide range of political positions, a process akin to the way librarians use a bibliorgaphic 'code' to organize books in stacks, Mani titles his study of the historial evolution of discourses of reading world literature *Recoding World Literature*. A focus on how and why libraries stacked the books that comprised 'world literature', Mani claims, will reveal how and why scholars thought and defined what "world literature" was, is and should be.

So what *is* world literature? Mani's answer is simple: there are as many ways of defining world literature as there are readers. In this, Mani echoes Herman Hesse's 1929 essay "A Library of World Literature", where the novelist suggested that like a personal library, what constituted "world literature" was subject to both literary judgement and how much money one could spend on books (152). But Hesse is only one of the many scholars whose opinions Mani discusses, and the others defined world literature in much less open, more Eurocentric ways. That much is not news for scholars; like Postcolonial Studies, World Literature too is guilty of being Anglophonic and Eurocentric. But instead of a theoretical critique of this Eurocentrism, Mani offers historical context, which suggests that world literature could have hardly been anything but Eurocentric.

Mani's history is bookended by two fictional libraries—Heinrich Faust's reading room, as imagined by Goethe in the first scene of

his play *Faust*, and the Frankfurt City Library, recreated by Orhan Pamuk as the refuge of Ka, the recently deceased protagonist of his novel *Snow*. Between these two, Mani narrates a story of how real libraries in Germany expanded in size but narrowed in scope. Even before Goethe read the Chinese novel and declared that poesie was a universally shared property, scholars had begun their efforts to bring Oriental books to Germany, and even as Goethe argued that world literature should replace national literatures, others had argued that world literature did not mean a replacement but instead an even deeper entrenchment of national literature. This narrowing reached its lowest in the years before the Second World War, when the Nazi administrator Hellmuth Langenbucher began editing the magazine *Weltliteratur: Novels, stories, and poems of all times and peoples*. In October 1937, Langenbucher dedicated the twenty-fifth issue of the magazine to Goethe's idea of Weltliteratur. In the editorial "Weltliteratur?" Langenbucher clarified what the magazine understood by the term, and what it should mean. Langenbucher first separated it from allerweltsliteratur (literature of the entire world). Allerweltsliteratur was a "literary salad", but *weltliteratur* was not just literature but the characteristic expression of the people of those nations, like Germany, who were rooted in a life-soil (qtd in Mani 161). The Nazi party identified these as Aryans, and a few years later, national libraries revoked borrowing privileges of all German Jews. History, thus, came full circle, and instead of a universally shared poetic genius, weltliteratur identified only expressions of people who belonged to a particular race.

Each of Mani's chapters narrates two parallel stories. As Oriental manuscripts migrate from Asia to find new homes in German libraries, German scholars and editors and curators talk about the value of non-German books. This dual approach is one of the most exciting takeaways for this reviewer. Each chapter begins with a carefully chosen scene in which a well-known German writer, say Goethe or Heine, imagined a library. Mani then describes how these concerns were realized and illuminated by the lives and careers of lesser-known individuals who travelled the world collecting books.

We begin, in Chapter 1, with Goethe's Faust sitting in his library and pondering the relevance of his book-lined library, which he calls "ancestral junk" (51). Mani glosses Faust's pact with the devil as Goethe's pact with books from outside Germany.During and before Goethe's time, several poets, scholars, librarians and booksellers had started to acquire and translate Indian, Persian and Chinese literature into German, and Mani's chapter is a story of these efforts.

We learn how the poet August Wilhelm Schlegel, the professor Othmar Frank and others sought to popularize Indian literature among German readers by editing literary journals, appealing to the Royal Asiatic Society, asking German state libraries to acquire Oriental manuscripts, and finally, helping start global projects like the Oriental Translation Fund. Schlegel directed the Prussian government to make and cut Devanagari types to print Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts as books (1826), and later published a Latin translation of the *Ramayana* (1829). Professor Frank started a journal to publish Indian literature in German translation, and named it *Vjāsa*. Frank imagined the journal collecting and mediating knowledge imparted by the written documents of ancient India, like Veda Vjāsa the collector and organizer of Vedas in Hindu mythology. Mani calls such efforts "the earliest possible utterances of a comparative frame" for studying "world literature" (70).

The Oriental Translation Fund, with strong ties with British colonial centers in India, had a three-part mission: to acquire manuscripts, commission translators and subsidize the publication of both the original and translated texts in Germany (78-79). In its third annual report, the organization mentioned that two literary works, classified as Romances from the Chinese, were identified for translation. One of these, *Hau-Qui Zhuan*, had been translated into German from an English translation in 1761 as *The Pleasing History*. Earlier scholars have identified this as the novel Goethe had finished reading when, in 1827, he made his famous statement on *weltliteratur*. Two years later, in 1829, the Oriental Translation Fund published a new German translation of the same novel, this time directly from Chinese, with the title *The Fortunate Union: A Romance*.

Mani then describes another influential person who was enabled by the Oriental Translation Fund to compare Oriental and European literature. Thomas Babington Macaulay declared, in the 1835 "Minute on Indian Education", that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (qtd. in Mani 56). To his credit, Macaulay admitted that he knew no Arabic or Sanskrit, but had read the translations of "celebrated" Arabic and Sanskrit works, and conversed with men who were experts in Eastern languages and literatures. These experts, presumably, were scholars like Frank and Schlegel, and the translations produced by societies like the Oriental Translation Fund. Both Macaulay and Goethe followed earlier European scholars who justified the study of non-European literature because it compared favorably to the greatest of European literature. Macaulay, who was given the responsibility to

decide the best way for the East India Company to spend the money kept aside for educating Indians, decided that English education was the best possible investment. Mani thus reveals how bibliomigrancy, a migration of books enabled by colonial rule, produced the impulse to compare books from different literary traditions.

Chapter 2 begins with Heinrich Heine's poem Germany: A Winter's Tale (1844). The lyric "I", returning home to Germany after years of exile, is stopped at the Franco-German border, where officers search him for dangerous books, suspecting that as a member of "Young Germany", with liberal ideas about women, Jews and the German nation, the poet will try to disrupt the peace. As the Prussian officers rummage through his things, the poet says that his head is a "bird's nest twittering with books to be confiscated" and that the books he is carrying in his head are more dangerous than Satan's library (qtd. in Mani 93). In little more than a decade, a real German would cross the borders and enter Germany with the largest personal collection of oriental manuscripts. He was Aloys Sprenger, and Mani's book is worth reading simply for this fascinating story.

Sprenger partook of "*poesie*" by studying Arabic, Persian and Turkish in Vienna, London and Leiden, where he wrote a dissertation on the history of medicine in the Arab world. In 1847, his knowledge of Arabic made him the principal of Delhi College, and "extra assistant" to the British resident of Lucknow, in which capacity he was entrusted to catalogue the royal library of the Princely state of Awadh. After a few years, following a misunderstanding, he was removed from the royal palace, and returned to Germany with a personal collection of more than two thousand palm-leaf manuscripts, acquired from the same library. This catalogue was published in 1857 as *Bibliotheca Orientalis Sprengeriana*, and contained a markedly harsh preface. In this document, like Macaulay's Minute, Sprenger was bitterly critical about "native libraries". These libraries had little by way of sentiments or ideas that Europeans could imitate, because even though the Orientals venerated their texts as sacred, they failed to preserve "bags and bags of old leaves", often leaving them to share space with rats (Mani 119). In a few months, the bags of leaves found (presumably rat-free) shelves in a German library, the Reichsbibliothek in Berlin, who purchased the collection from for fifty thousand Dutch gulden (121).

Mani's stories of real and imagined German and Oriental books which writers and scholars coveted, collected, and placed in libraries make for exhilarating reading. However, they do not necessarily form an overarching thesis, and some readers may find the mass of detail

overwhelming. But Mani's is an overwhelming task: a genealogy of 'world literature' cannot be anything less but must be more than a history of modern Germany, and readers should be grateful for a guide as masterful. This is a tour de force genealogy. By recreating the European history from which 'world literature' emerged, Mani's study will inspire younger scholars to imagine a future for 'world literature' outside and beyond Europe.