

Literature as an Exotic Substance in Pre-Modern Literate Societies

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World Literature defined:¹

World Literature is the literary faculty of World-Making.

More precisely:

World Literature is the practice of literary World-Making.

Literature is the practice of literary World-Making, and World Literature is the world-wide practice of literary World-Making.

Literature is ANY practice of literary world-making, and that includes and privileges any oral practice of world-making.

That’s the oral, the written, and the synesthetic definition.

The literary fact of World-Making is a total social fact.

The total social fact is a total artistic fact, i.e. it doesn’t necessarily include, but it certainly doesn’t exclude any of the senses, or any of the arts. World Literary History cannot be tied to the transmission of written texts, or the corpora transmitted from the past, it is documented in any form of world-making, and especially in all scripts,

1 This text was written for the “Seminar: World Literature: Circulations Outside the Modern” organized by Alexander Beecroft and Galin Tihanov at the ACLA (online) meeting on April 11, 2021 (Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association). The text was circulated in advance; but, due to unforeseen circumstances, not delivered at the online-meeting.

notations, scores, mnemonic devices, memorials, spatial paths, and repeatable spatial trajectories, small or large, that enable linguistic and synesthetic performances.

Literature is language, and language is synesthetic performance. Literature is the encompassing art, and everything that is verbal or verbalized is its domain. If we don't elevate or restore literature to the status of the first of the arts, for didactical reasons or for even better reasons, we will not be able to see its true dimension, and its historical trajectories.

How do we conceptualize the “interface between the oral and the written” in “literate” societies or “civilizations”?

First, there is a tiny literate elite and a vast “oral” majority. Even parts of the elite are not literate or even within the elite, there is an oral majority. And daily life is oral anyway, each society remains an oral society.

Thus, second: The interface between the oral and the written turns out to be between literate skills and crafts of World-Making, and oral skills and practices of world-making. “World Literature” in these societies is this interface.

(After all, World Literature is the world-wide practice of literary world-making or consists of all literary practices of world-making.)

So, what do written and oral modes of literary world-making in those societies have in common? and not in common?

This question can be answered positively, via Andrew Sherratt, Mary W. Helms and C.A. Bayly, i.e. Bayly's “Archaic Globalisation,” Helms's Crafts of the Exotic, and Sherratt's post-Bronze Age political economics:

The source of value lies Without, the highest form of value lies in the utmost Without, the transactions that obtain the higher forms of values are exotic or exoticist, both in the literal sense of exó, and the colloquial sense of exoticism. This is what elites and lower status groups have in common, but their transactions spheres partly overlap, and diverge in certain classes of valuables.

Thus, there is a common matrix for a “Theory of value,” and there are class divergences, and class struggle, in obtaining the exotic categories of valuables, by trading, war, smuggling, piracy, pilgrimage, or from the upper classes, or from the lower classes and the fringes (of jugglers, acrobats, beggars, entertainers etc.)

The “interface between the oral and the written” is highly determined by this multiple exoticism of valuables.

Mary W. Helms wrote about the crafts as a resource of elite power, elite crafts at courts, monasteries, in cities, as a resource for trading and exchanging valuables. Assume poetry, written literature, literature are crafts like these, made for exchange,

for export, and for demonstrating one's worth, one's prestige, and especially one's cosmological state of grace. That's why they are sponsored by the elites, and why poets, scholars, intellectuals can travel from one power center to the next, within their respective diasporas or ecumenes.

But the lower classes and castes have their "Centers Out There" as well, in pilgrimage, in processions, in possession cults, in their interfaces with the elite forms of religion and culture. They take part in trading bulk goods or staples for higher forms of value, and for exotic materials and forms of literate elite culture.

The difference is, that they have to adopt written literary texts by performance, by making it synesthetic (again), by supplementing the plot, the text, the score by performance, by dance, visual motion, music, dialogue, drinking, interaction. Thus, parts of the elite written corpora are adopted, i.e., of the sacred texts, the elite epics, and of courtly, monastic, and feudal and royal culture in general. Especially rites of passage are adopted too, f.i., coronations become birthday rites etc.

Thus, "oralizing" is making literary texts performative or synesthetic. But elite segments of a society also have their ways of making texts "oral" and synesthetic. Rhetoric is a case in point: in Western and Arabic cultures, but maybe also in India and China, written language is a grammatical culture, an *ars grammatica*, a craft of writing in an elite language, but also speaking it, speaking it well, i.e. rhetoric; and rhetoric becomes the "meta-art" of the arts, i.e. the synesthetic art of arts: the manual of precepts and devices for music, the visual arts, the performative arts, and thus, for looking, hearing, reading too.

Thus, for the elites as for the "missing masses," there are synesthetic supplements for the transmitted texts; those are the seminal corpora of literature (if they can be identified).

That's why literary history in the literate civilizations cannot be written from the corpora and their traditions or "tradition"; it can only be identified from the ways of world-making and their interfaces between the oral and the written, and between upper and lower classes.

The heuristic formula for these connections is (following Bayly, Helms and Sherratt): The "formula of the value of exoticism and the exoticism of value": The higher forms of value are outside; the highest form of value is from the farthest outside. In Post-Axial religions this "highest form" is obviously transcendent; but then, there are mediations below and between. Sufism f.i. becomes a necessary mediation between Diesseits and Jenseits, and between elites and populace. Similarly for mystical movements within Christianity; or for Indian and Chinese interfaces between transcendence, and virtuosos of transcendence, and popular traditions and popular belief (f.i. in Wu Cheng'en).

The “formula of exoticism” entails: The source of exotic value is in the outside, the “items” of exotic value come “from the outside,” and have to be obtained “in the outside,”

For the lower classes and lower castes or strata, the state is such an “outside,” and especially its bureaucracy and administration. Which means, what is vernacular for one class or caste, may be the manifestation of the “exotic” for others. The life of shepherds is not pastoral, but the life of shepherds seen from a distance may be exotic enough to become pastoral.

This also applies to the “craft items” and the “skills” of exotic value.

Let’s assume elite literature (i.e. written language and its corpus) is such a craft. The practitioners of that craft are “sources of value” in exactly this respect—for kings, courts, nobility, clergy, monasteries, and cities. Their “items” (plots, texts, figures) circulate as “items of exotic value,” like material, visual artefacts; like dances, acrobats and other specimens of the exchange spheres of exotic value.

From the written corpora and in the written corpora we find only traces of these relationships... you name them, f.i. Mohamed’s dream voyage in Dante, one Buddhist legend in St Francis, the Arabian Nights in Grimm’s fairy tales and one djinn turned into Paracelsus’ helper spirit etc.

And the tendency is to adopt texts and plots and make them synesthetic (again), f.i. by *laterna magica* performances, moritaten, Saracens and knights in puppet theatres, processions with mimetic re-enactments; etc. i.e. by popular performative arts

All over Eurasia or Eurafasia.

But not only the text or the plot are exotic sources of exotic value, but the genres too. Obviously, though, the adoption of genres is language-bound, and has to bridge one linguistic virtuosity by another and sophisticated one. This process is bound to the elite literate craftsmen; or it may not be bound to them, but these are the corpora we can identify. F.i. the troubadours; etc.

And the entwined interfaces between the oral and the written, the upper and lower classes are not one-sided; plots, figures, myths travel “down,” but also “up.” F.i. by elevating trivial literature and popular narratives to elite writing, which happened with the Arabian Nights, or by taking up popular legends, gods, demons; or by rising lower classes; or by recently converted pagans making a written literature out of their past (Iceland); or by recently converted pagans innovating upon their new religion and literary culture; etc.

But the general “formula of exotic value” will make all of these dynamical processes more understandable; and the literary potential of these class struggles and class translations, f.i. the long history of the Eucharist and of sacramentals; the

popular history of Buddhism and Taoism etc.—and, last but not least, the trinity of C.A. Bayly’s three forms of “Archaic Globalization”: cosmic religion, cosmic kingdom and exotic substances. Let’s just assume, written corpora can be part of those exotic substances as well.

