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## Cortázar in an Indian Classroom: Some reflections on World Literature

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In my final undergraduate semester at University of Delhi, my class read a translation of Julio Cortázar's "Blow Up" under a paper on World Literatures. Cortázar's well-known story, which was made into a film by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1966, elicited interested responses from the students, who articulated their fondness for the story and their fascination with the suspense-building in it, alongside writing that consistently meditated about itself. Going back and forth across space and time and retracing its steps towards a thwarted attempt at coherence, "Blow Up" instantly resonated with the class. It is noteworthy that in a paper on World Literatures, a text in translation garnered a favourable response and a relishing that seemed rooted in some sort of familiarity from the responders.

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Julio Cortazar, the Argentine French writer and intellectual, author of *Hopscotch* (1963) wrote “Blow Up” as “Las babas del diablo” in 1959, which was published and translated for English speakers and readers in the next decade. The instant intimacy of my classmates with the text might make one wonder how writing from the 1960s, in translation, from a distant cultural-geographical provenance endeared itself to Indian readers in the year 2020, in the age range of 19 to 21 years. One could make the case for the appeal for suspense, thrill and intriguing writing traversing borders and limits of time and space, but investment in such a grand narrative without qualification might lead to oversimplification and potential disregard for time, space and cultures. Avoiding such an outcome requires one to look at the historical-cultural coordinates of the author, the text and the readers, which in this case, reveals fascinating connections.

Some rudimentary research on Cortazar’s connections with India led to interesting findings. Sources such as *Latin American Herald Tribune* (2014), an online newspaper based in Venezuela and *Masala Dabba* (2015), a Spanish online portal that studies Indian culture report that Cortazar visited India in 1968 and stayed at the residence of Octavio Paz, then, an ambassador of Mexico in India and visited the Jantar Mantar observatory in Jaipur, to which he dedicated *From The Observatory* (*Prosa del Observatorio*), and of which he took numerous photographs. In the translation by Ann McLean, published in 2011, Cortazar’s writing style describes an Indian landscape from a perspective that destabilizes certainties of time and space, and presents a subjective narratorial description; an example would be a selection from the translation that appeared in *Guernica* (2011), an online magazine dedicated to global art and politics,

... the region of sargasso weed, the eels and also the marble instruments, Jai Singh’s night drinking a flow of stars, the observatories beneath the moon of Jaipur and Delhi, the black ribbon of migrations, the eels in the middle of the street or in the stalls in a theatre, giving themselves for the one who’s following them from the marble instruments, who’s no longer looking at his watch in the Paris night; so simply Moebius strip and eels and marble machinery, this that already flows in a silly, solitary word, looking for itself, that also sets in motion from sargassum of time and fortuitous semantics, the migration of a verb:

discourse, this course, the Atlantic eels and the eel words, the marble lightning of Jai Singh's instruments, he who looks at the stars and the eels, the Moebius strip turning round on itself, in the ocean, in Jaipur, fulfilling itself one more time without other times, being as marble is, as the eel is: you'll understand that none of this can be said from sidewalks or chairs or city stages; you'll understand that only like this, eel or marble giving way, growing into a strip, then no longer being among the sargassum, there is a course, that happens: try it, like they do in the Atlantic night, like he who looks for stellar measures, not to know, not for anything; something like the blow of a wing, a drawing back, a moan of love and then now, then maybe, then yes.

It is noteworthy that Cortazar is a representative figure of the 'Latin American Boom', the literary movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, when Latin American literature circulated around the world. The movement was influenced by European and American modernism, and Cortazar's writing has modernist elements that pose a challenge to a limiting literary realism, which attempts to present definite and fixed meanings. In the paragraph quoted from McLean's translation, one can discern how the narratorial focus is not on a matter-of-fact outlining of the terrain, but on a subjective rumination on the scene observed. Cortazar's writing, in "Blow Up" translated by Paul Blackburn does something similar while describing the landscape in a typically modernist narration that privileges the interiority and the perspective of the narrator. As in *From the Observatory*, Cortazar necessarily and perceptively looks at landscapes in "Blow Up", creating in Harold Bloom's words, "a verbal photograph" (Bloom 51), elucidated in the following excerpt from the story:

But the sun was out also, riding the wind and friend of the cats, so there was nothing that would keep me from taking a walk along the docks of the Seine and taking photos of the Conservatoire and Sainte-Chapelle. It was hardly ten o'clock, and I figured that by eleven the light would be good, the best you can get in the fall; to kill some time I detoured around by the Isle Saint-Louis and started to walk along the quai d'Anjou, I stared for a bit at the hôtel de Lauzun, I recited bits from Apollinaire which always get into my head whenever I pass in front of the hôtel de Lauzun (and at that I ought to be remembering the other poet,

but Michel is an obstinate beggar), and when the wind stopped all at once and the sun came out at least twice as hard (I mean warmer, but really it's the same thing), I sat down on the parapet and felt terribly happy in the Sunday morning. (102)

While the terrains described might be disparate, the concerns in Cortazar's writing remain the same, which, arguably acts like a grand solvent that softens distinctions between varying landscapes in description. This is not to say that there is a disregard for, or erasure of, specific toponyms, but in the face of clear statements of difference, the settings are rendered as descriptions of a fluid reality in his writing. In both the descriptions, Cortazar undermines the fixities of the observed scenes and reinterprets space from a subjective, personal perspective. In Cortazar's artistry, what one gets is not a prosaic detailing of settings, but a vision where time, space and locations become sites of interpretation.

Cortazar's writing, a conduit for his personal way of seeing the world and his literary craftsmanship, in both translations, is what makes up, in Hannah Arendt's words, the worldliness of "human artifice" (Arendt 137). Shu-mei Shih reports, speaking of a conception of world literature that recognizes its literariness as constituting its worldliness,

According to Arendt, works of art are, foremost, things in the world, worldly things. Writing a work of literature, like composing a melody or painting an image, is a process of reification that requires workmanship; [...] the work of art is more worldly than other things and is part of what constitutes the objectivity of the world. Worldliness requires workmanship. For the work of literature, this means literariness—the attention to language and form—that makes literature literature. [...] Literary texts along an arc come into relation through the critic's work, and perhaps this work, in its workmanship, also helps constitute the durability of the world, if only by upsetting Eurocentrism and other rigid power grids and by, if just for a moment, altering our conception of the world. (Shih 437)

Cortazar's distinct literary style and his writing constitute the plenum of writing that makes up world literature, and in its interconnectedness to the rest of the world, also partakes in its production and durability. The distinctive literariness of Cortazar's writing must be seen in relation

to the networks that make up the world. It is in this regard that the reception of “Blow Up” in my classroom at the University of Delhi can be discussed.

The responses of my classmates to the translated story, ranged from specific observations on the presence of technological devices such as the camera and the typewriter and the role they played and the capricious description of scenes to the tone of the narrative and the plot, which bristled with suspense, thrill and indeterminacy. While these young Indian readers happened to be regionally diverse, the entirety of it was bilingual, with languages such as Hindi, Malayalam and Mizo being the mother tongues of the students. In discussions on the story during classes and beyond the classroom, my classmates noted how they might have been more immersed in the story because it, with its elements of suspense-inducing ambiguity, seemed like something they were used to.

The aforementioned readership happened to be familiar with popular television content in India including thriller and detective shows they watched while growing up such as *Krishna Arjun*, featuring a detective duo based in Mumbai and *Cambala Investigation Agency*, which focused on five children who live in a fictitious town called Cambala and solve crimes. These shows invested in techniques of narration, deduction and meditation to foster suspense and thrill. “Blow Up”, with its move away from narrative clarity also acts as a thriller and a detective story of sorts. My classmates happened to note, in one of the post-class discussions we had on the story, how building up to the possibility of a climactic reveal and going back in time to discuss the events of the day, both happened to be common tropes in Indian thriller shows. Speculating a little on this basis, one may claim that this explains why the readers in question enjoyed an affinity and familiarity with a text that happens to be distant in spatial-temporal and cultural-geographical ways.

Both of these observations—the worldliness of Cortazar’s writing and the familiarity of the readers with the content “Blow Up” had to offer, owing their exposure to certain works with similar elements—hints towards the possibilities one might envision through reading a text under the conceptual framework of world literature. David Damrosch notes in his threefold definition of world literature, that to constitute the former, national literatures travel in “elliptical refractions” (Damrosch 281) and become relevant in different contexts as per events and particularities that

create spaces of relating and relevance between a text and an audience. Thus, “Blow Up”, travelling, in translation, arguably endears itself to readers in an Indian classroom in 2020 because of their conversance with and arguable nostalgia for content they watched while growing up. This might be read as a unique relational moment, and moments like these determine the contextual relevance of literatures in locations far away from their origins. In this case, historical, temporal and cultural relationalities specific to the interaction between the text and the readers happened to be activated.

Furthermore, such a set-up, where the cultural particularities of both the text and the readers are specified hint towards thinking of a global humanity, without discounting locations. To this effect, Jing Tsu, in a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* notes that in a desirable sense, “world literature suggests not a geospatial container or a singular historical actor, but an analytical descriptor of tendencies, correspondences, and texts in motion across time and space that continues to extend our understanding of the global literary geography” (Tsu 182).

The reception of “Blow Up” in an Indian undergraduate classroom, thus, has noteworthy implications, particularly for relational comparisons of varying sorts and also in terms of the endless and heterogenous ways to think of literatures in circulation. A translated short story, journeying from its specific origins in time and space, exciting the sensibilities of a generation far-removed from it in terms of locations provides the locus for a fascinating probing, but also signals towards an exciting way to look at national literatures in transit and cultures in conversation.

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